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Grand Craft: Builders of Fine Mahogany Boats

By Geoffrey D. Reynolds

During the 1960s, classic wooden boats were nearing the end of their production as fiberglass reinforced plastic (FRP) became the standard for boat construction. In the 1970s, small boatyards started restoring older wooden boats and building replicas for customers unhappy with the look, ride, and appeal of fiberglass boats. Customers wanted a boat with traditional styling, durable construction, and modern performance technologies that were comfortable and easy to maintain. Macatawa Bay Boat Works of Holland, Michigan, was one of these pioneers, along with GarWood Boat Company owners Larry and Tom Turcotte of Watervliet, New York, and Hacker Craft Boat Company owner Bill Morgan and his Morgan Marine in Silver Bay, New York.

In 1979, Steven Northuis, his father, and grandfather, founded the company known as Macatawa Bay Boat Works, located at 448 W. 21st Street, Holland, Michigan. The company built replica 1930 Chris-Craft 24-foot triple cockpit boats and restored all makes of wooden boats. His crew was made up of experienced craftsmen, many former employees of the local Chris-Craft boat factory, including brothers Chris and George Smith, grandsons of Christopher Columbus Smith, the founder of Chris-Craft. In fact, Christopher Smith used an original 1930 model to loft the plans used for the Grand Craft replica Chris-Craft 24-foot boats, which were first produced starting in 1982. Northuis priced his boats at \$29,000 for his Grand-Craft 24. The next year, the company offered the Grand-Craft Custom 27, a ten-

passenger classic based on the 1933 Chris-Craft design, as well as the 24-foot model. Their brochure also mentioned that Chris-Craft retirees and young apprentices were now working at the factory, undoubtedly to meet the increased demand for replica wooden classic. Their literature touted their boats as being “Designed for today and built for the rigors of contemporary boating, Grand-Craft now enables a few to

once again enjoy the grandeur of speed and ultimate luxury.”



In 1983, Northuis introduced the 23-foot Luxury Open-Cockpit model that was an original design for the company and one that caught the eye of actor Robert Redford. Redford eventually ordered the Grand-Craft 23' Luxury Sport Custom with hardtop model from Northuis.

During the building process, Redford visited the Holland boat shop to check on the upholstery color, seating arrangement, and other specifications. Redford's visits were not unlike other Grand-Craft boat owners who appeared periodically to check on the progress of their new boat, take in the aroma of the freshly-sawn mahogany wood, photograph the progress, and discuss changes. When Northuis sold the company to Dick and Marti Sligh in early 1984, Redford's boat was still under construction, as well as many other orders from his three model catalog of boats.

The Grand-Craft division of Macatawa Bay Boat Works was purchased from the Northuis family in 1984 by husband and wife Richard “Dick” and Marti Sligh of

(continued on page 2)

From the Director



This spring issue of the *Joint Archives Quarterly* is arriving in your mailbox in July due to lots of exciting archival reference work with Hope College student research projects and the normal amount of community research needs. While I hate to miss deadlines, student research needs are always a good reason to be behind in our

publishing! This summer we've welcomed two groups of student scholars—one group is working with the history department on the history of Reformed Church in America missionaries to China; the other group is creating an interactive website called Digital Holland, utilizing archival photographs, documents, oral histories and Google Maps. There will be more information on that project in a future issue.

In this issue, we have an article about the history of Grand-Craft Boats, one of a few new wood boat makers in the country. Also included are the reflections of Amanda Palomino, a recent Hope College graduate who worked as an archival research assistant for us, as well as the reflections of our spring graduate student intern Justine Bailey from Wayne State University's Library and Information Science Program. Both women are now embarking on either graduate work in library science or entering the profession.

Lastly, we celebrate with longtime volunteer and friend of the Joint Archives Lois Jesiek Kayes on the publication of her forthcoming book, *Jenison Electric Park: Holland Michigan's Beloved Resort and Amusement Park*. Since I have first known Lois, she has been researching in the Joint Archives of Holland for the writing of this book. It is a labor of love and one that reflects her hard work and dedication to seeing this project through to publication through In-Depth Editions, a local publisher. See the book announcement for locations where you can purchase a copy.

