

HEAVY-METAL MEMORIES

Crossing Lake Michigan in a 22-foot Bentley shows just how far pontoon boats have come.

BY CHARLES PLUEDDEMAN



The young man attending the gas dock in Frankfort, Michigan, seemed befuddled.

"So you just crossed Lake Michigan on a pontoon boat," he said. "Why would you do that?"

I thought about this for a moment and just shrugged. "I don't know. I guess because it's a nice day."

The kid slipped the nozzle into our fuel fill and switched on the pump. He stood back and looked us over some more: three guys on the far side of middle age and a 22-foot pontoon.

"So now what are you going to do?" he asked.

"I don't know," I replied. "I guess gas up and go back to

Wisconsin. It's still a nice day."

This little adventure was a goofy idea. Quite literally. The instigator was our friend Malcolm "Goofy" Sohm, a pontoonist of the highest order, who invited us to join him on this over-and-back. The voyage was a reprise of the same crossing Goofy made in 1999. Twenty-five years

ago, Sohm crossed the pond as a publicity stunt to promote his recently patented invention, the T.A.P. Fin System, the first lifting device devised to improve pontoon performance. That trip made for a great story but not much publicity. This time, Sohm made sure to invite a couple of magazine writers to share the tale.



THE ACCIDENTAL PONTONIST

The story of Goofy Sohm and the T.A.P. Fin has appeared on these pages in the past, in abbreviated fashion. This time I'll include all the details and tell a tale of one man's inquisitive mind and unrelenting determination in pursuit of a goal that has, so far, been elusive.

PHOTO: TOM KING

Sohm, who is about to turn 70 years old, grew up in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, where his father owned a filling station and was an avid boater.

"My early childhood was like a chapter out of Huck Finn," Sohm says. "We had a paddle-wheel houseboat. It was 42 feet long and 16 feet wide, with a wood hull we

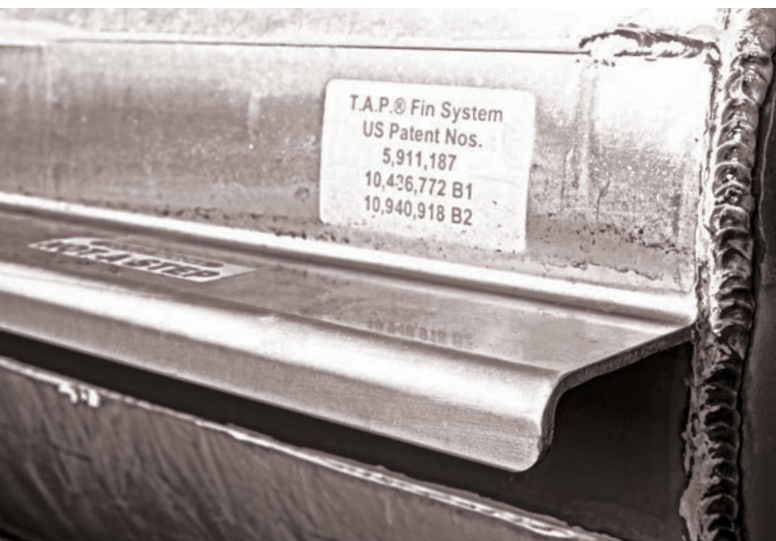
had to caulk up each spring. We used that boat to roam all over the Winnebago basin. It would take us two days to run 20 miles from Oshkosh up the Fox River to Eureka. But what a grand time! Fishing and swimming and sleeping on the roof with the stars overhead."

Sohm earned his nickname in

high school. On a dare, he rode his minibike one lap around the main hallway of Oshkosh West High School but crashed on the slick terrazzo right in front of the principal's office. "What a goofy thing to do!" Mr. Rahn said as Sohm lay on the floor. There you go. Sohm embraced his moniker, which perfectly fits his personality.



WHO ARE YOU CALLING GOOFY? Inventor Malcolm "Goofy" Sohm holds patents for the SSG (Super Sport Goofy) system for triple-tube pontoon boats (above) and his original T.A.P. Fin System (below).



Fast-forward a few decades. Sohm lost his fiberglass speedboat in a divorce. After he later married Terry Reiter, in 1989, the couple lived south of Oshkosh, across the road from Lake Winnebago, where Goofy had a one-man auto-body repair business. "After the divorce, all I could afford was a 21-foot Crest pontoon with a 25-horse Evinrude," Sohm said. "I could not keep up with my buddies. I kept putting a bigger outboard on that pontoon, but my best friend had a 34 Scarab. When Lake Winnebago got rough, I was miserable."

Sohm started wondering if there was a better way to improve the performance of his pontoon. One day, he had Terry drive while he lay on the forward deck, his head hanging over so that he could look below the boat.

