

Infamous Beauties

The Story of the Lake 'n Sea Speedboats

by Geoffrey Reynolds

A movement is underway to include more classic fiberglass boats, sometimes referred to as fibreglassics, within antique and classic boating shows. But why should this happen? I think that a good place to begin to learn about fiberglass would be with the interesting history of the Lake 'n Sea speedboat and its continued presence in classic boating circles.

The story of the Lake 'n Sea fiberglass speedboat often begins with the derogatory "Leak 'n Sink," a play on words coined by some staff members of the Chris-Craft Corporation after that company divested itself from its first attempt at building a boat made largely of fiberglass. But the story goes much deeper than you might have previously thought. It all started in the small sunny seaside town of Boca Raton, Florida, in 1956.

On NW 6th Street in Boca Raton stood the Lakensea Boat Corporation, a division of Southern Plastic Corporation. According to a 1957 city directory housed at

the Boca Raton Historical Society, the Lakensea Boat Corporation was made up of Charles R. Foote as president, William Betts as vice-president, Robert Payne as secretary, and Mrs. Margaret Payne as treasurer. The only other known record showing their existence is a rare copy of their one and only brochure from 1956 that uses two different spellings of the boat name, Lakensea and Lake-N-Sea. I will use the former spelling to simplify things. Within the brochure I learned that the company had made three 15-ft. models that year: the outboard motor driven Lakensea L-15 two-cockpit runabout, Lakensea I-15 two-cockpit runabout available with the Fageol "44" V-drive inboard engine, and Lakensea U-15 utility model. All three models included an exaggerated spray-deflecting bow and deck, molded-in front seats, and were, according to the brochure, "made entirely of fiberglass." Most likely the boats were not entirely fiberglass, but also included wood stringers and keel and a plywood core transom and floor.

NEW!

Lake 'n Sea

15-FT. PLEASURE RUNABOUT

**MADE OF TOUGH,
MOLDED FIBER GLASS**

NOW BUILT AND BACKED BY PARSONS CORPORATION

The three models appeared to be the standard two-piece construction type (deck and hull), even though they are described as "moulded in one piece for safety." That would be a feat worth witnessing if you are familiar with how a fiberglass boat is formed within a one-piece mold. Other features included custom color-impregnated schemes for hulls available in Cadillac Pink, Seafoam Green, Yellow Chartreuse, Flamingo, Boca White, Midnight Black, and Sunset Red. The deck piece was only available in white. The utility version was billed as the "fisherman's delight with large space for gear and tackle," while the runabouts were said to "seat six comfortably." While the weight of the boats was not listed, they were estimated to go 40 mph with "a million thrills and no spills."

Even with what appeared to be a winning trio of boats, the Southern Plastic Corporation sold off its Lakensea Boat Corporation division to the Chris-Craft Corporation in late 1957. This new owner had done very well making wooden boats and now was looking to the future of boat making and wanted to get into the fiberglass boat making business with this purchase.

In August 1957, *Motor Boating* magazine reported in an article that Chris-Craft was entering the molded fiberglass boat field with the purchase of all assets, tools, equipment, name, trademark and designs of the Lakensea Boat Corporation. The boats were reportedly going to be manufactured in their Algonac, Michigan, and Pompano Beach, Florida, plants under the Lake-N-Sea Boats Division of Chris-Craft. From the mouth of the vice president, Wayne Pickell, came the following comment:

"Spiraling sales of practical and stylish outboard motors by many manufacturers has created a broad new market for low-cost outboard boats. Lake-N-Sea Boats will develop a line of durable fiberglass boats that reflect both unique styling made possible by molded fiberglass construction and low prices resulting from volume production."

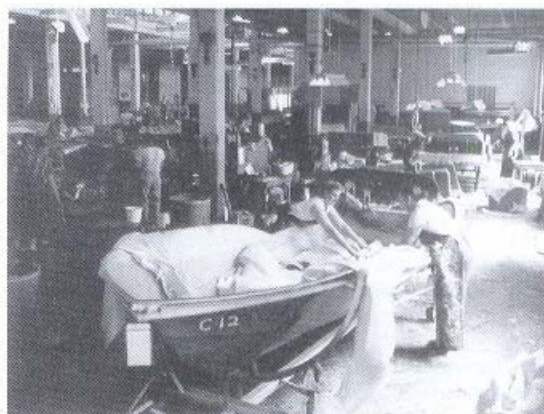
By October of that year, *Outboard* magazine was reporting that this new style of Chris-Craft boat was now being produced and would be one of the highlights of the 1958 model year. According to Jeffrey Rodengen in his book *The Legend of Chris-Craft*, improvements in the construction process included the special formula Chris-Craft Polyester Laminate (CPL) to mold the hull and decks. A half-page advertisement in the December 1957 issue of *Outboard* magazine listed Pompano Beach as the contact address for free brochures. Maybe by then the Algonac plant had stopped producing the boats while production continued in the Florida plant? It is hard to tell without company documentation. The advertisement also listed this new model as the Lake 'n Sea runabout. While it was just a slight spelling change both in the division and on the boat, it was nevertheless telling as Chris-Craft looked to cement the model in their company's nomenclature. This subtle change is also a sure way of identifying these boats when encountering one since little changed in the styling, except for the dropping of the inboard and utility models,

from one company to next during that first and only year of production under Chris-Craft. Colors were now limited to Boca White decks only and a choice of three hull colors in Sunrise Pink, Seafoam Green, and Yellow Chartreuse. Chris-Craft also touted the fact that Styrofoam floatation, created by the Dow Chemical Company, came standard on all models as a safety feature in case of a mishap. The cost of the boat at your local dealer was only \$755. And if a dealer was not available, Chris-Craft encouraged you to become one.

