

WILD ABOUT WHIRLWINDS (PART III)

by Howard Johnson

The decade of 1946 through 1956 were years of hard work. Charley Wingo, Ed Hewitt, and Charles Abramo transformed the remains of Allied Aviation into Molded Products, Inc. They moved all the equipment three times and put 35 friends and family to work building pontoon bridges, medical boxes, air rescue boats, canoes that weighed 37 pounds, lifeboats, a fleet of small sailboats for the Navy, and larger 24' sailboats for Luders in Massachusetts. It was also during this period, they went to the New York boat show every year and succeeded in signing up 40 boat dealers nationwide to distribute their line of fast, lightweight mahogany veneer runabouts.

Charley, Ed, and Charles set up shop in rented barns near Williamson Veneer in Cockeysville, MD, where they designed and built several dozen solid wood mandrels on wheels. These 30-foot long steel autoclave ovens – powered by 250 pounds of steam and 150 pounds of vacuum pressure – molded thousands of boats, baking each until rock solid. The threesome set up and ran a lumber mill, a huge veneer coating department, cutting and shaping departments, assembly rooms, and a painting and finishing room.



The founders worked most weekends improving every aspect of their operation. Designs were constantly critiqued and improved to keep up with the market. Hardware, fastenings, tools, construction methods, and advertising steadily evolved over time.

Charley Abramo often traveled to Philadelphia, to the Thompson Lumber Co., where he selected the finest, knot-free, straight grained mahogany. The record largest board brought by train was 21-foot long, 25-inches wide, and 6 inches thick.

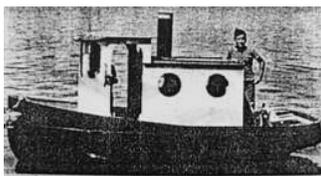
They worked all year round, renting local barns and stacking piles of boats for spring and summer sales. The third Charley – Charles Martin – drove the Chevy heavy duty pickup with a special trailer they built to haul eight boats at a time. He delivered boats throughout the year to dealers all around the United States. Each one was his baby; he kept touch-up paints and varnish on board and made sure every one was perfect before the papers were signed. Once, when several boats flew off the top in a huge storm, he took them back to the factory where they were repaired good as new.

After being flooded out 3 times – with all employees involved in the cleanup operation – they finally bought 3 acres nearby on the edge of a farm for \$1,000 per acre. It was a great relief to finally move into these new buildings on York Road.

THE WHIRLWIND STOCK RACERS

They modified their designs and went racing – everyone participated and all had some measure of success. Charley won first, second, and third prizes in a dozen races during the '46 to '49 era. They even sold cut down, stock racing models. Their successes made all the local papers.

They shipped boats unfinished for do-it-yourselfers. They painted or finished for individual tastes. Some models were just plain wood or fancy padded and upholstered with blonde decks called avoidire for magazine covers. A tiny promotional tugboat for kids was made in limited production. A custom, double ended Cleopatra's Barge was built for a special customer.



They had a Montgomery Ward contract for Sea King boats, and 300 per



year were set aside for spring with the special trim. Every year new models and designs were offered to keep the line fresh. Dealers would sell remaining stock as "new", each succeeding year, a nationally accepted practice at the time. Employees appeared in all ad photos, using color for the first time when they could afford this luxury.



In 1956, their New York Boat Show visit revealed that changes were sweeping the industry. The narrow, early models needed to be redesigned. For 1957 the whole Molded Products Inc. line was changed, and wider, more family friendly hull widths were introduced,

along with wrap-around windshields, solid floorboards, more bow flair and sweeping painted side trim. All bottom colors were now white, and hulls used more layers of veneer. Fancy new hardware and steering wheels and bigger engine capacity also appeared.

In '58 and '59 soft and hard tops were added and model sizes went to 19' and 21 feet. An exciting new cruiser, completely fitted out for weekend outings, debuted.



In 1960 and 1961 sales began to decline, due to the impact of fiberglass boats and the slowing economy. For the second time they built prototype hulls out of fiberglass. The quality of the materials they could buy was not good, and none of their craftsmen liked working with the new materials. The methods now required were quite the opposite of the ones they had been using. At the New York Boat Show where they had become friends with boat manufacturers from all over the country, they discovered that some 600 U.S. boat builders had closed their doors. Their larger boats did not sell well. The writing was on the wall. They had done everything they could, but they had to cut the salaries of all employees for 1961. Many cost reductions were made for '62, and vinyl decks, pre-manufactured seats, gold flecked steering wheels and different bow treatments were introduced. Still sales fell.

In December, the final boats were produced, and a closeout auction was held. Everything remaining went to the dump. The buildings and land quickly sold. Ed Hewitt paid every supplier and all the company's bills. The money from the land and buildings gave the founders a steady income. Fifteen years and fifteen thousand boats were behind them now, and they were the lightest, fastest and most beautiful mahogany boats ever made!



1960 CHRIS CRAFT SKI BOAT 17' – details on page 5.

"Very original and in one family on one lake since new."