



Classic boat

*Preserving and Celebrating
Our History—Tolka the
Poster Boat for the 2012
Summer Boat Show*

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Preserving and Celebrating Our History

Tolka the Poster Boat for the 2012 Summer Boat Show

By Rick McGraw

Walking the streets of London and many other parts of England makes everyone marvel and respect the history of that great country. Around every corner are buildings and traditions that are hundreds of years old, all extremely well preserved and thoroughly celebrated. As a result London has become one of the most popular destinations for travellers from around in the world.

Canada is a young country and we are just learning to respect and preserve our heritage. More and more historic buildings are being protected, restored, or at least incorporated into new structures. The Muskoka and Georgian Bay region has a wonderful heritage and a lot has happened over the last 20 years to protect, celebrate and preserve it for generations to come such as the Muskoka Boat and Heritage Centre (Grace and Speed).

Wooden boats are a huge part of the history of the Muskoka and Georgian Bay region because they were not only practical but often the only mode of transportation as well as an integral part of the social life in the early 1900s. There were many visionary designers and builders such as Bert Minett, Herb Ditchburn, Henry Gidley, and Tom Greavette fiercely competing all the time to build the best boats for some of the most discerning clients. Many fine examples

of their work survived because of loving care and attention, but many were abandoned, sunk, or simply left in a barn out of sight. Fortunately many of those orphaned boats have been restored with great accuracy to their former beauty by passionate wooden boat lovers, and they now ply the waterways once again. These boats bring joy to the owners as well as all the people who get to see them at the annual ACBS show in Gravenhurst or the biannual Muskoka Lakes Association (MLA) show in Port Carling.

Depending on the condition of a boat when it is found or discovered, restorations can be very extensive and take years to complete in order to make them authentic. Owners who embark on these adventures are most often intrigued and even captivated by the history and often spend countless hours researching the provenance in order to get every detail correct. Unlike the stone buildings of London, wood often deteriorates, loses its integrity, and eventually disintegrates. Completing a proper restoration of some boats can involve the replacement of virtually all the wood, sometimes just to make it safe to operate. Some members of the wooden boat community feel quite strongly that if more than 50% of the wood is replaced, the boat is a replica and no longer an antique. This has been a subject

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Preserving and Celebrating Our History - continued



Above: *Tolka* found in pieces. Right: *Tolka* now.



Photo by Tim Du Vernet

of quiet debate in the wooden boat community for years.

ACBS International, the top governing body for all the ACBS clubs in North America, has established very strict restoration rules that enable up to 100% of the wood of boat to be replaced and have it still considered an antique as long as at all times during the process it remains a boat. In other words throughout the restoration process the boat must at all times retain its shape and be only one boat. If that was not the rule, then I believe many of the boats we celebrate today, especially the larger ones, would not be motoring for everyone's benefit. The reason is none of these owners would undertake such an extraordinarily expensive process and expend the energy, if the finished product would be considered a replica and not an antique. And then we would not have as much of our history preserved and available for celebration.

Replicas and new wooden boats should be celebrated as well as new entrants into our wooden boat history.

Whether built by one of the swelling ranks of professional builders or by an amateur with a dream, they all make a contribution and in my opinion are welcome in the wooden boat community.

KITTYHAWK, a 1929 Gidley Gull model (32'6") was the poster boat for the 2011 ACBS summer show in Gravenhurst. *KITTYHAWK* was used by the famous Orville Wright at his summer home in Georgian Bay. Guy and Katherine Johnstone began collecting information in 1957, acquired *KITTYHAWK* in 1972, and Bruce Wilson of Greavette Boatworks finished an extensive restoration for the Johnstones in 1975. Guy said, "I was interested in the Wright Brothers since I was a young boy, and when I stepped aboard *KITTYHAWK* I just shivered with excitement. The history of the owner and the builder made us want to take on the daunting task of restoring the boat to what it is today". The Johnstones have now taken their project to the next level by publishing a beautiful book documenting the history of *KITTYHAWK*.

