

New owners of the Gerry Lo, William Hawks and F. Todd Warner, took a spin last week on Lake Minnetonka. (Photo by Craig Lassig)

Legendary boat to remain on lake

By John Mugford

There have been proclaimed kings of certain sports ever since the first Olympics were held in Greece centuries ago.

In the boating world on Lake Minnetonka, there may never have been a king of such glorious stature as Frank W. Griswold, a millionaire who spent his summers in Greenwood.

From 1929 on, residents from the far reaches of the lake knew of Griswold and his boating exploits. During an era when speedboats, then known as runabouts, were faster than cars, Griswold was the fastest of the fast.

His stature as supreme boatsman on the lake grew in the 1930s when he raced and defeated an airplane in Wayzata Bay.

In recent weeks, F. Todd Warner, of Mound, and William Hawks, of Minnetrista, bought a speedboat together. The boat they purchased, however, is no ordinary boat — it is the famous Gerry Lo, owned for more than 60 years by millionaire Frank W. Griswold, who spent summers with his family in Greenwood. Because Warner and Hawks are local men, they will keep the Gerry Lo on Lake Minnetonka, where it is part of local folklore.

“The airplane really didn’t stand much of a chance because it had to start from out of the water,” said Lois Mary Shaw, Griswold’s daughter. “But in that race, like in all of his big races, he never pulled too far ahead. He kept it close enough for the crowds to stay excited.”

The irony of the feat, witnessed by thousands, was

that Griswold may have had as much power inside the frame of his runabout, made of a rich, reddish brown Honduras mahogany, as the pilot had in his plane.

Griswold was a well-known man outside of the Minnetonka area — his invention of an early form of the traffic stoplight accounted for that.

But on Lake Minnetonka, his stature was heightened by the boat he drove for pleasure and in high-profile races, such as the defeat of the airplane in Wayzata Bay.

And rightly so.

The “Gerry Lo,” named after Griswold’s two daughters, Geraldine and Lois Mary, was no ordinary runabout.

In 1929 Griswold had his personal engineers design a speedboat to his liking. The Dingle Boatworks Co. in St. Paul carried out those specifications and built Griswold’s dream boat.

He barred no expense. The mahogany wooden planks on the 32-foot runabout matched perfectly. The seats in the three cockpits were lined with red leather. Chrome fixtures

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were hand-casted specifically for the Gerry Lo. Inside the frame was a V-12 Curtis Concord airplane engine of 450 horsepower. When Griswold wanted to really "let out" the engine, the boat could hit speeds of 65 mph to 70 mph.

The final tab in 1929: \$25,000. Other very expensive runabouts were selling for about \$5,000 back then, according to on local boat expert.

When the Gerry Lo was delivered to Griswold's summer home on the lake, Griswold was wearing a smile his daughter still remembers.

"He was proud of that boat," said Lois Mary Shaw, who with her husband, Clint, today lives in Deephaven.

For almost 60 years the Gerry Lo and Griswold were legends on the lake. But as Griswold reached his 90s in the 1980s, he and the Gerry Lo ventured out from the boathouse less and less.

In 1992, Griswold died at 96.

But the Gerry Lo did not suffer the ill affects of age. It sat protected from the sun and wind inside Griswold's boathouse on his lakeshore in Greenwood. It was stripped and re-varnished only once, in 1955. The airplane engine has also been replaced with a Dodge 350.

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Last week, F. Todd Warner of Mound and William Hawks of Minnetrista wore smiles as wide as the one Griswold probably wore in 1929 when the Gerry Lo was delivered to Greenwood.

"All my life I knew about Griswold and his runabout," said Warner, who owns Bristol Classics Ltd., an Excelsior firm that restores and sells classic boats. "I guess I would dream about one day owning the Gerry Lo. But I never actually thought I would."

Now, the boy who grew up in Minnetonka Beach and watched in awe anytime Griswold would cruise by in the Gerry Lo, indeed owns the legendary boat.

