Myles Jeffrey: Small town sensation

19 foot Jeffrey Manotick Classic Boat Club photo

You never know what you are going to end up doing. Grow up on a farm never even seeing a gas engine or a boat larger than a fishing punt and you end up building high speed motorboats. Myles Jeffery and Lloyd Shepherd were both farm boys from small towns in Ontario who ended up in the mahogany runabout business.

Jeffery started out as an apprentice at the Gilbert Boat works before the Great War. Like so many boat shop workers he was a transient tradesman and moved from one shop to another. After Gilbert's he worked at Consolidated and several other shops after that. This was and still is normal in the industry- ask anyone in the business even today and you'll hear the same story- worked there, then there and now here. They go where the work is. In the 1920's Jeffrey ended up working for Chris Smith family's new enterprise, known by the jaunty name of Chris-Craft.

Racing rivals Deb Campbell and Vince Ryan pose on Campbell's boat Sky Breeze. Campbell owned a funeral home and Ryan a lumberyard.

In the Chris Craft plant, one team of workers cut the boards and frames out of mahogany and oak. Each piece was cut to a specific pattern. The pieces were moved along to the hull assembly area, where the basic hull was put together and then to the painting and varnishing stage and then to the final assembly stage, where the engine, steering gear and other hardware and upholstery was attached. Myles Jeffery was one the very first men they hired and with his experience he was promoted to foreman heading up the hull assembly team. The "foreman" position was usually given to a master tradesman, whether a mechanic, machinist, woodturner or upholsterer. This might have seemed like a comedown to some purist craftsmen, but the monotony was relieved somewhat by the high pay, which for Jeffrey was $220 for four weeks or around $2,600 a year, which is close to a professional level salary (engineer). The assemblers learned only what they needed to know to do their job, no more. The impression that I got from those who knew Myles Jeffrey the Boat Builder was that he was not a patient person nor a kindly tempered man, but good luck finding such a person in a 1920's factory. The picture is that of a cranky, moody, demanding, ill tempered, no-excuses shop boss with a tendency to burn through staff. Most bosses like that survive as they seem to have knack of finding a few hard-

core loyalists who develop a thick skin and can put up with the occasional explosions and can keep the production flowing in spite of the turnover.

Chris-Craft started off with a 22-foot runabout. It was a hit and soon the product line expanded with bigger 26- and 28-foot boats with bigger engines and smaller 17-foot economy models. The assembly line concept was a qualified success. The business model was successful, but wood is, and always will be an unpredictable substance, unlike steel and even at the hull assembly stage would still have to be shaved and planed and sawed and cut here and there to go together, regardless of the accuracy of the original pattern.

When the bust came, not in 1929 with the stock market crash or 1930, where there was brief spring rebound, but actually in the spring of 1931 when the economy began to free fall in earnest and the mass layoffs began. The big corporations and banks ran out of cash by 1932 and many US and Canadian businesses were in a state of functional bankruptcy for the next few years. Needless to say, the want list was put aside for the need list. People did not stop buying boats altogether, but sales dropped to a tenth of what they had been in the late 20's, or worse. Other than the inheriting rich, there were still a surprising number of individuals who had money, such as senior military officers and civil servants, doctors, undertakers and presumably bankruptcy lawyers and who would still spend money on a boat. For many builders who had financed big capital expansions, such as Ditchburn's the low sales simply could not generate enough cash to pay interest costs and they had to close down. Ironically, it was the small family shops that survived, such as Dowsett's, Gilbert's or Minett Shields, which had little debt and could scrabble along with minimal sales. Chris-Craft mothballed most of its plant and laid off of most of its staff, including its most expensive foreman, Myles Jeffrey in 1931.

The Ryan's at speed in 1935 Shamrock II. This Jeffrey replaced the original Gilbert racing launch Shamrock.

With nothing in the U.S. Jeffrey went back to work at Gilbert's in 1931 for a cruiser project that Fred had landed, the hull of the Skylark, which had been ordered by Victor Sifton (brother of Sir Clifford). The Skylark hull alone took up almost all of the Gilbert workshop and the topsides were literally scraping the ceiling. It was impossible to finish the cabin in the shop so after it was launched it was towed across the river to Hutchinson's to do the finishing and brightwork. Alas, this was the last contract at Gilbert's of any consequence until 1937. Gilbert Marine survived on repair work and small jobs until then.

