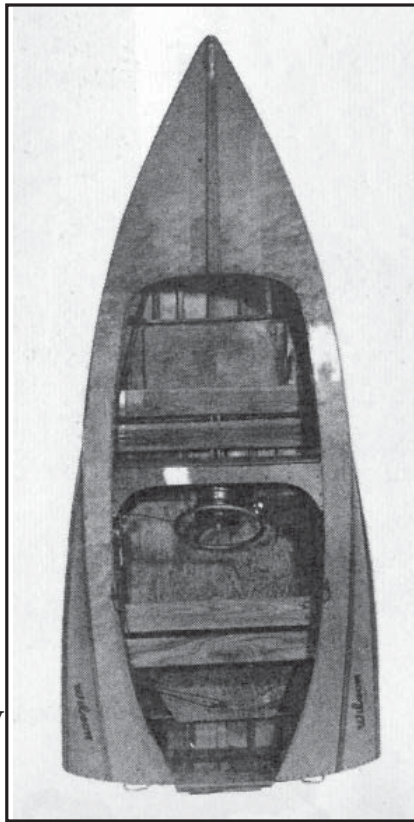


By Andreas Jordahl Rhude

Wilson Boat and Rice Lake Boat are names, by and large, lost to history. The small, quaint town of Rice Lake, Wisconsin was home to the boat builder. To find one of the wood or fiberglass watercraft made by them is quite rare today.

The history can be traced back to March 1947 and George Wilson. Wilson started building small wooden boats at his home. Fishing boats and three-point hydroplane race boats were his specialties. He moved operations to the north side of Rice Lake at the junction of county roads C and M to the site of the present day Miller Cheese. Later he moved south of town to the top of the hill where Baribeau Implement is currently located on old highway 53.

Plywood outboard utility boats in twelve and fourteen foot lengths were typical of the output of the boat works. Douglas fir plywood with white oak framing was utilized in the construction. In those early years, most boats were unpainted and sold factory direct. Advertisements in the late 1940s were secured



1955 Wilson A/B Runabout.

in magazines such as *Popular Mechanics* and *Mechanics Illustrated*.

About 1950 Wilson made a special boat for a unique customer. The buyer was of considerable size at 430 pounds and he wanted a watercraft to fit his measurements. The boat was intended to be used for deep sea fishing off the Florida coast. Wilson made a sporty sixteen foot red and white, hefty boat for the man.

Midwest Marine of St. Paul, Minnesota was a dealer for Wilson, prominently advertising the Wilson utility racing hydroplane and runabouts in their 1955 brochure. The AB hydro was listed at \$295 complete or \$255 unpainted. They also sold it as a kit for \$130.

Wilson Boat Corporation was incorporated on April 18, 1957 by George Wilson and Lester



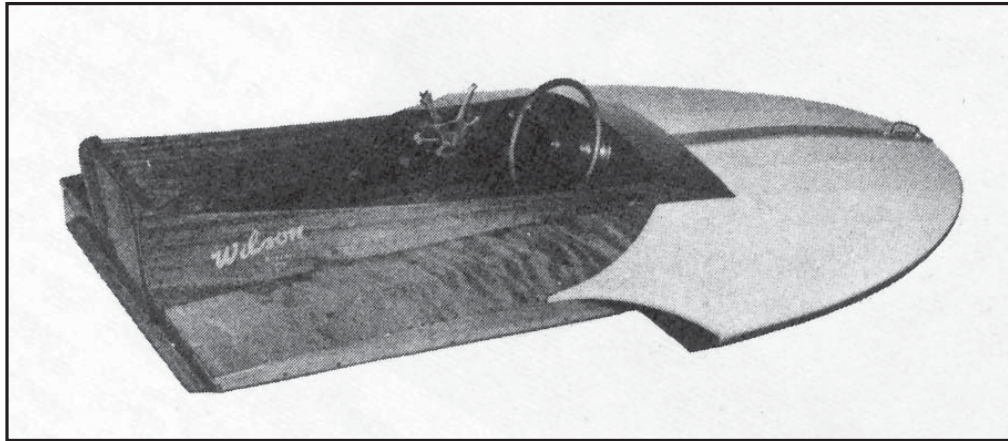
Jerry Wilson, racing in the late 1940's.

Gilbertson. Fiberglass boats were soon added to the abbreviated line, some with fins. According to Jean Wilson Whitney, daughter of George, the first fiberglass plug was built for them by a man from Shell Lake, Wisconsin. Did someone with Shell Lake Boat or Peterson Bros. Boat make it for Wilson?

