Up until the 1950's, very few people had money for motorboats. Our family was solidly middle class and we didn't own our first motorboat until 1949, and then it was Peterborough Lakeside with a Martin 60 for power. The great majority of power boat owners on the Rideau and St. Lawrence systems were businessmen and successful professionals, and sometimes the merely rich. An inboard boat, even a cheap one would cost you about $600 by the late 1920's and that was as delivered. You still needed a boathouse to keep it in, gas and oil and grease to run it, and the cost of frequent repairs to bent props, leaking bottoms and the annual ritual of repainting the bottom and scraping, sanding, and re-varnishing the decks and interior. After the Great War, the shape of the launch was changing. It still had a long foredeck, housing the gas tank and engine. But the hull had widened at least to give a beam of five and a half feet from the original four. There were more powerful engines available. The prewar launches needed to be very thin to provide the maximum speed from the very small engines of the time-most of them were between five and nine hp. Most of them were stable enough in calm waters. But drive them broadside against the waves and it was like going sideways on a rollercoaster. This was what the Edwards family experienced with their first Nichol boat.

Overloaded boat near Smiths Falls, Ontario, likely an early Nichols, circa 1910

There were two boatbuilders of note on the Rideau Lakes in 1900, Davy Nichol in Smith's Falls and Will Dowsett in Portland. Davy Nichols' father Thomas Nichol had moved to Canada from Scotland to find work as a stonemason and built a small wood frame house in Smith's Falls (stone houses were for the well off) in 1868. Davy was born in 1858, one of six children. Along with the house they built a small workshop in the yard. In their earlier years, Davy, and his older brother Adam (or Addie) were avid outdoorsman. All the brothers were crack shots but they still needed duck decoys. Early decoys were often crude and awkward, sometimes little more than blocks of wood with a vaguely duck shaped head nailed on (crude and amateurish then but worth a fortune these days as rustic art) so they sent away for some proper decoys shown in a hunting magazine. Both were surprised at the poor finish and look alike quality. Therefore Addie began to carve his own decoys and Davy followed suit. Along with decoys they also needed boats and Davy, already a talented carpenter, did a little research around town and began to build rowing skiffs. He picked up the trick of carving out a half model out of a block of sheets of wood glued together, then making little pencil marks down the side of the model where the inner hull molds would be taken from. The mold shape was transferred from the half model on a sheet of wrapping paper and the mold was cut from the wrapping paper. Once he had the knack of doing this the rest followed suit. One of his earliest creations had a odd fishlike tail at the stern. By the 1880's his boats were standardized skiffs and he was already making a name for himself as a skilled builder. Many of the boats used ash ribs, but Nichol used white oak ribs, which he thought were more rot resistant. He may have been right as a surprising number of his boats have survived. He chose British Columbia red cedar to plank his boats, preferring this over the local and cheap white or "swamp" cedar. For decks and trim he used cedar, and for some of the more high-end projects, walnut and cherry, which were available locally and mahogany, if the customer wanted to pay the max. Once he bought two standing butternut trees, but it turned out they were completely rotten inside so he stayed away from butternut after that.

By 1900 Davy had more or less taken over the little shop in the yard and his little business was a going concern. All of his boats were built to order only, even simple things like duck monitors. All of these boats were built with hand tools, planes (some made to order by Nichol). There was no electricity. Most of these boats wouldn't have benefitted much form electricity anyway. Much of the work was by hand anyway power wouldn't have sped things up. Nail and

screw holes were drilled out by either the brace and bit or the classic eggbeater drill (a handy item still available in hardware stores up to a few years ago). Some of the early ribs were soft enough when steamed to have a nail driven right through them without a hole. This apparently was Dowsett's method as well. It might work for the little 1/2 skiff ribs. Nichol generally worked alone, but he needed an extra pair of hands to do the rib nail clenching. The design of the boats was all his own. Like many builders he didn't rely on boating magazines but simply on a knowledge of how displacement hulls moved through the water. He had a continuous backlog of boat orders, even though boat building was primarily a winter time profession. Like many other boat builders he preferred to save summers for camping and fishing. Some days he could pull in as many as 25 fish in a day. I don't know what you would do with that kind of catch, there was only very limited space in the icebox and I recall that half a pike was more than enough for dinner.

Davey Nichol takes a small sailing skiff out for a test.

By 1905, customers began to request gas engine powered skiffs. Like many of the early builders he simply beefed up the rowing skiff so it could handle a one- or two-cylinder St. Lawrence engine. The great majority of boats on the Rideau Lakes chain were open deck launches mostly with 4-8 hp engine power. The most powerful boat on the system by 1911 was the Ryan's Shamrock with its 18 hp Erd engine. The covered long foredeck was a rarity as well. Even so the Shamrock was small potatoes compared with the super speed boats on the American side of the St Lawrence and rich cottagers in Muskoka and their 100 and 150 hp power plants. How little things have changed!

1910 Nichol Rideau Passages

Most of Nichol's boats sold for $100 or so, somewhat more if they were powered with a gas engine. The Nichols were never wealthy but they kept what they made and lived a modest lifestyle. Addie and Davey never married and lived in their parents' little white painted wood frame house their entire lives. At the time unmarried children stayed together, usually living

with their parents and finally each other. There was no reason to move out unless you were married. Only the third brother, John married and had children. Even for families well off enough to have cottages had separate cabins for unmarried adult children. Unmarried adult brothers would sleep in the same room.

