

ONE AT A TIME

ONE OF A KIND



The Rockwood, Ontario, workshop of Peter Breen Antique and Classic Boat Company Limited, a small but steady stream of hand

crafted masterpieces continues to appear, each one enhancing the already impressive reputation of this wooden boat restorer. Each vessel displays almost unbelievable skills in boat-building carpentry, period hardware, impressive metalwork, and flawless finish. Meticulous attention to every detail has produced a stunning result.



Opposite: (top) Peter Breen at the helm of Cash Injection; (bottom) Ian Bruce's Arequipa. Right: Elinore, a 29' Ditchburn Launch, picks up the pace. Below: The helm of the Tenawa.



Peter Breen is no stranger to his craft. He started his career as a fourteen-year old dock boy and water-taxi driver for Williamson Marine of Port Severn. A jumping-off point for both Georgian Bay and Severn River cottagers, the marina provided reliable transportation to remote holiday sites in an area with few roads. The taxi itself was a husky Williamson-built 22-foot Georgian Bay style sedan, well able to handle rough conditions with a full load of passengers and their gear.

By age sixteen, Peter had decided to become a full-time employee, learning to repair wooden boats and servicing all manner of marine engines. Annual winter training school at Outboard Marine's

Peterborough factory created his proficiency in outboard motor servicing, eventually qualifying him as a certified marine mechanic. Williamson Marine staff prided themselves on handling every customer's needs, so a wide variety of skills in every marine requirement was soon added to Peter's development.

In 1975, Peter became a partner with John Blair in Lackie's Marine by buying out the shares of Tom Lackie. This was to become a fifteen-year growth and success story that saw expansion into three additional locations – Bay Moorings at Penetang, Pier Four and Leslie Street in Toronto as well as the original Humber River location. Fibreglass Sea Ray boats and Johnson outboards were their principle brands, supplemented by many other lines of boats, hardware, clothing and accessories.

But, wooden boats remained Peter's first love. In 1973, he had established a "hobby" shop on Kingston Road in Toronto where he always managed to have a project vessel in rebuild. The first was a 19-foot, lapstrake Midland Boat Works runabout to be used at his island cottage then in construction on the



Severn River. More project boats were appearing all the time and neither Peter or John Blair were able to resist opportunities to acquire wonderful Muskoka built launches in need of restoration. Three Ditchburns were acquired from the Hamilton Harbour Commission and others from private owners – all were restored and sold to appreciative new owners.

Tom Smythe, grandson of Conn Smythe of Maple Leaf Hockey team fame, really brought attention to the idea of restoring these aging beauties with his restoration of Marmilwood, a 32-foot Minett Shields launch. A newsworthy event in itself, it created wide public interest when Tom invited superstar Frank Mahovlich to launch the restored vessel. For some years afterwards the vessel was known by Frank's hockey nickname, "The Big M."

Collectors were now starting to appear, able and willing to spend the time and money needed to effect a sensitive restoration, bringing an aging vessel back to its original appearance. Antique boat clubs were being formed across Canada and the United States and their shows, activities, and publications were rapidly increasing interest in the hobby. Owning a mint condition classic Muskoka launch had suddenly become fashionable.

In 1984, Peter sold out his shares in Lackie's Marine to John Blair and built his dream workshop for wooden boat restoration beside his new house near Rockwood, just a few miles west of Toronto. Here he has become one of the most skilled, versatile and busy restorers in Canada, now with a two-year list of on-going projects.

This October, two 31-foot Ditchburn launches will be started, each to take two years to completion. They will be joining the work presently in the shop, which is to be completed within the coming year.

What is now in the shop is mind boggling, guaranteed to start the heart pounding, certain to instill a magical feeling. Most obvious in the main shop is the hulking presence of the vintage race boat Heldenra, a 1916 monster that tore up the Toronto waterfront for several years. Originally powered by a 300 hp Van Blerck engine weighing 3600 pounds, she was later powered with a 415 hp Liberty engine that weighed only 880 pounds, hurtling her 36-foot hull to dangerous speeds. After winning many races for her Toronto owner, she was retired to duty with

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the Harbour Police. A new Liberty engine awaits her completion and she will be resident in Muskoka.

