

# EVINRUDE OUTBOARDS, 100 AND STILL GOING STRONG

By Dennis Evinrude

**The** year 2009 marks the one hundredth anniversary of the outboard motor known as Evinrude. The humble beginning of this business is also a love story. After spending a number of years working throughout the Midwest, Ole Evinrude came to Milwaukee in 1900. The twenty three year old had gained valuable knowledge in various foundries and machine shops and was ready to create on his own. Ole's first endeavor was to build engines that allowed people to convert their carriages to self propelled units. Ole had just been kicked out of a boarding house run by a Mrs. Doyle who had a sixteen year old friend by the name of Bess Cary.

Adjacent to the Cary property was a shed for rent. Ole rented it and took on a partner and formed a company to custom build engines for whatever people desired. At the same time a curious 16 year old Bess volunteered to type correspondence needed to start the business. Her reward was an occasional horseless carriage ride and Sunday picnics. The firm of Clemick and Evinrude lasted only six months but the relationship of Ole and Bess would endure through thick and thin. After enjoying many picnics together Ole and Bess were engaged in the summer of 1906. Near the end of that summer they and a few friends journeyed to Lacys Resort (now the Golden Mast) on Okauchee Lake, west of Milwaukee, and rented a boat for the trip to Party Island. During the course of the day Ole returned to Lacys to fetch some ice cream for the group. On the return trip Ole rowed into a stiff wind and the delay caused the ice cream to melt. The frustration of the melted treat set into motion events that would change outboard history in a big way. Bess encouraged Ole to develop an affordable engine that the common man could clamp onto any rowboat he wished.

On November 21, 1906 Ole and Bess were married. On September 27, 1907 their son, Ralph S. Evinrude was born. After Ralph was born, economic times were tough and the health of Bess suffered. They persevered and by the summer of 1909 Ole had an engine ready to test. Ole and Bess' brothers took the engine to the Kinnicinnic river, clamped it to a boat, and off they noisily went. Many people rushed to the riverbank to see that historic event. It was at this point that Bess' influence on the company also made history. She had the foresight to see the market possibilities and the business acumen to make it hap-

pen. Many years later Ole and Bess would both remark how they were the perfect business partners as well as perfect partners in matrimony. Bess ran the office and created all the advertising while Ole ran



the shop and saw to it that reliable outboards were produced. The engines developed one-and-one-half horsepower, weighed 62 pounds, and initially sold for \$62.00.

After five very successful years, Bess' health suffered again. Ole did what some men might regard as radical today. He sold the company and concentrated on restoring Bess to good health. They traveled the country and among other places visited my Dad's family home in Glendive, Montana. My father is 95 now and still remembers their visit. By 1920 they settled in New Orleans where Ole and young Ralph worked on a new engine design together and Bess grew stronger.

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In 1921 their new engine took the New York Boat Show by storm and entered full production in 1922. Due to the sale of their original company, they did not have the right to use the Evinrude name at this time so Bess coined the

acronym ELTO (Evinrude Light Twin Outboard). Once again the advertising and business genius of this lady propelled the company forward. One must realize that for much of her career women in the United States did not even have the right to vote. All of her correspondence was signed "B. Evinrude". Only those who met her in person ever knew they were dealing with a women. Bess was a trail-blazer in the truest sense. The Elto Company was very successful while the original Evinrude firm was slowly failing. In 1929 Stephen Briggs of the small engine maker, Briggs & Stratton, approached Ole and together they formed a new concern which consisted primarily of the original Evinrude and the new Elto companies. Thus, Outboard Marine Corporation was born.

Four years later the health of Bess deteriorated again and she passed away on May 13, 1933 at the age of 47. The love that had made the perfect partnership was now a dark void. Those who knew Ole well say he was never the same and a scant

14 months later Ole passed away on July 12, 1934. He literally died of a broken heart. From the time they started the

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most successful outboard company ever to the time of their deaths was a mere 25 years.

Their son Ralph took over OMC and, under his direction, survived the depression, supplied the military with outboards during WWII and guided it to worldwide success well into the 1980s.

Today, the Evinrude E-Tec is produced by Bombardier and is the only outboard to date to win the EPA's "Clean Air Award". Things have come a long way since the love of two talented people brought forth a brand of outboard engine that celebrates its 100th birthday.

