

Mount Clemens Public Library

Local History Sketches

Hacker Boat Company

(©2008 by Mount Clemens Public Library. All rights reserved.)



Hacker Boat Company at 9 Judge Street in Mount Clemens

Gleaming mahogany runabout motorboats - play things of the rich and famous, renowned for their record-breaking speed, and now prized by collectors - were once manufactured in Mount Clemens, Michigan, by the **Hacker Boat Company**. Hacker Craft boats are known the world over for their fine craftsmanship and sleek V-bottom design which allowed greater speed at lower horsepower.

The Hacker Boat Company was founded in Detroit by **John Ludwig Hacker**, a native of Detroit who had shown an interest in boats and naval architecture as a youth. Hacker was born on May 24, 1877, and studied speedboat design by correspondence course while working as a bookkeeper in his father's business. He developed a design for a hull which would produce maximum speed and efficiency, and his success prompted him to go into the boat-building business.

In 1911, Hacker designed the "Kitty Hawk," the first successful step hydroplane which reached a then-unknown speed of 50 miles per hour. Hacker's success was interrupted by a nervous breakdown which caused him to sell out his first business to partner **L.L. Tripp**; after John Hacker's departure the company eventually became known as the **Albany Boat Company**.

In 1914, approximately, Hacker returned to Detroit and founded the Hacker Boat Company at 323 Crane Avenue. His runabout designs for **Gregory's Belle Isle Boat & Engine Company** were soon to bring great success to the firm. The boats, called "Belle Isle Bear Cats," proved popular with prominent owners such as **Edsel Ford** and **J.W. Packard**. Business was booming, and in 1921, John L. Hacker decided it was time to open a satellite facility in Mount Clemens. Two years later, he announced that he was moving the entire boatbuilding operation from Detroit to Mount Clemens.

The boat works at 9 Judge Street on the Clinton River in Mount Clemens were enlarged twice by 1928, providing 35,000 square feet of floor space for the handcrafting of fine mahogany runabouts. The *Pageant of Progress* reported that Hacker Boat Company employed sixty-eight men in 1928, and demand for the product was high. In 1930, the **King of Siam** ordered a custom-built 40' Laundau top runabout powered with an 800-horse Packard engine. Interestingly, only four authorized dealers offered

Hacker boats to the public during this time period; the company did most of its business through factory-direct orders from the customer, and excelled in custom-built craft.



In 1925, a private pilot named **S. Dudley McCready** came to Mount Clemens after his family had purchased a Hacker boat. McCready was from Ohio, and held a pilot's license which had been signed by **Orville Wright**. He became financially interested in the Hacker Boat Company, and by 1928 was listed as the secretary-treasurer of the company. Hacker and McCready worked together through the glory days of the Roaring Twenties, when demand for pleasure boats was high and the innovative and ingenious Hacker designs were developing an increasingly large following.

The Great Depression effectively killed the market for pleasure boats, and the Hacker Boat Company fell upon hard times. John L. Hacker apparently sold or lost control of his business about 1934, and by 1935 the Hacker Boat Company was still alive, but going on without John Hacker. S.D. McCready was listed as owner and president of the firm in 1935, and would continue in that capacity until the company closed its doors two decades later. Although John L. Hacker was no longer connected with the Hacker Boat Company, he continued to design boats for a number of firms until his death in 1961, and was responsible for a number of racing winners including "My Sweetie," which took the Gold Cup in Detroit in 1949.



Hacker-built Navy picket boats under construction in 1952

Meanwhile, back in Mount Clemens, Hacker Boat Company rebounded from the Depression with popular "utility" runabouts priced for the ordinary consumer. In 1935, the 17-foot utility could be had for \$975.00! Business was strong, and in 1952, Hacker Boat was awarded a government contract for the construction of 25 ocean-going picket boats for the U.S. Navy.

By the mid-1950s, however, Hacker's heyday was past. It is the opinion of some industry historians that Hacker's decision to offer a low-end utility boat called the "Sport Dolphin" contributed greatly to the company's downfall. The Sport Dolphin had a painted hull and was not as deluxe as Hackers of old. Instead of attracting new customers, it drove the old ones to competing lines such as Chris-Craft. Customers and admirers of the luxury builder were not interested in its attempt at design for the masses. Besides, lower-priced boats of aluminum and fiberglass construction were coming on the scene. Hacker tried to hang on, but by the late 1950s production was stopped because of escalating costs and a dwindling customer base.

Today, there is a new Hacker Boat Company operating in the small Lake George village of Silver Bay, New York. Operated by Hacker restoration expert **Bill Morgan**, the new Hacker company offers reproductions of the original Hacker designs, augmented with the latest advances in boat-building technology. The replica Hacker Craft are faithfully built by hand, just as their predecessors were, and, although new, represent a little bit of Mount Clemens history.

For more information about John L. Hacker and the Hacker Boat Company, we recommend:

- "Hacker Craft--the 'Steinway' of Runabouts," in Speltz, Robert. *The Real Runabouts*. Lake Mills, IA : Graphic Publishing, c1977, pp.26-35.
- "John L. Hacker," in *The City of Detroit Michigan, 1701-1922*. Detroit : S.J. Clarke, 1922, v.5, pp.659-660.
- Vincent, Maurice. "Sleek, Seaworthy 'Cadet' Outboard Made in Mount Clemens Boat Works," *Mount Clemens Daily Monitor-Leader*, May 28, 1954, p.2.
- "McCready Gets Contract for Navy Craft," *Mount Clemens Daily Monitor-Leader*, January 22, 1952, p.1, col.5.
- "Hacker Boat Wins Coveted Army-Navy 'E'," *Mount Clemens Daily Monitor-Leader*, February 15, 1944, p.1, col.6.
- "Hacker Starts Work on Boat for a King," *Mount Clemens Monitor*, May 23, 1930, p.2, col.6.
- "Hacker Company Was in Detroit, But Famous Boat Plant Came to This City in 1921," *Mount Clemens Monitor*, November 22, 1929, p.7, col.7.
- "Hackercraft Boats Famous All Over World: Boat Company Spreads Name of Mt. Clemens," in *Pageant of Progress*. Mount Clemens, Mich. : Nellis Newspapers, [1928], sec.3.
- "Hacker Has Built World Champs," in *Pageant of Progress*. Mount Clemens, Mich. : Nellis Newspapers, [1928], sec.3.
- "Hacker Boat Works Expands: Will Employ 125," *Mount Clemens Daily Leader*, December 7, 1927, p.1, col.8.
- "Hacker To Move Boat Works Here: Plant on the Clinton River to Be Enlarged," *Mount Clemens Daily Leader*, December 12, 1923, p.1, col.1.
- Click here to visit [Steven McCready's Hacker site](#).