

# Yachts of the Auto Barons

by John F. Polacsek

*During the 1920s and 1930s the waterways of Lake St. Clair were the home of a number of yachts owned by auto barons – those who amassed their fortunes by either assembling automobiles, or by providing parts for others to create the horseless carriage.*

*In this article John F. Polacsek tells the story of these magnificent floating mansions.*

**Y**ACHTING HAS ALWAYS been one of the costliest diversions in the world, as it takes a bankroll of royal proportions to purchase a steam or motor yacht, and to keep it spic and span. In the 1920s the waterways of Lake St. Clair and the Great Lakes were the home of a number of yachts owned by auto barons—those who amassed their fortunes by either assembling an automobile or by providing parts for others to create the horseless carriages. There were two factors that occurred in the 1920s that made possible these floating palaces that were mirrors of the mansions on shore—the diesel engine and the interior decorator.

There was a great desire among yachtsmen to own a spotless vessel. A large steam yacht might need a crew of 50 men, but a diesel yacht needed only one third that size crew or less. The advent of oil burning engines to replace the coal burning steam engines in the 1920s and 1930s was evident in the port of Detroit. In 1925 there were three steam yachts registered in Detroit and 58 motor yachts, by 1939 there were only two steam yachts while the number of motor yachts rose to 136.

The motor yachts were equipped with diesel engines and required a crew of 7 or 8 men to operate the vessel. Additionally, the absence of smoke, hot boilers, and a coal bunker altered the design of the vessel and more living space was the result. Hulls were designed with ample draft and stability and were able to sail through the roughest weather that

the Great Lakes or Atlantic Ocean could produce. On yachts 150 feet in length, two diesel engines provided between 800 and 3,200 horsepower, and matched propellers could produce a speed from 12 to 16 knots. The oil in the tanks inside the hull allowed for a cruising range of 2,000 miles or more, double that of the steam powered vessels.

**A**s early as 1907 one of Michigan's auto barons, Ransom E. Olds, owned a yacht and was a member of the Detroit Boat Club as well as the Detroit Yacht Club. Mr. Olds organized the Olds Motor Vehicle Company in 1897, and reorganized it in 1899 as the Olds Motor Works in Detroit. In 1901 a fire destroyed his Detroit plant and the company moved to Lansing, Michigan. A few years later Olds sold the Motor Works and organized the Reo Motor Car Company. By the early 1920s he was ready for his fifth yacht.

In February 1922 Olds received a letter from Harry Defoe of the Defoe Boat & Motor Works in Bay City, Michigan. Defoe had heard that Olds was contemplating building a yacht and he requested to bid on the job.

The Defoe Boat & Motor Works was a well equipped steel ship building plant especially adapted to the construction of medium-sized vessels. The company began in 1905 by building fishing skiffs. With the closing of the Frank Wheeler Shipbuilding Company in 1911, Defoe was able to grow using the pool of experienced shipbuilders who were in the Bay City and Saginaw area. They could construct a vessel

## YACHTS OF THE AUTO BARONS



REOMAR III, starboard view.

from the design of any naval architect. Vessels up to 125 feet in length were built under cover, larger boats were built out in the open.

Mr. Olds contacted the Detroit naval architects Cox & Stevens and had them draw up the plans for a new steel hulled yacht. On December 30, 1922, Olds entered into a contract with the Defoe Boat & Motor Works for a new 97'5" vessel. The blueprints and specifications were delivered to the Defoe shipyard. Work commenced immediately as the yacht was to be delivered in the Saginaw River at the plant on or before the first day of June 1924. It was mutually agreed upon that any changes in the plans would need the approval of the builder and the owner. The agreed price for the vessel was \$25,000, and the owner was to pay all federal taxes assessed on the luxury yacht.

In February 1923 the Defoe Shipyard wrote to Olds stating that the revised set of plans and specifications had arrived from Cox & Stevens. However, the shipyard had been advised not to proceed until hearing directly from the owner as there was a distinct possibility that he might wish to change something else.

