

Vintage Boating Life

Rita Hayworth's Riva Tritone... *PIRANHA*

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Lovely Rita's Riva... Piranha

By Dan Hauser

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Photos: Wayne Davis

It's a head-turner... just like its former owner.

When you see this recently restored 1959 Riva Tritone, 26-foot speedboat with its forest green hull, rich mahogany planked topside, baby blue steering wheel and zebra-print seats, you fall in love. It enralls you with its beauty. Just like its former owner, movie star Rita Hayworth, who was once known in Hollywood as the "Love Goddess" for her on-screen sizzle.

When Prince Aly Salomone Khan, Hayworth's third husband, purchased the craft christened Piranha in 1959 it was worth \$14,740.00. Without question, it was the most expensive runabout in the time of Eisenhower. To put the price into perspective, a Cadillac Convertible from that era sold for about \$6,000.00. In other words, even back then this boat was a one-of-a-kind.

The *Piranha* is now docked on the affluent waters of Lake Minnetonka in suburban Minneapolis and it is worth significantly more than \$15,000.00. Though its new owner, Twin Cities ophthalmologist Dr. Richard Lindstrom, would call it priceless, the *Piranha* is likely worth more than half a million dollars, according to F. Todd

Warner, chairman of Mahogany Bay, the company that restored the boat.

Considering what the boat went through to become a Lake Minnetonka showcase, it could be renamed the Phoenix. It has died and been re-born, thanks to the meticulous efforts of the Mound, Minnesota-based company.



Rita Hayworth - 1918 -1987

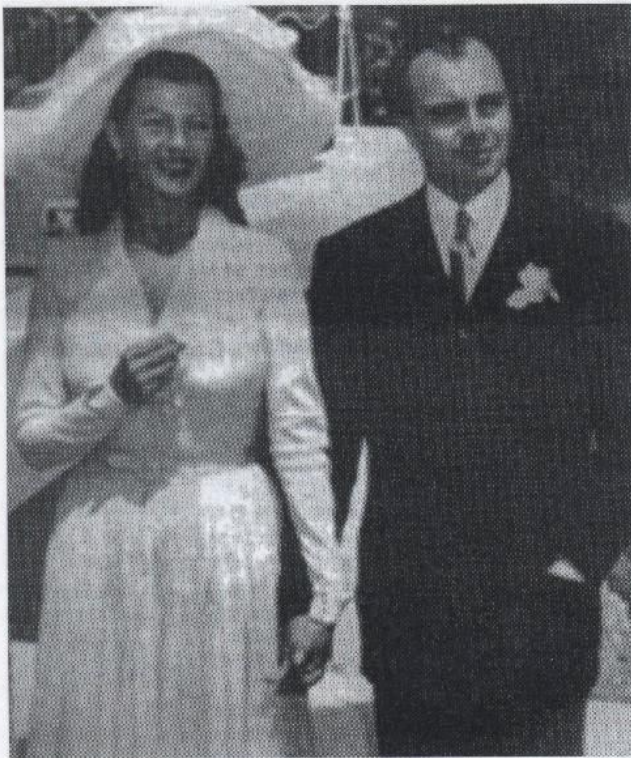
A Rich History

The *Piranha* left the shipyards at Sarnico, Italy, 43 years ago and was one of only 29 Tritones built that year. Overall, only 263 Tritones were built between 1950 and 1966. The Tritones were the ritziest of the Riva bunch. And, Riva boats were the crème de la crème of the boating world, appealing to captains of industry, starlets and royalty. Famous names in business such as Forbes, Heineken and Martini Rossi owned the boats. Jordan's King Hussein, Prince Ranier of Monaco and Egypt's president Nasser all owned Rivas.

And then there were the movie stars: Brigitte Bardot, Peter Sellers, Sophia Loren, Sean Connery, Richard Burton, Elizabeth Taylor and, of course, Rita Hayworth. Made famous by her roles in "Gilda", "The Love of Carmen" and "The Lady from Shanghai". She is also famous by the men in her life, namely Orsen Welles, her second husband, and spouse no. 3, Aly Khan, whose father Aga Khan III was the spiritual leader of the Muslim faith. Details of how Hayworth came to own the boat are sketchy but she is listed in the Riva com-



1959 26' Riva Tritone - Piranha



Rita Hayworth & Prince Aly Khan

pany registry. The starlet and Khan divorced in the '50s but did stay in contact because they shared a daughter, Yasmin.