Alongside Helden, and looking somewhat dwarfed, is a 26-foot hull following the general lines of the 1923 Rainbow III, Harry Greening's very successful Gold Cup racer designed by John Hacker. To be finished as a two-seat Gentleman's Racer, this speedster will be powered by General Motors latest V-8 Vortec engine, a 496 cubic-inch model that has been blueprinted, balanced, then powder-coated. All moving parts of this engine have been dismantled, weighed, and balanced - valves, push rods, cranks, and pistons. In addition, liquid mercury is poured into each cylinder head, and then ground-out until each cylinder displacement is exactly equal. All parts are then powder-coated with magne-

tized particles, then oven baked to produce a finish that won't fade or discolor with engine heat. This finish also dissipates heat at a faster rate.

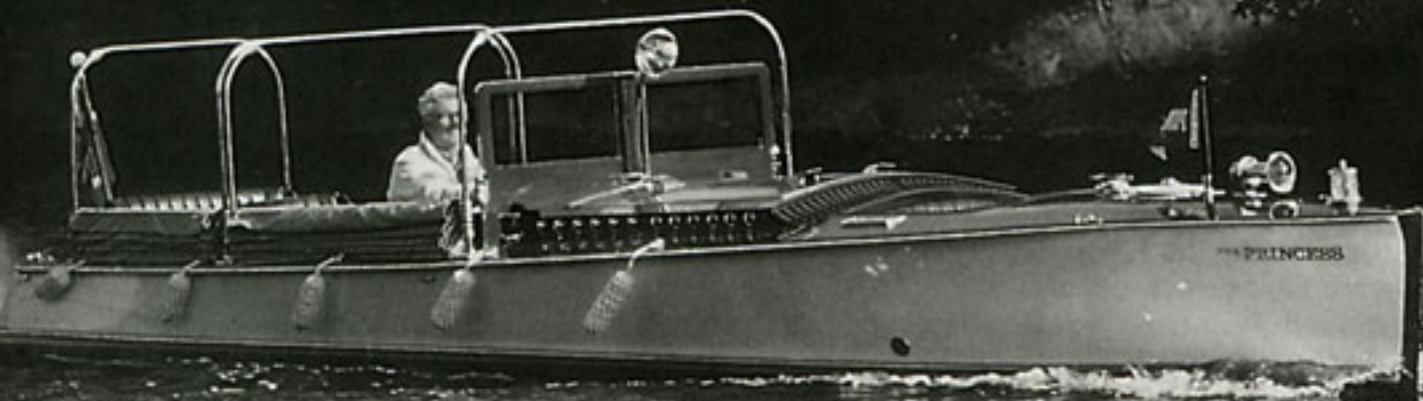
While unnamed, the vessel is being built in mahogany planking on white oak frames and all wood is encapsulated in epoxy for added strength and rot resistance. Enormously strong, this hull should enjoy a long low-maintenance life. Its proven hull design and awesome power will guarantee exciting performance.

