

# 50<sup>th</sup> ANNIVERSARY LAKELAND BOATING

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JANUARY 1996

## WOODEN BOAT RENAISSANCE



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## WOODEN BOATBUILDERS

### THE Fox



*The venerable Mayea Boat Works delivers its latest masterpiece and kicks off our series on Great Lakes wooden boat builders.*

article by Bob Pearson  
photos by Ken Hanna

**W**anna create a warm fuzzy feeling in boaters? Show 'em a high-gloss mahogany runabout. It's like showing pretty babies to mothers—these classic boats are time-honored favorites.

While they hardly threaten the incomes of production fiberglass boat builders, wooden boat builders are surfing along quite nicely on the crest of a wave of nostalgia and a recharged market. *Lakeland Boating* talked to a number of wooden boat builders and found they appear to be surviving despite luxury taxes, scarce wood resources and the near-disappearance of wooden boatbuilding skills. In fact, most builders reported business at an all-time high.

In researching our several-installment series on wooden boat builders in the Great Lakes area, we talked to a number of custom builders and several production builders. Naturally, there are similarities and differences. All use mahogany. All use plank-on-frame construction. All use epoxy to stabilize and strengthen the wood and prevent rot. The differences: Some use modern modified deep-V, broad-beam designs. Others stick to the traditional narrow-beam designs with deep forefoot forward, transitioning to flat-bottom surfaces at the transom. Some incorporate heavier layers of planking. One builder insists on using only mahogany, even for frame members, while oth-

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ers resort to white oak framing.

When it comes to power, our experts are split. Some use traditional powertrains with gasoline engines, transmissions and propellers tucked under the transom at the end of shafts. Others, because of the relative scarcity of big, high-torque gasoline engines, have gone to high-performance diesel engines and are experimenting with outdrive and surface-piercing powertrains.

Though their individual approaches may vary, all of the builders we spoke with had one thing in common: All are iconoclasts, building wooden boats *their* way in the firm belief it is the *only* way. The builder featured in this, our first installment, is perhaps the most iconoclastic of all.

*The Fox* is the latest stunning product of the venerable Mayea Boat Works, in Fair Haven, Michigan. The Works has been in business since 1908 and has occupied the same site on the shores of Lake St. Clair's Anchor Bay since 1914. *The Fox* is a 36-foot, all-mahogany Mays-Craft (the Mayeas think "Mayea-Craft" is awkward to say) runabout that has a top speed of more than 65 mph. With eight people aboard she cruises comfortably, gobbling up water at a rate of between 50 and 60 mph.

The Mayea Boat Works is also busy building two other boats. One is a sport cruiser similar in style to popular models now factory-built by Bertram, Viking and Hatteras. This raised-foredeck 42-footer is, yes, almost all mahogany. It will have a full stateroom with ensuite head and galley forward. It has a modified-V bottom with dual strakes, reversed and dropped chine and the trademark full-framed mahogany windshield. The other boat, now

just a bunch of frames stacked against a wall, will be an ultra-fast 40-foot mahogany speedboat.

The Mayea Boat and Aeroplane Works, as it was formerly known, was founded in 1908 by Louis T. Mayea on the banks of the Detroit River. Mayea decided property in Detroit was too expensive to allow for expansion, so in 1914, he picked up his boat works, put it on barges and moved it out on Lake St. Clair.

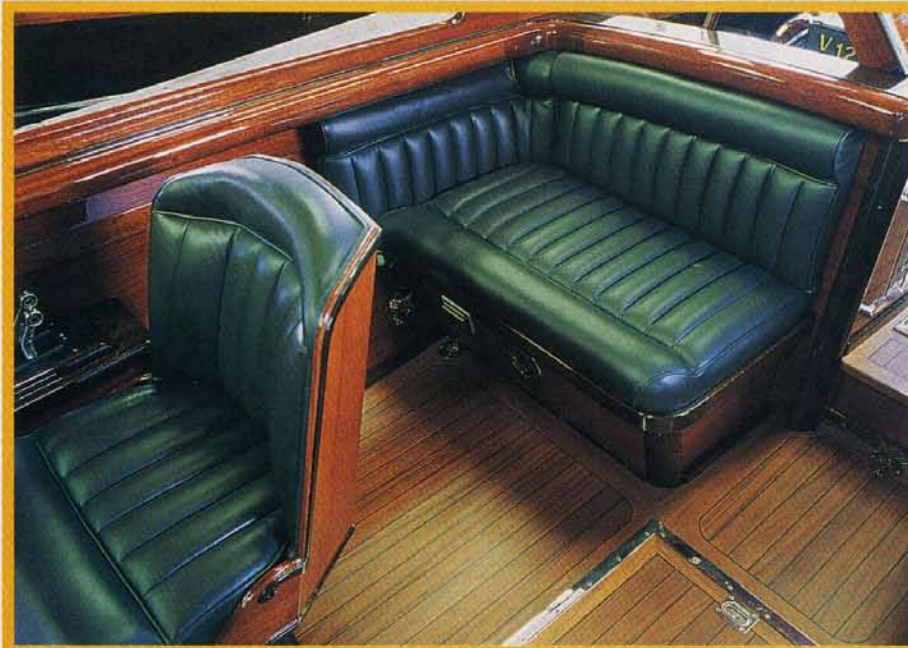
For many years, business was good. Around that time Mayea had a brief working relationship with the legendary John L. Hacker. When World War I came along, boat-building skills translated quickly into flying boat-building skills. The Works built several U.S.