It is possible that Rita or Yasmin inherited the boat after Aly Khan's untimely death in an automobile accident in the South of France in May 1960. Whatever the case, Hayworth is listed as a one-time owner. In 1963, Aly's son, Karim, took possession of the *Piranha* and it is here that the Minnesota connection comes in.

In the 1960s, Todd's father, Frank, was running a business in Texas called Hammond Industries that supplied washers and dryers to hotels. In his free time, Frank Warner collected wooden boats from his home on the shores of Lake Minnetonka.

He had already acquired several rare boats when he heard, through one of his London-based distributors, that Karim had put the boat up for sale.

Mr. Warner had never owned a Riva and was certainly lured by their sex appeal. The elder Warner met the distributor in the South of France and, the minute he saw the boat, he fell in love.

From the South of France to Minnesota

Frank Warner bought the *Piranha* from Karim and shipped it back to Minnesota in the summer of 1967. Now, for a teenage boy just discovering the allure of the opposite sex, his father's acquisition

was a dream come true. Young Todd knew that riding around in a boat that was once owned by Rita Hayworth and a Prince would turn a few heads on Lake Minnetonka and... it did.

However, Todd grew up and out of the house, and started his own business. One of his early jobs was to restore the Riva, which was in need of some mechanical attention. By the time this restoration took place, the *Tritone* had a new owner.

After Todd left home, his father no longer had use for the Riva and decided to divest of some of his boats. He found a fellow collector in Twin Cities businessman Robert Pond, who was happy to take the storied boat off his hands.

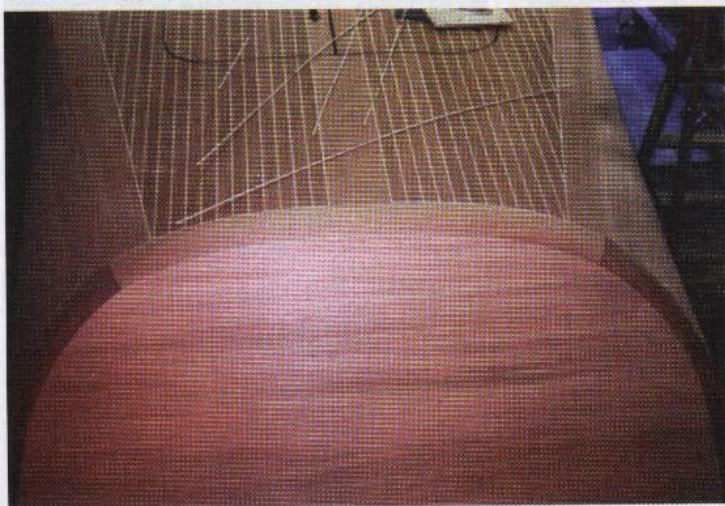
Pond's first love was aircraft; he once owned the 'Planes of Fame' Air Museum in Eden Prairie, Minnesota. Unfortunately for the *Tritone*, Pond apparently had more enthusiasm for the planes than the Italian-built speedboats. The boat fell into disrepair and was eventually 'sold' to Dr. Lindstrom along with a 36-foot Motonautica Italian Water Taxi, when he purchased Pond's stately Victorian mansion on Lake Minnetonka.

Upon seeing the condition of the *Tritone*, Lindstrom knew he would have to get restoration experts to return the boat to its former grandeur. He hired a local group and paid more than \$100,000.00 to restore it from stem to stern. The result was anything but historical.

"That's when I got involved again," says Todd Warner. Because his father had owned the boat, Todd was emotionally tied to it. Now, three years and two trips to Italy later, Warner and his crew have brought the *Piranha* back from the ashes. "From the keel up, we improved it. It's better than when it came out of the factory. It's the finest Riva in the world," Warner says.

