

Staff Photos by Earl Seubert

Todd Warner stood in the cockpit of a 1955 Chris Craft Cobra, one of only 13 or 14 of the original 55 left in existence. Warner owns two of them.

## For dealer / restorer of old boats, life is seldom dull

By Ben Kern  
Staff Writer

Todd Warner, 27, owns and runs a nationwide business in buying, restoring and selling antique runabout motorboats.

What kind of business is that?

Lots of kinds—absorbing, arduous, fascinating, exciting. Yes, and money-making—if you know what you're doing. Warner does.

He lives in Mound. Travels something like 30,000 miles a year dealing in boats.

He trailer-trucks around. Stores boats. Works on them. Has men work on them. And makes deals. A lot of deals.

Back East, recently, he relates, he found a dealer in his 80s who had a warehouse full of boats and was tired of the whole thing.

So Todd bought the whole thing.

Some, he said, are in their original burlap-and-canvas packing. Never been used. Mint condition. Ages?

"From 1950, '53, '54, to 1959. Brand new. Never been in the water. Never been outfitted."

He declined to say how many. He bought them all—a choice selection.

"I can't give you his name, either. I promised him some privacy."

What make are they?

"Penn Yans; made by the Penn Yan Boat Co., named after Penn Yan, N.Y., where they built them. Between

Keuka and Seneca Lakes. The firm originated the tunnel-drive: it goes back to 1912 or thereabouts.

"Penn Yan still features it. The advantages are less draft and protection for the shaft, propeller and rudder.

"Yes, the old gent is alive, and I agreed to buy his inventory. I've got a semi-truck and trailer, so I can move them and deliver them anywhere in the United States. I'll probably end up bringing most of them back here. Of course, my interest is: I want to sell them.

"I've always been around boats. When I was about 6, my grandfather put me in a canvas-covered rowboat. Rowed around in that.

"After a couple summers we got a 2½-horsepower Johnson. Putted around in that. Kinda slowly progressed through the different boats.

"My father, before it was fashionable, was a boat collector. Back in the middle and late '60s. They used to tease him about it all the time."

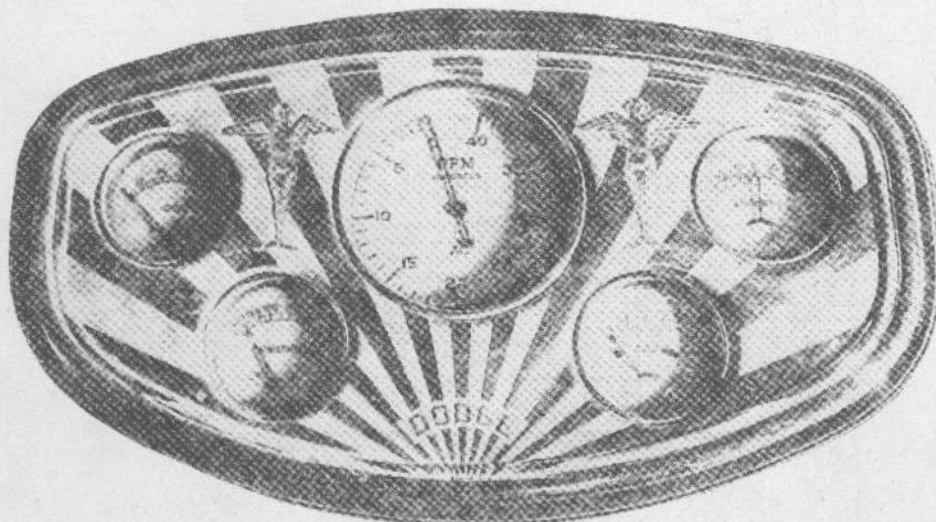
Todd's father, Frank Warner, isn't in business with Todd. He has a Gold Eagle Corp. It deals with dry-cleaning and laundry establishments in the metropolitan area.

The father has "a number of interesting older boats," with which the son soon became familiar. Then he worked on boats "over at Tonka Bay Marine" and "just kinda grew up around a lot of the old boats."

