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MADE OF STEEL *The History of the Roamer Boat Company*

by Geoffrey D. Reynolds

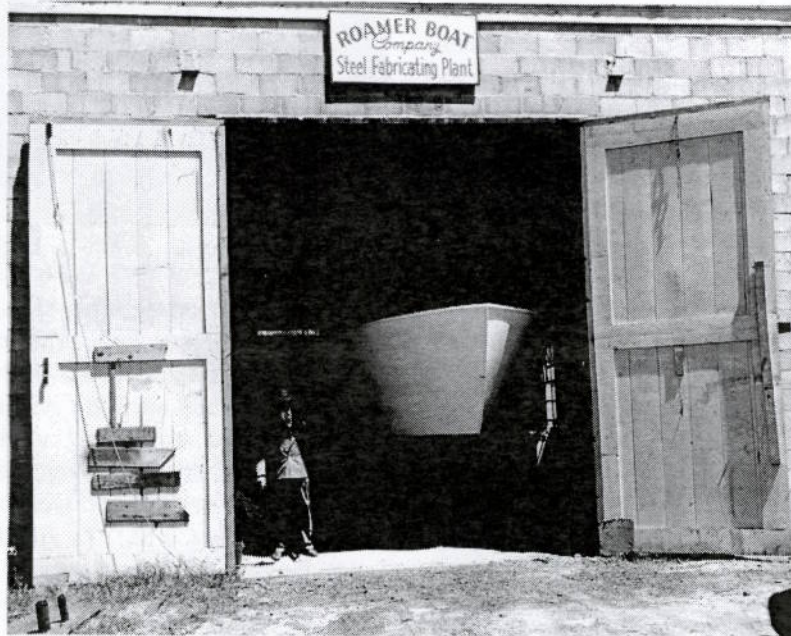
When it comes to pleasure boats, few people think of purchasing a boat made of steel. Thoughts of a boat made from this manufactured material include weight, cost and corrosion. But for post World War Two American consumers and government agencies, the desire for steel boats was driven by their strength, endurance and reliability. Holland was home to one of those boat building firms in the form of the Roamer Boat Company.

The Roamer Boat Company was formally founded in Holland, Michigan, in 1946, by Robert R. Linn (1910-1994), son of Allen and Grace Linn of Grand Rapids, Michigan. Linn came to Holland from Grand Rapids as a young man with his wife, Frances H., and apprenticed with Ken Campbell of the Campbell Boat Company for two years. The couple and their two sons, Robert, Jr. and David, lived at 1024 South Shore Drive, very near the Campbell Boat Company. The 1947 *Holland City Directory* listed Linn as a boat manufacturer at the South Shore Drive address.

Linn built his first Roamer cruiser, a steel-hulled 32-foot express cruiser, in 1946. This most likely took place at

the Campbell Boat Company facility, since a factory site had not yet been procured, according to city directories and boating magazine stories. By the fall of 1947, Linn had produced another all-welded steel 30-footer called

“Roamer,” which was christened by his wife, Frances, at the Campbell site. This boat was produced for the Linn family by the Campbell Boat Company, according to newspaper reports, and featured a mahogany wood cabin, much like the boat pictured on the back cover.

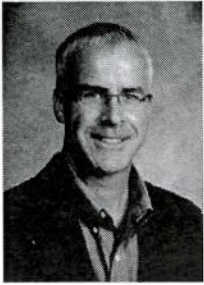


In 1949, Linn produced a 36-foot line patrol boat for the City of Chicago for use in their drainage canal.