He and Hawks, who among other things owns a pontoon-building company, bought the Gerry Lo from Clint and Lois Mary Shaw a couple of weeks ago.

As it turned out, the Shaws sold the Gerry Lo to Warner and Hawks after receiving serious bids from potential buyers who would have moved the boat to places such as Lake Tahoe in Nevada, and Lake Geneva in Wisconsin.

"We decided we weren't getting much use out of it and hoped that we could sell it to someone who would keep it on Lake Minnetonka," Clint Shaw said. "And that's what they plan to do. This is where Frank had so much pleasure with it; and where it became so well-known. That's why we're glad it will stay here.

"We put a classified ad in the newspaper and got a lot of calls from boat enthusiasts. Every one of them had heard of the boat before. People would come out, take a look at it and say they'd mortgage the house if they could buy this boat."



One day last week, even though temperatures didn't rise much above 50, Warner and Hawks took the Shaws for a quick boat ride in the Gerry Lo.

"When I look at this boat I really remember my dad,"

One of the most touching pieces of memorabilia left behind about Griswold and the Gerry Lo came from a group of about 100 young women who were staying at the Elizabeth Lyman Lodge in Greenwood in July of 1933.

They sent a poster-size card to Griswold thanking him for taking all of them on boat rides one evening. It read: "We all wish to express our appreciation for the grand speed-boat ride in the 'Gerry Lo' which you gave to us last evening. That ride will go down in our memory books as the most thrilling and the most happy even that has taken place at Lyman Lodge. We thank you one and all."

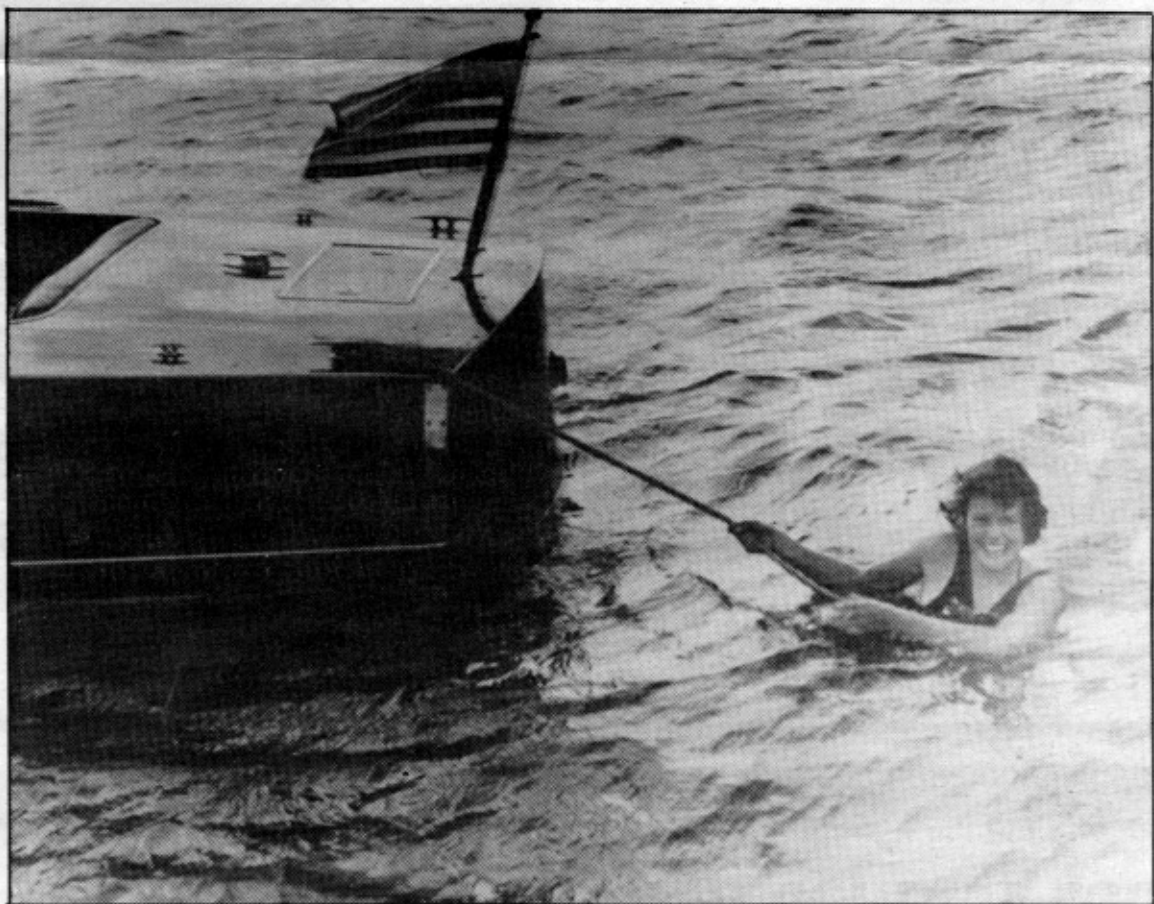
Among those who signed the card and who was staying at the camp at the time was Lois Mary Griswold, who only lived five doors down from Lyman Lodge.

