

UNLIMITED NewsJournal

A CHRONICLE OF SPEED

DECEMBER 2020

2020 SEASON REVIEW:

The year that wasn't.

Four days after we celebrated the arrival of 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) first reported that there was a cluster of pneumonia-like cases in Wuhan, China. Within a few days after that, WHO published a technical report about the new virus and media outlets such as *Bloomberg News* and the *Washington Post* began reporting on the outbreak. By January 11, the first death from the virus was reported in China, nine days later the first cases outside of China were identified, and on January 30 WHO declared a global health emergency.

Little did we know at the time the huge impact this Covid-19 microorganism would have on our lives this year. We've learned what it's like to be quarantined in our homes and to be unable to eat at restaurants or go to movies. Our kids are attending school via Zoom, we've become accustomed to seeing face masks wherever we go, and we've said goodbye to more than a quarter million Americans, a death toll higher than the combined number killed in all wars, excluding the Civil War and World War II, since our nation was founded.

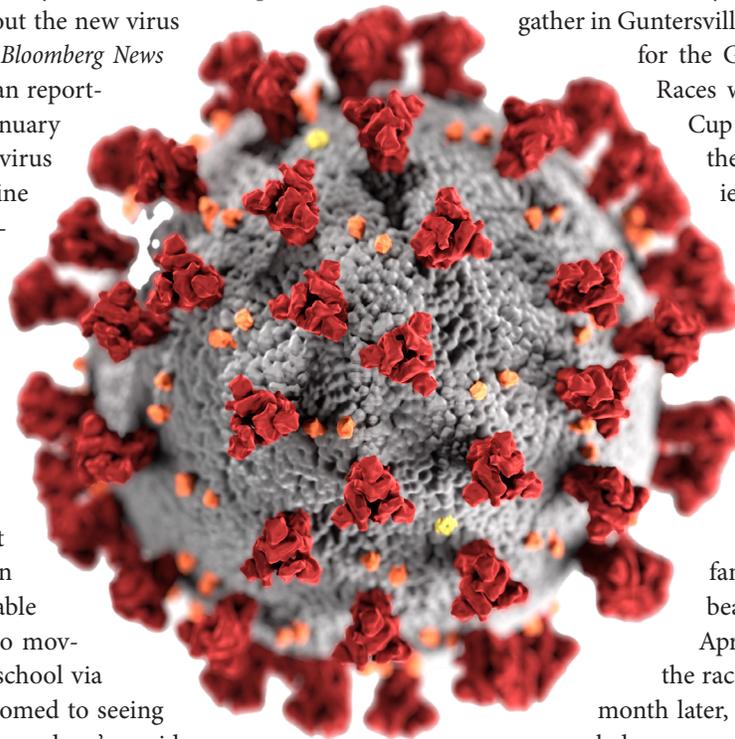
With all of that, it's no wonder that the H1 Unlimited Rac-

ing Series also became a victim.

The plan for 2020 was to have five races. The season would start with the annual Spring Training opportunity on the Columbia River in early June, then the boats would gather in Guntersville, Alabama, later that month for the Guntersville Lake Hydrofest. Races would follow with the Gold Cup in Madison, Indiana, and then with races in the Tri-Cities, Seattle, and finally San Diego in mid-September.

With an announcement in late March, Guntersville was the first to fall because of Covid-19. With the pandemic underway, the event organizers there realized that it simply didn't make sense to have fans gathered together on the beach to watch the action. In April came a similar decision by the race officials in Madison and, a month later, the race in Seattle was canceled.

In early June, the organizers of the Tri-City Water Follies in the Tri-Cities announced that their July event was postponed to later in the year, depending on how the pandemic had progressed by that time. San Diego organizers pulled the plug on their race in mid-June and then, when Tri-Cities



ALSO IN THIS MONTH'S ISSUE:

2 **Comments from H1** by Jan Shaw
3 **Slo-mo IV wins Seattle's heart**

12 **Around the Circuit** by Chris Tracy
14 **An interview with Don Kelson**

22 **HydroFile** by Lon Erickson
23 **My \$0.02 Worth** by Andy Muntz

officials realized there was no longer any hope for this year, they also pushed off their race until 2021.

It was the first time in 75 years, the last being in 1945 when the nation was ending World War II, that an entire season of Unlimited-class hydroplane racing was canceled. It wouldn't be until Kelly Stocklin took his boat to remote Pateros, Washington, on Halloween day

that an Unlimited would even so much as touch the water this year.

Meanwhile, the pandemic continues. As families celebrate the holidays, a third wave of Covid-19 infections is underway. While doctors have improved their methods for treating those who come down with the illness, more than a thousand Americans are continuing to die each day.

So, what about next year?

There's some hope. It's said that a vaccine will be available to the general public in a few months. Officials at H1 Unlimited and at each of the race sites are making plans for the hydroplanes to return to action this coming summer. But there also can be no guarantees. With the pandemic not yet under control, it's far too early to be certain. ❖

COMMENTS FROM H1

Jan Shaw, Director of Operations



With the cancellation of the 2020 season, the H1 board has been working on executing the mission statement established in 2019. That mission statement is, "To maintain, improve and expand the sport of Unlimited hydroplane racing, while being ever mindful of enhancing the fan experience." Recently, we have been working with Andy Muntz on describing where we think we are today and steps we can take now to help execute the mission. The following is a summary of our self-assessment.

1. Strengths: H1 is a very established producer of events that center around fast boats and community events. As a member of APBA, the national sanctioning body of boat racing in America for over 100 years, and being associated with UIM, H1 has the ability to hold races in world-wide venues. Strong and professional presentation of the racing teams provides a professional, well-organized program for fans and communities that want to have an event in their towns across America.

2. Weakness: Racing teams at times do not understand that promoting sponsors other than their boat sponsors is essential to the H1 and event organizers. Owners need to support H1 efforts to see the big picture and look past solely their internal interest. Owners also need to commit to supporting as many of the

events as possible. Owners need to support H1 management so that we speak with one voice to event promoters.

3. Opportunities: The race programs are very structured and provide event organizers a variety of options to hold an event. H1 management makes every effort to provide a professional event with excitement and fun for all. An H1 race allows event organizers to market many other activities at the event to increase attendance with many fun items during the race-day program. Drivers autograph sessions are available during the day for attendees to meet and get information from the drivers. Special events and displays are available for event organizers if needed to help support the events. The 2020 "pause" of the types of events that H1 has participated in is an opportunity to reintroduce our program to race site groups at former venues to see if there might be a current fit.

4. Issues/problems: Awareness of the attendees of our race format and the inability of fans/attendees to get up close and touch the boats is difficult. Racing can have one hour or more between races; sites and attendees want more action to fill time. Event cost for race sites to hold an event can be an issue if promotional efforts are insufficient.

5. Impressions: H1 makes every attempt to present a professional, ac-

tion-packed day of racing that provides fast/competitive action. Other classes of boats or airshows are welcome to increase attendance and provide a full day of excitement. H1 works with events to suggest other activities to add to the fan experience.

6. Five-year plan: The H1 goal is to have an eight-race schedule of events that is also successful for event organizers. H1 is committed to working with sites to make every event a success. The goal is to have a greater number of competitive teams available for every race event and be supported with other displays to draw interest of fans/attendees, such as display boats at the site that attendees can touch up close. A video display would explain and show what is involved in boat preparation and operation. Fans could have a simulator to get a first-hand experience of what actual race action is from the drivers view. H1 will offer one, two, or three race-day programs for event organizers to market as they wish. There will also be the ability to do promo events with four boats as an option for future full-race event possibility.

H1 welcomes your thoughts on our status and progress. If you have suggestions or comments please send them directly to me at janetshaw4994@comcast.net. Hope to see you at the races. ❖

When Slo-mo IV won Seattle's heart.

The following article was the cover story for the July 26, 2020, issue of *Pacific NW* magazine, a glossy-paged publication that is inserted in the Sunday edition of the *Seattle Times*. It is presented here accompanied with different photos and with some minor modifications to account for the time difference between then and now.

Hydroplane and Raceboat Museum

BY ANDY MUNTZ

The unlimited hydros didn't race on Lake Washington this summer. Perhaps some people didn't care, but for many, especially those who lived here in the 1950s and '60s, the lack of a Seafair race caused a special void. It was missed because hydroplanes were once the city's greatest passion, a reason to yearn for the coming of summer each year.

The city's hydro-crazed tradition started 70 years ago.

Before the Sonics, Mariners, Seahawks, Sounders, or Storm, we had hydroplanes. It was the biggest game in town.

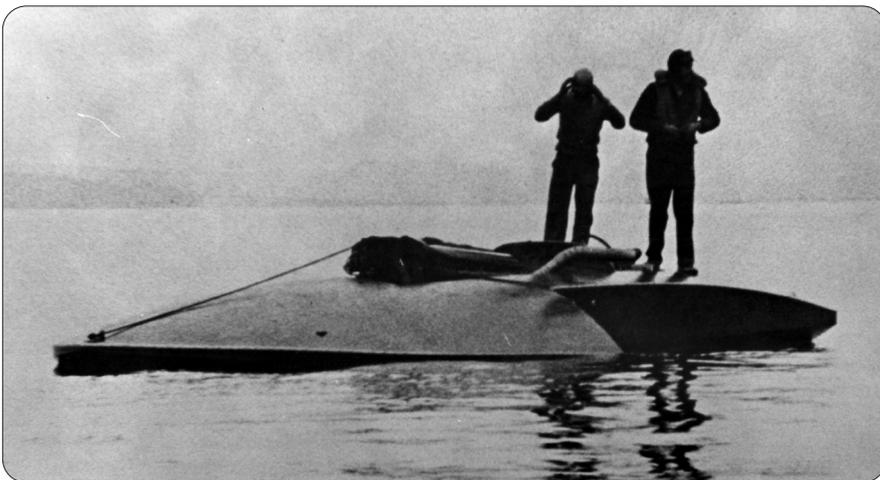
Younger generations have had sports heroes such as Gary Payton, Ken Griffey Jr., Sue Bird, and Russell Wilson, but kids growing up in the Puget Sound area during the 1950s and '60s had Bill Muncey, Jack Regas, Mira Slovak, and Ron Musson—hydroplane drivers.