He also published his first brochure, which featured a 32-foot cabin cruiser, as well as house boats, fishing boats and work boats. The cabin cruisers ranged from 32-40 feet, and costs ranged from \$9,950 to \$15,800. You could even purchase a “handyman’s special” model that provided you with a hull and the rest was up to you to complete at a much lower cost. During the early years, interior finishing was often completed by the buyer, even on the stock boats sold as complete. Other models included express cruisers, deckhouse cruisers, and double cabin cruisers in 33, 36, 38, 41, 42, and 48-foot lengths. Many of these

(continued on page 2)

From the Director



To celebrate the arrival of warm weather, I have penned an article about boating and the Roamer Boat Company's role in making pleasure craft and military boats out of steel. This company, while only existing for less than a decade, was instrumental in forming an entire division of the mighty Chris-Craft Corporation once

it was purchased by them in 1955. This company and many more will be spotlighted in a story about Holland boat builders that will be appearing in the July/August 2011 issue of *Michigan History* magazine.

Also included in this issue is our annual list of financial donors. Thank you to those listed for your support, which goes a long way toward helping us continue our work of gathering, preserving and providing access to the archival materials in our care.

Geoffrey D. Reynolds

Made of Steel (continued from page 1)

cruisers were designed by naval architect A. M. Deering of Chicago, Illinois. Commercial craft included passenger boats built for Olson Boat Corporation of Wisconsin Dells, Wisconsin; Roseland Amusement Park, Rochester, New York; and Wilderness Outfitters, Ely, Minnesota.

By May 1950, a factory building, located at 961 Washington Avenue, was being used. Linn promoted his steel-hulled boats as the easy, low maintenance boat of your dreams, utilizing the special, copper alloy steel as non-corrosive. And, after all, it was made of steel, 1/8"

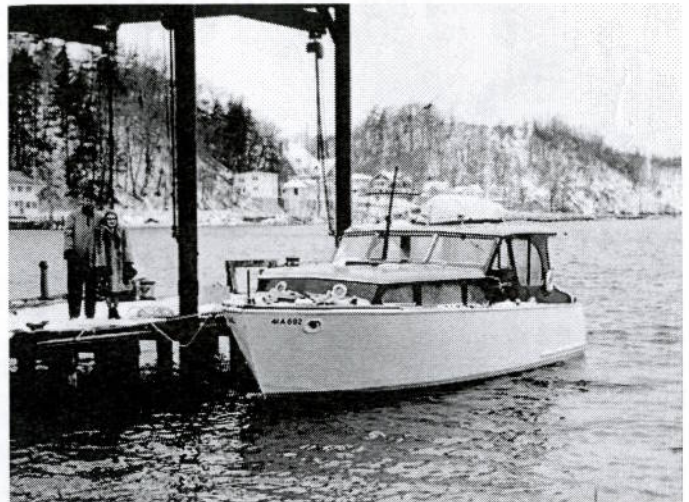


Richard Cole of Orono Boat Works and Robert Linn at the Chicago Boat Show, 1950

thick for the hull sides and 3/16" for the bottom, which would give its owners carefree confidence in doubtful waters.

Linn took his sales pitch to boats shows around the United States and took on the competition in this market, which had existed since 1939, and included Safti-Craft, Steel Craft and Higgins.

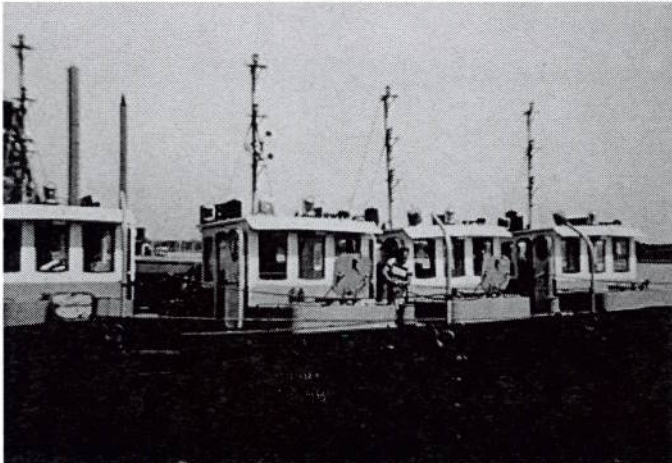
After selling and building his large, steel-hulled boats, Linn launched most of them at Jesiek's Boatyard (now Eldean Shipyard), where the new owner took delivery. Very few were delivered over land and thus the phrase "They'll Go Anywhere" came to be used in sales literature.