Geoffrey D. Reynolds

Grand-Craft (continued from page 1)

Holland, Michigan, and incorporated as Grand-Craft Corporation. Dick grew up around the water in Holland and enjoyed putting on waterskiing shows on Lake Macatawa with his brothers, sister, and friends. Dick was also a wood boat enthusiast of longstanding, having worked on wood boats since his childhood days and owning a marina (Sligh Marine) on Lake Charlevoix in East Jordan, Michigan, that specialized in the care of wood boats. His experience also included working in his family's furniture business (Sligh Furniture), teaching at the college level, and serving as a high school principal.

While Marti came into the wood boat building business from an academic background, she quickly took to partnering with Dick in making the company a success.



Dick and Marti Sligh, 2004

Together, they put in many long hours, weeks, and months developing a marketing plan, taking in restoration work, and eventually modifying some features in the classic runabouts, as well as developing a new 20-foot model that had an all-new look. This model was called the 20-foot Sport Runabout and was designed by Dick. Soon it became the company's most popular model, due to its solid mahogany construction, excellent performance on the water, and contemporary good looks. It was so well designed that Robert Redford traded in his original 23-foot Grand-Craft boat for this newer design. At the time, it was the only 20-foot Sport with a fiberglass hardtop. Redford's first boat was returned to Grand-Craft, restored and sold to a new owner. The company added a double cockpit version of this model to further satisfy customer demand. In addition to offering classic and contemporary designs in a fine looking mahogany boat, the Slighs and their craftsmen worked with customers to customize features and upholstery color combinations.

In 1988, the Slighs introduced their 20-foot Custom Classic model at a special preview event in Kollen Park. The double cockpit, triple-tone interior and blond decking model was designed by Dick. By 1990, the company employed sixteen craftsmen and produced about six boats annually, averaging 600 man hours per boat, or about nine months. That same year Outboard Marine Corporation (OMC), now owner of the Chris-Craft name, contacted Chris Smith and asked him to select a classic Chris-Craft boat design and build twenty-four boats for the company. Smith turned the order over to Grand Craft which contracted with OMC to build twenty-four triple cockpit boats. Between 1990 and 1991, Grand Craft completed fifteen of that model before sales dried up and the two parties decided to stop production. Grand Craft would later design their own 24-foot triple cockpit model for consumers.

By 1995, Grand-Craft was building five sport runabouts (21- to 28-feet), five classic runabouts (22- to 36-feet), and three hardtop commuters (30-, 36-, and 42-feet) per year. Prices ranged from \$35,000 (21-foot Sport Runabout) to \$250,000 (42-foot Commuter). Unlike the early Grand-Crafts, which were heavily influenced by older Chris-Craft designs, the Sligh era designs were largely created by Sligh with input from Chris Smith. The Sport boat line incorporated style characteristics seen in wooden boats from the 1950s and 1960s. The

classic boat line was inspired by the styles seen in boats from the 1920s and 1930s. That year, they predicted they would build 52 boats, the most popular model being the 21-foot Sport. In all of their boats they described the structure of the boat being much like those of decades past, using 7/8- by 3-inch mahogany for hull frames, with the hull being laid up with two layers of quarter-inch mahogany. The first layer was put on diagonally to the chine (the corner location where the side of the boat meets the bottom), then epoxied to a second layer of horizontal planking. Then, the inside of the boat was saturated in epoxy resin, while the exterior side received stain and between twelve and eighteen coats of varnish. This is referred to as the cold-molded mahogany approach, using the WEST (wet epoxy saturation technique), and is still in use today.

Other modern improvements included using stainless steel fasteners in some areas, while using time-tested silicon bronze fasteners in others. For their larger boats, four layers of mahogany were used on the bottom and three on the sides to further strengthen their construction. This type of construction allowed the Slighs to offer a lifetime guarantee of workmanship and materials for their boats and prove that wooden boats built with contemporary construction materials were a viable alternative to the proliferation of fiberglass boats.

