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A Brief History of "LAWSONS"

Lakeside Drive, Bemus Point

by David S. Lawson, Jr.,
October 15, 2010

In November 1918, 32-year-old David S. Lawson purchased a Nineteenth-century house, garage, and boat house at 73 Lakeside Drive at Bemus Point, New York. Naming his enterprise The Lawson Boat and Engine Co, Inc., he serviced and stored automobiles at the street level and boats at the lake level.

About 1920, Lawson built on the lake side. His boat-building shop was on the top floor with boat storage below. Lawson-built boats included: double-ended row boats (used for Muskie fishing), sail boats (catboats and early Snipes), and motorboats (up to 22-foot, triple-cockpit runabouts).

In 1927, Lawson married Margaret Boak. Daughter Jean was born in 1928; David, Jr. in 1933.

In 1927, Lawson purchased property on Fluvanna Ave. at the Jamestown city line (Clifton) on Chautauqua Lake outlet where, in earlier days, steamboats were hauled out for maintenance and repairs. There he built a boat shop and boat-hoisting facilities.

In 1930, Lawson formed L-S Aero Marine with Ralph Sheldon, Jr. as principal shareholders. In 1947, the garage on Lakeside Drive was razed and the-brick-and concrete-block-showroom was built (bricks made by Chautauqua Brick Co.). Retails sales grew.

Dave, Jr. and Jean took over the operation of the business. Dave, Sr. was active until 1968 and died in 1971. Margaret was the bookkeeper until her death in 1985. Jean ran the Bemus Point store until 2000 and died in 2001.

In Fenruary 2010, Dave, Jr. agreed to donate the property to a group of businessmen. In October 2010, ownership of this historic structure passed to the Lawson Boating Heritage Center on Chautauqua Lake, Inc.

Chautauqua Lake's Belle Epoch

The Belle Epoch of boating on Chautauqua Lake, New York literally began in 1922, when David S. Lawson,

Sr. began selling fast, well-appointed mahogany "speedboats" from his Lawson Boat & Engine Company in Bemus Point, New York.

The first of these were manufactured by Chris Smith and Sons Boats (soon to be Chris-Craft Corporation) in Algonac, Michigan. The Epoch ended in 1968, when Chris-Craft Industries manufactured its last mahogany-hulled boat amid the burgeoning new era of fiberglass. Never before and never again would the lake be populated by such unique and esthetically beautiful watercraft.

When their day ended, wood boats disappeared quickly. No one who knew them could ever try to further a fiction that they were easy to maintain, in any way. Even the best varnishes lasted only a few seasons. The gleaming wood scratched and marred easily. And even those boats that were meticulously cared for were always subject to the quiet killer called dry rot. Wood boats were lovely to look at, but they were rarely built to last more than six years before they became literal throwaways for the wealthy, and ever-deteriorating problems for the American Middle-Class that had embraced boating more and more as small watercraft became increasingly useful, affordable, and pleasing to the whole family.

Boats built of fiberglass hit the boating scene like a hurricane. Manufacturers loved them because they could be built quickly and economically by a workforce that didn't require expensive woodworking skills. Buyers loved them because they were relatively inexpensive, durable, and fast. Within little more than a decade, the graceful wooden boats (now looking rather shoddy as they aged) disappeared into barns, if they were lucky, or rotted away under decaying canvas. Their brief Belle Epoch began quickly, and just as quickly faded into the dust bins of history.

Today, when new boats increasingly resemble Clorox (c) bottles with roll bars, and boating itself has become more of a sport than an activity unto itself, it is sometimes difficult to remember the days when boats were considered great because of their beauty instead of in their utility. Fortunately, nothing quite so beautiful and unique as these grand old boats could disappear completely. Their surpassing beauty lingers in the minds of people like the founders of The Lawson Center, who are determined that neither these irreplaceable icons nor their elegant milieu will be forgotten...

History of 'The Friends'

THE NAUTICAL COUNTRY STORE

All nine Executive Board Members of "The Friends" grew up around Chautauqua Lake during the Belle Epoch, and during that era: the Lawsons, as well as L-S Aero-Marine, itself, left a distinct stamp on each personality. There was always a familiar smile in the showroom for people who needed boats, parts, supplies, repairs, gasoline, and advice. There were also a trio of canvas chairs?and time?for those who simply wanted to sit around and talk boats. L-S Aero Marine was Chautauqua?s nautical country store. What a warm, wonderful place it was!

RUMORS?

As so often is the case, The Friends of the Lawson Center, Inc. began in large part due to misinformation. After Jean Lawson?s untimely death in 2001, David (Dave?) Lawson, Jr. had concentrated more and more on boat repair and restoration at L-S Aero Marine?s campus on ?The Outlet? in Fluvanna, New York, just north of Jamestown. Over time, the Chandlery in Bemus Point gradually closed its doors and fell into disrepair?excellent grist for a rumor mill.

By July 2009, word on the street was that David Lawson planned to bequeath the Chandlery to his church and that soon after his demise, L-S Aeromarine would be sold off to become just another Bemus Point restaurant. Upsetting news to many local residents, but what could anyone do? In today's busy world, most people find themselves tied up just coping with their day-to-day lives.

Not so retired Police Chief Anthony (?Tony?) Hopfinger; he decided to see what could be done. One morning in July 2009--following considerable discussion with Retired Detective William R. Reynolds III of Lakewood--Hopfinger invited retired Bank Executive William (?Bill?) Locke and Writer/Programmer Bill Baldwin to meet in the Bemus Inn and talk things over. The three agreed immediately that if Lawson would turn over the Chandlery to a small, not-for-profit corporation, it might be possible to raise funds that would turn the building into a ?Museum.? These talks became a weekly exercise that continued throughout the remainder of the summer.

