

Vintage Views

The Helter Skelter Saga (Con't)

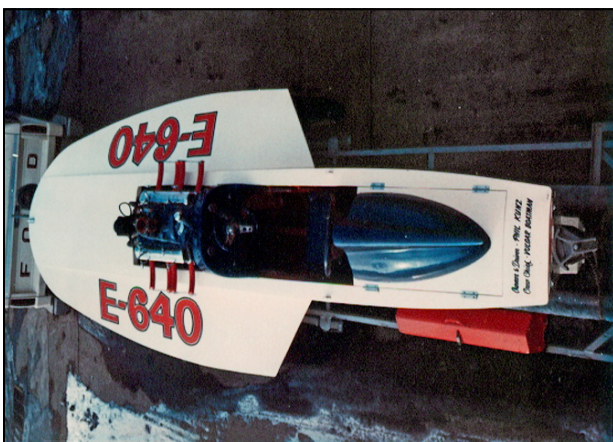
Part 2 The Beginnings by Phil Kunz

"The phone call from Rich Willim and the pictures he sent me triggered a thousand memories of Helter Skelter. And, more memories of the two boats I had and their drivers which led up to the building and the racing career of Helter Skelter. I had Helter Skelter built because of those less-than-satisfactory experiences with my first two race boats.

"I started out in the sport with a boat I bought called **Fleiger**, which translated from the German means **Flyer**. I renamed it **Nemesis**. This boat was originally an experimental narrow "S" Class *Sooy* cabover which was 15'2" long. It only needed 10" added to it for it to be a legal 280. Some of my fellow competitors here in Dayton helped me add this length to its flat-nosed bow, and we had a legal 280 raceboat. We didn't have much success with **Nemesis**, so I sold it and looked for another boat with more promise.



Fleiger / Nemesis running as an "S" class 145 before lengthening 10".



Nemesis, with bow extended to legal 280 dimensions.

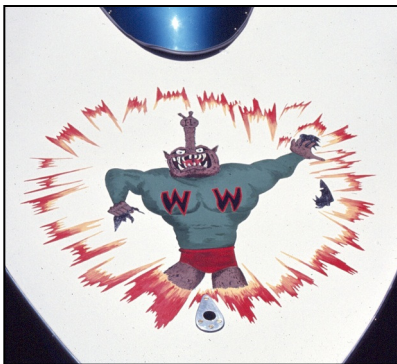
"My second boat was an "E" Class *Farmer* which I bought from Dean Chenoweth, a successful inboard driver and owner here in the Ohio Valley. Dean, of course, eventually made his name and reputation driving the unlimited **Miss Budweiser** and winning four *Gold Cups*. I named the boat **Wonder Wart Hog** after the underground comic book character. **Wonder Wart Hog** was built by Will Farmer as a 14' "S" Class boat. Dean already had a seat in a local "S" boat, **Chuck's Joy**, a boat he drove to victory in the Nationals in 1965. Dean had local boat builder, Jim Davies, add two feet to the nose of the *Farmer* hull, again making a boat a legal 280. Being a local *Pontiac* dealer, Dean installed a 215 *Buick* in the hull and called it **Little Wide Track**. It won a few local races, but was scary fast and somewhat flighty – it went end-over-end twice in 1965. Dean sold me the bare hull in the Fall of 1965 for \$200. I thought I could solve this hull's attitude problem by installing the heavier Chevy 265 out of the **Nemesis**, to hold her down on the water.



Wonder Wart Hog in its typical Sky Dance position, often when accelerating out of a corner.



A good view of the extended two foot "nose" of Wonder Wart Hog.



"I drove **Wonder Wart Hog** several times, but felt that it required a better driver than I was to make it perform. It still seemed a little wild for me. Gene Whipp was my first choice to pilot the boat. Gene had won the prestigious Calvert Trophy in 1960, was the 280 National High Point Champion in 1969, won three Inboard Nationals in various classes, and eventually piloted the unlimited **Lincoln Thrift** in 1973. In other words, an accomplished and talented driver. Gene drove the **Wonder Wart Hog** once and said, "Find another driver." So I did: Gene Benning, a local inboard owner, builder and driver, and eventual unlimited hydro owner. Gene took out the **Hog** for the five minute warm up, drove a few laps, and came back to the pits - white-faced, and said "No more." Bobby Musson was next. Bobby raced it once, and returned to driving his own boat.

Iconic Wonder Wart Hog cartoon on the boat. Note the "nose".

"That was it - until a young man named Jim Kropfeld, who later in his career went on to unlimited racing success in the **Miss Budweiser**, took over the driving duties. In his first race at Hillsdale, Jim took a third place in a boat I and several other more competent drivers could not master. And at the end of the day he asked "Where's the next race?" The answer was the whole year, 1968. Near the end of the year we put a hole in the air trap at Ypsilanti, and a boat builder by the name of Jim Cunningham offered to fix the boat. At the end of the year, I realized that what we had was a strong engine and excellent driver, but a less than adequate hull. Jim suggested that he build us a boat to match the quality of the engine, the Chevy 265, and talents of the driver, Jim Kropfeld. Cunningham, out of Neptune, Ohio, a suburb of Celina, had a successful boat running at the time called **Shamrock**, the current high point champion, and was willing to build us a boat based upon the success of that hull.



