



JUDITH G

A scenic photograph of a lake with mountains in the background and a boat with an American flag in the foreground. The boat is on the left side of the frame, and the American flag is flying from its mast. The water is calm, and the mountains in the distance are partially obscured by a light mist or haze. The sky is a pale, overcast blue. The overall mood is peaceful and nostalgic.

Elco Boat Revivals

by
Joan Wenner

Photos courtesy of Elco Boats

Nostalgia is a fine thing, especially when it comes to classic wooden yachts of the last century. Then motorized vessels were more than a way of moving across the water from one point to another—for many it was the experience of motoring in luxury and style on their Elco yacht. Kudos go out to present-day master restorers like Sam Wright of Portsmouth's Virginia Boat & Yacht, Ltd. He has brought more than one marvelous Elco back to life to once again to cruise the waterways.

Elco, which stands for Electric Launch Company, was a boat builder with a fascinating history along with a very distinguished list of previous owners including Thomas Edison, J.P. Morgan, John Jacob Astor, Charles Lindbergh and numerous other notables of the day. And although there were other companies producing beautiful crafts, it was said none compared to Elco, “the high watermark of quality.”

Elco Then

Elco's company records are housed at the G.W. Blunt White Library at

the venerable Mystic Seaport Museum in Mystic, Connecticut. Although the original Elco closed its doors in 1949, it had a wonderful run from its beginnings in 1892. First introduced at the Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago, 55 36-foot launches carried over a million passengers on over 60,000 trips over the surrounding waterways. In the years that followed, Elco built various crafts for the US Navy and Coast Guard and designed and built more than 6,000 pleasure boats ranging in size from an 18-foot gig or yacht tender to deck-house cruisers and other models up to 127 feet in length. Over 400 of these are thought to still be in use.

It is not known precisely who founded Elco, but it was Henry R. Sutphen, more than any other person, who built the pleasure boat market. He ran Elco from 1895 to its close in 1949. In 1906 he hired a young naval architect, Irwin Chase, who designed several highly coveted models such as the famous 26-foot Cruisette introduced in 1921, a gasoline cabin cruiser thought of as the Model “T” of modern pleasure boating. This success was followed in the 1930s with



A memorable afternoon cruise on Saranac Lake in New York in a 24 foot Classic Elco Electric launch

Many options are available on each model of launch allowing the discriminating owner to personalize his own launch.

With a generous cockpit, the 19 foot Elco Sport utility can move your treasures or six passengers in silent comfort.



30-57 foot Veedettes and Flattops, gasoline-powered boats that set the highest standard in a golden era of boating.

During World War II, Elco built wartime craft for America, Britain and France. An Elco retrieved General MacArthur from the Philippines, and Jack Kennedy's PT109 was an Elco. After the war, Elco returned to building pleasure boats, but by 1948 it was just a small

branch of a company called General Dynamics. Selling boats to the public did not fit into the corporate scheme, and Elco was simply no longer a profitable enterprise. The Elco plant in Bayonne, New Jersey, was closed.

Elco Now

But it was not to be forever. In 1987 the Elco name was purchased by

Joseph W. Fleming, Jr., an entrepreneur in the electrical equipment industry with a lifelong interest in antique and classic boats. His father had worked building PT boats at the old Elco. The new company took the Elco name and the "Elco" trademark from the original Electric Launch Company, and it was off and running, this time in Highland, New York. Under Fleming's direction, the same commitment to quality that was the

Elco hallmark continues. Twenty-six Elco launches in the 18-foot, 24-foot and 30-foot models have been built with the very latest materials and technology, while keeping the style and uniqueness of the original vessels. Elco's electric boats and inboard and outboard electric drives are being used in a variety of applications on both fresh and salt water where quiet, simple operation and environmental benefits are the primary considerations.

Elco has been a member of the well-respected American Boat and Yacht Council (ABYC), and all its launches, electric drives, restorations and upgrades meet or exceed ABYC and Coast Guard standards for construction, mechanical and electrical safety, and design.

Collectors and admirers of the gorgeous Elco 40- to 55-foot "classics" still treasure them. Sam Wright of Portsmouth says it took him over a decade to restore two Elcos: the 1937 *Hiawatha*, 53 feet long, which he sold almost a year ago, and the 1944 *Frolic*, also a 53-footer, which he purchased for \$10,000 and sold for a quarter of a million dollars. He uses original company specifications whenever possible, and naturally his longtime experience allows for their correct interpretation and execution.

Roomy and versatile, this 19 foot Picnic Elco Electric Launch features a spacious horseshoe bench with room to spare for additional seating and picnic supplies.



Note

Although people sometimes use the terms interchangeably, Sam Wright notes that there are actually three classifications of the older Elco beauties: **Historic:** Built from

the turn of the century to 1929; **Antique:** Built from 1929 to 1947; **Classic:** Built from approximately 1948 to 1954.

For more information:

Elco Electric Launch Incorporated
 21 South Water Street Athens, NY 12015,
 Phone 518-845-2200; Fax 518-945-1131
www.elcoelectriclaunch.com
 E-mail: info@elcoelectriclaunch.com
 Sam Wright Virginia Boat & Yacht Ltd.
 3515 Shipwright Street Portsmouth, VA
 23703. 757-673-7167

Joan Wenner has contributed stories on classic yacht histories and restorations and writes for numerous boating magazines. The Chesapeake and the Rappahannock are her favorite Virginia waters.