Navy seaplanes, along with launches that were forerunners to speedboats and runabouts. The Works also was building floats for seaplanes for the Wright Brothers.

When metal became the material of choice for planes, The Mayea Boat and Aeroplane Works concentrated on boats. Much of the roaring in the Roaring '20s was done in speedboats, and the Works, along with Chris Smith, Gar Wood, Hacker,

the Dodges and others, prospered.

Then came Prohibition and rumrunning. With Canada just across the Detroit and St. Clair Rivers, the Lake St. Clair area became a hotbed of booze-smuggling activity. Again the Works profited. Rumrunners needed fast boats. So did the Law. Both sides became Mayea Boat Works customers. It was not uncommon for the Works' repairmen to be patching bullet holes in a rumrunner right next to a law enforcement boat requiring similar attention. It was an unwritten rule that the Mayea Boat Works was



Custom mahogany bucket seats and benches covered in rich green leather provide comfortable luxury. The full-framed mahogany windshield and unique instrumentation are Mays-Craft trademarks.



neutral territory.

The Depression hit following Black Tuesday, Oct. 29, 1929, but the Works was so busy keeping both sides afloat in the Prohibition battle that no one noticed...until Prohibition was repealed. Things got slow for a while but picked up again in the late '30s; then came World War II and the Navy business.

During World War II, Mayea designed and built experimental diesel patrol craft and stackable landing craft for the U.S. Navy. After the war, prosperity fueled the custom boat business, but then came fiberglass technology. There still was enough wooden boat business around, especially in restoration, to keep the Works going until a resurgence in custom wooden boats kicked in during the late '50s and early '60s.

Aside from *The Fox's* considerable speed, what really makes this genteel wooden muscle boat different is her layout. Her forward and aft passenger areas are connected by a walk-through between the engines. No clambering awkwardly over hatches here. One saunters, even at speed, fore and aft while holding on to handsome, custom stainless steel hand rails.

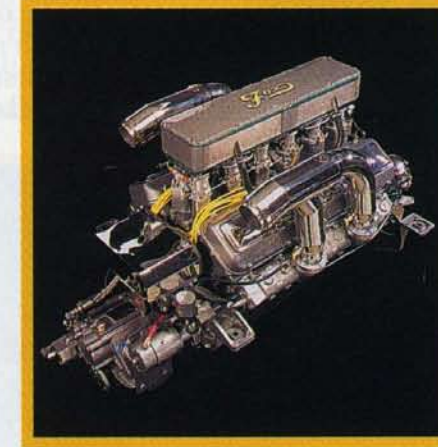
In the forward passenger compartment, pilot and co-pilot are supported luxuriously in custom mahogany bucket seats. In the bulkhead in front of the co-pilot is a 110v/12v beverage refrigerator. Behind the buckets, there's a split bench seat for four. The aft passenger compartment has a bench seat for three. All seats are covered in rich green leather of the same grade used in luxury cars. The green is a shade the Mayeas call "Savannah Green," after an earlier custom Mays-Craft runabout called the *Savannah Jane*. The same color shows up on the runabout's bottom and in the background of its unusual instrumentation.

*The Fox's* helm is also noteworthy. Instrumentation is by Telcor, an Irvine, California, company that makes instruments for railroad engines and industrial power complexes. The instruments are exactly accurate and can be adjusted, or "zeroed out," readily through knobs on their backs. Instrumentation includes a racing compass and differential GPS. The transmission and throttle con-

trols are the positive-action units used in ocean racers. A custom stainless steel steering wheel bears the shape of a fox.

Mayea Boat Works' signature is the unique dual full-framed mahogany windshields fore and aft. Riding at speed in *The Fox* won't result in a "bad hair day." The handsome windshields are highly effective in keeping out spray, noise and the very active vortex of air moving by. The rear windshield is split to accommodate fore-and-aft passages.

The heart and soul of *The Fox* is a pair of 780-hp V-12 Botta Purricelli Milano engines. Rev limiters keep these monsters at or below 5,200 rpm, but the operative big number is torque—885 foot/pounds at 3,000 rpm. These V-12s are "hemis," which is to say they have hemispherical combustion chambers like Keith Black's famed Chrysler V-8 hemis that made drag racing history. The B.P.M.s put out unmatched power and torque (except by full-race engines). You can hear hemis before you see them. You feel them vibrate in your stomach like a



(above) A pair of custom modified B.P.M. hemis kick out enough torque to push *The Fox* to nearly 60 mph. (below) The Mayeas minimized *The Fox's* silhouette by raising the fore-deck and using a darker stain on the coaming than on the rest of the hull.



low-down bass being played in a passing vehicle with a mega-power stereo. For gentility's sake, *The Fox's* B.P.M. hemis have been muted somewhat by special Mayea-designed exhausts. Nevertheless, you immediately know raw power is present when the boat idles by.

