

HOW IT WAS DESTINY FOR ME TO END UP OWNING MY 31 CHRIS CRAFT COMMANDER BAD INFLUENCE

By Ted Schnitz



I grew up in Detroit, and spent my summer vacations up north on the beautiful “Chain of Lakes” So I experienced both the “City Life” and the, shall we say “On Golden Pond” life.

Before I was born, my loving Father came home from serving in the Navy during World War II with a passion for boats. As far as I know he may have had the passion before then, but that’s where the story begins for me.

He purchased a 30 some foot (I can’t remember the length, but I want to say 36 foot) triple cockpit, mahogany hull, twin engine, Gar Wood speed boat. She was called “Midnight Sun”. He became a member of the Detroit Yacht Club. My mother used to talk about how my Father was the only one in the Detroit Yacht Club that had a pilot’s license at that time, so he used to lead all the parades and runs up and down the Detroit River. My Mother and Father used to sand her down every spring and put a fresh coat of varnish on her. It sounded like he really loved that boat and that he took extremely good care of her. This is significant because he never really seemed to be materialistic, or care about his cars other than keeping them mechanically sound. But he would love when I asked about the boat. He would tell me stories about Chris Craft, Garwood, and Henry Ford. And how they would all race each other in their boats. My memory is failing me, but I think he said that Henry Ford owned a Chris Craft.

My Father sold the boat before I came into the picture, because my parents decided they wanted to adopt children. I think back then there was quite a process you had to go through to adopt, and that you had to have a certain amount of money in the bank. Or my parents were just planning ahead because I remember my mother telling me that my dad sold all his hunting guns and his boat to be able to adopt my sister and I. Looking back, even though my Father never said so, I know he missed the boat because he always kept a photo of her on the basement wall. It's a small 4x4 black and white photo, which I still have today in my office. That photo is what opened the door for me to know and ask about his boat. My Father used to always take my sister and me to the Detroit Boat Show when we were little. It was something we always looked forward to. And I also remember him taking me to the hydro-plane races and getting us right up to the stands where he said Gar Wood used to sit for the race.

One day my Father and I were driving down what I think was I-94, returning from somewhere. When suddenly my Father (Who never at any other time in my life showed any sign of wanting something more, especially something material, out of life but life itself) said "That's what I want some day". At first, I had no idea what he was talking about. He explained.... "See that boat right there? There was a huge boat on a trailer in front of us. He said "That's a Chris Craft Cruiser. That's the best boat being made today. That's what I want some day. A Chris Craft Cruiser." To hear my father say this was a big deal for me. It's the first memory I have of my father talking to me like a grown up, or one of the guys, or something. I was very young at the time, and this was a big deal. So I brainstormed with a child's mind and asked. "Well Dad why don't you get one?" He said "Because they are very expensive and we will have to wait until you are older" Or something like that. So I said "Well how much would it cost if you and I split the cost and share it?" He said, "Well when you're old enough it will cost about \$80,000.00, so it would be \$40,000.00 for each of us." I don't remember what was said next, I think it was quiet as we both sat there day dreaming.

As soon as we got home I devised a plan. I didn't understand about money yet, but I knew I didn't have any. So I decided to open a bank to get people (Mom, Dad, and my Sister) to give me their money. I made envelopes for all my family members and bugged them day after day to make deposits. Then the day came when I finally had acquired enough money for my half of the new Chris Craft Cruiser. (\$40,000.00) I anxiously waited for Dad to come home from work so I could present him with my bounty. Once I had his attention, I presented him with the money. It was at that exact moment that my Father decided to teach me about money and why 40 pennies was not equal to \$40,000.00 and why the Cruiser would have to wait.

Later in life I decided to use my paper route savings to build a boat. But I knew I would have to keep it small due to limited funds. About \$40.00 and I knew by now that \$40,000 was a lot more. I sat on the dock day after day wishing for a ride on one of the speed boats going by, without any luck. But now I would blow them all out of the water. I would build the fastest boat on the lake. I began production in the woods behind the cabin so as to not be detected by spies. Or maybe it was so Dad wouldn't catch me using his tools and hardware. I didn't know about marine plywood at the time, or that all leaks had to be sealed from the outside. But, I was pretty proud of my six foot flat bottom, square sides, and front wedge looking thing. I was most proud of my rope steering system that I stole from a previous attempt at a go-cart. (That's another story for another time.) I learned a lot from this experience, like all the first names of the men

working at the lumber yard, and hardware store, what support ribs were, that paint does not seal leaks, that fiberglass will separate from wood, what swelling is, and that wood gets really heavy when it swelled, and how to retrieve your outboard from the bottom of the lake when your transom rips off bounding across the waves. I also figured out how to make a profit off of this thing I called a boat, to be used for the next attempt at a boat. What I did was dig a big hole in the field, place the boat in the hole, sticking up about 4 inches, filled it with dirt, and started a worm farm. I sold the worms by the highway, until the local bait shop bought me out.