We were captivated by the boats. We stood awestruck if we saw one on display at a shopping center or at the boat show,

and we loved watching them in action, throwing spray high into the air and making a thunderous roar that rattled windows three miles away.

That's why, for us kids, the hydroplane races were a highlight of the year. That's when we would spend the day near the racecourse in wonderment. Our dream was to somehow get into the pits, but most of us settled for gazing through the fence, hoping to catch a glimpse of one of our heroes.

And, when the boats weren't racing, we raced our own little wooden hy-



TOP: Ted Jones tested his ideas on prop-riding hydroplanes by designing the *Slo-mo-shun III* for Stan Sayres. **MIDDLE:** The newly completed *Slo-mo-shun IV* shortly after its launch at Anchor Jensen's boatyard. **ABOVE:** Sayres and Jones during one of the boat's first test runs.

droplanes. In every neighborhood, kids created miniature boats from scraps of wood; tied them with string to the backs of their bicycles; and “raced” each other around the block, just like the real boats. The one painted green was the *Bardahl*, the pink one the *Hawaii Ka'i*, and the brown one was *Wahoo*.

We borrowed a couple of dad’s playing cards and attached them to the bike frame with clothespins stolen from mom’s laundry basket so a proper sound was made as the spokes spun. The most creative among us put a nail at the back of their boats so sparks would fly as it was dragged across the pavement. To us, it looked like the roostertail of a real hydro.

ALL OF THIS passion began with a world-headline-grabbing event that occurred on Lake Washington 70 years ago this summer.

Seattle was in the backwoods of the sports world back then. Oh sure, fans had Husky football and Seattle U basketball. There were the Rainiers of baseball and the Ironmen of hockey, but that was minor-league stuff. It was nothing that could match the big-time happenings in, let’s say—Detroit.

The Motor City had the Tigers of Major League Baseball, a team that led the American League for most of the 1950 season. Detroit was one of only eight cities in the nation that had a team in the National Football League. As for hockey, it had the Red Wings, an Original Six member of the National Hockey League. Led by hall-of-famer Sid Abel and a young star named Gordie Howe, they had just won the 1949-50 Stanley Cup championship.

Detroit also was the hub of the boat-racing universe. The most renowned event in that sport, the Gold Cup, had been contested on the Detroit River regularly for almost 35 years, since Christopher Columbus Smith built a boat that won the trophy in 1915. (Smith

is also known as the founder of Chris-Craft.)

Boat racers in the Pacific Northwest, meanwhile, were involved in smaller limited-class contests—again, minor-league stuff. But a few Seattle racers did have one thing over their brethren in Detroit.

They had an exciting new idea.

Since the days of Chris Smith, the bottoms of the boats had steps that would cause the craft to skip across the surface and therefore go faster than those that plowed through the water. That idea was refined in the mid-1930s by a pair of boat-builders in Ventnor City, New Jersey: Adolph and Arno Apel, who designed a boat that used pontoons (or sponsons) on either side of the bow to lift it out of the water and reduce drag.

The hydroplanes that the Apels built at Ventnor Boat Works were state-of-the-art for race boats when World War II ended, but Ted Jones, a passionate Seattle-area boat racer and a student of his favorite sport, thought the process of making race boats go faster needed to advance one more step: The boat's stern needed to be out of the water, too.

JONES, A SUPERVISOR at Boeing, had spent many years mulling the concepts of aerodynamics and how they could be applied to race boats. He sketched many of those ideas on papers that he kept hidden in his sock drawer. Then, one day in 1942, he heard from Stanley Sayres, a fellow boat racer who owned a successful Chrysler dealership at the corner of Broadway and Madison in Seattle.

Sayres had just purchased one of those Ventnor boats; brought it to the Pacific Northwest; and named it *Slomoshun II*, a moniker he chose because his wife, Madeleine, had once remarked that his previous hydro was going so fast, it seemed the other boats were in slow motion. Problem was, the new boat arrived with a damaged sponson. Could Jones fix it, he asked?

It was while making these repairs that Jones told Sayres about his scheme for a faster hydroplane. Sayres was intrigued and ordered the construction of *Slo-mo-shun III*, another limited-class boat that would test the theory.

That boat was successful enough so that in 1948, Sayres decided to go big time. He would pay for an Unlimited-class hydroplane—the fastest in the world, the type that competed for the Gold Cup in Detroit. So, a third member was added to their team: a master shipwright named Anchor Jensen, the proprietor of the Jensen Motor Boat Company, one of Seattle's finest boat builders. Their effort would produce the *Slo-mo-shun IV*.



The Associated Press



Hydroplane and Raceboat Museum

TOP: The builders of the *Slo-mo-shun IV*. From the left, Ted Jones, Stan Sayres, and Anchor Jensen.
ABOVE: Sayres and Jones aboard the *Slo-mo-shun IV* during a test run on Lake Washington.

Building the hydroplane wasn't easy. Jones was brash and outspoken, a big-picture guy who didn't like to get bogged down in minutiae. Jensen, on the other hand, was shy and a perfectionist who obsessed over a boat's every detail. It was said that there was a wrong way to do things, a right way, and an Anchor Jensen way, which was a few notches beyond the right way. Needless to say, the two clashed.

Construction of the *Slo-mo IV* began late in 1948 at Jensen's boatyard, in an old wooden structure nestled on the northwest corner of Portage Bay that featured crystal windows and a high cathedral ceiling, and was steeped with the smell of sawdust and varnish. There, the project lingered for almost a year as Sayres was forced to play the uncomfortable role of referee between his quarrel- ing teammates.

BELOW: The *Slo-mo-shun IV* is launched from the boathouse located at Stan Sayres's home on Hunts Point.
BOTTOM: The *Slo-mo-shun IV* during its record-breaking run on June 26, 1950.

Don Ibsen of Anacortes, the last surviving member of the *Slo-mo-shun* crew, describes Sayres as a man of few words. "A quiet achiever," Ibsen says. "Somewhat introverted, and some might say shy. You wouldn't think, 'Oh, he drives an unlimited hydroplane.' No way, you know."

Finally, the boat was launched in October 1949. The golden-brown craft with red trim attracted a great deal of attention during its test runs on Lake Washington. People wondered about its shape, somewhat like a flying saucer, 28 feet long and nearly 12 feet wide, but mostly they heard its thunderous roar, produced by a 12-cylinder Allison fighter-plane engine. They also were amazed by the plume of water that shot 30 feet into the air behind it—a roostertail, caused because the boat literally flew across the lake's surface, and its propeller penetrated only halfway into the water.

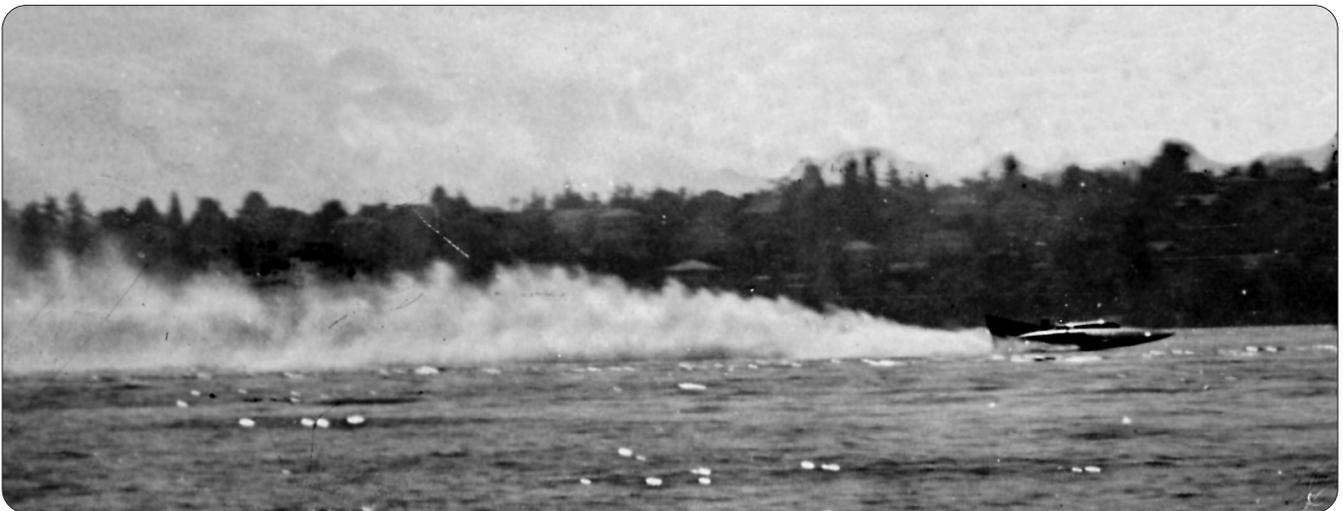
BY APRIL, AS Sayres was building a home on the tip of Hunts Point, the operation moved to a boathouse he had built there. By June, testing had reached the point where Sayres felt the *Slo-mo IV* was ready to challenge the world's straightaway speed record, a mark held by Sir Malcolm Campbell, who in 1939 had driven his boat *Bluebird* to a speed of 141.74 miles per hour.

