

Requiem for a Runabout By: Larry Hinton



Early this year, while on a visit to Grand Lake, I had the occasion to become acquainted with a marina operator. Rich Haynes and I had spent most of one day running down "hot leads" on old wooden boats in general and specifically the elusive Chris Craft Cobra that was reportedly at the lake some years ago. Around every bend, behind every barn, and in some forgotten boat storage we expected to find a diamond in the rough. One such lead had brought us to this particular marina. It was rumored that the manna had "a wooden boat shaped like a torpedo, a GarWood maybe." This, however, like most of our searches, turned out to be a wild goose chase. The man did have one thing to offer after being asked if there were any old boats around.

"Naw," was his reply, "Nothin' any good. Well, there's an ol' Chris Craft a layin' on the bottom over there under one of my slips. Kept leakin' and finally sank about twenty years ago."

"Really ?" I tried hard not to seem too overly interested. "You sure it was a Chris Craft ?"

"Oh yeah," he replied, "She's a Chris all right. Belonged to ol' Doctor So-and So. He gave us the boat for storage fees. She kept leakin', though, and then one day she just went under and that was the end of her. Weren't worth raisin' up and fixin' or nothin' so there she lays. She's still there, though, when the lake's down and the water clears up, you can see her deck."

My mind was filled with visions of the Cobra. It was supposed to have been owned by a doctor! I had recently read a story in Brass Bell of a Barrelback found in a lake in Iowa that had been on the bottom for 47 years. They raised it and found it in remarkably good condition. It still had some of the varnish on the hull! There was a strong possibility that the long lost Cobra was right here only a few feet below the surface. I wanted to strip down and jump in right then and there! But it was April and the water was ice cold and the lake was unusually high right then so common sense won out.

"You come back next summer, about August, and you can see her." he added. Next August ! I wanted to know what was down there right now!

"Yes, I'm interested in that boat. If it is a Chris Craft and it is at all salvageable, I want it. After I determine what it is, we will negotiate a deal and I will pay you a fair price." I felt strongly enough to put some money down to let him know that I was serious.

I related the story to Darrell Heath, a certified diver. and his comment was "Cool, lets go get it right now!" It was my decision to wait until warmer weather and better conditions. I had watched enough Jacques Cousteau to make me an armchair expert on under water search and salvage operations. We would plan and execute this project to do as little damage as possible to the fragile boat. We would first explore the site and then carefully place nylon straps around the hull and gently lift it with inflatable air bags. This would preserve the integrity of the boat. We would save a valuable piece of history.

As you know, August is boat show month and my schedule did not allow me to get away. I finally made contact with the man in early fall to inquire about the sunken Chris Craft.

"Oh yeah, I been meaning to call you all summer," he said. "I got a hold of that old boat with my backhoe and tried to pull her out for you to see, but she broke up before I got her up the bank. You can see her deck and windshield if that will help you."

"O.K. Don't do any more until I can look at it. I will be up there Saturday by noon." He didn't seem to realize that he had possibly destroyed a rebuildable classic runabout.

Jan and I made some hasty arrangements and arrived at the marina on time. We were met by the marina guy and he immediately escorted us to the site in a dilapidated Chevy pickup with no muffler. I was filled with anticipation. Having not slept very well the night before. Finally arriving at the appropriate slip, I caught my first glimpse of the boat. Even from a distance I could spot the unmistakable profile of the trademark clipper bow that came to be known as Chris Craft "bull nose" used on the more expensive boats built in the mid-fifties. This is the nose of a Cobra! My heart raced and my feet tried to keep up.

Visible out of the water was the nose and deck of an obviously decaying Chris Craft. The light was there and what was left of the steering wheel and instrument panel. From mid-cockpit back, the boat was still in the water. My first thought was to get my camera and take a picture. This story had to be documented. Honestly, a good story appeared to be the best thing to come from this poor old boat. I was able to determine that, while not a Cobra, that it was indeed a Chris, a Holiday with an "M" engine, probably a 20 footer built around 1954~1956. Since being partially dragged up the bank, kids had bashed in the windshield and most of the deck with rocks and the deck hardware was missing.

What was left was the remains of a once majestic lady. She had given her life to fun weekends at the lake, hauling water skiers, picnickers, sightseers and lovers to quiet bays and hidden coves. In my mind, I pictured her skimming along expanses of pristine water shimmering at the feet of autumn foliage of Eastern Oklahoma hardwood forests. I could hear the deep drone of the powerful Hercules engine and the sound of water spraying and of children laughing. Her once beautiful Mahogany & Chrome was now only bleached bones. It seemed almost irreverent to try to drag her remains from its watery grave. She had lived a full and productive life and had little left to give. As the marina operator had commented, "She's sure seen better days." I wondered if, in her youth, she'd had a name painted proudly across her transom.

What happens to a boat when it dies? If a boat has a soul, surely this one deserves some reward, if only to be remembered. May she rest in peace