Jeffrey's Athens workshop, with boat hoist in place

After the Skylark contract, Myles Jeffrey returned to his hometown of Athens, Ontario. Athens is a small, landlocked village, there isn't even a river through it. Charleston Lake is several km away, Big Rideau 27 km away, in both cases down mostly rough dirt roads. He bought a nice brick house on Henry Street and converted a former blacksmith shop in the back yard into a boat shop. The shop had two stories, the boats were built in the second story and then once completed were run out on a metal gantry system which would lower the craft to the ground. Early on the winch broke and sent a boat crashing down to the ground. This is a good 10-foot drop and these type of accidents probably didn't do a boat any good causing all the planks on one side to shear off their screws or just as bad to throw the hull out of alignment. Either way it's a lot of extra work to eat in to your profit. The second story work area was about 25 feet long by maybe seven feet wide by six feet high. Its tight. It was probably more comfortable for Jeffery, who was a about 5'5". When I visited in the mid 1980's there were still some mahogany pieces stored in the ceiling rafters. There was a stove, bare bulb lighting and a table saw. There

was a work bench at one side of the shop. Building season started in the fall and continued on all winter until June of the next year, when the boats were launched, tested, the bugs ironed out and finally sent on their way. The boat would be rolled into the first-floor work area where the engine would be installed, the seats and upholstery fitted and the hardware attached. This way a second boat could be underway while the earlier one waited below for delivery of finalizing components. Like many builders, the work was done generally from September to June and then, as he put it himself, he would "fish and fool around all summer". Boat deliveries were usually made in late May or early June when the cottage owner would open up for the season. The boat that Jeffrey began building was his own design. It had the hull and general styling of a Chris Craft but the low-profile deck of a Gar Wood. In the late 1920's Vince Ryan had taken out the 18 hp Erd out of the original Shamrock, which had been seriously underpowered and put in a 125 hp Chrysler, so now it was seriously overpowered. Like all long deck launches the big power boost gave it a little more speed but a great deal of instability. At full rip the bow would rear out of the water and the boat would be riding on its aft bottom. This was ok as long as the water was calm and you could hold it, but if you tried to turn at speed the boat would roll over on its side and throw the passengers out. This was the same problem Gilbert's had experienced with the Insurgent. The Ryan's wanted a more modern planing hulled boat.

One of the earliest Jeffrey boats built in 1934, the Zipalong, in front of its boathouse.

The Jeffrey boat never had a builder's plate on it. However their signature were two glove compartment doors on the dash, one door was for odd items and the other was part of a seven-foot-long box in which to put the boat hook and paddle.

The Jeffrey boat, even at 19-22 feet and a midsize hull by industry standards was still pretty big and heavy. The boat hull itself probably weighed about 2000 pounds and the engine a further 700 and once you added four riders, a full tank of gas and other bit and pieces you came close to two tons of weight once the boat headed out on the water. Along with the boat trailers of the day, which usually converted farm trailers, no car, certainly not a Ford and not even a Packard could easily pull this load, at least not very far and not for long before burning the clutch or blowing the transmission. It wasn't until the 1950's with the big V-8's did family cars have enough beef to easily move a boat and trailer around. You hired the local garage to tow the boat and put it in the lake and there it would stay, sheltering in a boathouse until the fall.

The boats were built in the second story and lowered onto a trailer when complete.

Jeffrey's own trailer was a four-wheeled farm cart style with the axles at the front and back. This distributed the weight well and made it easy to move the boat around in the yard but it was slow going on the highway. Farm trailers tend to weave at speeds much over 20 mph on the highway. Modern double axel boat trailers have the wheels well back and close together which eliminates the weaving effect and allows safe pulling at modern highway speeds.

The business had started slowly, with one boat, the first, Zipalong to Lionel Williams in 1934. Jubilant and Bluebird came out in 1935 and the orders started to come in. You could race these boats. You could race the long old deck launches, which were fast on the straight but slow on the curve. Up until the 1930's the long launches were the fast boats of choice at the annual Rideau Ferry Regatta. The only really fast modern boat was the 26-foot Chris Craft owned by Mr. Arnstein down the Lake. The Gran D was a fairly fast boat of the type, possible the fastest and it could wind up to 30 mph. But that was the limit.

