

# Wooden boats making a big comeback

By Mark Brown  
Wages said to come to 100

**By Maggie Schuette Voss**  
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**LESTER PRAIRIE** — In the cycle of death and life, even objects are reborn and brought back to life. Wooden boats from a time less chaotic are being restored back to life at a shop in Lester Prairie.

The company is called Bristol Classics, owned by F. Todd Warner. The main office is in Excelsior, but it is at the old creamery in Lester Prairie where the wooden boats are transformed.

Warner said he found the shop in Lester Prairie through the grapevine. A former occupant called Warner and said he was moving out. Would Warner want the space?

"It had overhead cranes and electric hoists, it was just perfect for what we were doing," Warner said.

He moved the shop to Lester Prairie in April 1992.

Warner started buying, selling, restoring, and exhibiting wooden boats in 1976 at Tonka Bay Marina on Lake Minnetonka.

In 1976 not a lot of people were interested in wooden boats.

"That year, the Antique and Classic Boat Society (ACBS) nationally had less than 100 members," Warner said.

In 1977 he started the Land O Lakes chapter of the ACBS, which received its charter on April 23. In the U.S., this was only the third chapter of the society and there were only four boat shows held that year.

(The chapter was recently renamed the Bob Speltz Land O Lakes chapter. Speltz, the founding treasurer, recently passed away after 20 years on kidney dialysis. Warner said Speltz wrote seven books called the "Real Runabout" and was considered an expert in the wooden boat field.)

During the intervening years, interest and ownership of wooden boats has skyrocketed.

Warner said the ACBS has gone international. Throughout the world, there are 37 chapters. Total membership, he said, is about 7,000. "That represents 12,000 boats," Warner said. "And now its spreading to Sweden, England, Italy, and Australia. All are in the fledgling years of wooden boat involvement," he said.

Warner said he came to know and love wooden boats "through osmosis" from his father, who was ahead of his time.

In the 1960s and early 1970s wooden boats fell out of favor to the new fiberglass boats. "You couldn't give a wooden boat away," Warner said.

He calls his dad a visionary, who saw beyond the short term and began collecting wooden boats.

"I absorbed a lot about particular brands, whether it be Hacker Craft, Garwood or Riva. I was fortunate enough to be exposed to those," he said.

"If you look at some of the fiberglass boats, they don't have the soul a wood boat has.

They don't have the ride, the character. They don't give the same experience of wood in the water," Warner said.

Because interest has grown, so has the extent of the restoration Warner's company completes.

"We're doing boats for people from all over the U.S. and we're competing internationally with our work," he said.

In 1992 and 1993 at the Lake Tahoe De La Gant Boats, Bristol Classics restored were awarded "Best in Class." In the 1994 competition the company was awarded both first and second "Best in Class."

The increased interest has also taken Warner out of the shop. He refers to himself as "captain of the ship" and handles the business end of Bristol Classics. The business has gotten too big for him to do everything. "I travel all over the U.S. and Canada attending boats shows."

As a member of the international board of the ACBS, Warner attends four meetings a year and notes the pulse of growth in the industry.

Part of the reason there has been an upsurge in wooded boat buffs in the rarity factor, Warner said. "There is a finite supply and increasing demand."

The shop is restoring many different kinds of wood boats, old cedar strip rowboats, fishing boats, and wide stem stern row boats from the turn of the century.

There is also philosophy attached to the restoration of the boats. Warner said people who own

**F. Todd Warner is the owner of Bristol Classics, which restores, buys, and sells wooden boats. The restoration shop is in Lester Prairie. Warner stands in front of the "Laura," the only boat of its kind.**

wooden boats feel that preserving them for future generations is very worthwhile.

"I said 'What are we going to do now that is going to affect the world seven generations from now?' Some of the restoration we do is far outgoing to live our lifetime. Because of the huge expense involved in restoration, people are going to protect their investment," he said.

Before Warner will agree to restore a boat, the client must be committed to it for the long haul. "I find out if they are going to be committed to this, to be passing the experience to the next generation," he said.

Recently, Warner delivered a restored boat to an owner from Lake Geneva, Wisc. The restoration of the 25-foot Chris Craft Sportsman took three years to complete. Only 15 of these boats were

built, and Warner said this one was the only one known to exist. The interior restoration was replicated to the smallest detail, down to original Chris Craft Coast Guard tags on the cushions.

In 1949 the boat's price tag was \$8,300. The average price of a new house was \$7,300, Warner said.

Warner has his own boat he is passing on — a 1938 19-foot Chris Craft his grandfather bought new.

"My dad grew up with that boat and I grew up with it," he said.

The most interesting boat, he said, was one the company just shipped to Lake Tahoe. The hull card of the 1938 Chris Craft Custom revealed it was special ordered and delivered to Duluth. The special orders included a racing engine and something Warner had not seen before. The boat was also ordered with a Zenith radio.

"We think it was not a regular radio, but ship to shore during races," he said.

As the resurgence of wooden boats continues, Warner said some companies of the past went back into business. Hacker Craft is manufacturing a reproduction of its 1930 model, using an improved bottom and modern epoxy. Garwood has also gone back into business. "You can buy an original boat for about the price of a reproduction," Warner said.

Warner will show off the work of his Lester Prairie ship at the boat show at the Minneapolis Convention Center Jan. 25-29. Bristol Classics will be the featured exhibit and will be showing a 1931 27-foot Meteor, the only one known to exist, and a 1928 26-foot Chris Craft.

