

# Alexandria Bay

*“The Algonac of New York”*  
By Doug Vittum

If you're a lover of old wooden boats, and know anything at all about Chris-Craft, or Garwood, then Algonac, Michigan means something to you. Algonac is the birthplace of both Chris Craft and Garwood. boats. To an old boater, Algonac is *Meca, or The Holy Grail*, of where it all began in our world of *Classic Boats*. (Note: Not far from Algonac are the birthplaces of Century and Hacker boats).

Now you ask...how do I see a similarity between Algonac, Michigan and Alexandria Bay, NY ?

The answer began to come to light back in February 2016. I has just received my monthly issue of *Thousand Island Life*, ( <http://www.thousandislandslife.com/> ), and was scanning the index, looking for an article to read. I can always find interesting, and historic articles in the monthly publication and this issue was no exception. As I scanned the list of articles and authors, one immediately caught my eye.

I was immediately drawn to an article written by one of my favorite wooden boat authors, Anthony “Tony” Mollica Jr.. If you're interested in the classic older wooden boats, I'm sure you have one or more of the twelve wonderful books Tony has written.

Following is the entire text and photos of Tony's article. Reproduced here with the permission of Editor Susan Smith (Thousand Islands Life), and the author Mr. Anthony Mollica Jr.

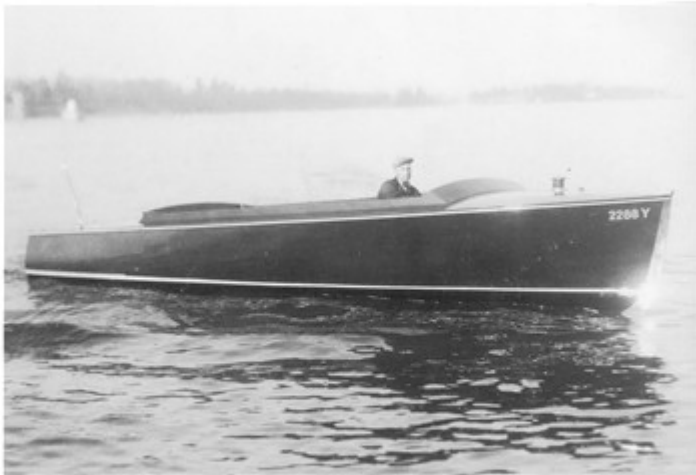
My ramblings will continue after the article.... I can guarantee two things. First, you will enjoy the article and learn something, and Second, there will be no test at the end. ENJOY:

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## **The Fascinating Association of Gar Wood and Fitzgerald & Lee.**

Written by [Anthony Mollica Jr.](#) posted on February 13, 2016 12:38

With the unexpected discovery of the Fitzgerald & Lee business records that took place in Alexandria Bay two summers ago, valuable information has emerged about this special boat building company. The business records had been stored for seventy three years and were discovered quite by accident. It turns out that this custom boat building firm was far more significant than most historians realized. They were recognized as a favorite boat builder for the famous American naval architect, John L. Hacker, and a favorite dealer for one of America's most prestigious boat building firms, Gar Wood Boats. Today, Fitzgerald & Lee's custom boats are often considered among the finest classics of their era and frequently command great attention at vintage boat shows.



The popular 26 foot V drive custom fishing launch developed by Fitzgerald & Lee.

The firm was established by two skilled tradesmen, Bernie Fitzgerald and Alfred Lee who visualized the growing need for a reliable marine engine service facility in Alexandria Bay. Fitzgerald was the respected foreman in the highly successful and important Cranker Machine Shop in Alexandria Bay. Alfred Lee was the head mechanic for Captain Thompson's large fleet of River tour boats. The men were good friends and frequently talked about the possibility of establishing their own small business specializing in servicing, repairing and rebuilding marine engines right in Alexandria Bay where there was a increasing abundance of boating activity.

In 1920 when the former location of the Hutchinson Brothers Boat Works on Mill Point was offered for rent, Fitzgerald & Lee decided that it would be a perfect location to start their new business. They served notice to their employers giving up their secure positions and announced the establishment of The Motor Boat Shop.

The new business was off to a fast start and before long they were selling a variety of new marine engines and even began to build small boats.

Fitzgerald's role was to manage the new business and promote sales while Lee devoted his extraordinary skill to the marine engine service and repairs was so well recognized..



The 26foot 1935 Vdrive sedan utility, Poetica, offers an unobstructed cockpit.

Together their expertise and devotion to customer service was so apparent that their business flourished. The need for suitable boats in the region was so apparent that the partners determined that building custom boats would be a natural extension of their operation. Their facilities were well suited for boat building and renaming their business to, **Fitzgerald & Lee**, seemed appropriate as well.