Motor boat on Rideau Lake, 1907

The customers of the boatbuilder's were another matter. They were usually very well off. Most small middle-class cottagers (such as my grandfather) could only afford a small skiff and a summer rental fee. Moneyed cottagers could buy a beautiful piece of property but building a cottage and boathouse and buying a big boat still cost real money. The Edwards family (descendants of lumberman J. R. Booth) had bought a place on the northwest side of Big Rideau in the early 1900's. (they bought a second property from a Mrs. Spalding in 1918 and installed a boathouse). Mr. Edwards built the family's first motor boat himself, probably a heavily built wide beamed slow steamboat style hull with a canvas canopy. By 1913, this was looking like

old hat, so he contacted Davy Nichol to build a fast motor launch. Nichol designed a boat very much along the modern lines of a Dey or a Gilbert. It was actually closer to Edgar Dey's style, 4 and a half feet wide, twenty-six feet long and no bow flare to speak of so any wave would wash over the deck. There was no real protective combing so this would have been a wet boat. It was powered by a 2 cylinder 8 hp Roberts engine. It was likely a great deal faster than the first boat and it was a lot more difficult to handle than its driver realized. Mr. Edward's son Gordon took his (future) wife out for a picnic one summer day and when they set back the wind picked up suddenly and they found themselves battling three-foot waves. It was not a pleasant ride as the boat pitched wildly and them hammered down. At one point the boat was caught in a cross swell and Mr. Edwards thought that they were going to go right over. The boat was officially named the Edna but it was referred to as the "Log" for its propensity, so typical of the early speed launch, to roll from side to side.

Nichol motor skiff Manotick Classic Boat Club photo

The Log was an open deck launch, with the engine under an engine box. This was Nichol's usual design style for building motor boats. A long foredeck would only get in the way of ready access to the engine, which always needed adjustment and attention. This boat later had a long deck added to cover the engine bay, but another 1915 Nichol boat, now known as Rideau

Passages has the original open deck configuration.

Wego, a Nichol launch from 1915 Manotick Classic Boat Club photo

After the war, Mr. Edwards contacted Nichol to build a new launch, one that would be a little more seaworthy. This boat was 23 feet long but much wider and five and half feet beam and rode the waves satisfactorily. This was known as the Edina and it was a favorite of the Edwards family out of all the boats they had owned. However, only a few years later they took it to watch the Rideau Ferry regatta and it caught fire, probably from a leaking gas line that filled the bilge with gas and then went off when the engine was restarted. Edina burned quickly to the waterline and sank. No one was injured, but shortly after Mr. Edwards was back at Nichol‘s shop again ordering a new boat. This time he wanted one that could do everything, that had the width and seaworthiness of Edina, the sleek style of Edna and this time real speed. This was going to be a long deck launch, 28 feet long and six feet wide. Nichol had to add 6 feet onto the little shop just to accommodate it. Even so it would have filled the shop and there wouldn’t

have been much more than a foot and a bit of walk around the room on either side. Nichol was a slightly built man, but this was a squeeze. Nichol used his favorite mix of cedar sides and bottom held in place with white oak ribs, keels, and stringers. The deck and seats were to be trimmed in Honduras mahogany, which the Edwards family was able to obtain as their building supply business included imported exotic woods. This time Nichol built the forward part of the hull with a nice flare to deflect waves and keep them from blasting over the deck. Most of the launch builders use this shape now. The engines were big enough so they didn't have to rely on narrow low-profile canoe like hulls for speed, which was important because they needed real muscle to push this boat. Until only recently the 18 hp engine in Shamrock was the ultimate in local power. Even in the early 20's, the great majority of power boats still only had three to eight horsepower engines. Most of them were two stroke flip the flywheel engines. In 1911 Kermath Manufacturing put out the Model 20, a four-cylinder four cycle 180 cubic inch engine, engines which provided a 12 hp and weighed about 450 pounds. The power to weight ratio was almost embarrassing compared with the high performance 2 strokes, but they were easy to start and reliable (unlike the 2 strokes), and that went a long way when family and friends wanted to go for a boat ride. By the 1920's it was Kermath that ruled the boat engine market and the multitude of 2 stroke builders had folded up. Adding an electric start unit in 1922 was the deal breaker and now you could start your boat with the press of a button. An equally popular alternative was the marinized Ford engine, which was simply a Ford Model T engine with a marine reverse gear attached to it. This refit was provided by St. Lawrence Engine and was a great deal more practical than building their own 4 cycle engine, which they had looked into. Stewart Taggart replaced the 8 hp Lockwood Ash in *Bonito* with a Ford. Any car engine could be marinized this way, and a variety of auto engines were adapted, such as the Durant (actually a Continental Red Seal), Packard's, Chryslers (which replaced the 18 HP Erd in the Ryan's *Shamrock*).

Davey Nichol's Gran-D, purchased by the Edwards family. Mrs. Edwards was daughter of J. R. Booth, Ottawa biggest lumber cutter and wholesaler. Gran D, in the photo back was 28 feet long and had a 100 hp Sterling for power. Boat in foreground is 1920 Dowsett Ju-el, 20 feet long. Photo taken in Bob Sneyd's boathouse on Fancy Free Island on Big Rideau.

