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# The Joint Archives Quarterly, Volume 23.01: Spring 2013

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# The Joint Archives *Quarterly*

Volume 23 Number 1

Spring 2013

## *From Russia With Love: An Immigrant's Story*

By Amanda Palomino

A small collection on the shelves of the Joint Archives of Holland gives us a peek into the lives of two Russian immigrants, their harrowing tales of hardships endured during the Russian Revolution, and a happy ending among loved ones following a long journey to safety. We begin with Woldemar A. Bary, who was born on September 30, 1887. He was raised in Moscow, where his father, an American citizen, worked as an engineer. There, Woldemar grew up in a large family of nine siblings. His was a wealthy family due to his father's lucrative occupation and factory holdings, but all that changed when a series of revolutions began in February 1917. That year, the Soviets, or the members of workers' councils in Russia, backed by the support of the lower classes and the political left, staged a coup that removed Czar Nicholas from power and installed a Provisional Government under Aleksandr Kerensky, which permitted state power to remain in the hands of the Imperial Parliament. Initially, counter-revolutionary forces, known as the White Army, planned a military coup led by General Lavr Kornilov to reclaim power, and Woldemar played an active role in this resistance. However, the attempt failed and later, in October of the same year, the more militant Bolshevik party overthrew the Provisional Government and replaced it with a communist government. The systematic removal and persecution of the Bolshevik's political enemies following their victory forced many Russian officials and aristocrats to flee the country by any desperate measure they could conceive. Woldemar, in disguise as a woman, was able to escape from Russia

and eventually immigrate to the United States, where he lived for many years in New York City with his first wife, Nina.

Although he lived out the rest of his days peacefully, Woldemar never forgot the danger which drove him out of Russia and never really ceased to fear that, someday,



*Woldemar A. Bary, ca. 1920s*

the Bolsheviks would come for him. These were the feelings of many Russian immigrants who came to America during the Revolution, and it helped to build a strong connection among that community of people. Not too long after he had arrived in America, Woldemar, an engineer like his father, formed a great professional friendship with another Russian immigrant named Igor Sikorsky, the man who later founded the Sikorsky Aircraft Corporation in 1935. This company garnered great success throughout the early 1900s, especially with its specialization in helicopters, a recent innovation in flight technology. They also created the first water plane—a plane that could land on water or land—called the S-34

Amphibian and associated with such historical figures as Charles Lindberg, whom Woldemar knew personally. During his time at Sikorsky Aircraft Corporation, Woldemar served as vice-president through the company's transition from New York to Pennsylvania. When he retired from that position, Woldemar continued to live in that small town of Bushkill until the end of his life, which would have been quite uneventful had he not met the woman who would be his second wife, Valentina.

*(continued on page 2)*

## From the Director



After reading our first article, some of you might wonder how did the papers of a deceased Russian immigrant aeronautical engineer and his wife with no connection to Holland, Michigan or Hope College come to reside at the Joint Archives of Holland? Simple.

Connections. Through a conversation I had with Janet DeYoung in 2006 about the need to place Bary's papers in a safe place for future public research, I agreed to accept the papers, have them translated from Russian to English by Hope College library staff member, John Dykstra, and processed by archival assistant Amanda Palomino. Today, Bary's papers are available for public research and much will be learned about his life experience. Our mission has been accomplished.

Geoffrey D. Reynolds

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### *From Russia With Love (continued from page 1)*