Officials from the American Power Boat Association were summoned to measure a one-mile course near the Sand Point Naval Air Station and to operate the timing equipment. On the morning of Monday, June 26, after several days of attempts that were canceled by equipment issues and strong winds, the conditions were finally ideal. A light chop was on the lake's surface.

Sayres was behind the steering wheel, Jones



Hydroplane and Raceboat Museum



Hydroplane and Raceboat Museum

beside him, and together they directed their thundering hydroplane from Hunts Point north toward Kenmore, then turned around and headed south toward Sand Point, where a small crowd had gathered. According to the rules, they needed to make two runs through the one-mile course, one in each direction, and the average of the runs would be considered for the record.

The first two runs through the course didn't count. There was a timing error the first time, and then miscommunication between Jones and Sayres caused Sayres to shut down the engine too early. But the third time through was flawless. Sayres pointed *Slo-mo IV* toward the course and hit the throttle. The roostertail flew high into the air, the timer's watch clicked on when the boat entered the course and clicked off when it passed the official exactly one mile away, and the time was recorded: 21.98 seconds, or an average speed of 163.785 miles per hour.

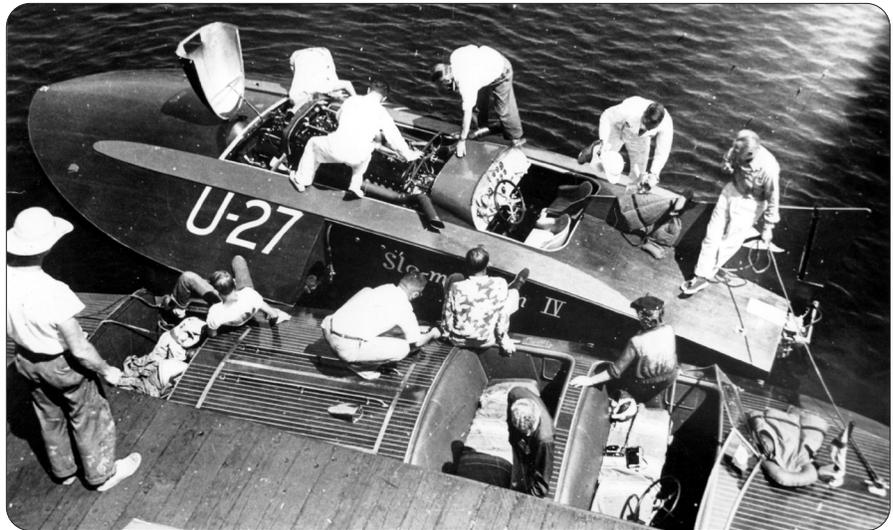
After a quick refueling, and worried about waves from the Kirkland ferry and from a tug with a tow of logs that was passing by, Sayres hurriedly turned the boat around to make a run through the course in the opposite direction. *Slo-mo IV* passed through the course in 22.95 seconds. Though slightly slower than the previous run, it was adequate to give them a two-run average of 160.3235 miles per hour, good enough to easily break Campbell's record.

News of their accomplishment soon spread around the world. *Time* magazine described the craft as "Old Faithful on a rampage" and said it was "the fastest thing afloat." The Associated Press quoted Jones as saying, "We know the boat has a lot more power. No further comment." Sayres was perhaps a bit more diplomatic when he told the reporter he was "very pleased" at the boat's performance and promised he would be taking the boat to Detroit for the Gold Cup, scheduled in late July.

Of course, the news also caught the attention of the Gold Cup racers in De-



Kent Hitchcock



Hydroplane and Raceboat Museum



Hydroplane and Raceboat Museum

TOP: The official timers and scorers from the American Power Boat Association who certified the results of the mile straightaway run. **MIDDLE:** The *Slo-mo-shun IV* was refueled between runs on the mile course. **ABOVE:** Sayres (his hands over his ears) and Jones are greeted by crew members and the local press after their successful speed record attempt.



TOP: The *Slo-mo-shun IV* heads to Detroit for the Gold Cup. **MIDDLE:** The *Slo-mo-shun IV* being towed through the marina at the Detroit Yacht Club. **ABOVE:** *Slo-mo-shun IV* races across the Detroit River, leading *My Sweetie* during the 1950 Gold Cup.

troit, who saw a headline in *The Detroit News* that said, “Boat Going 160 mph Just A Blur, Detroit is Next Stop.” Clarence E. Lovejoy of *The New York Times* gave the Detroit drivers a little bit of hope, though, when he wrote that the *Slo-mo IV* could “turn out to be a craft more suited for straightaway time trials than for the rugged navigation of buoyed turns in a slam-bang competitive event.”

THE SLO-MO-SHUN IV arrived in Detroit on the back of a flatbed truck and caused a sensation each time it made a test run on the Detroit River. But Jones, who was now driving the boat, didn’t want to disclose too much, just yet. He played to the prognosticators’ doubts by purposely causing the boat to wallow around the turns.

His ruse was revealed on race day, however. The *Slo-mo IV* was clearly faster than the others. It was third across the line at the start of the day’s first heat, but Jones already was ahead and pulling away by the time the fleet rounded the first turn. He ended a full lap ahead of the second-place finisher, the defending Gold Cup champion *My Sweetie*, owned by Horace Dodge of the famous automotive family.

In the second heat, *My Sweetie* held a lead for most of the race, with Jones content to follow close behind. His patience paid off midway through the final lap, when the *My Sweetie’s* engine stopped,



Hydroplane and Raceboat Museum

allowing Jones to speed past to another victory. That made the final heat a mere formality. Jones won it easily, *Slo-mo IV* was crowned the 1950 Gold Cup champion, and the team went home to Seattle as civic heroes.

In those days, the Gold Cup winner decided where the prestigious race would take place the following year. Consequently, the race was held on Lake Washington for the first time in 1951, the year Sayres, Jones and Jensen introduced a second boat, the *Slo-mo-shun V*. Others eventually would follow, and Seattle would soon become, and remains, the center of the boat-racing world.

That place in history, and the passion for boat racing in this corner of the nation, explains why the *Slo-mo-shun IV* still is a treasured artifact, displayed at Seattle's Museum of History & Industry.

"The *Slo-mo-shun IV* invented summer in Seattle," says Leonard Garfield, the executive director of the museum. "It not only stole the thunder of the world's Motor City; it brought glory and an unbridled sense of excitement to the Puget Sound region. It gave us a great reason to get outside every summer for a Seafair celebration that revolved around these flying boats."

It also inspired us kids to drag little wooden hydroplanes behind our bicycles. ❖



Hydroplane and Raceboat Museum



Andy Muntz

TOP: The *Slo-mo-shun IV* during the 1950 Silver Cup in Detroit.
MIDDLE: In preparation for the Harmsworth Trophy, the owners of the top two U.S. defenders engage in a friendly tussle over the famous trophy. From the left, Jack Schafer, the owner of the *Such Crust II*; Dan Arena, *Such Crust II* driver; Lou Fageol, driver of the *Slo-mo-shun IV*; and Stan Sayres.
ABOVE: The *Slo-mo-shun IV* on display at the Museum of History and Industry in Seattle.

For those in the Seattle area, hydros were the biggest game in town.

When one is given the opportunity to write the cover story for *Pacific NW* magazine, he or she also writes a piece called “Backstory,” which is placed on the inside-front cover and serves as an introduction to that issue’s featured story. And so, when I wrote the article about the *Slo-mo-shun IV* for the publication, I set the stage with a piece about growing up in the Seattle area in the 1950s and ‘60s, at a time when hydroplane racing was the biggest game in town. I told the readers that hundreds of thousands of people would crowd the shore of Lake Washington to watch the races, that all of the local TV stations offered live coverage of the event, and how during race week they would even interrupt regular programming, the Friday afternoon soap opera, to show a local boat making a qualifying run. Many readers also remembered those days and were kind enough to write messages to me that shared their memories. A few of those are offered here. --Andy Muntz

I’m a girl who grew up in the 50s with my brother. We are 75 and 79 now, but while reading your article, I was 10 again. Indeed, the bike had the crude wood hydro, rope, and card, giving us the thrill of recreating wishful thinking.

I might be a little younger than you but Seafair and the hydros have been a big part of my summers since the mid ‘60s. Towing simple wooden hydroplanes behind our bicycles in the cul-de-sac for hours, listening to AM radio for the action. As summers passed, our hydro building and associated activities got more sophisticated and competitive. It was truly a passion a number of us ‘kids’ carry with us today. Thanks so much for your wonderful article, reactivating those fond memories.

For just a few minutes while reading “Ruling the Roostertail,” I was a pre-teen waiting for the roar of the engines, the spray of the roostertail, the flying start of the *Hawaii Kai* from just north of the Floating Bridge and the voice of Bill O’Mara calling the race for KING-TV. I remember making hydroplanes from scrap wood and pulling them behind my Schwinn with playing cards fluttering against the spokes of my 24” fat-tube tires. I lived in Sheridan Beach on the lake, so we also were able (after Metro Seattle cleaned up the lake) to make the boats literally fly over the lake surface while becoming dizzy. I moved on to enjoy other sports, but there is nothing like the thrill of the sounds and sights of Race Day, and I still remember it well. Thank you for the wonderful memory-evoking, time travel back to the ‘60s.

