

RESTORING AN ANCIENT EVINRUDE

By Christopher Scratch

Chapter 1 – Discovery & Recovery

Preface:

The article which follows is the first installment of a four-part series providing a detailed account of events describing the procurement and restoration of the oldest Evinrude Detachable Rowboat motor that I've ever had the good fortune to own. The article was written in stages which documented the steps I followed in bringing this antique motor back to life. During the later stages of research, much of which was done in the next-to-last stages of the restoration, some discrepancies were uncovered; however, instead of going back and re-writing or correcting what had already been written, I left the script as-is, with the intent of pointing out all the "errors" as well as the applicable correction(s) to the readers in the final chapter. I hope you enjoy the article, and I issue a challenge to all antique outboard fanatics to try and figure out what the "discrepancies" are BEFORE I point them all out to you in Chapter 4.

This is the story of how I lucked into owning one of the oldest Evinrude Detachable Rowboat motors known to survive from the early days of production, and how I went about attempting to restore it. I've always wanted to have one of the skegless models in my collection; I did not think it would happen quite like this. If not for some incredibly lucky breaks, and the help of a good friend who went way above and beyond the call of duty, I would not have this motor.

It all started innocently enough. It was the afternoon of July 16, 2003. My wife, daughter and I were preparing for our annual camping trip to eastern Ontario. I was in the garage working on loading the truck with our gear. For some reason, I had brought the cordless phone out into the garage when I went out to start packing, which is an odd thing for me to do. When working in the garage, I detest being disturbed by a ringing phone, and with this being a typical hot and muggy southwestern Ontario summer afternoon, the kind where even the mere *thought* of any type of manual labour causes you to break into a sweat, there was even less reason for me to want to chat on the phone or endure countless calls from telemarketers. I was deep into the chore of packing the bed of the truck and just had the sweat pouring off me when the phone rang. I didn't really feel like answering it right then & there, so I just let it ring. I figured "it's probably a teenager or, even worse, one of those blasted telephone solicitor services calling so who needs that at a time like this". However, after the 6th ring I decided to click the phone on and at least find out who was calling, and after wiping the perspiration out of my burning eyes, found the phone where I had left it on the bow of my boat and finally answered.

I was pleasantly surprised when the caller asked for me by my full name, as I knew straight away that this was not a solicitor; in fact, I suspected that it was a "motor call", since many people who call me at home looking for motor information typically ask for me by my published name as it appears in the *Outboarder* magazine. Little did I know just how interesting this call would become. I informed him that he was indeed talking to the party whom he had requested, and asked how I could be of assistance.

He informed me that Kneal Wiegel, who serves as Evinrude (Classic) Special Interest Group Leader for AOMCI, had given him my name. He wanted some information about an Evinrude motor that he was buying. He had found Kneal's name and called him but Kneal felt that the man's needs would be better served by calling me instead, since the motor seemed to be much older than what he (Kneal) normally deals with. The man was looking to buy this motor from an estate to re-sell it and hopefully make a few bucks. His story was that buying a "useless old relic of an antique motor" (a blasphemous statement in its own right) would allow him to get his foot in the door with the executor of the estate and give him access to the "good stuff" (furniture, pottery, knick-knacks, etc). He was going to have to pay "a pretty good buck for it" and wanted some advice; he didn't want to get stuck with it if he couldn't re-sell it for a profit. I do not like pricing stuff over the phone, normally I would avoid it like the plague, especially with a motor that's completely sight unseen, but decided to try and tell him what I could at any rate. I asked him to describe the motor for me so I could try and get some idea of what he was looking at.

