

A History of The Matthews Boat Company

by Peter Bohr
(1986)

When Scott Jeremiah Matthews introduced the world's first production cruiser in 1924, he had no particular visions about becoming the Henry Ford of the waterways. He simply wanted to escape the boom 'n bust cycles that had plagued his boat building business for years. By building stock boats he hoped to keep his employees busy year after year, without layoffs.

He succeeded. Innovations like the production cruiser seemed to blossom from Scott Matthews and his company like wildflowers after a spring rain. Even during the dreary days of the Depression and World War II, the company kept right on building boats, for the government if not for yachtsmen. It took a new and complex age – one of fiberglass and oil embargos – to kill the company in 1975, some 85 years after its founding and 20 years after Scott Matthews' death.

The company's early boats (beginning in 1890) were small open launches with torpedo sterns, mahogany carvings and wicker chairs. They were powered by relatively new-fangled contraptions, gasoline engines made by the Lozier Co. The engines produced as little as 2 ½ hp, which could move the boat at a thrilling 5 mph.

In 1900, Lozier commissioned Matthews to build a 31-footer with the fetching name **Beulah**. With its 6 hp two cycle Lozier engine, **Beulah** made a 500 mile trip from Toledo, Ohio to Plattsburg, New York at an average speed of nearly 8 mph.

Because most power boats in those days used steam engines, **Beulah's** journey was considered remarkable. "Many gas-powered engines experienced explosions in base, which would cause the engine to stop or to clog," one newspaper reporter wrote. "They would not ignite because of improper air mixture, or they would only use one-half gasolene (sic), which caused a foul vapor that covered the side of the boat with oil and dirt." **Beulah** suffered none of these indignities.



William Scripps

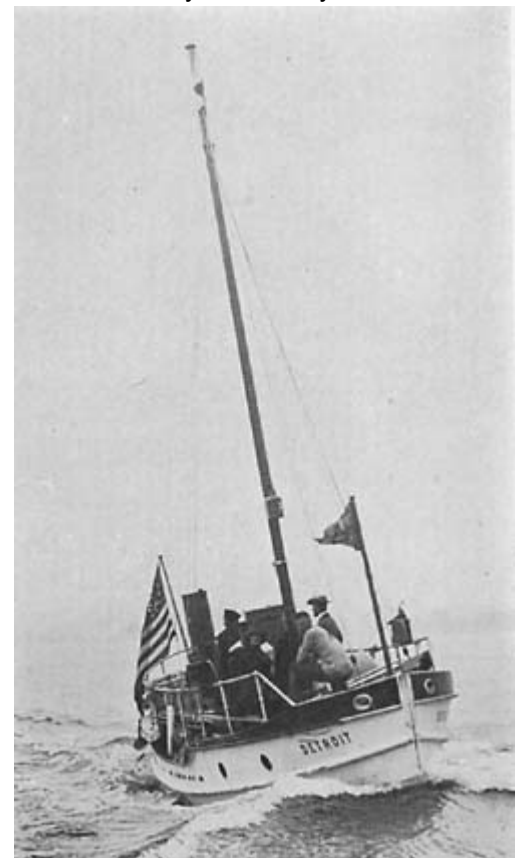
By 1912, gasoline engines had become far more civilized and had earned more respect. William Scripps, commodore of the Detroit Motor Boat Club and president of Scripps Motor Co., asked Matthews to build a 35 foot boat capable of crossing the Atlantic. Resembling an oversized lifeboat, **Detroit** departed its namesake city on a historic voyage that eventually ended in St. Petersburg, Russia. **Detroit** thus became the first boat to cross the Atlantic under gasoline power.

With gasoline engines accepted as suitable power plants for yachts, could diesels be far behind? The following year Matthews constructed **Aeldgytha**; at 110 feet, the largest vessel the company would ever build, and the first boat of its size with American-built diesel engines.

During 1914, **Aeldgytha** cruised 2,700 miles in the Great Lakes, its twin Craig six cylinder diesels operating without a hitch. The engines became quite a selling point; compared to a steam-powered yacht of similar size, **Aeldgytha** needed far fewer crew members. It carried a captain, two seamen, two engineers, a steward and a cook. By contrast, a typical steam yacht might have a captain, a mate, three seamen, two engineers, two firemen, a steward and a cook.