I, too, grew up in Seattle, and did just as you in the 1950s: the wooden boat pulled behind my bike, the playing card sounding the engine. From our home in Wallingford we could hear those fabulous thundering engines marking the height of summer. Such great memories!

Loved your piece in the *Sunday Times* magazine. Brought tears to my eyes. For me, it was more than just a great sports story, but a metaphor that, when juxtaposed with recent events, brought me to the stark realization that the idyllic Seattle where we grew up is no more—and will never be again.

I too was of those kids who “raced” my wooden hydroplane from behind my bicycle in the 1950s. I recall my parents and relatives having hydro party get-togethers around the TV set, all rooting for our personal favorite boat/driver. Thank you for your insight into that never to be forgotten era of the thunder boats!

Oh, what memories! I grew up in the ‘50s and ‘60s above Lake Washington in the Mt. Baker neighborhood. If Seattleites were wild about their hydros, residents around the lake shores were bonkers. My parents had large Gold Cup yard/patio parties, as did every house in the neighborhood that had even the smallest peekaboo view of the racecourse. Of course, it was more than a week-long event with all the warmups and trials leading up to the race. And, as you said, we all tried to score a pit pass, which was like Willie Wonka’s Golden Wrapper. On our block, some kids did

the wooden hydros behind the bike thing, but several of us went another direction. We made small (3-4 inch) models in great detail and tried to get the colors and markings just right. We “raced” them indoors, on carpet or hard flooring, setting up an oval course with buoys scavenged from game pieces. I still have some!

I was a kid in Seattle in those days and was totally enthralled with hydro racing. My friends and I dug a small pond in my backyard. Our hydros were pulled by a string on a stick, around and around that pond. I was the builder. I attached bent tubing at the stern so water shot up into the air.

You’re right, the hydro races were the highlight of the summer. I knew all the boats, and sometimes rode my bike down to the Mt. Baker pits to watch testing. The *Slo-mo vs Gale* boats from Detroit was an intense rivalry. The thrill took a hit for me when five (?) drivers were killed one year, and turbines on shorter courses just wasn’t the same. But I do have fond memories of the days of the piston powered hydros. Thanks for bringing them back.

I grew up in Hawthorne Hills, N. Seattle and a buddy’s dad worked for Western Gear so we could sometimes get into the pits. We were hydro crazy, built them and ran with them attached to strings in a big mowed grassy backyard in the neighborhood. Had trials, draws, heats, races, timed records, prizes, etc. Personally, I love the *Thriftway* and *Hawaii Kai*! When kids moved into the neighborhood from back east they totally didn’t get it, until they heard the roar over Lake Washington!

You captured everything perfectly and it brought back memories. I was in my early twenties, not really a sports fan, when the Gold Cup (which we had never heard of!) came to Seattle from Detroit. Exciting! For several summers we had to go down to spread out our blanket on the Lake Washington shore. It was fun to watch the boats milling around over the course, but then came the great roar of a new engine and a huge plume of water under the west approach of the floating bridge. *Slo-mo* had arrived! Everyone stood up and cheered. That moment was almost more exciting than the race itself. But winning made the day. You brought a lot of this back, along with so much background and detail. Thanks so much.

I too drug a wood "hydro" behind my bike. I think it was, depending upon the time, the *Miss Thriftway* or *Bardahl*, or even the *Miss Spokane* when we lived there. I saw a Diamond Cup from the log boom on Lake Coeur d'Alene. The sound and vibration is etched in my memory.

I am an 85-year-old Seattle native and really enjoyed the memories you wrote. I have one to share. In 1957, I attended a summer session at Columbia Teacher's College in New York. My friend and I wanted to watch the Gold Cup race in the dorm's TV room. I can't remember where the race was being held but it was going to be broadcast at 9 p.m. When we walked into the room it was full of residents. At 9:00 my friend walked to the front of the room and asked if anyone had a special program to watch. Nobody did so she explained we were from Seattle and we would like to watch the Gold Cup. Nobody complained. She found the station and we settled back to watch. Gradually one by one the others left the room and we were soon alone. I don't remember anything about the race but we were happy to be able to watch!

My husband and I have lived south of Seattle all our lives. We grew up with Stan Boreson and J.P. Patches and all the great children's shows. We have watched the hydro races since we were kids and can relate to the wood boats on the back of our bikes. We will

miss the races this year. But reading your story means we are not alone. Looking forward to better times.

You NAILED it! Thank you for the reminders. I am 77 and have lived in Seattle all my life. Was a kid on a tender for many races. My two friends Ed and Mike were the first tender following the time-trial full flip by *Slo-mo*. I watched it from the beach. We use to carry a hose to the top of any hill, plug it in to an unsuspecting neighbor's faucet, turn it on full for the run down the curb. GREAT fun. Was ALWAYS a Muncey fan.

The passion for the sport still lives in some of us. I'm 70 and still get goose bumps at the sound of the Allison. The boats are built a bit better, but the bikes we pull them with have changed. Will surely miss the thrill this year. Great article you wrote.

Nice job! I grew up in the Seattle area and I was one of those kids who made a plywood hydroplane and towed it behind my bike. Our friend's milkman was Bill Brow, a hydro driver of some repute. We were envious! I built a model hydro from a kit (it was about a foot long or so) and it came with a motor, etc. I don't remember if we ever got it on the water! I only went to the races a couple times, but our entire family watched the Seafair race on TV each year. We knew all the boats and all the drivers. It is difficult to visualize something like that happening again. Thanks for rekindling some memories!

I could regale you for hours about how, as kids in my neighborhood up in Edmonds (in early '60s), we used to idolize drivers and mimic real hydro racing. It included not only the towing of wooden hydros behind my bike (that was kid's stuff), but also elaborate game playing. We invented a board game on a large piece of butcher paper—larger than a picnic table top—and played it with dice, moving pieces from square to square around course. You had to avoid the squares marked "flipped" and "dead in the water," among others. Our own hydro game pieces were roughly 2 inches long that we made of sandpapered-down and

cut Popsicle sticks (the hull), carved wooden match sticks (cowling), and wooden strawberry boxes cut for the tail and all coated with model paint exactly replicating all the real hydros. My favorite was *Miss Thriftway*, for a time during World's Fair called *Miss Century 21*, driven by the incomparable Bill Muncey. Winner of our regular Summer Sunday races got the trophy (made of Oldsmobile hood ornament mounted on a 2 x 4). Unfortunately, I've lost the two dozen or so model hydro pieces I meticulously assembled and painted. Great memories.

I grew up in Mt. Baker neighborhood in the early '50s and could walk to the pits when they were still at Mt. Baker Beach. Your writing brought back warm and comforting memories, although my actual experiences were very exciting back then. Count me among the sub-species who didn't have bikes, who dragged our hydros behind us as we raced in a big oval in our backyards. (I built my hydros from the solid wood end panels of wood fruit boxes. Add learning to work with hand tools as a fringe benefit of the experience. For those who wonder, didn't the fastest boy always win? And, of course, the answer is 'no' because if your boat flipped you were disqualified.)

I thoroughly enjoyed your article. It brought back a lot of memories of the thunder boats of my youth. I remember mom taking us down to Lake Washington for the time trials. I never did make it to the actual race, but my parents spent many races on the log boom. I'll never forget the roar of those old piston engines that we could hear all the way south in Burien. Like you, we also built hydro to pull behind the bike. Fortunately, we had puddles on the road in front of the house that we could skid them through. Spent many hours pulling those boats and making them. We didn't do the nail trick, nice touch. Thanks for the trip down memory lane!

The greatest memories I have are of the "flying starts" and the TV announcer shouting, "Here comes *Slo-mo-shun IV* under the bridge." It was a wonderful, roaring Grand Entrance.

I was born here in Seattle in the early '70s and, although I certainly knew of Stan Sayres, I never knew what a huge impact he had on the hydroplane sport and how we likely would never have seen Seafair hydroplanes if he and Ted Jones hadn't won the Gold Cup in Detroit in 1950. Thanks for bringing that history alive in this Seafair starved summer!

Thank you for writing your wonderful article. It brought back memories of our old neighborhood, Arbor Heights, in the most southern part of the city of Seattle. We did tie wooden hydros to the backs of our bicycles. We even had heats. The *Hawaii Kai* was my boat. I remember the week before our mom would take me and my brothers to Lake Washington to hang out for the day for the time trials. We spent most of the time swimming in the lake of course. Half the neighborhood seemed to be there to hang with.

I didn't grow up the Seattle area, but did come down for one of the hydro races from Bellingham. I think it was 1960 or '61. What I do remember was that Mira Slovak had an accident and flipped the boat upside down right in front of where we were sitting. It seemed

like it took forever to get him out of the boat. I don't remember if he had any serious injuries. Lots of excitement for the one and only time I attended. Reading your article brought back all those memories. Thanks again.

I sure enjoyed your article and wanted to share a great memory. My "handcrafted" *Miss Bardahl* hydro dates from approximately 1966 or so, when I was 9-10 years young. Somehow it has stayed with me in the five-plus decades that have followed. It is now displayed above door in our garage. Even shows signs of wear from flipping. I guess some turns were taken a little too fast on the bicycle. Also I recall being able to hear the thunderboats from the front yard of our house in the Robinswood area of Bellevue. "Hey dad, they're out there racing!"