The next summer with a pocket full of loot from the worm farm, and more paper route funds, I purchased a \$100 14 foot aluminum hull fishing boat. I knew if I could get the weight forward it would fly across the water. I named it after my Dad's boat. "Midnight Sun 2" (That brought a tear to his eye. Well maybe it may have been a glare for spending my savings again, but I prefer to remember it as a tear.) To build a deck on the front, I needed to bend 2x4's to form to the hull sides. Then I could mount my deck ribs to the 2x4's. But how was I to bend the 2x4's? I told my dilemma to an old timer that used to make wooden fishing boats. He taught me something really cool. I sank the 2x4's into the lake for a few days. This made them softer. Then using large C-clamps I was able to bend them to the shape of the hull, and through bolt them. When they dried they were perfect. My deck turned out great. I purchased a used steering wheel with cables, and a throttle at a garage sale. All was fine except all I had was an old very loud air cooled 5 horse motor of my dad's, and I drove back and forth in front of the cabin all day until the neighbors complained to my parents. "Please let that kid ride out of the cove and around the point" Maybe that's where the glare came from. I then received more freedom, but I needed "More Power" A larger motor was in the plans, but motorcycles, classic cars, and other things became interesting, so the larger motor never happened, but eventually a new plan came to light. A bigger boat and a bigger motor. After all, I vowed to someday have the fastest boat on the lake.

Fast forward a few years. Finally I had a real job, making real money. I stripped down what I had done to the aluminum hull and put it back to a fishing boat. I bought a trailer and put together a package to sell. I took that profit, and the new money I had saved at the real job, and made my goal become reality. I bought a brand new 16 foot fiberglass boat and I bought the biggest motor that would fit on it. A 90 horse Evinrude outboard. Finally my goal almost became reality. I had the second fastest boat on the lake. Our neighbor had a 17 foot fiberglass boat with a Black Max 1150 that I could beat out of the hole, but he would slowly walk away from me. But when his boat wasn't in the water, I had the fastest boat! That status only lasted a year or two. Because then they came out with the bass boats that had 200HP plus.

The coolest thing and a very memorable moment, was when I showed my Dad the new store bought speed boat. Up until then and every time after that, whenever I showed my Dad a new car, truck, or motorcycle, I would hear the same type comments from my Dad. "That thing's too dangerous". "That thing uses too much gas". "That thing cost too much". "You're wasting your life away spending all you time in the garage". "You're wasting your money". But when I called my Dad over to my house, so I could show him the new speed boat, he said "She is beautiful" and headed towards his car. This moment topped all others. He returned from his car with a box that he presented me. In the box was a beautiful brand new Bendix Co.

binnacle (compass) that he brought back from the navy in World War Two. He was saving it for his cruiser. I realize now he must have by then given up on that dream. Also in the box were all his charts that he used to navigate the same areas I travel now. These items meant too much to me to put on that speed boat. The compass still sets on my desk. The charts I will talk about later.

Even though my Dad gave up on the dream of the Chris Craft Cruiser, he and my mother retired up north on the lake, with a fishing boat and a pontoon boat. I have those boats today and have just begun restoration on them both in their memory. When finished, I will save and leave them to my sons.

Fast forward about 25 years. My Mother passed. My father developed Dementia, and I moved him in with me. The place up north was sold and life's plans changed. My dream was to retire in my father's cabin, and now it was time to give up on my dream. I stored my speed boat and my father's boats away.

I met a beautiful woman (Lana), and we engaged. She helped me to take care of my father, until it overcame our abilities, and my sister moved him into a home. Sometimes in the evenings we would take walks towards the water to escape for a while. One night we decided to sneak into a marina and walk around there. There was a 30 foot Sea Ray for sale, so just out of curiosity I walked over and looked at the price on the sign. The price was about one fourth what I thought it would be. (The economy had really driven the prices down I discovered later.) Never before that moment did I ever consider a large boat. I always liked speed and fishing. I don't know what made me curious but remembering the dream of the cabin up north on the lake was gone, we tinkered with the idea of a cabin on the lake in the form of a large boat. We asked to see the boat. Once we went into the cabin, I hated it. I felt like I was in an ever shrinking tunnel. Nothing like a cabin at all.

We said our pleasant goodbyes to the owners and walked away. I don't want to sound way out there, or strange, but something like a strange act of fate happened. A mysterious couple saw us walking from the boat. They stopped us and asked if we were interested in a boat. We said not really and were just looking out of curiosity. We also said we didn't like what we saw and decided it really wasn't for us. The mysterious couple suggested we look at a friend of theirs boat before we made our decision not to buy a boat. They said their friend is only selling the boat because he has cancer and his days are numbered. I don't know why but even though darkness was approaching, we decided to agree to go see the boat. What could it hurt? Besides they said it was a special boat with a special history. I was intrigued.

