

The "Special Sportsmen" of 1949

The Chris-Craft 25' Sportsman is a pretty special model in itself. After all, only 208 examples were built from 1946 to 1950. We know immediate post-war mahogany supplies were scarce, and very few 25' Sportsmen were built in 1946. The model was temporarily discontinued in 1947. As the flagship of the Chris-Craft line, and the spiritual successor to pre-war triple cockpit boats, Chris-Craft wanted to make sure the quality level of this model, in particular, was maintained at the highest level.

By the 1949 model year, mahogany was again available, and the three Smith brothers, the sons of Christopher Columbus Smith, decided the 25' Sportsman was the boat for them. Not just any "garden variety" 25' Sportsman would do, though. Theirs would be special!

Six 25' hulls were constructed in the Holland, MI plant, one for each Smith brother, and one each for their attorney, lumber supplier, and one for the Ford family. Each was equipped with twin 105 hp KL's (except for one). Each of the six boats have two hull cards, one from the Holland factory, indicting the boats were "to be completed by factory at Algonac", and another from Algonac, where very special modifications and equipment were installed.

Each boat received a shock-absorber dampened front seat, said to have been supplied by a friend of Bernard Smith, who manufactured them for the U.S. Army, as used in tanks. Rumor had it the seat did its' job so well, the Smith's thought owners would beat the bottoms out of their boats if they made it an option!

Each boat also received the optional aft seat, with a live well under the starboard 2/3 of the seat, and a cooler under the port 1/3. Each boat had an aft steering tiller installed, and a pre-war single pane folding windshield (except for one), and a fish pole locker with locking door. These guys were serious fishermen!

While production records confirm there were six of these boats built, it's unclear who got which boat. Hull 179 was the first, but whose it was has been lost. Hull 180 is noted "Owen" on the Algonac hull card, so we assume that belonged to Owen Smith. At Woods and Water, the International Boat Show held on Gull Lake, Minnesota in September, 2015, Chris Smith identified Hull 181 as having belonged to his father, Bernard Smith. Hull 182 was special among the specials, with red leather interior, red flooring, and twin ML 145 hp engines. It also had a "standard" vee windshield. Whose was this one? The attorney, of course, Wayne Van Osdel. Hulls 183 and 184 were delivered to Motor Boat Sales in Detroit. Hull 184 was acquired by its' current owner with unbroken provenance to the Ford family.

So we don't know exactly who, but the bigger question might be why? It certainly makes sense that the Smith brothers would build themselves whatever boats they wanted to have. Why would the notoriously parsimonious brothers provide such expensive gifts to suppliers, and why did the Ford family get one? We may never know.

What we do know, however, is only three of these boats are known to exist, and all three will be displayed at Woods and Water?

Hull 179 (Uncle Buster) Known for years as "River Rat", this boat fell into disrepair, but was rescued by Bob VanOrsdel, restored, and now calls Lake Okoboji in Iowa home.

Hull 181 (On Point) was restored by Freedom Boat Service in 2014, and currently lives on Green Lake in Wisconsin.

Hull 184 (Butterfly), the Ford family boat, was purchased over 20 years ago by its' current owner whose family enjoys it each and every summer in the Alexandria, MN area. Note the original upholstery in this one!