Mahogany Bay assembled a Dream Team of shipwrights headed by Mark Sauer and 15 other specialists from chrome platers to instrument restorers to metal fabricators to upholsterers. Three to four workers were on the project at all times. In the end, it took a little over three years and more than 4,000 hours of painstaking and exacting work.

Because of its pitiful state, the crew had to move slowly. "It was a tedious effort, to put it mildly," Sauer says. "With this kind



"Three to four worker were on the project at all times..." *"three years and 4,000 hours of painstaking and exacting work"*



of boat, the outer planks are glued to the inner frames so there is no room for expansion or contraction. All of the planks were split", he says, describing the *Piranha* when it came into the shop.



The Piranha's Twin 5.7 Liter Crusader V-8s

To give the restoration a little perspective: Italian boat restorers wouldn't touch the *Piranha* because it would be too much work to completely re-plank the boat. In fact, after 1960, Riva boats were built with plywood that were crafted to look like planks, which is how they would restore a

boat like this in Italy today.

Restoration began at the bottom with its rotten frames and worked up resulting in a whole new stem, new chines, knees and just about everything inside and out. The *Piranha* was rebuilt with 85 percent new wood including Mahogany with inlaid Holly "seams" in the decks.

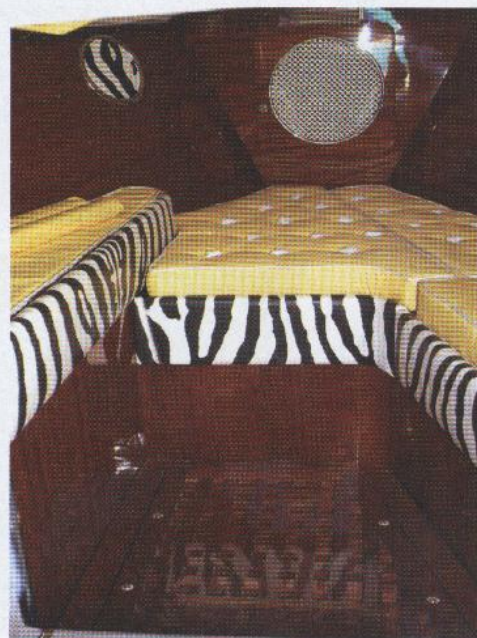
The engines were replaced as well. Originally powered by twin Chris-Craft 175 horsepower 339 cc dual carb engines, the boat was given dual 225-horsepower Volvo Penta V-8s during the first round of restoration work in 1980-81. Now, the *Piranha* is powered by twin 330

horsepower 5.7 liter fuel injected Crusader V-8 engines.

Throughout the restoration process, hundreds of photographs were taken to document the laborious process. The photos continue today; although now they are

taken by admirers rather than by artisans.

