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Roamer, Before Chris-Craft

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Roamer, Before Chris-Craft

By Geoffrey Reynolds

Linn took his sales pitch to boat shows around the United States, and took on the competition in this market, which had existed since 1939 and included Safti-Craft, Steel Craft, and Higgins.

After selling and building one of his large, steel-hulled boats, Linn launched most of them at Jesiek's Boatyard (now Eldeans) where the new owner took delivery. Very few were delivered overland, and thus the phrase "They'll Go Anywhere" came to be used in sales literature.

The year 1951 brought big changes to the Roamer Boat Company, its labor force and profit sheet. That July, it was announced that Roamer had contracted with the U.S. Navy to produce ten John Alden-designed 45-foot steel tugs, powered by diesel, worth over half a million dollars, and delivered between December 1951 and June 1952. These boats were used by the Army Transportation Corps. In 1952, a second contract, worth almost a million dollars, to build an additional twenty-one tugs, was awarded and with it came an expansion to the Washington Avenue plant and to build a warehouse in Park Township near the Big Bayou.

Ultimately, thirty-one tugs were built and 120 persons were involved in the project. The last three tugs steamed south in September, 1954.

With the addition of the warehouse in Park Township in 1954 came plans for Roamer Haven and eventually Bay Haven Marina in May 1955, now part of the Eldean family holdings.

In March 1955, Robert Linn sold Roamer Boat Company to the Chris-Craft Corporation for \$117,000 and ended an era. Chris-Craft owners wanted to enter the welded steel boat business and Roamer was a natural choice, seeing that it was in the same town as one of their largest plants, and had proven itself in the market place for several years. It also allowed Chris-Craft to compete with New Orleans rival, Higgins. After selling Roamer to Chris-Craft, Linn and his sons operated Bay Haven Marine at 1862 Ottawa Beach Road in Holland for many years. Son David passed away in 1988; father Robert in 1994; and son Robert in 1996.

Roamer became Roamer Steel Boats Division of the Chris-Craft Corporation in 1956. Chris-Craft added on to the original Washington Avenue plant, soon after the purchase, and introduced subtle design changes to the Roamer line.

Chris-Craft built a new plant on Lakewood Boulevard in Holland in May, 1956. An aluminum boat was first included in the line in 1962, and eventually the Roamer Division concentrated on large aluminum motor yachts. Production was transferred to Florida in 1975 and ended completely in 1979. The latest Chris-Craft Corporation reintroduced the fiberglass version of the Roamer model for a short time, and ended production, again, in 2010. ♪

The Roamer Boat Company was formally founded in Holland, Michigan, by Robert R. Linn. Linn came to Holland from Grand Rapids as a young man with his wife Frances, and apprenticed with Ken Campbell of the Campbell Boat Company for two years.

The couple and their two sons, Robert Jr. and David, lived at 1024 South Shore Drive, very near the Campbell Boat Company. The 1947 Holland City Directory lists Linn as a boat manufacturer at the South Shore Drive address.

Linn built his first Roamer cruiser, a steel-hulled 32-foot express cruiser, in 1946. This most likely took place at the Campbell Boat Company facility, since a factory site had not yet been procured, according to city directories and boating magazine articles. By the fall of 1947, Linn had produced another all-welded steel 30-footer called "Roamer," which was christened by Frances at the Campbell site. This boat was produced for the Linn family by the Campbell Boat Company, according to newspaper reports, and featured a mahogany wood cabin.

