



Chapter Seven

BOATS WITH STORIES



Undoubtedly every Ditchburn boat could tell a story if indeed they could talk, and since we can't tell them all it's perhaps unfair to tell any. But some are so unusual, so charming, so unbelievable, that they just have to be told!

GRACE ANNE II

The last major vessel to be launched at Orillia was an 85-foot, houseboat-styled cruiser commissioned by John Forlong of Kenora, a colourful entrepreneur who wanted a new and larger vessel to be used on Lake of the Woods, as a surprise birthday present for his wife.

Around 1913, John Forlong had won a 52-foot cruiser in a high-stakes poker game, named it *Grace Anne* in honour of his wife, and for eighteen years used it to explore the wilderness areas of that huge water. John's father-in-law, Alexander MacDonald, had established a summer home on nearby Coney Island, and on his death this property was inherited by the Forlongs. The combination of cottage home and lake exploration by yacht was exactly to their liking, and summer weekends were filled with family and friends.

Knowing of the Ditchburn reputation for style, workmanship, and engineering excellence, Forlong chose this builder to carry out the next project he had envisioned. *Grace Anne II* was to be 85 feet in length by 17 feet in beam,



Grace Anne and John Forlong, owners of *Grace Anne II*.

with a draught of 5 feet. Her gross tonnage would be 105.63 tons, and powered by a single, 300-horsepower Sterling engine, she was expected to cruise at 12 knots. But her home was to be on Lake of the Woods, which is not connected to the Great Lakes. Thus her complicated rail delivery to those waters had to be ensured before production could begin.

Months of precision planning between the Ditchburn Company and Canadian National Railway officials of the Port Arthur division were required. Minimum clearances at rock cuts, bridges, water tanks, and coaling stations had to be checked. Superelevation of curves

was considered, to determine whether the load might be thrown off centre and overturned. Eventually, as a final check, a scale model was built and tested on a small-scale track to determine that all information was correct.

Naturally, for transport, the completed vessel would have to be stripped of her deckhouse and all external fittings. Her 17-foot beam exceeded several bridge spans, so it would be necessary for the hull to travel on its side, and a special cradle would be required to hold the hull in its travel position. Finally, it was all agreed to be possible, and construction began.

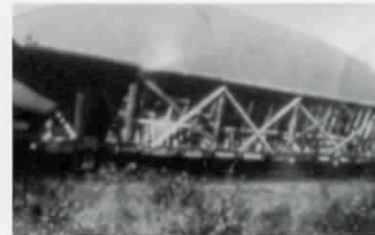
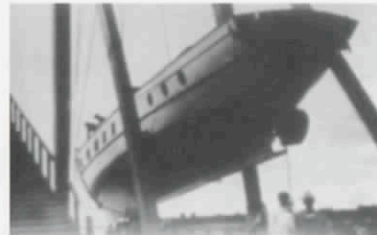
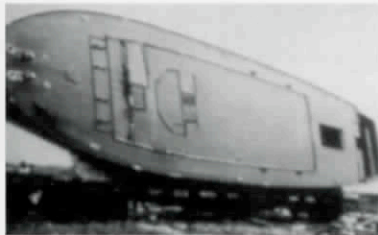
After four months and at an estimated cost of \$75,000, the *Grace Anne II* was ready for

launching. With flags flying, the town band playing, and Herbert's daughter, Josephine Ditchburn, breaking the customary champagne bottle on her bow, she slid into the water to the cheers of workers and guests.

Unfortunately, this triumphant day was almost coincident with the demise of the Ditchburn Boat Building Co. With the Depression that had followed the stock-market crash, orders had disappeared, two thirds of the workforce had been laid off, and the last two orders to be filled at the Orillia plant were a 117-foot patrol boat for the federal government and the houseboat cruiser *Grace Anne II*.

