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# H11-1773. Mac Bay Boat Company (1947-1964). Records, 1936-1973. 2.00 linear ft.

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**H11-1773.** Mac Bay Boat Company (1947-1964).  
Records, 1936-1973. 2.00 linear ft.

**One business day required for collection retrieval – please contact archivist.**

### Abstract

The collection contains company records of the Mac Bay Boat Company of Holland and Muskegon Heights, Michigan (also listed as Fruitport, Michigan), 1947-1962, makers of inboard and outboard engine powered molded plywood and fiberglass runabouts and cruisers. Records include 67 photographs, a Roamer Boat Company boat drawing, company sales letters, invoices, corporation ledger book (digital copy), parts vendor catalogs, engine supplier catalogs, construction time statistics ledger and clippings.

Accession No: H11-1773  
Storage Location: M033d  
Provenance: Mac Bay Boat Company  
Donor: JoAnn Dobben  
Photographs: 67 images  
Processed by: Geoffrey Reynolds, January 2013

### History

George Arthur Pelgrim, president of Bay View Furniture, began Mac Bay Boat Company in 1948 after his son-in-law, Jim White, returned from World War II. According to White's widow, Phyllis Pelgrim White, Jim spent time working in a few areas of Bay View Furniture. Before the war, White had been an avid power boater, sailor, and instructor at the Macatawa Bay Yacht Club. His love of the water and the many hours spent with local boat builder Kenneth Campbell, of Campbell Boat Company, must have also shaped his desire to start a boat building company of his own. Soon White's father-in-law became involved as an investor and plans were set for starting a new company based in the basement of Bay View Furniture Company. The combination of White's vision and Pelgrim's desire to capitalize on the emerging pleasure boat industry gave birth to the Mac Bay Boat Company.

On May 1, 1948, at 409 West 14th Street, the Mac Bay Boat Company was organized with the following officers: George A. Pelgrim, president; Mrs. George (Eva) Pelgrim, vice president; Jim White, secretary; and Henry Hopper, production superintendent. Now all they had to do was hire a crew of boat builders and start producing boats. From the beginning, the directors of the new company must have decided not to use the standard practice of building small runabouts with mahogany planks. Instead, they introduced a sturdy, safe, and affordable molded plywood-hulled boat equipped with quality hardware and inboard marine motors. This type of hull construction was new to the pleasure boat industry since it used heat, glue, and up to six layers of thin mahogany veneers molded together to create a sturdy preformed hull overnight. Other boat manufacturers, like the Chris-Craft Corporation, were still using planks of expensive Philippine mahogany wood, thousands of screws, and days of manual labor. Mac Bay purchased ready-made hulls from several companies, including at least one Canadian company, but mainly

from United States Molded Shape in Grand Rapids. The hulls were delivered, sometimes fifteen or twenty at a time, stacked like teacups, via large trailers.

Once the hulls were unloaded, the business of making them into boats was begun in earnest. To turn an unpainted boat hull without a transom into a finished 16 foot, 1,500 pound runabout took an engineer and many hours of labor from the company's small group of employees. Lester Kaunitz was responsible for the design and engineering part of the process. After about one week of construction, a glistening white or natural mahogany runabout with a mahogany wood deck would emerge from the basement of the furniture company ready for shipment to States. Each boat was complete with hardware, a choice of a 25, 45, or 75 horsepower Gray Marine engine, and seating for five passengers, at a price starting at \$1,495.

On June 29, 1948, the first of many Mac Bay Boat Company-built runabouts, sold under both the Mac Bay and Play Boy names, was sent to a customer in Salt Lake City, Utah. A *Holland City News* article from July 1, 1948, described the new company in detail. According to that front-page article, the Mac Bay-built Play Boy Sportster was unique for its time since it was the first boat company in the United States to produce an inboard motor-powered (vs. an outboard motor) mahogany plywood molded speedboat. According to newspaper clippings, independent boat broker Victor E. Watkins was said to have come to Holland about 1937. His daughter Phyllis Cox remembered the family leaving Muncie, Indiana, and moving to Holland due to her father's new job with Mac Bay. While in Muncie, Watkins worked on the Neptune outboard motor for the Muncie Gear Works. From historical sources, such as local newspapers, *Lakeland Yachting* magazine, and original sales brochures, it appears that Watkins was hired to sell boats to dealers for Mac Bay Boat Company.

