



September 2020

## The passing of a Seattle institution: Pat O'Day.

BY BILL OSBORNE

**T**he world lost a one-of-a-kind on August 4, 2020, when Pat O'Day passed away at his home on San Juan Island. Pat was an amazing promoter who loved rock 'n' roll and hydroplanes. His life story regarding the world of music and radio is a story for another time and place.

I met him in 1967 at the first test session of the new *Miss Bardahl*. He and his broadcasting buddy Lan Roberts were frequent visitors at test sessions on Lake Washington. "Hydroplane racing is Seattle at its best," O'Day said at one of those test sessions. "I'm not sure how or when it will happen, but I want to get involved in the sport one of these days."

In 1967, Pat started doing color commentary for the Seattle Seafair race. His enthusiasm and love of the sport became apparent to all who listened to him tell stories on Seafair Sunday. Some of his detractors were critical when he made an error regarding the history of the sport. Those same people were quick to forgive him because Pat was such a genuine fan of Unlimited hydroplane racing.

Pat continued his role as a commentator until 2013 when KIRO-TV and Pat



Cheryl Graham

Pat O'Day (left) poses with one of his friends, the author. Osborne says the picture means a lot to him because O'Day was all about the people who loved him. Osborne knew him for more than 50 years and says the two considered each other friends.

parted ways. "I'm going to miss the Seafair broadcast. I understand that KIRO made a business decision. I will always love hydroplanes and am willing to help the sport grow."

"Bill Muncey was an amazing racer and an even better promoter of the sport," O'Day said at Bill's last Seafair race in 1981. Muncey recognized Pat's enthu-

siasm and love of the sport. "He [Pat O'Day] does a great job of entertaining fans on TV. We [the sport of hydroplane racing] are fortunate to have him promoting our sport."

One of his favorite interviews was Chip Hanauer. "The biggest thing about Pat was, he was always positive," Chip says. "He was up for anything that was

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fun. His passion for Unlimited hydroplane racing was unmatched. He was Bill Barnum, a real promoter.

"The KYYX thing wasn't about racing, it was about marketing. My all-time favorite Pat O'Day moment took place in Seattle. I was doing the KIRO broadcast with him. KIRO always went to commercial just before the final heat. We went to Pat after the break and out of the blue, he said, 'The rudders are fracturing the sacred waters of Lake Washington!'

"That was classic Pat O'Day. I loved that line and told him that he needed to use it every time we worked together. He wasn't acting like he loved hydroplane racing, he was passionate about the sport. We didn't always agree about what was happening on the water, but he wanted the best for our sport. Pat O'Day epitomized that time in Seattle history. He was in an institution. For those of us who grew up in the '60s and '70s, he will be missed!"

In 1974, Pat became involved with the U-95 project. I was fortunate enough to spend a lot of time with him at the Miami race that year. He loved the U-95. "This is the future of Unlimited hydroplane racing," he said at Miami. U-95 raced without any commercial sponsor-

ship. The only stickers on the boat were the U.S. Air Force and Pat's KJR decal.

U-95 driver Leif Borgersen shed light on Pat's involvement with the team. "Pat and Jim [Clapp] were very good friends," he said. "When Jim decided to build the boat, Pat had to be a part of the team. Back then, KJR was the number-one radio station in Seattle. They called themselves Channel 95. Jim asked Pat if he could use the number 95.

Since the boat was privately funded, Pat thought it was a good idea, hence the name U-95. Pat was always a cheerleader for the team. No matter what happened, Pat was always positive about the boat and life in general."

When Pamela Clapp dissolved the U-95 team at the end of the 1974 season, Pat continued his involvement with the boat. In 1977, Pat O'Day's KYYX Radio in Seattle sponsored Pete LaRock's

## PAT O'DAY

The sport of Unlimited hydroplane racing lost a great ambassador on August 4 when Pacific Northwest radio legend Pat O'Day passed away at his home in the San Juan Islands. He was 85 years old.

O'Day was among the biggest stars in Seattle-area radio in the 1960s as the premier voice of KJR Radio, the region's leading Top 40 rock 'n' roll station at that time. He would later become program manager of KJR and then its general manager.

After leaving KJR, he formed a company that became known as Concerts West. It would become the largest concert promoter in the world. The clients of Concerts West included some of the biggest acts in the industry: The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, The Beach Boys, Bob Dylan, Elton John, Frank Sinatra, Led Zeppelin, The Supremes, The Eagles, and many more. His first client was Jimi Hendrix and his company handled every live appearance by Elvis Presley from 1969 until his death in 1977.

Meanwhile, he remained in the radio business as the owner of KYYX, KXA, and KKMI radio stations in Seattle and KORL in Honolulu. He was also open about his struggles. In 1986 he was admitted to Schick Shadel Hospital in Seattle for treatment of an alcohol problem and ended up well-known as the voice of commercials for the organization.

As for hydroplane racing, he had a life-long love for the sport and began broadcasting the race action from Lake Washington in 1968. In that first broadcast, he famously enlisted the help of Las Vegas singer and entertainer Wayne Newton to assist in calling the action. He later was involved in the development of the U-95 in 1973 and briefly owned the Miss KYYX Unlimited hydroplane.

In 2002, O'Day co-authored a book titled *It Was All Just Rock 'n' Roll*, which detailed his work in radio and in the concert business. The following year he wrote a sequel titled *It Was All Just Rock 'n' Roll II: A Return to the Center of the Radio & Concert Universe*. He lived on San Juan Island in his later years where he sold real estate.

"It is with great sadness that H1 Unlimited has learned about the passing of Pat O'Day," the organization said in a statement issued shortly after his death was announced. "Pat was an instrumental part of the annual Seafair Festival Unlimited Hydroplane races on Lake Washington. Pat O'Day will be missed by the entire hydroplane racing community and we are forever grateful for his contributions to our sport." ❖



The Miss KYYX in 1977.

Bill Osborne



U-96 at the two Northwest races. The sponsorship paid dividends right away. Pete drove *Miss KYYX* to sixth place at the Tri-Cities and fourth at Seattle. “KYYX got lots of free publicity on TV in Seattle,” Pat said. “Sponsoring Pete LaRock’s boat at these two races was money well spent. I wish other sponsors could see the value of sponsoring Unlimited hydroplanes.”

When Pete LaRock sold the U-96 to Chuck King, Pat’s involvement with the former U-95 ended until 1981. Chuck King called Pat and offered the boat to him. He followed that purchase with a special announcement.

“Buying the boat was a dream come true for me,” he said. “KYYX will sponsor the boat and we need to do something special. Let’s face it, Bernie’s *Miss Budweiser* and Muncey’s *Atlas* are way too fast for us, so we need to win the publicity game. With that in mind, I have selected Brenda Jones to drive. Having a woman driver will get us a lot of publicity. She has the skills to do a good job, so I am looking forward to having her as part of our team.”

At the Tri-Cities, Brenda did an excellent job. She qualified eighth fastest at 112.923 mph. That was the good news. The bad news: *Miss KYYX* was almost 25 mph slower than top qualifier *Miss Budweiser*. In her first heat, Jones finished a distant fifth in Heat 1A. A DNF in Heat 2B effectively ended O’Day’s first race as an owner.

Despite failing to qualify and scoring two DNFs at Seattle, *Miss KYYX* gained more media attention than every other boat except for *Miss Budweiser*, *Atlas Van Lines*, and *Pay ‘n Pak*. “Brenda did her best, but we didn’t have a boat that could compete with Bernie Little, Bill Muncey, and Dave Heerensperger,” Pat explained.

Pat took the boat to San Diego and Brenda Jones qualified seventh at 111.211 mph, almost 27 mph slower than *Miss Budweiser*. *Miss KYYX* failed to start in either of its heats. At the end of the season O’Day sold the boat to Bill Wurster. “I loved owning a boat, but it was far more expensive than I thought it would be, so it was time for me to sell the boat.”

According to Sam Cole, former chairman of H1 Unlimited, “Pat was a great promoter. What he did with Brenda Jones was something the sport needed. The things he did for the sport made the sport better. He had connections with Maybelline and Unilever and he opened the door to sponsorship.



“I went to Chicago to make presentations for his team. If Brenda had a better track record as racer, those companies might have become involved. He had a lot of connections which could have really helped grow the sport. Pat was a good person and will be missed.”

For the next 30-plus years, Pat devoted his time in the sport to television commentary. His contribution to the sport was immeasurable. As an owner, Pat O’Day’s career was forgettable. His gift to the sport was his ability to make KIRO’s broadcast flow and keep viewers entertained.

One thing that set Pat apart from so many people in the business was accessibility. No matter where he was or what he was doing, if a person wanted to talk to him or have their picture taken with him, Pat was always there. He came across as genuine and personable. Again, he wasn’t acting, that’s just who he was.

Personally, I would be remiss not to include my personal feelings. Pat became a friend to me and so many other fans of the sport. I also respected him for overcoming his battles with alcohol, brain surgery, and lung cancer. Throughout his battles, Pat maintained a positive attitude. His life story should serve as an inspiration!

I, like so many of his fans, will miss the spirit of the man who made so many Seafair Sundays more enjoyable. ❖

Pat O’Day with Brenda Jones, the driver of his *Miss KYYX* and the first woman to drive an Unlimited hydroplane in competition during the modern era of the sport.

