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### "For Pleasant & Restful Recreation": The Foster Boat Company

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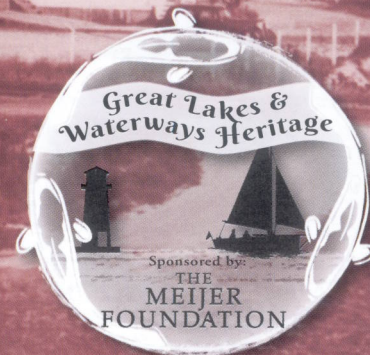
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## The Foster Boat Company

By Geoffrey D. Reynolds

*Above: The Foster Boat Company factory, located on Lake Charlevoix. Inset: The company's naval architect, Jim Bellinger, and a woman riding in a Foster outboard boat. (All photos courtesy of the Charlevoix Historical Society.)*

**Charlevoix, Michigan, has been the home of many successful ship and pleasure-boat builders since the mid-nineteenth century. During the 1940s and early 1950s, the Foster Boat Company arose, making its mark on the pleasure craft industry, military establishment, and growing recreational consumer base.**

### FOSTER'S COMPANY TAKES FORM

For boat-hungry middle-class families, the Foster Boat Company provided pleasure craft that were affordable, light, speedy, and sturdy. During its short history, the company played host to a few well-known personalities from Charlevoix, Michigan, and elsewhere.

Company founder Harry G. Foster was a native of Alden, Michigan, who had established himself in the Grand Rapids coal market. In the late 1930s, recreational

boating was becoming more affordable to financially strapped Americans, and Foster capitalized on that trend. He contracted with a boat-building firm based in Ionia, Michigan, to sell flat-bottomed rowboats in a display room converted from an old Grand Rapids gas station. He relocated to Charlevoix in 1940.

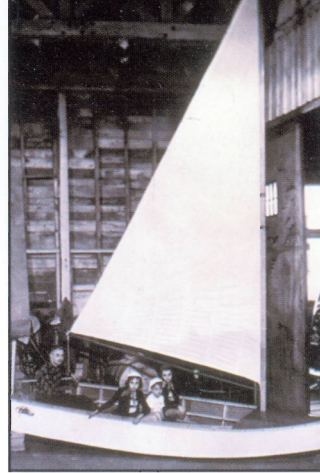
Foster's move to Northern Michigan was prompted by both his desire to return to the area where he grew up and the chance to lease an abandoned seed company building located on Lake Charlevoix. Built in 1892 to house the expanding operations of the Detroit-based D.M. Ferry & Company, the building was a welcome addition to local farmers, who were paid to plant and raise seeds.

In 1923, the seed company moved its operations away from Charlevoix and sold the building to William E. Parmelee for various manufacturing and warehousing needs. It was used for that purpose until the 1930s, when it was abandoned. As the paint peeled and the underbrush started to take over the property, the Charlevoix City Council sought alternatives for the building's use. Eventually, the Charlevoix Depositors





*Above left: The Foster Boat Company factory interior during WWII. Above right: Charles Duerr (left) and his family in a Snipe-class sailing dinghy. Duerr served as an investor, treasurer, purchasing agent, and comptroller for the Foster Boat Company.*



materials, such as fir plywood and canvas, had to be shipped in by railcar.

By January 1941, the Foster Boat Company had a booth at the Chicago National Boat and Sports Show, where potential customers filled out forms to receive future mailings and brochures. In exchange for filling out the form, the potential customer had a chance to win a Foster-built canoe. By February of that year, the company employed

a total of 15 steady employees to handle the orders that rushed in following the appearance at the boat show.

Even though business had improved, the company filed for receivership in March 1941, with Harry Foster being appointed temporary receiver. Foster listed initial start-up costs as the main reason for the company's financial problems. Nothing more was mentioned in the newspapers or boating periodicals about the situation, and before long, war contracts provided the solid financial ground that the company desperately needed.

## PRODUCTION DURING WWII

When the United States entered World War II in December 1941, the supply of necessary boat-building materials had dwindled due to restrictions imposed by the government for war production. At that time, Harry Foster decided that entering the war-production industry was a good idea—and he was right, since the war helped boost the company to its highest earnings and production.