There were bigger engines, for those who wanted to spend more money. The luxury power of the day was the Sterling which could be had in four- or six-cylinder configurations. The largest of the prewar Sterlings was the 100 hp six cylinder, which went into the largest of the Gilberts, the grand 36-footer model, which was enough to push a 24 X 5-foot launch to 25 mph at full throttle. The other big engine was Scripps, a successful engine manufacturer set up by a boat crazed heir to the Scripps-Howard newspaper chain. Nichol and Mr. Edwards settled on a Sterling six-cylinder 100 hp. The result was near perfection, a fast comfortable launch that could go 35 mph with relative safety, unusual for a displacement speeder, which usually had

control issues over 30 mph. The only oddity was the windshield, which was wood framed and curved and looked strangely Victorian on this modern boat. Gran D's had a substantial amount of flat planing hull surface at the middle and stern and this as well as the healthy power allowed it to keep it stem fairly level at speed, contrasting with the Muskoka launches which tended to squat down at the stern and pitch the bow ay up at high speeds. But the Gran D was Nichol's only big, long deck. After that he went back to building small boats again. Thirty miles down the lake, the Dowsett shop was turning these big boats out on a regular basis.

Ward McKim family boat Starlet, from McKim cottage on Star Island. This is Nichol's last boat before retirement. Nichol was moving towards a centre-drive runabout shape and style, but this is as far as he would go.

<u>William J. Dowsett: Big Rideau's master builder</u>

Will Dowsett and his brother Reg opened up a carpentry shop in the village of Portland in 1892. Like most boat builders of the time, they set up shop well away from the waterfront, up where Highway 29 is now. In Victorian days, the waterfront was where only the poorest lived. People had overcome their centuries old aversion to water but there was some lingering suspicion about it. Several hundred of the casualties on the Rideau Canal project had occurred on Cranberry Lake (not from malaria, but from some flu like mosquito borne disease similar to West Nile

Virus). Water was for fishing on or occasionally swimming in, but not to live or work next to. The Dowsett brothers-built carriages initially, but as Rideau Lake was becoming a sport fishing centre in the 1880‘s, they turned their hand to building fishing skiffs. An affable community minded man, Will Dowsett turned up in many local activities, crushing ice for ice cream socials or helping out with a picnic.

Will’s brother Reg Dowsett moved on to other work in 1900. By then Will was getting regular orders for his skiffs, particularly from the various fishing guides as well as the fishing camps and lodges such as the Opinicon. Needing extra hands, in 1912 he took in a chore boy named Wendell Brown. Brown’s father had died and his mother had remarried and the new stepfather, who was a farmer, handyman and sometime carpenter, didn’t care much for Wendell and without actually kicking him out the house he did little to provide for him. He was sent away from school on his first day because his clothes were a ragged mess. So he had no schooling. After that his stepfather more or less treated him as an employee and put him directly to work, even at the age of six. One of his first jobs was to help the stepfather who was working at the Edward’s cottage. Wendell’s job was to row the boat over to the cottage. A year later he was sent into the logging camps for the winter.

Arrah Wanna, 1920 Dowsett motor skiff, customized with a steering station, otherwise a stellar restoration.

At the age of 10 the stepfather then put Wendell to work at Dowsett's shop where he learned the trade from the rib end. This was at least some decent employment for a change and he stayed for 4 years. He worked hard (the normal 10-hour weekday and 9-hour Saturday) but he ate his lunches at the Dowsett's and they gave him decent clothes and some semblance of family support. He found Mr. Dowsett to be a kindly man if a bit odd and distant.

He began by helping Mr. Dowsett set the rib into the boat and then pounding the nails through. In time they could plank and rib a skiff in a day. The ash ribs were green and dripping when

they went into the steamer and were so soft when they came that Brown was able to pound the nail right though the plank and rib without having to pre-drill the hole. (I tried it with a somewhat drier oak rib and the copper nail did actually go through the other side, but then it stuck and crumpled with the next hammer hit. Dowsett skiffs were nailed with iron nails, which were much stronger). The small foredeck was made of cedar and there was a modest half combing oak piece at the bow and stern decks about 2" wide. Each seat had four iron braces attached to four ribs. This gave the hull added strength as well as helping to hold the boat together again the strain of rowing. Generally a skiff was a two-man boat, although you could fit three in it, as long as they were light. The wood of choice for the planking was yellow, or swamp cedar. Wendell found it hard on saws, even more than hardwoods and regular sharpening was needed. Cedar is a wet wood with some soft areas and other hard spots and saws catch and buck and drag and they do wear out quickly. They built between 50 and 60 skiffs a year. My Grandfather bought one in 1925 when he rented the family's first cottage near Westport.

1934 Dowsett motorized fishing skiff Manotick Classic Boat Club photo

The skiffs were mostly for the fishing guides and they were used hard. Tourists unused to tippy boats fell into them. The wood was gouged with hooks, fish knives and burnt with fallen cigar and pipe ashes. Boats were banged up on Big Rideau granite. Fish goo, bits of lunch and chewing tobacco juice accumulated in the bilge. The sun and rain boiled off the varnish. When the wind came up the little boats would row through the three-foot waves, pitching up and pounding down. Put up on land for the winter the planks dried out and shrank in the frigid winter air. Snow and ice accumulated on the upturned hulls and had to be cleared off or the weight would cause warping. Each year the boats had to be repainted and revarnished and after a few years the once bright cedar colors faded to a uniform dirty yellow brown. They didn't last forever. These were business assets and eventually they would get too leaky or rotten and it was

time for a new one.