***“I have selected Brenda Jones to drive. Having a woman driver will get us a lot of publicity. She has the skills to do a good job, so I am looking forward to having her as part of our team.”***

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# See you after the break, Pat O'Day.

BY DAVID WILLIAMS  
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**L**ike most of the kids that grew up around Seattle in the 1960s, Pat O'Day's gravelly voice and the amazing music he pumped out at KJR became the soundtrack of my childhood. Walk into any group of Seattle baby boomers and sing, "KJR Seattle..." and instantly they will respond on cue and in tune with, "...Channel 95!"

If you missed the AM radio boom of the 1960s and the rock 'n' roll revolution that was carried in on its back, you missed a marvelous moment when music dominated our lives. Music wasn't just the background to our story, it WAS our story; and Pat O'Day, first with KJR and then with Concerts West, provided us with that music. Pat brought Elvis, the Beatles, Jimi Hendrix, and the Stones to Seattle.

I was lucky enough to meet Pat at Seafair in 1976 and even though I was just another long-haired 18-year-old fan and he was a mid-40s radio icon, our mutual love of hydros turned us into lifelong friends.

Over the 44 years that Pat and I were friends we had a number of great conversations, but without a doubt, the best one took place five years ago when Pat was filling in for an hour on a talk show on KVI Radio for a friend who was on vacation. Pat asked me to come down and do 30 minutes on hydros then he would do 30 minutes on the Seattle music scene.

We both got to the station at Fischer Plaza about the same time. The producer buzzed us into the studio. Pat liked to work standing up; he said it gave his voice more life and excitement. We put on our headphones (Pat still called 'em "cans") and took our places across from each other with the microphone on a spring balanced arm between us.

The producer counted us down: three, two, one... The "on air" light blinked red.

Watching Pat in the studio was like watching Russell Wilson run a two-minute offense. Every move was confident, professional, and perfect. I could have listened to him all day, but suddenly there was silence and I realized that he had asked me a question and it was my turn to talk.

It took a second, I was self-conscious, but then he smiled that big friendly Pat O'Day smile and instantly I felt at ease. I soon forgot that we were on the air and it was just me and Pat talking hydros. He asked questions and I answered with my best stories. It was wonderful, but somehow after 30 minutes the conversation naturally shifted without any announcement to Jimi Hendrix.

I knew the story well enough to feed Pat a few leading questions to get his story going. Soon he was telling me about his night club, The Spanish Castle, and how one night in 1961 the headlining act, Tiny Tony and the Statics, blew their amplifier and a skinny young kid named Jimmy Allen Hendrix told Pat that he had an amp in the back of his car and he would be happy to loan it to Pat if he could just sit in and play with the band.

Jimmy played and no one really remembered—except Jimmy.

Six years later, Jimmy went to London, changed his name to Jimi, and morphed into the original Guitar God. When he returned to the states, he looked up Pat and asked that Pat's Concerts West produce all of his North American shows.

The rest is rock 'n' roll history. Jimi Hendrix embraced the wild life, and on September 18, 1970, he died in London. (Not from a drug overdose but from drinking too much red wine, passing out, and vomiting in his sleep, then choking on the vomit.)

Pat went on to explain that the platoon of London agents, promoters and managers that had gotten rich off Jimi's music scattered like cockroaches and abandoned Jimi's body in the London morgue. Al Hendrix, Jimi's distraught father, called Pat for help and it was Pat O'Day, calling long distance from Seattle, who made arrangements to fly Jimi's body home and have him buried on the hill overlooking Renton.

The whole time Pat was talking, I felt that he was just talking to me. It was only when we paused for a commercial and the producer said, "Wow, this is GREAT STUFF!" that I remembered that we were on live radio.

When the show ended, Pat said, "I know you were only supposed to do the hydro segment, but hydros and Hendrix seemed to blend together so well that I just decided to keep going."

That 30-minute interview that turned in to a one-hour show will forever be one of the highlights of my life. Pat O'Day died yesterday and with him he took a huge piece of Seattle history. He was one of the most amazing men I've ever met, and if you thought he was a big deal on the radio, oh my goodness, you should have met him in person!

Great show, Pat, and I hope to see you, "after the break." ❖

*The above article was posted on Facebook the day after Pat O'Day's death and is offered here by permission of its author.*

## UNJ INTERVIEW: PART TWO

# John Walters: The career of a talented technician and driver.

Last month, in part one of our interview, John Walters told how he started racing in outboards. He later worked for Ron Jones Marine in Costa Mesa, California. In part two, he talks about going to Seattle before joining the Red Man crew in the middle of the 1974 season, driving various inboard classes, and building boats for Don Kelson Hydros, which was located only a few blocks from Bill Muncey's Atlas Van Lines shop. The interview was conducted by Craig Fjarlie.

**UNJ: You went to the Gold Cup race in 1974, when the Seattle race was held at Sand Point.**

Walters: There was a lot of damage that year. The *U-95* ended up blowing up engines and sank and Tommy D'Eath was driving the *Miss U.S.* and it caught on fire. They'd mentioned at the drivers' meeting all week long that if there's anybody on the boat, the fire people, the rescue people will not get on the boat. The boat was on fire and they came over. Tommy wanted to help and so he was trying to just scoop water on, just do whatever he could do. Fire teams wouldn't get on the boat and they were yellin' for him to get off the boat. He wanted to help save it. And in the meantime, while everybody was arguing, it burned to the water line.

**Yeah.**

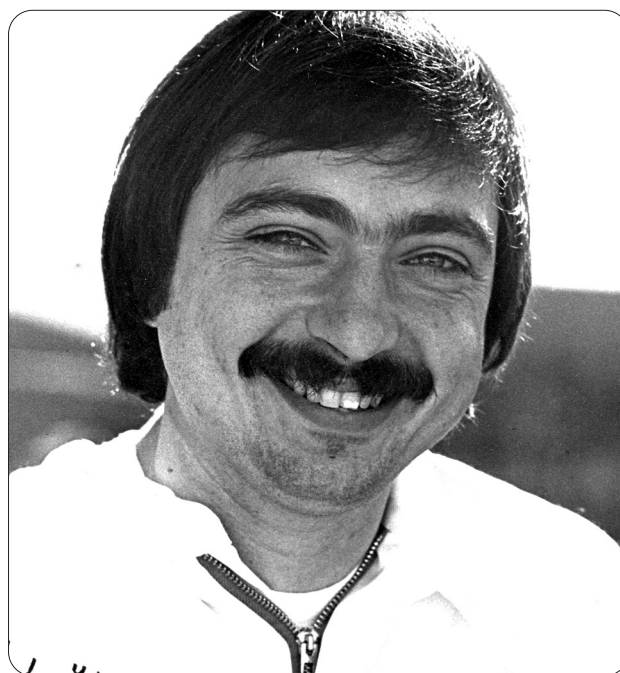
I think the *Lincoln Thrift* had the ability to be very fast, but it also had the ability to be unpredictable, you know, handling at times...

**It seems the balance wasn't quite right, or something.**

They were doing some things differently. They had the engine turned around the other way and they were trying to run the boat very loose and pretty free and relying on aerodynamic surfaces a lot to help control it. Sunday morning it was a little bit windy. I believe the Lincoln Thrift guys were fast qualifier that weekend, but they withdrew Sunday morning because the water was rough and Mickey [Remund] didn't think it was safe to drive, so they withdrew.

**Yeah. That was the race when Pay 'n Pak and Budweiser had their fabulous duel.**

Yeah, they had just an outstanding race there, one of the all-time classics. Good racing, a lot of damage, a lot of problems, but it was decision time for John and Arlene and we still hadn't quite made that decision [to join the *Red Man* team] so we decided we'll go back to the next race and make a decision then and see what we want to do. The next stop was Owensboro, Kentucky. They got the boat packed up in the shop and everything, kinda took a look around. We were kinda thinkin' at that point in time that we



Hydroplane and Raceboat Museum

were gonna move back there. Uh, Arlene, once again, I ended up abandoning her...

**In '74, Owensboro was earlier.**

Yes. We ended up going to...

**Was it Madison?**

Madison was right. The tornado came through there. We got there in October...

**Yeah, yeah.**

...in Madison. The race in Dayton was actually before the Owensboro [sic] race. We went back to the shop to get things done and then came back to the race in Dayton.

**And in '74 there was Jacksonville, they had a race.**

Yup. They got blown out. Got so windy. There were like 14 races I think that year, and we made several trips back and forth across the country. We were racing in Miami and then we came out west to Tri-Cities and Seattle, then went back for Dayton and Jacksonville, and then came all





John Walters served on the crew of the *Red Man* during the latter half of the 1974 season.

***"I even got to go for a couple laps in it. Extremely fast, but it just didn't feel like it had enough air under the thing. It just laid down in the turns and took forever to accelerate."***

the way back for Phoenix and San Diego, and then had to go back for Madison...

**And another try at Jacksonville. They re-scheduled it.**

Yeah, I think there were two races in Detroit that year.

**It was in '73 that there were two races in Detroit.**

I don't remember for sure. But I know we ended up going to Dayton, and Dayton was basically a sand and gravel pit. It was a huge, big pond.

**Yeah.**

Not very big.

**I went a couple years later, but not that year.**

Jerry Bangs was driving the boat because Jim [McCormick] was still injured with the legs. Had run his 5-Litre back there on that local course and was a little bit familiar with it. We thought he understood what we were getting ourselves into. We had some issues, things would need to be changed and fixed and made better, so we spent a lot of time workin' on the boat in Owensboro. Showed up back in Dayton a little bit late.

