

PROFILE

David S. Lawson Remembers Chris-Craft

By Bill Baldwin



DAVID S. (“DAVE”) LAWSON, JR. IS ARGUABLY THE PERFECT CHRIS-CRAFT ANTIQUE BOAT CLUB MEMBER PROFILE. CHRIS-CRAFT — THE HISTORIC CHRIS-CRAFT CORPORATION OF WOODEN BOAT RENOWN — HAS BEEN A MAJOR FACTOR IN DAVE’S LIFE FROM HIS EARLIEST CHILDHOOD. TODAY, AS PRESIDENT AND GENERAL MANAGER OF L-S AERO MARINE, BOAT AND MOTOR DEALERSHIP AND BOATYARD IN BEMUS POINT AND JAMESTOWN, NEW YORK, HE CONTINUES TO MAINTAIN THAT CLOSE RELATIONSHIP, RESTORING AND CARING FOR THE BOATS HE KNEW FROM HIS EARLIEST DAYS. IN THIS “PROFILE,” DAVE SHARES SOME OF HIS FIRST-HAND KNOWLEDGE ABOUT ALL THINGS CHRIS-CRAFT.

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DAVE'S FATHER, DAVID S. LAWSON, SR.— FROM 1918 TO 1971, A BOAT BUILDER AND BOAT-YARD OWNER ON CHAUTAUQUA LAKE IN WESTERN NEW YORK—WAS A CHRIS-CRAFT DEALER FROM THE MID-TWENTIES. IN 1923, HE PURCHASED THE FIRST OF HIS 20- AND 24-FOOT CHRIS SMITH & SONS BOATS DIRECTLY FROM CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS SMITH — LESS THAN A YEAR AFTER SMITH BEGAN BUILDING PRODUCTION BOATS.

In 1928, he purchased a 26-foot "Upswept" Runabout powered by a Kermath 225 engine, which he used to sell speedboat rides on Lake Chautauqua in conjunction with his other enterprises. Dave remembers his own first boat ride must have been in the Upswept some time in 1936 or 1937.

In those early days, Dave's dad picked up boats directly from the Chris-Craft plant by driving to Algonac, Michigan in his Dodge flat-bed truck. Dave's records show he usually took \$25.00 from petty cash for the trip—which, today, wouldn't even fill the Dodge's gas tank. Each January, he also boarded the overnight Erie Railroad coach to New York City for the New York Boat show, where he worked the Chris-Craft exhibit. Dave always looked for something from Macys when his Dad returned

Chris-Craft shipped boats either by railway or by water from Algonac; there were no boat trailers or commercial boat haulers. Dave recalls anxiously watching for the arrival of each new boat, either by truck or at a railroad siding at the Jamestown yard. When boats arrived on a flat car, they were covered by a returnable tarpaulin. Otherwise, they were delivered two to a boxcar. And each Chris-Craft came with its own cradle. Boats were laboriously moved by hand from their railroad cars on wood rollers.

Once at L-S Aero Marine, boats were lifted by two, four-ton, hoists mounted on overhead rails. The hoists were driven by long, endless chains; It took 10 minutes of pulling the chain through the

hoist to make it go up or down—whether empty or burdened by a boat.

If it was tough work in Lawson's boat yard, early Chris-Craft dealers had to be true "Iron Men." A case in point: The house guest of an L-S Aero Marine customer told Dave's Dad he would buy a 26-foot runabout—if it was delivered to his lake house. No local delivery this, however. The lake house was on Lake Manitou, located on Manitoulin Island in Lake Huron's Georgian Bay.

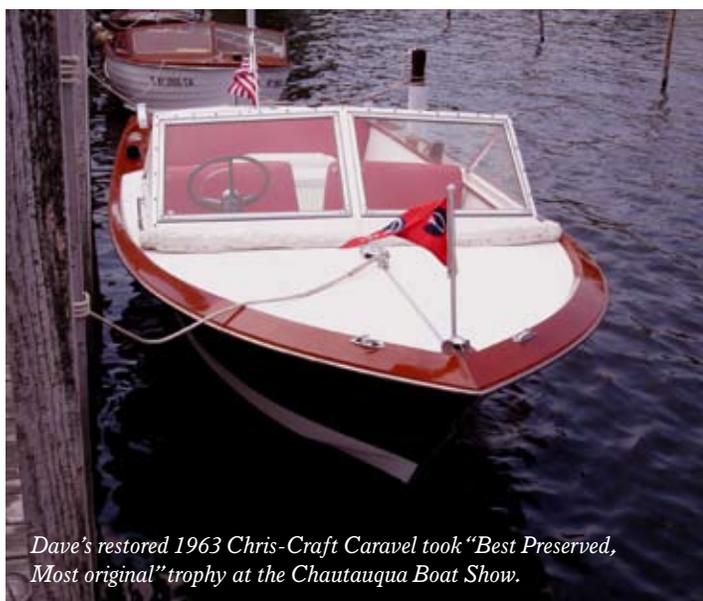
Unfazed, Dave's Dad took delivery of the big runabout at Algonac and immediately filled it with cans of gasoline. Heading north on the St. Clair River, he went past Sarnia, Ontario and Port Huron, Michigan north through Lake Huron, past Tobermory Ontario, and across the main channel of Georgian Bay to South Baymouth on Manitoulin Island. There he hired a teamster with a wagon and a team of horses. He then floated the boat onto the wagon, blocked it securely, and delivered the Chris-Craft to the land-locked lake.

