



All in the Family

*After five decades, it's still smooth sailing
for family-owned Streblov Custom Boats*

Holly Leitner photo

Owner Randy Streblov builds one-of-a-kind custom wooden boats, carrying on father Larry's legacy.

By Paul Anthony Arco

There are boat owners, and then there's Don Taylor. From the time he was a young boy, Taylor has enjoyed the boating life. His father passed along to him a wooden boat, named "The Pearl" in honor of his late mother. When he got older, Taylor bought a fiberglass model to entertain his active grandchildren.

But he missed the quality and craftsmanship of owning a wooden boat. So, nine years ago, the retired land developer, who splits his time between living in Williams Bay, Wis., and Mount Dora, Fla., returned to his boating roots. He bought a boat from Randy Streblov, owner of Streblov Custom Boats, Walworth, Wis. Randy's late father, Larry, began making wooden boats in the 1950s, and the family business lives on, five decades later.

Taylor, 71, purchased a boat once owned by actor John Wayne, who enjoyed boating on Lake Delevan, before his death in 1979. The Streblov family had repurchased the boat and modified it to specifications of the early 1980s. Dubbed "Mr. T III," the sleek, 23-foot craft looks impressive as it glides along Geneva Lake. In fact, in the past two years, Mr. T III has won awards at two annual boat shows.

"I always wanted a Streblov," says Taylor. "I fell in love with the Streblov boat back in the 1950s."

The Streblov Name

Building custom-made wooden boats was the passion that drove Larry Streblov, virtually every day of his life.

Larry was an engineer and designer with a special talent for working with wood and a love for boating. He worked on several prototypes, including a racing boat with reverse hydroplane, steered by a front rudder. He built a prototype of an amphibious car – a project that never got afloat. He assembled his first boat from a kit in 1947. Seven years later, he built a simple, 14-foot outboard design, called the Customer Liner, and with that, Streblov Custom Boats was launched from his three-stall garage in Kenosha, Wis. After a few years, he moved to a 7,000-square-foot facility, also in Kenosha. Larry and his 15-man crew moved fast; working long hours, they sometimes cranked out as many as seven 15-foot outboard boats in a two-week span. "It's something that gets in your blood," says Randy.

By 1956, Larry's work became more advanced. He introduced the Cruisaliner, a semi-enclosed design that he powered with twin 35-horsepower Johnson outboard engines. These early models kept his new business going until he came up with the Deluxe Streblov Custom Liner in 1958. By 1973, he was offering customers the option of a standard inboard with mid-shift engine or a V-drive with engine aft.



(Streblov family photo)

It's all in the family, as three generations of Streblovs work together on a boat. Kneeling in front, current owner Randy marks alignment, while daughter Kris, also kneeling, helps to hold the board steady. In the meantime, Randy, Jr., taps a bolt into the hole just drilled by Grandfather Larry, far right.

In 1987, the company moved to its current location, a spacious property along a country road in Walworth. Larry never slowed down. The boat-making business kept the energetic man young, and he worked until the age of 82. He lived another seven years before his death in 2003. "My father enjoyed his life," says Randy, "and he always wanted to make the customers happy."

Today, the Streblov name lives on through Larry's family. Randy and his daughter, Kris Streblov, are the business owners, and have kept Larry's memory alive through their own passion, commitment and hard work. It's a family affair. Over the years, Randy's wife, Cathy, and their son, Randy, have worked for the business, and Kris's former husband, Steve Horton, has been the chief builder for more than 20 years. Even their young son, six-year-old Mitchell, has taken an interest in the family business, stopping by the shop occasionally to check out his parents' work.

"It's a labor of love," says Kris, 41, who began working for her grandfather when she was in high school. Kris handles the administrative side of the business, but she also has toiled in the shop, sanding and varnishing the boats. "I always wanted to do this," she says. "I like being around the wood. I would rather be out with the guys helping build the boats. And it's very special to work with my dad. A lot of people never get that opportunity."

Randy did. He started working in his father's shop when he was 12 and has never held any other job. Wearing a Streblov baseball cap, faded t-shirt and blue jeans, Randy isn't afraid to get his hands dirty. At 64, he spends seven days a week in the shop, often 10 to 12 hours a day. "I'm blessed. I enjoy my work life so much," he says. "There's nothing I would rather do. I get paid to play with toys."