Ready for transport. By the late 1940's Jeffrey was sufficiently established that he could dress for comfort, rather than a suit and tie when delivering a customer boat

From the looks point the runabouts had a lower profile and were much prettier than similar Gar Woods or Chris Crafts Jeffrey himself had built. The 30's boats, Wiseman's Golden Girl and Dr. Wirt's Connemara looked good rode the water nicely but were not that fast, mostly due to the relatively weak 75 hp Kermath powerplants. Judson's Miss Joan was boxy and beamy to accommodate the big engine, but it was also the fastest. Ironically, it was the plain-Jane utilities that were the most pleasant to ride in. You could move around, talk to the other riders, get out of a picnic basket, fish, and party all you liked. In the runabouts you stayed in your cockpit seat until the ride was over. You couldn't really stand up and move without difficulty. The cute little gentlemen's runabouts like Felix and Just Fiddlin was basically sports cars and could

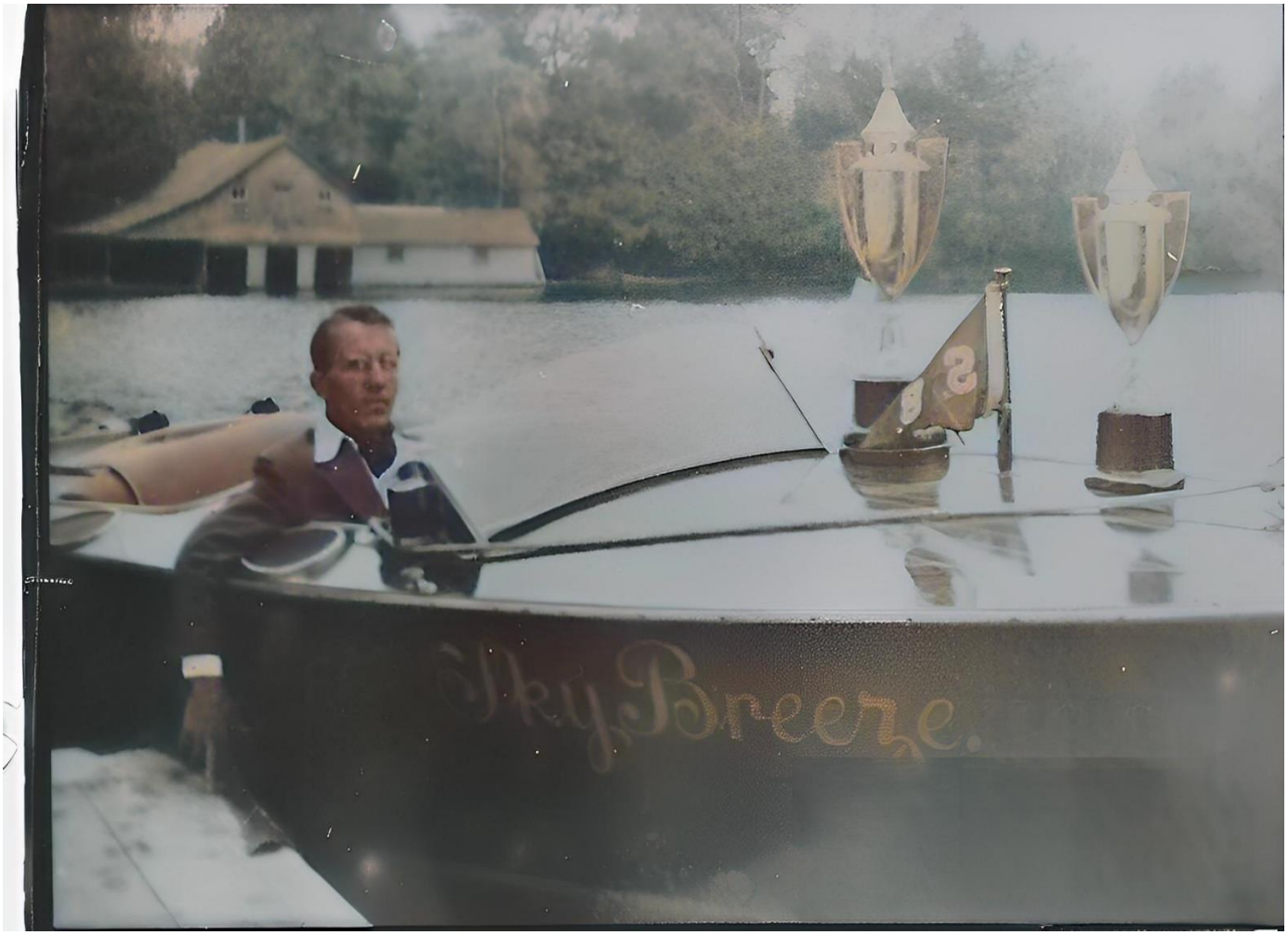
accommodate two adults and a small child and that was it.