We approached the boat and "OH MY G....." It was the most beautiful boat I had ever seen!!! It was like a beautiful classic historical Packard car sitting there glistening. We walked closer and all of a sudden I saw the brand name on the side. CHRIS CRAFT in beautiful script. I stood there in silence for just a few seconds, but it seemed like forever. My mind started racing. This is my Dad's dream boat!!! I thought..... This beautiful Chris Craft is a 1966. I would have been 5 years old. For all I knew, this could be the boat that was driving down the road in front of us that special day so long ago. I had to get this boat and take dad out on it before he was gone I thought. I didn't learn until later that Lana's first thoughts were, and I

quote, "This looks like an old man's boat, but I would like to see the inside" The boat's name (Bad Influence) was a perfect match, but that's a lot more stories for another time.



The next day after I gathered my senses, I decided to meet with the owner and do whatever I could to find enough flaws in the boat's structure to talk myself out of it. Besides the guy probably wanted way too much money for me, and Lana probably would hate it, I thought.

I'm not sure how to say this, but I didn't go out looking to find this boat. The boat and its owner found me. This guy seemed crabby on the phone, and was no different when we first met. I wasn't talking. I was just focused on checking out every inch of this boat's structure before checking out the power plants. Lana was talking to the guy and I don't know how it came up, but she ended up telling the guy about my love for old vehicles and my obsession over perfection, she told me later. By the time I got down in the engine compartment and discovered it had the original untouched 327F's that were just like the car motors I grew up working on (with the exception of the marine Add Ons), the guy's entire attitude changed. I can't explain it well, but he was now talking to me like I had already bought the boat. He wouldn't stop talking. He was telling me about every step of maintenance I had to do on every part of the boat. He was explaining everything he could think of, bad or good. I also found out later he had dropped his price from half of what he was originally asking. It's like he wanted it to go to us. Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe he just liked Lana's presence.

I couldn't find anything seriously wrong with the boat nor, that I didn't think I could fix. I loved it, and felt that it was already mine. Lana loved it also! She said "even though the Sea Ray was the same length and made us feel claustrophobic, the Commander felt roomy and fun." Once the guy told me the history of the boat, I wanted it even more. He showed me the original paper work proving that the boat was originally built for one of the Fisher Brothers, of General Motors Fisher Body Company. (Originally the Fisher Carriage Company.) I couldn't help but remember my Dad's rocker panels saying "Body by Fisher" Everything about this boat made me think of my dad.

The next day I came to my senses again and thought "What am I doing?" The guy will take us on the test drive and I will find problems then, and Lana will hate being out on the open water. It was a nice dream while it lasted. I did everything I could to convince myself not to take this huge step and instead be responsible and boring.

So we met with the guy for the test drive. As soon as I walked up he handed me my own set of keys, and a spare set. WHAT? Did I buy this boat in my sleep? I don't even remember showing him my interest. I thought I was displaying my poker face all along. I was confused and didn't say a word. When he started the motors and untied the boat, I sat down in the back. He said "What are you doing? You're driving". I said "I'm not driving. I don't know anything about handling a boat this big." He said "It's time to learn, get up there in the helm." I don't think I looked over at Lana because I didn't want to see the fear in her eyes. I thought "I can do this" I remembered the tests my dad put me through before letting me take the fishing boat out alone when I was 10 years old. He made me dock over and over again. Even in the rain. The procedure then was..... Well, I found myself repeating my father's words to my kids later in life, when returning from a ride. "Get your hands back in the boat. No touching the dock. A good landing needs no assistance. The boat should ease up with perfect alignment and the rope should fall over the piling as it comes to rest." Well this isn't a 14 foot fishing boat, on an inland lake, and let me take this opportunity to say that it's always a pleasant sight at the CCCC get together to see a crew waiting to assist.

The test ride was awesome and it was a pleasant surprise to hear Lana say, "Great Job" It was also pleasant to hear Lana say "That was fun. We are going to have a lot of fun on this boat." So, we talked the guy down a little more and bought the boat.

My beautiful bride Lana and I were married at the original Chris Craft factory in Algonac Mich. We departed there on the boat for our honeymoon, and headed across Lake Erie. On the way back we stopped at the Kean's Marina for the Chris Craft Commander Club Rendezvous in 2012, and we are still enjoying our constant honeymoon on the boat. It's been awesome owning my Father's dream boat, and spending so many fun times with my wonderful wife, and family. We've really made some great friends in the Chris Craft Commander Club.

My Dad's health, and mind worsened, and I never did get to take him out on the boat. But with all honesty and tears in my eyes as I write this, I will tell you this... From the maiden voyage and every voyage since,

my Father and his charts, have been right there in the helm with me, every moment. When weather kicks up, and things get a little scary, he even takes the wheel.

Ted and Lana

1966 31 Commander

“Bad Influence”

(In memory of the greatest people, I will ever know. My Mom and Dad.)

