Gar Wood

By Tim Clark: June 2002

Part 1: The ultimate enthusiast in a benchmark age of performance and panache

In 1924, when Gar Wood and his mechanic, Orlin Johnson, arrived at the starting line for the Fisher-Allison Trophy Race on the Niagara River at Buffalo, they were dressed in evening wear—white ties, tail coats, the works. According to Anthony Mollica, author of *Gar Wood Boats: Classics of a Golden Era*, Wood even wore an opera hat fitted with a chinstrap. They won all three heats and were awarded the trophy looking dapper, if somewhat disheveled.

Wood's motivation for this particular publicity stunt was manifold and in all likelihood can be traced back two years, to when the committee overseeing the American Power Boat Association's (APBA) Gold Cup Races instituted sweeping changes in the rules governing the competition. Prior to 1922 Wood—teamed up with Christopher Columbus Smith, the eventual founder of Chris-Craft—had won five straight Gold Cups under rules that left the design of the boats and the engines that powered them virtually unregulated. Wood's deep pockets were matched by his unparalleled fervor for extreme performance, and every year following his first Gold Cup victory in 1917, he relentlessly upped the ante with bigger engines and brawnier boats. By 1921, with entries falling off because of the great cost of facing Wood and with the Eastern boat-racing establishment supremely resentful of upstart Midwesterners dominating the sport, something had to be done.

So the legend goes, with much truth in it. But there was a parallel rationale on the part of the APBA organizers, and it's clear in the rules themselves: All boats competing in 1922 would have to have a minimum of 25 feet of waterline length, and only displacement or semi-displacement hulls were allowed. Engines could not exceed 625 cubic inches in displacement, had to have wet exhaust, and had to be enclosed under hatches. Finally, every boat in competition was required to have seating capacity for four people. In short, the APBA throttled down competition to a level that produced boats that nonracers could cope with. They had, in fact, deliberately legislated the development of stylish speedboats—"gentleman's runabouts" that, as Wood playfully demonstrated, could be piloted in a tux.

Part 2: Wood was an engine freak

But two years would pass before Wood's display of humor regarding the new limits. Given his ferocious approach to boat racing, it's a wonder he ever came to view them with any sentiment other than rage. To appreciate

the extent to which his wings were clipped, just take a look at his winner of the 1920 and 1921 Gold Cups, the 28-foot *Miss America*. One of the first twin-screw hydroplanes built in America; she was powered with two 500-hp modified Packard Liberty V-12 aircraft engines and in the 1920 Cup set an average-speed record of 70.41 mph that stood for 16 years. With a Philippine mahogany stepped hull, so much for displacement. With iron at 1,237 cubic inches apiece, so much for a measly 625. With dry exhaust that made her look like a pipe organ hurtling at blistering speed, so much for engine covers. And with three maniacs crammed between the engines and the transom, so much for seating four.

An engineer by training who made his fortune by inventing and manufacturing the first hydraulic hoist for dump trucks, Wood was an engine freak. According to Mollica, when he bought the Gold Cup champion *Miss Detroit* from a strapped racing syndicate in 1916, he was after her 250-hp Sterling engine, not her worn-out hull. Soon after this purchase, he traveled from Detroit to nearby Algonac, Michigan, on Lake St. Clair, to look up *Miss Detroit*'s builder, the C.C. Smith Boat and Engine Company. By the end of his visit, he owned a controlling interest in Chris Smith's yard and had commissioned a new vessel for the Sterling engine, the 1917 Gold Cup winner *Miss Detroit II*.

For years to come Smith and his principle designer, Napoleon Lisee, would build hull after hull to cope with Wood's mania for more muscle. According to Jeffery Rodengen, author of The Legend of Chris-Craft, Wood was the first in the United States to power a raceboat with an aircraft engine when in 1917 he managed to buy a prototype Curtiss V-12 for *Miss Detroit III*. Smith and Wood were able to boost the engine's full-throttle rpm by 350—to 2,000—and stripped it of more than 70 pounds. "It now weighed in at a slender 1,250 pounds and 400 horsepower," writes Rodengen, "compared with 1,650 pounds and 250 horsepower for the Sterling aboard *Miss Detroit II*." The new boat took that year's Cup, and Wood was committed to modified aircraft engines forever after.

Part 3: Having lorded over the Gold Cup for years, Wood relished the new challenge

He hit the mother lode at the close of World War I when he was able to buy surplus Packard Liberty aircraft engines "by the boxcar load at literally pennies on the dollar," says Mollica. The end of the war also allowed resumption of the Harmsworth, the unlimited British International Trophy races that were a de facto world championship. Having lorded over the Gold Cup for years, Wood relished the new challenge. Anticipating the possibility of rough seas on the race course near the Isle of Wight, but hoping for a calm day, Wood took two challengers to the 1920 event: for heavy weather, the beefy 38-foot *Miss Detroit V*, with a pair of Liberty V-12s; and for a mill pond, the aforementioned *Miss America*, 10 feet shorter but also sporting a pair of Libertys, for a total of 1,000 hp.

Wood was in luck. The day was calm, and the lighter boat triumphed. But as proof of Smith's and Lisee's superior boatbuilding, it was her agility and not

her brute power that won the day. According to racer J. Lee Barrett's 1939 account quoted by Rodengen, *Miss America*'s engines missed on several cylinders throughout the race, but because she was steered with a rudder mounted at her forefoot, she cornered far more tightly than the competition. Before the race the British had scoffed at the bow rudder; the following year their challenger had one.

By the time he retired from racing in 1933, Wood had won the Harmsworth nine times with a succession of boats that culminated in the 1933 winner *Miss America X*. By then he was shipping an obscene quantity of horsepower. In 1931 he'd become the first man to break 100 mph on a straightaway when *Miss America IX* took him to 102.2 mph with the help of twin Packard 3A-2500s. According to Packard historian E.K. Muller, writing at the Seattle Hydroplane and Raceboat Museum Web site, these engines were supercharged by Schwitzer-Cummins to a whopping 1,600 hp each, double their original rating. In *Miss America X* he used four of them, ramped up again by Schwitzer-Cummins to a total of 7,600 hp divided between two props. His successful defense of the Harmsworth was no trouble that year, nor was boosting his world-record straightaway speed to 124.9 mph.

So just what was Wood doing back in 1924 pottering around the course of a limited sweepstakes in a precious little runabout called *Baby Gar*? Selling boats, that's what. By then it was clear to him that the 1922 rules change had ushered in a new era in American boating. Chris Smith had recognized it and ended his partnership with Wood in 1923 to start Chris-Craft. Mollica notes that by 1924 Wood was already building exquisite 33-footers for persuasive clients such as William Randolph Hearst and P.K. Wrigley. Now he was ready to go into steady production. He may have been frustrated with limited racing, but a little publicity for Gar Wood Inc. couldn't hurt, especially if it poked some fun at the APBA. And, you know, there was always the Harmsworth.