"All this water was just flying up off the tubes and hitting the underside of the deck," Sohm said, "and I thought, *What a waste of energy. What if I could redirect that force?*" This was also after a pontoon with a 15 hp motor got caught in a thunderstorm on Lake Winnebago, and six people drowned. They couldn't get off the lake fast enough when the storm popped up."

TAPPING INTO PERFORMANCE

In a move that now seems prescient, Sohm in 1996 commissioned the construction of a custom pontoon. Twenty-six feet long and supported by a pair of 26-inch-diameter tubes, the boat was bigger than any production pontoon on the market at the time. The tubes were formed in two pieces by a local sheet-metal shop and welded together lengthwise. That seam also incorporated wide inner and outer flanges.

"It seemed obvious that I could use fins to capture the force of the water coming off the tubes," Sohm said. "The tubes came with the strip of aluminum sticking straight out on both sides, and I welded two Vise-Grips together so that I could bend 6 inches at a time and just work my way down the tube. I started with a 45-degree lip, and then tried 90

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degrees, and then more than 90 degrees. The 90-degree bend worked the best. I had no education and no money, but I had an invention."

Sohm finished the deck himself using off-the-shelf pontoon furniture bolted onto a 200 hp Mercury outboard, and in 1998, he took his prototype to the *Pontoon and Deck Boat* magazine shootout on Lake Dora, Florida.

"My goal was to demonstrate the concept and sell it to Smoker or Bennington," Sohm said. "But the performance was disappointing. The boat ran only 31 mph. So I called my buddy John Litjens, who ran the Mercury Lake X test facility at the time, and he told me to bring the boat over."

Litjens set up Sohm with a new four-blade prop that brought the boat to life. It now accelerated briskly and ran 37 mph—Goofy got dialed in at Lake X.

Sohm returned to the pontoon shootout in 1999 with a new boat fitted with a clear plastic window in the deck so that passengers could see his invention, now called T.A.P. Fin System by Conrad Marine



PHOTOS: TOM KING



Inc., at work with the boat underway. Sohmm also invested \$150,000 to get the invention patented. A boat equipped with T.A.P. fins rode higher in the water and offered a smoother ride, improved economy, and higher top speed. The fins

also helped the boat carve through turns rather than skidding in typical pontoon fashion. According to Sohmm, boatbuilder Godfrey thought his was a brilliant solution. So they copied it. Sohmm sued, and in a settlement reached in 2003, Godfrey

GOOD SHIP AND TRUE Intrepid pontoonists pass by Pierhead Front Lighthouse exiting the Sturgeon Bay Ship Canal, outbound for Frankfort, Michigan. The Bentley pontoon with T.A.P. fins and Mercury Pro XS 250 proved capable.

agreed to pay a royalty for each set of T.A.P.-like fins it installed. After Godfrey became part of Nautic Global Group in 2005, that deal ended. Pontoon manufacturers began placing lifting strakes on the bottom of pontoon tubes, and then on the sides. Sohmm says that these devices improve performance, but the patented feature of the T.A.P. system is the 90-degree bend, which he says simply performs better than any other solution.

Anxious to turn his invention into a profitable business, Sohmm began selling T.A.P. fins in kit form, to be welded to a customer's boat. He continued to pitch his invention to pontoon builders, hoping to either license or sell the patent outright. Time after time, Sohmm says he ran into a "not invented here" attitude.

"The engineers at these companies don't want to admit

that a device created by a guy from Oshkosh named Goofy, with no degree, works better than what they've got," Sohmm said. "Or they just don't see the value. What they have is good enough."

Sohmm decided that he needed some publicity to help promote his business, and one evening came up with the beer-fueled notion of crossing Lake Michigan, the biggest handy body of water.

"Sturgeon Bay to Frankfort is 87 miles, the shortest distance across the lake," Sohmm said. "My big boat had a 200 Mercury and a 24-gallon fuel tank. We added another 32-gallon tank on the deck, but I still had to carry 36 more gallons in plastic jugs. That motor was a guzzler."

His boat had no GPS and not even a compass, so he enlisted his speedboat buddy Terry Kaiser to lead the way in a 34 Formula.



MAKER Sohmm aboard his original custom-built pontoon on the Fox River in Oshkosh, Wisconsin. This boat was the test-bed vessel for the T.A.P. fin prototype.

PHOTOS: (FROM TOP) TOM KING, COURTESY BRADY KAY



SWELL RIDE Swells rose higher than the pontoon fence in the middle of the lake, but the triple-tube Bentley stayed on top of the water (top). The crew in our Cruisers Inc. (now Cruisers Yachts) chase boat reported a much rougher ride (above).

“Those guys were out all night and sick over the rail, and got us off course,” Sohm said. “We missed Frankfort by 20 miles, and I almost ran out of gas, but we made it over and back. I took a few waves over the bow, so it was just a little sketchy.”

Sohm says that at the time, the media wouldn’t write about his accomplishment because it seemed so risky, they feared being held liable if readers attempted to repeat the feat and died trying. So much for publicity.