The shipyard was ready to create a scale model of the yacht and they wanted Olds' approval before any additional changes were made. If there were to be any changes in the lines of the hull, this might also be reflected in the amount of steel plate and frames that were needed. It was June before a letter from the Reo Motor Car Company arrived with instructions to order the steel from the Joseph T. Ryerson & Son firm of Chicago, Illinois. The steel was to be billed to Olds' account, but Defoe had some reservations about what kind of steel was coming under the classification of "warehouse stock." He was of the opinion that the warehouse stock would probably be inferior due to the ordinary open hearth steel making process, and he suggested a better quality ship's steel. In July the steel arrived after being purchased from the firm of Jones & Laughlin of Cleveland, Ohio, and Defoe was satisfied that it was good quality.

The joiner work for the interior was being created and would be installed as soon as the hull was ready for it. In September Olds decided to have the deck house made out of teak wood for an additional \$500 charge. Olds did not like the look of oak. He preferred a darker appearance along with

YACHTS OF THE AUTO BARONS



REOMAR III, main salon.



REOMAR III, interior with organ.



REOMAR III, stateroom.

## YACHTS OF THE AUTO BARONS



REOMAR III, aft deck.

natural mahogany. He noted that it was vital that the very best varnish be used and that the outside varnish should be the best Valspar—nothing else would do.

As the joiner work came on board so did Olds' new interior designer, The Grosvenor Company of East 48th Street, New York City.

The interior designer recommended that no glass knobs be used anywhere on the yacht, and that the hardware in the owners cabin be of white brass. It was suggested that the finish on the mahogany in the owners stateroom be in a French gray or stain. Olds suggested that the shipyard try out a piece and he would look it over when he came up for an inspection. Olds was not satisfied, and had the interior designer send a sample of wood showing the exact finish that he wanted for the mahogany doors, trim in the state rooms, passage way, and the lobby of the yacht. The colors for the walls in the various rooms were forthcoming, and the Defoe Shipyard accommodated Olds' wishes. In addition, Olds requested that the lounge cushions and seats on the deck be made of brown pantesote, and the designer was to forward a swatch to match.

Work progressed on the vessel and in early June 1924, the yacht was in the final stages of completion. Olds wrote to Defoe, noting that he had ordered in May, from the Wanamaker Company of New York City, the table linen, bed linen, etc, and he wanted to be sure that it was all set aside and under good care.

On July 24, 1924, Olds sent a note on stationary embossed ON BOARD REOMAR III to the Defoe Boat & Motor Works. He stated that he was "very much pleased" with the yacht, and he thought that the shipyard had done a credible job.

Mr. Olds was pleased with his yacht, and as the seven-man crew got underway, he came down to meet them at the Detroit Boat Club on Belle Isle in the Detroit River. Olds used the REOMAR III for sailing north, up the lakes, then back down and out to the Thousand Islands and the St. Lawrence River. During 1925, Olds cruised about 2,500 miles aboard the REOMAR III and used about 2,000 gallons of oil as fuel. The vessel was wintered in Charlevoix, on Lake Michigan. Olds noted that he had a number of chances to sell the REOMAR III, but he held on to the yacht until 1931, when it was sold to Alex J. Groesbeck of Detroit, a former governor of Michigan. Groesbeck renamed the yacht RENMAR.

William C. Rands came to Detroit in 1891 and engaged in the bicycle business. In 1903 he bought out the Wheeler Manufacturing Company and was soon producing windshields, tops, lamp brackets, etc., for various automobiles. The company grew into the Rands Automotive Company, which in 1916 was combined with the Motor Products Corporation, a major source in the automotive industry. Rands was also one of the original founders of the Automobile Club of Michigan and held card number three.



Advertisement – 1931.



## YACHTS OF THE AUTO BARONS



ROSEWILL II, main salon.

In October 1923, Harry Defoe wrote William C. Rands of the Motor Products Company of Detroit asking to bid on the new yacht that Mr. Rands was contemplating building. Defoe mentioned that the hull of Olds' large steel yacht was about completed, and he was proud that Olds had chosen his Bay City shipyard to build his yacht. Rands was invited to visit the Defoe shipyard to inspect their work, or to visit the Detroit Boat or Yacht Club where Defoe products were at the docks.

