

The Timeless Beauty of Chris Craft Boats



Growing up, I was what can only be called a “lake kid.” Despite living in the Midwest, where summers were only the prescribed 3.5 months long, I spent a lot of time on the water. Water skiing, pontoon partying and occasionally jet-skiing was the order of the day up until the point I moved out of the area.

As fate would have it, my travels brought me to Florida, where summer pretty much lasts the entire year, and my exposure to the boating lifestyle grew exponentially.

My point is this: I’ve seen a lot of watercraft in my time, from garage sale john boats to multi-million dollar power yachts, and there is nothing as impressive as a beautifully crafted and maintained wooden powerboat. While there have been many manufacturers of wooden boats through the years, the undisputed king of these mahogany works of art has always been Chris Craft Boats.

Chris Craft essentially began in 1874 when a 13-year-old Christopher Columbus Smith built his first boat to use in duck hunting. His friends were impressed with the craft so they commissioned him to build boats for them as well. Chris continued to make skiffs until 1910 when the Smith Ryan Boat Company was formed. The company focused its efforts on building affordable runabouts.

In 1922, the company evolved into the Chris Smith & Sons Boat Company, and in 1927 Chris Smith’s son, Jay Smith, took over the company and remained at the helm of Chris Craft Boats for more than 30 years. During that time Chris Craft became the world’s top producer of wooden power boats.

During World War II, Chris Craft did its patriotic duty by producing 12,000 vessels for the United States military. These vessels included patrol boats, launches and rescue boats for the Navy and Army.

The 50s marked the heyday of Chris Craft's wooden boat lineup, and I personally think the models from this era are by far the coolest. You can still find many of these original and restored boats cruising waterways all over the world. During this time, Chris Craft boasted an impressive lineup of 139 powerboat models, and it was during this decade that the company built its first fiberglass boat.

Chris Craft continued to drive its wooden boat production through the 60s, and in 1971 they saw the end of an era when the company produced its last mahogany boat.

In the 80s and 90s, Chris Craft turned back to producing smaller, more affordable power boats once more, but that only lasted until the turn of the century. In 2001, Chris Craft launched a line of high-end heritage models, and they also introduced a 43-foot yacht.

Today, Chris Craft is still producing gorgeous watercraft that blends modern function with the timeless beauty of wooden detail. The hard part is deciding whether to go modern or antique. One thing is for sure, if you're cruising the lake in a vintage Chris Craft, with its polished mahogany hull, throaty V8 engine and a flag billowing on the bow, you're guaranteed to turn some heads.