Valentina Shmatovich was also a Russian immigrant who had fled to the United States during the Revolution, but she came much later, in 1968. Before that, she and her family first escaped to Poland and lived many years there on a farm her father owned. Valentina had two siblings, a sister named Galena, who married and moved to Paris, and a brother named Kolya who married a woman named Tatiana. Valentina was married also for many years until her husband, Leon, died of cancer. Valentina, in her later years, recounted many stories of hardship from those years of living in the shadow of Russian oppression for, even in Poland, food shortages and political instability were major problems. Then, in 1939, the Russian armies invaded Poland, and Valentina's family was torn apart. Kolya was taken away by the Red Guard to Siberia and was never seen again. Tatiana was then forced out of her house by soldiers and, with two baby boys, she trekked through the wintery countryside to cross the border. Once, she was captured and imprisoned in a rat-infested dungeon for four days, but fortunately, she was transferred with her children, later escaping to Germany and then to the United States. Valentina made it eventually to America, too, and worked for many years as a nanny. Then, one summer, she came to Bushkill and found work as a housekeeper for Woldemar, who fell in love with her so quickly that he asked her to marry him after one week. At first, she says, she told him no, but he cried so pitifully that she gave in. So, in 1973, Woldemar and Valentina were married. They lived quietly and contentedly together, also caring for Woldemar's sister Catherine, until Catherine and Woldemar's deaths, both in the same year of 1979.



*Woldemar Bary (right), his wife Valentina (center), and his sister Catherine (left) at their home in Bushkill, ca. 1970s*

A few years later, Valentina went to live with her close friends, the DeYoungs. The DeYoung family first came into Woldemar and Valentina's lives when Roger DeYoung, the pastor of Bushkill Reformed Church, was making hospital visits and met the Barys; Valentina was the one laid up, due to an ankle injury she incurred while attempting to paint their 13-room farm house by herself. She could not speak English, but Woldemar was able to translate for them both, and from that day on, the two families became good friends. Roger DeYoung's relationship with Valentina was particularly special as his own mother had died when he was a little boy, and Valentina never had any children of her own. They were the mother and son the other never had, and so close were they that when Woldemar passed away, the DeYoung family welcomed Valentina into their own home. She lived happily with them and their two little girls, even moving to join them in Holland, Michigan, in 1986. On October 29, 2002, Valentina passed away after eighteen years with her adopted family. Now, through the DeYoungs, the Barys live on, a testament to a legacy of gentleness and love left by truly remarkable people. Woldemar and Valentina's stories of struggle and hard-earned peace are preserved through their collection of articles, letters, photos, and more, which is now housed in the Joint Archives of Holland.



*S-38 Amphibian, built in 1928 by Sikorsky Aircraft Corporation*

# ***From Craft to Industry: The Boat Builders of Holland***

**By Geoffrey Reynolds**

For over 175 years, Holland has served as a boat-building center in Michigan. From sloops and schooners that plied the Great Lakes to the powerful pleasure boats enjoyed by modern-day mariners, Holland has seen—and constructed—they all.

Holland's boat-building industry had its origins in 1836. That is the year the Black River Company platted the village of Superior and erected a few stores, houses, and a steam-driven sawmill. Near the eastern edge of the settlement, where the sawmill was located, was the construction site of the first known boat on Black Lake (the English translation of the Ottawa name *Macatawa*). At that site, James Handy built the *A. C. Mitchell*, named for one of 14 investors in the ship. Its layout included two masts, and it measured 54 feet long and weighed approximately 51 tons.

In 1837, the investors of both the village and the vessel became involved in speculative wildcat banking and went out of business. It would be 10 years before the area would see another ship slide down a slipway.

## **The Dutch Era**

In February 1847, the Dutch leader Reverend A. C. Van Raalte led a small band of followers into the area by oxcart from Allegan, about 40 miles to the south. The majority of his followers traveled to the colony by water, landing at the sand-choked mouth of Black Lake. Here the weary travelers transferred to the lake's only mode of water transportation: the flat boat. This primitive vessel was constructed of a few beams and some poles, and was built at the fledgling settlement of Groningen by workers associated with Jan Rabbers. With the aid of a sail, pole, or even oars, boatmen helped convey the newly arrived immigrants from the mouth to the head of the lake, points along the shore, or farther upriver. In addition to transporting passengers, these early Holland-made boats were used to move forest products, like hemlock bark for tanning and barrel staves, out to the mouth of the lake and onto waiting steamers and sail vessels bound for Great Lakes ports. This helped foster the first entrepreneurs of the colony and also provided an income of as much as 50 cents a day for immigrant men.