Fitzgerald developed into a gifted salesman creating a strong loyal following among his customers. He possessed a natural desire to take good care of potential customers by getting whatever brand of boat or motor that a customer desired to secure the deal even if they didn't have it on hand. In just their sixth year of business, Fitzgerald secured the franchise to become an exclusive Gar Wood Boat dealer for the Thousand Islands territory. He was convinced that having the Gar Wood dealership would be an ideal way to compliment their custom boat building operation and expand their customer base.

Gar Wood boats were built in Michigan and shipped by railroad to Clayton, NY, where they would be unloaded and launched. The ten-mile trip to Alexandria Bay provided an ideal water test to be sure everything was working properly. For customers that desired a new boat quickly, the standardized Gar Wood boats would be readily available. Customers that preferred a custom built boat had to be patient while designs were prepared and details worked out. The combination of offering stock boats and custom built boats to meet an owners preferences seemed to be well suited for Thousand Islanders.



Ms. Paula Allen, whose family were originally from Alexandria Bay provides this photograph taken in 1934. See also the story behind the photo in the February '16 issue of TI Life.

During the 1920s Gar Wood's racing accomplishments were frequently in the national news and he became a highly recognized champion of international significance. In 1925 Gar Wood captured the news again when he challenged America's fastest passenger train, the famous Twentieth Century Limited to a race from Albany to Manhattan. The race captured national attention when it was broadcast over the radio by a sports reporter riding in an airplane. When Gar Wood's boat beat the famous train in his Baby Gar runabout, his boats quickly became the first choice among wealthy sportsman around the world. Fitzgerald's plan to secure a choice Gar Wood dealership in 1926, to the start of World War II, was a stroke of brilliance.

One of the first customers to purchase a Baby Gar runabout was Edward J. Noble, the CEO of Life Saver Candies and Beechnut Foods. Noble spent his summers in the Thousand Islands and was a most influential personality.

Fitzgerald was sure that Noble's ownership of a Gar Wood would be a strong influence on other Thousand Islanders to purchase Gar Wood boats. Fitzgerald's hunch was right on target and during the summer that followed Fitzgerald & Lee sold more 26foot Gar Wood runabouts than any other Gar Wood dealer in North America. The records confirm that Fitzgerald & Lee would become Gar Wood's highest volume dealership from 1926 through to World War II. The relationship between Gar Wood and Fitzgerald & Lee became very strong. Bernie Fitzgerald always attended the National Motor Boat Show in Manhattan where he made a point of working at Gar Wood's exhibit. He always provided complimentary passes for the New York Boat Show to potential buyers and always sold one or two Gar Wood boats during the Show. Fitzgerald's skilled salesmanship so impressed Gar Wood, that he was offered the opportunity to set up their new dealership operation in Florida during the winter when Alexandria Bay was frequently snowbound. It was an interesting opportunity, but Fitzgerald turned it down twice because their business in Alexandria Bay remained strong.



"Vamoose," the 44 foot Hacker designed Fitzgerald & Lee high-speed boat featured in the national magazine, "Motor Boat."

Fitzgerald & Lee's custom boating operation gained national attention in 1937 when "Motor Boat Magazine" prepared a feature story on their latest custom boat, "Vamoose." The featured boat was a 44-foot John Hacker designed, high speed express cruiser. This streamlined, ultra modern, twin engine express cruiser, was capable of 40 mph speed. It was a gorgeous boat and the entire boating world took notice of the exciting design and its builder.



Gar Wood's 22foot V drive runabout model called the "Streamliner"

The Alexandria Bay firm was also building several custom boats with the new V drive transmission. By locating the engine all the way aft, utility style models no longer had the bulky engine box in the middle of the cockpit.

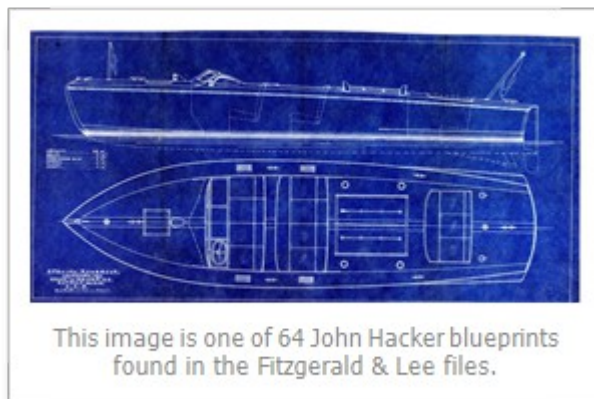
Thousand Islands' boaters seemed to favor this arrangement. Designer, John Hacker, felt that the V drive also favored it and forecast that it would soon become popular. Fitzgerald & Lee's success building V drive models even caught Gar Wood's attention. With Fitzgerald's encouragement, Gar Wood prepared their new runabout, a 22 footer named the "Streamliner" with a Chrysler Crown V - drive in 1938. Their new runabout offered a creative, congenial seating arrangement rather than the traditional individual "cockpits" that often left passengers isolated for the duration of the ride.

