

THE STREBLOW MYSTIQUE

by Mike Pehanich
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JUST OVER FIVE DECADES
AGO, LARRY STREBLOW
BUILT A KIT BOAT IN
KENOSHA... AND A FAMILY
BUSINESS WAS BORN.

Geneva Lake's jewel-like water hosts a summer-long parade of watercraft. Sleek powerboats and fine pleasure craft create a feast for the eyes and imaginations. Look long enough and you will spot a unique class of wooden craft made with remarkable taste and elegance. Gliding smoothly amid a fine spray or floating gracefully at the public pier, this handsome mahogany runabout draws instant attention. This is a Streblov.

Wooden boats have long been part of the maritime culture of East Coast harbor towns. But it is only in those rare enclaves of the elite and well-to-do in the upper Midwest that vintage craft like Streblov classics are concentrated.

The Lake Geneva area is home to an estimated 120 custom-built Streblov runabouts in 20-, 23-, 26- and 28-foot lengths. You'll know them by their rich Philippine mahogany, superb craftsmanship, and vintage beauty. They are throwbacks to a bygone age of boat building kept alive by men, women and families only marginally touched by trend and fashion.

Owners cherish their Streblovs, treasuring them like fine works of art – which they are – and passing them as heirlooms from generation to generation. The price of entry into Streblov ownership, however, is significant. The cost of a 23-foot runabout – a kind of entry-level Streblov – begins at \$185,000. It will take at least \$325,000 for a 28-footer.

BIRTH OF A BOAT BUILDER

Larry Streblov's maiden voyage into boat building was assembling a kit boat in 1947. The 20-foot craft with twin forward cockpit he built met with enthusiasm from fellow members at the Kenosha Yacht Club.

"Hey Larry," the club members encouraged him. "You ought to do this for a living."

Larry Streblov took them literally. In 1954, Streblov Boat Builders opened in the port of Kenosha and a simple 14-foot, 10-inch outboard design called the Custom Liner officially put him into business.

Philippine mahogany – the wood of choice for custom boat builders – was scarce following World War II, so Streblov scavenged for mahogany shipping crates for the essential raw materials for his hulls.





In 1956, he introduced the Cruisaliner, a semi-enclosed design that he powered with twin 35-horsepower Johnson outboard engines. Inboard designs included the Rebel 18, which morphed customarily through subtle fin and transom changes. These early models kept his fledgling business afloat until he could sow the seeds of prosperity with the Deluxe Streblov Custom Liner in 1958. Surviving product literature called it “the aristocrat of deluxe outboard runabouts.”

But the road to success took a detour. The late 1950s and early '60s were tough on wooden boat manufacturers.

Fiberglass designs transformed the industry suddenly, making more craft available at prices within the reach of millions.

“We are one of the only manufacturers from the '50s who continued making boats with wood throughout,” says Kris Streblov, granddaughter of the family business founder. Kris, along with her husband Steve Horton and father Randy run the business today from their Walworth office and manufacturing location – a site the family moved to in 1987.

“If Larry had been smart, he would have switched to fiberglass,” admits Steve. “But wood was his passion.”

“He never considered changing,” Kris explains, defending Larry’s undying determination to produce high-quality boats. “For him, it would be wood or nothing.”

The prototype for the modern Streblov emerged in 1968. Streblov lore has it that the design came to Larry in a dream. By 1973, Streblov was offering customers the option of either the standard inboard with mid-ship engine or a V-drive with engine aft. The V-drive with its horseshoe interior configuration drew rapid favor.

Design improvements have always helped set the Streblov runabouts apart. Larry Streblov’s innovative double-plank bottom, for instance, eliminated the need to swell the hull at the start of the season.

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A plywood inner bottom with sealant adhesive around the edges prevents leakage. As an innovator with a keen instinct for design and function, Larry Streblov did a variety of prototypes including a racing boat with reverse hydroplane, steered by a front rudder. He even designed an amphibious car – a project that never came to fruition.

EXTENDED FAMILY

Streblov boat owners regard themselves as part of the Streblov family and come from near and far to display their custom craft. The annual Geneva Lake Boat Show, held at the Abbey Resort on the Fontana end of Geneva Lake, becomes an annual “family” gathering. Proud owners vie for awards in such categories as Contemporary Streblov and Classic Streblov.

An avid Streblov owner may own several of the boats during a lifetime. A fortunate few own several at a time. Indiana owner Michael Pacult owns three of the family boats – a 28-, a 23- and a 20-foot model. The Kent Shodeen family runs 23-, 26- and 28- foot Streblovs. Late Streblov owner Fred Edeleston owned a record seven Streblov boats.

To date, the family (led today by Randy Streblov) has built 520 boats. Output is patient and steady but rarely exceeds more than two a year. That’s because much of their operation involves storage, maintenance and updates of existing Streblov craft.

Engine updates can cost as much as \$20,000. Upholstery alone may have a price tag of \$10,000. Wood prices, too, are up, but Streblov maintains that the two-part polyurethane finish on new or updated Streblovs is good for at least 10 years

and occasionally as much as 20 – a vast improvement over the three- to five-year finishes of boats past.

Nearly all boat components are of Streblov design and manufacture as well – ladders, cockpit ceilings, swim platforms. Even the instrument panels and the wiring harness for the motors are made by Streblov.





In spite of what proves to be a very costly luxury item... “We have a two- to three-year waiting list to buy our boats,” states Randy. “Occasionally we may get a used Streblov, but most are already spoken for.”

“A Streblov is different from most classic boats,” explains Kris. “With most classics, you don’t want to change them. You want to keep everything the way it was originally. But we

put in the updates for our boats ourselves and those updates do not depreciate the value of the boat.”

“In a way,” adds Steve, “because we do it, it’s still an original.”

THE ART OF WOOD

To watch a Streblov emerge from component materials is to witness the miracle of fine art and craftsmanship.



It all begins with the wood.

“Picking wood is very difficult,” says Steve, noting that wood selection alone can take up to two weeks. “You look at the grain and the color and the compatibility. You want the wood to look like it’s all one piece.”

The belief that wood boats are difficult to maintain is highly exaggerated, Steve argues. “Maintenance is no different on a

wood boat than any other boat,” he asserts. Maintenance is often a matter of simply keeping a cover on the boat – a procedure, Steve admits, is easier said than done for Streblov owners. “Most of our customers don’t like to cover our boats,” he smiles. “They like to show them off.”

Randy, Streblov’s current patriarch, calls their boats “user friendly”. You can hang them or keep them on the water, he explains. But ease of use and functionality are only a very

small part of the Streblov experience. These factors can hardly explain the special role that the boats play in the owners' lives, nor the profound passion for boat building and the quest for excellence which has been woven through three generations of Streblovs.

"It's seeing that small piece of wood transformed into a work of art," says, Kris offering her best explanation of why building and owning a Streblov remains magical over five decades since her grandfather showed off his kit boat at the Kenosha Yacht Club. "This love and pride show up in our product...Our customers wouldn't want our boats if they were made in mass. When [boats] are mass produced, something gets lost."

The family's move from Kenosha to nearby Walworth in 1987 made sound business sense, but it also had a return-to-family aptness to it as well. Geneva Lake, with its stately mansions and pristine waters, has been a stronghold of Streblov ownership since the company's early years. In fact, the Streblovs still store over 100 boats for local "family."

"Most of them don't even have a trailer," says Kris. "We take the boats in and out of the water for them."

The owner's reason, explains Steve, is that they want someone to take good care of their boat.... Someone in the family. ♣

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