In 1942, the company was awarded its first defense contract to manufacture a specially designed seaplane-rearming boat. The company turned out about 30 of those boats, which measured 33 feet in length and were designed to slip under the wings of a plane so that personnel could attach bombs and torpedoes to the aircraft.

Additional contracts included the 17-foot line-handling boat with a kapok fender, used to tow and maneuver

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*Utilized by the U.S. armed forces, storm boats were intended to be used to cross German rivers then be discarded.*



Corporation purchased the building from Parmelee and repainted it for its new renter—the Foster Boat Company.

Under the lease agreement, the owners decreased Foster's rent as his payroll increased and benefited local residents. Over time, Foster assumed ownership of the building and property.

Along with Foster, Charles Duerr came to the area with his family. Duerr was an original investor, treasurer, purchasing agent, and comptroller for the company. Another important addition to the staff was James Hilton Bellinger, a Charlevoix native who learned many of his boat-building skills from his father, William C. Bellinger. The younger Bellinger also held a degree in science education from the University of Michigan. He was described as a genius naval architect and marine engineer by members of the Foster family.

## BUILDING PLEASURE BOATS

Once in Charlevoix, Harry Foster appointed Claire Webster as plant supervisor. Production then began in earnest on a canoe, a Snipe-class sailboat, an outboard motorboat, a pontoon boat, and two models of panel-plywood rowboats. One report in the *Michigan Manufacturer and Financial Record* predicted that 1,500 boats would be produced at the new Charlevoix plant.

Next came the purchase and relocation of a Grand Rapids canvas operation, as well as the creation of a manufacturing division for oars made from ash wood. That division would produce more ash oars than any other business in the world. The company also made bowling pins from locally grown maple and sold them to the Brunswick-Balke-Collender Company of Muskegon. Needless to say, the three-story Foster Boat Company building was a flurry of activity.

During that time, much of the lumber used in the manufacturing process came from lots belonging to local farmers and was milled at the on-site sawmill. Varieties of wood used included basswood and ash for oars, maple for bowling pins, and white oak for boat frames. Additional



seaplanes; the 27-foot personnel boat, used to transport seaplane crews to and from their aircraft; sailing dinghies for the U.S. Navy; and dinghies for the Coast Guard.

During the war years, Foster Boat Company employees were represented by the Industrial Union of Marine and Shipbuilding Workers of America and filed only one complaint concerning recognition of the union as a formal organization.

After the Battle of the Bulge in January 1945, the company hired extra workers to labor 24 hours a day, seven days a week—for several weeks—to manufacture hundreds of 16-foot plywood “storm” boats powered by 30- to 50-horsepower outboard motors for the U.S. Army. Those boats could be stacked like teacups for easy transport, shipped via express rail from Charlevoix to Detroit, loaded onto transport planes, and flown directly to the front lines.

There, the boats were used to transport military personnel across German rivers and then be discarded. Foster was one of two Michigan firms that produced storm boats—the other being the Century Boat Company of Manistee.

As stated in a letter to consumers in July 1945, another military contract involved utilizing the company’s sail and canvas operations to manufacture portable arctic shelters from insulated fabric—which could be dropped from a plane to provide a waterproof hut with an air-lock vestibule and built-in heating stove.

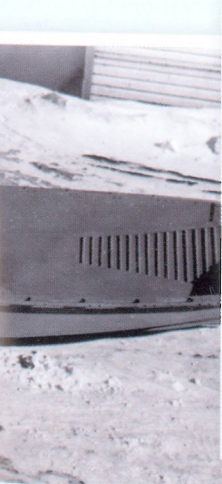
All the while, as WWII raged on, the company maintained its relationship with consumers through boating magazine advertisements, much like larger companies did. As consumer demand rose and production increased, the company acquired the former garage of The Inn Hotel on Cherry Street—located on Charlevoix’s north side—and established Plant #2. There, workers put the finishing touches on the boats’ hulls and sent them back to the main plant to be shipped by rail. The company’s 12,000-square-foot Plant #3 was located in Petoskey, Michigan, on Charlevoix Avenue. At peak production, the three plants employed about 175 people total.

Above left: A brochure featuring the Foster Boat Company’s offerings—including outboards and rowboats. Above right: The installation of a Tucker engine, as seen in the November 1947 issue of *The Boating Industry*.