So, we didn't get a lot of run time and Jerry

didn't get a lot of seat time before we had to go racing. I remember he said he didn't really have very good start times, so he said, "There's a full speed and I'll just kinda wing it. I'll make my starts on the outside and just see what it is and then follow the guys that I know are gonna make good starts and I'll do better later in the day."

I remember standing on the beach there watching Jerry and I remember he was lookin' over his left shoulder to see where the guys were and I could see he's getting closer and closer and closer to the beach and by the time he looked up and realized where he was, there was no savin' it and ran the boat up on the beach.

**That's right.**

Yeah. It was just really scrappy, kind of a wet-land in there. There was no way to get a crane in there. There was no way to have a crane with a large enough reach to stay on dry land and pick it up. So, basically, it was people power. We got people, guys shoulder-to-shoulder, moved it four or five inches at a time until it got in the water deep enough to float it. Good thing it was so soft there was minimal damage. Propeller got dinged up a little bit. I think the rudder post got bent just a little bit. Other than that, everything was pretty well just fine.

We got it back, floated it, got it back to the beach and got the rudder changed and went through all the systems and refueled and everything and went out and ran the next heat. After that, I guess there was a tornado that came through, that touched down in Louisville, Kentucky, and then it touched down again in Madison. Caused a lot of damage and then went farther north. In fact, it even touched down in Detroit. Madison was scheduled to be the next race and we ended up going back the middle or end of October. I remember it was cold.

**Yeah, yeah.**

It was cold and we had such a difficult time getting the engines, especially the turbo-Allisons on alcohol, they didn't want to start very easily. So, we ended up having to build a gasoline primer system thing to get 'em started on gasoline and then switch it over to alcohol so that it would continue to run. And I remember it being cold.

**Well, did you stay with *Red Man* for '75, or did you go back to racing inboards?**

I went back to racing inboards for a little while. The problem now was that at the end of



Jerry Bangs drove *Red Man* in 1974.

the '74 season, Jim McCormick had a sheet metal shop. He did heating and air conditioning. His father had actually started the business and when his father got older and was retiring, he divided the business up and Jim McCormick got the sheet metal side of it, the heating and air conditioning, and his brother, Roger, did the plumbing stuff. And so, several things happened there. One was that when we did finally run in Madison, I thought that *Red Man* boat had just a tremendous amount of potential. In fact, I got to drive the boat a couple of laps in

San Diego that year.

**Oh, I didn't know that.**

Yeah, there was kind of a musical-chairs thing goin' on there. Jim McCormick was driving the boat and Jerry Bangs was driving the boat, and I even got to go for a couple laps in it. Extremely fast, but it just didn't feel like it had enough air under the thing. It just laid down in the turns and took forever to accelerate. I wanted to deepen the sponsons a little bit. In those days, as I mentioned, Ron set up the boats very conservatively and he set 'em up to where they ran down hill.

**Oh, yeah.**

So, the strut was a fair amount deeper than the sponsons and I thought, you know, if we could free this thing up just a little bit, I think it'd be a monster. I wanted to deepen the sponsons a half-an-inch for Madison. Jim agreed but then Jim and Larry, the crew chief, went off and talked about things and they came back and said, "You know, let's adopt the if-a-little-bit-is-good-more-is-better theory" and they wanted to deepen 'em a whole inch."

**That might be too much.**

It was too much. And as much as I tried to discourage that, we ended up deepening 'em a whole inch. By the time

they got to Madison, it's late October, the air temperature is cool so it's very dense, and long straightaways in Madison. And, uh...

**Rough first turn.**

Rough first turn and I remember as the boat got through the second turn and was starting to accelerate down the straightaway towards the pits there, nice and light, not a lot of speed but a big 280, but about the time that it was getting to the starting line—and Jim McCormick is driving the boat now—about the time he gets to the starting line he ran over his own wake and the boat rattled up and it got up in the air and waved its nose in the air and got pretty light. Jim immediately brought it back to the pits. They said those things are gone, get 'em out of here. And I said, "Well, let's just take half of 'em out." "Nope" "Just take three-quarters of 'em out." You know, I knew that you could see that the potential was there, we'd just gone too far.

**And it was there.**

It was there, yeah. And he said, "Nope, I don't want 'em in there at all." And so, we took 'em out and it ended up going back to the stock configuration, which I think was a bit of a mistake. But in the end, what ended up happening was we got the boat back to the shop and a couple of things happened, both good and bad. One is that Jim had enjoyed very good success in conventional boats.

**Mm hmm.**

And all of the old timers that were around, Graham Heath and Bill Cantrell and a lot of the guys that had been involved in building these boats didn't agree with the new cabover style, thought there was way too much strut weight and that we were doing the wrong things there and so they advised Jim to turn the boat into a conventional.

**Oh.**

And the next thing that happened was a life-changer. In 1974 George Henley had driven the *Pay 'N Pak* to a Gold Cup and a national championship and George retired. Dave Heerensperger



Crewmembers survey the damage after *Red Man* went into the weeds at Dayton, Ohio. That's John Walters standing next to the cockpit and wearing dark pants.





After the 1974 season, Walters was tasked with the job of converting the *Red Man* to a conventional set-up with the cockpit behind the engine. The hull is shown here in 1975 racing as *Owensboro's Own*.

called Jim McCormick and asked him to drive the *Pay 'N Pak*. Jim obviously was excited. If you were a boat driver in those days that was the call you dreamed about.

**Yeah.**

So, when Jim agreed to do that, now all of a sudden running his boat wasn't much of a priority. The sponsorship from Liggett and Myers was now gone, and so Jim was more interested in selling the equipment than he was racing the equipment, especially because he now had a ride with the defending national champion and Gold Cup-winning *Pay 'N Pak*. So that was what prompted him to think that it would be a good idea to turn this thing into a conventional. He thought it would be more sellable as a conventional than as a cabover.

**Well, in those years maybe it would've been.**

It might have been.

**I don't know.**

I was disappointed in the decision but was kind of in a position where I didn't have much choice. I asked Jim, "Well, what about me?" He said, "I don't know that we're gonna run the boat very much. I've got a couple of projects for you. One is we're building this new house and you're a pretty decent woodworker. I want you to help me with the cabinetry in the house. After that," he said, "I'd like to take this boat and turn it into a conventional. I think you're more than capable of doing that. Let's do that. Then if you've got a job you don't have to worry about that." He said, "When the boat gets turned around, we can, you know, get that thing on the market. Then you can do sheet metal work or install furnaces or whatever we need to do here."

I didn't mean to be a smart aleck and no disrespect to him or my dad, but I said, "I came here to race boats. If I wanted to do that I could have stayed in Spokane and worked with my dad." He said, "Well, those are the choices and something else may come up now and between then."

Jim loaned Arlene and me the money to move everything from Costa Mesa to Owensboro. And it was indeed a loan. I had to pay it back. So, I needed to work on getting that done. I agreed to his terms and to his options 'cause I didn't feel I had any others. So, ended up workin' basically on the boat by myself. Turned it into a conventional. I think it ran as *Owensboro's Own* after that a little bit. Roger D'Eath maybe drove it?

**Might be.**

I think.

**Yeah, Roger D'Eath may have...**

Yeah, so when that ended up happening, got the loan paid back and got the boat finished up to where it was ready to paint—the paint wasn't gonna be part of my deal. So, we packed everything up and, uh, were headed back west someplace. In the meantime, I'd been in contact with Ron Jones a bunch of times and Ron was pretty confident that he was gonna get his shop going again and that I was gonna have a job with him again. That was kind of my plan.

We ended up, my parents

were living in Las Vegas at the time and my grandparents now, on my mom's side of the family, were getting pretty elderly and having a difficult time with the business and things. They were partners with some other people in some apartments and condominiums just off the strip there. My grandfather on my mother's side was a professional gambler.

**Oh!**

He was a professional gambler in Spokane. When they outlawed gambling in Washington they moved to Pocatello, Idaho. Shortly after that they outlawed it in Idaho, and they ended up in Las Vegas and ended up with those apartments and things. We stopped there to visit for a while, and I was in constant communication with Ron. I had a lot of tools still there.

Ron's luck went from bad to worse. When he closed up the shop in Costa Mesa, he was still pretty good friends with Bob Fendler, who we just finished building a boat for. And Bob said, "I've got a lot of shop space here in Phoenix. If you want to bring the stuff over here, you're welcome to do that." So all of Ron Jones Marine Engineering equipment—bolts and parts and pieces and machine tools and the patterns and office—everything got moved to Phoenix.

Shortly after it all got moved to Phoenix and the doors closed behind it, um, Bob Fendler got sued and was under indictment by the grand jury. Supposedly Lincoln Thrift had gotten too big, too fast. So, while that was under investigation, all of Ron Jones' stuff was locked up 'cause nobody knew



who belonged to what, and so it was just there and it wasn't going anywhere for a while.

Ron, you know, still was confident that at some point in time he was gonna get going again and I was gonna have a job. In the meantime, I needed to find something to do to pay the bills and eat. My dad had a 32-foot Chris Craft, an old Chris Craft cabin cruiser, maybe 35 feet, somewhere in that range. It was kept at the Las Vegas Basin Marina out on Lake Mead.