It was worth it. Big Rideau was one of the great sport fishing lakes in Ontario (and still is, in spite of a disastrously stupid bio-engineering program undertaken in the early 1960's to increase the trout population). Little Sunfish and Pumpkinseeds and perch were everywhere although they were a lot of work to clean and didn't come with bragging rights ("a pan of sunnies"). Whitefish were boring looking and not much in the fighting department and the fact that they were bottom feeders did not help their image. They ended up a on a lot of local dinner tables and were a popular catch in the ice fishing season. Pike lived in shallow and weedy areas where they could hide and scope out passing meals. They looked mean and business-like but I always found them to be predictable when caught, whipping about initially, then relaxing and letting themselves being dragged to the boat when they made one big jerking dive and usually broke the 8 lb. test line if you weren't quick enough to release the reel. They were more trouble than they worth on the dinner table as you had to chew slowly to find and pull out the needle like ribs. Bass were much better both for fighting and eating. They preferred the drowned lands at the north end of Lower Rideau where they could hang out around sunken tree stumps or in indents in the cattail walls fisherman referred to as "holes". Pickerel has a good dinner table reputation. The king of sportfish was the trout, which lived in the deepest part of the lake. Adult Pike and Bass averaged 3-4 lbs. Every now and again someone would pull in a 5-pound bass. 10 pounders were the raw material of fish stories. "You moved. Now you've gone and scared it away." Somebody knew some guy whose friend had caught one years ago and the photograph was around somewhere. Trout could grow up to 25 pounds and there were many of them, as the straining forearm muscles of the lucky fisherman attest to. It was the trout that brought in the tourists and there was no such thing as a limit. You could catch as many as you liked as long as you or someone ate them- there wasn't the conspicuous show-off wastage and greed that became such a problem with the 1950's fishing crowd.

All fishing poles were bamboo or bundled strips of wood glued together. Most of the lines were a thick green cable with about a 25 lb. test rating. Since the trout tended to hang around the granite lake bed the fishermen used a kind of downrigger system, with a huge reel that looked like it came off a move projector. Basically you attach a nickel plated or aluminum spoon with a hook attached (no bait) and let it sink, sometimes down 25 and sometimes 150 feet and then bounce it along the sea floor. The dull flash from the spoon attracts the trout and hopefully it will bite before it gets a closer look and realizes "oh yeah it's one of those damn things". But the skiffs were limited. You could only row so far. By 1905 motorboats were popping up along the Rideau system. The little 14-foot skiff was far too flimsy to mount an engine in. With the

exception of the go-fast motorboats in Ottawa and Brockville, most local motor boat hulls were converted steam boat hulls, very heavily built, beamy and very slow. Conley in Westport and Elgin Boat Works in Elgin all built boats like this. On the side they looked sleek enough but from the rear you realized how wide they were. But the wider they were, the more stable, something to consider when you are fishing.

The existing skiff was a fast-pulling boat, so Dowsett simply made it larger and put it in a wider keel and ash engine beds. He added a steering system that was comprised of sash cord running through loops and controlled by an iron ring attached to a handle. The cord looped around the ring and you simply pushed the handle forward to turn right and pulled back to go left. There were two steering stations, one at each seat bench. The motor of choice was the 3 hp St. Lawrence; however this engine didn't supply the margin of speed and power wanted. In the fishing game faster is always better. Later he installed the twin cylinder 8hp and this became the standard style of fishing skiff the Dowsett shop produced for thirty more years. It was a perfect set up and there was no need to change it. It was fast and tough and relatively light. It was simpler and more powerful than the fancy Dispro with its retractable propeller shaft and 3 hp Waterman engine. The fishing guides and local cottagers were pretty familiar about where to and where not to go on the lake and bending a propeller was not cool.

In 1906 Dowsett's brother-in-law, Sylvanus Waffle, ordered a motor launch. The Waffles were prosperous farmers and had a cottage on an island in Big Rideau. At 21 feet in length and 5 1/2 feet wide this was a big boat for the time. It was built in the style of the time, with a short fore and rear deck and a single open passenger cockpit. It had what was known as a beaver tail stern, where the sides turn in and slope down to the waterline at the rear. This was a very difficult piece of carpentry. You can't use ribs, the stern planking had to be shaped over frames. That's the easy part. The side planks have to be steam bent, resulting in a 90' turn in the wood over four feet. Not to mention this is a compound turn as the bend is three dimensional. It's almost impossible with today's woods, which are cut, kiln dried and then stored before going on sale. There are some stories of builders bundling up fresh planks and tying it to a rock and throwing it in the river for a week. Soaking in water would help a little, but if the wood is under 15% moisture it is better for the fireplace. Faced with this kind of bend, many (most probably) modern day boat restorers rely on the glued laminate approach as the thin wood strips are easy to bend. In the early days, logging usually occurred nearby and the only way to make this work was to cut the tree down in spring, mill it right there, throw it in the steam box and hope for the best. Local wood was cheap and plentiful, and so was patience as you hauled the plank out, clamped on the easy end and then began the long, short groaning push and pull as you and the

assistant pulled the plank closer to the frames, clamping as you go and hoping not to hear the telltale crick crick crick SPRAACK sound.

A classic Dowsett skiff, the tell-tale are the iron seat brackets. 1910's apprentice Wendell Brown said the Dowsett shop could turn out one of there every three days. He wasn't much older than the toddler in the boat when he went to work.

As a finishing touch Dowsett built a canopy for the boat, now named the K.A.R.L. (the first letter of first names of the four Waffle kids).

