

Peter Breen, a Canadian Legend

By Bev McMullen
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He has been referred to as the "Picasso" of modern Canadian boat builders. Perhaps his creative intelligence, unrelenting passion or financial determination to produce "one of kind" wooden boat masterpieces. Peter Breen's undying love of and infatuation with wooden boats, his attention to detail and authenticity landed his 2003 Peter Breen Launch "Cash Injection" the prestigious "Master Craftsmanship Award" at the Sunnyland Chapter's, Mt. Dora Antique and Classic Boat Show 2003.

A show stopping masterpiece, "Cash Injection" is the result of a five-year project. Like all obsessed craftsmen, Peter began the project to occupy his limited spare time. "Cash Injection" is "the combination of several design elements starting with a proven John L. Hacker Gold Cup hull", says Peter. "It's a luxury runabout with a Ditchburn flavor and styles and shapes of period hardware. The Indian Head bow ornament and Vernier throttle are two things I designed for "Cash Injection", I installed self-standing Ditchburn launch type seats with leather upholstery, all done inhouse, including custom lumbar support and oak inlays throughout the cockpit. An entire year was dedicated to the hardware for "Cash Injection".



"We make all our own hardware patterns and sand cast and machine all our own parts to control the quality. We go to great lengths to locate and buy period components such as spotlights, horns, fire extinguishers and even antique tools for the toolbox".

The power in "Cash Injection" is a new Mercruiser 496 cubic inch 8.1 litre engine. "A Mercruiser dealer can hook up his black box to the engine and through the telephone with computer tracking, make a diagnosis through a central location. Mercury and General Motors went together on this engine to make the maintenance user friendly. They can tell you more about your engine on the telephone than they can with your new car sitting at the dealership", explains Breen. "I also had the engine blueprinted, balanced and powder coated. In my new boats, I try to use new engines and dry shaft logs whenever possible, I don't use old engines because they are not as reliable and user friendly", says Peter.



Mercury 496 cubic inch 8.1 litre engine.

"For the past 30 years I replaced old bottoms on boats being re-powered, tuning and adjusting to make them safer (some were never right from the start). I incorporated this knowledge and what I've learned over the years into the design without changing the period look of the overall boat whether original or new replica." "Engines in the 20's and 30's weighed two to three times more than they do today with less than half the power. It was necessary over the years to tune up the bottoms of old boats, as they are not necessarily safe with larger and

Born in Toronto, Peter and his seven brothers and sisters spent their summers at their Great Grandfather's camp on a pristine, wooded island located in the Severn River in South Muskoka. Peter loved the area for its natural beauty and life on the Severn River shaped his innate expressive traits and personality by connecting him to the land, the boats and water. By the age of 23 he bought his own "piece of Muskoka" and named it "Severn Place", still his base camp today some thirty years later. Peter's career began to formulate at the age of 14 when he took a job at Williamson Marine in Severn Falls. At the marina he pumped gas, learned how to fix outboards, repair wooden boats and service marine engines. His extensive knowledge of the River landed him the added responsibility of the 22-foot wooden Georgian Bay style sedan taking cottagers to their weekend holiday destinations as 90% of the cottages were only accessible by water. "At age seventeen I made the decision to quit school and work at Williamson's full time. "As well as getting my certified marine mechanic's license", he said, "winters were spent repairing everything from the old Ditchburns, Minnets and Greavettes to modern fiberglass boats. I worked at Williamson's for seven years, but the off-season was too lonely for a man in his early twenties."



The budding entrepreneur headed south to begin his amazing rise to become Canada's busiest restorer. He landed at Barton and Lackey's Marine on the Humber River on Lake Ontario (the original site of the Walter Dean Canoe Company that had been destroyed in 1953 by Hurricane Hazel). In 1972 Breen bought out Tom Lackey's shares and commenced a 13-year partnership with the charismatic John Blair. Their combined strengths were the recipe for success and their marina grew. They added other locations; Bay Moorings in Penetang, Pier Four in Toronto, the original Humber River location and the Leslie Street Store which could facilitate boats up to fifty feet. In the seventies the two wet marinas were probably 40%



wooden cruisers that were looked after and kept up. All this, as well as the new boat sales and service, kept Breen's younger days extremely productive.