As the flat-boat construction business continued, the need for a locally owned Great Lakes vessel also became obvious. To remedy this problem, the fathers of the colony purchased the two mast schooner *A. V. Knickerbocker* in 1847, but this foray into cooperative

ownership ended after eight months due to poor management and competition from private merchants.

## **Early Commercial Shipbuilding**

In 1848, Jan Slag purchased two lakeside lots on the east end of Black Lake and proceeded to build a wharf and shipyard from which practiced a Netherlands style of shipbuilding. His first creation was a small, shallow-drafted sailing vessel known as a "coaster," for its ability to navigate the channel mouth and to move up and down the Lake Michigan shoreline in the safe shallows. Locals called it *The Flying Dutchman*. Andries Steketee and his sons Simon and Cornelis also reportedly built a Dutch-style sloop that year. The Steketees named their vessel *Eensgezindheid* (Unity), but little is known about its history. The Steketees perished in the 1857 shipwreck of the schooner *Mary* near St. Joseph, which probably precipitated the early demise of their shipyard.

In 1851, the village post office of Black Lake officially changed names to Holland, and the brief Dutch-only, boat-building era came to an end. Two years later, a man by the last name of Avis, a non-Dutch inhabitant, constructed the 87-ton scow schooner *Commencement* for a Mr. Lambert. While small compared to other schooners on the Great Lakes, it continued a tradition of locally made trade ships that would last until the end of the 19th century.



*Kate Howard entering Holland harbor, ca. 1900*

## **Schooners Rule the Waves**

During the latter half of the 19th century, the production of ships increased sharply due to the relocation of channel and dredging work that allowed larger vessels to pass into and out of Holland harbor.

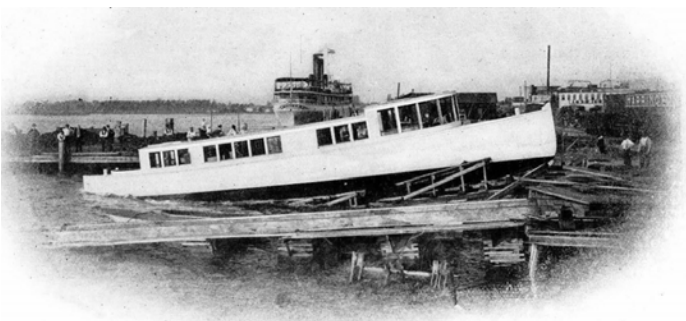
Schooners were being produced at shipyards at the eastern end of Black Lake, and on the northern and southern shores as well. By 1860, Holland shipbuilders such as Peter de Graff, William Clark, Harman Slag, and Pascal Taylor produced wooden vessels for local shippers or mercantile businesses. Most likely, this was an attempt at controlling shipping rates as prices,

fluctuated wildly from season to season and year to year. As the 1860s unfolded, additional shipyards were erected, including those of E. M. Beckwith, Hopkins, Andrew Anderson, and John Waring. By 1870, only Anderson's was left.

As the lucrative business of building boats on the Great Lakes increased, so did the number of Holland shipbuilders engaged in it. During the 1870s, builders such as Schols & Bass, Scotch, Jacob De Vries, Levi Myrick, Andrew Clark, and Johannes Houwer were added to the list. By the 1880 census, only Cornelis Schols was left.

### Pleasure Boats Are Introduced

Spurred by a technological advance in motive power in the 1880s, a new type of boat building promised to replace the lagging schooner industry in the area.



*Wolverine Motor Works employees launching the 60-foot Chilion in Holland, ca. 1901*

Wolverine Motor Works was primarily known for its dominance of the gasoline-engine market when it relocated its boat division from Grand Rapids to Holland in 1901. Situated on the former Anderson Shipyard site, the company produced motorized pleasure boats on the banks of Black Lake until moving the entire operation to Bridgeport, Connecticut, in 1907. Soon after its departure, Holland Launch relocated from its 5th Street location to the site vacated by Wolverine. It produced launches with gasoline engines until about 1911.