Will Dowsett's own sons Reg and Claire were growing up in the shop as well. Wendell Brown liked Reg but he didn't get along so well with Claire. Reg had the boatbuilding talent while Claire was more interested in the marina and service part of the business. Skilled though he was, Reg was also losing interest in life in the shop and was taking correspondence courses to become an actuary. Nonetheless, they all worked on the first big launch, built in 1911 for the

Workmans, a well-off family from Montreal who had a cottage on Big Rideau. This boat was 30 feet long and was powered by a 2-cylinder St. Lawrence (most likely the big twin 12 hp model which would have been necessary to push a boat this big). The Workman's boat was planked entirely in local cedar and had rock elm ribs. The mahogany deck finish that would appear on later Dowsett's was unheard of then- it was too expensive to import and put on boat built in Portland. The launch and first test of this boat caused a sensation in Portland. This was the first time anyone had seen a speedboat in this town. Granted the Ryan's in Smith's Falls had a genuine race boat from Gilbert's in Brockville, but that was thirty miles up the Lake.

Marjorie, a very long launch, Big Rideau. 1910's Almost open cockpit from stern to short foredeck, the engine would be rear-centre, between the standing man in the grey jacket and the seated woman in white.

Reg's interest in the boat business faded and he was coming along in his actuarial studies, that was the profession noted in his enlistment papers, although he was still a student at that time. He was in the trenches until becoming injured during the Passchendaele attack, his leg was amputated. That sealed any further career in boatbuilding and once he received his designation he went to work for Met Life in the City of Ottawa.

In 1922 the province began construction of what would be Highway 15. It would run right through the front doors of the shop. He bought a piece of waterfront property in town and built the new boat shop, a large dock for rental boats and rental slips for customers who needed a place to moor their boat for trips to their cottages, most of which were not accessible by road. The actual workshop was picked up and towed to the new lot by Wendell Brown, who now had a contracting business and won the government tender to move all 32 of the houses displaced by the highway construction.

Dowsett launch just south of Rideau Ferry bridge.

Thus began the golden age of Dowsett Boat Works. There wasn't much competition. Many of the other prewar local builders, such as the Dey's in Ottawa, Conley in Westport, or the Elgin Boat Works had closed during the war and would not reopen. Gilbert's in Brockville was not recovering easily. Knapp's was providing little more than marina and rental boat services and Davis Dry Dock was fading, no longer building luxury steam launches and the new generation of lake freighters were too big for its repair facilities. The only real competition was Davy Nichol, who seemed to spend more time carving his duck decoys than building motorboats.

Dowsett launch, all mahogany, now owned by Kevin Tackaberry Photo Graeme H. Beattie

The 1920's was a busy time on Big Rideau. New cottages were being built, not just hunt shacks but substantial summer residences with big boathouses. There was a lot of American money coming into the area, drawn by the fishing and the relatively cheaper land than the costly and exclusive Adirondack "camps". At that time, except for the cottages near the town, most cottages could not be reached by car as there were no roads in. The idea of driving your car to your cottage was pretty new anyway. Generally you take the train the Smiths Falls or Portland, get on the Ferry boat which dropped you and your cargo off at your dock. If you needed to go to town you had your motorboat. My Grandfather's first cottage in the 1920's was a rental located two miles from Westport on the northwest side of Upper Rideau Lake. He bought a Dowsett rowing skiff to serve as a commuter boat. He would finish work at noon on Saturday, drive for three hours up to Westport, and then row for another hour to get to the cottage and then row and

drive back to Ottawa the following Sunday night. A few years later he found another rental halfway down Big Rideau near McVeety's point. You could actually drive to this cottage. The skiff was around for years, although it was just for pleasure trips. In the teens, shortly after marrying my grandmother, and before the kids, he bought a well-used double ended motor skiff, but that lasted only a summer, replaced by a Indian motorcycle the next spring. As is the case, once the babies started to come, the toys disappeared. I do wish he had kept the Indian, though.

Ju-el, the first of the modern long deck style for Dowsett, from 1920 Manotick Classic Boat Club photo

The first new contract was for a small 20-foot launch. For this boat, Dowsett used the long deck style, narrow, but not too narrow hull shape and a long foredeck enclosing the engine. This was known as the Ju-el (Julie and Elizabeth?) and was launched on Big Rideau in 1920. This was the prototype for the long deck launches that became a signature of Big Rideau. More big launch contracts came. The Dowsett launch was stretched out to 26 feet long and six feet wide. These were the standard dimensions for the 1920's launch. The Wen-Wel (now the Arawan), built for a Dr. Hughes was made to these dimensions and it was launched in 1927, powered by a 50 hp Scripps. Engines were getting more powerful as well. 40-50 hp was the norm for boat power now, although you could still go as high as 80 or even a 100 hp Sterling. The Wen-Wel was still built with a front and rear bench seat and there was a long open section between the two where you could add wicker chairs. There was no real way to attach the chairs to anything, so if you were going to take the additional passengers you had best do it on a calm day.
The Arawan deck was mahogany. Mahogany was becoming more and more the wood of choice for local motor boats. Prior to the Great War it was rarely used, except in the most luxurious of the Gilbert or Davis boats. Boat decks were made of local fancy woods, such as cherry (Shamrock) and butternut (Bonito).

1920 Dowsett Ju-el The lapstrake planking was unusual for this builder Manotick Classic Boat Club photo

The 26 foot Dowsett built Arawan, from 1927 Manotick Classic Boat Club photo

The long deck Launch era was fading by 1930. The future, in the form of a 26-foot Chris Craft called Let's Go (owned by Broadway producer Denny Arnstein) had shown up on the Big Rideau and could easily beat any boat on the lake with its 120 hp engine and planing hull. Dowsett was contacted by Senator Frost, the founder of Frost and Woods in Smith's Falls to build a launch. Frost had purchased a cottage property at the turn of the century at the east side of the Rideau Ferry bridge. Rather than build from scratch, he bought a fancy wood house in Smith's Falls, had it pulled onto a barge and hauled down to the property, where it was winched ashore. Now they wanted a more stable and more modern launch to replace their aging Gilbert.