Now, Captain Arthur Davies was ready to undertake the long and complicated journey from Orillia through the Trent-Severn Canal to Georgian Bay, Lakes Huron and Superior to Port Arthur—a 1,285-mile trip. This phase was accomplished with a minimum of difficulty, the vessel behaving as expected. The second phase, from Port Arthur to Rainy River at the south-east end of the Lake of the Woods, had to be made by rail. It was a monumental feat, never before attempted with such a large vessel.

When the boat arrived in Port Arthur, the Port Arthur Shipbuilding Co. took eleven days to remove the deckhouse and all external fittings. The hull was then lifted on its side into the



Very exacting arrangements were needed to transport the 85-foot houseboat to her home on Lake of the Woods.





Above: The bridge and instrumentation of *Grace Anne II* have been continually updated.

Right: Ditchburn quality is still breathtaking.

Opposite: Always faultlessly maintained by her various owners, this stately houseboat still looks very much as it did originally. Photo courtesy Salisbury Cruises Ltd., Kenora, Ontario.





large, special cradle designed for her rail transport. The cradled, 85-foot hull was then lifted onto a 61-foot flatcar, and her engine, deckhouse and all other parts were loaded onto three additional flatcars. Herb Ditchburn himself had come to Port Arthur to work with railroad officials in completing this most difficult shipment.

Despite an overhead bridge clearance near Fort Frances of only 2 inches, *Grace Anne II* arrived in Rainy River without a single crack in her painted finish—a testimonial to careful handling and exacting planning. There on the banks of the river, the houseboat was reassembled, launched, and piloted to her new home at Kenora, on the north side of the lake. Arriving on August 12, she was immediately installed in her new boathouse, where the six men who had accompanied her put the finishing touches to her hull and machinery. In September, she took her first official run, to Crow Rock and back.

Enjoying a cruise on the *Grace Anne II* would be an easy assignment.

No expense was spared in furnishing this luxurious yacht to make it the finest on the lake. The Forlongs entertained lavishly on afternoon and overnight cruises, each trip allowing the family and their guests to enjoy the incredible scenery, fishing without equal, and wilderness exploration in spacious, self-sufficient comfort. *Grace Anne II* carried 1,000 gallons of fresh water, 1,000 gallons of gasoline, and had a cruising range of 1,000 miles.

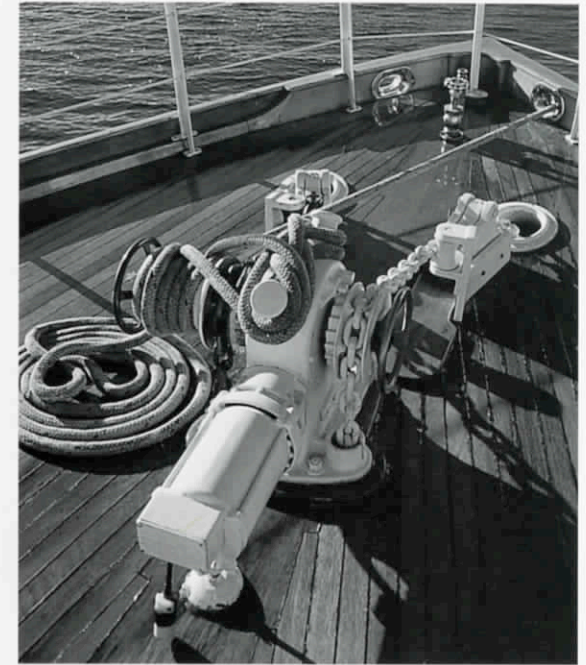
In 1946, the boat was sold to Ralph Erwin, who ran it as a cruise and charter ship for his Salisbury House restaurant chain. Charter price for the six-day cruise, accommodating twelve to fifteen guests, was \$2,500. For a limited time, daily cruises were offered as well. Guests paid \$10 for the daylong cruise, with lunch and dinner included.