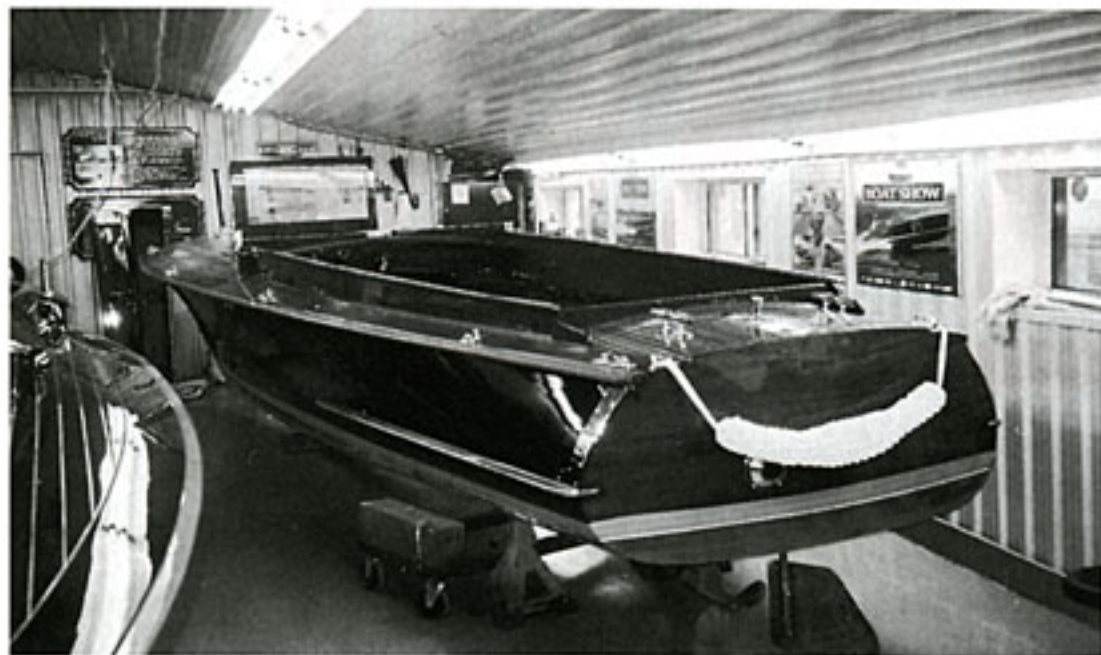
In one of the two varnish rooms are two more beauties. Tenawa is a 24-foot version of the proven Rainbow hull lines, now completed and ready for delivery. All hardware is in the Ditchburn style; floors and seats are in mahogany grating. Twelve coats of spar varnish have produced a deep, flawless finish. A

Left: Tenawa is a 24-foot version of the proven Rainbow hull lines and sports 12 coats of spar varnish to provide a deep, flawless finish - combining beauty with power. Bottom: The graceful cruise of The Princess - a 1928 28' Ditchburn.

custom 1920s banjo-style wooden steering wheel with mahogany centre insert and an unusual vernier throttle offer fingertip control for the helmsman. Power is provided by a 350 cubic-inch V-8 with electronic fuel injection. In addition to being blueprinted, balanced and powder-coated, this engine will output at least 350 hp. On her bow, Tenawa sports an Indian chief mascot, a newly created badge of Breen Boats, marking a new direction for the company. Totally new vessels will be built using proven hull forms, the best of wooden construction with modern power, but in the style of the twenties.

Lying alongside this newly built vessel is a 1928 gem - hull number 28-4 - a 23-foot Ditchburn runabout named Whip-poor-will, belonging to a well-known Muskoka collector. Probably one of the prettiest and most original of her time afloat, this vessel is in for varnish and minor upgrading only. Having received careful maintenance for her lifetime, she beautifully reflects the superior design and workmanship of her builder. Powered by her original four-cylinder Buchanan engine of perhaps 40 hp, she is every bit as





Clockwise: Tenawa's newly created badge, an Indian chief mascot. This emblem marks a new direction for the company.; What is now in the shop is mind boggling, guaranteed to start the heart pounding, certain to instill a magical feeling. Here, Whip-poor-will awaits further refinements.

desirable as her modern stable mate.

The other varnish room contains four more treasures – two well-known vessels, the 1934 Kemah II

and The Princess which dates to 1928. Both models are just getting a few coats of varnish for routine maintenance. Sharing the room and ready for varnish are two additional vessels – the 1929 Viking, Mint Julep which has been totally restored, and a new and very exciting vessel to be named Cash Injection.

Mint Julep is one of the few remaining examples of Ditchburn's stepped-hull runabout introduced in

the late twenties. Powerful, distinctive in appearance and able to attain over 40 mph, this daring design ranked Ditchburn as a leading edge manufacturer. A rebuilt 225 hp Kermath aluminum engine will be installed.

Cash Injection is a new Breen boat, very much in the general appearance of a Ditchburn Viking,

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but smaller and without the raised deck of the engine compartment. All hardware, outboard rudder, seating, instrument panel, spotlight, gearshift, steering wheel and windshield are in the Ditchburn Viking style. Custom details abound in the magnificent woodwork. Engine hatch covers, for example, have been built with steam bent frames on eight-inch centres to demonstrate strong, light construction and to save two inches in cover depth, thus avoiding the need for a raised deck as in the Viking.

