Along the Shores of Macatawa: Boat Building in Holland

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BOAT BUILDING
IN HOLLAND

By Geoffrey Reynolds

For 175 years, Holland has served as a boat-building center in Michigan. From sloops and schooners that plied the Great Lakes to wartime vessels that sailed on the open ocean to the pleasure boats enjoyed by modern-day mariners, Holland has seen—and constructed—them 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 two-masted A.C. Mitchell, named for one of 14 investors in the ship. 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 site 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, such as 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 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 he 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 Steketee 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 of Black Lake officially changed names to Holland, and the brief Dutch-only, boat-building era came to an end.

**Schooners Rule the Waves**

During the 1860s, the production of ships increased sharply due to the relocation of Holland's shipping channel and dredging work that allowed larger vessels to pass into and out of the harbor. Schooners were being produced at shipyards at the eastern end of Black Lake, and on the northern and southern shores as well.

Holland shipbuilders such as Peter De Graaff, William Clark, Harman Slag, and Pascal Taylor manufactured 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 decade unfolded, additional shipyards were erected, including those named Beckwith, Hopkins, Anderson, and Waring. By 1870, only Anderson's was left.

A second boom and bust played out locally from the mid-1870s to the mid-1880s.

**Pleasure Boats Are Introduced**

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

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 Shipyards site, the company produced motorized pleasure boats in town until it moved 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 gas-engine launches until about 1911.

In 1910, another Grand Rapids company relocated to Black Lake, this time in the Jenison Park area. Known as the Jesie Brothers Boat Yard, this enterprise 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 was 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.

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.

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 design area and offices for the owner, Kenneth Campbell, and his crew of sailboat makers. This marked the first time since the end of the schooner era that wind-powered boats were being built in Holland. 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 its 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 a boat-building yard until 2003.

Chris-Craft Comes to Town

While most pleasure-craft builders in Michigan struggled to survive the Great Depression, the Chris-Craft Boat Company of Algonac made plans to expand. And Holland—with its

SLIKKERS SPEAKS
ABOUT THE INDUSTRY

The Joint Archives of Holland maintains a collection of 73 oral history interviews conducted with the owners and employees of many Michigan boat-building companies of the 20th and 21st centuries. Among those whose comments are preserved is Leon Slikkers, founder of the Slick Craft Boat Company and S2 Yachts, Inc. Here is what Slikkers had to say in 2001 about the way the industry changed during his career...

ON NEW MARKETS:
“I looked at a Chris-Craft [customer] as a person that had lots of money...and I said, ‘We can build a product here [at Slick Craft] for the next level of society: the blue collar worker that maybe has a good job, has his house paid for and wants another toy.’”

ON NEW MATERIALS: “[There] was a company in Minnesota that was offering fiberglass liquid that you could buy in quarts and buy the cloth, and you’d cover wooden boats with it in the very early stages. [By] the very next year...I had done a few boats with it. Didn’t like the process at all; it just seemed like an awful lot of work. But then I heard that they were molding it with multiple layers, and I said, ‘Wow, that sounds very interesting.’ It intrigued me because we were always trying to bend wood that didn’t want to bend to some of the curves, and so you’d have to saw it out. And I was thinking, if you could just lay this material in, wow, you could really come up with some fantastic shapes that are more conducive to a boat... [Plus] the talk was that [fiberglass] would last forever.”

ON THE APPEAL OF WOODEN BOATS:
“When I was making wooden boats, the people actually spent more time working with their boats then using their boats. But that was what they enjoyed. [The customers were craftsmen themselves]; they like[d] to tinker and all that stuff. You know that’s what made that industry, I’m convinced—the small boat industry. The person could take care of the boat themselves.”

Workers at the Beacon Boat Company launch a minesweeper, circa 1956.
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 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.)

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.

In 1948, George Arthur Pelgrim, president of a local furniture store, 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 in Holland, then at a small plant on Riley Street, and finally on Airline Road in Muskegon Heights in 1956.

Eventually, the Dobbins started hearing from their distributors that wood boats were simply too much work for consumers to maintain, and that they should get into the Fiberglas boat-making business. A significant drop in sales prompted them to give Fiberglas a try in about 1960, but their decision came too late. They shut their doors in 1964. In 1952, two co-workers from
Chris-Craft 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 Chris-Craft employees to start companies of their own.

Petroelje produced small inboard- and outboard-motor runabouts 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- and molded-plywood and Fiberglas outboard motorboats until converting completely to Fiberglas in 1962. Fortunately for Slikkers, he had been experimenting with this new construction material before consumers said goodbye to the maintenance-intensive wood boats. He initially purchased Fiberglas 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 Fiberglas and molded plywood.)

Today, Slikkers' company is called S2 Yachts. It makes powerboats with the Tiara Yachts nameplate 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 over the past 30 years worked against the development of new boat-building companies in Holland. Two firms that were determined to take on the tough times and succeed were Richard Sligh's Grand-Craft Corporation—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 until they reached a level of production requiring a factory. Their company—later called PowerQuest Boats—was considered the BMW of the sport-boat industry. Still, that accolade didn't prevent them from shutting down in 2009.

Grand-Craft, however, continues to produce runabouts at its Ottawa Beach Road facility, under the leadership of Jeff Cavanaugh.

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 grew by leaps and bounds and so did its boat-building industry, which successively accommodated the demand for commercial ships, military craft, and pleasure boats. From a peak of more than 50 companies, there are now only two: Grand-Craft and S2 Yachts. But both are nationally recognized for their products, 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.