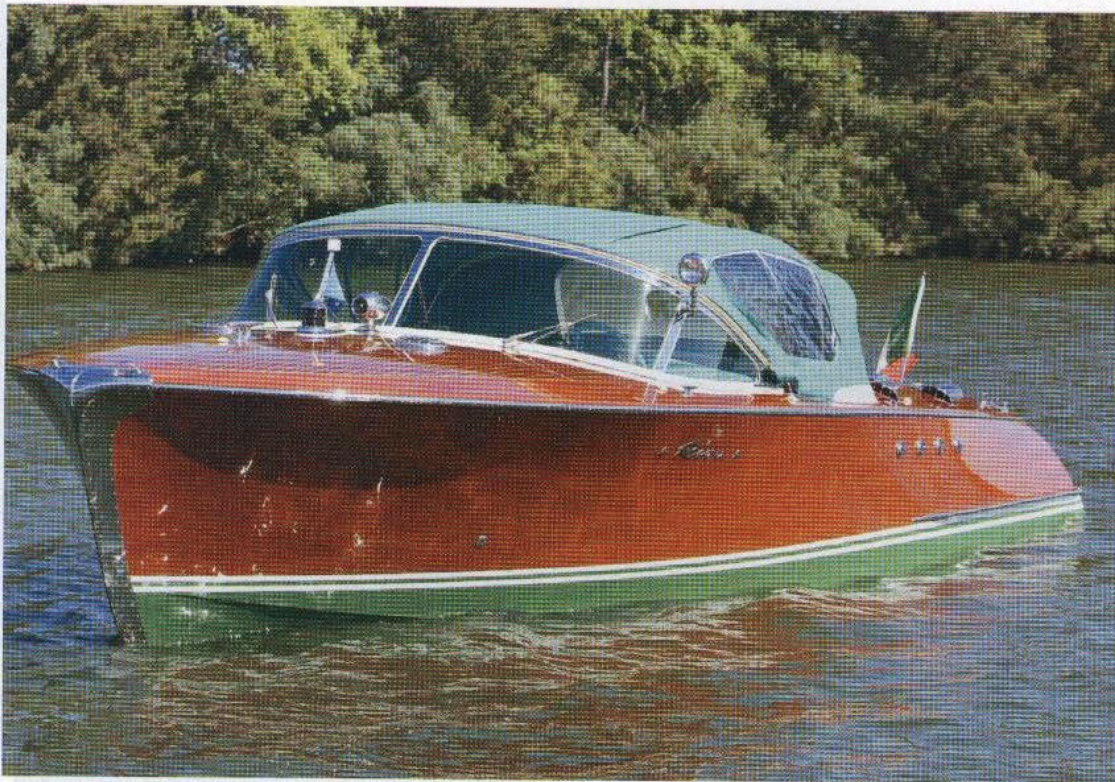
And what a pretty picture it makes. The fully restored boat is a wonder to behold with its jade green convertible top for inclement weather, it's sunflower-yellow sun canopy, it's fold-down, 'zebrata'-patterned vinyl front seat that turns into a 'playpen' and a forward cabin complete with yellow and zebra-print upholstered v-berth.



Zebra-Print Upholstered V-Berth



Piranha - 1959 26' Riva Tritone



The Tritone's Jade Green Convertible Top

Though it originally came with a record player, the *Piranha* now sports a CD stereo plus everything else a weekend captain needs including a compass, refrigerator, head, windshield wipers, siren, spotlight and a transom-mounted swim ladder.

The Power of Wooden Boats

"The *Piranha* is a head-turner, which is fun," says current owner Dr. Lindstrom, who has been a boating enthusiast for 50 years. "But its more fun how it attracts people at (lakeside restaurants) or the boat shows who come up to talk about it and see the boat. This is a fun way to get to know other boating enthusiasts."

Like Warner for instance. Since they met through the Riva, Warner and Lindstrom have become friends. They are both members of a newly-formed U.S. Chapter of the Riva Historical Society and serve on several corporate boards together in the Twin Cities. And, of course, there is the professional relationship involved with keeping and maintaining vintage boats. Owning a spectacular piece of nautical history can turn into a full-time job. That's why Lindstrom depends on Warner's Mahogany Bay operation, which is involved in much more than restoration work. Mahogany Bay is also a full-service marine business that buys, sells, stores boats and provides top-notch care for such nautical jewels as

the *Pinanha*. "We make owning a wooden boat easy again," Warner says.

Todd Warner has always been drawn toward the water. "From the time I was 14, I was pumping gas and cleaning boats," the 50 year-old says as he walks through the showroom of Mahogany Bay. Given his dad's penchant for wooden boats, it made perfect sense for his son to follow suit. That's why Todd started his first boat restoration business in 1974 at the age of 21.

Two years later, he organized the Lake Minnetonka Antique and Classic Boat Rendezvous, which continues 29 years later. It is the third oldest antique boat show in the country. In 1975, Todd helped form the Land 'O Lakes Antique and Classic Boat Organization. Since then, he has gone on to help form six other chapters across the country.