Jeffrey from stern Manotick Classic Boat Club photo

Zipalong was underpowered with a 25 Hp Model A Ford engine. Jubilant was fitted with the new 85 hp ford flathead V-8 and this gave it some decent speed. But it wasn't until Vince Ryan's Shamrock II was built with its 125 Hp Chrysler that the local speed demons took notice. It could wind up to 35 mph. Ben Wiseman had Golden Girl fitted out with a V-8 Ford. The Ford was considerably less powerful than Ryan's Chrysler and he exchanged it for a straight 8 Kermath (about 110 hp) but still couldn't beat Ryan. Lyman Judson killed them all when he pulled up to the 1938 race line with Miss Joan with its two huge exhaust pipes and its powerhouse noise coming from a 220 Hispano Suiza. It was impossible to best this monster engine and Miss Joan pretty much held the title of fastest boat on the lake until the war came.

Bigger and better wasn't always the answer. George and his son Austin Crate ordered a 17-foot speed hull from Jeffrey in 1938. It was the most unusual and beautiful of the boats, a small design jewel with its curving lines and sharp tumblehome, butternut decks and sides. It was powered by a 75 hp Gray Marine Phantom and could do about 40 mph at top speed. The speeders were always tuning up their boats. After the war, the local stock car mechanic, Eddie Mars put a bored-out Mercury V-8 complete with Offenhauser heads into Tom Brown's boat,

complete with exhaust pipes poking out the sides rather than the stern. Jeffrey made very little money off the racing but did it more for the kick of watching his boats being pushed to their limit. He sponsored his own race -the Jeffrey Cup was for the big boats, which of course were all Jeffrey boats. The Rideau Ferry Regatta, held in August each year, was a big deal and drew crowds of 8-10,000 spectators. even during the depression years. The event also brought in some serious money and serious contenders, such as Charles “Chas” Wheaton (from Muskoka) who brought his Minett-Shields Shadow II and won the 1938 225 class races. Shadow had the same engine as Miss Joan, a 1917 Hispano Suiza, but it was a true three-point hydroplane based on the Arno Apel Ventnor design -the next generation of racing boats. At speed it would rise up on two forward sponsons like a seaplane and it could go well over 60 mph. Runabouts would continue to get faster but they would always be in second place now. Hydros were the future. Gar Wood wrote them off as “paper boats“, so lightly built they were little more than delicate engine mounts. Unlike the runabouts and launches they could not double as cottage excursion boats. Racing was all they could do.



Delbert "Deb" Campbell of Charleston Lake pauses with trophies. The competition was almost always other Jeffrey boats.

My great uncle, John Coombs was completely the opposite. He ran a textile company in Smith's Falls and had a cottage down on the southern shore of Lower Rideau Lake. He ordered a 22-foot triple cockpit runabout. It was completed and delivered in 1938. Coombs was afraid of it. His wife would nag him to take visiting relatives out and he would pause thoughtfully and scan the lake for signs of ripples and the sky for any scheming clouds and if the coast was absolutely clear he would take the guests out on the lake for a dead slow run. The boat rarely ran higher than idle and as a result the 6-cylinder Buchanan Bulldog engine ran hot almost continuously as the water pump never went fast enough to pump the needed cooling water. When he returned to the boathouse he slowed down and shut the engine off and drifted carefully into the boathouse. Eventually the Buchanan burned out and was replaced by a 6-cylinder Kermath.