He started by telling me that it was very old, had an exposed flywheel with a wooden knob on it, a squared-off cookie-tin type of gas tank, and a brass propeller. I asked him which way the cylinder was pointing, and he indicated that it would be pointing at the operator when mounted on a boat. "OK", I thought, "it's a detachable rowboat style of motor, but we don't know what kind for sure" so I inquired as to how he knew he had an Evinrude motor. His answer was that there was a rectangular brass tag soldered to the top of the gas tank with

“Evinrude Motor Company” and “Milwaukee, Wisconsin U.S.A.” embossed on it. When asked for more details on the tag lettering, he volunteered that the only other text visible were the words “Patents Pending”. I asked him if there was any lettering visible on the flywheel itself, his reply was that the flywheel had 4 holes cast into it but there wasn’t any lettering. Now, I know that by 1912 Ole Evinrude had been granted patents on his motor designs and this fact was printed on the motor ID tags, also that the flywheels after 1912 had the word “EVINRUDE” cast in letters that stood above the wheel surface, so we were talking about an early version of the rowboat motor. It was getting very interesting. I next asked him if there was a skeg on the lower unit. He did not know what I meant by a “skeg”, so I replied, “OK, what about a fin sticking out the bottom then?” instead. “Oh, there’s no fin on the bottom” he said, “with the casing sitting on the ground you can’t turn the prop”. Hmmmm.... A skegless model to boot. Awesome. Next question posed by myself was if there an aluminum exhaust manifold bolted to the port side of the motor with the words “Evinrude Detachable Rowboat Motor” cast into it. “There’s a manifold there, but sorry, there’s no lettering on it at all”. OK, now I’m starting to sweat all over again, but it ain’t from packing the truck. Next question was if there was a number visible on the tag, likely in the bottom right-hand corner of the tag. The answer made me stop and catch my breath; “it says number one-two-zero-seven” the man replied, “so does that tell you anything”? Well, if he only knew; he had a very early example of a skegless, blank exhaust manifold-equipped Detachable Rowboat Motor that he wanted to sell, and at this point the motor is not spoken for. To say that my heart skipped a beat would be putting it mildly. As calmly as possible, I asked him to put a dollar figure on the motor, which he did not do right away, but he did indicate that he was willing to be “reasonable”. I told him “Well, I think that your worries of being stuck with the motor are over; if you really want to sell the thing, I don’t think you have to look any further for a potential buyer”.

But, not all was well.. far from it, in fact. Finally I regained some presence of mind, and actually got around to asking the gentleman where he was calling from. Problem # 1; he was calling from Wisconsin, near Green Bay. OK, with me being situated in southern Ontario, that’s a bit of a haul for me, and maybe the least of my problems. Problem # 2; this was late in the afternoon on the day before we were leaving to go camping. No time to do anything as far as make arrangements to pay him anytime soon. Problem # 3; he informed me that he only had 5 more minutes to talk on the phone, then he would have to leave for his dialysis appointment, which he had to undergo three days a week; in fact, making appointments to meet with him was often a problem unto itself, since his various medical conditions made things quite unpredictable for him. Problem # 4, he could not possibly be responsible for packing a motor up and shipping it because of his many health issues. Well, obviously nothing could be done right away, so I asked him if he was in a big, big hurry to make his money off the motor, and explained my predicament. He did agree that he would be willing to wait until my family & I had returned from camping before he did anything with the motor. After gathering his phone number from him, the conversation ended. Well, on with the packing for the trip. After completely filling the back of the F-150 with most of our stuff, and loading the Larson Pla-Boy with the rest of it, it was break-time.

Guess it was just natural to do at this point, but now I couldn’t help thinking about that Evinrude. Had to do something to try and see if this motor was even what it was being held out to be, and also try and find a way for it to get home. With the Tomahawk Mini-Nationals on the horizon, I decided to give fellow AOMCI member Bob Skinner a call and see if he could help out, since I knew he was going out to Wisconsin for the meet. As usual, he was more than willing to do whatever he could. Bob volunteered to talk with the gentleman about the motor, see if he could glean any further useful information about it from him, and then attempt to meet with the seller as Bob & his wife Peg made their way to Tomahawk for the meet. Bob took the man’s phone number and I left it with him at that point.