## POST-WAR MARKET

After the war, the company returned to what it knew best: recreational boat production. But the market had changed since 1942, and the competition was fierce—with the likes of the Chris-Craft Corporation vying in the market.

To Harry Foster’s credit, he forged ahead, offering time-tested small watercraft and a new 26-foot cruiser designed by James Bellinger. The cruisers were powered by a 73-, 93-, or 102-horsepower Gray Marine Express-series motor, and they were constructed of marine plywood or planks of cedar, cypress, or spruce coated with ivory paint. The decks and cabin top were painted blue, and mahogany trim was varnished to make it shine.







*An advertisement for Garform-brand boats, which Gar Wood Jr. produced after his move to Oklahoma.*

The company retained many of the production techniques incorporated during the war years to make fast, sturdy boats at a reasonable cost. Consumers could also purchase smaller models as kits that could be assembled in two or three spare evenings, according to company literature.

Some of the cruisers were even equipped with six-cylinder, 150-horsepower engines that were delivered personally in August 1947 by budding automotive innovator Preston Tucker, who sold the engines to fund some of his other projects. His connection to Charlevoix stemmed from his grandmother, a summer resident on the north side of Pine River Channel. Many Charlevoix residents still remember the Tucker sons' exploits on the water and around town.

Even though it received praise from boating magazines and consumers alike, the bulky, heavy cruiser did not sell well—although the Foster Boat Company's rowboats and outboard boats did very well in sales. By the 1949 New York Boat Show, the company spotlighted its best-selling product in a specially designed display, adorned with lights and a wire sound recording.

During the late 1940s, the board of directors for the company included Gar Wood Jr., son of the famous Detroit boat racer and builder. Wood and his family owned a large home on Lake Charlevoix's Oyster Bay that once previously belonged to automotive pioneer Ransom E. Olds.

After Wood returned home from the war, he began the Wood Marine Engineering Corporation in Foster's Plant #2. In 1947, Wood moved his company to Tulsa, Oklahoma—where he had attended college—to produce Garform-brand, inboard-motor-powered fiberglass boats. His company is believed to be the first in history to put that combination into production.



*Lieutenant Gar Wood Jr., a former member of the company's board of directors.*

## FOSTER BOATS FADE AWAY

As the 1940s drew to a close, the Foster Boat Company struggled on with its small craft designs, including 14-foot sailboats, 12- and 14-foot outboard-powered boats, and 16-foot outboard-powered cruisers.

The company also made toboggans, canoes, snow scooters, and kapok life vests, and it had small contracts with the government before and during


the Korean War. Those contracts mostly involved canvas construction, which was initially completed in the Petoskey plant and later moved to Ironton, Michigan, when Harry Foster decided to relocate there in 1952.

In 1950, naval architect James Bellinger left the company to open Bellinger Marine. Bellinger's departure, along with the increasing competition in the pleasure-boat-building industry, made it easy for Harry Foster to sell out to the newly formed Huron-Charlevoix Boat Company in 1952. Foster was placed in charge of that company, which constructed 16-foot outboard cruisers for consumers and rescue boats for the U.S. Navy, though neither was successful.

Huron-Charlevoix was part-owned by boat industrialist George Glen Eddy, who also owned the Huron-Eddy Company and many other boat-building companies, if only for a short time, such as Eddy Boats in Bay City and the Century Boat Company of Manistee. Eddy would later move to Holland, Michigan, to start the ill-fated Power Boat Company in 1960, which lasted only one year before it failed.

With increased competition, smaller profits, and Harry Foster's wife finding it harder and harder to contend with a bad heart and Northern winters, the company moved operations to Conway, Arkansas, in 1953. There, the company continued making oars for the world market until the 1990s.

The two Charlevoix plants were sold to Robert Schleman's South Bend Tool & Die, which made fiberglass recreational equipment. Schleman later sold the buildings, and they were used for storage for many years before being converted into condominiums in the mid-1980s.

Today, the Ferry Avenue building is known as the Foster Boat Works Association and contains a display of the Foster Boat Company history for generations to enjoy. A 1949 outboard boat is owned by the Charlevoix Historical Society and is periodically put on display. 