I was born in Seattle in 1952 so my Seattle hydroplane memories start in the early 1960s with the *Thriftway*, *Bardahl*, *Exide*, *Notre Dame*, etc., but I certainly knew the history related to the *Slo-mo* boats. Both in reading newspaper articles and in conversation with my peers who grew up within the Seattle city limits, I heard a number of reminiscences about dragging crude model hydros behind bicycles. In con-

trast to that, my friends and I raced our model hydros by pulling them on a string as we ran around an oval course on the lawn of our parents' homes. It was even cooler if we mowed the lawn without the grass catcher so they threw up green rooster tails. In the discussions of our different approaches to "racing" our model boats, we realized that the kids that grew up within the city limits generally had smaller lawns but smoother streets, so they gravitated to a bicycle/street solution, whereas in Normandy Park the lawns were generally large but the streets were very rough oiled gravel, so we did our racing on the lawn.

I was one of those kids who towed a hydro behind my bike. And I can remember a picture of a deserted downtown Seattle when everybody was at hydro races. Probably early '50s. I also remember, because I saw it live as well as in many re-runs, when Lou Fageol did a 360-degree flip approaching the north turn. As I recall that was in *Slo-mo V*. Again, thank you. I greatly enjoyed your detailed history of the development of hydroplanes. ❖

AROUND THE CIRCUIT

Race Site News by Chris Tracy



I spent my preteen youth growing up in the south end neighborhoods of Seattle that were within walking or biking distance to the Stan Sayres hydroplane pits: from north to south, Leschi (just north of the floating bridge), Mt. Baker, Columbia City, Lakewood, and Seward Park. Sometimes all of those neighborhoods, plus Hilman City and Rainier Beach, are lumped together and called the Rainier Valley, which in the 1950s was nicknamed Garlic Gulch because so many Italians lived in those neighborhoods.

My parents rented when I was a child, until we bought a house when I

was in sixth grade. We lived in the Columbia City neighborhood when I was a young child through my kindergarten year, and then moved to the Mt. Baker neighborhood the summer before I started first grade. Throughout my elementary school years, except for six months, we lived in Mt. Baker.

It was during those six months in 1959, the end of third grade and during summer before starting fourth grade, that I first learned about hydroplanes.

Dad was a grocer and a hydro fan. In those days, Associated Grocers sponsored the *Miss Thriftway*. Although my

dad worked for a competing grocery chain, one of the things that I think drew dad in as a hydro fan was that many folks involved with Seattle hydro racing were also in the grocery business or part of the food industry.

Bill Muncey was once a Mercer Island grocer and the mainstays of Seafair hospitality at the hydroplane races were folks my dad knew from the grocery business, like Phil and Henry Gai (Gai's Seattle French Baking) and food representative Speed Sposari.



View of Lake Washington from the house the Tracy's rented.

We lived in the same three-bedroom apartment since I entered first grade. An apartment worked well, as my dad worked six days a week and long hours. My mom had her hands full raising me and my two preschool-age sisters. There was no time for home maintenance and lawn work.

But on March 1, 1959, my parents pulled me out of Mrs. Johnson's third grade class at John Muir Elementary School and enrolled me in Miss Boss's third grade class at Whitworth Elementary School, because we moved.

My parents leased a fixer house in the Lakewood neighborhood. Why? Well, the tired house on the Lakewood hill had a rooftop deck that had a 180-degree view of the hydroplane racecourse. And when the first Sunday of August rolled in, my parents introduced me to hydroplane racing, as they hosted a hydro-viewing party on the rooftop deck.

I remember that we all drew boat names from a hat and that was the boat we rooted for. I was allowed to participate and I remember that my boat was Miss Seattle.

Like too many of today's races, there was controversy about the winner of the 1959 Gold Cup. The winner was not determined until well after the final heat was completed. And, when our six-month rental lease was up, we moved back to the same Mt. Baker apartment

complex and I was again enrolled at John Muir Elementary School. The next time we moved, it was to buy a house, also in the Mt. Baker neighborhood.

August 1959 marked the beginning of a special bond for my dad and me. A few years later, we went together to the Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, race and later to the first Tri-Cities Atomic Cup, as well as all of the Seattle races. My dad and I were different as night and day, but we both enjoyed hydros, and ever since 1959, it was our thing.

Dad's unbelievably hard work resulted in a series of work promotions. When promoted to Seattle grocery store management at the company's central

office, dad gave space in all of the stores he supervised to a relatively unknown non-Washington beer; dad gave Budweiser their first shelf space in any major grocery chain in the Seattle area. While Bud was coined the King of Beers, Bernie Little treated my dad and me like we were royalty in Seattle.

About three years before my father passed away in 2008, he suffered a severe hemorrhagic stroke and after a long rehab, he could walk and talk like before, but had major short-term memory issues. His long-term memory was just fine and often when we talked, we recalled the races we attended, the boats we liked, and the drivers we idolized. We talked about the interesting owners and sponsors and more. Hydros were still our thing. ❖

Christopher Tracy III is president of Unlimiteds Unanimous, publishers of the Unlimited NewsJournal and is a retired teacher-librarian. His father, Christopher Tracy, Jr., started his more than 30-year career in 1950s as a stocker in Seattle for Big Bear Grocery Stores, later purchased by Lucky Stores; he rose to be Lucky's district manager for Washington/Oregon for many years and retired as the head of the Northern California division of Lucky Stores, now Albertsons/Safeway.



The Lakewood house today. The rooftop deck was removed when the house was totally remodeled.

UNJ INTERVIEW:

Remembering Don Kelson, a respected boat builder.

Don Kelson was a respected and prolific builder of hydroplanes. Most of the boats that were produced at his shop, Modern Pattern Works, were for a variety of inboard classes. He did, however, build the second *Hallmark Homes* in a record 21 days. Kelson was born in Seattle on November 17, 1930, and died on August 24, 2020, a few weeks shy of his 90th birthday. The following interview was conducted by Craig Fjarlie on October 31, 2016.

UNJ: Will you tell us a little about your early life experiences?

Kelson: My mother died when my brother was born, so we were raised by my dad's parents. My grandfather worked for the railroad so he was transferred off quite a bit. We lived in North Dakota; we lived in Minnesota; we lived in Cleveland, Ohio, 'til 1945 when we got too old and too ornery for the grandparents to raise us. So, then we moved back with my dad and my stepmother. This was 1945, and 1950 I went into the service, so I didn't live with them very long.

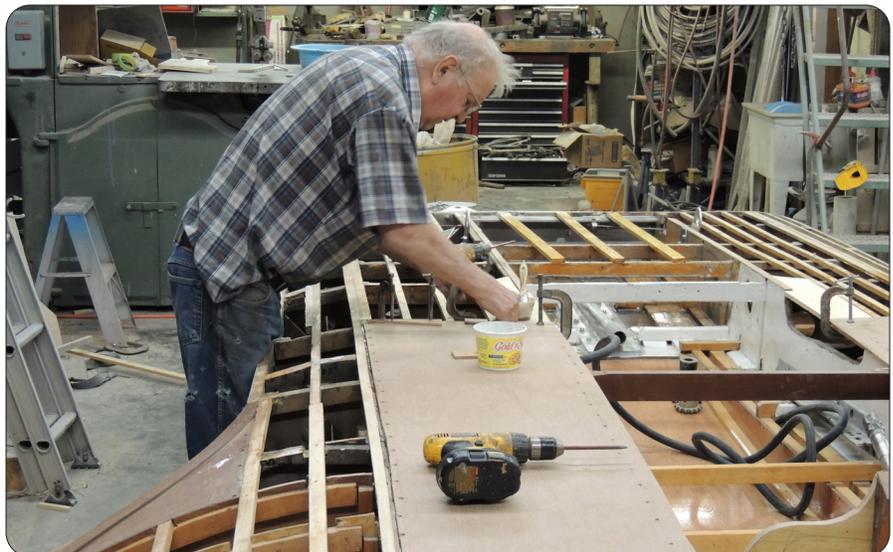
OK.

Before that I'd gone to West Seattle High School and met my future wife at school. We both graduated in 1950 and after, like I said, I went into the Army. After I got out of the Army in 1951, I started an apprenticeship as a pattern maker at Olympic Foundry here in Seattle. In April of 1952 I married my wife of now 64 years. We have three children, two of them most all of you know from boat racing experiences, Eddie and Jerry, and I have a daughter named Jeannette.

OK.

That pretty-well brings us up to now.

So, you went to work for Olympic Foundry, what kind of work were you doing there?



John Woodward

Don Kelson at work in his Seattle shop.

I served my apprenticeship there and worked on building patterns for the foundry. Most of the stuff was in the water works type of thing.

Mm hmm.

We built manhole covers, grates for water pipe fittings, large pipe fittings, we're talkin' anything from 12-inch up to 48-inch diameter pipe. Cast iron pipe.

How did you become involved with boat racing?

Well, before, I was still at home, I had a *Times* paper route. One of the customers on that paper route was a man named

Ray Hassleberg. Ray was very, very interested in boat racing, the Unlimiteds, and then he finally got interested in the limiteds. After I left my paper route, we were still friends and he knew that I was working in wood, so he says, "Why don't you build me a boat?" This was in 1957. He got a hold of a set of plans for a Norm Christiansen 280. That's what we used; that's where I started, in my garage at home in White Center.

So, you had tools and equipment to do that?

Well, I used some of the shop equip-

ment where I was workin' and the rest of it was hand tools. The power tools I was able to use at work.

Did you mostly build it yourself, or did he help you?

No, he tried to help me, but he was more in the way than anything. [Laughter.]

You said that was a 280-class?

Yeah, 280.

So that was your first boat.

Right.

