

The Legend of “Miss America VII”

by Jack Savage

Odd how serendipitous events from years ago guide our ambitions. Passion for classic boats is often stirred by some distant memory from our early years, some childhood resolution – when I grow up, I’m going to have a boat like that.

Such was the case for Geoffrey Magnuson, who vividly remembers being a teenager, watching with fascination a short film in the 1950s called “Faster and Faster.” In it, a twin engine, “Miss America” leapt across the water, 24 cylinders of horsepower wrapped with just enough wood to call it a boat.

Fast forward four-plus decades to the New Hampshire Vintage Race Boat Regatta in Wolfeboro this past September. There was Jeff, joyously piloting his latest race replica, “Miss America VII”, around the 1.25 oval course marked out on Wolfeboro Bay.

The Regatta, staged by the Trustees of the New Hampshire Boat Museum, was held in conjunction with Wolfeboro’s annual Antique Boat & Car Rendezvous at the Town Docks. A veritable fleet of vintage raceboat replicas and originals gathered to run heats starting at 10 a.m., and thrilled the estimated 8,000 attendees with a day of mock racing.



It's A Wonder

Magnuson brought three replicas and two restorations from his Blueberry Hill Racing Team to demonstrate for the crowd, including the V-bottom “Arab VI” and single-step hydroplane “Arab IV”, both of which have won the ACBS Wine Country Regatta race multiple times – the only truly competitive race for such boats in the United States. Also on hand from Magnuson were the three-point hydroplane “It’s A Wonder”, and V-bottomed “Flashback.”

“Miss America VII” was one in the line of famous “Miss America’s” financed and raced by Gar Wood and designed by Napoleon “Nap” Lisee. The original “Miss America” was built by Chris Smith and his sons in Algonac, Michigan, in the years before they decided turn to pleasure boating by starting a little company that would come to be called Chris-Craft.

Gar Wood would break with the Smiths, but Nap Lisee would end up continuing to work for the industrialist who made his fortune by inventing the hydraulic dump truck. Lisee is credited with more than 30 of the world’s finest race boats, including all 10 “Miss Americas”, all the “Miss Detroit’s”, all the “Baby Gars”, “Baby Americas” and “Gar Jrs”.



In many ways, “Miss America VII” represents the most exciting elements of powerboat racing during the 1920s. In 1928, Englishwoman Betty Carstairs challenged the Americans for the Harmsworth Trophy, bringing to Detroit the “Estelle II”. Carstairs had proven herself by winning the Duke of York’s Trophy in Newg against an international field in 1926. Gar Wood, while publicly expressing disappointment at being challenged by a woman, had the newly-built “Miss America VI” made ready. During testing less than three weeks before the race, however, and reportedly while under the full power of her twin 12-cylinder Packard engines capable of generating 2,200 horsepower, the 26-foot “Miss America VI” nose-dived and ended up at the bottom of the river. Wood escaped relatively unharmed, but mechanic Orlin Johnson suffered considerable injuries, including a broken jaw.

Wood was nothing if not a man of action. He arranged for the big Packard engines to be raised and rebuilt. A new 28-foot hull, “Miss America VII”, was built in less than three weeks. Presumably, Lisee felt two additional feet in length were needed to handle the considerable horsepower of the twin Packard engines. Wood was ready for his challenger by race day. The race itself was something of an anticlimax, as Carstairs and the “Estelle II” capsized on the first lap, leaving Wood with an easy victory. “Miss America VII” had defended the Harmsworth Trophy.

Less than a month later, on Oct. 1, 1928, “Miss America VII” was officially timed by the UIYA in the unlimited class at 92.82 mph. Like her “Miss America” ancestors, she was then a world record holder.

“Miss America VII’s” next challenge came in the spring of 1929 when Major Hane Segrave set out to capture world speed records on land and water. His 27 foot hydroplane, “Miss England”, took on “Miss America VII” in Miami, where she managed to outpace Gar Wood and his crew on the straights, but reportedly couldn’t maintain speed in the turns. “Miss America VII” was credited by press with a world-record speed of 94 mph. The boat would be joined by a nearly identical sister, “Miss America VIII”, in Detroit in the late summer of 1929. The two boats were there to fend off another challenge from the young Betty Carstairs, who had commissioned the construction of “Estelle IV”, initially equipped with three 12-cylinder engines that, in theory, could generate 1000 horsepower each. Engine trouble gave the Detroit Harmsworth race once again to Gar Wood, whose team finished first and second in the two “Miss Americas”.

“Miss America VII” and the older “Miss America V” then were taken to Venice for the Count Volpi Cup, open to an international field that included Segrave’s “Miss England”. There, in the rough waters of Venice, “Miss America VII” would meet her end- piloted by Gar Wood’s brother Phil with Orlin Johnson as mechanic, VII hit something and reportedly jumped 30 feet into the air before crashing. Phil Wood and Johnson were rescued by the crew of “Miss America V”. Johnson reportedly nearly died as a result of the crash. Ultimately, “Miss England” proved her superiority, and “Miss America VII” was finished. According to Magnuson, the boat was recovered, and the engines were salvaged while the hull was ultimately scrapped.

The story that made it into the contemporary press suggested that “Miss England” could better handle the choppy waters of the Venetian race course. Magnuson, having driven the “Miss America VII” replica and seen “Miss England”, doubts that conclusion given the considerable weight (more than 9,000 lbs.) of the “Miss America”. More likely, he posits, “Miss America VII” simply hit something floating in the water and went down, and “Miss England” was ultimately a faster boat than “Miss America V”, especially without Orlin Johnson in the mechanic’s seat.

Magnuson’s replica of “Miss America VII”, meticulously researched and built with plans looted off the still-extant “Miss America VIII”, was launched 70 years later in July of 1999 for initial test runs on Lake Winnepesaukee. The hull is virtually identical in shape to the original 28-foot single-step hydroplane, built by Rich Woodman with double-planked mahogany sides and a marine plywood under mahogany bottom. Magnuson and collaborator Mark Mason installed twin Rolls-Royce Meteor 1650 cubic-inch twelve-cylinder engines, which generate about 60 percent of the horsepower of the original twin Packard twelve’s. Custom cam covers help the Rolls engines look the part, and Magnuson says that the replica, with help from a custom gearbox with overdrive from Mike Sage of S.C.S. Gear, can reach 75 mph, or about 80 percent of the original boat’s top speed.

No doubt, spurred by childhood memories and in the spirit of Gar Wood and his team, Magnuson will keep refining “Miss America VII”, always looking to go “faster and faster.”

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