

Carter Craft

By Bruce Danielson

My wife and I have enjoyed going to the Whitefish Chain Antique and Classic Boat Rendezvous every July in Crosslake, Minnesota. We have a cabin on Gun Lake in Aitkin County, and after seeing the beautiful boats at the show, thought it might be fun to fix up a classic fiberglass runabout for cruising around the lake and even visiting other lakes in the area. I let some friends know I was in the market for an old boat to fix up. It wasn't too much later one of them called and said he had a church friend who had a couple of old boats in his back yard that he would like to get rid of. They were located in Champlin, Minnesota and here is where my story begins.

THE FIND IN CHAMPLIN:

We stopped by the house in Champlin on a late August evening in 2004 to take a look. There was a large 18' fiberglass boat right behind the garage, but in the back of the yard, under a big oak tree was a boat wrapped in tarps. The 90-year-old owner said it was a wood boat that hadn't been in the water for over 25 years. We started to uncover the boat. It had been wrapped in five plastic tarps, each with a hand sewn cinching rope going around the perimeter of the boat. We didn't have the time to remove the tarps, so we pulled them back and found a plywood boat with two portholes on each side, complete with trim and badges. The boat was sitting on the old original trailer. The tires had been removed and the outboard motor was missing. It had been sitting in this spot for over 25 years and had gathered a nice collection of wood and old tires.

The owner said it was a 1957 Carter Craft 16' Sea Hawk that he purchased from his old boss years earlier. The Carter Craft had been purchased new from Lucky Marine, located on Excelsior Avenue in Hopkins. The tag said that it was manufactured in Panama City, Florida. Two days later my friend and I went back to uncover the boat completely for a closer inspection. The boat had all of the logos and trim, looked to be in reasonable shape, and also had the original convertible top and interior cushions. The boat had a family of squirrels

living under the front deck and it smelled very much like a septic tank. I purchased the boat and trailer from the owner for \$100, feeling that the trailer was worth that. When I arrived home after the purchase, I told my wife she was going to lose her garage space for while.

I visited the boat the next day to check the tires and pull the trailer hubs for inspection of the bearings. The trailer bearings were rusted solid to the races and the tires were completely shot. After new special bearings, races and new tires I now had more money invested in just being able to move the trailer and boat from under the oak tree then I had paid for the boat. But I finally got it home and backed it into my garage.



It looks sad, but this is just the beginning

THE RESTORATION PROCESS:

In 2004 I cleaned the exterior of the boat and completely disassembled all of the interior components down to the boats structural ribs and supports. I took lots of pictures and notes during the disassembly process. Next, I power-washed the interior to get all of dirt and grime from between the ribs. I tried several ideas to reduce the squirrel smell, but only time solved that problem. The boat then went into storage for the winter. During the



winter months I worked on varnishing interior components, painting the floor boards to original colors, reconditioned the steering wheel, and cleaned the trim . I also had new matching seats upholstered.

During 2005 I took the boat to a marine repair company to help me solve some rot problems next to the chines. The repairs only took a week, but it spent a couple of months in their queue, so I lost a lot of time. After it came home from the shop, I installed two coats of varnish to interior of the hull, ribs and floor area. I then installed the interior components including the floor boards, seats, storage compartments, and under deck boards. The boat went back into winter storage for a second time.

I started work on the boat in early June of 2006, with a goal of entering it in the 2006 Whitefish Show in July. I started working on the outside, varnishing the deck and mahogany side panels with 7 coats of varnish. I wasn't happy with the type of varnish and the results, but I pressed on. I sanded the yellow painted sides, applying an epoxy primer and an original matching polyurethane paint.

After making several small repairs on the bottom, I painted it with an original matching anti-fouling paint. Next was giving the trailer a paint job with the boat sitting on the trailer. I re-stripped the boat sides and interior to match the original trim. I then installed all the badges and trim pieces. Next came a complete new wiring system, installation of the steering system, and installation of a period 35 horsepower Evinrude outboard motor. The boat originally came with a 35 HP Evinrude when delivered at Lucky Marine.



Maiden voyage Labor Day weekend 2006

I spent a great deal of time the summer of 2006 on the boat and finished up a couple of days

before the Whitefish Show. Although there were parts of the boat I wasn't happy with, I still made the show. The boat made its maiden voyage Labor Day weekend 2006.

CARTER CRAFT BOAT COMPANY:

At the start of restoration I tried to find out more about the Carter Craft boat company. I knew the company was located in Panama City, Florida, but that was it. I found nothing on the internet about the company, so I called some marine dealers in Panama City. One dealer told me the company was actually located in Parker, a suburb of Panama City.



1955 Carter Craft advertisement

In March 2007 I attended a national Mustang car show in Pensacola, Florida, about 130 miles West of Panama City. I planned an extra day to see what I could find out about the company located in Parker. The day was great, playing the history detective, and successfully uncovering a lot of information.

I visited a shipwright who worked for the company in the early 60's who had purchased some of the equipment when the plant closed down. I visited the city hall to find out more information, and took pictures of what was left of the facility. A Baptist church now stands where the factory was located but the boat storage building, used prior to shipping, was still standing. I also found some articles written about the company and I started assembling the information.

The company operated from 1951 though 1969 and produced approximately 30,000 boats. Most of the boats were plywood but they did produce fiberglass boats and some I/O's in the late

60's. Most of the boats were 14', 16' and 18' plywood runabouts. They also produced a line of fishing boats. Carter Craft was considered one of the largest producers of plywood boats in the country during the late 50's.

James L. Carter started the company in 1951 in Parker, Florida. A woodworker and cabinetmaker by trade, he began with 14' plywood fishing boats and later graduated to 16 and 18' runabouts. One feature that put Carter Craft ahead of the plywood boat market was the unique deck and side striping. Carter achieved this by etching out the top layer of veneer and painting in the recess. This gave the appearance of wood planking and gave the boats a sporty look.

The 16' Sea Hawk models were called the "Overnighter" for their ability to sleep two adults under the bow. It featured a convertible top that could secure the sleeping quarters from any inclement weather.



1958 Carter Craft advertisement

By the late 50's Carter Craft was producing between 25 and 35 boats per week with 70 production employees. By the mid 60's this had grown to 200 employees and the company had grown to multi-million dollar status.



1960 Carter Craft

James Carter sold the company in the mid-sixties to a couple of partners that he had picked up

along the way. In 1969 they closed the plant. James Carter died on April 5, 1995 and was buried in the Parker Cemetery, located right across the street from the location of his old production plant.

Carter Craft furnished boats for Cypress Gardens in Florida, and Evinrude used them extensively in their ads during the 50's.

DOCUMENTED HISTORY AND REGISTRY:

After assembling the information collected, I put together a 30 page history of the company along with pictures and historical information received from other donors. Along the way I met other Carter Craft owners on the Internet through boat forums and in 2008 I started a Carter Craft Boat Registry.

The registry includes boat owners from Florida to Minnesota, and Massachusetts to Texas. We currently have approximately 20 members including the grandson of James Carter, the founder of the company. Another member, is the daughter of the man who purchased the company from James Carter in the late 50's.



1957 Carter Craft

We published our own 2010 Carter Craft Calendar featuring member boats, and are now in the process of starting a Carter Craft web site. We are continuing to find more Carter Craft owners and expanding the registry. For me, this started by finding an old wooden boat in Champlin, Minnesota that has turned into a major pursuit.

