

TAHOE YACHT CLUB
BLOCK & TACKLE



WINTER 2008

Record crowd for Souper Saturday

Thunderbird's Hacker Siblings



By Bill Watson

My quest began with photographs that didn't quite make sense. Formerly in the personal collection of casino mogul William F. Harrah, the photos purportedly were of *Thunderbird* during construction at Huskins Boat and Motor Works in

Bay City, Mich., circa 1939. It was *Thunderbird* on a smaller scale: put a round hatch at the bow, narrow the beam, and eliminate the stainless steel. I suddenly realized there were others like her: *Thunderbird* had siblings.

Tempo, née SHIM-II

In 1934 or 1935, Hacker designed this 44'-foot long express commuter for MCA executive Jules Stein who christened her *SHIM-II*. Just before WWII, Mr. Stein conveyed the boat to the big band leader Guy Lombardo, who staged lavish shows at Jones Beach Marine Stadium on Long Island and renamed her *Tempo*. Lombardo arrived on stage by water—a channel separates the off-shore platform from the 8,200 spectators on shore—and a cast of white-jacketed boat valets helped him debark to conduct his Royal Canadians.

In 1971, Lombardo's widow donated *Tempo* to an Atlantic City area non-profit marine museum, after which she went through severe deterioration. George Kreissle, of Florida, rescued the boat for \$40,000 and began restoration. Sixteen years and approximately 35,000 restoration hours later, *Tempo* is now triple-planked in mahogany and has 55,000 proud fasteners in the hull and decks alone. F. Todd Warner of Mahogany Bay Vintage Boats recently acquired her. Sans engines, Mr. Warner is analyzing new powerplants for speed, reliability and performance. Final varnish and upholstery will soon be all that remain to do, and she should be on-the-beat again in 2009.

POSH, née Ravelston (née Wee-Joe II)

However, some of my photos indicated there had to be another boat. By fluke, I saw mention of a Huskin-built Hacker boat named *Ravelston* in a St. Paul, Minn. Yacht Club newsletter. Playing boat sleuth, Thunderbird Lodge volunteers Sherry and George McConnell dispatched to St. Paul to track down another *Thunderbird* sibling.

POSH was commissioned in 1937 as *Wee-Joe II* for Joe Cooper (though unsubstantiated, he may have been of the Cooper Tire Company family). *POSH*'s provenance is sketchy except that she arrived in Canada's Back of Bays area sometime in the 1950s, only to be "lost" again.

In the early 1980s, Montague Black acquired and began restoring the 54-foot long commuter. He modified the engine compartment area and re-planked the yacht bottom, topsides, and hull with new pattern-grade Honduran-mahogany. Rumor has it Montague spent more than \$1 million and, having seen the quality of the work, I believe it. Upon Montague's death, she conveyed to his brother, Conrad, who renamed her *Ravelston*. Not the yachtsman Montague was, Conrad has been, among other things, convicted of securities fraud and the Canadian government seized many of his assets, including *Ravelston*. On a 2005 trip to Canada to inspect and acquire another boat, F. Todd Warner could not resist and *Ravelston* soon joined *Tempo* in Warner's expansive collection at Lake Minnetonka, where she was renamed *POSH* (Port Out, Starboard Home). Although narrower in beam and tumblehome more pronounced, *POSH* was clearly the prototype for the Hacker-Huskins partnership's last and greatest work yet to come.

Thunderbird

Readers are likely familiar with eccentric San Francisco millionaire George Whittell and his 55-foot long *Thunderbird*. On Hacker's first trip "out West," Whittell reportedly told the Naval Architect to build an all-weather commuter having the lines of Whittell's DC-2 aircraft and Duisenberg automobiles. However, did you know that Whittell fitted *Thunderbird* with an autopilot that would automatically steer her home to Thunderbird Lodge? Did you know *Thunderbird*'s steel boathouse is a "temporary" structure that Whittell intended to replace with a much larger stone and timber structure? What about the four engines originally installed? In a future article, I'll share more new "secrets" we continue to uncover about this Tahoe classic.

A Fourth Sister?

There is still one photo I can't explain. If she exists, we'll find the elusive "fourth sister."

Meanwhile, gather all you can about your vintage yacht. As each old salt slips beneath the waves, it becomes more difficult to pass our art and legacy to future generations.

F. Todd Cooper of Mahogany Bay Vintage Boats, Mound, Minn., contributed to this article.