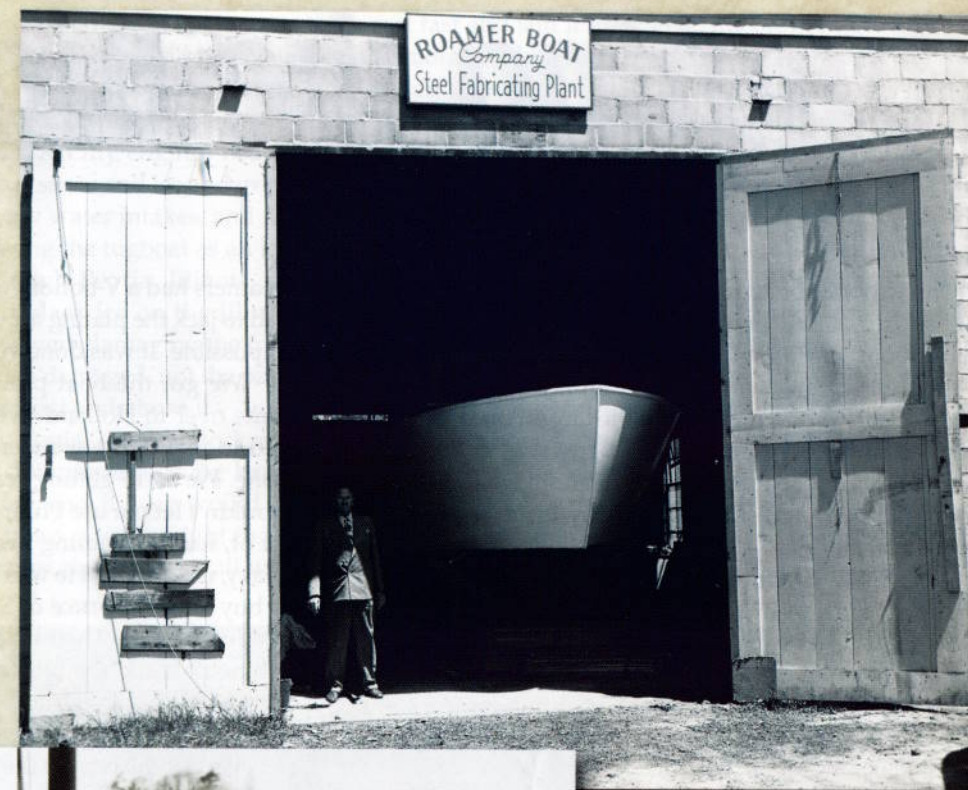
In 1949, Linn produced a 36-foot line patrol boat for the City of Chicago for use in their drainage canal.

He also produced his first brochure, which featured a 32-foot Cabin Cruiser as well as houseboats, fishing boats, and work boats. The Cabin Cruisers ranged from 32-40 feet. Costs ranged from \$9,950 to \$15,800.

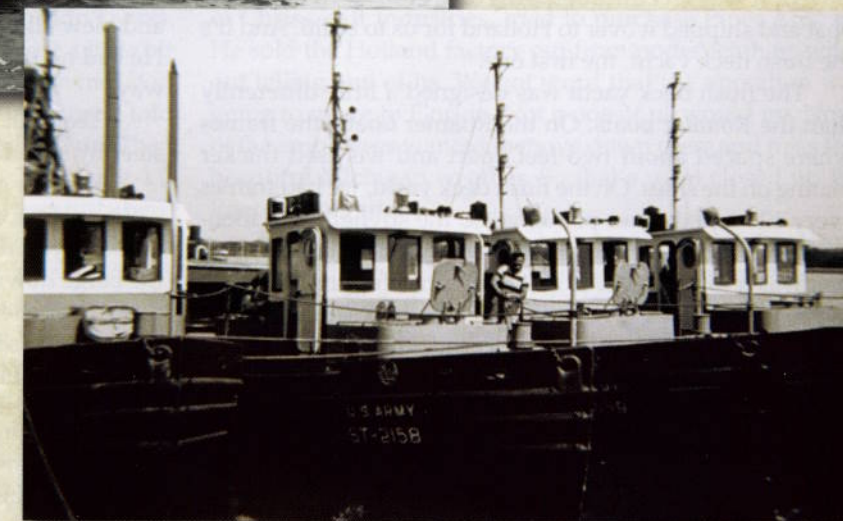
You could even purchase a "handy man's special" model that provided you with a hull and the rest was up to you at a much lower cost. During the early years, interior finishing was often completed by the buyer even on the stock boats sold as complete. Other models included express cruisers, deckhouse cruisers, and double cabin cruisers in 33, 36, 38, 41, 42, and 48-foot lengths. Many of these cruisers were designed by naval architect A.M. Deering of Chicago. Commercial craft included passenger boats built for Olson Boat Corp. of Wisconsin Dells, Roseland Amusement Park of Rochester, New York, and Wilderness Outfitters in Ely, Minnesota.

By May, 1950, and maybe before, a factory building being used at 961 Washington Avenue was robbed of its varnish stock and a boat model. Linn promoted his steel hulled boats as the easy, low maintenance boat of your dreams, utilizing the special, copper alloy steel as non-corrosive. And, after all, it was made of steel, 1/8" thick for the hull sides and 3/16" for the bottom, which would give its owners carefree confidence in doubtful waters.

OPPOSITE PAGE:
Robert R. Linn, founder of
the Roamer Boat Company.



BELOW:
A Roamer cruiser at Jesiek's
Shipyard in Holland, MI.



RIGHT:
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers tug
boats rafted together on the Mississippi River.

Photos supplied by the author