Even today, the Gar Wood Custom Boat Company of Brant Lake, New York, says this 1938 option remains very popular among their customers.

After twenty years of successful operation, the attack that forced America into World War II left Fitzgerald & Lee facing a crisis that would force the closure of their business. The war meant shortages of virtually all of the essential materials to build boats. Nor would Gar Wood be able to supply them with pleasure boats. The partners also faced health issues. There seemed to be no practical way to continue. There were twenty employees on their payroll. Their neighbor, The Hutchinson Boat Works, had a major Government contract to build 75 foot YP military vessels for the United States Navy. Hutchinson desperately needed all the skilled boat builders they could employ. This meant that the skilled craftsman of Fitzgerald & Lee's operation could be employed by Hutchinson Boat Works. Hutchinson's contract to build military YP vessels provided all of Fitzgerald & Lee's staff with the security of immediate employment right in their home village.



The decision to close was inevitable. The Fitzgerald & Lee business records from 1920 to 1941 were carefully packed into fourteen boxes and placed in a remote overhead location above their offices. Two years later the building was sold and then sold again about the time that World War II finally ended.



The new property owner became a dealer for Lyman boats and a variety of outboard motors. The new business called, Van's Motor Marine, operated for the next 71 years in this location. In all those years, no one ever discovered the hidden Fitzgerald & Lee records that included customer correspondence,

boat building time sheets, illustrated brochures and files from more than two hundred suppliers. Also included were sixtyfour John L. Hacker boat blueprints and more than one thousand pages of correspondence related to their Gar Wood dealership. The Gar Wood-to- dealer correspondence is the largest collection of information of this nature ever located.

The proprietors of Van's immediately realized the significance of the discovery and donated the files to the Alexandria Township Historical Society for study and review. The opportunity to carefully study these Fitzgerald & Lee records and the extensive Gar Wood material has become a superb opportunity to learn about this remarkable boat building firm and its remarkable success during the years of the Great Depression.

This information along with the details in the Gar Wood Sales Ledger provided conclusive proof that Fitzgerald & Lee was unquestionably the Gar Wood Boat Company's number one volume dealership from 1926 up to the start of World War II. The Village of Alexandria Bay has been well known among classic boaters for the superior wooden boats built for decades by the Hutchinson Brothers. With this historic discovery, the custom boats of Fitzgerald & Lee and their stature as Gar Wood's most productive dealership is another great achievement for this River Community.

[Note: Anthony Mollica wrote [Poetica, a Fitzgerald & Lee Classic Sedan](#), in the January 2014 issue]

By Anthony Mollica

About the author:

Anthony Mollica first wrote professionally in his teaching career in communications. Writing for pleasure evolved from his activities with the Antique and Classic Boat Society and the Antique Boat Museum as well as his life-long interest in the history of boat building in America. He has published articles in various marine periodicals including “*Classic Boating*,” “*ACBS Rudder*,” “*Gar Wood News*,” “*The Antique Boat Museum Gazette Annual*,” “*Motor Boating*,” “*Lakeland Boating*” and “*The Chris-Craft Brass Bell Quarterly*.” He is also the author of twelve published books, many of which are available in local book stores. In September 2010, *TI Life* reviewed “*Building Chris-Craft: Inside the Factories*”, a book he wrote with Chris Smith, a member of the founding family. - See more at:

<http://www.thousandislandslife.com/BackIssues/Archive/tabid/393/articleType/ArticleView/articleId/1881/The-Fascinating-Association-of-Gar-Wood-and-Fitzgerald-Lee.aspx#sthash.JpCT9sKb.dpuf>

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You can't tell me you didn't learn something new about Alexandria Bay from that great article.

But it is much more than just Fitzgerald and Lee that makes Alexandria Bay New York's Algonic. The Hutchinson Brothers, Duclon Brothers, Frank and Ed Dingman, Charles Bolton, Charles Rogers, William Heath, and others have all built boats in “A” Bay. The Thousand Island area is rich with boat building history, but I think Alexandria Bay is our own Algonic of New York.

My Thanks again to Editor Susan Smith and author Anthony Mollica Jr for allowing me to share this great article with our chapter and friends. You can subscribe to Thousand Islands Life.com by going to their website and signing up. Then you'll never miss another great Thousand Islands article.

Recommended reading:

History of Hutchinson Brothers Boat Works. By Bonnie Wilkinson Mark

<http://www.thousandislandslife.com/BackIssues/Archive/tabid/393/articleType/ArticleView/articleId/587/PageID/624/Hutchinson-Boat-Works.aspx>

Here is a list of articles written by Tony Mollica Jr., all published in the *Thousand Islands Life* magazine.

<http://www.thousandislandslife.com/BackIssues/Archive/tabid/393/articleType/AuthorView/authorID/315/Default.aspx>