When Chris-Craft operated a factory in Falconer, New York, near Jamestown, Dave often accompanied his Dad through the plant. His Dad would buy kegs of screws that were swept up from the production floor. Dave remembers many evenings sorting screws on the living-room floor.

Dave's Dad and his siblings had to leave school after the sixth grade to go to work. He developed his boat-building skills from

Bemus Bay at Bemus Point, on Chautauqua Lake in western New York State. The L-S Aero Marine showroom and store is at center; the small building to its left is the L-S Aero Marine gas dock. The Chautauqua steamer City of Jamestown is at the Bemus Point City Dock that Dave's dad built for the city. Various Chris-Craft boats can be seen in the L-S Aero Marine buoy field, which was filled in those days because most people didn't keep their own docks.





Dave's restored 1963 Chris-Craft Caravel took "Best Preserved, Most original" trophy at the Chautauqua Boat Show.



The perfect interior of Dave's 1963 Caravel.

observation and reading. Because of this, he steered Dave toward a career in naval architecture. Being constantly in contact with boats and engines also fostered Dave's interest in engineering. Thus, when he achieved high grades in high school, Dave was accepted at the Webb Institute of Naval Architecture and Marine Engineering in Glen Cove, Long Island. He earned his B.S. degree in 1955

Between semesters at Webb, students were required to work for ten weeks (January - March) in industry. During the Winter of 1954, Dave worked at the Chris-Craft plant in Algonac. Gene Eckfield, Chief Engineer in the Engineering Department, scheduled Dave's job assignments. Most of the time, he worked on the production floor at the first station on the production line for the 53-foot Conqueror. He learned how to assemble the keel, stem, stringers, and frames on a jig, plumb and fair everything, then fit and fasten the side planking. This step in the production took about four days. On the fifth day, the line moved and the boat was shifted to the next station where the bottom was put on and some interior work begun.

Nearby, the first 22-foot Sea Skiff open boats were being assembled on up-side down jigs using clinch nails. Each strake was plywood, scarfed together as one strake with Resorcinol glue; sides pre-beveled; seams caulked with two-part polysulfide (Thiokol) sealer, then screwed to steam-bent ribs and clinch nailed between ribs. Dave calls it a very expensive process.

Dave also recalls a time when he was staring at the Sea Skiff line with his hands in his pockets. A gruff voice from behind warned if he was going to just stand there, he shouldn't have his hands in his pockets; trainees were supposed to look busy. It was the immortal Bill MacKerer, Chief Naval Architect 1922-1965—belying his reputation as a fearsome manager.

Dave was also fortunate to assist in making the patterns for the side planking of the 34-foot Capitan. He helped lay out the seams (battens), scribe the plank patterns, shape and fit the individual plank, and adjust the pattern if necessary. Years later, he feels this was invaluable training for his boat restoration business.

Among the many restorations coming out of L-S Aero Marine over the years, Dave's favorite is one he did for himself: the completion of his Dad's 1938 International 14-foot sailboat. Its double-planked, Philippine-mahogany hull has a natural finish; the Sitka-

Spruce mast is hollow and was formed from two halves. The hull is fastened with copper rivets and about 5,500 brass clinch nails—a type of construction rarely to be duplicated because of the labor involved. Dave enjoyed the challenge of researching what the rudder, centerboard, sails, and rigging should be—and sailing the completed boat.

Incidentally, Dave's International 14 has won the "Best Sailboat Trophy," at the Chautauqua Boat Show four years in a row.

Dave's most difficult restoration involved a 1948-1949 Red & White, 19-foot Racing Runabout. The first two boats received of this model came out of Algonac in fine shape, but this particular boat came out of Caruthersville, Missouri. About 45 years later, Dave was trying to restore the deck and some bottom planking when he ran into real problems. After much study and measuring, it became apparent that the jig had been damaged when shipped from Algonac, and the boat was built with frames that were not perpendicular to the center line or keel. Rather than straightening the jig, Chris-Craft made the deck and hatches to fit skewed frames. Evidentially, many of the boats from the Caruthersville plant exhibited problems when brand new. Dave says his Dad would not order a boat built at the Caruthersville plant for quite a while after the Red and White Racing Runabout.

The most dangerous Chris-Craft in Dave's opinion was the 1937 16-foot Special Race Boat. He doesn't remember the particular boat, but his parents talked about Pete Boyle of Maple Springs, New York, who capsized his 1937 16-foot Special Race Boat, whereupon, his father immediately traded it in for a mild-mannered 17-foot Deluxe Runabout, Double Cockpit Forward—with a Model K engine. Must have been some come down! The Special Race Boat's relatively flat bottom and curved chine in plan view (from above) allowed the chine to "catch" a wave forward and pull the bow down and to that side ("trip"). When the rudder went out of the water, the boat instantly flipped up-side down. Dave Lawson is a living fount of information about all things Chris-Craft. Look for more articles from—and about—him in future issues of *The Brass Bell*. 🚩