Above: Streblov's custom boats dominate the waves of Wisconsin's Geneva Lake, like this one, owned by Rockford, Ill., entrepreneur Dale Gustafson. Below: Every component of a Streblov Custom Boat is custom-made and installed onsite, from the instrument panels and seats inside to the ladders and swim platforms outside.



(Holly Leitner photo)



(R. Bruce Thompson photo)

Above: Lake Geneva, Wis., July 2001: A fleet of 50 Streblov boats, led by Randy Streblov, roar full throttle across the 7-mile length of Geneva Lake. Below: Randy (in his signature baseball cap), in his own El Do VIII, the only triple-cockpit-style Streblov has built, enjoys Geneva Lake with other Streblov family members.



(Tom Ramsey photo)



(Holly Leitner photo)

Each Streblov is built by hand, with skill and precision, starting with the keel and ribs, which are then framed with white oak.

It Starts With the Wood

Streblov Custom Boats is the oldest wooden boat maker in the country. Since Larry launched his first boat, the company has built more than 450, all of which are recorded in a journal kept by Larry – and used by Randy and Kris to this day. “We’re very old-school,” Kris says, laughing.

Despite the rise in popularity of fiberglass boats in the mid 1960s, the Streblovs resisted the urge to move away from wood. For Larry, it was wood or nothing. “He never considered changing,” says Kris. “My grandfather had a passion for the wooden boat, as does my father. And there’s always been a demand for the niche.”

It all starts with the wood. “Picking out wood is difficult,” Kris says. “It sometimes takes two weeks. The key is looking at the grain and color and compatibility. It’s important for the wood to look like it’s all one piece.”

Streblov boats come in three lengths: 23-, 26- and 28-foot. Construction starts from the bottom and moves upward. Each boat is framed in durable, rot-resistant white oak, and finished in lush, dark-red Philippine mahogany. The builders are like surgeons; every step of the process is complex and delicate in nature. Streblov designs and manufacturers all of its boat components, including seats, swim platforms, speaker grills, ladders and instrument panels.

Talk to owners, and they’ll happily tell you why they fell in love with their Streblov boats, which are known across the boating industry for their spectacular craftsmanship

and classic beauty. “Streblow is the Mercedes of boat building,” says Taylor. “It’s a class boat that has outlasted time. People come up to me all the time and say, ‘They still make those?’ They can’t believe it.”

These days, Streblow builds one or two boats a year, due, in part, to the laborious process. The build typically starts in the fall and lasts through spring. Currently, there’s a one-year waiting list to have a boat crafted. Streblow also maintains, services and updates existing boats, and has enough storage space to house about 115 boats onsite for its customers. “People want to know that we’re going to take care of their boats,” Kris says.

While some owners prefer to invest in a restored boat, others opt for a custom-made boat built to their satisfaction. Owning a Streblow is not an inexpensive hobby. The handcrafted boats range in price from \$250,000 for a 23-foot boat, to \$450,000 for a 28-foot. “They’re expensive, but first-quality,” says owner Ken Rodeck. “You get what you pay for.”

