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The Joint Archives *Quarterly*

Skipper-Craft Boats

by Geoffrey D. Reynolds

As an archivist, I am often drawn into researchers' projects as they seek to verify a fact or locate just the right photograph, be it the writing of a family history or the restoration of a classic boat. In 2000, while interviewing former boat builder Jason Petroelje, I became enthralled with the history of his boat company, Skipper-Craft Boats (not to be confused with the molded plywood brand made in Maryland during the same era). I eventually purchased one of his products, a 1957 Skipper-Craft *Sportsman* runabout, and began to restore it. But first, I wanted to do some research on the company and its products.

The son of a Zeeland, Michigan, carpenter, Jason Petroelje grew up around wood and enjoyed the things you could do with it. In 1949, the young but already skilled Petroelje landed a job at the Holland plant of the famous Chris-Craft Corporation. There he learned the art of building fine wood cruisers and the value placed on them by consumers. Petroelje took this knowledge home and, along with scrap lumber purchased from Chris-Craft, he built a mahogany plank outboard powered boat based on plans he found in *Mechanics Illustrated* magazine. For ten months the project consumed his spare time. "My dad had a pretty good-sized chicken coop there, and he wasn't using it anymore. So I built four boats in that chicken coop over a period of about three years, improving on them and making a

nicer boat and better performing boat each successive time," he recalled in a 2000 oral history interview. After those magazine inspired boat projects, Petroelje began designing his own outboard boats and constructing them from marine grade sheet plywood, a product used heavily by boat manufacturers during World War Two. No longer did you need thousands of dollars and a boathouse to own a

motorboat. After purchasing a Skipper-Craft for about \$2,000, a trailer and outboard motor, consumers of Petroelje's boats were free to enjoy them anytime on any body of water they chose. Freedom like this spurred a huge post-war boating craze throughout the United States that has continued to this day.



ca. 1953 15-ft. Skipper-Craft with Jason Petroelje (left) and Bob Taylor

Petroelje continued to make boats in his spare time until 1952,

when he left Chris-Craft due to a labor strike and a desire to create his own fine boats. His new company, Skipper-Craft Boats, was made up of himself and a few helpers, like Warren Thompson, Gene Gort, Jacob Steenwyk, "Pug" Yonker, and Dick Schutt. The new company was located at 249 East 26th Street in Holland. At this location, the company built stock and custom 14 to 18-foot sheet plywood outboard boats with plywood mahogany decks. The sheet plywood models were built with seven mahogany frames, an inner keel, and longitudinal stringers for the 5/16 U.S. Royal Marine Duraply

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From the Director



The Joint Archives of Holland has been a busy place these past few months. We have hosted many scholars from the Netherlands, Canada, Wisconsin, and Michigan during the recent Association for the Advancement of Dutch-American Studies biennial conference held here at Hope College. We have also been busy helping many Hope College students working on books, professor-led projects, and class work. We enjoy assisting our researchers and welcome more each day.

The article for this issue is one that I have been working on for years, like the boat it mentions, and finally found the time to complete it. I enjoy writing about the pleasure craft industry in Holland as much as working on a Holland-built boat. If you like antique and classic boats as much as I do, please plan on attending the Vintage Holland Boat Show at the Holland Museum on Sunday, August 26, from 1-5 p.m. The Joint Archives of Holland and the Holland Historical Trust are co-sponsoring the event, and we would love to have you attend.

Geoffrey Reynolds

Skipper-Craft Boats (continued from page 1)

plywood to fasten to with bronze screws. The exterior surface of the plywood was coated with a thin paper surface, which gave the boat a smooth appearance when painted. The chines and keel were made of white oak. Wood filler was used to cover the screws on painted surfaces and shallow bungs on varnished surfaces. The seat cushions were constructed of 3" foam rubber and covered with two-toned Naugahyde brand vinyl upholstery and mounted on plywood. Skipper-Crafts were equipped with Kainer, Perko, Attwood Brass or Jervis brand hardware and steering gear, depending on prices offered to Petroelje by traveling salesmen. Each boat took approximately eighty hours to build and included fine craftsmanship and quality materials that continue to serve many Skipper-Craft collectors on the water.

The 1959 brochure is the only one known to exist. Along with this brochure, photographs, an oral history conducted with Petroelje and my own research, I learned that Skipper-Craft Boats offered four models in any color scheme and

weighed an average of 400 pounds each. The models were called *Panther*, *Custom Runabout*, *Sportsman* and the 830 pound, 18-foot *Voyager*. Six *Panthers*, 18-foot molded mahogany inboards, were built after local Hollander Willis De Boer asked Petroelje to build an inboard Skipper-Craft boat with the name *Panther* on the transom. These rare models were sold for \$6,000 each. After De Boer's contract was completed, Petroelje created a sheet plywood *Panther* model, complete with two separate cockpits and a small mid-deck. These early models were painted black, decked with mahogany plywood, which included a blond king plank and covering boards, and upholstery on the interior sides and seats. Later models were designed without the mid-deck and included automobile industry inspired fins and two-tone appearance with a chrome or polished aluminum strip dividing the colors. Two-tone color schemes included white and natural mahogany. By 1959, the fins were nicely integrated into the sides of the boat, whereas earlier models' fins appear to be an afterthought. The aft-deck included a small hatch for accessing the remote fuel tanks and battery, even though the engine well area was open to reduce dangerous gas vapor build up. The interior included upholstered seats, interior, and dashboard.

