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Before the Thoroughbreds
Roy Brady and the Century Boat Company
by Geoffrey Reynolds

The history of boat building in the United States is based on successful business relationships between designers, owners, and craftsmen. Some of those relationships were tremendously successful while others failed miserably. An example of a successful business relationship, although short-lived, was between Melvin Roy Brady and the Century Boat Company during the years before their boats became known as the "thoroughbreds of the boating industry."

The Century Boat Company was founded in 1926 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, by brothers William and James Welch to build outboard racers, sailboats, rowboats, and canoes. A former U.S. Life-Saving Serviceman, William Web Sherman, was hired to manage the plant and helped introduce many different-sized outboard models to the small lineup.

In 1929, after considerable success, Sherman and the Welch brothers relocated the company to Manistee, Michigan, in 1929 to take advantage of the cheaper labor and abundance of factory space. There they were able to produce an even greater number of small outboard racing boats so popular with consumers. By 1930 the Welch brothers decided to sell the company and return to Milwaukee, where they produced kit boats under the Welch Boat Company name for many years. The new owners, headed up by George Glen Eddy, immediately recognized the need for a designer and superintendent of production that could help the company capitalize on the ever increasing consumer interest in stock outboard racing boats. They eventually focused on a small, but successful, boat builder, Melvin Roy Brady of Charlevoix, Michigan.

Melvin Roy Brady, better remembered as Roy, was born in Kalkaska, Michigan, on February 18, 1886, to Hubert and Laura Brady. He was one of two sons, Homer being the other, and a daughter named Ethel. Eventually, the family members moved to Bellaire, Michigan, located on Torch Lake. In 1905, Roy, then 19 years of age, first began building open runabouts powered by Sintz-built engines, which were made in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The family moved again, leaving Bellaire and relocating in Charlevoix, Michigan, where they were employed in the commercial fishing business. In addition to fishing, Roy continued designing and building boats.

In Charlevoix, Homer and his family lived in a stately brick home on Hurlbut Street overlooking Round Lake. From his home, he could also survey his south shore property where the fishing business and Roy's small boat shop were located. At that time, Round Lake shoreline property was in the hands of commercial fishermen, boat builders, and a few large boat houses belonging to summer resorters like Ransom E. Olds. The shoreline was dirty with fish refuse, storm water runoff, and general household waste. Some say that is why the perch fishing was so good. Today, however, with the advent of an improved sewer system, it is some of the most expensive property in Michigan because of its picturesque beauty and proximity to Lake Michigan and Lake Charlevoix.

Around 1910, Roy married Canadian-born Eva Nice in Detroit. In 1916, their first and only child together, William G., was born. It is unclear why Brady was in Detroit at that time, but soon after the birth of their son, the trio returned to Charlevoix where they made their home on Antrim Street. During this time Roy began building and racing Hispano-Suiza-powered racing boats like the 26-foot John Hacker-designed Miss Charlevoix.

In May 1921, Brady divorced Eva. He remarried some-
time later to his second wife, Maude, who has been credited with Roy’s success in both boatbuilding and racing. During their marriage, Maude reportedly located her “office” above the boat shop, reportedly to keep an eye on her husband as he went about his craft. According to newspaper sources that seemed to track Roy’s movements monthly, like the Charlevoix Sentinel, Maude was also very visible as his mechanic during his trips to powerboat races around the country.

Brady’s stature in power boating circles grew and by 1927, when he helped arrange for the Mississippi Valley Power Boating Association (M.V.P.B.A.) to hold a race on Lake Charlevoix during the summer, he had become well known. But more prestige soon followed. In October of that year, Roy and Maude left for a winter long trip to Florida to race and represent the Johnson Outboard company as traveling representatives. During their time in Florida, Roy raced at Daytona Beach, Lake Butler, Tarpon Springs, and Palm Beach in February, 1928. Roy captured the free-for-all class that year in what appears to be his favorite ride, C-U-Later, at Detroit during a race held on Labor Day. That race also earned him a gold medal for setting the international mile record for C Class outboards and some free advertising from Evinrude outboard motors. Later that fall, he headed back to the southern states to sell Johnson outboard motors and to race.

Upon his return to Charlevoix in early 1929, he continued to build racing runabouts like Miss Danville for a Danville, Kentucky, customer, and experimenting with the small, single stepped-bottom Vamp hydroplane that he had designed.

By 1929, the then 43-year-old Roy was participating in boat regattas as an official and committee member, but his age did not deter him from also participating as a contestant. At the National Outboard Championship Regatta in Peoria, Illinois, in October 1929, he met the young female racing phenom from California, Loretta Turnbull. Their correspondence reflects a mutual love for the sport and the need to have faster boats and bigger motors to continue their success. On her 1929 Christmas card addressed to Roy, she wrote “Best wishes for a full Christmas tide, a successful turn into 1930, and that you win the perpetual trophy—Happiness.”