Later that same evening, Bob called me to say that he had contacted the seller and, based on the answers to the questions he had posed, and although advised by the seller that the motor was “stuck”, was satisfied that indeed the motor was a very early example of an Evinrude, a purchase price had been negotiated that was indeed reasonable, and against very steep odds, an agreement reached for a meeting time and place to make the purchase. It did involve a great deal of driving out of their way to pick up and pay for a motor that I was getting, for which a “thank you” is simply not sufficient. The Skinners would put in at least an extra day of driving (not to mention having to wait a couple of hours for the seller to show up at the agreed upon meeting place) and also paid an extra nights stay in a hotel just to try and go after the old motor. How I’ve been blessed with friends like them, I have no clue.

But first things first, now it’s off on the camping trip north. Of course, I’m looking forward to getting out onto the lake that I can’t get enough of, and spending time with my wife and daughter away from the distractions of normal everyday life. However, I must confess, that while I was buzzing around on Round Lake with the Mark 55 purring away as per usual, my thoughts kept drifting off towards a much older marine specimen that I didn’t even know for sure really existed. We’ve all received descriptions of some “rare, never seen before, one-of-a-kind

gen-you-whine ant-eeek motor” only to be offered a Johnson TN-27 or some darn thing like that when we actually track down the seller. I knew this one wouldn’t be a TN-27, but, well, you know what I’m talking about. Folks have been known to lie over the phone once in awhile. At any rate, about half-way through our scheduled two-week stay up north, the weather just was not cooperating as we thought it should; so, when my wife Margriet suggested that possibly we cut the camping time a bit short and head home to spend some time soaking up the southern Ontario sun on our pool deck, I did not mind breaking camp early and making the return trip ahead of schedule. I had other fish to fry anyway. Call it “ulterior motive” if you will.

The trip home was largely uneventful, aside from getting to see a pair of moose standing out in the open of one of the many marshy areas of Algonquin Park along the Hwy. 60 corridor. As usual, every time we make the trip, I get stares and comments at every stop along the way about the classic Merc perched atop the transom of the Larson. It’s a nice motor, and I do love that big rascal, but right now it’s not the motor I’ve got on my mind. When we pulled into the driveway at 11:30 that night, I was kinda glad to have that garage door open and see all the other motors hanging on the racks. Somewhat of a reminder that “oh well, if it doesn’t work out, you still have all these waiting to get played with”. The next day, when the unloading was completed and all the camping gear packed away, I got on the phone and talked with Bob, who assured me that I could just relax and that the side trip to the Green Bay area was still a “go”, and he’d let me know what was going on when he got to the seller’s place.

Well, the rest of it goes like this. On the appointed day, Bob called on a cell phone to say that he was at the sellers’ residence; the motor was on the front porch, but no seller in sight. He was looking at the motor and telling me all the good & bad of the whole thing. Tank & tag were good, had the correct lower unit but the gear-foot housing was heavily soldered or brazed, carburetor was correct but the poppet valve knob was probably not, flywheel was correct and the knob was appeared to be original, no spark plug in the hole, steering handle was missing, transom thumbscrews most likely incorrect, but at least it wasn’t “stuck” anymore, because the flywheel did turn, the compression seemed to be decent, and he could tell the motor had been recently oiled. The big thing for me was that the skegless lower unit was original and not “butchered” (i.e. skeg cut off a later model foot to make it look like the early version), and that the exhaust manifold was the correct part, without the lettering, although the muffler can was missing. He asked me if I was still wanting the motor to come home with him or not, but my mind was already made up ahead of time so I said “definitely, if you don’t mind”. He said he’d buy it and take it with him, and that he would call when he got back from Tomahawk in about a week.

