

New store reflects owner's love of wooden boats

By Chelsea Busche
Assistant Editor

Boating is more than a hobby for F. Todd Warner; it's a way of life that encompasses both work and leisure. Many people around the lakeshore area enjoy boating, but Warner turned his love of wooden boats into a thriving business, which changed its name two years ago from Bristol Classics Ltd. to Mahogany Bay.

The latest wave in the company's history is a new location in Mound near Mound Bay Park.



The new Mahogany Bay Boat Showroom sailed into Mound in January. Photo by Chelsea Busche.

The boat showroom

Back in September, the building at the new Mahogany Bay location was gutted both on the inside and the outside. Just five months later the newly refinished corporate offices and boat showroom, which has 3,500 square feet of space, opened for business on Jan. 10.

Mahogany Bay's boat showroom reflects the wooden boats and the sparkling lakes they traverse. Once through the door - which features a porthole - a blue-green carpet like lake water is underfoot and a wooden GarWood boat greets visitors. A 100-year-old banner, originally from the Minnetonka Yacht Club, is strung overhead echoing the memories of excited boaters revving their engines in a show of power.

Learning about wooden boats on land can be fun also, and in anticipation of this, a variety of books on the subject are displayed. There are even hot sauces such as Screamin' Demon and Tropical Chill Sweet Revenge to go in the ship's galley. Interspersed between the books and hot sauces are old oil cans. Numerous awards and articles line the wood paneled walls. During the winter, with just a little imagination the interior of Mahogany Bay could be the setting for a vision of boating on Lake Minnetonka on a clear summer day.

There are also plans for Mahogany Bay to create a line of clothing along with selling items like varnish, toy model boats, artwork, picnic items and nautical antiques.

There are five employees who work at the Mound boat showroom

who work on restoring boats.

Boats in stock, services

Mahogany Bay has 115 classic boats in stock, which change regularly, Warner said. Customers can buy an already restored boat or choose a boat that will be restored by master shipwrights.

Restoration and maintenance services are also offered at its five different locations, including one in Lester Prairie and two in St. Paul.

A 24-hour dock call service is also offered to help make owning a classic boat as easy as possible. In addition, Mahogany Bay provides

pick-up and drop-off propeller repair for any boat, along with trailer sales for wooden boats.

Generations of boat lovers

Warner said that his family's love of boats dates back three generations. His grandfather owned a Ramaley boat with an airplane engine. This particular Ramaley boat carries with it interesting stories of its past, and although it was sold many years ago, it has since been reunited with the Warner family.

As Warner tells the story in an article he wrote, his grandfather Harold and a neighbor Dan Bull, chairman of the Cream of Wheat Co., both owned the same type of boat - the Miss Liberty Ramaleys. Harold's boat was named the "Moonahontas" and Bull's boat was named the "Roweda." Beginning in 1928, every Sunday the two would take their boats out to race each other.

Each boat had a 220 Hispano Suiza, Wright Aviation, 90 degree V8 engine. After losing races for quite some time and having to watch Bull wave a salute upon winning, Harold came up with a plan. Under a curtain of secrecy on a Monday afternoon, after losing the race again the day before, Harold took his 15-year-old son Frank to Gene Ramaley's boat shop. While at the shop the original engine was replaced with a Wright Aviation Hispano Suiza, 1127 cubic inch, 365 horsepower engine. Which, needless to say, was much bigger.

Warner writes, "As soon as Dan Bull gave the special little salute to Harold in the next Sunday race, Harold got a glint in his eye and

Bull's eyes were as big as toilet-bowls as the 'Moonahontas' roared and leaped, twisted and turned up to 65 mph and unsafe speed and left Dan in the dust."

Warner writes that his father Frank still likes telling this story today. The story became even more special when F. Todd Warner came across a boat exactly like his grandfather's and after some inspection realized it was indeed his grandfather's old boat, which had been refitted to accommodate the larger engine. Warner was able to identify the boat by looking at the engine compartment, which had been extended 15 inches. One of the seats was also moved forward by 15 inches, and he recognized the H-3 designation on the engine.

Growing up on the lake

Growing up on Huntington Point, Warner watched his father operate and continue to acquire boats. During the 1960s when major boat manufacturers like Chris Craft switched over to fiberglass, wooden boats were less popular and therefore cheaper to buy.

"With the value of classic boats, you basically couldn't give them away. They were just about as close to free as you could get," Warner said.

At age 14 Warner began working at the Tonka Bay Boatworks. While surrounded by wood boats at work, Warner pumped gas, wiped down boats and learned from foreman Ken Luke.

"It really just became a way of life, and really through osmosis, being around my dad's boats and being at the boatworks, I was absorbing all this information about old boats and finally turned that into a business," said Warner.

It took awhile for people to once again see the value in wooden boats, but now there is worldwide demand.

Accomplishments

Warner said that he has been in the antique and classic boat business since 1974. He also founded the Antique and Classic Boat Rendezvous on Lake Minnetonka in 1976, which started out at Lord Fletcher's. In addition, he founded the Bob Speltz Land-O-Lakes Chapter of the Antique and Classic Boat Society.

Warner's philosophy is that restoring and collecting classic wooden boats is important because it preserves the boats for future generations.

"I really think classic boating is a real family affair - something the whole family can participate in," said Warner. "Not only enjoying the classic boat on the lake and just as serviceable if you are going to ski or go on any trips. It makes Lake Minnetonka more fun not only for the people in the boats, but [also] the people who are out boating and seeing the boats."

For more information about Mahogany Bay call (952) 472-0317 or visit www.mahoganybay.net