In 1910, another Grand Rapids launch company relocated to Black Lake, this time in the Jenison Park area. Known as the Jesiek Brothers Boat Yard, this company made gasoline launches and cruisers. They continued in the business until the onset of World War II, when the demand for vessels of war forced them to lease their facilities to the Victory Shipbuilding Company, a producer of submarine chasers.

Dutch Craft Boat Works was founded in 1931, and owned and operated by Bill Woldering of Holland. While little is known about the longevity of this company, many of its 75-pound "Rinky-Dink" rowboats were said to adorn the running boards and roofs of local automobiles traveling to nearby lakes.



*Gil-Boat Company brochure, ca. 1936*

In 1936, a new enterprise appeared on the shores of Lake Macatawa (renamed from Black Lake in 1935 to sound more attractive to visitors). The Gil-Boat Company constructed rowboats, unsinkable lifeboats, and futuristic cross-lake ferries from rolled steel and aluminum. The company appeared to be doing well until unpaid bills and the failure to register with the federal government forced its formal demise in 1942.



*Sailing yacht under construction at Campbell Boat Company, ca. 1930s*

In 1937, the Campbell Boat Company set up shop in an old hotel along the south shore of Lake Macatawa in the Virginia Park area. The large building served as the lofting room, a space where the boat designers draw out the parts of the boat in full scale on paper so that the



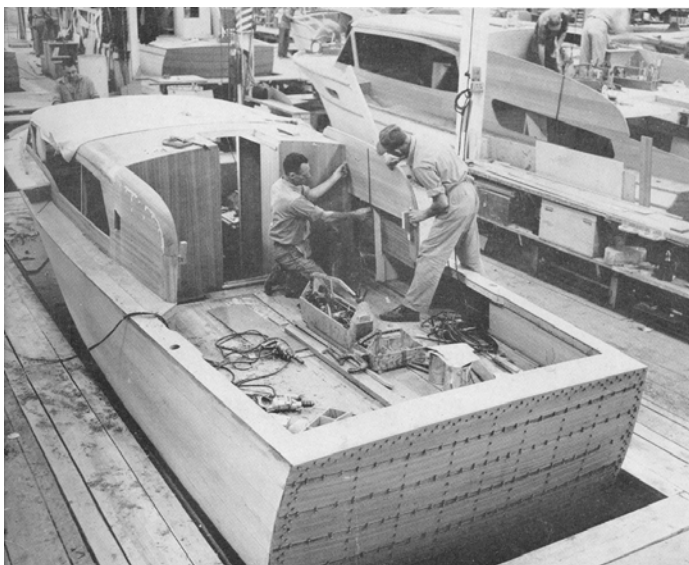
*Beacon Boat Company launching, ca. 1956*

builders can make the boat out wood or steel or other material, and offices for the owner, Ken Campbell, and his crew of boat makers. The Beacon Boat Company, headed by Orville Munkwitz, rented the Campbell yard until purchasing it

outright in 1953. Bad management and lack of funding forced Beacon to close their doors in 1960, after making large and small sailboats for local consumers, as well as wooden mine sweepers and utility boats for the U.S.



Navy during and after the Korean War. Robert Dawson, Sr. then purchased the property and named it South Shore Marine. The Dawson family operated a marina, as well as a boat-building yard, until 2003.



*Chris-Craft plant workers, 1957*

### **Chris-Craft Comes to Town**

While most pleasure-craft builders in Michigan struggled to survive the Great Depression, the Chris-Craft Corporation of Algonac made plans to expand. And Holland—with its skilled workforce and lack of labor unions—was company owner Christopher Columbus Smith's first choice of location. By February 1940, the first 15 1/2 foot runabout was completed, with more soon to follow. While in Holland, the company helped produce military landing craft that were used at Normandy, as well as thousands of Chris-Craft cruisers for a boat-hungry, post-war public. (A successor owner to the Smith family closed the plant in 1988, prompting hundreds of employees to retire early. As we'll see later, some established their own boat companies.)