Tolka is the featured boat and poster image for the 2012 ACBS show. *Tolka* was found in pieces in the woods in 2003. She was originally built at Alexander Graham Bell's Bell Laboratories for the Lash family, who wanted a special boat for Muskoka. *Tolka* is a 36' limosine originally built in the late '20s that has been meticulously restored over the past five years and is a unique example of the work produced at a boat yard

established by the world famous telephone inventor. It's not well known, but Alexander Graham Bell built many different types of boats over a 20-year period including way-ahead-of-their-time twin hulled speedsters called Hydrodromes, now known as hydrofoils.

Lee Anderson, *Tolka's* new owner said "when I heard about the amazing history of *Tolka* and examined the provenance that confirmed her origin, I immediately wanted to undertake her restoration...what an opportunity to bring a terrific piece of history back to life".

I know he is hugely satisfied with the restoration and is planning to tour the boat next summer and share the history at not only the Gravenhurst show on July 7, 2012 but at a number of other shows in the US. It is not about being Canadian or American, but about celebrating wooden boat history, and Lee has just made another huge contribution.

I know this feeling because I had the same feeling when I completed the restoration of *Heldena II*, the oldest race boat in Canada that was built in Toronto in 1916. Up until I found *Heldena II* in the field of dreams at the 2006 ACBS Boat show, I had been musing about building a replica of *Babybootlegger*, a famous US Gold Cup Racer. But when I saw *Heldena II* and, more particularly, learned about her provenance, I bought her immediately and began a very memorable life journey. If a restored *Heldena II* would have been considered a replica, I



would not have undertaken the restoration and sourced a 1918 Liberty aircraft engine for power. I believe she is a fine antique, an excellent example of the builder J.J. Taylor's body of work, and it shows George Crouch's, the famous designer, early work.

The *RMS Segwun*, which is the oldest operating steamship in North America, will be celebrating her 125th year on the water next year in Gravenhurst. The wood on her 128' hull requires regular attention in order to be safe and comply with

There are boats in the community that are thought of as original, but they actually have been significantly modified over the years, which I think makes them more questionable as an antique than one with more than 50% of the wood replaced. If we go out another 100 years will not most of the wood on most of the boats have been replaced?

There have been many wonderful restorations in the past 20 years, and there are very few grey boats left to be found. However because wood is wood, the restoration process will

continue and must if we want these boats, our heritage, to be around for hundreds of years.

So salute all wooden boat owners who covet their boats and look after them like they want them to last forever. Our kids' kids and their kids will truly appreciate the preservation of history and while we may not attract the crowds that London does, everyone who does come to visit Muskoka will truly admire our heritage and think of it as the land of the wooden boats. ❁



Heldena II retired as a Toronto police boat in 1958, purchased from a scrap yard in 1984 (left). She was raced from 1916 till 1922 when she was purchased for marine patrol by the Toronto police. Now running for pleasure on Lake Muskoka (above).

the regulations of the Canadian Coast Guard. The thousands of passengers who ride her every year and the cottagers of Muskoka who love to watch her sail past all want to see the 'old gal' operating for at least another 125 years.

A most current project is the restoration of *Wa Chee We*, a 1934, 35' Ditchburn that was recovered from the bottom of Lake Muskoka. John Unsworth, her newest owner, extensively researched the boat and confirmed that it was one of five built according to a Miss Canada design that George Crouch stretched to 35'. This is a major restoration project involving all new wood that is being meticulously completed in accordance with ACBS restoration rules, and we can look forward to seeing her on Lake Muskoka sometime next summer.

There are many other boats that have been saved or resuscitated that we are enjoying today because of the passion of the owner for the history, the story and the beauty of the wooden boat. To be honest, who can really determine what percentage of the wood of a boat is 'original'? Is that to be measured by lineal foot or volume and what about repairs made along the way that were probably not documented or accounted for? Boats and their stories are passed from one owner to another, and there is no practical way to confirm what is old and what is new wood. I think what really matters is the provenance of a boat and how accurately and precisely it has been restored.

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