Sedan hardtop Jeffrey circa 1948. Launching in progress

1941 was the last year Jeffrey built boats before the wartime shutdown, evidently finishing old contracts. None of them could be used anyway due to rationing and had to be put immediately in storage. Jeffrey went back to work for Gilberts while the shop worked on its one big torpedo/rescue boat in 1942 and he found other work in 1943 and 1944. The war work petered out in 1944 and he returned home and started work on three outstanding orders, finishing Good Grief for Lloyd Johnson in 1946 and three more in 1947 and 1948. Jeffrey was a production man and knew how to work fast. But he also knew how to apply the care as needed; a longtime Athens resident, Bob Purcell, remembered going into the shop (Purcell was working as a delivery boy for the local hardware store that ordered fasteners for the shop) and watched as Jeffey ran his hand plane along the edge of a long plank, a single wood curl growing ever larger as he did so. Assuming a 2,000-hour work year, this comes to about 660 hours per boat, and this means from an engine, boxes of fittings, a pile of lumber, stains, caulk, paint, screws, varnish into a complete watercraft from a 60-year-old man working mostly by himself. From time to time he would draft his daughters into setting in the wood plugs. Other Assistants and helpers came and went. Few, except for his brother-in-law, Perley Chant, could put up with his moody personality and crankiness. One man I talked to wandered into the shop as a boy and was blown back out with a blast of curses. According to Frank Wykes, who knew Jeffrey (but didn't work for him) noted the man would get worked up over something and start fulminating over oppression and wacky conspiracy theories. It's a pity Jeffrey did not live in the modern age, I'm sure he would have loved social media; maybe he would have been easier to work with if he had another avenue to vent his outrage.

1940's Jeffrey utility at a boat show, sometime in the 1980's

One of his less clever moves was to build his early boats with steel screws. His old employer Chris Craft used exclusively phosphor bronze screws which did not corrode and could be easily removed if you wanted to replace a plank (the Chris Craft plant would send a precut plank through the mail if you specified which one needed replacing). The early Jeffrey boats would develop black stains as water encouraged the fungus but when you wanted to clean or replace the plank the steel screw was swollen with rust and one turn of the screwdriver would break off the screw head leaving the restorer up that well-known creek. Later he used plated steel screws, this was a little better but not much as the plating would eventually come off the rust process would start later, but it would still wreck the screw.

Jeffrey 17-foot gentleman's runabout with long-time owner Lorayne Bradshaw Manotick Classic Boat Club photo

Most of the boats he built were entirely by his own hand. He had to subcontract some items. The seats were made by an upholsterer in nearby Elgin and were built like house furniture, with steel springs overlaid with burlap and a strange stringy brown substance that was called 'horsehair". Horsehair was common in upholstered furniture at the time (until the 1930's), when foam rubber became the norm. The horsehair substance could be formed to provide curved edges and hide the protruding metal springs. I had to take off the covering on my 1936 Jeffrey as the ties for the springs had broken and had to be replaced. The "horsehair" I uncovered did not seem to be animal, but rather some sort of dried root matter. It was nasty stuff and once it finds its shape, the strands all stuck to each other and that's it. I suspect it was a Depression substitute; actual horsehair was not cheap. If you disturb it, then you get lumps under fabric; I was never able to get rid of the spring bulges. The early seats were finished in leather, and the original colour was burgundy.

Jeffrey with detail of dash and foredeck. The signature of a Jeffrey is the two compartments on the dash, one for an oar and boathook and the other for stuff Manotick Classic Boat Club photo

The price for a simple 19-foot Jeffrey utility was $1,500. There were four equal progress payments, in this case of $362.50 each, the first to start, the second when the framing was complete, the third after the woodwork was done and the final payment on delivery. Generally the profit on the boats was about 25-30% or about $450-600 per boat or assuming three boats a year a total of $1,350-1,800 per year and add to that odd jobs, repairs service in the 30's and 40's he probably earned, at the very most about $2,000 per year. This works out to be about $1.00 an hour, assuming a 2,000-hour work year. It wasn't much money and perhaps somewhat less than many small-town tradesman, whose journeyman salaries in the early postwar tended to be about $2,500 to $3,000 per year. Jeffrey never made close to the money he had pulled in with Chris Craft.