In a 1991 newspaper article, Dick Sligh reported that the factory had twelve employees. Models offered ranged from 21- to 48-feet, with prices averaging \$115,000, but ranging from \$60,000 to \$500,000. Ten years later, he reported employing fifteen employees and averaging eighteen of the 24-foot Runabout model per year, each taking about ten months to build, with a cost of \$124,000 to \$165,000, depending on special equipment and custom touches. The 48-foot cabin cruisers started at \$1 million.

By the time the Slighs sold the business in May 2005, they had annual sales of \$2.5 million, had increased the space of the company to 22,000 square feet, employed sixteen employees making a boat every three to four months, and had built custom boats for customers like actors Tim Allen and George Clooney, actress-singer Jennifer Lopez, professional basketball star Joe Dumars, furniture and interior designer Barbara Barry, and singers Merle Haggard and Kid Rock. Sligh reported he and Marti had personally sold, designed, overseen construction, delivered each boat, and made sure that each owner felt very comfortable with their new Grand-Craft before leaving. His marketing plan consisted of word of mouth sales from current owners, and advertising in a handful of luxury magazines, like *The Robb Report*. Under this system, the company produced eighteen boats during its best sales year.

In May 2005, Chicago-based TMB Industries purchased the company. Tim Masek, who held a twenty-five percent share in the company and had a passion for wooden boats, was appointed president of the company, and incorporated it as Grand-Craft Acquisition, LLC. The Slighs stayed on to direct the design, production, and marketing aspect of the corporation. From the onset, Masek reported that he wanted to double the size of the business within twelve to eighteen months by doubling the number of employees, and utilizing more of the company floor space for production of thirty boats per year, ranging in size from 24- to 40-feet.



Checkers is a 2010 Grand-Craft 42-foot cruiser

In December 2006, Masek resigned from TMB Industries, and in January 2007 purchased Grand-Craft Acquisition, LLC, outright, becoming the sole owner of the newly-named Grand Craft Boat Company. Masek's background included running foundries, stamping companies, and buying and selling more than thirty-five companies across the United States. He found the position a welcome change from operating and owning smokestack manufacturing businesses that were underperforming, according to an April 16, 2007, *MiBiz* article. In that same article, he was quoted as saying that "owning the company gave him a chance to be involved with an exclusive high-end product and a very stable workforce of twenty-five people who have a passion for what they're doing." At that time, the company offered seventeen standard boat models, ranging in size from 20- to 40-feet, for prices between \$65,000 and \$1.9 million.

Soon, the company's boats were appearing in prestigious money magazines like *The Robb Report*, *Stratos*, *Yachts International* and *Millionaire Yachts*, and being sighted around the world. In the May 28, 2007, edition of the *Grand Rapids Business Journal*, Masek stated that orders were twelve months out for their standard models, starting at \$69,000, and they were on course to produce between twenty-five and thirty boats for the year. Masek even predicted that a new manufacturing facility might

be needed by 2009, the company's thirtieth anniversary. It appeared that his goals of immediate and significant growth through more capital, and the creation of a full-time marketing department, headed by Corey Koopmans, built upon the tested personal sales approach and new ideas, were working for the company, then reported to be worth \$10 million.

In 2008, the State of Michigan featured two Grand-Craft boats in the foreground and Big Red Lighthouse in the background on the cover of its state road map. The company also joined forces with Cincinnati, Ohio-based Antique Boat Center to produce and market a new Contemporary Classic runabout, styled very much like the 1946-1949 model years 20-foot Chris-Craft Custom. The Antique Boat Center held the exclusive rights to market this boat model. Later that same year, the company announced the introduction of the revolutionary Volvo-Penta IPS drive system on their larger models, including the new 42-foot Express Cruiser. This was the first wooden boat manufacturer to incorporate this system, which allowed greater maneuverability of the boat by its driver by pulling the boat through the water (tractor drive) versus pushing it with more traditional approaches. That same year they took another non-traditional approach with the marketing of their boats to exclusive housing associations and hotels, like those at The Reserve at Lake Keowee, located near Greenville, South Carolina, and Hotel Janelle, located in Harbor Springs, Michigan. At both facilities, owners and visitors could use a Grand-Craft during their stay, as well as work with a sales representative to purchase a Grand-Craft of their very own.