Frowildo the Second, built by Dowsett in 1933, following the lines of Frowildo I. Current owners Besch brothers Tom and Peter in front seat, father Clayton in back. Photo taken 1970's.

Frowildo II, photo taken mid 2000's.

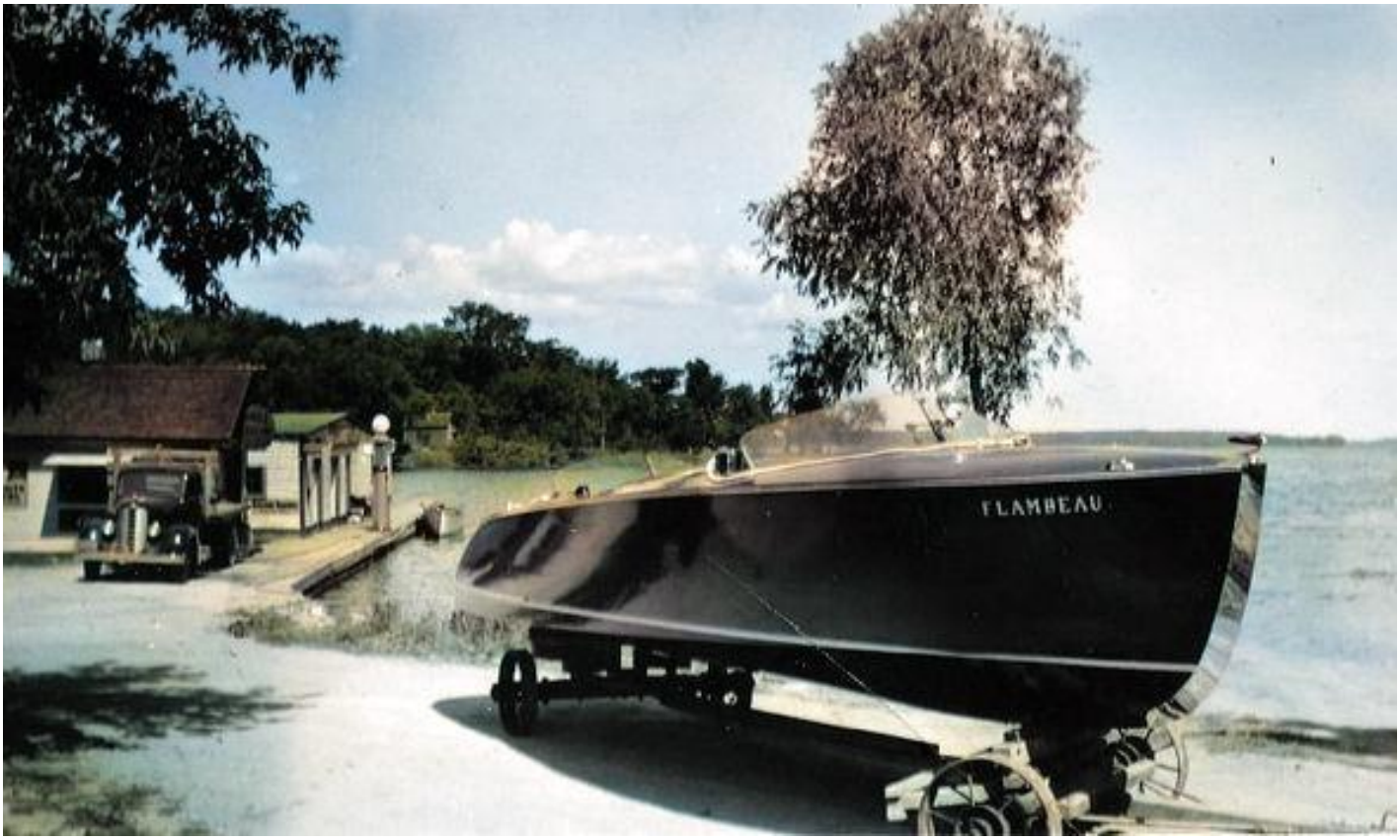
The result was a masterpiece. From the inside, Frowildo, a Tolkien-sounding combination of Frost and the daughter's married names Willard and Dodds looked similar to any other of the Dowsett long deck boats. There was some magic or accidental combination of the slight slope of the deck, the nickel-plated hardware, the black painted hull, and the red waterline stripe that

made the boat in the water an arresting sight. True, as an unimpressed friend who saw it and said “it’s just a long boat” it was indeed a long wood boat with a lot of wasted space. What did they need all that open cockpit for, or that crazy long deck. It wasn’t runabout fast, but one could sort of waterski behind it (there are pictures of the Frost extended members being pulled on an aquaplane). But that perhaps was the point. There was a delightful liberating element of casual, arrogant grandeur that comes with owning a big house, an expensive car, or this sort of old boat. For the observer who sees a useful life as a long series of purely practical gestures sights like this can be annoying. But the long decks were practical, insofar as boating is practical at all. The narrow long hull was the only way to get any speed and travel distance out of a boat equipped with the terribly heavy but feeble engines of the early 1920’s. You could pack the long cockpit with extra chairs and as many as twelve guests without overloading the hull. The long deck housed an engine and gear box that was often five feet long, and then aft of that the gas tank was hidden under the remaining deck. Frowildo moved into its waterside rectangular boathouse in 1933. Boat registrations were now required and they received the second one issued for Rideau Lake 74E-2. The issuing magistrate kept 74E-1 for himself.

