



A Preservationist Path

AFTER COLLECTING WOODEN BOATS FOR 37 YEARS, F. TODD WARNER REALIZED HE HAD COMPILED A HISTORY OF AMERICA'S MARITIME PAST AND THE SEEDS OF COUNTLESS OTHER COLLECTIONS.

Story by Heather Steinberger Photography by Richard Steinberger

WE'D BECOME LOST THREE TIMES in the undulating, autumn-splashed farm country west of Minneapolis, but at last we rolled into the modest town of Winsted, Minnesota. I couldn't imagine a more incongruous setting for a historic classic-boat auction.

Ahead of us yawned a cavernous space filled with gleaming wood and redolent with the aroma of varnish and paint. Antique and classic boats were everywhere, more than 100 of them, all awaiting bidders in Mecum's no-reserve Warner Collection Vintage Boat Auction.

To my right sat the 27ft *Sugar Lady*, a celebrated 1932 Chris-Craft 309 Custom Triple Cockpit Runabout boasting transitional raised coamings and a Dietrich convertible top with oval windows.

To my left was the 28ft 1929 Chris-Craft Sedan Limousine Runabout *Tuxedo Taxi*, her factory installed Van Mourick limousine sedan top already drawing a crowd. Just five sedans are known to exist, and the other four aren't operational.

Propped against the far wall was the 32ft *Alter Ego*, a 1962 Staudacher Unlimited Hydroplane, and perched smartly ahead of her was the venerable *Harriet*, a 1909 Moore 42ft Enclosed Glass Window Launch that is the only surviving vessel from Moore Boat Works of Wayzata, Minnesota.

"An auction like this will not happen again in our lifetimes," said Scott Ales, an investment-grade classic boat specialist who coordinated the



27FT SUGAR LADY, CHRIS-CRAFT 309, \$275,000





GERRY LO, 1929 CUSTOM ST. PAUL DINGLE BOAT WORKS, \$285,000



32FT ALTER EGO, 1962 STAUDACHER UNLIMITED HYDROPLANE, \$92,500



event for Mecum Auctions and collection owner F. Todd Warner. "Other collections might have more monetary value, but this is more significant with its variety of styles, configurations, and conditions. High-end bidders have an opportunity to make museum-quality acquisitions, while everyday enthusiasts can pick up an unusual fixer-upper or the missing part for an existing restoration.

"All of these boats are works of art, and together, they are the history of recreational boating in America," Ales observed. "Until now, we've all been 'missing the boat,' so to speak; we'll buy [vintage] cars for \$5 or \$6 million, but boats with the same exclusivity have a tenth of the value. It's time to realize that we've overlooked these American treasures.

"Because a no-reserve auction results in both high and low returns, it reveals actual market value, giving consumers a benchmark for vintage and classic yachts," Ales said. "They'll [establish] a comfortable basis for rational purchasing decisions. We've never had that before." Ales was visibly excited at the prospect, especially given the "wild cards" of the day, with some winning bids proving advantageous for the seller—and others for the buyers.

Ales and Warner have been friends for years. Facing a need for capital to re-energize his vintage-boat business, Minnesota-based Mahogany Bay, Warner decided to auction his prized collection of 126 boats, 115 engines, spare parts, waterskis, and boating memorabilia. He discussed the possibilities with Ales, and together with Mecum Auctions, known for its sales of collector cars, they set dates.

"I forewarned Todd, there will be moments of despair and moments of joy," Ales commented. "But I told him that whatever happens on auction day will be the best result we could hope for."

Warner definitely exuded a sense of pride on auction day,

taking pleasure in reflecting on nearly four decades of collecting, a journey that began as the wooden boat era was ending.

"My dad was a visionary," Warner said. "Everyone wanted something new and modern in the 1960s, so wooden boats were being destroyed or literally given away, but he saw their significance." Warner's father jumped into a veritable free-for-all, turning the family's Minnesota lake property into what they affectionately called "Warner's Dry-Rot Marina."

"But I believed [in] my dad," he said. "These are America's treasures—for their rarity and survivability, and because only the wealthy could own them. In their day, each of these boats cost fifteen to twenty times more than a new car.

"There's nothing rarer in American culture than the American speedboat," he emphasized. "Think about *Sugar Lady*, one of two built in 1932. If that were a Ferrari the cost would be astronomical."

Warner started his own collection at age 12, courtesy a 1965 tornado that leveled a nearby dealership. The boats were scattered like cordwood, and he rescued a 17ft 1947 Higgins Sport Speedster. Later came a 19ft Chris-Craft Runabout. It was one of 500, and he bought it for \$300. "I caught the bug," he said. Unlike owners who restore boats for shows, often by fabricating new parts, Warner is a preservationist, a steward; "The past as it was, not what we want it to be," he said. "The boats you see here set a standard that I've spent my life trying to find."

After building and cherishing his collection for 37 years, Warner faced its dissolution in a single day. He was hopeful that his boats' new owners would follow his lead into the future. "A wooden boat puts the soul back into boating," he said. "Even the smells of wood, varnish, and leather provide a connectivity that people yearn for, carrying all the stories of generations past."

Ales had predicted the collection could go for as little as \$1.5 million or as much as \$5.5 million. In the end, the tally was close to \$4 million; between 4,000 and 5,000 people strolled the warehouse on auction day.

The highest sale: *Gerry Lo*, a custom-designed triple-cockpit runabout built at St. Paul's Dingle Boat Works in 1929. Her new owner took her home for a cool \$285,000. *Sugar Lady* went for \$275,000, *Tuxedo Taxi* for \$160,000, *Harriet* for \$130,000, and *Alter Ego* for \$92,500. Then there were project boats, like a 1958 Chris-Craft Clipper 26 that sold for \$350 and a 1903 Dan Kidney launch that sold for less than \$10,000. Her vintage-condition sistership, the lovely 1905 *Ulietta*, went for \$31,000.

Now, Warner said, the future lies in the new owners' hands. "I've tried to show my vision, and now it's their turn," he commented. "Our creations outlast us. People are transitory, but the boats remain." ■

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