



by Mr. Andreas Jordahl Rhude

The plains of Kansas were an unlikely spot for a boat manufacturer to grow out of the wheat fields. However, such was the case with WesCraft Boats.

WesCraft Boat Mfg. Co. was formed by Wesley "Wes" Hagelgantz of Bazine, Kansas in the late 1950s. Wes had a Guernsey farm north of the small prairie town. One summer he rented a Thompson cedar strip boat with a small outboard motor. He took it to Cedar Bluff Reservoir, a new recreation spot about twenty miles north of his home and the boating bug hit!

The next winter he purchased a Speedliner boat kit and after putting it together he sold it. Soon he built about a dozen more kits from Glen-L plans and quickly sold them. The decks were two-toned using Korina and Philippine mahogany plywood. He decided to add fiberglass coating to the wooden boats and with this, his hobby transitioned into a new career.

The Gothic shaped barn at the farm was converted into a boat shop and he hired a knowledgeable fiberglass person to get into full fledged production. Howard Watts of Topeka came aboard along with his wife, an experienced upholsterer.



A view of the converted barn

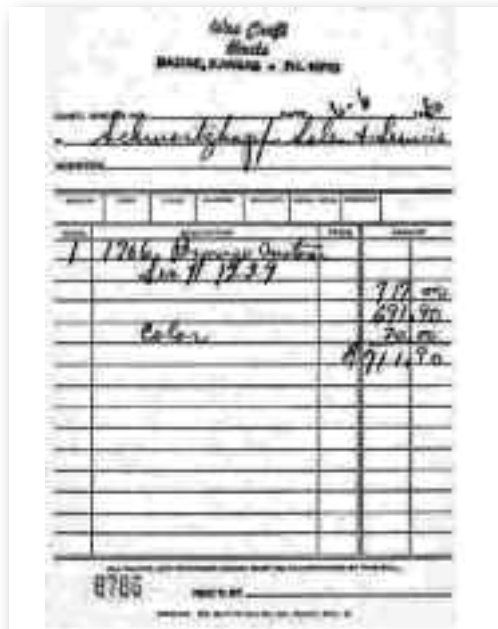
Wes and Howard popped a mold from a Skagit boat and slightly modified the design. With this the WesCraft fiberglass boat was born in 1957.

The first molded 'glass boat had a black hull and red deck. She was not a thing of beauty, recalls Robert Hagelgantz, Wes' son!

A new boat shop was built on the farm and WesCraft was making one boat daily by 1959. The most deluxe model was a six seat runabout complete with upholstered seats, wrap-around plastic windshield, navigation lights, hardware, and steering. Two other models were made using the same hull mold. Deck configurations and seating were different than the deluxe boat. The "foam-glide bottom" was used for the hull. "Longitudinal channels molded into the hull sweep foaming bubbles of air under the boat." Greater speed and shaper turns were possible with this hull design. The transom had a curved tumble-home and had rounded corners at the junction of the hullside. Typical hull color was white with deck color options of red, blue, yellow and black. Any color combination could be special ordered. The early boats had a fiberglass structure under the floor boards. No wood was utilized. This changed in later year models.

Mrs. Watts and Mrs. Ruth Hagelgantz cut, sewed, and fit the upholstery over the company built wooden seat frames. A thriving side-line business was providing upholstery for automobiles and tractors.

In August of 1959 WesCraft was advertising factory seconds and demonstrator boats for sale. Most boats were sold through traditional marine dealers. Schwartzkopf Sales and Service in nearby Ness City acted as a sales outlet for west central Kansas. Between January and August 1960, a dozen WesCraft boats of fifteen and seventeen-foot length were sold to the dealer.



**An early invoice**

The company's seventeen-foot boats were selected in 1960 for use by the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary Division XX Cee Gee's precision, high speed boat demonstration team. It was quite an honor. The boats were powered by 70 horse power Scott McCulloch outboard motors. The team debuted at the Colorado Water Festival and Governor's Cup Regatta at Cherry Creek Reservoir in August. 10,000 to 15,000 spectators attended and Miss Julie Wrasse of Denver was crowned "Miss Cee Gee" during the fun filled day. The WesCraft dealer from Denver, George and Irene Steiver, arranged for the boats to be utilized by the Coast Guard Auxiliary.