**OK.**

So, I was goin' out there to help my dad do some work on the boat several days in a row. We stopped at Boulder Marina there on Las Vegas Boulevard to get some parts and pieces for that boat. I was wearing a boat racing T-shirt of some sort. Some of the guys who were there started askin' me about that and I was telling 'em some of my experiences and the things I had done and all. Well, the owner of the business, Las Vegas Marine Supply was actually the name of the company, his son had a hydro drag boat that needed to be put together. He had all the parts and pieces from Sanger, had all the hardware, but nobody to put the thing together.

**Wooden boat?**

Fiberglass.

**Oh, fiberglass, OK.**

And he had a 21-foot Sanger, I think it was, and Sanger supplied most of the hardware and things, but it was a kit boat and they didn't have anyone there to do that sort of thing. I said, "Well, that's kinda what I do." So, one thing led to another and within about three hours I was an employee of Las Vegas Marine Supply and was gonna put this drag boat together. So, I did that, still hoping that I was gonna get the call from Ron Jones.

Time went by and the phone didn't ring, and the boat got done. I did do some work for Las Vegas Marine Supply and when the race boat was done, I had kind of a unique position that I was going out to the marinas on Lake Mead. A lot of people had boats that were too big to trailer out there. They just left 'em in the water. In Las Vegas, a lot of people would come out and spend certain times of the year, but not other times of the year. Not the summer, because it was too hot. So I was out there and worked on these people's boats.

Well, as I was workin' on some of the boats one day, one of the owners came by in a particularly grumpy mood and said, "You know, they

charge me..." (I think it was \$45 or \$47 an hour in those days) "...to work on the boat. So, they charge me \$47 an hour from the time you leave the shop until the time you get back and there's an hour-and-a-half you gotta drive each direction, and that's ridiculous."

And then I was a little bit of a smart aleck at times and I said, "Yeah, that is ridiculous. I'd come out here all day and work on your boat for \$25 an hour." You know, just being a smart aleck. A little while later he came by and invited me to lunch and he said, "I'd like you to meet some friends." And I don't really know this guy other than just workin' on his boat a few times. So, we go in.

There's a table full of people who were sitting there. Eventually it got around to the questions, after all the introductions and everything. "Were you serious about working on my boat for \$25 an hour?" And I said, "Well, I guess I kinda was, but I have to have enough business to keep me busy because as soon as Las Vegas Marine Supply finds out about this I'm gonna lose my job." And they said, "Well, all these guys here are owners of boats that we'd like you to work on."

So, I went back, put in my two-week notice at Las Vegas Marine Supply. They were thankful for the two-week notice but said basically my services were no longer required, so I packed up my stuff and went home.

And, so, it was a pretty cool job. I could go out there, you know, show up in a T-shirt and a pair of cutoffs, and then it was casual on Friday after that. You know, it was real easy. Sometimes Arlene and the girls would come out with me and they would clean the boats and clean windows and do things. We'd do sea trials on 'em, put some time on the stuff and, you know, cruise around the lake a little bit. I'd install hardware and make things, continue the maintenance and keep things running and working.

And during our travels and during the different things, Arlene and I agreed that when the girls, Katrina and Maciva, were old enough, then Seattle would be our area we wanted to settle down in and the kids would go to school. So, I wasn't really sure how that was gonna happen, how that was going to work out, or some miracle was going to occur that was gonna get us to Seattle.

And one night the telephone rang, and it was Bob Espland. And Bob said, "John?" And I said, "Yes." And he said, "What are you doing these

***"And, so, it was a pretty cool job. I could go out there, you know, show up in a T-shirt and a pair of cutoffs, and then it was casual on Friday after that. You know, it was real easy. Sometimes Arlene and the girls would come out with me and they would clean the boats and clean windows and do things. We'd do sea trials on 'em, put some time on the stuff and, you know, cruise around the lake a little bit."***



Walters helped build the *Miss Vernors* and was on the boat's crew in 1976. He was offered the job of crew chief the following year, but it would have involved moving away from Seattle, so he turned down the offer.

***"And so, the miracle occurred. We talked with my parents and kind of explained what was going on and talked with all the owners of the boats and within a few days we were headed to Seattle."***

days?" And I explained to him. And he says, "Well, here's my situation." He says, "I just got hired by Jerry Kalen in Detroit, and we've got this Staudacher kit boat that needs all the hardware and needs to be put together." And he says, "I'm gonna build the engines for it and be the crew chief. Would you be interested in coming to Seattle and putting this thing together for us?"

And I said "Well, I would, but you just dialed the phone number, you know I'm in Las Vegas." And he said, "Yeah." And I said, "Well, how am I gonna get from Las Vegas to Seattle, where the boat is at Boeing Field?" And he said, "Let me work out all the arrangements and I'll call you back." And so, he called back and said, "I talked with Jerry Kalen." He says, "I need two addresses. I need the address where the stuff's gonna get picked up. I need the address where you want the stuff delivered." And he said, "We're gonna pay for everything, just let us know where, when, and what."

And so, the miracle occurred. We talked with my parents and kind of explained what was going on and talked with all the owners of the boats and within a few days we were headed to Seattle. Ended up working on Boeing Field there, getting that boat put together, which ran as the *Miss Vernors*. Jerry Bangs, who I was introduced to many years earlier in the *Red Man* days, was gonna drive the boat. Jerry was enjoying some pretty good success, a national championship, with this 5-Litre, *Champane Lady*.

**Yeah.**

So, we kinda started from scratch there; ran

the boat in 1976. At the end of the '76 season I knew there were some differences going on between Jerry Kalen and Bob Espland. I got a very flattering telephone call one night from Jerry Kalen. Asked me if I had any interest in becoming the new crew chief of the *Miss Vernors* Unlimited hydroplane.

To be honest with you, I was flattered. Also, to be honest with you, I'm not sure I was ready yet. Still pretty young and I was having some second thoughts and then kind of questioning the whole thing. Then he made a comment that really was the decision-maker. He made a comment that he wanted to move the boat back to Detroit. Again, I was very flattered, but I didn't want to move to Detroit.

**Yeah.**

Arlene and I had made the decision that we were going to raise the girls in the Seattle area and so I had to respectfully decline.

**Sure.**

The next day I felt a little bit self-conscious about the whole thing and I told Bob what had happened. He goes, "Oh, I know." He said, "I'm the one that told Jerry to give you a call because I didn't want to move back to Detroit, and I didn't want to work on this stuff anymore." [Laughter] So, he said, "Do you have time to go to lunch today?" And I said, "Yes, of course." He said, "I'd like to introduce you to somebody if you're interested." I said, "OK." So, we went to lunch. We went over to the South Park area and he introduced me to Don Kelson.

**Oh.**



Don Kelson was just gearing up to start building some boats. And Jim Lucero and Bill Muncey were just down the street a ways, there on Riverside Drive. Jim was helping to give Don some design pointers and they needed somebody to build some boats, and I ended up accepting the job.

**Jim Lucero often hired people with no experience and would mold the person into who he wanted to have on his crew.**

Sure.

**So, you started working for...**

I actually started for Don Kelson first...

**Don Kelson, OK.**

...and was building boats for Don and, you know, driving some of the boats. It was kind of a fun job because I got to, not only helping the design in the early stages of drawing the boats and things, to actually building 'em. Then when they were done, got to be the test pilot and drive 'em and run 'em a little bit and make adjustments and corrections and see where we were at.

Over time, I also was working on a part-time basis down the street with Bill Muncey and Jim Lucero. As things progressed and Kelson Hydros got more and more busy, my heart and soul was still with Unlimited hydroplanes and it got to a point where I started to realize that I was gonna have to make a decision here, uh, that I needed to do one or the other. Continuing to do both was more, each one was more than a full-time job, and I was still trying to have a family life and be with Arlene and the girls as much as I could whenever I could.

The Kelson side of things was good from that respect because it was more family-oriented and, you know, we went on picnics and the boat racing and everything was a family adventure with the Kelsons. But again, I think my heart and soul was with Unlimited hydroplanes and I still had visions in my driving career of someday being able to pilot an Unlimited hydroplane.

When it got down to having to make a decision, one over the other, uh, I figured at some point in time if it didn't work out, I could always come back and build boats with Don. I may not get an opportunity to go racing with Jim Lucero and Bill Muncey.

So, I talked with Don about it and he said, "I completely understand, and I will support your decision whatever way you go. I just ask that if you decide to go racing with Bill and Jim and the *Atlas* team that you help me find somebody and help to train your replacement." So, we worked on that and talked with a couple of different people and Bob Bolam actually ended up coming in as I phased myself out of Kelson Hydros and started putting more time in with Bill Muncey Industries.

Bob came in and was doing more with everyone there,

**"Arlene and I had made the decision that we were going to raise the girls in the Seattle area and so I had to respectfully decline."**

and of course there were no hard feelings and there wasn't any kind of problem. Don and Annette and everybody with the Kelsons completely understood and backed my decision. I still had some opportunities to drive some of their boats and you know, Arlene, if she were here, would tell you that was some of the best years.

You know, everything was wonderful. Our girls were still small and needed a mom and dad every day. You know, the Kelsons were great people and family and I was being able to fulfill goals and set new ones and things were just really good for us then.

**You drove some inboards for Mike Jones at that time, too?**

I did.

**What classes and what all did you do with him?**

I got to do a lot of different things with Mike Jones. He had purchased one of John Leach's boats, a 280, the *Buccaneer*.

