

Vintage Views

The Helter Skelter Saga

Introduction

Machines built to race have a defined shelf life – and it's usually quite a short one.

They live as long as they are competitive with the other racing machines they compete against. Once they are judged as being uncompetitive – because of technological developments, design innovations, rule changes, or powerplant upgrades, these machines are put to rest. Raceboats - and in particular wood hydroplanes from the '50s, '60s and '70s - enjoyed their relatively brief time in the racing spotlight after which most of them became obsolete, unable to compete anymore.

Some of these boats were sold off or carefully stored. Others were haphazardly covered up, abandoned and forgotten about in the back of barns or behind garages. Still others were cannibalized for useful parts and then destroyed, sometimes in a Viking Funeral. A few did end up in boat museums or collections, or can be seen hanging on the walls or ceilings of sports bars. Many just seemed to cease to exist, their whereabouts unknown. Recently, however, the belief that these old warhorses held some value has emerged in the race boat culture.

Here's the story in four parts of one of those racing machine survivors, a three point 280 hydroplane by the name of **Helter Skelter**. It was designed and built, raced and then sold. It eventually disappeared, was unexpectedly discovered, underwent rebuilding and restoration - and now lives and performs on the American Powerboat Association's Vintage Circuit. The story is told through the eyes of the original owner and drivers, the discoverer, the restorers, the current owner (who happens by chance to also be the original owner), and the boat's current drivers. The saga involves a time span of over 45 years, and is a case study of friendship, expertise, persistence, and a whole lot of luck and coincidence.

Part 1 The Discovery by Rich Willim

"I have a friend, who has a cottage on Wolf Lake which is near the Michigan International Speedway. The Jackson, Michigan area. About seven years ago, he told me about a hydroplane which his buddy Erik got from an elderly lady whose husband had passed away. It was in a garage. Upon first contact he wanted \$15,000 for it. Well, here's the hitch. I asked for some pictures of it and was e-mailed pictures of George English's *Lloyd 135*. Nope, ain't gonna pay that much, no way, for that boat.

So every once in a while I would ask Tom, my friend, to check with Erik about the boat. Over the year's time the price kept coming down as Erik realized he probably couldn't afford to restore the boat. It was supposed to be a father/son deal, but unfortunately his father passed away. Tom called me and said Erik would now take \$5,000 for the boat. I figured there would be negotiation room at that price so I made an appointment to see the boat.

I drove up to Wolf Lake and met with Erik at a small factory in the area. Covered with a canvas, the boat was now sitting on an old trailer in a yard behind the factory. As soon as I saw the canvas, I knew there wasn't a *Lloyd 135* underneath it. We uncovered the boat – but I was stumped as to what make it was. I knew it was a 280 because you could see **E6_ _** faintly bleached into the top of a sponson. But, I couldn't identify the builder of the boat. It looked like a *Lauterbach*, but it had *Farmer* influences. I took a dozen or so pictures of the boat, and considered buying it if the price was right. Erik and I wheeled and dealt our way to a price I was sort of willing to pay, an amount he seemed willing to accept.



The yet-to-be-identified hydro as found next to the fence in a shop's back lot. I just removed the tarp.

That Friday night I e-mailed the pictures to my friend Phil Kunz, who has a large historical archive of hydroplane pictures he has taken over the years, and asked him to identify the boat if he could. Early the next morning I got a call from Phil. “That’s my old boat, **Helter Skelter**” he said. “It’s my old *Cunningham*. Where is it, and is it for sale?” Although the boat was in rough shape, Phil recognized it from the details in the pictures I sent him. I told him where it was and how much the owner was asking – the agreed upon price. Phil asked me if I would buy it for him and bring it home.



The name Lauterbach is cast in the rudder, but the boat itself does not call out Lauterbach design and construction.

I agreed to do this, and drove up to Wolf Lake a couple of days later. I met with Erik, and some further discussions lowered the price somewhat, and he did throw into the deal a lot of extra engine parts. I very carefully and slowly towed the boat back to my home on rotted tires and a jury-rigged taillight bar which I brought along. Poor Phil did not sleep for a couple of nights until I called him and told him it was safe in my garage. All in all, I was happy to be instrumental in getting Phil’s old race boat back to him. I guess luck is being in the right place at the right time.”



The mechanicals as seen in the boat’s cockpit all seemed to be there. She hadn’t been cannibalized when stored. A good sign.



The aluminum cladding on the sponson was in place. Looks like there might be patch or modification on the bottom.



The cowling has been butchered and half the deck gone. Not the best of signs.

Next Month: Part 2 **The Beginnings**

Submitted by Paul Poledink