

# Minnesota Lakes Maritime Museum Opens New Larson Boats Exhibit

By Mark Proudfoot



**The Larson Boats Exhibit** – A Minnesota Boat Builder Receives The Accolades It Deserves.

When 11-year old Paul Larson built his first boat in 1905, little did he know it was his first step into Minnesota boat building history. The company he founded, Larson Boats, is the subject of a new exhibit at the Minnesota Lakes Maritime Museum (MLMM) in Alexandria, Minnesota.

Steps towards the development of this exhibit began in 2007 when the MLMM opened the doors to its new museum building. At that time, Paul Mikkelson generously loaned the museum several of his restored Larson Boats. These boats include two Falls Flyers, an award winning 1958 Thunderhawk Senior and a beautiful 14' wood Speed Runabout Deluxe. They proved to be very popular with museum visitors.

In 2008 MLMM board member Carl Mammel began conversations with Earl Geiger regarding the importance of telling the Larson Boat story, and how the MLMM would be willing to develop a quality exhibit if an underwriter could be found. Geiger was Paul Larson's business partner from 1957 – 1960. During this critical time Larson Boats, and the wood boat building industry in general, was transitioning to the new fiberglass material. Under Geiger's leadership Larson Boats developed a consistent manufacturing process that resulted in a high quality prod-

uct, increased production, national recognition and a nationwide network of happy, successful dealers. Earl discussed the exhibit project with his family, and they agreed to underwrite the cost of developing the exhibit, provided it include Paul Larson's history with the company as well.

The project began when Lee Wangstad agreed to interview Geiger in order to capture his first-hand account of the company's history during his tenure. The series of interviews provide an in depth look at the challenges Larson Boats faced as they exited the wood boat business and tackled the problems of working with the new fiberglass material. The interviews took place over several months, and Wangstad found Geiger to be a very interesting subject.

"Earl just turned 90 years old this year, and he's as sharp as a tack," commented Wangstad. "I have previously written about Larson Boats, but the time spent with him really helped put the beginning of the fiberglass era into perspective. What they did, taking Larson Boats national in such a short period of time, was really quite an accomplishment."

The interviews were used as a basis for a video production with Earl Geiger, that was filmed at John Monahan's Boat Works in Little Falls, this past spring. Over three hours of film was edited into a 17-minute presentation that is now part of the Larson Boats exhibit at the museum.

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The exhibit display begins with Paul Larson's first boat building effort in 1905 and continues through the wood boat era and the design of the fabulous Falls

"We were very fortunate to have access to these collections," said Mark Proudfoot, MLMM Exhibits Committee. "Wangstad, Mikkelson, and Monahan are very passionate about Larson. Their knowledge, and memorabilia, allowed the Maritime to develop a first class exhibit about this exceptional company."



In addition to Paul Mikkelson's boats, mentioned earlier, a vintage Larson Duck Boat is on display, and a 1953 Cabin Outboard Special was recently added to the exhibit. The MLMM hopes to include a canvas-covered Game Warden model in the near future. Museum Director Bruce Olson noted that like other exhibits in

Flyer. It explores the introduction of fiberglass and Larson's use of the Rand Gun, which was a critical element in helping the company move into the national market. The story concludes with Brunswick purchasing Larson and then, three years later, selling the assets of the company back to its original investors.

The MLMM was granted access to an extensive collection of catalogs, artwork and memorabilia owned by Lee Wangstad, Paul Mikkelson (The Mikkelson Collection, Inc.), John Monahan, and the Morrison County Historical Society.



the museum, the boats in the Larson Exhibit will change from time to time.

The MLMM would like to thank the Virginia and Earl Geiger Family for underwriting this exhibit, which is a permanent part of the museum. The Larson Boats Exhibit opens to the public in mid-May, when the Minnesota Lakes Maritime Museum begins the 2010 season.

[www.mnlakemaritime.org](http://www.mnlakemaritime.org)

