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Mac Bay Boat Company

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Since beginning my research and writing concerning the pleasure boat building industry of Holland, Michigan, I have found the history of the Mac Bay Boat Company to be one of the most intriguing. Maybe it is the early tale of personal tragedy or its final struggle against a wave of emerging fiberglass boat companies. I may never be able to put my finger on it, but that's what makes studying history fun.

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. Overseeing the estimated 3-8 workers was Harry Hopper, production superintendent. Under his direction were craftsmen Alva Burdett (A. B.) Melton (foreman), Donald Van Lare, Gary Versendaal, Doug McKay, Andy Riemersma and his brother, and William De Boer. 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 distributorships around the United States.
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. While this arrangement eliminated the name recognition gained by having the company name on the boat itself, this was not an uncommon practice as investors and owners constantly sought to keep payrolls and overhead low through outsourcing. This practice is still common today. With Watkins selling the boats under the Play Boy nameplate, sales were brisk. According to newspaper sources, 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

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- 72” beam — lots of room.
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Office: 5 E. 6th St. — Holland, Michigan
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In late 1949, under the direction of Hemy 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. Past employee William De Boer remembers making 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. According George Dobben’s son Clifford, his father thought the boat model was comparable to Chris-Craft or Century boats, but at half the cost.

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. Kaunitz, the driver of the automobile, survived with only minor injuries. Evidently, Watkins and Kaunitz were on their way to Petoskey with a Grayboy runabout in tow when Kaunitz was blinded by the headlights of an oncoming automobile and lost control of the car. Their vehicle eventually hit a utility pole and threw Watkins from the car. Watkins died early the next morning in a Petoskey hospital, hours before they were to have demonstrated the boat for a potential customer.

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. An oral history interview with William De Boer, who started at the Mac Bay company in 1948, revealed that soon after Watkins’ death, the employees were given a “vacation” or they could take out their back pay in tools, which he opted to do.

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At the new factory, long time employees A. B. Melton, Gene O’Neil, and Andy Riemersma continued sell-
Jeff Magnuson’s 1948 Mac Bay Miss Barbara J, named for his wife.

Mac Bays displayed at the 1948 Chicago National Boat Show.

Jeff Magnuson’s 1948 Mac Bay Miss Barbara J, named for his wife.