By 1950, the *Grace Anne II* was being operated as a private club with seven shareholders, each entitled to three weeks cruising time. A share cost \$6,000 plus a \$2,000 annual fee for maintenance and operation. The 3M company of St. Paul bought into this venture, eventually purchasing

all remaining shares in 1954. For the next forty years the vessel served the needs of a growing number of 3M service and product divisions.

During the 3M ownership, vast sums of money were spent to preserve and maintain the *Grace Anne II*, always with the objective of retaining the original character of the vessel and the high quality of its Ditchburn craftsmanship. Throughout all the years of their ownership, the vessel lost none of its unique style, its superb craftsmanship, or its Ditchburn distinction.

In 1994, the vessel's captain, along with several other former employees, purchased the beautifully preserved cruiser from 3M, forming a new company, Salisbury Cruises, to charter the vessel for wedding parties, company meetings, family getaways, fishing friends, and other unforgettable cruising experiences. Threading her way through the thousands of pine-covered islands on one of the most beautiful lakes in the world, the seventy-year-old *Grace Anne II*, the largest Ditchburn yacht still afloat, continues to provide a wilderness experience in pampered luxury.



The power windlass on the foredeck makes anchoring a pleasure.



Eccentric Marion "Joe" Carstairs drove everything from ambulances to motorcars, from schooners to hydroplanes, always at full throttle. Assisted by her mechanic, Joe Harris, she became the fastest woman on the water, and a Ditchburn customer. Photo by Lambert of Getty Images.

ESTELLE V

One of the most bizarre episodes in Ditchburn history centres on the race boat *Estelle V*, a 35-foot hydroplane powered by two 900-horsepower Napier Lion engines, designed by Bert Hawker, built in England, but completed, tested, and perfected at Ditchburn's in Muskoka. The owner was a most unusual woman, Marion Barbara Carstairs, who preferred to be known as "Joe."

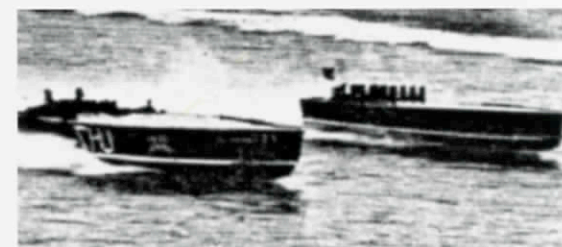
A flamboyant character, mannish in appearance and dress, given to smoking cigars, sporting tattoos, and always seeking adventures not ordinarily available to young women, English-born Miss Carstairs was fabulously wealthy, her American grandfather being one of the founders of Standard Oil. Her beautiful mother married many times, travelled the world, and generally ignored Marion. Throughout the First World War, Marion drove ambulances in France, seeking out dangerous living. Then in the 1920s she turned to boats and the world of speed.

In 1927, Carstairs commissioned three hydroplanes to be built in secrecy, hoping to



break the 100-mile-per-hour mark. Named *Estelle I*, *II*, and *III*, these vessels did not accomplish her goal but did make her the fastest woman on the water. In September 1928, she was a challenger in the tiny, 21-foot *Estelle II* for the Harmsworth Trophy at Detroit, where Gar Wood's *Miss America VII* dwarfed her. The British challenger actually led for a half lap, but broached, nose-dived and sank, succumbing to a tremendous stern wave from her larger rival.

Gamely, she returned the next year with *Estelle IV*, a much larger vessel, at 35 feet by 9.5 feet, which had been brought to Muskoka for summer testing in advance of the September racing. Powered by three Napier engines, the



Above: In her first Harmsworth challenge in 1928, Carstairs and *Estelle II* experienced an unexpected sinking.

Below: *Estelle V* didn't win, but for the first time Gar Wood's *Miss Americas* were seriously challenged.

