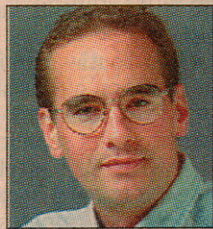


Queen of the Lake



Famous vessel faces court test



CHRIS NISKANEN
OUTDOORS EDITOR

Minnetrista millionaire Bil Hawks will go to court Feb. 27 to defend what may be the most beautiful boat ever built and driven in Minnesota.

She is 30 feet of sleek, handcrafted Honduras mahogany and improbably powered by a V-12, 650-horsepower Rolls Royce engine. In 1929, the Dingle Boat Works of St. Paul spent an entire year building her, plank by plank, to the tune of \$25,000.

For 68 years, the *Gerry-Lo* has been the queen of Lake Minnetonka, the kind of boat that makes antique boat aficionados weak-kneed and teary-eyed.

"Priceless," said Todd Warner, an Excelsior boat restorer who has revered the *Gerry-Lo* since age 10. "Well, let's just say if JFK's humidor is worth a half-million dollars, then the *Gerry-Lo* is worth \$1 million."

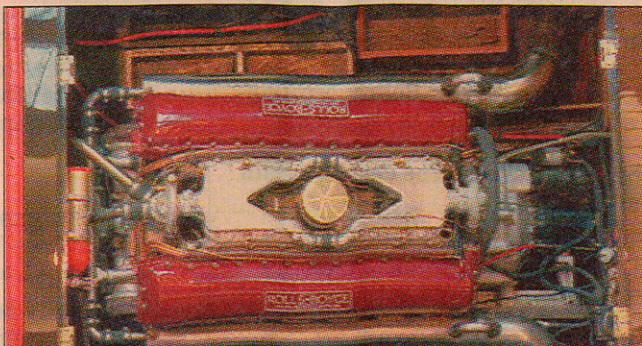
Starting today, the public can see the *Gerry-Lo* at the Minneapolis Convention Center during the Boat Show. It is the first time the craft will be on display since Warner's company, Bristol Classics Ltd, completed a 3,000-hour restoration.

The *Gerry-Lo* has a long and rich histo-

**PHOTOS BY
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Todd Warner, above left, and Bil Hawks sit in a wood speedboat built in 1929 for \$25,000. The *Gerry Lo* usually is based on Lake Minnetonka but is now parked at the Minneapolis Convention Center for the Boat Show. The engine, left, is a 650-horsepower V-12 Rolls Royce that

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ry, and Hawks seems determined to add to the tradition.

Hawks' battle with the authorities started 18 months ago when he sought permission to build a boat house in front of his Halstead Bay home to store the *Gerry-Lo*, which he bought from its original Lake Minnetonka owners in 1992.

Hawks' applications to build a state-of-the-art boat house were repeatedly turned down by the Lake Minnetonka Conservation District, the lake's governing body. LMCD has banned such permanent structures from the Lake Minnetonka waterfront, presumably because they are unsightly.

So Hawks decided to sidestep the ordinance. He built a lovely 38-foot houseboat, complete with cedar shingles and pontoons, that houses the *Gerry-Lo*. Hawks argued it was not a permanent structure and could be driven around the lake.

Still, the city of Minnetrista sued Hawks, and the LMCD said he still was violating the law.

So Hawks decided to prove his point.

On warm day last summer, Hawks drove the houseboat around Lake Minnetonka, begging the sheriff's water patrol to give him a ticket.

"It didn't have a fire extinguisher and some other stuff," he said. "But I got the tickets."

Hawks also got a license from the Department of Natural Resources for his new houseboat, which has the awkward problem of looking a lot like a floating boat house.

Then on Aug. 14, the LMCD struck back. It rewrote its ordinances.

The new law makes it illegal to own any structures built above a dock "whether such structure is floating or affixed to the bottom

of the lake."

So Hawks goes to court in February. And don't expect him to back down without a fight.

For weeks, he has taken out ads in local weekly newspapers lambasting the LMCD. By his estimates, he has spent \$25,000 in legal fees, which is chump change for someone who made a fortune in building toxic waste incinerators.

Hawks said he plans to sue the LMCD, the city of Minnetrista and probably anyone else who stands in the way of his floating storage unit for the *Gerry-Lo*.

That is the *Gerry-Lo's* history in just the past year. The rest of the story is just as colorful.

Franklin Wolcott Griswold of Minneapolis was a self-made millionaire who made a fortune designing the first flexible stop sign. The sign tipped over when hit. He also invented early versions of railroad-crossing semaphores.

In the late 1920s, Griswold was determined to own the fastest and finest runabout ever constructed. So he tromped off to the New York Boat Show with famed boat designer Joseph Dingle of St. Paul to see what was the best.

When they returned, Dingle devoted his entire company, located on the Mississippi River, to fulfilling Griswold's dream.

Griswold named the boat after his two daughter, Geraldine and Lois Mary. He brought the *Gerry-Lo* to Lake Minnetonka, won every race he entered and even challenged an airplane to a duel in the 1930s, which he won. He was a notoriously fun guy, and he apparently raced the *Gerry-Lo* around on Lake Minnetonka well into his 90s. He died in 1992.

"I remember it when I was 10 years old on Lake Minnetonka," Warner recalled. "It was the queen of the lake."

Warner learned that Lois Mary planned to sell the boat after her father's death. News of its sale

spread around the world, and soon offers were pouring in from Australia, Lake Tahoe and the East Coast. Warner convinced Lois Mary to sell the boat to him and Hawks, thus ensuring the *Gerry-Lo* would remain on Lake Minnetonka.

During the restoration, Warner tracked down a replacement engine in Scotland. The boat was originally outfitted with a V-12. Curtiss Wright airplane engine, then later a V-8 Chrysler. Warner replaced the Chrysler with the 1941 Rolls Royce engine he found in Scotland, an engine that was originally designed for World War II tanks. Her top speed is 60 mph.

Warner describes the ride as "unbelievable."

"It gets up on plane very quickly," he said. "It is like driving around in a La-Z-Boy lounge."

Warners also beefed up the hull with six layers of Kevlar. When he found an old scrap of original red leather upholstery, he bought 30 cow hides and had them dyed to match. No expense was spared in the restoration.

Last summer, the Warner firm entered the *Gerry-Lo* in major classic boat-show competitions across the Upper Midwest. The *Gerry-Lo* left with every major prize.

"It is one of the top-10 speed boats in the world," Warner said. "It is one of a kind."

Hawks refuses to allow his investment to sit outside under the damaging sun. Like Griswold, he has fallen in love with the *Gerry-Lo*. And like Griswold, Hawks has deep pockets.

Pity the bureaucrats who stand in the way of Hawks and his *Gerry-Lo* house boat.

"I'm trying to protect my baby," Hawks said, adding "I also want to drive her every day."

Outdoor Editor Chris Niskanen's column regularly appears Sundays and Wednesdays.