How did it perform? Was he happy with it?

No, it performed, but not well, 'cause he didn't have the resources. He used a big ol' DeSoto engine in it. It was way too heavy by the time we finished.

So, he took care of buying all of the hardware?

You know, I don't even remember where we got the hardware. I'm sure he bought it somewhere, 'cause I didn't have the way of making it then.

OK. Now, you also raced? You drove for a while?

No, not up until quite a bit later.

OK. So you started building and you got other...

Well, then we started getting repair work and some alterations. Then we started building other new boats. Then I got tied up with Jack Colcock.

OK.

Jack was doing real well about that time and he couldn't handle all the work that he was getting, so I subcontracted to him. I built, oh, I don't know, maybe five or six boats for Jack. Here again, at home. [Laughs.]

Were they different classes, or...

No, they're basically all 280s.

All 280s

Yeah, they were the big thing starting then.

Yeah, OK. Did you get other classes that you were starting to build also?

Well, yes, after working at Olympic Foundry for about 10 years I went to Coolidge Propeller and stayed there and learned how to make propellers—theirs.



In 1984, Eddie Kelson is at the wheel of a 145-class hydro designed and built by the Kelson family that was named *Gang Green*. Note that the two sides of the boat are not symmetrical.

Randy Hall

Then I had an opportunity to buy Modern Pattern Works with a partner. We lasted together about two years and then he decided to part ways and that's when I took over the business totally. And from there I was...

Did you buy an existing business then?

Yes. Modern Pattern Works originally started in 1939.

OK. What was their line of work before you bought it?

They did a lot of work for Bethlehem Steel and Pacific Car and Foundry. Those were their two biggest customers, and they had a bunch of other small customers. When we bought the business, we just took over the customers. So, it just flowed right on in.

Yeah, OK.

We were down across the street from Sears, on First and Lander, upstairs. It was a real pain in the neck gettin' big patterns in and out of there. We had to use a freight elevator, leave it sittin' about half-way up. So, you'd bring it in, down part way and then... So, the building down here in South Park became available and we purchased the building and moved the shop down here in South Park.

Hmm, OK.

And like I say then he decided to move on and do other things and I continued on with the business. In the process I had become very good friends with

Lynn Montgomery and Glen Davis.

OK, yeah.

They contacted me to build the *Pussy Cat*. While I was building the *Pussy Cat*, Pete Thomson liked what he was seeing and he wanted a new boat himself, so that's where his boat came in and everything we did on the *Pussy Cat* we just copied over to his boat. That's why it became known as the *Copycat*. Everything we did on the one we copied and did on his.

And what class were they?

These are 7-litres. These are J boats, stock 7-litres now. We're getting up into the bigger classes.

Yeah, yeah.

At the same time the boys were getting of age where they could start driving and stuff, so we started in on the, uh, well, Eddie bought a 48, a Colcock 48, and we raced that for a couple years and he did pretty well with it. We decided that as long as we were getting into the picklefork designs, we'll make a picklefork design out of the 48, which became the 850s. And, um, we did very well with those boats. We probably built close to 15 of those boats, maybe more. I can't remember for sure.

Yeah.

Both boys did very well with 'em. Jerry won national championships twice with it and National High Point. Eddie set a record, a mile-and-two-thirds record on Lake Sammamish with it. Steve



Don Kelson and his wife, Annette.

David set the kilometer record at over 102 with one. So, from there we've just been... I haven't built so many new boats lately other than the vintage stuff. I've been real active and real busy in the vintage boats now in the last seven or eight years.

To back up to the earlier days, when you were building the boats, did you also do the drawings and the design work?

Yeah, the...

So, you knew where all the frames would go and...

Right, um hmm. When I first got involved with the vintage boats [boats that are now considered vintage - Ed.] Jim Lucero had the *Atlas Van Lines* shop just a block away.

Just a little ways...

Yeah, right over here. I got to talkin' with him and he came down, gave me quite a bit of advice. He didn't do any drawings, but he'd give me some ideas and angles that he thought might work well, which I incorporated into my drawings.

OK.

I did the drawings, but I credit Jim with helping me start.

Did you take any classes in engi-

neering and drawings, anything?

No.

Drafting or anything like that?

Just what I learned in pattern making.

Just learned it on the job.

School of hard knocks! [Laughs.]

Back when you were building, did you have a favorite class that you liked to build boats for?

Well, we enjoyed the 850s. In fact, I'm building a new one right now for the vintage class, because there are no 850s out there running right now. So, I thought, well, let's see, we still have an engine here, you know, parts for it that we gotta build. I've got some material and parts and pieces layin' around here that we don't have to go out and make any more, 'cause we still got 'em from before.

Yeah, OK.

That and the 280s were always fun. And of course, the J boats were always a lot of fun, too.

You had other people working for you from time-to-time, did you not?

Oh, I had Jeff Richards, Mike Hanson. I had John Walters.

Could you see their talent, that they had some ability for building, not just

for driving?

Oh, all three of 'em were very good craftsmen, yes.

Did they learn things from you?

They learned things from me, I'm sure, but they also brought in a lot of their own knowledge.

Going way back, did you ever build any boats for Billy Schumacher or Donnie Benson or...

No.

Not for them.

No.

Well, one boat we'd like to ask about is the second *Hallmark Homes, the Unlimited*.

Right.

That was a very fast project.

21 days.

How did that come about? They wrecked the first boat.

There again, their boat shop was half-way between my shop and Lucero's.

Yeah, OK.

So, Fred Wright was the crew chief on the thing. I'd been renting out some space for Fred for his machine shop in the back corner of my building that I wasn't using. Well, obviously, with the boat so close and the friendship so close, there was hardly any time somebody wasn't walking across the street from one shop to the other.

OK.

And so, the first race of the year, of course, was in Miami and all they had for a crew was Fred and one other fellow, and in the meantime, he had a couple of volunteer helpers. They weren't getting enough work done so he hired Eddie, my oldest boy to come down after school to help get things organized that had to go. Well, when they got to Miami with just the two, the owner of the boat had to work on the crew. He couldn't sit with Bernie and the rest of the owners havin' their cocktails and mint juleps, or whatever.

Yeah.

So, he says, "Hey, we need some more help back here." So, they called me

up and wanted to know if Eddie could come back and I says, “Well, yeah, I suppose he could except he’s goin’ to school yet.” School wasn’t quite out. It was a couple, three weeks away. And he says, “Well, geez, see what you can do.”

So, we went to the school, talked to the principal. The principal said, “By all means let him go. He’s gonna learn more on that two weeks than he’ll ever learn here in three weeks.” So, we allowed him to go. And so, when Leif wrecked the boat in Madison, it was brought back here.

“Well, what do we do? What do we do with it? Well, why don’t we build another one?”

“We ain’t got time, it’s gonna take all year,” I says.

“Well, let’s see what we can do.” So, it was a Karelsen...

Um hmm.

...and we got in touch with Ed. He had thought he had plans but he had to do some quick drawings so we says, “Well, get busy drawing. Give us whatever you have now.” He had enough for main engine stringers, but he didn’t have the frames laid out yet. He knew where they were, but he hadn’t got ‘em. He had to let us have ‘em. So, anyway, we got going and I started on Wednesday morning and just stayed at it for 21 days and never went home.

Wow, yeah.

It left my shop on Wednesday morning three weeks later. It went over to their shop to do the final installation of stuff. We went down to the lake about noon on Saturday. They stretched the qualifying time just to let us...because of the situation.

Yeah.

And he went out and qualified. Then he went out and wrecked it. [Laughter.]

Yeah, he spun it out, or something.

Well, that was a funny story, too. We set it up, you know, not knowing exactly, the spokes in the steering wheel weren’t quite straight up and down.

Mmm.



Doug Hall



Doug Hall



Randy Hall

When the U-32 *Hallmark Homes* was destroyed at the 1971 Gold Cup in Madison, Indiana, Don Kelson was tasked with building a replacement that owner Tony Mulherin wanted to have done in time for the Seattle Seafair race only five weeks later. Kelson and his team completed the boat’s construction in only 21 days, which many feel is the fastest that an Unlimited has ever been built.

So, he readjusted the steering and wound up with about a half-inch of thread left. It stripped the thread out of the Hime end.

Oh!

So, not a big deal that we had, he should have left it where it was.

Yeah.

But anyway, that's beside the point. [Laughs.]

Well, who were some of your best customers when you were building inboards?

Well, Jack Sellers of St. Petersburg, Florida. He bought four boats, two 850s and two 2.5-litres. Charlie Baner of Baltimore; he bought two 2.5-litres. Ronnie Brunner of Dayton, Ohio, with Jimmy Johnson. They bought the *JB and Water* and the *Shopsmith*. And, uh...

You said Steve David drove one?

Well, Steve David bought one of Jack Sellers's boats. When Jack moved into the 2.5-litre he sold his boat. I think he sold it first to Jim Aide of Florida, and Jim ordered a new boat from me and sold that boat to Steve David.

The 850.

850, yeah. And, oh, what was his dang, son of Jerry Noland of Baton Rouge, they got two boats so far. Oh, Tate, Mark Tate's dad, Joe Tate, he bought, uh, was it two or three 850s? *Anti-Stick* was the name of their boats.

OK.

I think Mark Tate set an altitude record down in Florida. [Laughs.]

That's probably not so good!

Yeah, he went up quite a ways in the air.

Did you start working with composites?

I never worked with composites.

All your boats are wood.

All wood, yeah. I'm too old to learn how now. [Laughs.]

Have you been putting enclosed cockpits on them, canopies?