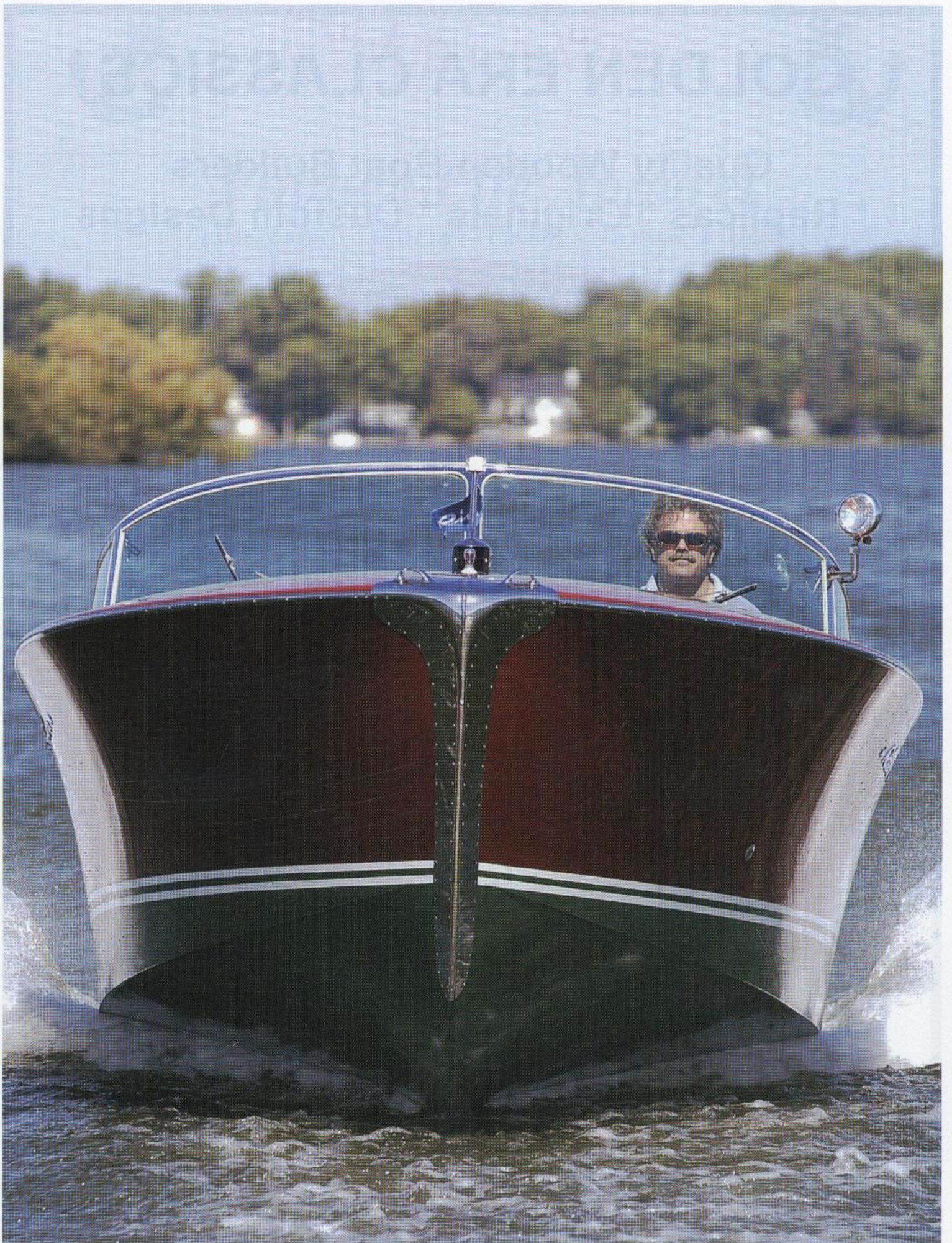
In 1991, he formed Bristol Classics, which in recent years, has become known as Mahogany Bay. The company now has 25 full-time employees, 80 percent of whom are restoration experts who are, at any given time, are working on a dozen boats or more. Mahogany Bay has two shops in St. Paul, a shop in Lester Prairie, Minnesota and one in Bayfield, Wisconsin.

"We are preserving the past for future generations," Warner says proudly. "We find that our customer's boats are an integral part of their most cherished and highest quality time with their families. Preserving their boats is a way to preserve their family traditions, whether now, or several generations hence."

And, it certainly makes it more interesting when the boats they are preserving are as magnificent as the 26-foot Riva Tritone speedboat once owned by a movie star and a Prince. ♠



Piranha - Outfitted with its Sunflower-yellow Canopy



1959 26' Riva Tritone - Piranha

Photo: Wayne Davis