Just Like Family

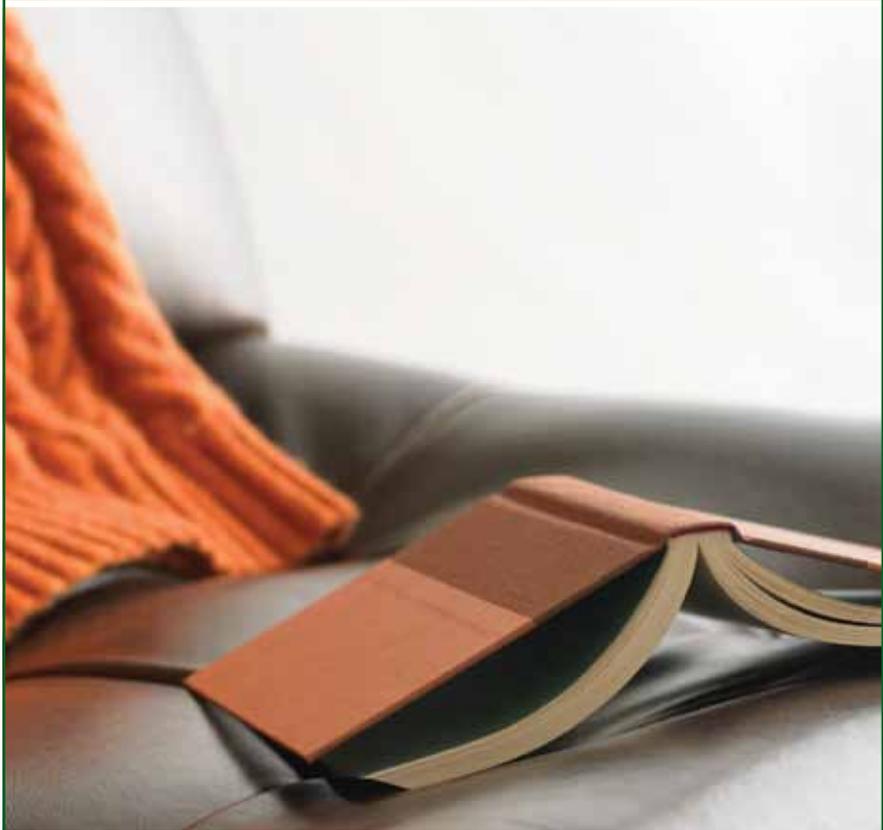
Geneva Lake is home to regal mansions, gleaming waters and a fleet of Streblow boats. On many summer days, it’s not uncommon to see more than 120 Streblows cruising along the lake. One day last year, nearly 50 Streblow boat owners participated in a rally called the “Wake on the Lake.”

Streblow owners share a special bond. Many have become close since they joined the Streblow “family.” Taylor supports such camaraderie with a Web site he created as a way for Streblow owners to share stories, photos and boating experiences.

The annual Blackhawk Chapter of the Antique and Classic Boating Society, held at the Abbey Resort, in Fontana, Wis., is a reunion for Streblow owners, who compete for awards like Contemporary Streblow and Classic Streblow. One of the big winners at last year’s show was Rodeck. The Fontana resident won two awards – Best Streblow and the highest honor, the Skipper’s Choice. As a token of his appreciation, Rodeck made a duplicate of the award and gave it to the Streblow family.

Rodeck moved to Fontana 10 years ago. He often bumped into Randy around town and, two years ago, decided to order a 26-foot Streblow. He spent considerable time with Randy on the design, but didn’t stop there. During the construction, Rodeck typically

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(Holly Leitner photo)

Only a part of the 15-person Streblow team. From left: Jim Kelsey; Dan Hodgman; Randy Streblow; Steve Horton; Juan Ruiz; Harold Holman.



(Holly Leitner photo)

Steve Horton (sans beard) carefully fits a piece of trim into the groove he's just routed out for it.



(R. Bruce Thompson photo)

Marsha and Bob Silverstein's 25-foot, 1961 Streblow is the last of the models with fins that reflect the automotive styling of the era.

spent two days a week at the shop, from the time the first board was laid to the launching of the boat. The entire process took 14 months, and Rodeck received his new Streblow on Father's Day; he celebrated by spending 50 hours last summer on the boat named "Rodan."

"The whole experience of working with Randy, Kris and Steve was great," Rodeck says. "Their knowledge is incredible, and I appreciated the fact that they allowed me to participate in the design of the boat. It was a fun process. The boats are truly well-built and solid. They're all personal endeavors by Randy."

Such stories are endless. Randy and Kris love to reminisce about how people came to be Streblow owners. Take the late Fred Edelston, who owned seven Streblows in his lifetime. Or the people who buy a boat over the phone, sight unseen. There are those who pop in every week, however, to watch the building process unfold. One customer rode in on a bicycle to purchase his boat. And then there was a man who bought his son a Streblow for an 18th birthday present. "That doesn't happen very often," Kris says, smiling.

There is no marketing plan for Streblow Custom Boats; there's no need. The best advertising for this company is seeing a boating enthusiast lined up along the lake, relaxing behind the wheel of their Streblow on a postcard-like summer day.

When Don Taylor returns home from Florida each summer, he likes to spend his time at Streblow's shop, tinkering on his own 23-foot boat, along with a few others that he's restoring. It's not so much about the boats, he says, but about spending time with a good friend. "Randy and I have become close," he says. "He even saw me through my divorce."

That's pretty typical. In fact, it's been that way for more than 50 years. "It's more than a business," Kris says. "It's a family." ■