In fact, the whole boat is being built as a demonstrator – to exhibit the skills of the workers, to illustrate how innovative solutions can improve the end product and let prospective customers know just how well things can be done. Many new and unusual items of equipment will be incorporated including a vernier throttle adapted from Cessna aircraft and a fibreglass shaft log with carbon collar four times the cost of the usual bronze shaft log but it ends troublesome leaking. Power will be the new General Motors 496 cubic inch V-8. Everywhere this vessel demonstrates construction details and equipment far beyond the usual range.

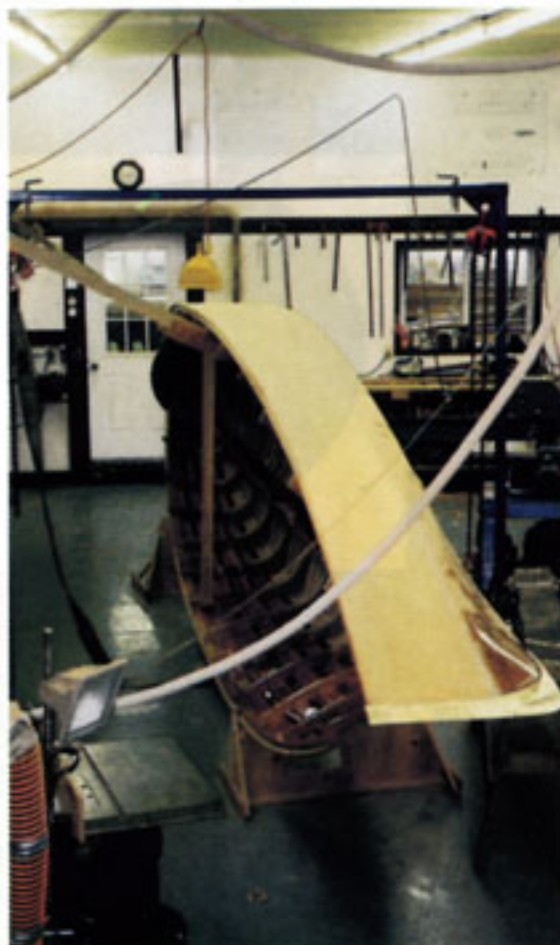
A big, bold luxury runabout, Cash Injection will set an entirely new standard with proven hull design, exceptional performance and flawless attention to detail. We await the launching of this scorcher next year with great anticipation. As Mae West was fond of saying, "Too much of a good thing can be wonderful!"

As business has flowed in over the years it has been necessary to refine construction methods, seeking maximum efficiency. Three young master boat builders are each in charge of their own project, laying the keel, making patterns and molds, framing and planking, mechanical systems, seating, wiring and engine installation - right through to initial staining and varnishing. Cameron MacDonald is presently decking the race boat Heldena, Brett Hibbs has just completed the hull of the unnamed Gentleman's racer and Adam Bosch has finished the 24-foot Tenawa, now ready for delivery to the American owner. Final varnishing, cleaning and polishing are usually done by Mitchell Oxford, the only full-time finisher with the varnish brush.

This system of a boat builder being totally responsible seems to please the staff exceptionally well, paying dividends in job satisfaction, accountability and pride. Peter Breen naturally functions as final arbiter and decision maker, but it seems to make for a happy work environment. An easy cooperation exists when a job requires extra hands at some stage and suggestions from past experience are often exchanged for mutual benefit.

Scheduling of work and rotation of space are of prime importance. The main shop is only 30' by 50' and the two varnish rooms are smaller. Some shed storage is available but controlled heat and humidity are vitally important in the work areas. Work is already scheduled into the second and third years but Peter maintains constant communication with his loyal customers, advising them of regular maintenance opportunities.

With the dwindling supply of "gray boats" for total restoration, Peter envisions a future workload that would be perhaps divided as 25 per cent minor maintenance of restored vessels, 50 per cent new restorations, and 25 per cent new Breen boats. With his skill, his experience, his trained staff, his love of traditional design and wooden construction, it's quite safe to say that wooden boats will be around for a long time yet. □



Early stages of the Gentlemen's racer

PETER BREEN

ANTIQUÉ & CLASSIC BOAT CO. LTD.

World Class Wooden Boats