A workaholic, tirelessly devoted to his craft, Breen spent his spare time in his own hobby shop on Kingston Road in Toronto. Here, with one employee, his future took a new direction. He started re-building, repairing, trading and selling wooden boats. In 1984 he sold his shares in the marinas to John Blair. Breen rearranged his future by

settling in the picturesque village of Rockwood a half-hour's drive northwest of the Toronto Airport. Here Breen came into his own; he designed and built his home, workplace and storage facility specifically designed for restoring wooden boats.



Like any great entrepreneur, Breen has surrounded himself with the industry's best; Tom Adams, Anthony Moore, Patricia Ross, Ian Pattison and Adam Bosch with Peter at the helm. This talented team coupled with Peter's charismatic character and unrelenting attention to the projects has produced some spectacular boats. They say "if you do something you love, you never work another day in your life", Breen is the epitome of that statement.

Today Peter's business, Antique and Classic Boat Co. Ltd., consists of 75% restoration of original boats and 25% building new "one of a kind" replicas. "When you are restoring an original boat you can't add anything

new; you have to be faithful to how they did it originally. All my life we've been locked into their style of doing it as we're re-building and refurbishing Ditchburns, Minnet-Shields and Greavettes...with Breen custom-built boats I can "push the envelope" so to speak".

Breen has turned out some real classic showboats in his clean and thoroughly organized Rockwood shop. "We don't design hulls. We use only proven hull forms from the master designers of the 20's and beyond; George Crouch, John L. Hacker and Douglas Van Patton, those are Canada's finest." "I begin with a proven 1920's hull, the Ditchburn Rainbow, for example", says Breen, "above the waterline, we custom tailor the boat to suit the customer's needs. We build wooden boats out of real wood; we use no plywood, veneers or glues to hold our boats together. We adhere to the 20's styles and designs; from steering wheel, throttle, gearshift, hardware, windshield to outboard rudder, these elements are blended together into the model we are making. When a finished boat rolls out of my shop it is faithful to the boat builders of the past era".

Breen says "I have never done anything else in my life but work with wooden boats, this is not a hobby, I got lucky, I fell into a profession that I know well, and that progressed into a good business with six year round employees". "I am really happy, I am very lucky, and I do what I love", says Breen who spends his spare time tinkering with his own old boats.

During the twenties the automobile master designers created their lasting touch by designing exotic and novel hood ornaments. Famous and most memorable are Jaguar's wild jungle cat, Rolls Royce's Lady of Fantasy and the Pontiac Indian head. Boat builder Earl Barnes also used an Indian Head for his bow ornament, as well as the larger Ditchburns and Minnets. Breen designed and cast the unique "Old Woman" hood ornament for Skookum (Ojibwa for Old Woman) a simply stunning restored 36 foot Ditchburn and incorporated a similar native theme into his own trademark.



"At the Clayton Boat Show flea market, I found and purchased the hardware for a 1920's folding auto top. "Cash Injection" has the appearance of a Ditchburn Viking with folded ventilator windshield. The only top Ditchburn offered was a Navy top with loose curtain fit to the windshield. Having gone on several boat trips throughout the years and getting really rained on we decided to fit the auto top to "Cash Injection" so we could get out of the inclement elements or hot sun". I designed the top like the 50's convertible cars and fitted the top directly off the folding windshield, no loose curtains." My son Jeffery and I trailered "Cash Injection" to Florida for

her maiden voyage on the St. John's River Cruise, it poured rain, however, my friend Jim Grand sat in the backseat and read his newspaper at 35 mph, dry as a bone".



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