As Petroelje's boats evolved, he kept some of the earlier design and components while adding new features. The *Custom Runabout* model, for example, was very similar to the *Panther* model, but lacked the fins, upholstered dashboard and two-tone upholstered interior. The *Sportsman* model was originally built with a walkway between the two cockpits, which were divided by a mid-deck, and regularly painted white with white and red seats. Throughout their construction run, only the seats were upholstered with the painted interior exposed. The later models extended the aft-cockpit for more room and less aft-deck. It was ideal for active families, fishing, or just "knocking around." The 18-foot *Voyager* model was billed as a roomy day cruiser with the lines and responsiveness of a smart runabout. The split cockpit measured 7'x10" and included storage under the seats, flat floors, paneled interior and self-bailing motor well. This model, like the inboard *Panther* model, would be a rare find for any collector due to their scarcity.

Indeed, Skipper-Craft boats can be difficult to identify. Skipper-Craft hull numbers are difficult to find because they were often stamped on the transom brace or the inside trim around the engine well, areas heavily sanded and painted over the lifetime of an outboard powered boat. Only three boats containing a hull number have been found: #57-46 and 57-60, the 46th and 60th hulls made up to that date; and #59-05, the 5th hull made in 1959, the last year of production. The hull numbering sequences changed sometime between the 1957 and 1959 model years, according to Petroelje. The



details of construction are the keys to identifying a Skipper-Craft. All models except the inboard *Panther* have a bull-nosed bow that is constructed of carved mahogany. Don't be fooled by the bull-nosed 1956 fiberglass Slick Craft model, since these boats were manufactured by Poll Manufacturing and were based on a wooden plug built by Petroelje for Poll. Once a mold was made from Petroelje's plug, Poll used it to make hulls for resale to companies such as Slick Craft Boat Company, Inland Marine, Sears (Elgin) and his own Wonder Craft boats.

Other unique details for identifying a Skipper-Craft include the hand molded Plexiglas brand windshields with Attwood Brass supports, one and two-tone color schemes, slight tumblehome at the stern, flat bottom or modified v-bottom, incredible detail on the front deck hand rails, distinctive port side glove box and solid mahogany dashboard, inside and outside white oak chine construction and two-piece floor panels, some of which were stamped with the hull number. Petroelje also used fiberglass to cover the bottom side of about half of the boats he built. The fiberglass covered bottoms consisted of one layer of nine ounce fiberglass cloth with resin and three additional coats of resin to give a smooth finish. The bottom was then faired and sanded until even and smooth. Like others in the industry at the time, Petroelje was trying to reduce maintenance time and costs to his customers with the addition of the fiberglass layer.

Skipper-Craft Boats sold most of its inventory to West Michigan customers through boat shows, visits to the boat shop, and word of mouth. A Detroit, Michigan, dealer sold a few boats, but many were sold by Petroelje right in Holland through word of mouth from satisfied customers. In 1959, boating consumers' desire for cheaper and lower maintenance fiberglass boats forced Petroelje to close the company and work for another boat building firm in Holland, under the direction of boating industry legend George Glen Eddy. This venture, called Power Boats, was short-lived for

Petroelje, who acted as foreman of a dozen men on the construction of thirteen 22-foot sheet plywood outboard motor powered boats. A 36-foot model was planned, but it never made it off the drawing board. The company lasted about one year before the doors closed. After the closing, Petroelje became a carpenter for a Holland-based construction firm. Through the years, he has rebuilt and maintained some of his creations for local owners.

After interviewing Petroelje as part of an ongoing project to document the history of Holland's century-long boat building history, I decided that I wanted to own a locally built powerboat. Petroelje sensed my interest and gave me the name of a man who might be willing to let his Skipper-Craft boat go, providing the new owner was a good fit. The owner had a 1957 Skipper-Craft *Sportsman* and thought the boat should come out of storage and back into use by a nice family. We agreed on a price and my family became only the fourth owner of the boat in its lifetime. In May 2001, the boat was brought to our home for new paint and upholstery. Three months later and several late nights in the garage, much expert advice from Petroelje, and new upholstery, *Miss Macatawa*, as my family named her, was ready to hit the water. We reintroduced her to our local water playground, Lake Macatawa, for the first time since having been put into storage in the late 1980s.

"Now that she is finished," I often say to myself, "was it worth all the late nights and money?" Yes, it was, and now I can enjoy the boat like it was meant to be used when it was built back in 1957. I especially relish the admiring looks and kind comments expressed by onlookers at launch sites, gas stations, and boat shows, and I love sharing its rich history with anyone who is curious. Jason Petroelje voiced the same sentiment recently when he said, "Find a hobby like boat restoration or building when you are young, so that when you retire, you have something to love and do." Before Petroelje left the boat building business, he made aircraft construction his hobby and continues it today at age 80.

Since my own encounter with a Skipper-Craft brand boat, I have come to know of only twelve other Skipper-Craft owners around Michigan. Every year a new owner contacts me about their Skipper-Craft, and we compare notes on the construction details, color schemes, and where to locate the hull numbers. If you think you might have one of these boats, please feel free to contact me with questions about it or any other brand of Holland-made boats.

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Grand Rapids Boat Show display, ca. 1956