**OK.**

And, of course, when John Leach owned it, it was nearly unbeatable.

**Yeah.**

When Mike got it, he renamed it *Easy Racer*. Several people had driven it and it had a tendency to want to hook and change ends and spin out in the turns. John Leach went for a ride at Mike's request at one point in time to kinda see what

went wrong with the thing. John's comment was, "I'm not a 100 percent sure, but this thing's like driving a ball bearing. You never know which way it's gonna go."

**Ooo.**

So, Mike asked me if I would be interested in driving it and I absolutely would. Actually, Jim Lucero was involved in that thing as well, as I was doing work for Bill Muncey Industries then. We used the video equipment that we used to film the *Atlas* stuff. The Jones boys at Delta Marine were kind enough to let us use a dock and things at their facility on the Duwamish River.

**This was who, again?**

Jones, Delta Marine. Jack Jones who later was unfortunately lost in a racing accident, and, gosh, I can't remember the other brothers' names right now. But just by coincidence their last name was Jones as well and they owned Delta Marine in the Seattle area there on the Duwamish River. They allowed us to use a lift and put the boat in and out of the water. Loaned us some buoys and we set up a turn and set up the video equipment there.

I ran the boat, gosh, four or five hours that day. You know, just in and out of the turns, trying to figure out what was goin' on and videotaped everything. Then we went back and took some pretty serious looks at it

all. One of the biggest problems that I felt as the driver of it was there was just a lot of play in the steering mechanism.

**Mmm, yeah.**

You know, you turned the steering wheel back and forth a lot and nothing would happen. It seemed like you were always a half-step behind, trying to catch up with the boat. And the boat was just very over-reactive. It would get into rough water conditions and rattle up and do weird things, and it did have a tendency to want to hook and spin out in the turns. In fact, it did several times during that several hours that we ran it that day.

So, we all got it back to the shop, watched the video for a couple of days and then started tearing into things. The first thing I did was tear all of the steering out of it. It had push-pull rods and pitman arms and different things in there and the Hime joints and the bearings and everything were all worn out and that's where a lot of the play was coming from. The tube had a tendency to want to flex, which caused some more issues, so took all of that out and put a cable steering system in it like we had in the *Atlas Van Lines* and then started measuring up the sponsons and everything.

Generally, like to have a flat area that's perfectly flat in the dihedral angle of attack. This boat didn't have any of that. It had what they call a barn door sponson, which was all one big surface area. And, uh, angles of attack on the

chine and on the air-trap were all different. The chine rolled up, so the angle of attack increased as it went forward. So, every time the boat landed on its nose it'd hit that high angle, it'd over-react and boom, the thing'd get in your face.

**Yeah.**

So, I peeled the primary runners off of it, flattened that all out and made sure that the dihedral and the angle of attack was what we wanted. Straightened it all out. Put the cable steering in it. I drove that boat for Mike for two years and never lost a race in it. We went one year in the 280 class here in Region 10 pretty much undefeated, which is a pretty difficult thing to do, and we're pretty proud of that, especially in 280. In those days we'd show up and there might be 20 boats at one race, and they'd run 10-boat elimination heats.

Like I say, I was very fortunate that every time I drove it, it seemed like we managed to pull a win out with it. It was, it literally was, almost unbeatable for a couple of years there. And then as I started getting more involved with the Unlimited and getting the opportunity to drive some boats and do some things, it seemed that it was more and more difficult to spend time with the limited boats.

At that time Mike had also partnered up with a guy from Alaska, Tim Johnson, in a brand-new Ron Jones 280, called the *Ragged Edge*, which had all the late modifications and all the cool-guy stuff. [Jones bought the boat from John-

son, they were not co-owners – Ed.] A much wider tunnel. Much lighter boat, much lighter on its feet and a little easier to drive. Much more responsive.

So, the program started switching more towards the new boat. Of course, by that point in time there were a lot of other new boats out there and it was a very competitive class anyway, and it had gotten even more-so, you know, over the years there. But a very fun time in my career.

**Now, you were working more on the Unlimited...**

Yeah.

**...and they went to Vancouver.**

Yes.

**And you drove the boat at an exhibition there in 1979.**

Yeah, I got to drive the Blue Blaster.

**How did that come about? They knew you wanted to drive an Unlimited?**

Yeah, Bill knew that I wanted to drive an Unlimited. And Bill, whenever he was in town here, a couple of times he came to Lake Sammamish, one year he came to Lake Spanaway, to watch me run the boat and give me some pointers here and there.

**This was with the 280?**

Yeah, the 280 and a 5-Litre and a 145 at different times, and a 98.

**Oh.**

And I got to go for a ride a couple of times in some of Don Kelson's boats, the *Copycat* and the *Pussycat*, the Division II 7-Litre boats, so I was getting a lot of seat time in a lot of different classes.

**Yeah.**

And, you know, Bill would come to the races whenever he could. At that point in time he was the vice president and marketing director for Atlas Van Lines. So, it was difficult for him, sometimes, to be able to come to test the boat.

And Bill made a comment at lunch one day, when Jim wanted to schedule a test. He said, "You know, when it comes down to it, just breaking in engines and just doing routine tests to make sure that



Mike Jones

Walters tested the brand-new 280-class boat *Ragged Edge*, a hydro with all the "cool-guy" stuff.





John Blair

the boat floats and does everything it's supposed to do, instead of me comin' all the way up here from San Diego or wherever I might be for Atlas, why don't we just let John drive the boat? So, I got to test the boat on Lake Washington three times, I think it was.

**Mmm.**

And by that time, Bill had kind of taken me under his wing, if you will, and, uh, Bill was always promoting boat racing and always lookin' for the future and I think he thought that it would be an opportunity here to maybe recruit me as an Unlimited driver someday. So, I got to test the boat a few times for Bill on Lake Washington and then when it came time to do this exhibition in the Vancouver area...

### **Near the end of the season.**

Yeah, he allowed me to run the boat down there. So, I have some of my favorite pictures on the wall, at home, of me preparing to drive the *Atlas Van Lines* and Bill Muncey is acting as a crew-member helping to put the boat in the water and then getting me in the cockpit. And that's a pretty special feeling. Not many people got to do that.

**So, you were getting comfortable working with Jim Lucero too, then?**

Yeah, Jim and I...

**Not only on the crew, but also to drive the boat.**

Learning to, yeah, drive the boat. And, uh, Jim and I always had a good relationship. I think we were always, you know, on the same page as they say. There's no question that my racing philosophy was a lot like his, that I wanted to win every time the boat went in the water, or why do it?

I was always looking to make improvements and, you know, we might go out and set records and win the race, but we were always looking to be better the next weekend.

And I think Jim saw that and appreciated that, and there's no question that I learned an immense amount of knowledge from Jim Lucero and I hope, somewhere along the line he may have learned something from me as well. ❖

*Next month, in part three of our conversation with John Walters, he talks about driving the turbine-powered Pay 'N Pak. Be sure to read next month's Unlimited NewsJournal.*

**TOP:** The *Atlas Van Lines* team celebrates their victory in the 1979 APBA Gold Cup in Madison, Indiana. Clockwise from the left: John Walters, Tim Ramsey, crew chief Jim Lucero, Ed Nelson, and owner/driver Bill Muncey.  
**BELOW:** The "Blue Blaster" *Atlas Van Lines* in the pits in 1979.



Tony Bugela

# The era of the “Happy Hydro” crew has come to a close.

Robert B. Woolms. Jr. died in Spokane Valley on May 27, 2020, at the age of 83. At the time of his passing, he was surrounded by his loving family—his wife, Marlene, and his three daughters. If you check the annals of Unlimited hydroplane racing history, you’re not going to find Woolms’s name. He was never an owner, a driver, or a crew chief. He was just like many hundreds of others, a guy who loved hydroplanes and who had a talent for working on the boats—in his case, as a member of the “Happy Hydro” crew, the team that worked on the *Miss Exide*, the first to use “laughing gas” (nitrous oxide) to boost speed. He was a volunteer on the *Miss Seattle Too* and *Miss Exide* crews for five seasons and, when he passed away, was likely the last surviving member of those teams. Back in 2011, Woolms shared his experiences with David Neil as the latter was doing research for an *Unlimited NewsJournal* article that we published in March 2012 about nitrous oxide systems. In the story that follows, Neil passes along a few of the stories Woolms would tell, giving us a peek into what it was like to be on one of the sport’s top crews during the early 1960s.



Photos from the Bob Woolms family



BY DAVID NEIL

**B**ob Woolms began working on hydros right out of the Navy in the early '60s, a volunteer on Bob Gilliam's *Miss KOLroy*. Hydroplane racing was in his blood, so to speak. Like so many other crewmembers of the era, he had to hold down a full-time job outside of hydroplane racing to support his family. For Woolms, he worked at Pepsi. He followed in his father's footsteps who was a mechanic himself and owned Bob's Automotive on Capital Hill.

Volunteering on *Miss KOLroy*, he first learned the various systems of an Unlimited. He gained knowledge about engine cams, heads, blowers and many other aspects of the boat during the 1959 and '60 race seasons.

Bob Gilliam invited a female KOL Radio employee to attend the re-showing of the 1960 Seattle Seafair Race at the KING Television studios. Woolms, being a crew member on the boat, also attended. Well, during the showing, he met the young woman from KOL and, as the story goes, the two ended up getting married and having a family together.

