

## Classic boats are his business

Even though he was not yet a teenager at the time, F. Todd Warner remembers like it were yesterday the day some neighbors on Lake Minnetonka played a joke on his father, Frank A. Warner.

The neighbors hung a sign on the Warner family dock in Minnetonka Beach that read: "Warner's Dry Rot Marina." The sign was in reference to Frank Warner's love of classic wooden boats and the 10 or so he docked at his home.

"People used to good naturedly tease our family about our wooden boats," said Todd Warner, now in his 40s and living in Mound. "But my father always said that classic wooden boats were the only way to go; he said someday they'd be in high demand. He believed this even when everyone was buying fiberglass. He was a visionary in that respect."

Judging by the success Warner has had in recent years, his father was right. When Todd grew up and was considering a career, he did what he knew best and in 1976 started buying, restoring and selling classic wooden boats such as Chris-Craft, Hacker Craft, Dodge, and others.

Warner acknowledges there have been some lean times since starting what is now called Bristol Classics Ltd., an Excelsior firm.

But just as his father had predicted, the classic boat business is booming, coming on strong in the last few years. After shutting down the restoration portion of his business years ago, Warner re-established that service in 1992. Since then, gross sales have doubled

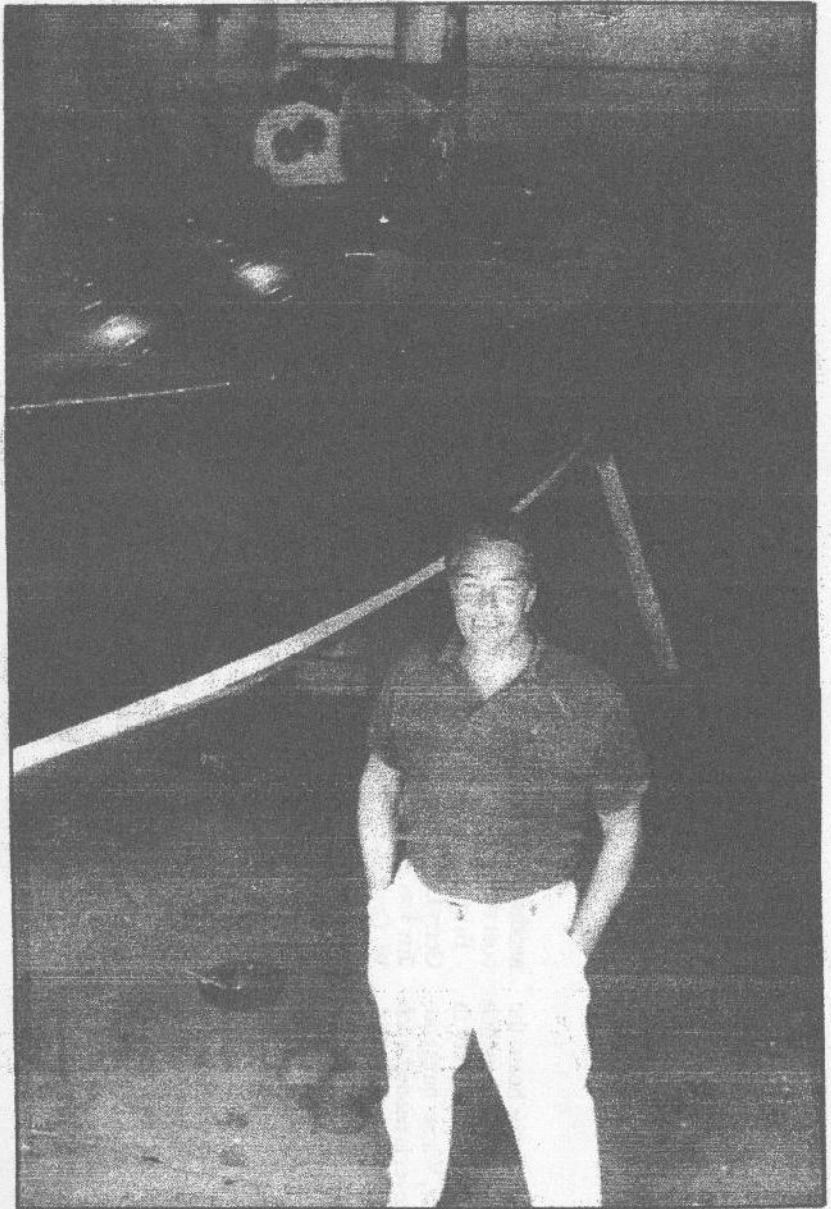


Photo by John Mugford  
F. Todd Warner's firm, Bristol Classics, restores boats at its facility in Lester Prairie.

each year, he said.

"I think a lot of people today are realizing what boats with a connection to the past can mean to them and their families," said Warner, who has sold more than 450 boats since 1976. "And the thing is, there is a finite supply of the

classics available. That's why the demand is so high. When I started, I often found boats that people were going to scrap for the brass. It's amazing how things have changed."

As an indication of how high demand

lassics, Warner said that 50 the boats he sells are never in the best-known boating is. People usually find out oats he has in stock through ine, and contact Warner. eek a man from Florida y my office and said he want- classic boat," Warner said. ked at what I have and sold hat's how a lot of my sales aking place lately. Or some- ie and says they want a cer- Chris-Craft model from a ur. I can almost always tell know where I can get it." he boats Warner buys need

restoring. When he sells the boats, the final price includes a restoration, which is done in Bristol Classic's facility in Lester Prairie. There, Warner hires contractors to do whatever is needed, such as re-varnishing, re-upholstering, adding a new motor, replacing chrome, or anything else. Warner has sold restored classics for as low as \$15,000, and for as much as \$300,000.

One boat that Bristol Classics recently purchased, after two years of negotiations, is a 1939, 33-foot Goodhue Laker that the late J.C. Penney commissioned for his niece. It's the only one of its kind and is worth about \$75,000. Warner said it will take about

another \$50,000 to restore it to show-boat status.

Bristol Classics is also restoring the Gerry Lo, a Dingle Boatworks creation that was owned for decades by Frank W. Griswold, a summer resident of Greenwood who was long known as the boating king of Lake Minnetonka. Warner and Bill Hawks of Minnetrista co-own the boat, which will make its first appearance since being restored at the 20th Annual Lake Minnetonka Antique and Classic Boat Show Rendezvous. The Rendezvous takes place this Saturday and Sunday at the Excelsior Park Restaurant.

Warner said many boats that Bristol

Classics has restored have won awards at boat shows throughout the country. Last month at the Whitefish Boat Show in northern Minnesota, a 1925 Fay & Bowen boat that Bristol Classics restored won both the Skipper's Choice Award, which is voted on by all of the skippers at the show, and the People's Choice Award, which is voted on by everyone who attended.

"The thing about the classics is that they have soul," Warner said. "There's an old saying in boating circles that if God intended boats to be made out of fiberglass, he'd have grown fiberglass trees."