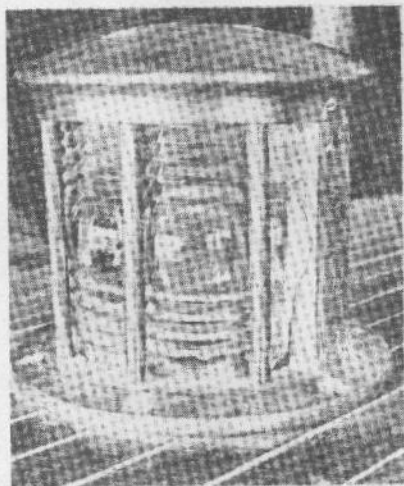
He dropped out of high school in the 11th grade.

"I used to sail scow racers on the lake here with my father," Todd said. Gordie Bowers, Cottagewood, a highly successful sailboat racer, gave him pointers. "He makes winning scow sails. I'd like to delve into the sailing thing as time develops."

Now he's motorboat-oriented.



This is the dashboard of a 1930 25-foot Dodge boat built by Horace E. Dodge Boat & Plane Co. of Newport News, Va. Only 10 still exist.



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The step pad above is off a 1936 26-foot HackerCraft, the boats used for "speedboat" rides at the Excelsior amusement park. (Warner has two of the original Excelsior boats.) The solid brass bow light at right is from a 1919 Fay and Bowen Engine Co. boat, which is 27 feet long and has only a 6-foot beam.

## Old Boats

From/13C

In 1976 he displayed antique motorboats at the Minneapolis Auditorium and discovered there was quite an interest to be organized. He said:

"It's like anything scarce—people want it—but there's more to it than that.

"There's beauty in an antique boat. In performance. The way it rides. The particular sound that six-cylinder or that big V-12 motor makes."

(One thinks of the old mahogany launches taking people for amusement-park "speedboat" rides.)

An aristocratic aura about the old boats?

"There sure is. I guess it's just a little classier statement. Not something everybody can have. There are only so many. Take the 1955 21-foot Cobra. Maybe 13 or 14 left in existence."

Quieter? Solider?

"Impossible to describe.

"There's great beauty in some of the new designs and how they perform—ride—there's beauty in practicality, but this is a whole different thing."

The boats today look like rejects from a motorcycle helmet—red, green, blue, metal-flaked. Aesthetically, they don't do a thing for me."

Of course, Todd Warner didn't jump right into the antique-boat business after dropping out of the 11th grade.

"I've done a couple of other things. I had a business that dealt with antique and semi-antique oriental rugs. My mother was in the antique business, so I grew up around that.

"She's also a musician, and that wore off on me. I'm a drummer. I've played with different bands, and I still drum. For three years I dealt wholesale in the oriental-carpet business. Around the country—New York, Chicago, Los Angeles. Went to estate sales, specializing in older rugs—collectible stuff."

The next jump was to floating collectibles, usually made of wood, and to the restoration of them.

"Primarily, the inboard runabouts are finished in mahogany, generally built on oak frames. Some are cedar-strip. Sometimes there are two, three, four different kinds of wood in a boat, but what's in the mind is what you see, and mahogany would have to be the primary wood.

"Often Philippine and Honduras mahogany. Cedar otherwise is as good—as to durability and weight.

"In any wood boat, the enemy is perishability. Take care of it, or it'll deteriorate. The king of perishing effects is the sun. Keep the boats under canvas. The organization is making more people aware of this."

"The organization" is the Antique & Classic Boat Society, Inc. It started at Lake George, N.Y., about 1974.

Boats under 25 years old can be modern classics, those over 25 can be classics, and pre-1942 boats can be antiques.

"In our area there are probably more classics than antiques," Todd said.

"Antique boats are getting hard to find. In 1976 I sold a 26-foot Hacker-Craft, the Steinway of runabouts. It went for \$6,800. A show-quality 26-foot Hacker just sold out East for \$30,000. Beautiful boats."

The Hackercraft was designed by John Hacker in Mount Clemens, Mich. Other lore:

Chris-Craft was built by Christopher Columbus Smith in Aigonac, Mich., on the St. Clair River. Gar Wood and Chris Smith worked together for a while, but before World War II Wood broke off and started his own factory.