By January of 1958, *Motor Boating* magazine featured



Women workers apply fiberglass cloth to Lake'N Sea boat at the Michigan Fiberglass Plastics plant in Holland, Michigan, circa 1961.



the same full-page advertisement, now labeling the craft as the Lake 'n Sea Pleasure Runabout. Although the advertisements made the new model look good to readers, Chris-Craft would sell off the division later that year, citing problems with production adaptation and delamination problems with the fiberglass-wrapped fir plywood transoms and plywood floors. In the construction of fiberglass boats, compound curves are attractive to the customer, but they are sometimes hard to implement in design because they are made in a mold that has been separated from the



The Grand Traverse Cruiser slept two in a cabin with cushioned berths, galley, toilet, and large storage spaces. The ventilating cabin and bridge windshields and canopy top were standard equipment.

new boat after construction. Delamination, or the peeling of fiberglass away from its wooden supports, transom, or floor, would occur when moisture was introduced naturally between the wood and the fiberglass. This not only looked bad to the customer, but also because it would more than likely undermine the strength of the boat. Soon the name "Leak 'n Sink" became synonymous with this boat model as it was gladly sold to another Michigan manufacturer in 1958 with less than 300 boats produced.

In 1957, John T. Parsons, president of the Traverse City, Michigan, based Parsons Corporation, visited with local Traverse City boat representatives of Murray Boats and Motor Sales in an effort to form a boat building firm to supply locally made boats and employ local residents. Local fiberglass boat builder Merle Barger of Barger Boats had attempted this task, but Barger's crude designs and manufacturing process made Parsons realize that he could make better boats himself, in his own company, which specialized in fiberglass rotor blades for helicopters. At that same time, a moment Parsons says was "ripe for the picking", his lawyer notified him that Chris-Craft was looking to sell its interest in the Lake 'n Sea Division. In December 1957, Parsons had purchased the assets and rights of the Lake 'n Sea Division of Chris-Craft for \$17,500 and formed Lake 'n Sea Boats, Parsons Corporation Special Products Division.

Known as the father of the modern production line, Parsons had founded Parsons Corporation in 1928. The company made bombs during WWII, nose cones for bombs used by the United States armed forces, and fuel lines for the booster rockets used in the Saturn V/Apollo missions. He is best known for his ability to engineer the making of most anything and boats were no challenge for him in 1958.

A color brochure from 1958 illustrates what appears to be the same model outboard motor-driven boat previously manufactured by Chris-Craft. In fact, the brochure's text has been taken almost word for word from the advertisements Chris-Craft used in 1957 and early 1958. The same

Sunrise Pink, Seafoam Green, and Yellow Chartreuse hulls with white decks were also the only color choices. It is not surprising that Parsons used previously written information to generate a quick, but attractive color brochure in early 1958 that promised "a molded, durable, carefree bundle of boating fun!" Parsons reported, "We built a few of the boats right after we purchased the company in early 1958, but we were not happy with the results, so I had my chief engineer, Don Goodland, rework the molds and sold the new boats through the remainder of 1958 model year." By August 1958, *Outboard* magazine had caught up to the Parsons Corporation purchase and reported that Parsons was now producing eight different models of the Lake 'n Sea model boats measuring 12 to 19 feet in length and 68 inches wide. Evidently, Parsons wasted no time in having his team of designers, headed up by newly hired industrial designer, Bert Carlson, make the necessary changes to the purchased molds so that the hulls would release properly and look good as well. "The only two contributions I made were hiring Don Goodland to style the boats and insisting that he change the look of the boat from the stern," commented Parsons in a May 2003 interview.