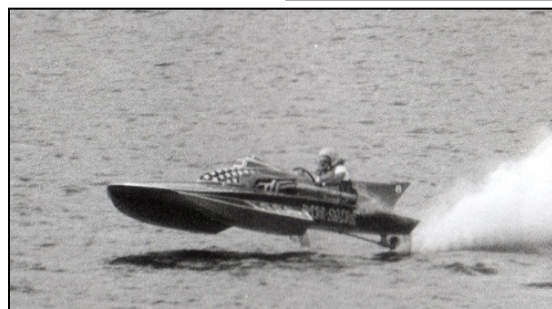
Helter Skelter and Shamrock, two Cunningham hulls battle it out at Newport, KY.

"Jim started building **Helter Skelter** in the fall of 1968, and we began testing early in 1969 at Dayton. I drove it and it seemed OK. With my limited driving ability in mind, I wanted someone else's opinion other than my own to evaluate the boat. The opportunity occurred at Walther's Marina with George Henley. Henley raced outboards, inboards from 145's through 7 Liters and eventually unlimiteds. Most notably **Pay'NPak** to Gold Cup wins in 1974 and 1975. George took **Helter Skelter** out for a few runs, returned and said "Good boat. Don't change a thing." A satisfying endorsement. Gene Whipp also tested it, and concurred with Henley's judgment.



Jim Cunningham, the designer and builder of Helter Skelter and the El Shamrock.

"The four year saga of **Helter Skelter** as a raceboat for us began in Decatur, Illinois in May of 1969 with an elimination, and ended in September of 1972 in Newport, Kentucky, where we flipped the boat. In between those two dates, we ran in 42 races with Jim Kropfeld as the primary driver. How did we do? In general with a lot of podium finishes, firsts, seconds, or thirds. It didn't always turn out well. We had a DNF in Morgan City at the '69 Nationals when the steering wheel came off and another at the '70 nationals in Ypsilanti when the shaft broke. We had one DISQ for jumping the gun in Columbus in '71, and a DNS in St. Petersburg in '71 when we hit an alligator during warm ups - which ended our racing and the alligator's for that day.



Helter Skelter in the lead with lots of air under her at Newport, KY.



Chuck Wagon with Chuck Thompson, Yankee Doodle with Davy Sutton, and Helter Skelter with Jim Kropfeld in typical sponson to sponson racing at Celina.

"Along with Jim Kropfeld's success with **Helter Skelter**, three other drivers who subbed for Jim when he was unable to drive found the boat to be easy to handle. Frank Deem remarks that "It was a solid boat. I always felt safe in it. Never had to let up on it. It ran fast enough to compete for the lead, and allowed me to take a 2nd at Louisville in August of 1970, and a 3rd at Trenton in September. I think it was only by a nose length or so that I didn't win those races." Butch Kropfeld took a 2nd at Hillsdale in 1971, and Bobby Musson a 3rd at Pontiac in 1972. Other than those races, it was all Kropfeld.

"I believe we can attribute the many successful finishes we had to several factors. One, the *Cunningham* hull was a good one. It ran well and was very competitive. Secondly, we got as much power out of the Chevy 265 as possible. But the main ingredient was the skill of the driver for almost all the races: Jim Kropfeld. We were running against the inherently more powerful Chrysler 273s in most of the other boats, but made up for their power advantage with driver skill.



Trash in the water at Jeffersonville, Indiana put a hole in the hull.



A cabover Chuck Wagon competes with Helter Skelter at Sylvan Lake.

"Until Newport, Kentucky in 1972, our last race. The overturning of **Helter Skelter** did some damage to the boat, and I too had to face the question of its competitiveness at that stage of its racing career. As a conventional hydroplane design, engine in front and driver in the rear, the boat was losing its edge to the new cabovers with the drivers in front and their wider transoms. I had to face the fact that the shelf life of **Helter Skelter** – after just five years or so of racing - was reaching its end, so I put the boat up for sale. The buyer of the boat went on to race it for a couple of years, and later I found out he sold it to a fellow up in Michigan who was running it as a recreational boat on a lake up there. I sort of forgot about **Helter Skelter** since it wasn't on the raceboat circuit anymore and had no real future in the sport.



Damage from a collision at Ripley, Ohio race.

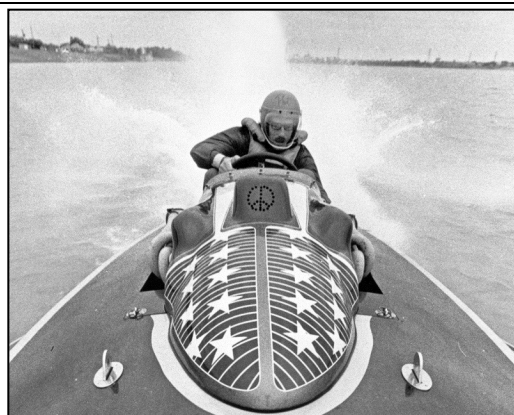


Helter Skelter with Jim Kropfeld, Shamrock with Jim Roberts, and Suzy's Kitchen with Ron Snyder at Celina in 1971.

"Helter Skelter came to mind again in 1992 or '93, when the vintage raceboat concept came into existence led by Tom D'Eath. The first recognized gathering of old raceboats took place in Clayton, New York in 1994. I started to realize the potential for these old hydros when I provided my old 265 engine to Tom for use in **Wa Wa**, a successful raceboat from the past which he was restoring. In the back of my mind I thought of ol' **Helter Skelter**, and whatever became of her.

"The phone call from Rich Willim years later – out of the blue – answered that question, and led to possibility and hope of her running again."

Next Month: Part 3 The Restoration



A "selfie" of me (Phil) taken with a front mounted driver-actuated camera at the Dayton Hydroglobe.

Submitted by Paul Poledink