Frowildo II, under Rideau Ferry bridge, circa 2018. Manotick Classic Boat Club photo

Split photos show Ward McKim putting Frowildo up on beams for winter storage.

Dowsett: Going out, but in style



Launch day for Dowsett's last project, the Flambeau, in 1938. Photo provided by Graeme H. Beattie

In the meantime, things had been quiet at Dowsett's. The big, long deck launches that had made the firm's name in the 1920's were obsolete and after Walgradia in 1931 and Frowildo in 1933, no more launches came out of the Portland shop. But Dowsett wasn't finished yet. Will Dowsett was in his late sixties by 1938, but he did pull two more big boat contracts. This time he used plans from Douglas Van Patten, a sharp young boat designer who had designed the Miss Canada racers for Harold Wilson and Greavette. These were mahogany runabouts, both remarkably pleasing to the eye, with their rounded deck and contoured hull lines. Flambeau, a 21-foot triple cockpit runabout and its utility styled sister boat the Sea Eye, a copy built in an open cockpit form, both ran through the water like a Cadillac on a new highway. Even with plans, success is not assured, and it takes experience to make a boat work. This was Will Dowsett's last stand.

Sea Eye today Manotick Classic Boat Club photo

Jack Mallette: River Rat for hire

Dowsett was the principal builder of long deck launches, but from time to time another builder would turn one or two out. These were unusually big contracts for small one-man shops and

frequently the boat would barely fit in the shop. A particularly handsome launch known as a Ynyescraig was launched in 1924, the product of Jack Malette.

Jack Malette's shop (brown building, two boat slips) at the Gananoque waterfront, 1920's, next to the Gananoque Rowing Club. The shop is still there, it is now a private cottage.

Jack Malette started out as a river rat, that is to say a person who makes his or her living on a river. Born in 1870 his early business was as a small shipper. He had a sailboat which he used to make deliveries along the Thousand Islands from dry goods to something as prosaic as topsoil, which he delivered to one of the islands, probably for a cottager building up a garden. Like many rivermen, there was no delivery work in the winter, so he turned to boat building. In 1910 He set up a unique shop down by the Gananoque waterfront. It was right next to the Gananoque Rowing club, so a customer was right next door. It was also right under neath the porch of a tourist hotel, and Mallette would have to climb up on his roof with a bucket of water from time to time to put out smoldering cigarette and cigar butt ends that the hotel guests would flick away. The shop was essentially a boathouse with the assembly area on the top floor, and

two slips below, one for small sailboats and canoes and the larger one for the motor launches. The floors in the shop could be made to open and a lift would lower the boats down to the slips below. In 1919 Malette married a widow named Eva Nicholson and became a stepfather to her three children. He bought a house on Charles Street, a few blocks from the shop. The eldest, Leonard, became the chore boy for the shop, holding onto the other end of the boards and helping set the ribs in place.

One of his first postwar boats was a motor skiff. Mallette's motor skiffs were rather grand, much larger and beamier than Dowsett's, which was understandable since his were used on the St. Lawrence, where four-foot waves were not uncommon. The deck was beautifully set up with a brightly contracting cedar and mahogany strips. There were curved wicker seats fore and aft of the long cockpit and the fishing guide sat on the engine box in the middle and steered from there. The combing had little bronze mounts where a canvas sheet could be attached, known as a dodger, providing some degree of protection from spray for the tourist fishermen. It could get fairly wet fore and aft when navigating the big waves and the passengers were more likely to get soaked than the guide, whose amidships position was relatively dry. Most of the fishing skiffs had a muscular 20 hp Gray Marine engine for power, compared to the 8 hp plant for the Dowsett skiff.

Malette's tour boat project Sun Dance Gananoque Historical Society

Mallette had an eccentric temper. He didn't take frustration well. Like the cartoon golfer bending up offending golf clubs, Malette blamed his tools for every mistake. A split plank, a bad corner, or a jammed finger and the perpetrating tool would be hurled into the St. Lawrence River. In time the sea bed outside the shop became littered with tools he pitched overboard. Once he was trying to file a piece of metal and the vise jaws kept loosening off and the metal strip would fall back and hit him in the face. After the rod came loose three times, he picked up his sledge and hammered the vise to pieces. He would even put on a show for his customers if (he felt) they crossed him. While the Ynyescraig was being built, the owners (two well off unmarried sisters) came down to the shop. One of them commented on an unusual dark colored plank in the mahogany deck. She only commented on it being darker than the other planks, but Mallette steamed up, picked up a persuader (hand held sledge hammer) and brought it down full force on the offending board smashing a hole in the finished deck. "Well, it's gone now,"

Ynyescraig was as handsome a launch as anything put out by Gilbert's or Dowsett's shops. It was typical of the post Great war launches, 26 feet long with a six-foot beam coming to a narrow stem. The deck was mahogany with cedar sides, the engine hatch was simple. Rather than the two-fold out hatches, this was a rectangular one piece that slid forward on runners. The difference was the elegant shaping and contouring work on the seats- just enough to give it an elegant look and not so much as to appear gaudy. It rode comfortably through the water and it was wide enough to manage the waves without rolling excessively, as had been the case with the pre-war pencil boat launches. The windshield was made with wood frames but was hinged and could be folded down. unlike so many other river launches which used fixed windshields. Most of the metal parts used were made at the Ontario Steel Products plant north of town. This company made all types of marine products out of any metal, producing steel propellers for the larger work boats, and bronze and aluminum props for the pleasure craft.

