

# Gar Wood, Speedboat King

By Vivian M. Baulch and Pam Shermeyer / *The Detroit News*

Gar Wood was only 5 feet 6 and never more than 130 pounds, but he had an extra-large appetite for speed and an imagination to match. He loved airplanes and boats, and his marriage of the two would make him the international king of the water in the 1920s and '30s.

Without formal education in engineering, Garfield Arthur Wood was a marvel at mechanics. He did more than any other American to develop the speedboat, becoming the first man to go 100 miles an hour on water, and the first to do two miles a minute in a boat.

The son of an Iowa ferry boat operator, Wood was an unknown 35-year-old inventor when he moved to Detroit in 1915. He bought the Miss Detroit boat, a proven winner, and went on to win a record five straight Gold Cup Races with a succession of boats.

In 1917 he decided to put an airplane motor into Miss Detroit III. The experts said it wouldn't work. It had too many delicate parts and would pound to pieces, they said.

Wood thought otherwise, figuring that airplane motors *had* to be more dependable than boat motors, since there was little margin for engine failure in the air. So he bought a Curtiss "12" engine, rebuilt it, and put it into Miss Detroit III. It worked beautifully and won the 15th Gold Cup Race on the Detroit River. "We hardly ever had to work on it," Wood said.

Working on engines and boats was the joy of Wood's life. He designed many boats, each more powerful than the last. The hydraulic hoist, which helps a boat turn or back up, was the first of Wood's many inventions and patents which helped make him a multi-millionaire by the time he was 40. He was the first man to design a hull strong enough to handle multiple airplane motors and make world-record speeds while remaining maneuverable.

In 1920, he took his Miss America I speedboat to England to compete for the coveted Harmsworth Trophy -- roughly equivalent today to the America's Cup as an international racing spectacle. Wood won. Detroit's downtown streets were jammed from Belle Isle to Randolph as the crowd awaited his return by seaplane. In America, Gar Wood's name had become as famous as Ty Cobb's.

Other Miss Americas stood up to challenges from England and France as Wood successfully defended the Harmsworth eight times.

In 1931, Miss America IX became the first boat to reach 100 mph, topping out at 102.256 mph. That year saw the most dramatic of all the Harmsworth races, with England's Kaye



Gar Wood, whose hair turned white in his fifties, was nicknamed "The Gray Fox."

Don the chief opponent, his Miss England II powered by a Rolls-Royce motor from the British Air Ministry.

Police estimated that a million fans lined the Detroit River to watch the races. Kaye Don got a better start in the first heat and beat Wood, who couldn't pass Miss England's wake. The hometown crowd was shocked. Wood had always seemed unbeatable.

Before the second heat, Don denied Wood's request for a 45-minute postponement so a crack in Miss America IX's fuel tank could be welded shut. Risking an explosion, Wood and his mechanic soldered the fuel tank by the starting time.

Larry LeDuc, dean of the country's powerboat writers, described what happened next: "The start of the second heat was a desperate man-for-man, nerve-against-nerve struggle between Don and Wood to get across the finish line first, each knowing that the difference in speed of the boats was so slight that the one in front would win if it held together.

"Each craft came down on the starting line, in front of the Detroit Yacht Club, with the throttles wide open. Like two meteors, they hit the line almost bow on bow, Wood slightly in front. "Wood beat Don to the first turn and the latter capsized going into the backstretch. But it didn't matter. Both Wood and Don had beaten the gun by seven seconds -- and five seconds was all the leeway allowed.

"Both were disqualified.



In 1931, Miss America IX (bottom), with Gar Wood at the wheel, battles Kaye Don and Miss England II on the Detroit River for the coveted Harmsworth Trophy. Both crossed the starting line too soon and were disqualified. But Gar's brother George won the race with Miss America VIII to keep the trophy in America.

"Wood's Miss America VIII, his brother, George, driving, finished the race, ran again and the Harmsworth stayed in America."

For seeming to trick Don over the starting line ahead of the gun, LeDuc dubbed Wood "The Gray Fox of Algonac," a name that stuck despite Wood's protests that he did nothing of the kind.

Wood built the Gar Jr. II, the world's fastest express cruiser, in 1921. The Gar Jr. II was a V-bottomed displacement boat, in contrast to the hydroplane design of the Miss Americas. A 50-footer with an 11-foot beam, the Gar Jr. II would be adapted by the military as the PT boat of World War II fame.

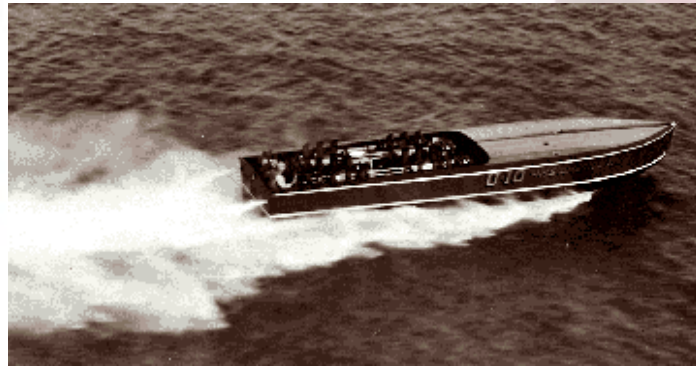
In a feat that captured the nation's imagination in 1921, Wood raced the Gar Jr. II against the Havana Special train, up the Atlantic coast from Miami to New York. Wood's boat made the 1,250 mile trip in 47 hours and 23 minutes, beating the train by 12 minutes.

Four years later, he raced up the Hudson River to beat the famed Twentieth Century Limited in a match race between Albany and New York by 22 minutes.

While Wood was a consistent winner, he had occasional setbacks and near-disasters. In August 1928, his Miss America VI blew up on the St. Clair River. His mechanic, Orlin Johnson, was seriously hurt, but eventually recovered. Wood, who always drove his own boats, escaped injury. But he had no boat, and the next race on the Detroit River was in September. So he fished his motors out of 90 feet of water, and redesigned and built a new creation, Miss America VII, in just 14 days.

He won the race.

Perhaps Wood's greatest design feat was the Miss America X, called a "madman's dream" by engineers. Powered by four 1800-horsepower, 12-cylinder Packard engines, the big boat smashed the world record, becoming the first to do over 2 miles a minute: 124.915 mph. It's a speed that, 64 years later, remains a respectable time for the Gold Cup race on the Detroit River. In 1932, Wood had no trouble defeating Kaye Don in a rematch.



Powered by four massive engines, Miss America X was 38 feet long and 10 feet wide.

After his final successful defense with Miss America X in 1933, Wood retired from racing. A wealthy man, he and his wife had homes in Detroit, Algonac, Georgian Bay, Miami and Honolulu, and a son, Gar Wood Jr., to carry on the speedboat racing tradition. He kept up his friendships with members of the Detroit Yacht Club, which he loved, having become its commodore in 1921.

Wood died at age 90 in Miami in 1971, just a few days before a gigantic civic celebration in his honor was to have been held in Detroit, celebrating the 50th anniversary since his first Harmsworth victory. "If he'd announced at that time that he was going to take off for the moon, his faithful following would have believed him implicitly," wrote George Van for The Detroit News upon Wood's death. "To the public, he was Tom Swift, Jules Verne, Frank Merriwell with a little bit of Horatio Alger thrown in."

