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Wooden Boat Production Throttles up in Walworth County

By [Associated Press](#)

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By BARRY ADAMS, Wisconsin State Journal

GENOA CITY, Wis. (AP) — Patrick Gallagher was looking for a change, maybe as a widget maker.

For most of his professional career he had worked in the family asphalt business. So after selling his shares in the suburban Chicago company, Gallagher began searching for a business that he could grow using his marketing and sales skills. He wasn't wedded to a particular product but knew it had to involve manufacturing.

He found the answer in Holland, [Michigan](#).

Only it turns out his widgets are hand-built motorboats made of mahogany and teak that can cost between \$250,000 and \$500,000.

In early 2021, Gallagher and his wife, Rose, purchased Grand Craft Boats. In June the couple moved the company to this Walworth County village that daytime television viewers associate with the soap opera "The Young and the Restless," set in a fictional version of the community located just north of the state line.

Only instead of making just one or two boats a year, like the previous owner had, the Gallaghers are dramatically expanding production and building boats before there are orders, the [Wisconsin](#) State Journal reported. The gleaming luxury boats will be marketed to those who live on high-end properties like those that rim nearby lakes Geneva, Delavan and Como. Lake home owners in Waukesha County's Lake Country, select lakes in northern Wisconsin and on Lake Tahoe, [Nevada](#), and Lake Minnetonka just west of the Twin Cities are also being eyed.

"It's a distilled audience, and it's identifiable," Patrick Gallagher said of his potential customers.

Grand Craft is believed to be one of just a handful of wooden boat manufacturing companies in the country, including Hacker Craft, established in 1908 in Lake George, [New York](#), and StanCraft, founded in 1933 on Flathead Lake in [Montana](#) but now based in Hayden, [Idaho](#).

Streblow Custom Boats, founded in 1950 in Kenosha but since 1987 located in Lake Geneva, stopped producing boats about 10 years ago and since then has been focused on restoration work and storage. Now, under new ownership, the company has just started construction on a 26-foot twin-engine watercraft at its facility east of Geneva Bay. The boat, being built on spec, will ultimately list for around \$400,000 with its engines combining to crank out more than 800 horsepower.

"We're right back in the game," said Ed Cox, who worked at Streblow for 15 years before buying the company in 2020. "We have the keel laid and the back transom is laid. It's going to be great when it's done."

The Streblow name is synonymous with the wooden boating culture on Geneva Lake where Cox estimates that, of the lake's 870 piers, more than 170 have a Streblow boat tied to them. Like Gallagher, Cox wants to grow his boat-building business but is on a less ambitious pace.

"I wish him luck. It's a tough business," Cox said. "And, when you're building handmade wooden boats, that particular customer is very knowledgeable and aware of the quality they're getting."

Patrick Gallagher is well acquainted with Streblow boats and the quality craftsmanship that goes into a handmade motorboat. He spent summers at his family's second home on Geneva Lake where, as a teen, he was often at the wheel of a Streblow. Those memories helped fuel his passion and drive to buy the Grand Craft company and move it to southern Wisconsin.

The Gallaghers' small team of craftsmen have completed one boat, which was mostly finished when they bought the company, is working on two more and plans to build 32 additional boats during the next three years. The company also has an order from a Florida resort for a 36-foot-long commuter boat that can seat 19 people to shuttle guests to and from Little Palm Island Resort in the Florida Keys. Unlike most other Grand Craft boats, its hull is being made of fiberglass and being built in Florida. When the hull is completed, the boat will be shipped to Genoa City, where it will be finished.

But the majority of the boats are in the 22- to 26-foot range, designed for noncommercial use and inspired from the classic wooden boats made by Chris-Craft, which transitioned to fiberglass boats in the early 1970s.

"I think it's going to work because we have our priorities in line," Gallagher said. "We recognize that in order to scale up the operation and sell more boats that we need to build the company culture and make sure we are hiring the right people."

According to the Holland Sentinel, Grand Craft was founded in 1979 by Steve Northuis and Chris Smith, grandson of Christopher Columbus Smith — the founder of Chris-Craft. The company had several owners and actually ceased production in 2009, a year after a glowing profile in Forbes in which the magazine reported the company was in negotiations with Abu Dhabi's royal family to build a fleet of at least 100 boats.

The company was purchased in 2010 by Jeff Cavanagh, owner of a nearby boat service and restoration company, and began manufacturing the prototype of its sport powerboat in 2016. But in recent years, the company had only been making about one or two boats a year and had just two dedicated employees.

In February, Gallagher cold-called Cavanagh about selling the business. Less than a month later he and Rose owned it. Their plan all along was to move the company to Wisconsin since the Chicago couple had a second home in Lake Geneva and knew the landscape and culture of the area.

"We knew that finished carpentry, boatbuilding, upholstery, marine technicians — all of those skill sets are in the DNA of Walworth County," Gallagher said. "Lake Geneva can and will be probably be our largest market, hands down for customers. It's always had a big heritage of wooden boat owners and enthusiasts, and that really cemented it for us to be in the backyard of a hot market."

Boatbuilding tradition

The two Grand Craft employees in Michigan moved to Wisconsin but Gallagher has since hired three more finish carpenters, two marine technicians and Jeff Podhajsky, who serves as vice president of operations. He spent 20 years with Sturtevant-based Bombardier Recreational Products, the manufacturer of Ski-Doo snowmobiles, Sea-Doo watercraft and Alumacraft, Manitou and Quintrex boats.

By 2025, the Gallaghers hope to have 20 to 22 employees and to have successfully resurrected a brand in a state where boatbuilding has a long tradition.

Wisconsin is where Native Americans more than 1,200 years ago made dugout and birch bark canoes and in the 1830s white settlers began building boats along Lake Michigan. Today, massive Littoral Combat Ships are produced in Marinette, \$50 million luxury yachts are hand-crafted at Burger Boat Company in Manitowoc, and barges, ferries and dredges are constructed by Fincantieri Bay Shipbuilding in Sturgeon Bay.

The Grand Craft production facility takes up 25,000 square feet of leased space in a new building on the east side of Highway 12. The main production facility is essentially a massive wood shop, while a neighboring space is void of sawdust. This is where boats are finished by marine technicians who install the 430-horsepower engines, electronics, chrome hardware and brass propellers. Each boat receives multiple layers of epoxy that makes them impermeable to water.

The rebranding effort includes renaming all of the boats in the company's catalog. For example, the Grand Sport is now the Dearborn; the Luxury Sport is the Wrightwood; the Super Sport is the Burnham; and the Classic, a triple cockpit boat that is similar to a boat driven by former president Franklin Delano Roosevelt, is now the Roosevelt.

"We wanted to give them beautiful, stately sounding names," Gallagher said. "They are no longer going to be confused now with Pontiacs."

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