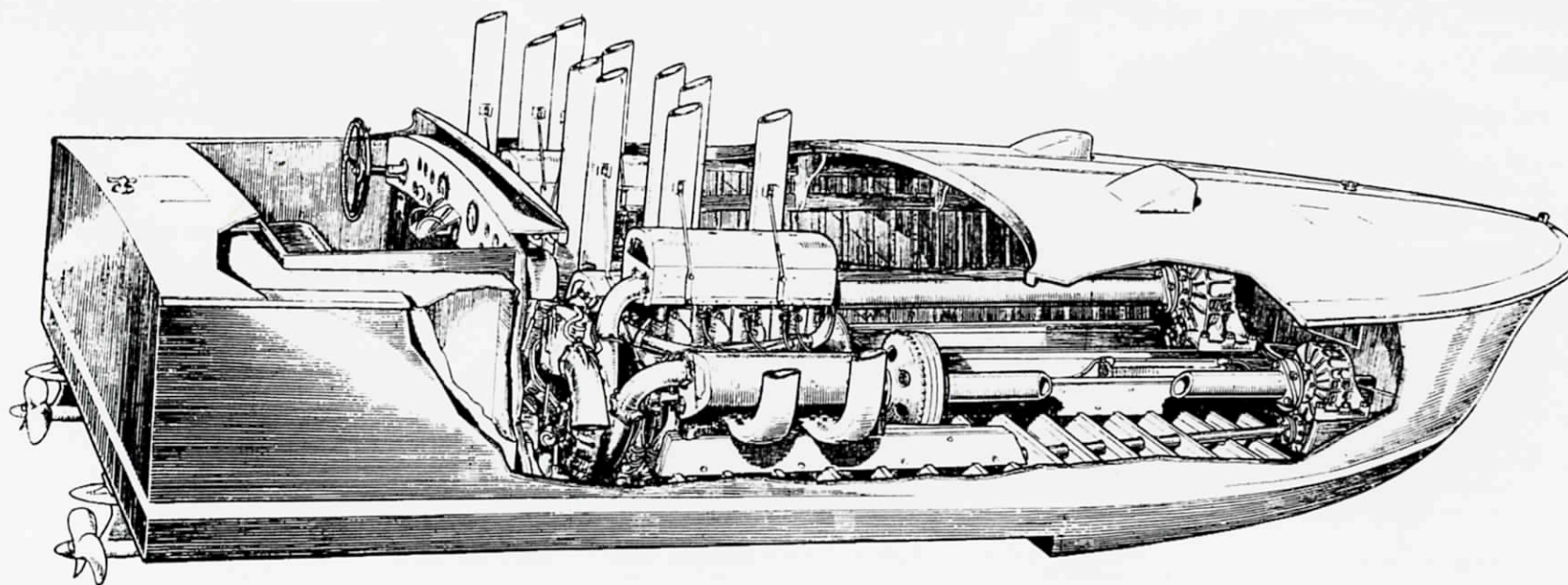
race boat handled badly, especially on turns. Bert Hawker and Herb Ditchburn finally decided to remove the third engine, and while handling was improved, the loss of top speed made her an easy victim for Gar Wood's new *Miss America VIII*.

Carstairs had turned to Bert Hawker as designer for *Estelle IV*, and now again for *Estelle V*, as she had recognized his skill and daring. By the Harmsworth rules the vessel had

to be built in the challenging country, which was done, but then it was shipped to Lake Muskoka for rigorous shakedown and fine-tuning. The new *Estelle V* was very fast, a much better performer, and both Ditchburn and Hawker began to express some confidence. Rumours had the new boat clocked at 94 mph. Meanwhile, Joe Carstairs was now living in rental quarters in Muskoka, shocking the natives, but preparing herself for the big test at Detroit.

On August 30, five unlimited racers came to the start line—*Estelle IV* and *Estelle V*, with Joe Carstairs driving the older vessel, and three *Miss Americas*—IX, VIII, and V—driven by three Wood brothers, Gar, George, and Phil. The winner was only briefly in doubt, but it still provided the first real challenge to Gar Wood's domination of the Harmsworth Trophy.