With Watkins selling the boats under the Play Boy nameplate, sales were brisk as trailers loaded with new models left for U.S. distributors as far away as California and international clients in Portugal and Argentina. While the newspapers quoted company officials as producing at least one boat per day with the help of 20 employees, past employees report it took more like one week to produce a boat with 6-8 employees.

By January 1949, the model name had changed from Play Boy to Grayboy, and Watkins had added Lester Kaunitz as a partner. The change in name might be linked to a trademark infringement on another boat company of that same name, but spelled Playboy. Most likely the name Grayboy came from the Gray Marine brand of engine used in the boats. Other than that, only small changes were made to the windshield brackets and deck hardware. Watkins and Kaunitz took the Grayboy to the New York Boat Show in New York City, where spectators were reportedly impressed with America's first molded plywood inboard. Unfortunately, in August of that same year, the sales momentum that Victor Watkins and Lester Kaunitz had created tragically ended when Watkins was killed in an automobile accident near Elmira, Michigan.

After Watkins' death, sales dipped dramatically according to sources associated with the company. Soon after this tragedy, Kaunitz disappeared from the scene and former foreman A. B. Melton ran Mac Bay Boat Company.

In late 1949, under the direction of Henry Hopper and A. B. Melton, the company struggled to continue the boat line in new quarters located at 9 West 7th Street. The two past employees now were running the company using the inventory of unfinished hulls and other parts left after the Pelgrim era ended. Three other employees, Andy Riemersma and his brother and William De Boer, also stayed with the company. In addition, a new set of officers was assembled to include Melton as president/treasurer, William Edward Burns as vice president, and Muskegon resident D. K. Melton as secretary. While in business, the company expanded its

offerings to the public with the introduction of a cabin cruiser model powered by a Johnson outboard motor and chartreuse-colored rowboats. Employees made about twelve cruisers before Melton and Hopper sold the business to George and Clifford Dobben of North Muskegon. The Dobben family had been interested in buying the company outright since its days at Bay View Furniture, and had been loaning money to the pair since relocating the company to 9 East 7th Street. Under George and Clifford Dobben's ownership, the company again flourished, still using U.S. Molded Shape hulls and now offering a choice of outboard or inboard motors to its runabout line, the 13' Thunderbolt and 15' Imperial. They remained at the East 7th Street location for a short time before relocating to an area on Riley Street between Butternut Drive and 144th Street. A small strip mall now occupies that area. They then relocated to a new factory on Airline Road in Muskegon Heights in 1956. At the new factory, new and long-time employees continued selling and making boats for Mac Bay.

In Muskegon Heights, Dobben was able to put many more boats into production at one time using construction bays, finish bays, and final assembly areas. He also continued to offer the consumer a 45 or 75 h.p. Gray Marine engine in a 17-foot Mac Bay, costing \$1,795 for the larger engine and boat. In an attempt to trim costs and still sell a quality boat, Mac Bay outsourced its upholstery and canvas work to Holland-based companies. They also cut costs by creating a dealership network that covered the United States and was serviced by salesmen traveling with trailers containing the latest models of Mac Bay. Salespersons offered incentives to buy large amounts at discounted rates. This way the factory could continue to run throughout the year and employ a consistent and trained workforce, the key to quality boat making. Nationally known dealers first learned of the company at national boats shows and would eventually set up dealerships in Brighton, Michigan; Corbin, Kentucky; and Amarillo, Texas, to name a few.

Eventually, the company started hearing from their distributors that wood boats were simply too much work for consumers to maintain, and that they should get into the fiberglass boat business. Unfortunately, the Dobben family thought like many other longtime wood boat makers that fiberglass was just a fad and soon they were playing catch up with the likes of Leon Slikkers and his Slick Craft Boat Company. At one point, they dropped to 25 percent of the volume they had enjoyed the year before. According to Clifford Dobben, after an unsuccessful attempt at entering the fiberglass boat market in about 1960, the company discovered that it was too late, and they shut their doors for good in 1964.

