Lake 'n Sea Speedboats

Geoffrey D. Reynolds

Hope College, reynoldsg@hope.edu

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ACBS LATEST MARQUE CLUB ADDITION:
LAKE ‘N SEA SPEEDBOATS

By Geoffrey Reynolds,
Water Wonderland Chapter

The story of the Lake ‘n Sea model fiberglass speedboat often begins with the derogatory phrase “Leak ‘n Sink,” a play on words coined by some staff members of the Chris-Craft Corporation after that company divested itself from its first attempt at building a boat made of plywood and fiberglass. But the story goes much deeper than that. It all started in the small, sunny seaside town of Boca Raton, Florida, in 1956.

On NW 6th Street in Boca Raton stood the Lakensea Boat Corporation, a division of Southern Plastic Corporation. The only known records showing their existence is a 1956 city directory and a rare copy of their one and only brochure from that year, which uses two different spellings of the boat name, Lakensea and Lake-N-Sea. Within the brochure the company illustrated three 15-ft. models that year: the outboard motor driven Lakensea L-15 double cockpit runabout, Lakensea I-15 double cockpit runabout available with the Fageol “44” V-drive inboard engine and the Lakensea U-15 utility model. All three models included an exaggerated spray-deflecting bow, molded-in front seats and were, according to the brochure, “made entirely of fiberglass.” The three models appeared to be the standard two-piece construction type (deck and hull) even though they are described as “moulded in one piece for safety.” Other features included custom color-impregnated schemes for hull piece available in Cadillac Pink, Seafoam Green, Yellow Chartreuse, Flamingo, Boca White, Midnight Black, and Sunset Red. The deck piece was only available in white. The utility version was billed as the “fisherman’s delight with large space for gear and tackle” while the runabouts were said to “seat six comfortably” and go 40 mph with “a million thrills and no spills.”

In August 1957, Motor Boating magazine reported that Chris-Craft was entering the molded fiberglass boat field with the purchase of all assets, tools, equipment, name, trademark and designs of the Lakensea Boat Corporation. The boats were reportedly going to be manufactured in their Algonac, Michigan, and Pompano Beach, Florida, plants under the Lake-N-Sea Boats Division of Chris-Craft. From the mouth of the vice president, Wayne Pickell, came the following comment “Spiraling sales of practical and stylish outboard motors by many manufacturers has created a broad new market for low-cost outboard boats. Lake-N-Sea Boats will develop a line of durable fiberglass boats that reflect both unique styling made possible by molded fiberglass construction and low prices resulting from volume production.”

By October of that year, Outboard magazine was reporting that this new style of Chris-Craft boat was now being produced and would be one of the highlights of the 1958 model year. Colors schemes included Boca White decks and a choice of three hull colors in Sunrise Pink, Seafoam Green and Yellow Chartreuse. Chris-Craft also touted the fact that Styrofoam flotation, created by the Dow Chemical Company, came standard on all models as a safety feature in case of a mishap. The cost of the boat at your local dealer was only $755.

Chris-Craft would sell off the division later that year citing problems with production adaptation and delamination problems with the fiberglass-wrapped fir plywood transoms and plywood floors. Soon the name “Leak ‘n Sink” became synonymous with this boat model, as it was gladly sold to another Michigan manufacturer in early 1958 with less than 300 boats produced.

In 1957, John T. Parsons, president of the Traverse City, Michigan, based Parsons Corporation, was notified by his lawyer that Chris-Craft was looking to sell its interest in the Lake ‘n Sea Division. By early 1958, Parsons had purchased the assets and rights of the Lake ‘n Sea Division for $17,500 and formed Lake ‘n Sea Boats, Parsons Corporation Special Products Division.
Known as the "father of the second industrial revolution" for his work in numerical control (NC), Parsons began working at the age of fifteen at Parsons Corporation, which was founded by his father in 1928. The company made bombs during WW II, nose cones for bombs used by the United States armed forces, and fuel lines for the booster rockets used in the Saturn V/Apollo missions. He is best known for his ability to engineer the making of almost anything, and boats were not a big challenge for him in 1958.

A color brochure from 1958 illustrates what appears to be the same model outboard motor driven boat previously manufactured by Chris-Craft. In fact, the brochure's text has been taken almost word for word from the advertisements Chris-Craft used in 1957. The same Sunrise Pink, Seafoam Green, and Yellow Chartreuse hulls with white decks were also the only color choices. It is not surprising that Parsons used previously written information to generate a quick, but attractive color brochure in early 1958 that promised "a molded, durable, carefree bundle of boating fun!" Parsons reported, "We built a few of the boats right after we purchased the company, but we were not happy with the results so I had my chief engineer, Don Goodland, rework the molds and sold the redesigned boats through the remainder of 1958 model year." By August 1958, Outboard magazine had caught up to the Parsons Corporation purchase and reported that Parsons was now producing eight different models of the Lake 'n Sea model boats measuring 12 to 19 feet in length and 68 inches wide. Evidently Parsons wasted no time in having his team of designers, headed up by newly hired industrial designer, Bert Carlson, make the necessary changes to the purchased molds so that the hulls would release properly and look good as well. "The only two contributions I made were hiring Don Goodland to style the boats and insisting that he change the look..."
of the boat from the stern,” commented Parsons in a May 2003 interview.