When the 1959 brochure for the Lake 'n Sea came out, it was clear that Parsons' vision for this boat line was dramatic and very stylish. The line had been expanded from eight, as previously reported in *Outboard* magazine, to eleven different models ranging in length from 12 to 19 feet. Models ranged in price from \$295 to \$1,040. Aftermarket outboard motors could now range from 5 hp for the smallest model to twin 100 hp motors on the two largest models. Model names now included the 12' Manistee, 14' AuSable, 14' Caribbean, 15' Biscayne, 16' Arrowhead, 18' Saratoga, and 18' Grand Traverse. Color choices included Mediterranean Blue or Coral Pink for the Biscayne only, plus one other, Tropical Suntan, for the other models. The most evident changes were the addition of snap-on padded seat cushions, vented factory installed windshield, deck hardware, steering wheel and controls, and Morse brand remote controls for whatever outboard motor the owner chose. Custom models included custom Lake 'n Sea logo dash panel, steering wheel, running lights, and jackstaff. The transom design of all but two, the 15' Biscayne and the 12' and 14' Manistee fishing utility, of the styles offered, had also changed to resemble louvers as seen on many automobiles at that time. This design makes the Parsons-made boats from 1959 to 1960 the most identifiable to this day. Parsons realized, "The customers recognized that the styling was terrific... and we didn't have much trouble selling the boats, even though we had to ship them all over the country." I also believe that the Parsons Corporation's successful history with manufacturing fiberglass also aided in reducing the problems Chris-Craft had with making fiberglass boat hulls, problems like delamination, establishing high production rates, and a quality product. This comment is supported by the number of Parsons Corporation built boats still available and being restored today and lack of models produced by the previous owners. "When I got into helicopter rotor blades, qual-

ity became more critical than ever to me... Quality control, with low cost, that's been a criteria of mine. I didn't want to have anything coming back to me as being unsatisfactory workmanship. No way," said Parsons.

Even with Parson's winning combination of style and the quality offerings shown in the 1959 brochure, his company could not make the boat line profitable enough. According to the January 1960 issue of *Boats*, the 1960 line of boats was to be "concentrated" to the 15' Biscayne sports utility, lengthened 15' Caribbean custom runabout, 17' Arrowhead custom runabout, and 19' Saratoga custom runabout with no change in standard equipment. Another source, the December 1960 issue of *Motor Boating*, reported that the Parson Corporation would not be producing or selling boats for the 1960 model year, but were studying new designs and manufacturing techniques with a view toward possible resumption in 1961. This report could have contained date typos or was horribly late in being published; we may never know. I do know that nothing more was reported or advertised for the Lake 'n' Sea models in magazines that included *Yachting*, *Motor Boat*, or *The Rudder* in 1961.

"My father often has said that he taped a \$100 bill to every boat that left the plant," said son Grant Parsons as he described his father's frustration with the venture into boat making. While John Parsons contended that he didn't lose money on the venture, the activity of laying off personnel during slow times in production bothered him so



Lake 'N Sea boats receive trim and hardware at the Michigan Fiberglass Plastics plant.

much that by 1961, he had decided to sell the boat line to yet another Michigan-based company. Exact sale figures and dates and other information are not currently available for research, but are being preserved in a university archives for future use. Till then, one can only speculate on the date the boat was discontinued or number of boats built by Parsons before selling the boat line to Michigan Fiberglass Plastics, Inc. of Holland, Michigan.

Michigan Fiberglass Plastics, Inc., a short-lived boat building concern, was started by Lawrence Valentine Meyering in 1961. Originally from Chicago, the former lawyer and banker turned fiberglass manufacturer started working for the Zeeland, Michigan-based Camfield Fiberglass Plastics, Inc. in 1959. After encountering some internal strife with management in 1961, Meyering left the company to try something new. Not long after leaving Camfield, Meyering contacted his former co-worker Henry Kort about his desire to start up a boat company and to ask Kort whether he would be interested in becoming his new facility manager. Kort liked the idea and took the job. Meyering then instructed him to prepare a warehouse for boat building. While Kort prepared the rented building, Meyering saw to the transferring of the fiberglass molds and equipment used to make the 15-foot model, from the Parsons Corporation.

After the molds had arrived, Meyering and Kort began the process of building the latest incarnation of Lake 'n Sea speedboat. But it wasn't long before they and other members of the production staff discovered why Chris-Craft had sold the rights to the boat and nicknamed it the "Leak 'n Sink": compound curves and delamination. According to John Schutten, former building manager of the rented building, many of these bad hulls were stacked on a lot near the factory and were later hauled away for disposal. Other employees who worked at Michigan Fiberglass Plastics, Inc. mentioned that many of the boat hulls were ruined when separated from the mold due to bad releasing agents or bad design in general.

After about a year of trial and error and bills piling up, Meyering vacated the building and moved his operation to two rented buildings in nearby Borculo, where he expanded the company's offerings to include not only the Lake 'n Sea speedboat, but also canoes and a small sailboat model called the Super Porpoise. The company remained there until being purchased in 1963, along with its inventory, by Grand Rapids, Michigan businessmen Richard Levy and Morrie Kleinman. The production of the Lake 'n Sea model speedboat apparently ended when Levy and Kleinman took ownership of the inventory.

If you are interested in acquiring and restoring a classic Lake 'n Sea speedboat, they can still be acquired in different conditions and different prices. I have seen one for \$50 missing most of its hardware and others unrestored, including outboard motor and trailer, for \$1,500. So if you are looking to restore or own a classic fiberglass boat the Lake 'n Sea might be the one for you.

(The rare 1956 Lakensea brochure and other research materials were generously shared by Lee Wangstad.) ▀