Roamer cruiser at Jesiek's, ca. 1949

The year 1951 brought big changes to the Roamer Boat Company, its labor force and profit sheet. That July, it was announced that Roamer had contracted with the U.S. Navy to produce ten John Alden designed 45-foot steel tugs, powered by diesel, worth over half a million dollars, and deliver between December 1951 and June 1952. These boats were used by the Army Transportation Corps. To fill the contract, Linn began adding more men to his staff, many of which were veterans eager to work and looking for something different in the way of work. One of these men was George Kuiper. Kuiper visited the plant one afternoon after quitting his auto mechanic job, and started the next day building boats, earning \$1.10 per hour. There, Kuiper was put to work grinding the steel frames of the boats that would support the huge sheets of steel that made up the hull of the tugboats. Once the boat was almost completed, Kuiper was promoted to the man in charge of plumbing and wiring the boat. The small staff had to be flexible to make sure production continued at a steady pace. Other employees, like Bernard Meiste, worked as the parts control foreman, Michael Potter served as foreman, Vern Lampen ran the engine

department, putting in huge Buda brand engines and propeller shafts, and Pete Riemersma was in charge of a large team that welded steel sheets that made up the hulls. Once the boats were completed, each was moved slowly down 32nd Street, the men using poles to guide telephone lines over the boats as they passed under, to Jesiek's Boatyard, where they were eased into the water and moored. Once in the water, Kuiper would test the boat for the Navy inspectors and officials from the Bureau of Ships. If they passed—and all did—Kuiper and other crew would sail the boats to New Orleans via Lake Michigan, Chicago, and the Mississippi River over a few months time.



U.S. Army Corps of Engineers tug boats rafted together on Mississippi River, 1952

In 1952, a second contract, worth almost a million dollars, to build an additional twenty-one tugs was awarded, and with it came an expansion to the Washington Avenue plant and a new warehouse in Park Township. Some of the men, like Kuiper, would work all day and then work some more at the emerging marina constructing the boat hoists. Ultimately, 31 of the tugs were built and 120 persons were involved in the project. The last three tugs steamed south in September 1954.

With the addition of the warehouse in Park Township in 1954 came plans for Roamer Haven and eventually Bay Haven Marina in May 1955, now part of the Eldean family holdings. This construction project was an indication that Linn was ready to get out of the boat building business and that changes were in the wind for Roamer Boat Company.

In the early months of 1955, representatives from the Chris-Craft Corporation, Owen Smith and Harry Coll, toured Linn's boat factory and inquired about selling his company to Chris-Craft. In March 1955, Robert Linn sold Roamer Boat Company to the Chris-Craft Corporation for \$117,000 and ended an era. Chris-Craft Corporation owners wanted to enter the welded steel

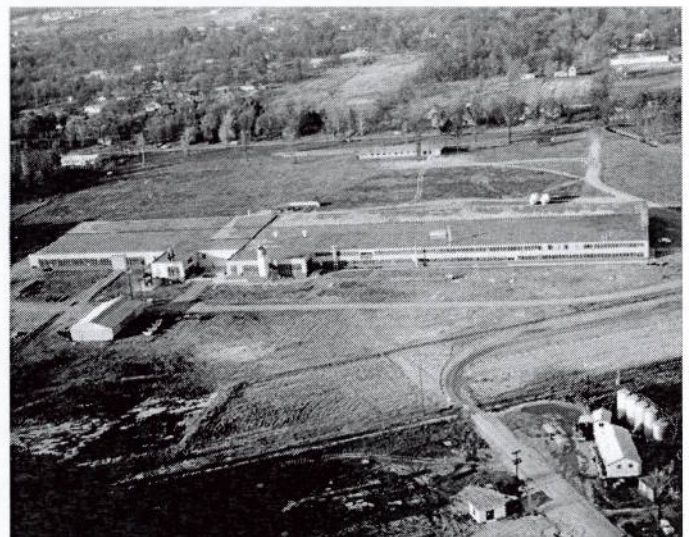


Robert Linn, ca. 1950

boat business and Roamer was a natural choice seeing that it was in the same town as one of their largest plants and had proven itself in the marketplace for several years. After selling Roamer to Chris-Craft, Linn and his sons operated Bay Haven Marina at 1862 Ottawa Beach Road in Holland for many years. Son David passed away in 1988; father Robert in 1994; and son Robert in 1996.