In the first 30-mile heat, *Estelle IV* was first



Hawker's design for *Estelle V* is revealed in this drawing of her internal layout. Enclosed shafts from the two Napier engines are carried forward to V-drives, then through secondary shafts to the propellers.

across the start line with three American boats in hot pursuit. By the end of the first lap, the two newest U.S. racers had passed Carstairs and enjoyed an enormous lead. But now the danger-loving Hawker seemed to come from nowhere, relentlessly cutting down the distance to the leaders.

Both of the American boats were running faster now—they had to—*Estelle V* was visibly gaining on them. A press plane flying overhead filmed the dramatic moment as Hawker surged into the lead, but then disaster struck. Hardly had the *Estelle V* taken the lead when her gas tank split and an oil line broke. Hawker, his goggles covered in oil, was blinded, and travelling at more than 90 mph. Veering off the course, the 8,000-pound challenger shot dangerously across George Wood's course, and then threaded, fate-guided, through a dozen spectator craft, before the mechanic could shut her down.

Unaware of the disaster and stung by *Estelle V*'s speed, the American boats pounded downstream towards the finish of the second lap. Hawker lost no time in getting underway



Estelle IV was larger but slower than *Estelle V*.

again, and although gasoline was flowing around the cockpit and oil was escaping from one engine, the chase was on. Even with all the lost time, *Estelle V* was within 200 yards of the leaders as they passed the judges' stand.

Of course, the chase could not last for long. A quarter mile past the start line, the last of the gasoline leaked away and *Estelle V* was dead in the water. By requiring a tow from the course she was disqualified from competition.

On Monday, September 1, the second heat got underway with only *Estelle IV* to carry the British hopes. Joe Carstairs graciously

surrendered her seat to Bert Hawker as the better driver, but even though he was able to produce a little more speed, the issue was never in doubt. With no chance of losing, Gar Wood drove his newest defender to a heat record of 77.39 mph. In the years following 1920, when Wood first captured the trophy at Osborne Bay, England, he had edged the winning speed up a small margin at each defence, from 61.51 mph to 77.39 mph in 1930.

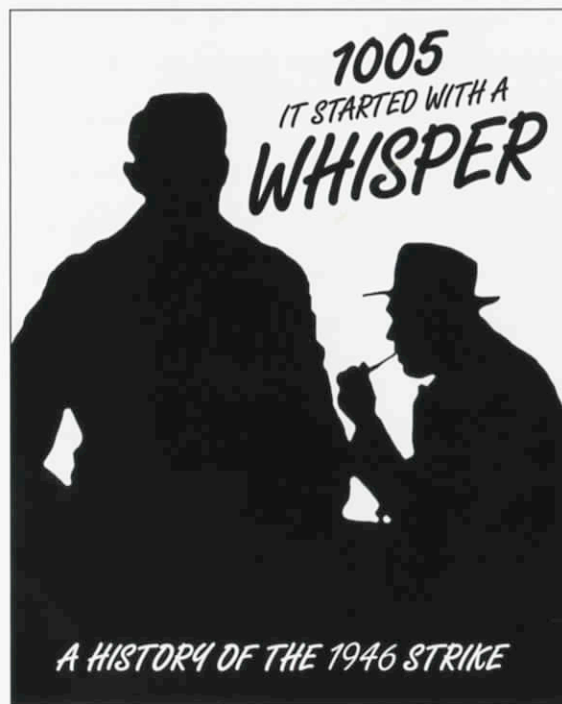
Marion "Joe" Carstairs now abandoned the racing scene, but then began an even more bizarre chapter of her life by purchasing a wild, sparsely populated island in the Bahamas for \$40,000. Here she built a residence, roads, and a yacht harbour, organized an "army," and entertained the Duke and Duchess of Windsor. British author Kate Summerscale recently documented her eccentric life in *The Queen of Whale Cay*.