Woolms knew George McKernon, the crew chief of the *Seattle Too*, from meeting him in the pits at several races. While in Detroit during the 1960 campaign, for instance, Woolms offered a



Hydroplane and Raceboat Museum

Bob Woolms first volunteered on the crew of Bob Gilliam's *KOLroy* in 1960.

helping hand to McKernon because the wind was blowing, and he was having a difficult time getting a tarp on the *Seattle Too*. After the season was over, Woolms stopped by the *Seattle Too* shop to visit during a late-afternoon work session on the boat.

Glenn Stoen, one of the *Seattle Too* owners, happened to be there and the subject came up about the possibility of adding another crewmember to the team. Woolms's enthusiasm for boat racing must have been obvious to Stoen because out of the blue he then said to Woolms, "You're hired!"

Woolms's main specialty became working on engine heads, rocker arms, and camshafts. The seasoned crew members on the team were McKernon, Walt Davis, Scott Freeman, Tommy Frankhauser, Nelson Kenny, Wes Kies-

ling, and Bernie Van Cleave. The vast experience those crew members came from working on boats such as the *Shanty I*, the *Slo-mos*, *Bardahl*, *Maverick*, *Hawaii Ka'i*, and the Stoen's other two boats, the *Miss Seattle* and *Miss Pay 'n Save*.

Woolms, being the youngest and with his deep interest in hydro racing, his talent in mechanics, and his enthusiasm, became a great match for the experienced veterans on the team. He had the utmost respect for owners Glenn and Milo Stoen, the drivers—Dallas Sartz, Bill Brow, Mira Slovak, and Russ Schlee—and the entire crew.

He began working on the *Seattle Too*'s engine heads and rocker arms at the work bench that they set up for him. He was the tall, young and agile one who could reach, climb, lift, and crawl where the mechanical work needed to be done.

Previously the boat won the Apple Cup in 1959 as the *Miss Pay 'n Save* and then the 1960 Diamond Cup after the name was changed to *Miss Seattle Too*. During this time frame, engine man Scotty Freeman was working on a way around using the troublesome quill shaft that the Merlin's had. (The quill shaft connected the engine to the supercharger.) The shafts often snapped because of the stress put on them when the propellers came out of the water or lost bite.

Freeman devised a much heavier quill shaft that was much larger in diameter and also an added gear. The Stoen's spent \$5,000 having a machine shop fabricate them as per Freeman's design and



Hydroplane and Raceboat Museum

Woolms next joined the crew of Milo and Glenn Stoen's *Miss Seattle Too*. The boat was destroyed in an accident during the 1962 Gold Cup.



*When the hull was finished and painted, it had the signature checkered tail the Stoen's always had on their race boats.*



Bob Woolms Family Collection

specifications. Nobody filed a patent on the design, though, so many of the other teams started using the same system.

The *Seattle Too* was running well in qualification time trials for the 1962 Gold Cup in Seattle. During Heat 1A, with Dallas Sartz at the wheel charging on the outside going into the south turn, the boat hit a roller and disintegrated, throwing Sartz away from the hull and ending his driving career. When the boat was brought up, it was severely damaged and far beyond repair. The crew removed what was salvageable and then disposed of what was a battered and broken hull.

Milo and Glenn decided to continue racing, so they hired Ted Jones to design a new hull

and have Ed Karelsen build it. The hull was built during the winter of 1962–63. The systems were installed during the spring.

The name for the new boat and the lightning bolts on the deck came from the sponsor, Exide Technologies, formerly the Electric Storage Battery Company. The company was one of the largest lead-acid battery manufacturers in the world, supplying batteries for all types of moving vehicles such as cars, trucks, submarines, street cars, and even electric locomotives. The first electric-started car in the world used a battery built by the company and even the Apollo space program used Exide electrical power on the Moon. The Stoen brothers acquired a one-year sponsorship from Exide.

**TOP:** The boat shop for the *Seattle Too* and the new *Miss Exide* was located on the ground floor of the Pay 'n Save Corporation's offices in Seattle. Here, much to the dismay of the office workers inside, the crew fires up the *Exide's* engine on the street outside the building.  
**BELOW:** The new *Miss Exide* on the day of its christening in 1963.



Hydroplane and Raceboat Museum



Photos from the Bob Woolms family

The shop was the former *Seattle Too* and *Miss Pay 'n Save* shop located underneath the offices of the Pay 'n Save drug store chain in Seattle. When the hull was finished and painted, it had the signature checkered tail the Stoen's always had on their race boats.

Mira Slovak stopped by the shop on occasion to visit with the crew and check on the progress of his new ride. It was during this time frame that Slovak, sitting on a stool next to Woolms's workbench, brought up the subject of how Germany used nitrous oxide during World War II to get more power in their fighter planes.

It was a very busy time to finish the boat and get it launched for the 1963 season. Before long, the crew had the boat ready to fire up. McKernon had them push the boat out on its trailer, out the front door of the shop, and right on the street. They hooked water up for engine cooling, they had fire extinguishers ready, and McKernon fired the Rolls up right there!

Of course, the building shook. This was right below the front windows for the offices of Pay 'n Save. Coffee spilled

from cups because of the building vibration and a loud voice called out, "Damn it, George. I told you not to start that boat here." It was the first successful firing of the *Miss Exide*.

Shortly thereafter, the boat was christened at the Stanley Sayers Pits on Friday, June 7 with the traditional bottle being broken over the bow by Milo Stoen's wife. Mira Slovak climbed in and

fired her up and away he went for her first run. It was smooth and, after a few laps building more speed with each lap, he then slowed her down and brought her back into the finger pier and shut her off.

The audience had smiles and so did the crew as Slovak got out. The boat ran smooth on the test run but that was no indication how it would ride in compe-



Hydroplane and Raceboat Museum

The mangled *Miss Exide* on display outside the Seattle pit area in 1963.



tition water. Slovak spoke to McKernon about some changes that needed to be done to the boat before its next run then a party was held at the Seattle Yacht Club that evening to celebrate the launch.

The first race *Miss Exide* entered was the 1963 Gold Cup in Detroit on July 7. Mira Slovak successfully completed all three preliminary heats, taking a third in each heat. Not bad for the first start for the boat. In the final, the boat took fourth.

The team found that the boat did not handle the competition water. There was work to be done to improve the handling of the boat, as Woolms recalled. McKernon spoke several times with Ted Jones about the control of the boat and the rough ride Slovak was having. Woolms worked with other crew members to make several adjustments, such as moving the fuel tanks and battery. There was no time to do any serious hull modifications. The opinions were mixed between McKernon and Jones on solving the handling issues in competition water.

The next race was the Diamond Cup on Lake Coeur d'Alene. This was the first chance to race in competition water to see if the boat handling had improved from the work the crew had done.

The *Exide* qualified at 109 mph. *Tahoe Miss*, *Bardahl*, and *Thriftway* all qualified much higher. The handling issue continued, and Slovak had his hands full with it. He won Heat 1A, defeating *Tahoe Miss*, *Eagle Electric*, *Fascination*, and *Tempest*. On Sunday, Slovak again took a first place in Heat 2A,



Hydroplane and Raceboat Museum

After their brand-new *Miss Exide* was destroyed at the 1963 Diamond Cup, Milo and Glenn Stoen quickly acquired the former *Miss Wahoo* to carry the Exide name. Here, Russ Schlee drives the boat from the Seattle pits during its debut as the *Exide*. The boat is using the U-101.5 number that *Wahoo* had when it last appeared in 1960.

defeating *Eagle Electric*, *Fascination*, *Tempo*, *Tempest*, and the *\$ Bill*. But the boat still did not handle well. It continued to hop up down and the handling was erratic, but Slovak made the final.

The final heat was set up to be a head-to-head race between Slovak and Bill Muncey in the *Miss Thriftway*. In addition to those two boats, the final included *\$ Bill*, *Tempo*, *Tempest*, and *Notre Dame*.

Slovak took the lead at the start going into the south turn and came out of the turn in first, with Muncey behind and on his hip to the outside. He continued up the back stretch in fair water going into the north turn. Muncey came out of the turn even with *Exide*. "Muncey was right there on my right," Slovak said, "and I guess I accelerated just too much for what the boat could handle in the water."

Before he reached the start/finish line, the *Exide* hopped

up and dipped the right front side of its deck into a wave, throwing Slovak out of the boat, and disintegrated into bits the whole right side of the boat. The left sponson, engine, and tail section were mostly intact. Woolms could not see just what happened because Slovak was on the inside and Muncey's roostertail was fully in motion.

Shortly thereafter, the boat sank. Colonel Warner Gardner stopped the *Notre Dame* and dove in, first swimming over to Slovak. The rescue personnel in a small boat pulled Slovak aboard and rushed him to the finger pier near where Woolms was. They immediately placed him into the ambulance and rushed to the hospital. Woolms said he saw splinters of wood in Slovak's mouth and chin area.

The following Tuesday, July 30, the remains of the boat were brought up with the help of divers. That's when the extent of the damage was clearly apparent. The water drained out of it as the boat was hanging on its sling and then was loaded on its trailer for the sad drive back to the Seattle shop.

The brand-new boat, just seven weeks after its proud christening, was now destroyed in a split-second mishap. The entire right side of the boat was gone, but fortunately Slovak was not killed. But it was clearly evident that if it had been a cabover-designed boat, Slovak most likely would not have survived.