The boating boom of the 1950s was in full swing and Wilson was capitalizing on this recreational trend. The 1959 Wilson line-up included fiberglass runabouts in fourteen, fifteen, and seventeen foot lengths. Twelve and fourteen foot open finishing boats were offered with a wooden class F cabover hydroplane. The new fifteen-foot runabout had substantial fins, a sign of the times. She came standard with upholstered seats, navigation lights, cleats and chocks, wrap-around windshield, and steering. She was rated for up to a 60 horse power outboard motor and was claimed to reach speeds of up to 40 miles per hour. The hull was white with options of red, aqua, yellow, coral or white for the deck and fins.



Their most unusual offering was the Wilson XIV with Snap-On Deck in length of fourteen feet. The hull was the same as the runabout version. She had aluminum gunwales. A removable fiberglass deck could be attached



1955 Wilson A/B Racing Hydroplane.

to the gunwale, turning the open boat into a simple runabout.

In 1959 there were numerous boat makers in northwestern Wisconsin. Within a 50 mile radius of Rice Lake competing boat builders included: Shell Lake Boat and Peterson Bros. boat both at Shell Lake; Chetek Boat; Hayward Boat; Badger Boat Builders at Couderay; and Chippewa at

Eau Claire. Thompson, Cruisers, Inc., Carver, Dunphy, and many others were also operating in the state at that time. That year was the all time record for number of boats sold in the United States with 329,000 units hitting the water. Wilson was right in the thick of this conspicuous consumption.

When Wilson started out building boats full time, two of his six sons worked along with him, Jack and Jerry. Jerry was barely a teenager at the genesis. Racing became a passion and Jerry did very well in hydroplane racing throughout the Midwest. While still in high school in 1951 he was champion of the Midwest Power Boat Association.

Jerry was seriously injured in a race at New Ulm, Minnesota on Sunday August 12, 1951. His boat capsized and he ended up in the water. Sensing that the boat behind him was unable to move out of the way, he made a split second decision. This quick thinking may have saved his life. Jerry threw his arm on top of his head and he pushed himself under the water as far as possible. The propeller of the boat hit his arm.

It was immediately apparent that a serious injury resulted. The crash boat retrieved him and brought him to shore. Mr. and Mrs. Wilson got him into their automobile and rushed him to the nearest hospital. The doctors amputated his arm just below the elbow. Mr. Wilson pleaded with the staff to save the arm. However, it was not to be.

George Wilson, for the remainder of his life, felt guilt over his son's injury, although the accident occurred through no fault of his. He encouraged Jerry to race and had he not done so, the horrible accident may never have

occurred. The injury, shock and recovery took the wind out of their sails. However, not to be intimidated, a special throttle control was created so that Jerry could operate a race boat and continue racing. He continued to win many races after his recovery.

Mr. Wilson was mechanically inclined and he designed and built most of his own wood working equipment. Prior to becoming a boat builder, he worked in the laundry business. At

One-Armed Driver Captures 2 Firsts in Motorboat Races

An 18-year-old Rice Lake, Wis., boy proved yesterday that motor boat racing with only one arm is not an overwhelming handicap. Jerry Wilson, who lost his left arm in a motor boat race at New Ulm, took a pair of firsts in the final Duluth-Superior Outboard Motor club races of the year.

Interested spectators at Connie and Ed's landing also saw Wilson's sidekick, Mike Gannon of Rice Lake, take a whack at driving in a motor boat race for the first time. The result — two firsts and two thirds.

Three flip overs and a boat with a motor on fire throughout an entire race spiced up the proceedings. Dave Knootz, driver of the latter, said afterwards, "I ran the hottest race of my life."

Another successful race outing for Jerry Wilson. Despite losing an arm, he was able to remain very competitive.

the request of a client, he designed and constructed a large dryer for commercial applications. It was subsequently patented, not by Wilson, and it became a successful invention.

While in the laundry business in Eau



Claire, Wilson designed and built a large race boat. Dubbed Hell-Z-Poppen, she was constructed in the basement of the laundry. Upon completion, a wall had to be knocked down to get her out of the building. She was used for racing, giving rides at carnivals, and for family use. The eight Wilson children all learned to water ski behind the fast craft. The eighteen-foot plywood racer weighed 1,200 pounds and a tweaked 115 horse power inboard engine was her power. Speeds of 65 miles per hour were possible.

Lakebreeze Pate Service of Sheboygan, Wisconsin was selling a Wilson fourteen foot



Jerry Wilson racing after the accident.

fiberglass runabout complete with steering and windshield with Mercury Mark 55 motor for \$1,095 in March 1959.