Turnbull wasn’t Roy’s only contact with racers of the gentler sex; he was the man who introduced aspiring Bay City, Michigan native, racer Hilda Mueller to the sport in August 1929. At a race that shaped up to be the state championship of female drivers for Michigan, Mueller, who had never driven a boat before, was given the chance to drive the Brady-built Vamp model powered by a Caille Flash outboard motor (Class B combination). During the morning preparations, Brady looked over the available drivers and chose Mueller. There was much shaking of heads by spectators about his choice; they felt that a beginner would have no show whatsoever against...
experienced racing veterans like Lansing native Loretta Fillian. Brady must have thought the same thing after Meuller took out the Vamp for the first time. Upon her return to shore, she crashed into the dock, smashing the bow of the boat and throwing herself clear of the boat and onto the dock, where, landing on her knees, she still gripped the steering wheel tightly in her hands.

Brady and others worked fast to patch up the bow and install a wheel taken from another boat, just in time for Meuller to race in the first heat, eventually winning the championship. With newspaper headlines like "M. Roy Brady of Charlevoix Makes a New State Champion from a Black Demon, and Whirlwind. While all seemed to be going well on the race course, it was a different story back in the front office at Century. In January 1932, an initial stock offering was given for 100,000 shares of Class A stock and 200,000 shares of Class B. On the official papers, George G. Eddy is listed as president, E.A. Doty as first vice president/treasurer (he also served in sales), M. Roy Brady as second vice president (also superintendent of production), Rex Maynard as secretary (who also served as purchasing agent and oversaw the shipment of boats). Even with this offering, the company was doomed due to the economic times.

Evening Racing

A vigorous spirit cannot be stopped from doing what he loves.

Following Brady's banner year (which was fueled by his designs and winning drivers), he was contacted by Century, then under the guidance of well-known designer George Glen Eddy. By July 1930, Brady was hired and made chief of the four-person designing staff as well as superintendent of production. In addition, he headed up the newly created racing-service bureau for Century. Brady's hiring at Century might have been fueled by his ability to work with both runabouts and outboard racers; Century shared that vision starting in 1930 with the introduction of the non-racing models Traveler, Traveler, Jr., and Aristocrat, in addition to the enduring Kid model. Brady's new position at Century certainly did not hamper his own racing aspirations: Boating magazine mentioned him again in the August issue of 1930. This time he was a placing driver at the 23rd Annual Mississippi Valley Power Boat Association races held in Madison, Indiana (that year on July 4th and 5th). There he placed in the Class B, Division III and IV-5 miles, as well as in the Class D, E, F, G, Division III and IV-10, along with protege Hilda Mueller. Other Century racers included perennial race winners Helen Hentschel and Earl Gresh.

When Brady took over as superintendent, he oversaw the design and production of the complete racing line, made up of the Midget, Hurricane, Cyclone, Pee Wee, Black Demon, and Whirlwind. While all seemed to be going well on the race course, it was a different story back in the front office at Century. In January 1932, an initial stock offering was given for 100,000 shares of Class A stock and 200,000 shares of Class B. On the official papers, George G. Eddy is listed as president, E.A. Doty as first vice president/treasurer (he also served in sales), M. Roy Brady as second vice president (also superintendent of production), and Rex Maynard as secretary (who also served as purchasing agent and oversaw the shipment of boats). Even with this offering, the company was doomed due to the economic times.

According to well-known Century Boat Company sources, like the Miklos family and past president Bill Wittig, Brady's time at Century was productive enough for him to be called one of Eddy's generals, but this was not enough to save his lofting position in the front office when Century declared bankruptcy in September 1932. Brady's demotion to working on the production line was most likely due to Eddy being relieved of command as general manager and demoted to manager of production and design, effectively eliminating a need for Brady's administrative services. Commodore E.A. Doty and Rex Maynard were simply fired. Eddy remained as general manager of Century until he moved on to Bay City, Michigan, where he founded Eddy Marine. It appears that Roy Brady remained at Century Boat Company at least until January.
1933, since a letter written to his first wife, Eva, was written on Century letterhead for that date. He also makes mention that she and young Bill should visit him sometime and see his office at the plant. Little is subsequently known of him until 1937.

In January of that year, Brady was living in Saugatuck, Michigan, and was granted a divorce from Maude. In April, he married Sally Lassa, a native of Manistee, a factory worker at the Goshen Shirt Factory, and sister of many Century employees. After their marriage in Paw Paw, Michigan, they made their home in St. Joseph, Michigan. There they welcomed the birth of a daughter, Rogene, and a son, Aroy Hubert. Sometime after his arrival at St. Joseph, he became superintendent of production at Robinson Boat Company, making cruisers for the wealthy around the world. In 1960, he retired from Nowlen Lumber Company, but continued to work as a carpenter until his death on February 11, 1972, in St. Joseph.

Failed marriages, job loss, advancing age, even the Great Depression could not keep Roy Brady from doing what he loved. He loved to build and race boats and he made sacrifices for his passion. Troubled times can spell the end of a productive company, but can't stop a vigorous spirit.

Author's Note: Since my research began on the life of Roy Brady, I haven’t been able to locate any of his boats, like Miss Danville, Miss Charlevoix and the Brady Sea Bird, a small experimental hydroplane with stabilizer wings, and the small Vamp hydroplanes. I'd like to hear from readers who might have information on these or other boats that he made. I can be reached via e-mail at reynoldsg@hope.edu or by phone at 616-786-9685.