The Stoen brothers needed a replacement boat for their sponsor and the retired, mothballed *Wahoo* was available. So, they purchased it and the crew went to work immediately putting in many long hours to get the boat ready

for the Seafair Trophy Race on August 11. There was no time to repaint the boat or put the *Exide* numbers on the deck, so the *Wahoo* colors and number remained. Meanwhile, the battered and broken *Miss Exide* hull was put on display outside the Seattle pits so the fans could see it.

With Slovak injured and unable to drive, Russ Schlee was contacted and agreed to drive for one race. The old *Wahoo*, with its new *Exide* name, owner, and crew, took a very respectable third-place trophy for the Seafair Race. Again, the credit must go to the crew.

There was more time before the Governor's Cup in Madison, Indiana. Bill Brow was asked to drive the *Miss Exide* until Slovak was healthy enough to return. Brow had driven for the Stoens before. The crew also painted the boat with its familiar orange with two white lightning bolts on the deck and, of course, the checkered tail.

Brow went out and won the race. Everyone was so proud and happy with the victory and the first-place trophy was over three feet tall!

With one win under their belt, the *Miss Exide* team headed to Washington, D.C., for the Presidents Cup two weeks later. Both U.S. senators from Washington state at the time, Henry "Scoop" Jackson and Warren Magnuson, were seen viewing the race from under a canopy in the *Exide* pit area.

The *Miss Exide* was awarded the win, but the racing was cut short because of poor weather. The *Exide* had the most points and the best overall elapsed time in the shortened race, which gave the team two wins back to back—not bad for a substitute boat driven by a substitute driver. That was about to change, though. After Brow's second win, Slovak told him, "The boat's yours; you deserve it."

The season's final race was the Harrah's Tahoe

Trophy in Stateline, Nevada. The boat did very well but did not win.

During the winter, the crew mainly built engines because the hull rode just fine, just like it did as the *Wahoo*. That's when Bernie Van Cleave began developing the nitrous-injection system for the engines that Slovak had mentioned the year before. Van Cleave did all the work on the system from its design to the installation, including that electric button that was mounted at the 5 o'clock position on the steering wheel. No one else did any of the work, Woolms said, except removing the driver's seat between heats and lifting the nitrous bottles to Van Cleave so he could connect them.

The team's first race for the 1964 season was the Gold Cup in Detroit. The boat had the fastest qualification speed at 119 mph and finished second. Then came the Dakota Cup, where the boat won its first heat and blew an engine in the second.

The *Miss Exide* won the Diamond Cup with a first and then a second in early heats and by winning the final just ahead of the *Bardahl*. It was reported in a newspaper article that the nitrous-oxide system was used in the boat at that race.

The Seafair Trophy race was very exciting with the battles between the *Tahoe*, *Bardahl*, and *Exide*. According to Woolms, the nitrous system was fully operational at this race and worked very well. There was a problem with two spark plugs in one of the earlier heats, so McKernon rigged up a heavy rubber boot to protect Woolms from the intense heat of the exhaust manifold as he changed the two plugs.

The race result heart breaking. The *Miss Exide* won the final while using the nitrous but was tied with *Bardahl* in total points. The tie breaker was total elapsed time and the *Exide* was two-tenths of

***During the winter, the crew mainly built engines because the hull rode just fine, just like it did as the Wahoo. That's when Bernie Van Cleave began developing the nitrous-injection system for the engines that Slovak had mentioned the year before.***

The *Miss Exide* team continued to use the former *Wahoo* through the remainder of its existence. Below, the boat is shown in 1964. The boat's number also has been changed back to U-75.



Rich Ombrek



a second slower than the *Bardahl*, so they won the race and the *Exide* took second place.

At the San Diego race, Brow set a new qualification record with the boat at 119.495 mph. Again, the nitrous system was used. The final results for race day for the *Exide* was a third-place finish overall.

The first race for 1965 was the Diamond Cup. They had just one engine with them, but it turned out to be the right engine. Brow did marvelous driving and had a competition lap of 114 mph—another Diamond Cup for the team's trophy case.

The 1965 APBA Gold Cup was in Seattle and 18 boats were there. On the first morning of qualification, the *Exide*

rolled into the pits at about 9:30. The crew had their bright checker-board crew shirts that they always wore. (The shirts were handmade from pizza-table-cloth material by the wife of one of the crew members.) The crew lowered the boat from its tilt position, added the fuel for a run, and, of course, the nitrous was on board.

The night before, Woolms and Brow were talking in the shop and Woolms told him, "You go out and break that record tomorrow." So, sure enough, Brow climbed in and away he went. The water was smooth with little or no wind and he did exactly what he and Bob Woolms spoke about. Brow turned in a scorching qualification run with an average of 120.357 mph for three laps, a record that

stood for years.

Those who were fortunate to watch witnessed the fastest laps in the world for a hydroplane. The Stoen brothers and the crew had planning this all along, to go for a new qualification record, and they succeeded. The crew had put together a special engine and set it up for the run and it all worked out. When he came in, the fans and crew cheered when they announced the world-record run, but the engine had it. A crack had developed down the prop keyway and, of course, the nitrous bottles were empty.

Bill Brow was sometimes referred as the "fastest milkman in the world," because he was a milkman in the Burien area south of Seattle. This certainly was appropriate on that day.

The stage was set for an incredible race, and it was. A total of 15 boats had qualified for the race, and five were faster than 112 mph. It was the fastest group of qualified boats in history. The front page of that day's *Seattle Times* featured at the top of a full-page spread a large color photograph of the *Exide*, *Notre Dame*, and *Bardahl* in the water just off the finger piers with their drivers on their decks.

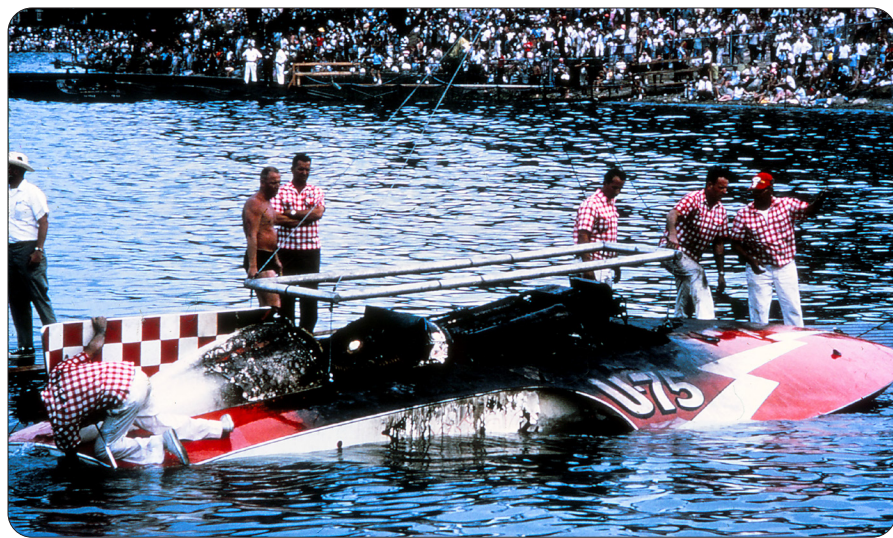
The *Exide* won Heats 1A and 3B, *Notre Dame* won Heats 2A and 3A, and the *Bardahl* won Heats 1B and 2B. This set up a barn burner for the final. At the start, the three Seattle boats flew down the front chute into the south turn with the *Exide* on the inside. At the exit buoy, the *Exide* was out first.

Brow hit the nitrous button and the boat took off out in front down the backstretch. Then, near the middle of the backstretch, the *Exide's* Rolls engine blew and caught fire.

"The front end of the engine let go and the fuel pumps were left on and they fed the fire," crew chief George McKernon explained. Brow jumped into the water and then the marine fire boat put the fire out. The *Exide* was towed back to its finger pier barely afloat with just its nose above the surface. Several crew



Hydroplane and Raceboat Museum



Kirk Johnson

The *Miss Exide* suddenly caught fire while leading during the first lap of the final heat at the 1965 APBA Gold Cup in Seattle. The boat began to sink after it was towed back to the pits, but the crew put a sling on the boat before it went completely under.



members then dived into the water and attached a sling before it could sink. The boat was raised up, draining water out the rear, and then placed on its trailer.

The world's fastest Unlimited hydroplane was now in severe distress. Again, her incredible crew was put to the test. Was the boat a total loss like the *Seattle Too* and first *Exide* were, or could she be repaired to race again? It was certainly worth saving. The boat handled very well and, Woolms said, "it had perfect balance." As the *Wahoo*, it had been severely damaged in an earlier Seattle race when Mira Slovak was driving it. The *Wahoo* crew spent an off season repairing it before it was retired by Bill Boeing.

The Tuesday after the race, the *Exide* team met at the shop and after looking over the hull they determined it was repairable, though they needed to do incredible work and needed to put in long hours to complete the repairs. Woolms remembered especially that crewman Scotty Freeman worked hard on repairing the hull while Woolms and the others repaired the systems and built the engines.

The crew completed the work in six weeks, having missed four races. So, it was off to Lake Tahoe for the UIM World Championship Regatta. McKernon towed the boat to Tahoe while the rest of the crew flew down, as they had done for the previous Tahoe races.