In December 1925 Defoe was still trying to bid on a yacht for Mr. Rands, and he wanted the job because this was to be Rands' first vessel. Defoe was proud that he had been in the boat business for 20 years, and had given up the construction of a cheaper class of boats and was working exclusively on high quality vessels. Defoe stated that he would like to place another boat in Detroit that would prove the quality of his shipyard's work. He recognized that he had an opportunity with Rands and was willing to cut a deal. The price of the new boat was to be reduced to \$29,500. However, this did not include the engines, electric equipment, the upholstery, or the small craft used to shuttle the owner and guests from the dock to the yacht.

A deal was struck, and the naval architectural firm of Hacker & Fermann, Inc., of Detroit, Michigan, designed an excellent 80-foot steel hulled vessel. The yacht, named the ROSEWILL, was completed late in the summer of 1926. Per Rands' request, the leather and cloth for the upholstery came from the Fisher Body Company of Detroit, and the furniture and cabinet work were completed under the direction of the Andrew Sisman Company, well-noted craftsmen of Detroit. The yacht was 79'9" in length, with a 14'8" beam. The crew of four handled the vessel and she spent much of her time at the dock of the Detroit Yacht Club. Rands owned the vessel

only a year, when she was sold to David Wende of Buffalo, New York, and was renamed the RESTLESS II.

Rands was a booster of the Defoe shipyard, and in 1931 a new 126-foot yacht named the ROSEWILL II was delivered to him in Detroit. The yacht was designed by the naval architects Cox & Stevens, Inc., who now had offices in New York and Detroit. The yacht had a low sleek design, in order to insure the proper clearance for canal navigation on the fall trip to Florida where the boat was wintered.

On the main deck was a dining salon with the galley up forward, followed by a large navigation room, and the owners stateroom, aft. The main salon was large and airy, measuring 12 feet wide by 25 feet long. Arrangements below decks included heads (sometimes known as bathrooms), dressing rooms, lockers, etc., all carefully worked out for the owner's family requirements.

The crew of eight managed the vessel. The engine room housed twin eight-cylinder 300-horsepower Winton Diesel engines which produced 16 knots. When the engines ran at top speed they were practically vibrationless. On board, a pair of two-cylinder 10 k.w. Winton Diesels generated electric current for the whole boat.

The ROSEWILL II was listed as being owned by Rands, Inc., and was operated on the Great Lakes until 1937, when the yacht was sold to Emma Burlington of Cincinnati, Ohio and the name was changed to the BURLANIA.

In 1926, Rands was instrumental in securing Defoe a bid on a new yacht for Ross Judson of Detroit. Judson was leaning towards having the vessel built on the lakes, and Rands extolled the merits and quality workmanship that was available in Bay City. After a tour of the ROSEWILL, Judson was convinced.



ROSEWILL II, owner's stateroom.

YACHTS OF THE AUTO BARONS



ROSEWILL II, port bow.

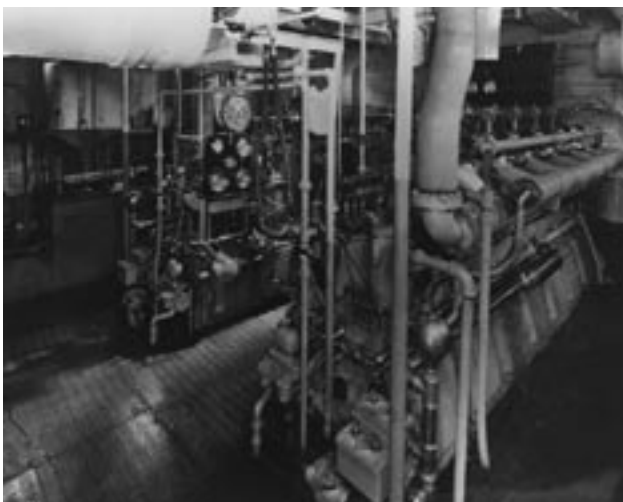


ROSEWILL II, starboard view, May 23, 1931.

YACHTS OF THE AUTO BARONS



COMOCO, dining salon.



COMOCO, engine room.



COMOCO, pilot house.

## YACHTS OF THE AUTO BARONS



COMOCO, port view.

