

The Boat Builders of Gravenhurst:

Borneman, Ditchburn and Greavette

This year's Antique and Classic Boat Society's Summer Boat Show on July 10 and 11 will feature boats built in Gravenhurst. Although there were several builders who built a small number of boats, three major companies stand out.

Julius Borneman, born in 1886, was young and full of ambition and couldn't wait to start his own business. Fortunately his grandfather Otto Roehl, operated a tourist camp on Sparrow Lake and needed several rowing skiffs and sailing dinghies to rent to the tourists, as well as a small launch to pick people up and their supplies at the Port Stanton Train station. So in 1908 with the backing of their grandfather, Julius and his brother Herman left their employment at Ditchburn Boats and opened Borneman Boats in a large boathouse on Gull Lake in Gravenhurst. Borneman boats were built in a unique method, like a canoe with a mould: ribs were bent over the mould and planked afterwards. Julius Borneman remained in the business until 1924 when he took over the Ford car agency in Gravenhurst.

Herbert Ditchburn opened a boat building shop in 1904 at Muskoka Wharf where the Muskoka Boat and Heritage Centre stands today. In 1907, the company produced a 24-page illustrated catalogue presenting their various lines. Ditchburn offered a full range of power boats described as good "all around" launches: safe for women and children and "handsome enough for the most fastidious." Ditchburn had been building launches powered by gasoline engines since 1898, and in 1908 offered a selection of boats ranging from a 16-foot powered skiff, to a 45-foot day cruiser. Over the years they were known as the premier boat builder in Muskoka. Ditchburn was known for building a series of internationally known racing boats, all called *Rainbow*. The Ditchburn Company collapsed completely in the spring of 1938. Today, many of the prestigious boats that cruise our lakes are these same Ditchburn built boats.

Thomas Greavette was born on August 14, 1881 in Gravenhurst. His first employment was at Ditchburn Boats where he worked for 30 years before starting his own company. Mr. Greavette sold the idea of the assembly-line principle to his backers, an idea already being used in the U.S.A. A new enterprise was incorporated in 1930 by erecting a plant in Gravenhurst across the street from our present day Wharf buildings. The same depression that finished the Ditchburn Company almost ended Greavette as well. After a few months they shut down, and over the next two years only reopened periodically when enough orders had been taken to necessitate it. Greavette Boats produced hundreds of boats including Disappearing Propeller Boats, assembly-line utility boats and custom-built boats. When Tom Greavette passed away in 1958, his daughter Lorraine and her husband Ron MacNab took over the business and ran it together until 1962, when Heintzmans of piano fame purchased the business. Ron stayed on the board of directors and managed the business until 1972 when Bruce Wilson purchased the company, operating it until it closed in 1978. ⚓



Top to bottom:

- Borneman's Boat Shop
- The Ditchburn Company
- Greavette Boats