Woolms remembered landing at the Tahoe airport and that there waiting for the crew were three Silver Cloud Rolls-Royce automobiles to provide them transportation to their hotel, compliments of Harrah's Lake Tahoe Casino and Hotel. During the ride from the airport, various people on the streets waved to the cars as they passed, and Woolms rolled down the window and waved back. He always thought the people must have thought he was a movie star or someone very important.

At check-in at the hotel, Woolms was also given a complementary card for all hotel charges, the hotel room, food and beverages. Everything except gambling. Well, anyway, he did not have any time to gamble. He was there for the race and the boat always needed work.

The boat ran well, but not as fast as it had run in Seattle. Brow qualified the *Miss Exide* at 114.547 mph, behind the *Miss U.S.*, *Tahoe Miss*, and *Notre Dame*. The boat finished the race with a third place overall, very respectable for its first race back from the extensive repairs. Again, the success was from the very hard work by the crew and the driving of Bill Brow.

It was then off to San Diego the following week. Again, the *Exide* qualified down on speed for the qualification ladder but was very dependable during the race, taking a third and a first in the preliminary heats and a very respectable second in the final heat. It finished with a third-place trophy for the race. Two races in a row they finished in the top three.

During lunch at the San Diego Princess the next day, Milo Stoen returned to his table and said to his wife, "I've sold the



Sandy Ross Collection

The pit area at San Diego in 1965. It would be the final appearance by the *Miss Exide* and the last race for Bob Woolms.

boat to Bernie [Little] and the crew can continue with the boat." Milo and Glenn had decided to retire from hydroplane racing having won six Unlimited races.

That's when Bob Woolms also left hydroplane racing. He decided to step back from volunteering in the sport and instead spend the time raising his family. But in the years that followed, he spoke many times about the many fine experiences he had with the Stoen brothers, their boats, and crew, and all the experiences he had at the various sites around the United States. He really enjoyed and cherished being on the crew starting from the first day Glenn Stoen brought him on board saying, "You're hired!"

Woolms had another very memorable experience in hydroplaning that he often recalled. Edgar Kaiser had called McKernon to ask him to arrange for one last ride in the *Hawaii Ka'i* out on Lake Washington, so McKernon contacted Woolms and asked him to help. Woolms agreed, so on the arranged morning, he and McKernon towed the *Hawaii Ka'i* and a drum of fuel through the Ship Canal and out onto Lake Washington to meet Kaiser at a set location and time.

Kaiser flew in by float plane and climbed into the *Ka'i* with McKernon and away they went on a ride. When they returned, Kaiser got out of the *Ka'i* and thanked the both of them for the ride and his last departing words were, "So long, boys." Kaiser then left in the float plane.

Edgar Kaiser's last words to George McKernon and Bob Woolms are appropriate now. If Bob Woolms could say anything to his former *Exide* crew members and owners, he would certainly like to say, "So long, boys!" ❖

# Last remaining hydro race is canceled.

All of the Unlimited races scheduled for 2020 were canceled by mid-June, thanks to the COVID-19 pandemic. In Grand Prix racing, the Hydroplane Racing League canceled its entire 2020 season last spring, but as of last month's issue of the *NewsJournal*, one Grand Prix America event still remained a possibility: the HydroFair in Owensboro, Kentucky. Now, even that race has fallen

The organizers of HydroFair initially hoped they could still do the event if they postponed the August 15 and 16 event to September 12 and 13. But, they soon realized even that delay would not help. The event has now been postponed to August 20 to 22, 2021.

"It is a decision that was not made lightly," said Tim Ross, director of public events for the City of Owensboro. "We

are excited to bring world-class racing back to the Owensboro riverfront.

"The safety and health of teams, volunteers, and spectators is always our primary focus. This event will bring in race teams and spectators from all over North America. We want to be sure everyone enjoys a safe and thrilling experience and, unfortunately, that is just not possible this year."

Unlike this year's Indy 500, it was never considered to put on HydroFair without fans. "It's not a race without fans," explained Randy Lientz, the race director. "We race for the fans' enjoyment." ❖

## Dragon Days now available in Kindle.

Jon Osterberg, the author of the 2012 book *Dragon Days*, which tells the story of the *Miss Bardahl* in the early 1960s, has announced that Amazon has released a Kindle version of an updated 2020 edition of his work. An Apple (ePub) version also is available at non-Amazon book sellers. The book sells for \$19.99.

"I'm announcing it just once," Osterberg said, "then hoping for word-of-mouth advertising. I don't want to turn Facebook into my personal storefront with endless posts hawking my book."

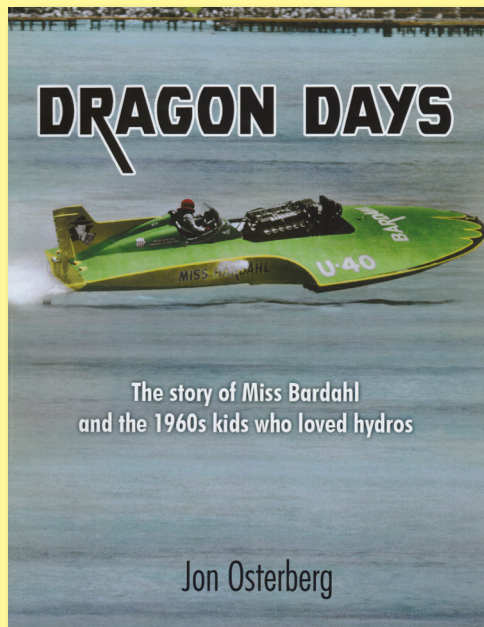
Relive the 1960s in *Dragon Days*, when hydroplane racing topped Seattle's sports scene and *Miss Bardahl* was the queen of the fleet. Go behind the scenes to learn what the owners, drivers, crews, boat builders, and their families risked for racing glory.

The story takes you from Seattle to Detroit to Lake Tahoe, San Diego, Coeur d'Alene, the Ohio and Potomac rivers, and points between. Learn how *Bardahl's* implausibly young crew infused the sport with innovations and fussy quality control that gave *Bardahl* its winning edge.

You'll soak in baby-boomer nostalgia recounting world events and pop culture that stirred the times. You'll learn how *Miss Bardahl* later was "lost" for years, found, rescued, restored, and now casts roostertails skyward in exhibition races.

The Green Dragon roars again!

*Dragon Days* is written in an active, lively style. It's the equivalent of a 490-page paper book with 402 photos, most in full color. ❖



## Tri-City Water Follies to hold drive-in air show.

Although the organizers of the hydroplane race in the Tri-Cities had to cancel that event for this year, they were able to work in partnership with Tri-Cities leadership and health districts to plan a drive-in air show for the community on September 4 to 6.

"We are thrilled to provide a much-needed distraction for our community," said Colin Hastings, president of Tri-City Water Follies. "This will be a once-in-a-lifetime air show in our region. This wouldn't have happened without the support of our area leaders and the hard work of the Water Follies volunteers."

The performer line-up includes the U.S. Navy EA-18G Growler, the U.S. Air Force A-10 Thunderbolt II and F-35 Lightning II, as well as a few civilian aircraft. The show will take place from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. each of the three days and viewing will be available from Wade Park in Pasco and from Columbia Park in Kennewick. ❖

# COMMENTS FROM H1

Jan Shaw, Director of Operations



At an outboard event in Oldtown, Idaho, last month, Rick Christensen came over to our camp area and sat down to visit. I asked him about his journey from outboards, inboards, Unlimiteds, now back to inboards and outboards again. This is what he said.

"I built the first outboard hydroplane when I was 14 in high school shop class. My dad built and raced world-class star sail boats. He taught me to loft out boats and build any kind of boats.

"After four races with the old design, I bought a Hedland boat from Mike Jones and was lucky to win the next race. That

winter we copied that boat and made it even lighter. We built the first 25ss motor and I raced A-Stock Hydroplane and 25ss Hydro for three years.

"I grew up in Pat Bertram's [Eatonville, Wash., inboard owner and driver] garage. He had a 145 Hydro (2.5 Stock now). He let me test it on my 16th birthday, then I qualified and drove his 2.5 Mod hydro at age 18.

"At 22, I got a job working for Norm Berg and Jim Lucero and the three of us built Bill Muncey's Blue Blaster and some inboards, including my 2.5. I started a family in the '80s and was forced to leave boat racing.

"In 1995 Mike Jones started an Unlimited team. He let me work on the crew and get qualified. In 1996, my rookie year, I ran the U-7 for Mike and was lucky to get to drive or qualify all three of his boats.

"At the end of the year, Mark and Mitch Evans and I built a boat for Ed Cooper, which I ran in the U-3 in 1997,

Evansville to Seattle. In San Diego

Bayfair 1997, I ran the *PICO American Dream* for Fred Leland. I got to drive four different boats for Fred in the *PICO* years.

"In the 1998 Unlimited season, I drove for Fred Leland in the U-99. In the winter of 1998, I helped build a boat with Fred Leland. That boat still runs today as the second *Graham Trucking* boat.

"I have been blessed to be taught and work with some of the best people the sport has ever known. The latest part of my journey brought me back to the E350 Inboard class in Region 10 and my venture back into Seattle Outboard Association, with my 300ss Hydro.

"I love to race and hope I can continue until I am not competitive. But boat racing is still about the people like you and all of the others who let us enjoy the sport we love." ❖



Rick Christensen drives his outboard last year.

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

Check our website for more information.