### Scope and Content

Records include 67 photographs, a Roamer Boat Company boat drawing, company sales letters, invoices, corporation ledger book (digital copy), parts vendor catalogs, engine supplier catalogs, construction time statistics ledger and clippings. Clippings and history of the company are included in H00-1389.

### Container List

Boat Sales and Service (owned by Clifford Dobben) receipts, 1968-1970  
Boats Sales, Production, Shop Time Charts, n.d. (2 folders)  
Clippings, ca. 1955  
Employees, 1956

Employment Inquiries, 1957

Invoice Pad (blank), ca. 1962

Letterhead, ca. 1955

Manufacturers Brochures, Correspondence and Flyers

Airguide Marine Speedometers, 1957

Aerotex Plastics Company (windshields), n.d.

Algonac Foundry Company (marine hardware), n.d.

Arnolt Corporation (Ivalite spotlights), 1955, 1955

Aqua Meter (gauges), 1955

Boat Lighting and Equipment Company (trailer lights, mirrors, electric), 1956

Cadillac Products, Inc. (boat wrapping), n.d.

Canvas Products Company (covers), 1956

Chrysler Marine Engine, 1954, 1958

Comfort Cushion Company, ca. 1955

Commercial Plastics & Supply Corporation (windshields), 1957

Dearborn Marine Engines, Inc., 1957

Detroit Surfacing Machine Company (industrial sanders), 1953

Douglas Company (nameplates), n.d.

Du Pont (painting equipment), 1957

Electro-Voice (tachometers), n.d.

Finson Products, Inc. (marine instruments), 1954

Gemmer Manufacturing Company (steering gear), 1936-1954 (also in Oversized)

Flagship Marine Engines, 1958

Hardware Designers, Inc. (tiller rope guides), n.d.

Heath Company (marine electronics), 1958

Howard Zink Corporation (floatation devices, covers, fenders, seats), n.d.

Jervis Marine Hardware, 1957

Johnson Outboard Motor Company, 1957

Ketcham and McDougall, Inc. (gauges), 1957

Michigan Wheel Company (propellers), 1957

Muskegon Marking Equipment Company (staple guns), 1957

Oscro Motors Corporation (marine engines, Ford diesel), 1956

Perko (Perkins Marine Lamp Company), 1954

Permacel Tape Corporation (paint masking paper), 1956

Presto (vinyl flooring), n.d.

Peterson Brothers, Inc. (Gator boat trailers), 1957

Reading Brass Company (plumbing), 1957

Senco Products, Inc. (staplers), 1955

Shiple Company, Inc. (finishes), n.d.

Shuford's Shurtape (paint masking paper), 1956

Sterling Products Company, Inc. (clear plastic boat and engine covers), n.d.

Stokes Marine Supply Company (marine engines, Willys, Packard, Hudson), 1958

Sudbury Marine Products (finishes, engine equipment, cleaners, electrical), 1957

Teleflex, Inc. (mechanical controls), 1955

Trimedex Decorative Moldings, 1956

Universal Motor Company, 1953-1954

U.S. Molded Shapes, Inc. (wholesale boat hulls), n.d.  
Vita-Plate Battery, Inc., 1957  
W.G. Feik Marine Products (drain plugs, control mounts), n.d.  
Weltrim, Inc. (upholstery vinyl), 1957  
Westberg Manufacturing Company (tachometers), n.d.  
Yates-American Marine Company (industrial woodworking machines), n.d.  
Manufacturing Production Ledger, 1948-1949  
Minutes Ledger (includes Articles of Incorporation and By-Laws), 1948-1955, 1962  
Photographs, ca. 1955 (2 folders)  
Thank You Cards to Customers (blank), n.d.

#### Oversized

Gemmer Manufacturing Company Steering Gear Blueprints, 1936-1954 (8 items)  
Newspaper article on Dr. and Mrs. Edwin Hodge and their Mac Bay Boat Company 20'  
Albatross outboard cruiser, n.d.  
Roamer Boat Company boat drawing, ca. 1955  
Unknown Engine Blueprints, n.d.