A month later Rands wrote Defoe, noting that, "I was very pleased to know that you were able to secure the order for Judson's boat." He suggested that Defoe pay a visit to the Detroit firm of Hacker & Fermann as Rands was aware that another of his business acquaintances was about to place an order for a yacht.

Ross W. Judson was president of Continental Motors Corporation, a company which he had founded in 1903. He observed that most American cars were using one- and two-cylinder engines, and was convinced that a practical four-cylinder engine could be developed, which he did. His firm had plants in Muskegon and Detroit. He was the owner of a large number of pleasure boats, sailing the Great Lakes in the summer and cruising off the Florida coast during the winter.

The naval architectural firm of John H. Wells of New York City received a check for \$25,000 in October 1926 as down payment for the new Judson yacht COMOCO. Soon after, Defoe requested the lines of the yacht so that a scale model could be made for Judson's approval.

Judson was a stickler for details and one day dropped into the New York office of Wells and decided that the smoke stack needed to be cut down one foot in height. He also planned a trip for himself, Wells, and Mr. Raphael, the designer, to be in Bay City to coordinate everything. Raphael provided sketches and details of a music roll cabinet which

was to be located in the port side of the main salon. It was noted that the style of leaded glass in the sketch was merely an indication of what he thought was suitable, "but need not be followed absolutely in detail."

Judson had an objection to the telephones in the state-rooms. They were the wall type and he considered them unsightly. He preferred the European type with the mouth-piece and transmitter in one piece. Raphael recommended that the cornices and window trim be covered with cornice valances under which the headings of the drapery could be concealed, especially in the dining salon and main salon.

The yacht COMOCO was launched on May 21, 1927, and slid out onto the Saginaw River. By July 1 COMOCO was ready to leave the dock and start on her trip down the lakes to Detroit. By August, word reached Wells that the COMOCO was "creating a great deal of favorable comment." Judson met Defoe at the Detroit Yacht Club and told him how pleased he was with the vessel. There were some modifications that Judson suggested regarding the electrical generators, and Defoe told Wells that he may "rest assured that I will in any event do whatever is necessary to satisfy him in every way."

By October 1927 the COMOCO left the lakes and sailed out the St. Lawrence to the Atlantic Ocean. She proved



## YACHTS OF THE AUTO BARONS



COMOCO, main salon.



COMOCO, owner's stateroom.



COMOCO, aft deck.

seaworthy. Early in December Defoe met with Judson in his Detroit office to discuss some problems with the vessel. Judson was convinced that nine-tenths of his troubles were due entirely to the crew. He was also considering selling the COMOCO as she was, and building another yacht 15 feet longer. Before the end of 1927 the COMOCO was sold to James Whitin of North Ukbridge, Massachusetts. The COMOCO spent the rest of her years on salt water, and was destroyed by fire on July 11, 1956 at Canton Island in the Pacific Ocean.

In 1927, Judson solicited bids and designs for a 165-foot yacht. In mid-July the naval architect John H. Wells and Defoe submitted a quote of \$300,000 for the new vessel. A week later Wells wrote Defoe stating that he "did not have the heart to tell you that Judson has decided to turn all of us down and have the boat built by Lawly at a price which he says is way below the figures we quoted him." Wells was, "disgusted with the whole thing, as it indicates that there is no gratitude after giving a man a good job." A small newspaper article later noted that the new COMOCO owned by Judson was launched May 15, 1929, at Neponset, Massachusetts, reportedly at the cost of \$525,000!

Even though Defoe lost the bid on the second Judson yacht, his business was still booming. He began the construction of the yacht LUANCO, which was 96'9" long and built solely as a display model. This steel hulled beauty was complete in every detail and as finely furnished and finished as anyone could possibly wish. A special feature was that she was built for salt water as well as fresh and could transit the New York State Barge Canal by lowering her mast and taking off the top section of the stack.

In May 1928 C.F. Kettering of Detroit came to Bay City to inspect the workmanship of the Defoe Shipyard. According to Defoe, Kettering bought the LUANCO with no sales effort on his part. He "took her about as you or I would go out and buy a Ford car." A crew of seven men took over the vessel, which was renamed the OLIVE K.