In September 2008, the company launched its own interactive website that allowed potential customers access to information and images of the company's complete line of boats. Customers of the company were given even more access as they were able to login and actually watch their boat being built via webcam, as well as images of the boat building process, with email and phone access to a customer representative if they had a

question about their boat or wanted to plan a plant visit. The company also launched LUXE Brokerage, an affiliated company that specialized in selling new and pre-owned Grand-Craft boats. Later that month, Koopmans left his vice president of sales and marketing position at Grand-Craft and was replaced by James Sheely. By all appearances, the company's future looked bright, even though Sheely remarked in an October newspaper article that inquiries were down from past years. On December 23, workers were sent home with no expectations to return. In February, a small group was called back to finish a boat, but were then laid off, according to Dick Sligh in a 2009 *Holland Sentinel* article.

In February 2009, Dick Sligh retired as president from the company that he and his wife had grown from very little. By June, the *Holland Sentinel* had reported that the company was "beached" and up for sale by owner Tim Masek. Inside the factory, about eight boats remained unfinished, fifty to seventy-five percent completed. Masek ended his ownership of the business in 2009, with no sale to a new buyer. The factory was then idle, except for the removal of unfinished boats and equipment after sale by creditors. Today, the building is being used by a new owner for purposes other than building boats. But, the Grand-Craft brand did not die with the 2009 closure. In 2010, Jeff Cavanaugh, president of Anchorage Marine Service, purchased two unfinished boats and the assets of the company, renamed it Grand Craft Boats, LLC, and moved it to Anchorage Marine Boatyard located at 1821 Ottawa Beach Road in Holland. By 2012, Cavanaugh and his crew of craftsmen had completed those two boats and two more new boats for customers.

Today, the company, made up of a crew of twelve, continues to build a few fine wooden custom boats per year from five standard models to custom orders, ranging from \$100,000 to \$1.6 million. Customers include Michigan Governor Rick Snyder, as well as current owners contracting for refinishing and restoring of older Grand-Craft boats.



Jeff Cavanaugh and the Grand Craft Boats crew with the boats they crafted, 2013

My Introduction to Hope College

by Justine Bailey

Prior to my experience working as an intern at the Joint Archives of Holland, I knew very little about the history of Hope College or Holland, Michigan. I was simply a student looking to develop archival skills in order to build my resume and fulfill requirements for Wayne State University's graduate program in library and information science.



The first collection I worked on was extremely small but prompted me to research and learn about both Holland and Hope College's history. The Janice Van Lente collection included records from prominent Hollander Albertus C. Van Raalte and family, along with influential Hope College faculty and graduates, such as

Gerrit J. Diekema, John B. Nykerk, Gerrit J. Kollen, John H. Kleinheksel and his family. Using records and collections held at the Joint Archives of Holland and some additional outside resources, I was able to link these people together and form an understanding as to why the records were all included within this one collection. As I was completing the research, I began to understand the uniqueness of Holland and just how deep its history truly runs. I also established a sense of how important Hope College is to Holland, as well as the leaders it creates through its students. The second collection was entirely representative of this.

I was given the incredible opportunity to work on George D. Zuidema's collection. Dr. Zuidema is a Hope College graduate who went on to receive his medical degree from Johns Hopkins University. During his Hope College years, Zuidema was a member of Phi Kappa Alpha, also known as the Cosmopolitan Fraternity, and the glee club. His "Pot Frosh" cap is even included in this collection! He was an extremely influential leader who served in the United States Air Force Medical Corps, where he studied the effects of positive G forces on fighter pilots. This led to him working with NASA's Science and Technical Advisory Committee (STAC) on the Apollo Space missions. Zuidema spent his career working at Johns Hopkins University and the University of Michigan, which he retired from after completing his second term

as Vice Provost for Medical Affairs in 1995. Zuidema has been bestowed with numerous awards, including an honorary degree from Hope College in 1969.