Well, all I could do now was think about that damned motor. What a conglomeration of fortunate events it had taken to get it. Usually, we collectors have to go find the motors; this one found me instead. I was afraid to even say anything about it to anybody, being so superstitious, figured I’d just jinx something or somebody and it wouldn’t work out. Anybody who has ever had a motor deal pulled out from under them before knows what I’m talking about. That was the longest week that I’ve ever lived through in recent memory, methinks. At work, I was counting the minutes till the end of each day. In the end, the subject of the motor did come up with a few of the guys from the club that I chat with on a regular basis, and they all thought it was just the greatest thing that this motor was going to be in my collection, but I was still doubting if I should have even mentioned it or not.

Well, then the Tomahawk meet was over, and the first pictures from the meet were being posted on the Internet.



Clicking through them, my mind was selfishly wandering to the thoughts of my own little prize traveling back here to Canada in the back of the Skinners’ van when there it was, leaping off the screen at me; picture number 59, a digital shot taken by Diana Baacke, showing Bob Skinner and Ned Courtright working over a rusty old relic of an Evinrude Rowboat motor. There wasn’t any doubt in my mind; this was it, blank manifold with the can missing, small tank, and small flywheel. You could not see the gearfoot, but I knew that it was my motor. The picture was quintessential Bob Skinner, working on an antique motor with his tools and battery box at the ready. It made me very happy to see that.

“You son-of-a-gun” I said to myself as I broke into an uncontrollable grin, “you did it, you got that thing to run”.

I knew right then and there that he had run the motor. Bob wouldn't hook his battery box up to a dead motor for no reason.

Well, now even though I've "seen" the motor through the wonders of modern technology, there's still some waiting time for its actual arrival. I manage to somehow retain my sanity through the rest of the weekend. It's now the Wednesday following Tomahawk. I've mentally been poised with my finger on the keypad of the phone for days, so today I finally call Bob and make arrangements to go see him and retrieve my "new" motor. Oh, I am SO looking forward to this moment!

When I arrived at Bob's house, the motor was on a stand in his backyard. It was interesting to hear about his adventures on the trip, both with trying to find the seller's house, and also about the Tomahawk meet itself. When I asked about the picture that had appeared on the Web, I got the story from Bob of how he and Ned Courtright, after some vigorous cleaning of the fuel tank rust deposits, had tried to fire the motor up on a "couple of spoonfuls" of gas. The motor took right off and ran for about 10-12 seconds, during which it managed to fill the airplane hangar exhibit hall with nice blue smoke. Apparently the other people in attendance did not view this as the positive event that we collectors would consider it to be. Lucky for me I was not there, I might have gotten a slap upside the head for chuckling whilst getting an earful from the organizers.

Anyway, after the smoke cleared, the event continued on. Bob volunteered that the old Evinrude had won an award for "Oldest Running Motor". The ancient Evinrude impressed many onlookers with its performance, especially when it was considered that this motor has been sitting locked away for eons without ever seeing the light of day. I'm wondering if it should have won "Ugliest Running Motor" as well, considering the motor's overall appearance. No matter. Finding and rescuing the motor is the main thing, what category it won in or that it won at all is just gravy.



Bob says I have to see it run before I take it, so the battery box is hooked up, some fuel poured into the tank, and after a few bounces of the flywheel to prime it, he pulls the motor through compression and off she goes. It was that simple. Again, I'm grinning from ear to ear. What a sweet running antique. Bob shut the motor off after about 15 seconds so it wouldn't overheat, and reminds me that if I get discouraged with the old beast, just let him know and he'll come take it off my hands. I can't imagine "getting tired of it"; but just the same I can never thank Bob enough for his efforts in bringing this motor back from Wisconsin. What a pleasure to have him as a friend; it reminds me of something that Mark Suter says, which is "it's not about the motors, it's about the people".



In the next chapter..... the continuing story of the restoration, refurbishing the powerhead.

Till then, good luck with your old iron Eh!

[Chapter 2](#)
[Chapter 3](#)
[Chapter 4](#)