Herb Ditchburn and Bert Hawker could probably have written an entertaining volume of their own experiences with the fastest woman on the water.



Above: Whisper, the union picket boat, bears down on a strikebreaker.

Below: The cover of the union publication honours the role played by Whisper.



WHISPER, THE UNION BOAT

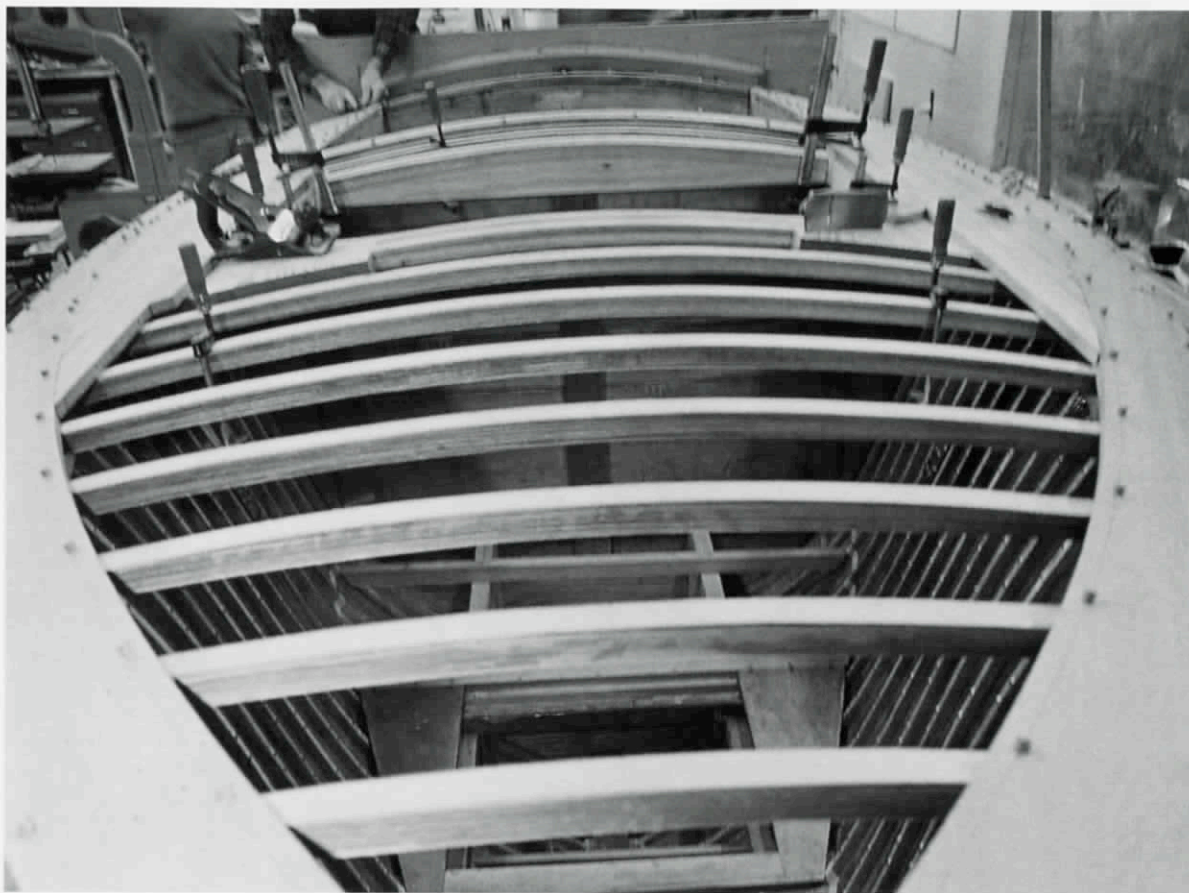
A 31-foot Ditchburn launch that left the Gravenhurst factory in 1929 has recently returned to Lake Muskoka after an exacting restoration. If this vessel could talk, she would have some tall tales to tell, as her various careers have included chauffeur-driven cottage service, rum-running, picket duty for a striking union, hotel livery duty, and the transportation of several private owners.