Roamer became Roamer Steel Boats Division of Chris-Craft Corporation in 1956. Chris-Craft added on to the original Washington Avenue plant soon after the purchase, and introduced dramatic design changes to the Roamer line. Michael Potter remained the foreman of the new division under George Smith and Russ Fredericks. Fredericks was also in charge of the Chris-Craft factory farther to the west. Kuiper also worked for the company, before rejoining Robert Linn at Bay Haven to help develop that business. He would eventually return to Roamer and work for many more years as a marine inspector, participating in the sea trials for the new models of Roamer yachts.

Chris-Craft built a new plant on Lakewood Boulevard in Holland in May 1956 and employed close to 350 workers. An aluminum boat was first included in the line in 1962 and eventually the Roamer Division concentrated on large aluminum motor yachts. Production was transferred to Florida in 1975 and ended completely in 1979. Chris-Craft Corporation reintroduced the fiberglass version of the Roamer model, for a short time, and ended production, again, in 2010.



Roamer Division of Chris-Craft Corporation plant on Lakewood Blvd., 1962

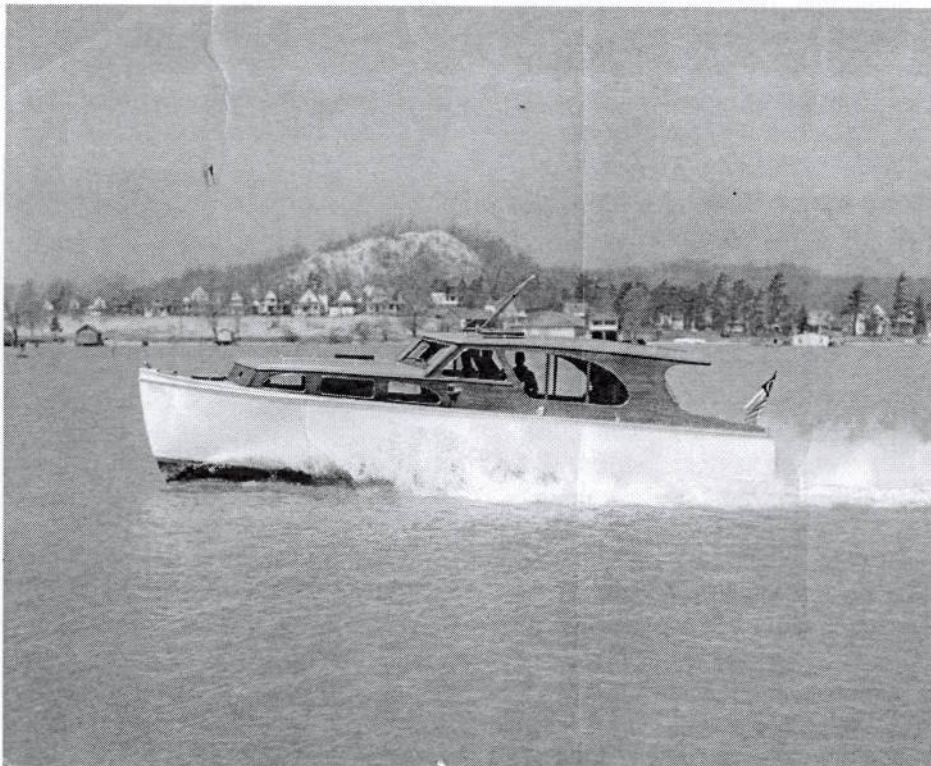


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36-foot Roamer on Lake Macatawa, March 1950—\$11,250

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