"Oh my, that boat was loud back then," said Lois Mary Shaw. "You could hear it from a long ways away. It was quite a site for people and the girls sure were excited to get rides."

Griswold started making his fortune shortly after he nearly died in a car accident in downtown Minneapolis in the 1920s. According to an article in a 1934 edition of *Modern Mechanics and Inventions*, rumor had it that on the way to the hospital, Griswold murmured: "Someone ought to be able to invent a stop signal that would be visible in all kinds of weather."

Griswold did. His invention, which flashed red and green

said Lois Mary Shaw, 71. “He was quite a perfectionist and a strong man. He worked hard and he played hard — always cracking one-liners, which he was well-known for. When it came to children, he would do anything for them. He loved entertaining them.”



lights, was in great demand after Minneapolis saved about \$10,000 in accident claims the first year it used Griswold's stop lights. He later branched out into coffee, machine products, and hotels and resorts.

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Virtually every time Warner buys a classic speedboat through his 17-year-old firm, Bristol Classics, his intention is to eventually sell it.

Often, his firm strips and re-varnishes boats at Bristol's plant in Lester Prairie. Since 1976, Warner has sold more than 300 boats and restored almost 60.

"We try to preserve the heritage of classic boats such as Hacker Crafts, Chris Crafts,

and others," Warner said. "But along with that goal, I would like to help repopulate Lake Minnetonka with some of the old classics that used to be on the lake. The beauty of those older boats is something to see."

Griswold's Gerry Lo isn't the only famous boat Warner currently owns. Workers at the Lester Prairie shop are in the process of restoring a 33-foot runabout built for J.C. Penny in 1939.