Ynyescraig in the early 1980's. Owner Dave Linkletter and a friend work on the engine, a Model 20 Kermath. Author photo

Ynyescraig was moved to its new cottage home on Ynyscrag Island (the boat name was spelled

differently) where it was docked in a unique drive through boathouse. Ynyscrag Island had been purchased as a speculation by a former Ontario Premier, Ray Lawson who had quickly resold it to the Williams sisters. The sisters employed a chauffeur named Davie Belfie who dabbled in bootlegging, apparently not very successfully. Rather than one gas tank in the nose, Ynyescraig had two tanks flanking the engine set just up under the deck. The apparent intention, or at least adaptation was that one tank would be filled with gasoline and the other with bootleg booze, so as to make a little extra money on tips to the American side. Once while preparing for an evening cross river run, Belfie brought the gas can down to the boat to fill the tank. Working in the dark he missed the filler hole and poured the gas all over the deck. He came back with a rag and the flashlight and tripped breaking the bulb on the deck, which ignited the spilled gas. By the time he finally put the fire out there were scorch marks all over the deck. It was just as well. There was little room for amateur bootleggers by the mid 1920's. Most of the booze traffic was controlled by gangs who took a dim view of occasional competitors (and even less for serious competitors like Hamilton's Ben Kerr, a marina owner who fell afoul of, well, we still don't know even to this day). The little wing tank on the Ynyescraig couldn't have carried much product anyway and most of the serious rum runners simply loaded their cargo in crates in go fast boats and did their business at night in the shelter of a quiet island. Later Belfie built a sort of torpedo like book trailer that would be lowered into the water and pulled by the boat on a tow line, easier to cut the rope if there was trouble on the American side.

Other than this near disaster, Ynyescraig had an uneventful life except that it was used as a taxi boat for Edward, Prince of Wales during this 1927 visit to Canada. As the boat passed, the spectators crowded the shoreline, trying to get a glimpse of the slender, snappily dressed blond haired crown prince. None of the fans could see that the future Edward VIII was so hung over from the previous night's partying he could barely sit up straight, let alone stand. Mallette did build at least two other long deck launches, the Black Duck and Mephisto, but these type of contracts were rare. All the Long decks had the same configuration with the sliding deck hatch and fold down window. They all used Star engines, which had been used in Durant Cars- again this was the popular 40 hp Continental Red Seal engine.

Malette also built 3 possibly 4 motorized propellor drive air boats, which were something of a necessity on the St. Lawrence and one of his machines, known as the Blizzard, was powered by an aircraft engine (usually Lycoming or Franklin radial 5-cylinder aircraft engines). The construction of these airboats was sheet aluminum over a wood frame. The hulls were 7 feet wide and the engines used a pulley system which could be disengaged by loosening the belts so the engine could be allowed to run with the propellor stopped. These boats could be useful in

summertime getting over the very shallow mud bottoms around the aptly named Tar Island, where in some places there is less than a foot of water over the mud bottom during the fall. The airboats could also be used in winter although the first boat was too heavy for the thin early winter ice and needed a 6-inch ice base to avoid breaking through. Later models were much lighter. He also built unpowered ice sailboats, which had four steel skate blades and cotton sails (which Mallette cut and sewed himself). The operator had to lie flat to cut down on wind resistance. No one used iceboats with the little training wheels we see today; that was a safety feature that came more recently.

Mallette's sailing canoe Tomahawk was a plank-by-plank copy of Friede's Mermaid, it still couldn't get past the champ.

Mallette had been contracted to build a rival to the Mermaid, a Gilbert built racing sailing canoe

owned by Leo Friede. Several of Friede's rivals snuck into the barn where Mermaid was stored for the winter and carefully took off the lines and Mallette copied it almost board for board. Friede and Mermaid won again anyway. Mallette had better luck with G-Class International sailing dinghies, which he worked on shortly before his death in 1938. These were lapstrake cedar, 14-foot-long hulls with a single mast that could carry 125 square feet of sail, even more if you added a spinnaker, the pillowcase like sail run aft the mast to provide additional forward thrust. The mast was a unique construction- it was hollow. These were very difficult to build as they were made with I believe, angled strips of cedar lashed together to form a hollow pole. Mallette considered this one his technical triumphs.

There was a steady flow of business, both for such small and fussy racing sailboats and large motorboats in the shop. But for Mallette the real money was building tour boats. At the dead centre of the Thousand Islands, Gananoque had become a tourist destination, particularly with boat tours for the Islands. There were many small entrepreneurs, such as Ray Andress, who ran their own little tour boats, but then as today there was one big operator and that was Dan Kenney. One of Kenney's largest boats was a 50-foot gasoline engine powered tour boat which had been the last boat to come out of the Davis works. More boats were needed and it was cheaper and easier to hire local talent like Jack Malette. These were big boats, usually over ten feet wide and usually forty-five feet long. Like the Ynyescraig, the sides were cedar but surprisingly the upper decks were mahogany, rather luxurious for the tourist hordes. There was only one deck with a cabin covering most of the deck other than a short bow. The pilots cabin was at the front of the deck for the tourists could only see out the sides. No one was allowed up on the roof. However the Cabin was open and there was plenty to see out the sides. Mallette built four of these boats, the Almina, Courier, Frances E., and Sun Dance.

New builds were few and far between in the 1930's, the St. Lawrence was no different. There was money, but it was almost all on the American side. Still Jack Mallette knew how to get through when times were thin; after all that is what a river rat does.