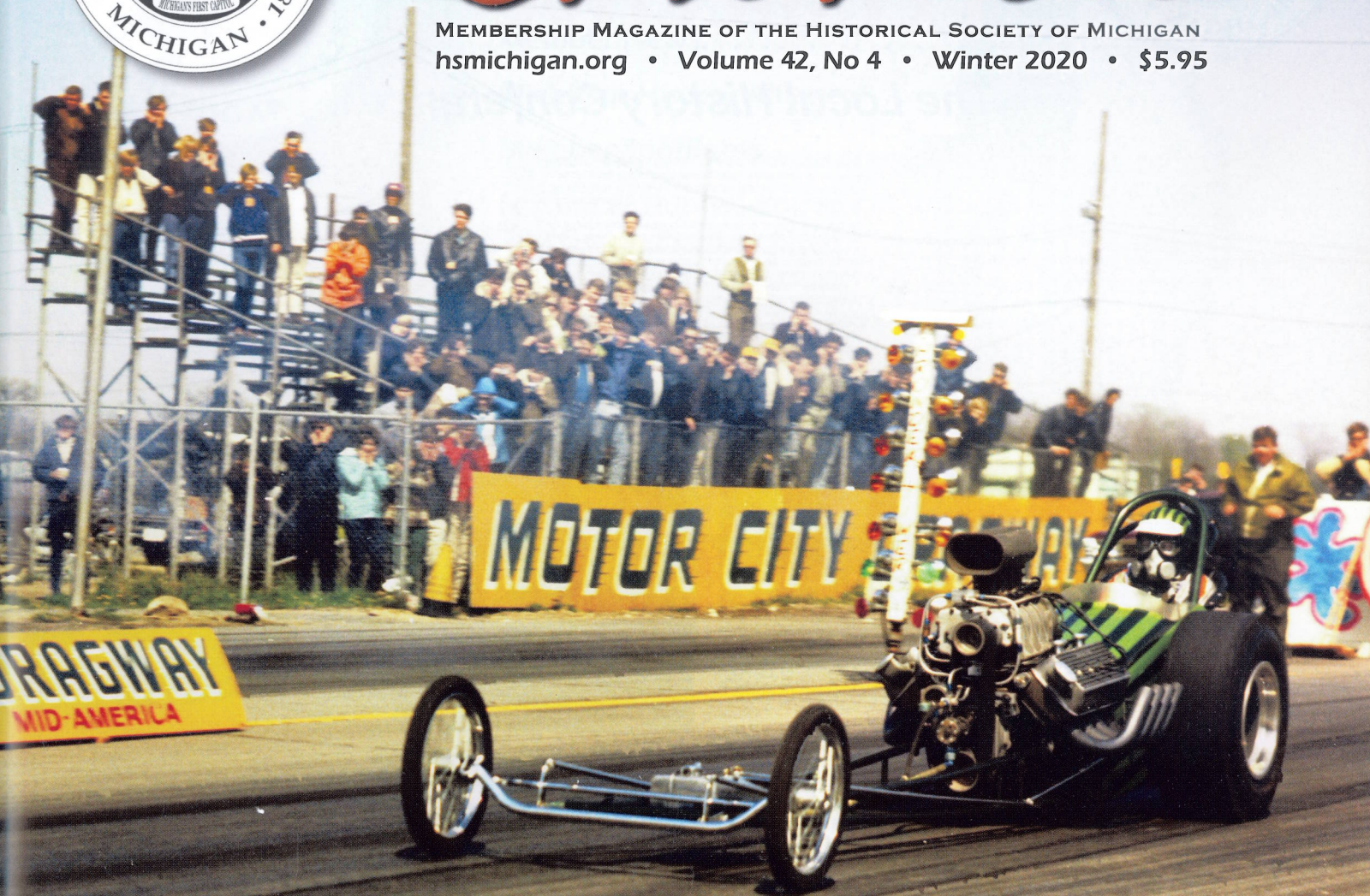
**Geoffrey D. Reynolds** is the director of the Joint Archives of Holland at Hope College and author of the book *Boats Made in Holland: A Michigan Tradition*.





# Chronicle

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## The Rise and Fall of **MOTOR CITY DRAGWAY**

"For Pleasant  
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Recreation":  
The Foster Boat  
Company

Anti-German  
Sentiment  
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Wood

East Meets  
West:  
Michigan's  
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