Sold by her first owner, the sleek mahogany *Whisper*, hull number 29-14, was delivered to a Hamilton operator for use on Lake Erie, where her low profile and high speed were put to immediate use delivering special cargo to the Cleveland area. Little is officially recorded of these nighttime voyages, but her owner apparently went out of business with the 1934 repeal of U.S. prohibition.

Her next owner was also in the bootlegging business but confined his deliveries to various lakeshore dance palaces in the Hamilton, Burlington, Bronte, and Oakville areas. Always a speedy vessel, she had a Kermath Sea Wolf

engine refitted with new Zenith carburetors, which took her top speed to over 40 mph, allowing her to run away from most other lake traffic.

In 1946, she experienced a most amazing career change. Purchased by Local 1005 of the United Steel Workers of America, *Whisper* was taken to Hamilton Harbour to play a unique role in a bitter labour dispute. In newspaper accounts of the time, *Whisper* figured regularly as the strikers struggled to prevent water access to the strike-bound plant, while management endeavoured to maintain production and supply food to non-striking workers in the mill. Any boats approaching the area were subjected to threats, harassment, and swamping by the patrolling picket boat. Shots were fired on one occasion, ending in arrests by the Hamilton Harbour police with resulting fines and jail sentences. After the long dispute was settled, the union commissioned the publication of a book entitled *It Started with a Whisper*, a history of the 1946 strike and the important role played by its Ditchburn launch.



Complete restoration of *Whisper* begins seventy years later.

To recoup its investment, the union raffled off the vessel, and a Hamilton fuel-oil dealer became the lucky winner of the now-famous launch. A later owner sold her to the newly opened Muskoka Sands resort hotel, where she transported guests for many years. In 1993, she was sold to a Michigan boater who intended to completely restore the aging craft, but that never happened, as other projects commanded the owner's attention.

Recently, Collingwood and Lake Muskoka resident Duncan Hawkins, an antique-boat enthusiast and past president of the Antique and Classic Boat Society of Toronto, learned of *Whisper*, then languishing in a Michigan storage shed. Hawkins, who had worked his student summers at the steel mill, knew something of *Whisper's* unique history and quickly decided that this proud Ditchburn launch should be restored and returned to her home waters in Muskoka.

Hawkins vowed that this would be an authentic restoration, taking *Whisper* back to her original equipment and appearance. A restored





Kermath Sea Wolf was located in Minnesota and over one hundred pieces of correct and authentic Ditchburn hardware found, including a keyless, rim-wind, eight-day clock for mounting on the dash. Eighty percent of her original planking could be used, but a new keel and some replacement ribs were needed.

The replacement of her original one-piece transom was somewhat more difficult, but eventually the right plank of solid mahogany was found, soaked for two months, then bent



Far left: A keyless, rim-wind clock was one of a hundred original items of hardware.

Left: A powerful horn graces the foredeck.

Opposite: The impressive size and speed of *Whisper* were used to enforce the picket line.

into position using steam. Finally, in August 2001, *Whisper* was back in her home waters of Lake Muskoka, throwing a powerful wake as she cruised easily at 35 mph—that same wake that must have terrified the small craft at the steel-plant strike.

Hawkins made an enormous investment to return this vessel to top condition, but knowing her history, having worked in the mill during student summers, it seemed to become an obligation. Or perhaps an obsession.

Says Hawkins, “There seems to be a certain sense of stewardship involved. Most of the old union crew are now gone, but I would still like to take *Whisper* to Hamilton Harbour some day. And maybe we’d need some volunteer scabs in tin boats to swamp.”