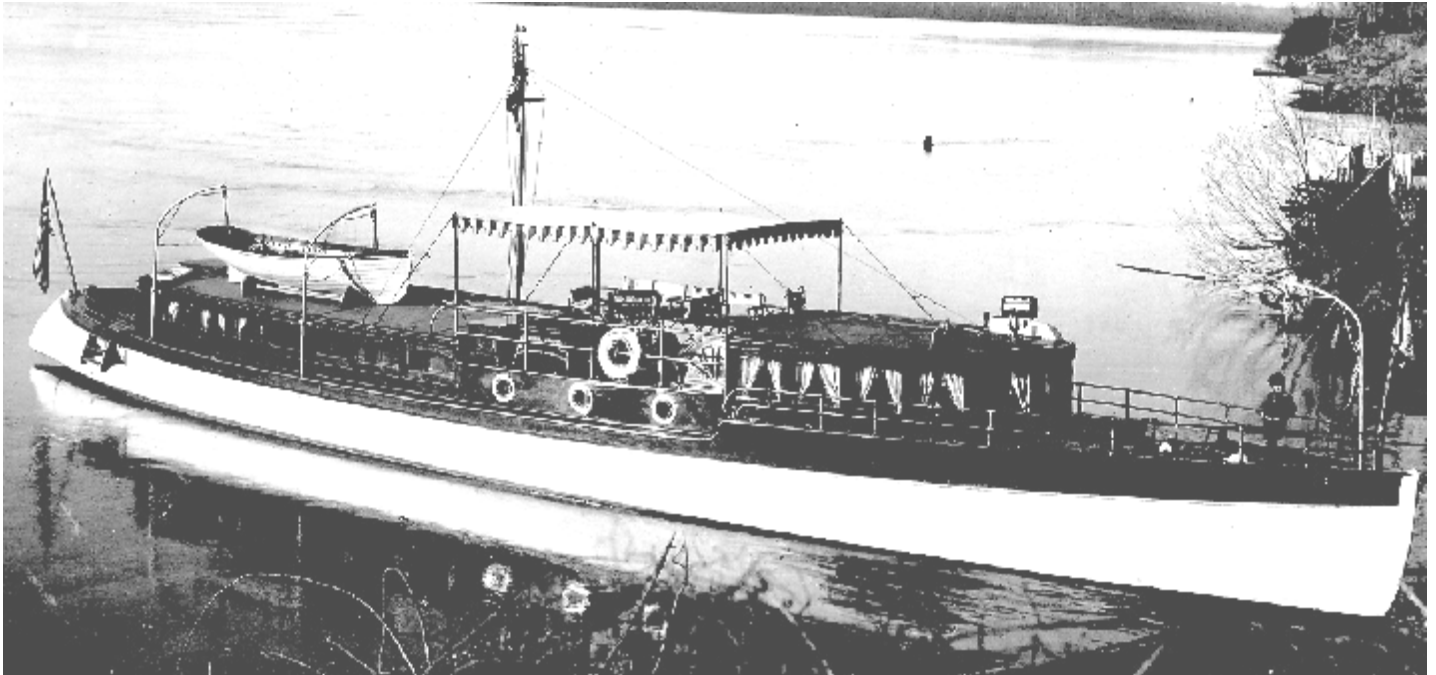
Scott J. Matthews



In those days even small launches were labor intensive devices, requiring two operators. Besides adjusting the fuel and retarding or advancing the spark, the crew had to stop and restart the engine every time they wanted to change from forward to reverse or vice versa. One fellow could not do this and steer at the same time.

Ever the inventor, Scott Matthews designed several devices to make power boats easier to operate. Among them was a leverage system that allowed a single person to operate a clutch for a reverse gear, as well as the throttle and spark. The system was installed on his own 74-foot boat, **Onward**, launched in 1905.

Onward also had such modern amenities as an "electric light plant" with storage batteries and a steam heating system (pipes passed through the coal-fired galley stove and into radiators in each compartment).



During these early years, the exploits of Matthews boats like **Beulah**, **Detroit** and **Aeldgytha** earned the Matthews Co. quite a reputation among monied yachtsmen. In addition to William Scripps, Charles Ringling (of circus fame) and the automobile world's J.W. Packard bought Matthews boats.

For the rest of Scott Matthews' life, his company turned out a steady flow of production-built cruisers for yachtsmen of more modest means.

Matthews retained the same basic design of its first production boat – the 38-footer of 1924 – through the 1960s.

"You can step off a 1936 Matthews and onto a 1966 Matthews and you'll be hard-pressed to find dramatic differences," said Edna Johnson, historian of the Matthews Boat Owners Assn. Of course the company made refinements and improvements along the way. And every so often, the boat grew a little in length.

By the late 1940s the 38 had grown to 40 feet. During the mid-1950s, it lengthened again, to 41 feet. "We call them 'stretch boats'," Johnson said.

"Part of the reason was that every boat was hand lofted, so it was difficult to be precise. The company would also make minor design changes, like a bullnose bow, that added length."

Borrowing a marketing tactic from his Detroit automobile-making friends, Matthews usually offered several different models, all based on the same hull. The most popular model and the one with the classic Matthews look was the sedan.

The convertible sedan had a folding bulkhead between the deckhouse and after cockpit; with the bulkhead open, there was a flush deck, open area some 20 feet long. The deluxe sedan had a fixed bulkhead between the cockpit and deckhouse. Flying bridges were available on either sedan.

Other models included a sportfisherman with a modified cockpit, and double cabin with an aft stateroom and midships saloon.

The various models were often offered with slightly different interior layouts. For example, the forward stateroom might contain V-berths or instead, upper and lower single berths.