Charles F. Kettering organized the Delco Laboratories in 1905 and perfected the electric self-starter that appeared in the 1911 Cadillac. In 1916 he sold his interest in Delco to the United Motors Corporation. In 1920 he became the head of General Motors Research Laboratories and acted in the capacity of vice president and director of research until 1947.

Kettering was soon in the market for another yacht. Less than three months after the purchase of the OLIVE K, Defoe called at Wells' New York office on a hunch that a new 165-foot yacht was to be built. Wells stated that the deal was going through and that he had been instructed to say nothing about the job. He did tell Defoe that the new yacht

YACHTS OF THE AUTO BARONS



OLIVE K, pre-launch, September 5, 1929.



OLIVE K, launch, September 5, 1929.



Advertisement - 1930.

was for Kettering, and that he had given him the design and specifications for the 165-foot yacht that Judson had turned down. Wells stated that the cost of the vessel would run approximately \$300,000 with engines, but without decorations or designer fees.

Mr. Kettering was doing his homework and went to the Winton Engine Company of Cleveland, Ohio to inquire what types of diesel engines would be appropriate for the new vessel. Another meeting was held with Wells and Defoe in October, and Kettering accepted their original figure of \$300,000, without asking for competitive bids from any other shipyard.

The new OLIVE K had a number of specifications added to the original contract due to Kettering's special work and Mrs. Kettering's taste.

- All staterooms were to have an ivory colored ceiling with the prevailing colors to include turquoise blue, peach, linen blue, orchid and rose.
- A second refrigerator, a 'Frigidaire' unit model AP-18 complete with compressor, motor and pumps, was to be installed in the engine room.

- All metal work exposed to view was to be chromium plated.
- A work bench measuring about 7 feet by 4 feet was to be installed in the engine room on the starboard side.
- Some machine tools, such as a small lathe, drill press, etc., were to be installed in the upper grating of the engine casing.
- The radio and automatic victrola were to be located in the library with speaker outlets in six other locations.
- A fathometer, which tells the depth of the water under the keel of the vessel, was to be installed.
- Stainless steel wire cable was to be used for hand rails and standing rigging.
- The linens and blankets were to come from the James McCutcheon Company of New York City.
- The china racks were to be made large enough to hold two dozen sets of dishes of various sizes. The pattern was to come from the yacht china department of Ovington's in New York City.
- All fixed seats were to have real leather cushions from the John Reilly Co., Newark, New Jersey.
- A gun cabinet was to be built into a shallow cupboard capable of holding 18 guns.
- A still from the F.J. Stokes Machine Co. of Philadelphia, and registered with the Treasury Department, U.S. Prohibition Service, District 25-Michigan, was to be installed (for scientific purposes).
- A special request to carry an airplane on the yacht, with a weight not to exceed 1,100 pounds, was dropped from the plans.

In August 1929 the registration of the original OLIVE K was changed and an official request went to the Collector of Customs in Detroit to have the yacht renamed ROYONO. The new owner, J.B. Ford, Jr. of Detroit, was to receive delivery of the yacht on or about September 5, 1929. At that time Kettering took all of the marked articles—the silver, china, bedding, and linen—off the boat and transferred them to the newly completed OLIVE K. The ROYONO was turned over to Ford and then dry docked in Detroit at the Great Lakes Engineering Works for repairs to the vessel's rudder, and to have the bottom painted. The new OLIVE K was used by Mr. and Mrs. Kettering on a number of excursions around the Lakes and to Florida. The vessel was eventually sold in 1940 to the United New York Sandy Hook Pilot's Association and was used to place pilots on inbound and outbound foreign commercial vessels.

YACHTS OF THE AUTO BARONS



OLIVE K, library.



OLIVE K, dining salon.



OLIVE K, owner's stateroom.



## YACHTS OF THE AUTO BARONS



OLIVE K, port view.

The auto barons made their fortunes based on the principal of the assembly line and mass production. Their private yachts were another matter. Here there was no assembly line, no mass production. These motor yachts were unique—not one of a class, but in a class by themselves. There was no need to justify the great expense of maintaining and operating these vessels—if you could afford one, you could afford to have it customized. The auto barons used their yachts for discussions of finance, for entertaining executives and guests, and for just some well-deserved relaxation—in their magnificent floating mansions.

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