

milwaukee journal sentinel

Grand Craft Boats building classic mahogany boats near Lake Geneva. Customers include Robert Redford, Kid Rock and Jennifer Lopez.



Rick Barrett

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel



Grand Craft's handmade mahogany boats have been owned by celebrities Robert Redford, Jennifer Lopez, Tim Allen and Kid Rock.

Until recently, the boats bore a "Holland, Michigan" plaque on their dashboards, a tribute to where they'd been made for more than 40 years. The company was

co-founded by the grandson of Christopher Columbus Smith, founder of Chris-Craft boats.

On Feb. 19, 2021, Grand Craft was acquired by Patrick and Rose Gallagher, from the Chicago area, who moved it to Genoa City near Lake Geneva. About a month ago, the first boat was completed at their 20,000-square-foot plant that also serves as the company's new headquarters.

That boat, a 26-foot Burnham model, has been shown to prospective buyers at various locations in Florida. "The feedback's been phenomenal," Patrick Gallagher said.

His interest in wooden boats was sparked years ago through his family's vacation home on Lake Geneva. After college, he worked in advertising and then spent about 20 years in his family's third-generation asphalt business.

"In the summer and fall of 2020, I realized that I wanted to do something totally different for the next chapter of my professional life," Gallagher said. Five months later, he and Rose acquired Grand Craft.

They decided to relocate the company to Genoa City to be near their home on Lake Geneva. "This is everything for us. There's no other thing we're working on," Patrick said.

Grand Craft boats take thousands of hours to build. Over the years, some have sold for up to \$1.5 million, although more often it's been closer to \$350,000.

Typically, the buyers have been wealthy business owners with homes at places like Lake Geneva, Green Lake, and Lake Minnetonka near Minneapolis. Grand Craft has also made commercial boats, that have sold for around \$1 million, for purposes such as ferrying passengers from the mainland to near-shore islands.

Those are sometimes called a "water limousine," Gallagher said.

The goal is to build a half dozen boats this year and steadily ramp up production over the next three years. The Gallaghers expect to employ around 20 people including skilled craftsmen and marine technicians.

"There's a heritage and deep pool of skilled finish carpenters" in the area, Patrick said.



Grand Craft Boats are now made in Genoa City, Wisconsin, after the company was moved from Holland, Michigan. *Grand Craft Boats*

Grand Crafts usually have two layers of planking on the hull sides and three layers of 1/4-inch mahogany on the bottom. Larger hulls are built with three layers on the sides and four layers on the bottom and transom.

African mahogany is preferred for its flexible strength, and sound and shock absorption. Each piece is hand selected for the consistent reddish-brown hue and grain, and the company uses a wood-epoxy saturation process that protects the hull from the damaging effects of saltwater.

The hardware is hand-cast brass or bronze. Gas marine engines deliver up to 425 horsepower to achieve speeds between 40 and 50 mph.

The Gallaghers' first boat, the Burnham, has a U-shaped seating salon that lends itself to entertaining guests. "We think it's probably going to be the flagship model of our lineup," Patrick said.

The Wisconsin Economic Development Corp. supported Grand Craft's move to Genoa City by authorizing up to \$125,000 in performance-based state tax credits over the next three years. The actual amount the company could receive will depend on the number of jobs created and the capital invested in the project.

The Milwaukee M7 Regional Economic Development Partnership also helped bring Grand Craft to Wisconsin.