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Thunder comes from out of the past

By Eric Sorensen

Seattle Times boating columnist

In case you haven't heard — and if you haven't, you might have your hearing checked — a small squad of vintage hydroplanes was out on Lake Washington on Thursday celebrating the ear-splitting sound that inspired the nickname "thunderboat."

Hundreds of people crowded the Stan Sayres Pits to see four boats and revisit the days when hydroplane racing was not only the city's major sport but regularly brought national championships to town.

The onlookers' median age was around 59, many of them having once dragged little wooden hydroplane models behind their bikes. They were drawn by nostalgia, said David Williams, executive director of the Hydroplane & Raceboat Museum in Kent, and a deep fondness for the sound of a World War II fighter engine churning out 1,500 or so horsepower.

"That sound is identified with that sport," he said. "It's an opportunity for people to come back and connect with their childhood."

At which point he was drowned out by the roar of Miss Bardahl, winner of three consecutive Gold Cups and national championships, leaping to life and throttling out onto the lake.

It was loud enough to bring tears to your eyes, and people were actually misting up, but mostly over seeing the piston-powered icons of their youth and Old Seattle brought back to life in all their deep-throated, screaming glory.

Witness Ron Jones, who saw the running of three boats designed by his late father, Ted. Among them was a freshly restored Miss Bardahl and a brand-new replica of Miss Thriftway, which revived his father's career after he parted from the Slo-mo-shun IV team in the early '50s.

"I might tear up," said Jones. "I didn't expect this boat to be remade. The original boat was wrecked. Nobody even tried to fix it."



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The all-wood replica of the vintage hydroplane Miss Thriftway roars away from the dock Thursday at Stan Sayres Pits on Lake Washington, driven by Larry Fuller, left, and Steve Compton. The boat performed flawlessly on its maiden voyage.



RON DEROSA / THE SEATTLE TIMES, 1959

The original Miss Thriftway with Bill Muncey at the wheel. This summer marks the 50th anniversary of the race at which Muncey and Miss Thriftway won a Gold Cup.



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The vintage hydroplane Miss

And here's Steve Payne, crew chief of Miss Thriftway, moments after Ted Jones' daughter, Shirley Steward, doused the vast mahogany bow in champagne and said, "I christen thee Miss Thriftway," much as she and her twin sister, Sharon, did in 1955.

Payne spent five years and \$125,000 building the boat with three other locals, starting with an Allison V-12 engine and working weekends in home shops on Vashon Island.

Said Payne: "I'm a blubbering fool."

In addition to Miss Thriftway and Miss Bardahl, fans Thursday watched test runs by Miss Burien and Oh Boy! Oberto, which are owned by the hydroplane museum. The restored Miss Bardahl is a relative newcomer to the vintage scene, once considered lost after disappearing in the decades after its last race in 1965. But after a three-year search, Jon Osterberg of Seattle found the boat in 1982 rotting in the great outdoors of Salem, N.H. It was finally rebuilt by a team led by Dixon Smith, a Bardahl crew member from the mid-'60s, and relaunched in 2005.

The Miss Thriftway effort began with two Allison engines bought by some Vashon Island hydro fans. They wanted to honor Ted Jones, a fellow island resident, and they recalled that Miss Thriftway had the phrase "Designed by Ted Jones" on the cockpit cowl.

They created a limited-liability corporation composed of Payne, a retired auto-parts dealer; Larry Fuller, an appliance repairman and crew chief of the restored 1967 Miss Budweiser; and Rob Wheeler, a mold maker at a local orthopedic- and medical-model manufacturer.

Steve Compton, co-owner of Compton Lumber, was drawn into the effort when a volunteer approached with a lumber list. As they spoke, a picture of Miss Thriftway's orange, cream and mahogany hull popped up on Compton's computer screen saver. After a few days, Compton approached the builders and said, "If you don't buy another stick of lumber, can I be a partner in this?"

That was more than 150 Saturdays and about \$50,000 in donated raw materials ago.

"We were young when we started," Fuller said Thursday.

The crew was inspired in recent months to finish the boat in time for a vintage-hydroplane race in this summer's Seafair, the 50th anniversary of when Bill Muncey, the winningest driver in the sport's history, raced Miss Thriftway to a Gold Cup here. Crew members were chapped that the race didn't materialize — Williams said it lacks a sponsor — but the crew and the crowd were all smiles after Miss Thriftway made several turns around the two-mile course, reaching speeds of about 100 mph.

"We saw your teeth," Mary Compton told her husband after he and Fuller came in.

"I was driving," he said.

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Bardahl is readied in the pits. The boat disappeared after its last race in 1965 but was rediscovered in Salem, N.H., in 1982. It was restored by a team led by a former Bardahl crew member.



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Rob Wheeler raises his arms at the first sound of the engines igniting on the Miss Thriftway. Wheeler is one of four local hydroplane enthusiasts who spent five years building the replica.