The Holland area benefited from the creation of many small boat-building firms in the 1940s and '50s. In 1946, Robert Linn, founder of the Roamer Boat Company, began building and selling cabin cruisers made of steel sheets welded together. He became so successful that rival Chris-Craft purchased the company in 1955, renaming it the Roamer Boat Division of the Chris-Craft Corporation. In 1948, George Arthur Pelgrim, president of a local furniture company, and his son-in-law, Jim White—who had spent hours working with local boat builder Kenneth Campbell—established the Mac Bay Boat Company. From the beginning, the directors of the new company were committed to innovation. Instead of following the standard practice of building with mahogany planks, they introduced a sturdy and affordable molded plywood-hulled boat equipped with quality hardware and inboard marine motors—the

first boat company in the United States to do this. After the company was sold to George and Clifford Dobben of North Muskegon, Mac Bay Boats were produced on East 7th Street, then at a small plant on Riley Street between Butternut Drive and 144th Street, and finally on Airline Road in Muskegon Heights in 1956.



*Mac Bay boat, ca. 1955*

Eventually, the Dobbens 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-making business. A significant drop in sales prompted them to give fiberglass a try around 1960, but their decision came too late. They shut their doors in 1964.



*Skipper-Craft display at ca. 1956 Grand Rapids boat show*

In 1952, two co-workers from the Chris-Craft Corporation began making their own plywood runabouts. The unofficial partnership of Jason Petroelje and Leon Slikkers began that year during a labor strike, but was short-lived due to religious differences and differing financial needs. These two men are the only known former Chris-Craft workers to start companies of their own.

Petroelje produced small inboard- and outboard-motor runabouts, called Skipper-Craft, until 1960, when he went to work for Glenn Eddy's Holland Powerboats Company. Leon Slikkers chose to form the Slick Craft Boat Company in 1954.

### **Slick Craft Is Established**

Slick Craft attracted many Chris-Craft employees looking for better wages and a more craftsman-centered

work environment. Slikkers continued making sheet plywood, molded plywood, and fiberglass outboard motorboats until converting completely to fiberglass in 1962. Fortunately for him, Slikkers had been experimenting with this new construction material before consumers said goodbye to the maintenance-intensive wood boats. He initially purchased fiberglass hulls from Poll Manufacturing—another Holland boat company—then finished the boats with his distinctive wood decks and attractive interiors. (Poll Manufacturing also provided hulls for Kenneth Cook’s company, Inland Boat Service, which manufactured KenCraft boats, both in fiberglass and molded plywood.)

Today, Slikkers’ company is called S2 Yachts. It still makes power yachts called Tiara Yachts in Holland (and North Carolina) and produces Pursuit fishing boats in Florida.

### **From the 1980s Forward**

The volatile economy and trend toward conglomerates in the pleasure-boating industry during the last 30 years has worked against the development of new boat-building companies in Holland. The only firms to take on the tough times and succeed included Dick Sligh’s Grand-Craft Acquisition, LLC (formerly known as Grand-Craft Corporation) and now owned by Jeff Cavanaugh, makers

of replica wooden powerboats—and the Power Play Boat Company, which was founded in 1983.

Like Slikkers, Poll, and Petroelje before them, Power Play’s owners—Kevin Hirdes and Todd Kamps—started by building one boat at a time in a small building until they reached a level of production requiring a factory. Eventually, they became PowerQuest Boats, and were once considered the BMW of the sport boat industry because of their quality workmanship and high powered boats. The company shut its doors in 2009.

One hundred and seventy-five years have passed since the *A. C. Mitchell* first floated out onto Black Lake. In the interim, the community of Holland has grown by leaps and bounds and so did its boat-building industry, which successfully accommodated the demand for commercial ships, military craft, and pleasure boats. From a peak of over 50 companies, there are now only two—Grand-Craft and Tiara Yachts. Both are nationally recognized for their craft and Holland is proud to claim them.

*Geoffrey Reynolds is the Director of the Joint Archives of Holland at Hope College and enjoys researching and writing about the boat building industry and vintage boat racing.*



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*Woldemar Bary (far right) and Sikorsky associates, ca. 1920s-1930s*