CROSSING THE LAKE

Flash-forward 25 years, and Sohm is still pitching his patent and still selling his kits at boat shows—thousands of pontoons are running with owner-installed T.A.P. fins. He

and Terry moved to North Carolina in 2003 to be closer to her family, and he works as a gofer at Long Island Marina in Catawba, North Carolina. Summer 2024 saw the confluence of the Oshkosh Toon-Fest poker run, the 50th anniversary reunion of the Oshkosh West class of 1974, and the 25th anniversary of the original pontoon crossing. What a weekend. Sohm insisted that *Pontoon and Deck Boat* editor Brady Kay and I join him on the anniversary crossing. Sohm towed up from North Carolina his personal 22-foot Bentley triple-tube pontoon, powered by a fuel-sipping Mercury FourStroke 250 and equipped with a compass and a GPS. For a chase/photo boat, I enlisted ace technician Dan Jansen to join us in *Cheap and Easy*, his 1983

Cruisers 220 Baron. We equipped ourselves with water, some snacks, handheld VHF radios, a spare prop, fuel filters and some tools.

The weather on July 15, our planned day of crossing, looked grim—thunderstorms and big seas—but a massive high-pressure dome was cruising in from Canada and would give us promising conditions the next day. We motored out of the Sturgeon Bay ship canal on July 16 under clear skies. Once we were a few miles out, we settled in, cruising at 20 mph. Seas were 3 to 4 feet and confused, with a chop on the top and wind from the northeast. The farther east we went, the rougher it got; we were catching the back side of the previous day’s weather. As high pressure approached, the wind shifted to the north, so we were rolling in a beam sea, with the tops of waves appearing higher than the pontoon rails. With triple-tube buoyancy and the T.A.P. fins, we stayed on top of the water, and while we smacked down hard a few times, we stayed dry and in control. For the last 20 miles, we reduced our speed to about 15 mph, but we were still outpacing the Cruisers. When I looked back, I could see mostly the bottom of the runabout as it bucked through the waves. Dan brought two curious buddies along; they and photographer Tom King took a beating.

The shoreline bluffs and Frankfort light appeared on the horizon about four hours after our



departure, and we motored past the breakwater and into Betsie Lake. At the gas dock, we pumped 25 gallons into the pontoon and 31 into the Cruisers. The pontoon got about 3.5 mpg. Consider that in 1999 it took almost 90 gallons to make the same distance plus 20 off-course miles. Our fuel economy was about three times better in 2024. And the ride was much less dramatic, thanks mostly to that

For an adventure ride like this one, that third tube is a game-changer and, along with the advent of force-capturing devices like T.A.P. fins, might be the most significant advance in pontoon evolution over the past 25 years.

PHOTOS: (FROM TOP) TOM KING (2)



third tube under the boat. For an adventure ride like this one, that third tube is a game-changer and,

along with the advent of force-capturing devices like T.A.P. fins, might be the most significant

AN ADVENTUROUS DAY ON THE WATER Pick your day, be prepared, and you could pilot a pontoon almost anywhere and still be smiling. Sohm is at the helm, with the author riding shotgun. What could go wrong?



PHOTO: (FROM TOP) COURTESY BRADY KAY, TOM KING

GOOF TROOP Sohm handed out commemorative T-shirts celebrating the 25th anniversary of his original Lake Michigan crossing aboard a pontoon boat.

advance in pontoon evolution over the past 25 years.

Our original plan was to grab some brunch after we arrived on the west coast of Michigan, then head back. There was no brunch at Jacobson Marina, however, and we didn't want to walk into town, so we settled for a few bags of chips. And then we shoved off on a due-west course back to America's Dairyland. By now the lake had really laid down, and we were cruising along at 25 mph.

Lake Michigan is a big expanse of water, but I was still surprised that during the entire trip, we spotted just two other boats—a very high-masted sailboat and a lake freighter—both far off in the distance. At one point on the return, in the middle of the lake, we stopped and shut off the outboard. The sky was perfectly clear, and the lake was a deep cobalt blue. For 360 degrees around us, there

was nothing to see but blue sky and blue water. It was beautiful and also just a little unsettling for someone who is rarely out of sight of land. I realized for the first time that if something went wrong, we were truly alone—no radio contact with our little handhelds, no other boats around, no cell service. The piece of gear we didn't have was a tracker, satellite messenger or a satellite phone. We did have our float plan logged with Terry waiting back in Sturgeon Bay, and we had checked in from Michigan. We were well-stocked with food, and if we ran out of water, well, you could drink Lake Michigan.

The return run took just three hours. I wish I had more drama to share, but in the end, this was just a long ride on a pontoon. Funny that since then, when I tell people that I crossed the lake on a pontoon, the response is universal: What a goofy thing to do! Exactly.