Les Gilbertson became a co-owner of the boat firm sometime in the late 1950s, possibly at the time of incorporation in 1957. About 1959 or 1960 the former Lampert's Lumber facility at Campia, just northeast of Rice Lake, became available and the boat works was moved there.

Sometime later, Ellis Huntsinger the horse-radish sauce king of Eau Claire became an investor. The company name changed from Wilson Boat Corporation to Rice Lake Boat Company. Wilson was an excellent designer, mechanic and builder but not necessarily a savvy businessman. Huntsinger on the other hand was an adept and shrewd businessman and after a period of time, Huntsinger forced Mr. Wilson out of the company. The particular circumstances of the take-over are unknown. Huntsinger bumped up salesman Ray Jones

to the general manager's position.

Fiberglass boats by Rice Lake Boat Company were being sold by All Sports of Manitowoc, Wisconsin in April 1961. The dealer prominently advertised them in newspaper ads for several weeks that spring. The ad claimed that Rice Lake was one of the oldest manufacturers of fiberglass boats. This was more exaggeration than fact; Rice Lake and predecessor Wilson had only been making 'glass boats for several years whereas some builders had been using that technology for fifteen years. The Boat Boys dealership at Sheboygan, Wisconsin was selling both El Rae and Span America fiberglass boats in 1961.

The boats were branded "El-Rae" after Huntsinger had complete ownership of the firm. The day after President Kennedy was assassinated in November 1963, plant superintendent Verne Einum closed the factory in respect for the national day of mourning. Ray Jones drove up from his base in Eau Claire and was beside himself that the plant was inactive on a regular work-

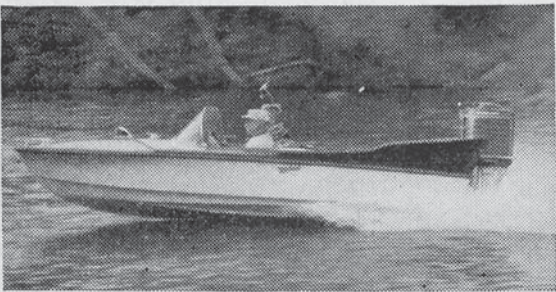
day.

Rice Lake Boat Company began to build "Span America" boats under a sub-contract deal with Chet Karstaedt and Bart Hoekstra about 1963. They continued to make their own El-Rae boats in addition to Span-America fiberglass boats. The Span America jigs and tooling were moved to Campia. Sales and distribution of the Span America line were handled by Karstaedt and Hoekstra, not Rice Lake Boat. These two men operated the Boat Boys dealership at Sheboygan.

The end of Rice Lake Boat Company came in November 1964 when a new corporate entity, Span Boats, Inc., purchased the firm's assets. Span was the creation of Karstaedt, Hoekstra, and Bob Barnabo all of Sheboygan along with Blackhawk Holding Corporation of Moline, Illinois. They dropped the El-Rae line and converted to making Span boats exclusively. Huntsinger and Jones departed. Span continued to make boats at Campia until February 1966 when they moved to a new factory in nearby Cameron.



According to the *Rice Lake Chronotype* newspaper of April 5, 1961, Wilson Boat was bankrupt. They also lost a court judgment in the amount of \$4,184. Winning plaintiffs were Wausau Metals, General Trading, Land O' Nod, Moeller Manufacturing, Worum Fiberglass, and U.S. Plywood. To add insult to injury after leaving the boating industry, Wilson was caught up in a lawsuit in 1964 and 1965. The widower of a woman drowned in a boating accident in 1959 at Lake of the Woods, Canada sued Wilson Boat and Cormican's Marine of Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin. The suit was



Wilson Boat Corp. of Rice Lake, Wis., announces this fiber-glass 14-footer with air chambers built in. Speeds to 40 mph with 60 hp.

1958 Publicity photo for Wilson Boats.

filed in 1964 and asked for \$32,000 damages, alleging that the boat and motor were cause of the drowning. An out of court settlement was reached in June 1965.

After the boat business, Wilson spent many years making fiberglass flooring panels for use in dairies. Concrete floors could not be utilized for health reasons as mandated by the state.

Fiberglass was an acceptable material and Wilson's experience with the medium found a niche market in that area.

In the late 1960s after retirement, George Wilson built steam engines. In the autumn of 1968 he and his friend D.B. Mommsen converted an old wooden twenty-foot GarWood boat into a steam launch. The wood fueled, five horse power steam engine was "not rated in miles per hour but in pleasure per mile" according to the tinkerers.

Mr. Wilson died at age 87 in September 1985.



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