

History: Tahoe boats leave long wake

Publisher's note: *The following is reprinted with permission from the Lake Tahoe Historical Society's July 1989 newsletter.*

There is no doubt that soon after Lake Tahoe was discovered, some adventurer found his way onto its surface in some kind of water craft. Sailboats, steamers, tugs and barges were busily at work on the lake by the late-19th century. By the turn of the century, when Tahoe was becoming a resort community, a number of people were ready for adventures on the lake just for pleasure using the internal combustion engine to facilitate the ride.



Lake Tahoe, with its twenty mile length of open, smooth water, was natural for speedboating. A commercial activity moved off the lake and onto trains and highways, the lake became the province of pleasure boats. New craft were developed with new engines capable of faster and faster speeds. New styles were designed which have become classic. Speedboat racing, tourist treks and rides on the lake just for the thrill of speed soon became popular attractions of a Tahoe summer.

In the early years of the 20th century motorboats had been narrow-beamed launches with small engines often converted from other uses. By 1920, a new kind of runabout was produced by companies such as Chris Craft, Gar Wood and many others. When they arrived at Lake Tahoe, they found a home. By the 1930s, commercial ventures crisscrossed the lake once again carrying passengers to scenic and noteworthy spots, not in 19th century steamers but in speedboats or turnabouts. Races and regattas that featured this new style of boat were held every year.

The new craft were narrow-beamed, sharp stemmed wooden boats with gleaming mahogany finish, polished brass fittings and raised, overhead decks and windshields. They were generally from twenty to forty feet long, though some exceeded these limits. They sported engines from fifty to three hundred horsepower that helped them fly across the water! These classic-styled boats became synonymous in the west with our lake that many westerners to this day call them "Lake Tahoe Boats". To the enthusiast of course, they are Chris Craft, Gar Wood, Belle Isle or Hackers or any one of a number of other makes. They are sometimes called "woodies" but this is hardly a dignified name for such a thoroughbredcraft.

These beautiful boats, lovingly restored, are still displayed at annual boat shows around the lake in places like Carnelian Bay, Tahoe Keys and Tahoe City.