Evinrude? "I'm just getting familiarized with the outboard group," Todd said. "They have their own club, but we're trying to start a merger in our area. The Evinrude outboards were started by a man named Evinrude."

A Land O' Lakes chapter of the Antique & Classic Boat Society was started in the Twin Cities in January 1977. "We had 15 members. I was president for two years," Todd said. "When I left, there were 125 members. Now I think there are 90 or 100."

Lake Minnetonka's first Antique and Classic Boat Rendezvous came in 1976. "We had all the boats gather over at Lord Fletcher's at the dock in Spring Park. We had 42 boats. Had a parade around the lake, and then on Sunday morning we had the boats back at the dock for people to see. Had an award ceremony.

"This year we're coming up to our fifth annual. Last year we had just about 90 boats. We were over at T Butcherblock's and Mai-Tai, and we'll be there this year, second weekend in August. Maybe we'll top 100 boats this year. We'll have people from Chicago, Wisconsin, the Dakotas. We'll have a motor display under a tent. Something for everybody."

As for boat awards, collectors "have gone back to a kind of casual stance," said Warner. "We find that people enjoy it more. Get away from niggling over details.

"Get out and have some fun together. Show our boats to the public and let them enjoy them. Yes, we award prizes. Among the judging factors is condition—how well-kept the boat is.

We have a People's Award, Skippers' Award, Best Antique Cruiser, Best Modern Classic. People's Award comes from the spectators.

"I suppose you could call it the public vs. the experts, if you count skippers as experts, although that's not always true. But we try to keep it on a casual basis."

Building motor boats of wood ended around 1968, he said.

"Wood is a requirement in any antique group, with one exception: when Chris-Craft built 'The Silver Arrow,' their first fiberglass boat on wood frames."

At last year's boat show, runabouts ranged from 1919 to 1968—the whole span. In 1974 there were 16 antique boat shows around the country. Last year, there were more than 40.

These were antique motorboat shows, but, Warner added, "We certainly don't discourage anyone with antique sailboats to become part of our group. We'd love to have it."

"Also, this year, we'll have five or six boats on trailers in the Aquatennial Torchlight Parade and some on display on one of the bank plazas downtown."

Todd Warner's company is called Minnetonka Restoration Co., Inc.

"I did a lot of customer work (restoring) at one point—had a shop with nine employees at one time.

"Since then, I've found that for my best style of work I just restore my own boats and sell those that are finished. I do take care of a small group of customers for yearly maintenance, generally on boats that I sell.

"I've got so many to sell and miles to travel that I can't run a full shop. I'm mainly involved in trading and selling."

In Oakland, Calif., Mal Weaver of the Hilarion Co. represents Todd's inventory, and in Kirkland, Wash., it's Evergreen Marine. His office is in Mound, the shop is in Watertown and the rest "is just basically a storage situation. Prospects have to call for an appointment." He has three storage areas and is thinking of another.

"I can accommodate just about any antique boating request," he said. "Or interest. I've got a big inventory and contracts around Canada and the United States. I can fill most needs. Italian speedboat? I can get one. Sold one on the lake last year. Switzerland? England? You bet.

"I'd say the finest speedboat built, and still built, is a 1956 28-foot Riva. Italian. A hull-in inboard with twin engines. Cooks your breakfast and entertains your guests at the same time. High power. Mahogany. Famous for the endless plank—no butt-seams in any of the side planks—you bet that's unusual. Over 35 feet long.

"Sold one to a gent in Spring Park last year. Have one unrestored in my inventory, but it'll take a major restoration. I do that all on contract—some myself, another man wood-working, another at motor work and another varnishing."

To join the Land O' Lakes Chapter of the Antique & Classic Boat Society, write Bob Speltz, treasurer and membership chairman, 505 Albert Lea St., Albert Lea, Minn. 56007. Payment of \$10 local and \$10 national dues gets you newsletters, the Dry Wrought (local) and the Rusty Rudder (national).

Speltz is the author of "The Real Runabouts," Volumes 1 and 2. Volume 3 is in the works.