The Mayeas—Larry, 45; his brother, Don, 40; and their father, Herbert, 74—power their boats with big gasoline engines

because they're light, have a great power-to-weight ratio and are smaller than diesels. But contemporary American marine engines are developed under the auspices of the American automotive industry, where fuel economy concerns and downsizing have all but eliminated production of big domestic gas engines. Consequently, the Mayeas were forced to turn to B.P.M. The Italian company also makes 1,000-hp V-12s with fuel injection. As you might imagine, the Mayea braintrust is working on a use for them.

There's more that's different about *The Fox* than the walk-through dual windshields and large gas engines. The 36-foot hull has a modified deep-V bottom. Deadrise at the transom is a rather modest 12 degrees but increases

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sharply toward the bow. Dual strakes on either side of the keel provide added lift and knock down spray. The chines are reversed at the hull sides to provide stability at rest and at low speeds. There is a sharp downward break as the chine runs down from the bow to meet the water. This traps air and helps break surface adhesion to get *The Fox* up on plane quickly.

To break up the mass of the 36' by 11' hull in silhouette and present a slimmer look, the Mayeas gave the boat a raised deck configuration. The foredeck rises to meet the windshield and passenger and engine compartments. In profile, the coaming for this raised area is stained in a dark mahogany giving the look of a long stripe above the sheer.

*The Fox* is built of Philippine mahogany, except for the clear fir engine stringers and three-laminate aircraft mahogany plywood bottom. The Mayeas previously used white oak for framing and keels, but this wood has become hard to get, and the wood that

is available is prone, in their judgment, to checking and splitting. They feel Philippine mahogany is stronger than either Honduran or African mahogany. They like the aircraft-grade mahogany plywood for their epoxy-laminated bottoms because of its high strength-to-weight ratio and its long-term stability. Hull sides, decks, hatches and covering boards are 1-inch mahogany.

After more than 4,000 hours of labor, \$60,000 worth of wood, and engines that cost \$50,000 each, *The Fox* was delivered to her owner, who has two other Mays-Crafts, after highly-successful sea trials. She was delivered at a price comparable to that of a fully tricked-out ultra-fast deep-V sport boat of similar size.

Performance is right where the Mayeas hoped. They feel 70 mph is attainable with some tweaking of the engines, a light load and some fine-tuning of propeller pitch, diameter, blade area and cupping. *The Fox* comes up on plane quickly, with little raising of the bow to get over the hump. The running attitude is flat. At speed, the bow is out of the water to just aft of the forward cockpit, right where the drop chines are placed. No spray comes onboard, even in the legendary slop of the usual Lake St. Clair steep chop. She tracks true—the helmsman can take his hand off the wheel for long periods of time. He only needs to feed in slight corrections for wind and wave

action. While there are custom hand grips everywhere, there is little need for them. Most importantly, there's no pounding. Larry Mayea is fond of describing the Mays-Craft ride by saying, "Our boats won't foam your beer."

Again, *The Fox* is fast. Deceptively and devastatingly fast. Just ask the owners of go-fast fiberglass offshore powerboats with menacing names. It's hard for the gold-chains-in-the-chest hair set to admit being waxed by a mahogany speedboat full of grandparents.



Though they look downright elegant and, dare we say, old-fashioned, Mays-Craft boats (*The Fox* is shown here with a vintage Chris-Craft) offer white-knuckle performance for the young-at-heart.

Today, the Mayea Boat Works is as busy as it was back in World War II, bustling along with a six-person staff, augmented by contract specialists. Larry Mayea would like to train young people in wooden boatbuilding but has been continually disappointed by the "video game generation," which he says is unwilling to dedicate any time to learning skills and crafts. Herbert handles design and lofting and also does some of the finer

woodworking. Brothers Larry and Don handle most of the building, and brother-in-law Norm Plettl, a skilled mechanic, handles powertrains, systems and hardware. Larry's son, Chad, and Don's son, Jared, represent the fourth generation of Mayea boatbuilders. They are learning the business just as their fathers did, starting with sweeping and sanding.

"Business is good," Larry said. "We're trying to stay with building new boats because we can build them our way, without compromise. Restoration of production wooden boats involves compromise. You can't go back and rip something apart because it isn't working exactly right." The Mayeas estimate that about 60 percent of their business is new construction, and 40 percent is restoration. Larry would like to get out of the restoration business altogether, but his customers keep bringing him classic boats they want restored. "It's hard to say no to someone who's been a customer for a long time," Larry said.

Larry looked at *The Fox* with understandable pride after it returned to the Works for winter layup. "It's a lot of hassle building wooden boats the way you think they should be built," he said. "Sometimes, though," he added wryly, "it's almost worthwhile." 