When the 1959 model year brochure for the Lake 'n Sea came out in the fall of 1958, it was clear that Parsons' vision for this boat line was dramatic and very stylish. The line had been expanded from eight to eleven different models ranging in length from 12 to 19 feet with different customizations and seating configurations. Models ranged in price from $295 to $1,040. Model names now included the 12 ft. Manistee, 14 ft. AuSable, 14 ft. Caribbean, 15 ft. Biscayne, 16 ft. Arrowhead, 18 ft. Saratoga and 18 ft. Grand Traverse. Color choices included Mediterranean Blue or Coral Pink for the Biscayne only, and Tropical Suntan added in, for the other models. Changes included snap-on padded seat cushions, vented factory installed windshield as well as standard deck hardware, steering wheel and controls. Custom models included custom Lake 'n Sea logo dash panel, steering wheel, running lights, and jack staff. The transom design of all but two, the 15-ft. Biscayne and the 12 and 14-ft. Manistee fishing utility, of the styles offered, had also changed to resemble louvers seen on many automobiles at that time. This design makes the Parsons-made boats from 1959 to 1960 the most identifiable to this day. Parsons realized, "The customers recognized that the styling was terrific... and we didn't have much trouble selling the boats, even though we had to ship them all over the country." I also believe that the Parsons Corporation successful history with manufacturing fiberglass also aided in reducing the problems Chris-Craft had with making fiberglass boat hull, like delamination, establishing high production rates and a quality product.

Even with Parson's winning combination of style and quality offerings shown in the 1959 brochure his company could not make the boat line profitable enough. According to the January 1960 issue of Boats and February 1960 issue of The Rudder, the 1960 line of boats was to be "concentrated" to the 15 ft. Biscayne sports utility, lengthened 15 ft. Caribbean custom runabout, 17 ft. Arrowhead custom runabout and 19 ft. Saratoga custom runabout with no change in standard equipment. Further evidence of a production stoppage appeared in the 1963 Blue Book Outboard Trade-In Guide which stated the company did not produce boats in 1961. In early 1960, Parsons sold the boat line to Michigan Fiberglass Plastics, Inc. of Holland, Michigan.

Michigan Fiberglass Plastics, Inc., also listed as Michigan Fiberglass Company, was started by Lawrence Valentine Meyering in 1960. Originally from Chicago, the former lawyer and banker turned fiberglass manufacturer, started working for the Zeeland, Michigan, based Camfield Fiberglass Plastics, Inc. in 1942. After encountering some internal strife with management in 1959, Meyering left the company to try something new. Not long after leaving Camfield, Meyering contacted former co-worker Henry Kort about his desire to start up a boat company and to ask Kort whether he would be interested in becoming his new facility manager. After Kort accepted the job, Meyering instructed him to prepare a warehouse for boat building. While Kort prepared the rented building, Meyering saw to the transferring from Parsons Corporation of the fiberglass molds and equipment used to make the boats.

After the molds had arrived, Meyering and Kort began the process of building the latest incarnation of Lake 'n Sea speedboat. But it wasn't long before they and other members of the production staff discovered why Chris-Craft had sold the rights to the boat and nicknamed it the "Leak 'n Sink": compound curves and delamination. According to John Schutten, former building manager of the rented building, many of these bad hulls were stacked on a lot near the factory and were later hauled away for disposal. Other employees who worked at Michigan Fiberglass Plastics, Inc. mentioned that many of the boat hulls were ruined when separated from the mold due to bad releasing agents.
After about a year of trial and error and bills piling up, Meyering vacated the building and moved his operation to two rented buildings in nearby Borculo where he expanded the company's offerings to include not only the Lake 'n Sea speedboats, but also canoes and a small sailboat model called the Super Porpoise. The company remained there until being purchased in 1963, along with its inventory, by Grand Rapids, Michigan businessmen Richard Levy and Morrie Kleinman. The production of the Lake 'n Sea model speedboat apparently ended when Levy and Kleinman took ownership of the inventory.

If you are interested in acquiring, restoring or simply seeking more information about these classic speedboats, contact me via the Lake 'n Sea Marque Club website at www.lakensea.org. There you will find information and photographs posted to help owners establish construction dates for their individual boats and the manufacturer, review original brochures, ask questions, and learn about the whereabouts of much needed parts and accessories to complete their restoration.

(The rare 1956 Lakensea brochure and other research materials were generously shared by Lee Wangstad)