A family 'Craft'



arry Mishton, Keowee Key resident, takes his brother Will out for a ride.

BY JESSICA SIBLEY
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SALEM — In the 1920s, owning a Chris-Craft boat was as, if not more, desirable than owning a Ford.

It symbolized elegance, grace and pure wittiness on the water, while setting numerous speed records for the aquatic books.

Today, the antique, wooden boats are still considered the "best of the best."

Enthusiasts continue to restore the gleaming beauties that seem to dance with the sun's reflection just before dusk.

The hidden engine provides a glorious thumping gurgle, reminiscent of a souped-up chopper on the lake.

"I lived on Lake Lanier for 18 years and could tell which neighbor was pulling up based on the sound of their Chris-Crafts," said Mickey Wander, antique boat enthusiast who lives on Lake Keowee. "That sweet noise never got old, and I don't think it ever will."

Chris Smith — grandson of the renowned Christopher Columbus Smith, the founder of Chris-Craft — came to The Reserve on Lake Keowee last year for the 2nd Annual Antique Boat Show.

Now 83 years old, Smith told stories of growing up in the boating business with an immediate love for the graceful machines.



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Antique boats are part of a certain culture across the nation.

"I was the youngest of six kids, and each summer I would spend time at my grandfather's factory," Smith said. "Talk about a playground."

During those summers, he learned more and more about the working boats that were being shipped out for World War II.

"Those were very interesting times," he said. "When the war ended and the GIs were getting out, those boats became even more popular. At that point, however, it was time for me to go to college. I hated the idea of having to leave the experience behind."

Set to leave the Michigan area that his grandfather's famous factory called home, he decided against the college route.

"I begged my father to let me stay and become an apprentice," he said. "And they let me. I did every job imaginable there. Wiring, plumbing, painting, building — you name it. Everyone knew me from all the summers I had spent there. They were all eager to teach me. It was unreal."

With family on Lake Keowee, Smith's trips to the Upstate are always made with his pride and joy.

"After my wife passed away, I bought and fixed up a 1961 27-foot Chris-Craft," he said. "I take it to all the boat shows with me now. It's a ball of fun and I have no plans on stopping."

Smith has six children of his own, all of whom are enthralled with the family business and share a love for boating. He travels with his eldest daughter.

"My kids don't like the idea of an old fella like me traveling on my own," he said. "So they come with me, and we have a blast. I'm very blessed."



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Classic controls on an antique wooden boat.

For those who want to get involved with antique boating or just the sport of boating in general, Smith sums up why it's a good idea.

"The hobby of restoring these wooden boats has become quite the show," he said. "They run so well, they look so great and they stand for history. There is nothing as relaxing as taking the boat out on the lake for a nice spin at sunset. There's just nothing like it."

Lonnie Mishton, Keowee Key resident and lover of Chris-Craft boats, expressed a similar fondness for growing up around these classic rides.

"I know a lot of us retired folk enjoy relaxing, that goes without saying," Miston joked. "But there is something about growing up around these boats then sticking with the hobby well into our Golden Years. You feel like you're in a secret society of sorts."

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