Although Matthews abandoned the custom boat building business when he switched to production cruisers in 1924, his company never became so large and impersonal that he lost touch with his customers. Buyers were encouraged to visit the factory. And Matthews always tried to accommodate their requests for interior modifications – a special piece of furniture or a bathtub in place of a shower, for instance.

The 38- to 42-footers were the mainstays of Matthews' business, but from time to time the company also offered smaller and larger boats, the smallest being a 28-footer, while the largest of Matthews' stock wood-hulled cruisers was a 53-footer. But even these boats retained the same basic Matthews look and hull design that originated with the 38-footer.

The basic hull, designed by Scott Matthews and his son Carl, had a round bottom that flattened out somewhat and even curved upwards in the aft part of the boat. A trademark of the Matthews look is a nearly vertical bow with a fine entry and practically no flare.



A Matthews "38" hull, looking aft from the bow



Adam McQuat, voted California's 1983 Yachtsman of the Year by the state Department of Boating and Waterways and a Matthews owner, agreed. "In rough seas a Matthews beats all other boats," McQuat said. He owns the archetypal Matthews cruiser, a 1947 "38" Sedan. He bought *Martha* and named it after his wife in 1963. "It's not a fancy boat, understand. I use it," he said.

Does he ever. McQuat, who will be 81 years old this year, frequently sails *Martha* from his home port of Alamitos Bay in Southern California up and down the coast, from San Miguel Island to San Francisco. Every summer he and six fellow members of the U.S. Power Squadron take a two-week cruise to the Santa Barbara Islands. "It's silly to go out with an empty boat," he said.

Does McQuat have any trepidation about bluewater cruising in a wooden hulled boat that's half his considerable age?

"None," he said. "She's so well built. She's on her third pair of engines (twin gasoline Chrysler V-8s), but I've never had to refasten the hull or replace planks."

Amazing. Of course, McQuat is fastidious about maintenance. "On a wooden boat you can't let things get away from you. If you don't, the maintenance isn't so bad. I enjoy it." Every six months, a diver replaces the zincs. *Martha* is a hauled at least once a year for bottom work, including paint and recaulking any seams if necessary. The hull gets a fresh coat of paint every two years, and McQuat puts a couple of coats of varnish on the brightwork every six to eight months.

Martha has white oak keel and frames and Philippine mahogany planking (some Matthews had Honduras mahogany or cedar planking). Hardware is brass or bronze chromium-plated, Monel or stainless steel.

McQuat said **Martha** is roomy enough for him and his six buddies, "though we can't all dance at the same time." **Martha's** helm station is in the deckhouse, along with a folding table and a convertible sofa. Down below three steps, there's a U-shaped galley with a three burner stove and a 200 pound ice box.

Opposite the galley, there's a large head compartment that includes a tiled shower. Forward of the head and galley is the owner's stateroom, with upper and lower berths, a large hanging locker and a mahogany dresser. In the forepeak, there are two more berths "for a couple of paid hands," according to a Matthews brochure.

Brand new in 1947, **Martha** sold for \$16,000. McQuat guesses that it's probably worth \$30,000 today, although he has no plans to sell his Matthews.

Scott Matthews died in 1956, and son Carl took over the business. But in 1965, the Matthews family sold out to Charles Hutchinson, a Great Lakes yachtsman. Four years later, the company introduced its first fiberglass boat, a 45-footer that looked identical to its wood-hulled forerunners. By 1971, the company built fiberglass boats in four sizes.

Matthews made its fiberglass boats with just as much care as the wood boats. At the time, Matthews was the only fiberglass production power boat in the U.S. to carry a Lloyds of London certificate of approval.

Nevertheless, the switch from wood to glass was a wrenching experience, especially for the company's longtime employees, some of whom had been with Matthews for a half century.

"They were true craftsmen who would take a piece of wood and pet it," Johnson said.

"In any case, the company made the change to fiberglass much too late," Johnson said. Costs soared, in part due to the oil embargo during the early 1970s. The Matthews factory closed in December 1974, and the company declared bankruptcy the next year.

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Today, in 2012, thanks to a legacy of 85 years of high-quality boat-building and production cruisers, from 1890 (when Scott Matthews first started commercial production of boat building at the age of 16) thru 1975, the Matthews Boat Company may be gone, but it's far from forgotten.



If Once You Have Cruised on a MATTHEWS

*If once you have cruised on a Matthews, you'll never be quite the same;
You may look as you looked before and go by the same old name*

*You may hustle about in street and shop; you may sit at home and sew,
But you'll see blue water and wheeling gulls wherever your feet may go.*

*You may chat with the neighbors of this and that and close to the fire keep,
but you'll hear ship whistle and lighthouse bell and tides beat through your sleep.*

*And you won't know why and you can't say how such a change upon you came,
But once you have cruised on a Matthews, you'll never be quite the same!*

by Gerry Merritt

True Grit, 1957 42-foot Matthews