

Chris-Craft Celebrates 100 Years

by James Paynton, Pacific Northwest Fleet

A century ago, in January of 1923, Hamilton Smith was preparing three boats for display at the New York Boat Show. In a moment of marketing virtuosity, he coined a new name for the fledgling company that had built the boats, the business then known as "Chris Smith and Sons." Just before the runabouts went on the floor in New York, he inscribed the name "Chris-Craft" on their mahogany sides. Thus was born the most iconic boatbuilder name in history. Maritime historian Jeffrey Rodengen says, "The name Chris-Craft is one of only a handful of trademarks universally recognized throughout the world. In fact, some dictionaries have the word 'Chris-Craft' as a synonym for pleasure craft. There is a mystique, an



Christopher Columbus Smith, founder of Chris-Craft Corporation, with his ever-present cigar. photo from Chris-Craft archive.

elusive magic about the name and yachts which have borne that signature in script."

The origins of Chris-Craft stretch back to the beginning of America's Civil War, with the birth of its founder, Christopher Columbus Smith. As a young duck hunter, Chris began making his own duck decoys, beautifully crafted and detailed. These were in great demand in the St. Clair River area of Michigan. He soon found that he would have to build his own boat as well, to meet his specific needs while hunting. So he built an oak-ribbed clinker-style hull with his brother in 1874. Patrons of their guided hunting trips appreciated the rugged little boat, and finally talked the Smith brothers into building some more. Despite a rather high price, the demand kept the brothers quite busy.

The Smith Boat House was built in Algonac MI, and boats of many types were built, including simple duck boats, canoes, rowboats, sailboats and launches, during the period of the 1880's and 1890's. The launches gained quite a bit of popularity in the region,

partially because of their use of naphtha engines rather than steam. The single most important development, however, was the application of a two horsepower Sintz gasoline engine in one of the launches, which allowed it to reach 7 mph. The Smith Brothers had turned the corner with powerboating, especially after Charles Sintz showed up with a device he called a "carburetor" which helped performance dramatically!



Aerial view of the Algonac plant about 1940. photo from Chris-Craft archive.

During the early part of the 20th century, Smith continued to develop his powerboat technology, pushed on by orders from eager customers. During this period, the famous Reliance speedboats were built, with speed increasing as Smith developed the single step hydroplane hull. Smith began accepting commissions for building Gold Cup competitors, winning six in a row at one point. It was at this time that boats were built for Gar Wood, although this partnership would deteriorate significantly in later years.



A finished runabout emerging from the Chris Smith & Sons yard in the early 1920s. photo from Chris-Craft archive.

When the final iteration of the company was incorporated in early 1922 as “Chris Smith and Sons,” the emphasis shifted to pleasure boats. Aggressive marketing of quality products helped grow the com-



Chris Smith, grandson of company founder Christopher Columbus Smith, visiting aboard *Maranee* at the Pacific Northwest Chris-Craft Rendezvous in 2007. photo by M Paynton. *Maranee* is owned by Margie & Jim Paynton.

pany exponentially. Sales for the firm jumped from \$70,000 in 1922 to over \$3 million in 1929. Franchises were awarded during this period, and the brand “Chris-Craft” was advertised broadly in the U.S. and Europe. A 115,000 square foot plant was built in Algonac, and hundreds were employed there. A separate Marine Engine Division was opened. The first enclosed cruiser was built in 1928, a 30-foot commuter complete with enclosed head and 200-hp Chris-Craft engine. By the time of the 1930 boat show season, Chris-Craft turned in a record number of sales. One popular model was a 48-foot cruiser with full galley which was said to be able to carry “30 passengers at 30 mph!” The celebrated Chris-Craft hull construction of double planking below the waterline, and battened seams above, was perfected at this time, and was utilized through the end of the wooden boat era.



The main Chris-Craft plant building survives today in Algonac, serving as a yacht storage facility next to the famed Algonac Harbour Club. photo by J Paynton

The Great Depression was difficult, but the company began to turn the corner in 1936, and by 1938 was offering an amazing 105 different models of boats. Yachts of up to 55 feet were being produced, and Chris-Craft purchased land in Holland, Michigan for a large new plant. The decade ended on a sad note, however, with the death of founder Chris Smith in September of 1939.

The company had become a master of advertising and marketing, and 1940 was the best year in its history. Still run by Chris Smith’s sons, the company began to pursue military contracts, and geared up to build the thousands of boats that would soon be needed by the military. Frequently rewarded by the armed forces, Chris-Craft flew the prestigious “E” flag over its facilities until the war was won.



Emblematic of Chris-Craft’s immense contribution to the war effort during World War II is this photo of its 10,000th landing craft leaving the factory in early 1945. photo from Chris-Craft archive.

In 1946, the first post-war pleasure boats began emerging from the plants, and Chris-Craft began pursuing the large yacht market with a new intensity. The company also diversified, building outboard motors, kit boats, water skis and even travel trailers (“land cruisers”). The 1950’s saw many of the innovations many people remember as typically “Chris-Craft”, including the bull-nose cruisers, the early Cobra runabouts, and the Sea Skiff lapstrake line.

The 1960’s saw the first major ownership changes in the company. The Smith brothers sold the firm to NAFI, although the president of Chris-Craft, Harsen Smith, voted against the deal. He was presiding over a very successful company at its prime: 3,500 employees, sales of over \$40 million, and three times the market share of its nearest competitor, Owens.

As the fiberglass revolution turned the boatbuilding industry upside down, more ownership changes took place over the ensuing years. Murray Industries purchased the company in 1980. Growth slowed and stopped, and by 1988 the company filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy. OMC purchased the firm, but by

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2000 bankruptcy was again declared, and Genmar Corporation purchased the operation. The most recent acquisition saw Winnebago Industries taking over the company in 2018.

Through it all, the “Chris-Craft” signature in script has for 100 years always continued to be inscribed on the sides of handsome and well-built boats.

Hamilton Smith certainly got it right.



Distinctive example of the mahogany beauties Chris-Craft produced during its hey day is Riva, a 1953 52-foot yacht owned by Gerald and Pamela Zytnicki of the Pacific Northwest Fleet. photo courtesy of G Zytnicki