Though Locke and Baldwin returned to homes in Charlotte, North Carolina and Dallas, Texas, the meetings continued by teleconference throughout the remainder of the year. By early 2010, the three had drafted a proposal that they hoped would interest other Chautauqua-area personalities into joining the group. Their goal was eventually forming a corporation that could pay tribute the Lawson Family heritage through The Lawson Center Museum as well as ensure the present L-S Aero Marine facility in Bemus Point: (a) remained available to the boating public, (b) was preserved and maintained as an integral part of the Bemus Point Community, and (c) continued to exist, in perpetuity, as an asset to Chautauqua Lake boating.?

In January 2010, the original trio was joined by William R. Reynolds III, Insurance Agent Andrew Robinson of Jamestown, and Chemical Salesman/Councilman David Wesp, of Bemus Point. This second trio accepted the ?Proposal,? and planned to continue refining documentation until presenting David Lawson with a finished proposal in Late June, 2010.

MORE RUMORS?

Plans changed abruptly when another rumor developed on the street: a local businessman had supposedly made an offer to purchase the Chandlery from David Lawson. Though there was no way of verifying this information, the six made a decision to act immediately. With the Proposal complete, the next unknown was what reaction Lawson would have and what options were available in case that reaction was unfavorable. This resulted in the flowchart below, which now serves to underline the determination to ?save? the Chandlery that had developed among the six principals: they would keep modifying the proposal until David Lawson either accepted or told them to, ?Get lost!?

PRESENTING THE PROPOSAL

It was decided that Reynolds and Robinson would accomplish the actual presentation of the Proposal, however, they asked that Baldwin first introduce the concept by phone. Baldwin decided it was worthwhile to present his introduction in person, so on February 22, 2010, he flew to Buffalo, then drove to Jamestown, where he invited Lawson to supper at Roberto's Ironstone Restaurant and verbally presented the Proposal. To everyone's astonishment, Lawson accepted. At that point, what had been theoretical became real, and the six ?Friends? began work in earnest. In the next weeks, Businessman Marlin Younker of Cleveland, Ohio added his acumen to what was coming to be known as ?The Board.? Later, David Graper, an experienced contractor, also from Cleveland, joined, and was followed by David Lawson, himself, completing the original, nine-member Board.

History of the TLC

Once incorporated as The Friends of the Lawson Center, Inc., The Friends got down to business quickly, applying for a second incorporation, this one with Provisional Charter for a New Museum from the New York State Education Department. The requested name of the corporation: *The Lawson Boating Heritage Center on Chautauqua Lake, Inc.*

When this was granted, the new corporation could at last apply for an IRS Section (501)(c)(3) and become a truly not-for-profit corporation.

The next tasks involved the dilapidated, Nineteenth-Century house connected to the Boat-Chandlery showroom and a single buried fuel tank. The Village of Bemus Point had long demanded that this building be torn down as soon as possible; the NYDEC (New York State Department of Environmental Conservation) was much more pointed in their demands.

Work began on both projects July 20 and continued until July 31, with removal of both the known gasoline storage tank and one that caught everyone by surprise. Luckily, both tanks were in reasonable shape, and close work with hard-working NYDEC personnel made it possible to deal with these problems while causing minimal affect to our restoration schedule?which began immediately. A third tank discovered in September had been so isolated by the Chandlery?s foundation, that its removal took place without any adverse affects to the building schedule.

Since then, the building has been completely renovated with outdoor additions that have transformed it into one of the most attractive structures in Bemus Point. Restoration of the Chandlery and showroom--along with continuous introduction and rotation of various artifacts--will never be completely finished (as long as we have anything to do with things).

ENTER THE LAWSON BOATING HERITAGE CENTER ON CHAUTAUQUA LAKE, INC.

The Lawson Boating Heritage Center on Chautauqua Lake was awarded Provisional Charter for a New Museum from the New York State Education Department September 14, 2010 [EIN 27-3671294]. Shortly afterward, we applied for our IRS Section (501)(c)(3).

Since September, 2010, all Corporate officers and Directors have moved their offices from The Friends of the Lawson Center, Inc. to The Lawson Boating Heritage Center on Chautauqua Lake, Inc. We have formally and legally taken possession of the L-S Aero Marine building and continue our major restoration to Bemus Point?s Boat Chandlery that is now a museum.

Come by Bemus Point often and observe our exciting progress. The Lawson Center opens this year (2013) May 15. Come see us!

Incorporation History

When the friends applied for incorporation in June, 2010,the State of New York and the IRS awarded them a ?Type-A," not for profit corporation as The Friends of the Lawson Center, Inc. [EIN 27-3671294]

Having cleared all the hurdles necessary to gain this special, Type-A incorporation, the friends immediately incorporated a second time and on Sept. 14, 2010 was awarded a provisional charter by the New York Department of Education as, The Lawson Boating Heritage Center on Chautauqua Lake, an Educational Corporation, i.e., a ?Museum.? [EIN 27-3671294]

April 15, 2011: We received our determination letter from the IRS. As of that date, we qualify as eligible to receive contributions that are tax-deductible under IRS Section **(501)(c)(3)**.

Loving Boats since 1918...

73 Lakeside Drive (P.O. Box 10) Bemus Point, NY 14712

See map

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