I've never put a cockpit on.

OK.

No.

So, if you built a new boat and somebody wanted that, the owner would have to install it.

He'd have to have somebody else do it, 'cause I'm not qualified for that. You have to be qualified from APBA to do that stuff.

Yeah, OK. So, all of your boats are open cockpits.

Open cockpits, yeah.

But you changed from rear cockpits to the cabover, forward cockpit.

Yes.

Were there differences in the way you built the boats when you had to change that?

No. No, they were basically built, you know, like a skeleton and so it doesn't make any difference whether it's round nose, straight nose, or picklefork.

Picklefork, yeah, OK. Now, how would you compare your designs and your building to, say, Ed Karelson or Ron Jones? What are the significant differences, do you think?

[Sighs.] Well, you know, I don't think there's a whole lot of difference between all three of us...

Mm hmm.

...except for profile-looking.

Yeah.

Just what my boat looks like compared to Ron's boats, I've worked on a number of Ron's boats. I just did finish, this last spring, rebuilding the *Joya Mia*, which is a Karelson.

Oh, yeah, yeah.

And I did a major rebuild on that. Ed's method of construction is very close to the same thing I do. He uses the same



Randy Hall



Randy Hall

TOP: A crowd watches as the new *Hallmark Homes* is launched in time to compete in the 1971 Seafair Trophy Race. **ABOVE:** In 1973, the boat that Kelson built appeared in Seattle as the U-8 *Red Man*.

types of wood and, uh, his method of building is the same as, pretty close to the same thing I do. He has his ideas, Ron has his, yeah.

Years ago, Ed Karelsen made the comment that it's not so important who builds the boat, it's who gets it...

Yeah.

...what they do with it.

Right, right, yeah.

So, you would agree with that.

Oh, yes, yeah. Like I say with Ray Hassleberg, uh, nice fellow but it was just a waste of time. And with Jack Sellers, I mean, he's very successful. He held the records in both the 850s and the 2.5s. Steve David, you know, he's got one record there. Charlie Miller, they were very successful. I think he won the Nationals, he won National High Points. Nolands, they were very successful down in the southeast in Louisiana area. And there was a couple, I don't even remember their names now, and I built them a 145. They were from New York state, I believe. They came and got the boat and I never heard from 'em.

Hmm.

Never. I don't know whether they ran the boat, whether they sold it, or what happened to it.

Yeah.

So, he's right. Whoever winds up with it. I mean, look at the *Pussy Cat* and the *Copycat*. Both boats have set... Matter of fact, the *Pussy Cat* is the only 7-litre, J or H, that has held both records at the same time in the same year with the same boat.

Oh, yeah.

Nobody else. Either they set it with, the J record or the H record, but not holding both records at the same time.

Same boat.

Yeah, so we've been pretty proud of our boats.

You did race for a while, did you not?

Yes, matter of fact I held the J record, mile-and-two-thirds record from Yelm, Lake Lawrence.

What class did you start in?

I started in 7-litre. [Laughs.]

Oh, OK. That's kinda fast for...

Really, what happened is that, um, I never got around to drive. The boys started before I did, both of 'em. I just never got around to driving. Well, when they finished the *Copycat*, Pete [Thomson] and his wife decided to take most of the summer off and go traveling. Well, the boat was brand new and they didn't want to leave it sit.

Sure.

So, they says, "We'll just let somebody drive it." I says, "OK, I'll drive it. I built it, I'm gonna drive it." So that's when I first started.

Ahh.

That's it. And then, when they set the record at Lawrence, he had just gotten back from his year off, or summer off, and then he went out and drove the first heat and he did a miserable job. I says, "Get out of that thing, let me show you how it's done." [Laughter.] I went out and like I said, set the record. I says, "Now, see, that's what you gotta do." [Laughter.] But it's been fun. We've made, out of all of these people I haven't had anybody that's really been mad at me or dissatisfied. We've made a family out of the whole thing and it's been a, made a fun deal out of it. If it had gotten too serious, I'd have said, "Forget it."

When you were driving, did some of the other drivers who had more experience help you and tell you how to do things, or give you advice?

Oh, advice, yeah. "Hey, you're not doin' this quite right." "Well, how do you do it?" "Do it this way." "OK." So, then we changed.

Who did you get the most help from, do you remember?

Probably Lynn Montgomery. He's a very talented man.

Yeah.

Very talented. I don't know how talented he would be makin' wood work, but as far as an engine's concerned, he made the Crosleys work, he made the Chevrolets work.

So how many years did you race, as a driver?

[Pause.] Well, I quit two years ago at Soap Lake.

Oh, OK.

We set it up, that was, we knew that was gonna be my last race. So, we set up five Kelsons with five Kelsons driving.

Mmm.

There was myself, Jerry and Eddie, my granddaughter Christina, and my grandson Shaun.

OK.

And we had the *Copycat*, we had the *Bolam Express*, the *Cat's Meow*, um, *Cat Ballou*. *Gang Green*. I think that was it. Yeah, five.

Was this vintage or actual racing?

Vintage.

Vintage.

Yeah, it's a vintage. Basically, there were a number of years that I didn't do any driving. It was basically when the *Copycat* was first built.

Oh, yeah.

And so, a bit then, and then we quit and then once in a while we'd jump in. Somebody'd say, "Hey, I haven't seen that thing run." Like 2009, I was named boat builder of the year for American Power Boat, and that was at Wheeling, West Virginia. I was invited back there. So, Annette and I went back there. The *JB and Water*, which was one of ours, was the featured boat on all the T-shirts and the program and all that.

And the man who owned it says, "Hey, I want you to drive the boat." He says, "I've driven the boat a lot and I've seen pictures of it, but I've never seen the boat actually run. I've never watched the boat run." He says, "I want you to take it out."

"Naw, I didn't bring my life jacket, no helmet." "Well, we can find stuff." "No, I don't think you'll find anything that'll fit me here in the wrong place." We argued back and forth for Saturday, and Sunday I says, "OK, I'll take it out for you."

So, come time to take it out, the referee, which was Tom Bertollini, he

cleared everybody off the water. I said, "He don't trust me or whatever." He says, "No, I just want you to have good, fresh water all by yourself." So, I took it out. I ran the boat as hard as I could run it. If it blew up, that's the way it went.

I come back in, the announcer was Dick Filsner and I was wearin' a full-face helmet. He says, "I could see that smile clear through that full-face helmet." [Laughs.] He says, "You had a good time." I says, "I did have a good time with it." The man that owned the boat he says, "Thank you. That makes my whole weekend." [Laughs.] So that was a pretty good highlight, too.

When you were racing, how far out of town did you go? Clear across the country?

We went to St. Petersburg. I can't remember if it was once or twice.

OK.

Dayton, Ohio.

Yeah. Did you ever go to Valleyfield?

No, we never went up into Canada. Mission Bay, of course. Decatur, Illinois. That's probably it.

Yeah, OK.

That's far enough.

Lots of miles.

Yeah.

You've been involved more recently with the outboards and their J-class project.

Right.

Could you describe what your involvement with that is?

Well, they were building these J boats down at the museum. And all of a sudden they got so many Unlimiteds in there, they ran out of room.

Yeah.

So, Pat Gleason went around lookin' for a place to build these things and he finally wound up here. He wanted to know if I would consider letting 'em build boats. That's when I had my building, before I rented it all out. And I said, "Oh, I suppose it wouldn't work out too bad." And he says, "Well, we'll be here to help you and we can do this and do this." And



John Woodward

I said, "Well, where's your plans?" "What plans?" He says, "What we do is buy a kit boat from a guy in California and assemble 'em." And I said, "Well, that's OK." So, they did. The first ones we did were five boats that were from California, and they were a piece of junk.

Mmm.

And Ed Karelson was down here helping a couple of times and he says, "We gotta do something better than this." So, we took one of his old boats and started measuring it up and we copied it.

OK.

And then I started cuttin'. Ed didn't come down an awful lot, but he came down quite often to help. But I started into designing it, re-doing it, making it a little... and I started cutting all the frames and all that stuff so the kids, all they had to do was assemble 'em.

Yeah.

And that's, and now I rented the building so I can't do 'em here anymore, so they're doing 'em in a building down by the... So far they haven't asked for more of 'em this year and I'm hoping they don't, because I just, I just don't feel I can. All of a sudden my health has gone to heck. In February I had open-heart surgery with a new valve, five bi-passes and a pacemaker.

Wow.

So, I'm not moving as quickly as I used to. And like I say, another week, two weeks, I'll be 86. So, it's time to let

somebody else younger help 'em.

You and Ed Karelson get along pretty well.

Oh, absolutely. We're real good friends, yeah. Oh, I get along with Ron.

Yeah, yeah.

I get along with everybody. I mean, it's just, yeah, but Ed and I are real close friends. Always have been. I mean, we don't have any secrets between us and all that stuff. [Laughs.]

Did you ever have much to do with Jon Staudacher?

No. If he were to walk in that door right now, I wouldn't know who he was.

Yeah. Or Lauterbach?

Oh, yeah, Larry and I get along fine. Larry's a good guy. As a matter of fact, on my wife and my 50th anniversary we went back to Virginia, the big tourist town back there where the Pilgrims were.

Plymouth?

Yeah.

OK.

Yeah, somethin' like that. Anyway, when we got all done we met with Anne Fitzgerald and John, and Bill and Annette Moore back there and then we went to Henry Lauterbach's shop. That was just before he died. And Henry and I got along fine. He was a crabby old guy, but he and I got along just fine. I mean, he could crab somebody. I'd say, "Never mind, Henry." I says, "You know him better than I do." Then we became good friends. [Laughs.] But no, Larry is a good

guy. Larry is a good kiddo.