This experience allowed me to process two different collections and create collection registers for both, develop an inventory for a portion of an additional collection held at the archives, work with various formats that I will most likely encounter in my future endeavors, and create metadata for a digital postcard collection. Through my 135 hours that I worked at the archives, I not only gained valuable archival experience, but I also was able to establish a deeper understanding of the Holland area and its history. I also was able to experience the unique atmosphere that Hope College offers its students, and I can see how it helps to shape and develop future leaders.

I would like to sincerely thank Geoffrey Reynolds for selecting a solid assortment of tasks for me to complete, and for assisting me with my questions when I was unsure. I would also like to thank Lori Trethewey for always offering words of encouragement and additional support, as well as students Amanda Palomino and Victoria Henry for providing me with assistance and much needed conversational breaks. I wish you both the best of luck in your future studies!

About the author: Justine Bailey is a graduate of Albion College and Wayne State University. She received her Bachelor of Arts degree from Albion in 2009, with a major in history and a minor in management. In 2014, she completed her master's in library and information science from Wayne State University, along with receiving a graduate certificate in archival administration. Justine hopes to start a career working in an archives and has developed an interest in public records.

From Archives Amateur to Aficionado

by Amanda Palomino

Four years ago, as an incoming freshman at Hope College, I did not even know what an archives was, let alone that we had one. However, my eyes were opened the day my sophomore class of Mellon Scholars visited the Joint Archives of Holland for the first time. That day, I met Geoffrey Reynolds, the director of the archives, who, during his introductory speech to us, let it slip that the archives frequently hired students as research assistants. *Whoa*, I thought excitedly, *I have to check this out!* So I met with Geoffrey afterwards, and the rest is history.



Over the past three years, I worked at the archives and learned so much about Holland and Hope history, as well as the job of an archivist. One of the things I loved about working there was the variety of projects we got to work on; any given day, I could be scanning old letters from the Nykerk collection, organizing bulging files from the art department, searching for information through the stacks for the relative of a Hope alumnus, or entering metadata for the online collection of the Van Ark postcards. Besides finishing or updating current collections, I also had the opportunity to tackle some projects entirely on my own. For example, in honor of CASA's twenty-fifth anniversary, I wrote an article for the *Joint Archives Quarterly* newsletter detailing the organization's history. My process began with going through the archives' CASA (Children's After School Achievement program) collection, which I was able to supplement with more files brought over from the their office and several interviews which I conducted with CASA staff. This kind of research and writing really excited me, and I began to realize how I could use the skills I had acquired in the archives in my future.

As a young student, I had a difficult time deciding how to translate my English major into a career, but through my work in the archives, I struck on an entirely different possibility – library science. The archives helped me to see that, today more than ever, librarians and archivists have an important role in the community, helping citizens utilize information resources which have grown exponentially with technology. This service-oriented perspective is one of the things I liked so much in the archives, where our first priority was always to help community members and students find answers.

Now, as a graduate of Hope College heading off to pursue a masters in library science at University of Michigan, I know that I owe a big thank-you to the archives for getting me started on this path, and especially to Geoffrey Reynolds and Lori Trethewey, from whom I have learned so much and who have both been so encouraging and supportive. I hope someday to be able to help others the way the Joint Archives has helped and continues to help so many, including me!

About the author: Amanda Palomino is a graduate of Hope College, with a double major in English and Spanish, as well as a Mellon Scholar. In the fall, she will be attending University of Michigan's School of Information to pursue a master's degree in library science.



JENISON ELECTRIC PARK
Holland Michigan's Beloved Resort
and Amusement Park

By Lois Jesiek Kayes

Jenison Electric Park is an illustrated historical profile of the lakeside resort and its beloved amusement park that blossomed at the turn of the twentieth century. Located on the shores of Black Lake (Lake Macatawa since 1934), it rose to popularity during the gentle era of steamship travel, electric railroads, and the twilight of the horse and buggy. Families, church groups, and other vacationers sought refuge from the summer heat on the shaded lawns cooled by lake breezes. This painstakingly researched book brings life to a forgotten time in Michigan's fascinating history.

Available in mid-July from local and online retailers or through the publisher at:

www.in-deptheditions.com/JenisonElectricPark.html

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Dick and Marti Sligh enjoying a ride in one of their fine creations, ca. 2005