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. . . about fine, old motoryachts

Lake Union Dreamboats

Dreamboats from the Northwest:

Elegance for Everybody in the 1920's

By Marty Loken



In the early 1920's, West Coast boatbuilding yards, as though synchronized, awakened to the marketing potential of stock-designed motorboats "for the average man."

In a 1924 edition, Pacific Motor Boat predicted that boat buyers would soon be able to "walk into a sales room and pick from boats actually on display," following the trend that had been established by motorcar dealers.

While East Coast yards such as Elco had already developed a few stock cruisers, the rush toward production boats did not unfold in the Northwest until the mid-1920's, when the premier builders -- led by N.J. Blanchard Boat Company and Lake Union Drydock of Seattle--began to produce "standardized cruisers."

N.J. Blanchard, which had built its reputation on large, custom motoryachts and elegant sailing vessels, turned to designer Leigh Coolidge for what became known as their "Standardized Raised-Deck Cruiser," a perfectly proportioned 36-footer. After successfully producing custom yachts for 15 years, the first Blanchard stock cruiser slipped into the water in 1924, launching a wave of competition that would continue for six furious years -- until the Great Depression nearly shut down all pleasure-boat yards.

One of Blanchard's neighboring yards, Lake Union Drydock and Machine Works, began producing their copyrighted "Lake Union Dreamboat" in 1926. The Lake Union Drydock boats were similar to the Blanchards, but with greater volume. (Most were 42 feet in length, with some at 45 feet, compared to Blanchard's 36-footers.)

The owner of Lake Union Drydock, Otis Cutting, had designed his first raised-deck cruiser in 1910, nearly a decade before founding Lake Union Drydock, while working as a young draftsman at the Moran Shipyard in



Seattle. His first boat, [Lawana, pictured below] built by Taylor & Grandy on Vashon Island in 1911, became the inspiration for Cutting's line of Lake Union Dreamboats, which went into steady production in 1926.

Blanchard built 25 of their 36-foot Standardized Cruisers between 1924 and 1930. Lake Union produced a similar number of 42- and 45-foot Dreamboats, and other Northwest boatbuilders joined the raised-deck rush, including

Grandy Boat Works, Vic Franck, Jensen Motorboat Company, Karl Rathfon and a few others. Despite Lake Union Drydock's copyrighted "Lake Union Dreamboat" term, most of the Northwest's raised-deck cruisers became generically known as "Dreamboats."



Why did raised-deck cruisers, as a style, flourish in the first place?

In the Northwest, where boating is a year-around activity -- often under rain clouds -- the design made tremendous sense. The boats were long, lean and easily-driven (Blanchards were 36' by 9'); they had full headroom below, cozy cast-iron stoves and bright, airy pilothouses -- welcome when cruising in the often-gray Northwest. And, as stock models, they were "ready to cruise" the moment they left the

showroom.

Our Blanchard 36-footer, MER-NA (named by and for her first owners, Mervin and Naomi Troyer), was sold during the 1930 Seattle Motor Boat show for \$5,500, including just about everything you'd need to go cruising -- 9-foot lapstrake dinghy, life jackets, fenders, set of dishes, drinking glasses, silverware, horn, compass, docking lines and other necessities.

MER-NA, as it turned out, was the last Blanchard Dreamboat to be built, since the Depression hit as her keel was being laid. One of the finest examples of early raised deck cruisers -- by any builder, we think -- MER-NA was originally propelled by a 60-horse, six-cylinder Kermath. When we purchased the boat in 1986 she was running a wheezy, oversized Chrysler Royal (straight 8, 145 hp), which we replaced in 1996 with a four-cylinder, 51-hp Yanmar diesel. (When we lowered the relatively tiny Yanmar into the engine compartment, we had to add 800 pounds of lead ballast to equal the weight of the Royal.) Someday, we may restore a vintage Kermath 60-hp for the boat, but for now we're happy with the reliable little Yanmar.

MER-NA and the two dozen other Blanchard Dreamboats were built using Western red cedar planking over

white oak frames, spaced on 9-inch centers. The keel is Douglas fir, and the hull is fastened with iron boat nails. The pilothouse and all other bright areas are teak. The deck is canvassed, and MER-NA still carries her original 9-foot cedar-planked dinghy, a little jewel.



Below decks, forward, MER-NA has a generous chain locker that is accessed through the deck or via a door in the forepeak bulkhead. There are V-berths forward, followed by a hanging locker and enclosed head to starboard. To port aft of the V-berths is the galley and its original porcelain-coated Lang kerosene stove, completely rebuilt. (Copper water lines coil through the stove, looping up to a stainless tank that provides hot water for dish-washing. Above the galley is a teak-framed skylight.) All of her bronze plumbing lines and crystal light fixtures are original.

The main saloon is next. Two opposing settees are transformed into four single berths when the backrests are pivoted up to hang from overhead. Storage cabinets are beneath the berths, both in the saloon and in the forepeak.

Upholstery in both areas is tufted burgundy mohair.

From the main saloon, companionway stairs rise to the wheelhouse, a center of activity whenever we're on the



water. The steering station is to port, with chart table and large icebox to starboard. Hatches in the wheelhouse open to the engine compartment. Two 40-gallon fuel tanks flank the engine, and forward-beneath the V-berths-is a stainless 60-gallon water tank. Two 12-volt batteries provide starting and backup power.

Although MER-NA is capable of sleeping six, she's a small 36-foot cruiser with only a 9-foot beam. We find her perfect for a cruising couple. Wherever she goes, she draws a crowd. Although we haven't campaigned her on

the boat-show circuit in recent years (we'd rather be cruising!), in the past she's won her share of honors, including "Best Classic Yacht" in Seattle's Opening Day Parade; "Best Classic" in the Tacoma Daffodil Festival; and "Best Power Vessel" at the Victoria Classic Boat Festival.

While Blanchard and other Northwest builders produced dozens of "standardized cruisers" during the 1920's, they obviously were not "standard" in quality. Stock models rivaled custom motoryachts when it came to fit and finish, and most of the Northwest's raised-deck cruisers are still around, being restored and enjoyed. As owners, we share a responsibility to love and maintain our boats, and to eventually pass them on to another generation of boatkeepers. In the meantime, we'll continue to enjoy MER-NA, the perfect little Northwest cruiser!

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