Yeah, yeah.

But here again, they have a different way of building boats than the rest of us do. And they're fine boats, they're real good boats. They're much in demand.

Yeah. Did you ever build anything for the Grand Prix class, or the Unlimited Lights, or anything?

Yes, I did. I built for Scott Pierce. I built him, uh, at that time it was a 7-litre and it is down in Tacoma now and it's sittin' idle as it went to an Unlimited Light.

Mmm.

'Cause it was a big boat. It was 24-foot.

OK, yeah.

That's the biggest, other than the...

Hallmark Homes.

Yeah.

Well, when you look back at everything you've done, what are some of your proudest accomplishments?

Oh, to get to set the record, and then named boat builder of the year, and being in the Honor Squadron for APBA [in 2015 – Ed.].

Yeah.

And meeting a ton of super neat people all over the country. Being accepted by most all of 'em, you know, as a friend as well as a builder. That's the kind of stuff.

So, it's been a rewarding career for you.

It has been, yeah. It's been costly.

Um hmm.

Time-consuming, but, uh, lookin', would I do it again? I think so. I think so, yes.

Is there anything we should talk about that we haven't touched on?

No, not really. I think what the future looks like is just... I'm gonna sit back and enjoy a little bit more. I've been refreezing and stuff and I'm getting a little tired of some of the squabbles, so I'm gonna let the younger guys do it.

Yeah.

I'll just take my little 850 with us and find some young kid that wants to drive and let him go out and play with it. That's what Eddie does now with his *Gang Green*. He lets almost anybody that wants to drive, drive the thing. Well, I'll do the same thing with the 850 'cause I'm not gonna drive it, that's for darn sure.

Yeah.

But there's a lot of young drivers in the, um, J class that I know that I'm sure would like to drive a limited, er, an inboard. You know, move up. I mean, that's how Billy Schumacher started.

Yeah, sure.

I mean, there's a potential, there's a couple super good drivers in the younger boys now and they're getting up. Travis Ulsh, he's legal to drive an inboard now. He's a very good driver, very talented young man. And I think Charlie Mar-

quist's daughter is a pretty darn good driver. So, fun to see them movin' into a different class, too. You know, maybe they don't want to even bother, I don't know. We'll find out. [Laughs.]

One other question, in addition to building boats, did you ever do much engine work?

No.

No?

No. I could do, barely, maintenance of engines. I mean, we've got this Sunbeam together for this little 850 I'm building now and so, we're gonna be looking for somebody to help. [Laughs.]

OK.

I'm not an engine builder, no.

You did learn a little bit about propellers, you said. Can you give people advice about propellers?

Well, yeah. I don't do any propeller work. The propellers that we build are all stuff that's up, oh, 50-inch up to 170, 180-inch diameters. I mean, it's big stuff.

Sure.

So, all we do is build the pattern, we don't do any of the casting or finish work or anything else. They go to Sound Propeller for that.

OK.

But no, if I see the boat is doin' some weird stuff I can tell 'em, "Hey, we gotta change this or change that."

Yeah, OK.

Yeah.

All right.

Very good.

We've covered quite a bit.

OK.

Thank you very much.

You're welcome. ❖

Editor's note: Although Don Kelson died in August, his son Jerry is still keeping the lights on at Modern Pattern Works. Most of his current projects include patterns for railroad tracks and deck hardware for ships.



Don Kelson talks with Donny Benson and Benson's daughter Lori before driving one of his boats at the Mahogany and Merlot event in Chelan, Washington.

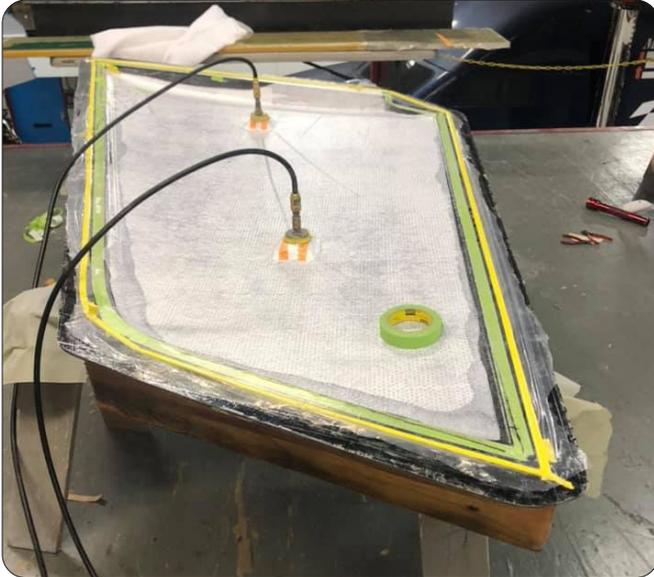
HYDROFILE

Race Team News by Lon Erickson



HomeStreet Racing

Several of the HSR team members, Trey Holt and Jeff Bernard, have been busy making new parts to build the inventory for the race boats. Here are some fairings being made at the shop in Tukwila, Wash.



Trey Holt

Bucket List Racing 99.9/440

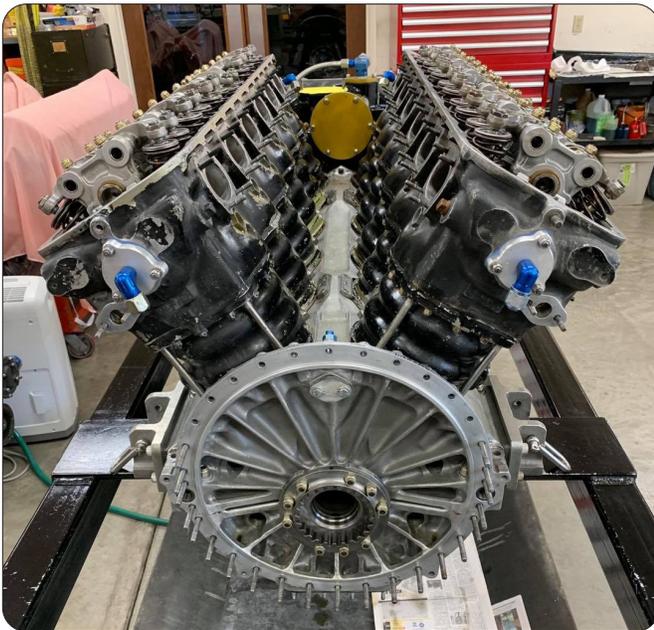
As they were hoping to do this fall, the team got a break in the weather and the newest addition to the BLR team hit the river at Pateros, Wash., on a sunny Halloween day. The U-99.9 race boat was on the water four different times on Saturday with Dave Villwock behind the wheel for three of those sessions and Dustin Echols driving the fourth testing run. After an initial shakedown run, crew reports were positive on the updates made since acquiring the hull from the GFTL team back in February.



Chris Denslow

Go3 Racing

Some of the work in progress during the winter months. The evolution of tearing down and building back up of an Allison V-12.



Go3 Racing



Chris Denslow



Chris Denslow

MY \$0.02 WORTH

Editorial Comment by Andy Muntz



I'm going to let you in on a little secret about this sport.

Have you watched the programs on Netflix about Formula 1 racing? If so, you've probably been impressed by the vast amount of money that is spent on that sport. I was particularly taken by the McLaren race team, which is headquartered within a beautiful glass building on the shore of a lake where many hundreds of full-time workers toil to make their race cars faster. Among them are numerous highly skilled, and I assume very well-paid, engineers.

Well, here's the secret:

Unlimited hydroplane racing is not like that.

In this sport, the typical race team consists of a bunch of guys, and a few women, who gather on some weekends to work on their boat. It's their hobby. They have other jobs that actually pay the bills, but they enjoy getting together to tinker with the engines or work on the hull. Then, when the season comes, they use their vacation time to travel with the

team to take part in the races.

It's not ideal. Nobody disputes the fact that the sport would do much better if it was more professional and operated by people who have Unlimited racing as their highest priority. And, maybe that day will come? But right now, the sport has no money and has no choice but to depend on volunteer labor.

Why do I bring this up? Toward the front of this issue, you may have read the comments from Jan Shaw, the director of operations for H1 Unlimited, about the organization's effort to develop a plan for its future. You also may have noticed that she mentioned my name as being associated with that process.

You see, until I retired about a year and a half ago, I had been in the public relations business for more than 40 years. During that time, I've written many strategic public relations plans, a process that identifies where an organization wants to go, what problems are standing in the way of it getting there, and how relationships can be improved to help solve those

problems.

The leaders at H1 Unlimited felt that having a strategic plan for the sport would be a good idea, so I was asked to lend my expertise in that area. Being a hydroplane nut since I was a little kid, I was happy to help.

Which brings me to another secret. As I read Facebook, I notice that there are many so-called hydro fans who enjoy lobbing complaints from their computer, criticizing everything that the sport does and trying their hardest to impress the world that they are smarter and know much better.

So, here's the other secret:

You're not helping.

Maybe you do have a good idea on how the sport could be better. If you do, and if you care about this sport as much as you say, then do something other than complain. Nobody likes a whiner, my mom used to say.

Instead, get involved. Lend your expertise to improve things. Make a difference. ❖

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Letters are welcome, but may be edited for clarity and space.

PLEASE JOIN US AT THE NEXT MEETING OF UNLIMITEDS UNANIMOUS

The December meeting has been canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Check our website for more information.