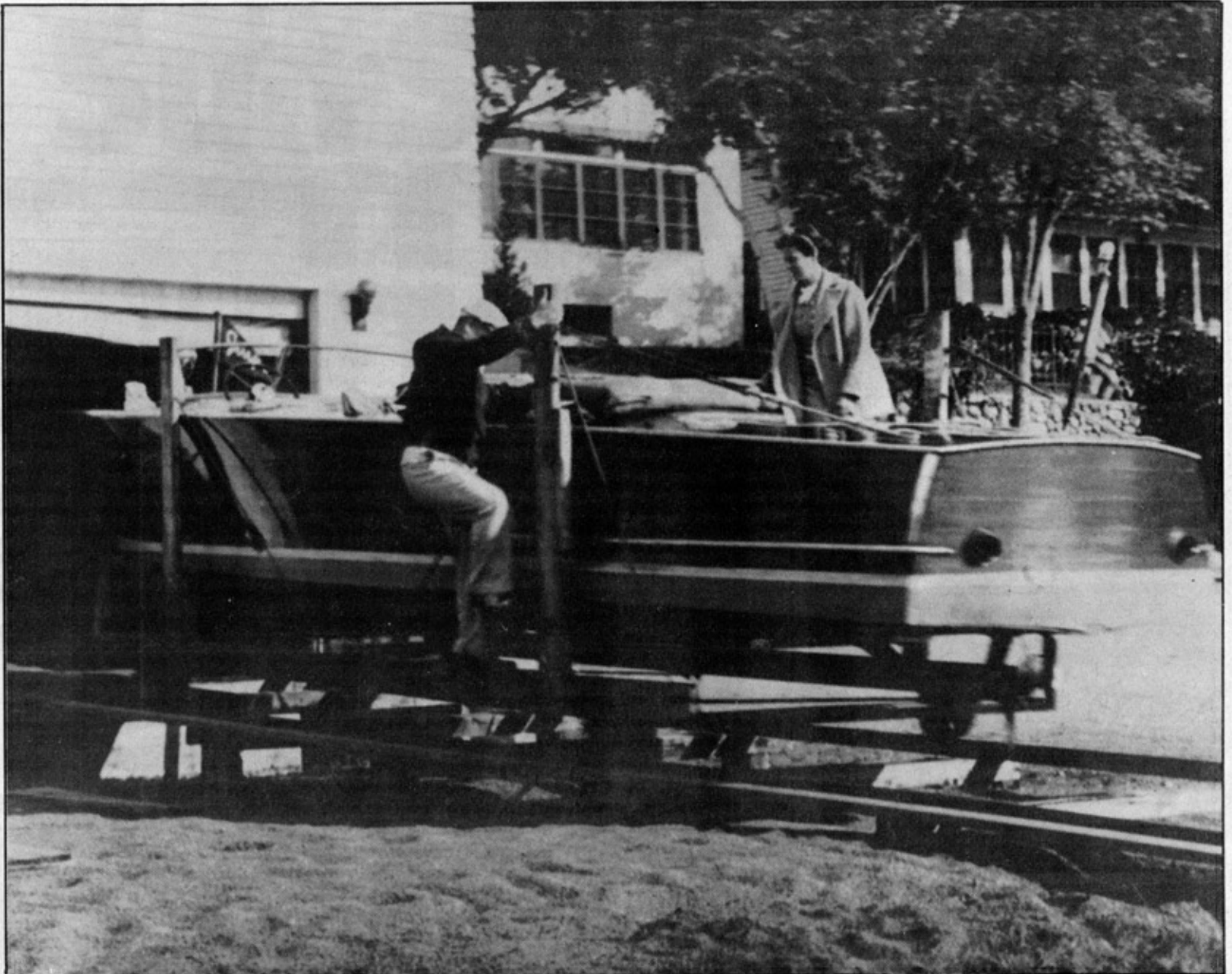
When it is restored, however, the J.C. Penny boat will go on the market.

That's not the case with the Gerry Lo.

"We bought the Gerry Lo to

keep it on Lake Minnetonka," Warner said. "It's still in great shape. If it hadn't been in that boathouse all these years it would never have stayed in such great condition. We do plan on doing some work on it, though. We'll strip it down and re-stain the finish to the rich color it had back when it was newer. Then we'd like to get another V-12 Curtis-Concord engine back in there — something like 500 to 600 horsepower so she can go 60 mph to 70 mph again. We'd show it at boat shows and maybe put on demonstrations of its speed. We want this boat to be seen for a long time to come."

Gerry Lo is a lake legend



Above, Frank W. Griswold and his daughter Lois Mary removed the "Gerry Lo" from their Greenwood boathouse in the late 1930s or

early 40s. Below, Lois Mary grabbed a line while she was a teenager. (Photos courtesy of F. Todd Warner, and Clint and Lois Mary Shaw)