Jeffrey 17-foot speedster Felix, Original owner Austin Crate at the controls. Author photos

During the war, gas was rationed. Obviously, if you had an essential service such as milk delivery, a medical practice, or a funeral home, you would have more gas, but still it would have to be only for the business. You received a weekly ration card, but how you used your gas, or food or whatever was still up to you. Mr. Judson decided to use some of his accumulated coupons for a boat ride around the lake. It was hard to do this quietly as he fired up *Miss Joan'*s Hispano engine, particularly on a lake devoid of any engine noise. He apparently netted more

than a few dirty looks from his neighbors over the next few weeks, but can you really blame him? I wonder how our impatient generation would deal with things like *conscription* and *rationing*.

Buzz Wiseman's Jeffrey Golden Girl.

Once he returned from the wartime work, boat orders started coming back in. One of the first boat was a hardtop utility used by Smiths Falls man to commute to his cottage every Saturday. The hardtop had curving lines which was unusual since most tended to be boxy and practical. Hardtops tended to subtract from the boat's sleek looks but they paid for themselves when the weather turned. Jeffrey did not grow. His space never expanded beyond the backyard shop and the shop itself never added more space or more tools or more staff. There's no magic in a small business. The more staff you have and the more product you sell, the more money you make. Jeffrey had the ability but by himself his income would always be limited, no matter how hard he worked. He usually had an apprentice or a helper such as future Athens historian Perley

Chant, but they came and went. His customers were mostly businessmen who knew how to run businesses with employees and they could afford luxury items like boats. Jeffrey never built an inboard boat for himself. As a fisherman, all he needed was a little 12-foot boat (a Peterborough) and a 4.5 hp outboard. He did experiment with his own outboard design in the fifties, which was shaped like a mini version of one of his big inboards but was too heavy to be useful. In fairness, as noted Jeffrey, like his rival Lloyd Shepherd, was an outdoors type and was more into fishing than cruising.

By the early 1950's the boats were all utilities, as was the norm. However Jeffrey, like Chris-Craft incorporated runabout like qualities to improve the old prewar utility appearance and give them a racier look, with more rounded garboard planks. The boats were getting bigger as well, with wider beams. Bob Layng, one of the earliest customers in 1935 bought a new boat in 1946 which he called the Pardon Me and promptly sold it to Ken Hughes. Hughes ordered the successor, the Pardon Me Too in 1956. Pardon Me Too was Jeffrey's last runabout. It had the rounded garboards of a Shepherd and had a very Shepherd like appearance. The boat hull alone cost $4,000 and the 325 Cadillac Crusader engine another $2,000. You could hear this boat all over the lake even when it was off in the distance and watch it charge past in a blast of noise and spray looking like it was going through a brick wall.

Pardon Me Too, the second last boat Jeffrey built before his retirement.

Jeffrey was in his seventies now but still managed two boats a year out of his shop. He finally hung up his shingle in 1957 with Viking II, built for local realtor Will Kerfoot. He stayed active in the business to a limited degree, still serving as a referee at the Regatta and was working on small sailboat when he died in 1963 at the age of seventy-nine.

19-foot Jeffrey built for Alfred and Ethel Lang in 1938, the husband retired from the insurance business the previous year and moved in the summer to the Rideau Lake cottage. He last used to the boat in his 80's and still lived an active life to the age of 94. The couple in the boat Mel and Pearl Evans bought the Lang property and the boat was part of the purchase. They had it repaired and re-varnished (it's all original) and are shown here at the Rideau Ferry show in the late 1980's.

Jeffrey would never be anything but a one-man operation with one helper, as needed. He knew that, and I think he was perfectly happy without the burden of a big-time operation like Chris-Craft, looking after hundreds of staff, dealing with endless headaches of competition, labour unrest and economic downturns. By contrast Lloyd Shepherd was a businessman who could plan big and manage a big staff and accordingly it was Shepherd that came to dominate the post war runabout market in Ontario. Jeffrey worked hard and built 30 boats after the war, almost all between 20-22 feet long. Shepherd built over 900 boats, from 14-foot outboards to huge 30-foot day cruisers, weighing several tons.