**The Coast Guard Cee Gee boats**

Family members were vital to the operation. In 1961 a load of seven boats was shipped to Starkey at Maple Plain, Minnesota. While attending school in Enterprise, Kansas, a son of Wes Hagelgantz mentioned to a classmate that his father built boats. A prospect came from the casual conversation and as a result, a substantial sale was consummated.

When Glass Magic Boats of Fort Worth, Texas went belly up in the early sixties, Hagelgantz went to the liquidation auction. He came home with tooling for the patented Nomad which became Wes Craft's Sport-Aero and Fishin-Aero. The diminutive hull was used for hunting and fishing and was very fast with as little as an eighteen horse power motor.

The small rural based boat company was growing. Often times the farm yard was full of boat hulls and decks curing in the sun. Up to twenty guys were building boats during the peak season. However, it was difficult to find workers in the remote factory location, especially during farming season. By 1963 it was decided to seek a larger facility and one closer to a steady labor source. In early August it was announced that they would move to Great Bend, Kansas. They incorporated as WesCraft Industries, Inc. on 05 September 1963. A city funded industrial revenue bond in the amount of \$60,000 was established. The money was used to purchase property and have a building constructed. The city provided it to WesCraft on a lease-purchase agreement.

The new facility at 623 Madison Street was in operation in January 1964. It was next to the Dubois sand pit, a thirty acre lake which could be utilized for demonstrations and testing. The pond was used all year round by the boat firm. Wes Hagelgantz enjoyed breaking the ice during the winter, proving that his boats were strong. Hagelgantz made the move to Great Bend and Charles Girton joined the firm. A number of other Great Bend businessmen were minor stockholders.

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**Wes Hagelgantz proudly applies the name plate**

The first boat completed at the new plant was a fifteen-foot outboard runabout which was crated and shipped to Seoul, South Korea in late January 1964. It went to an American missionary for use in his evangelical work and also for personal recreation.

Stern drive boats were a major portion of the firm's output after the move to Great Bend. The firm's product mix soon expanded beyond boats. They began to make fiberglass pickup truck toppers, one piece shower stalls, speaker baffles, washer and dryer pans, concrete forms, and burial vaults. The latter were made for Ray Products of Wichita. Dune buggy bodies were made for about two years before that tooling was sold.

Wes personally constructed the molds for all his products whether it was a boat, camper topper, shower stall, or dune buggy. The camper tops for trucks eventually became an important part of the company output.

The 1964 boat line included small 14 and 15-foot runabouts and fishing boats. They also built 17 and 18-foot runabouts with a full-V bottom. The larger boats were offered as outboards and inboard/outboards. The 18-foot boat with 150 horse power V-6 engine factory installed sold for \$3,995. The Fish n' Ski fifteen footer came standard with back-to-back seats and was rated for up to 80 horse power. The smallest boat, the Fishin-Aero, sold for \$295. Foam flotation was provided in bow chambers. Their motto was "Not a Cheaper Boat. A Better

Boat!"

Just like the boating industry in general, fiberglass tri-hulls became a popular design at WesCraft starting in the late 1960s. Their 1968 Tri-V 18-footer could be ordered with a 155 horse power Buick engine. Berkeley Jet drives were offered along with standard outboard models and stern drive units. The company was offering rides to the public in February that year at the sandpit next to the factory.

A milestone was reached in December 1973 when WesCraft made its final loan payment to the city of Great Bend. The deed to the property and building was turned over to the company in exchange for one dollar.

Hagelgantz was asked one time why he used the name "WesCraft," for his boats. His response was, "Why, do you think I should have called the boats HagelgantzCraft?"

Wes did all the selling and set up dealers in Kansas, Nebraska, Colorado, and surrounding areas. Even if a dealer only sold a few boats a year, the boat builder remained loyal to that dealership. The company was an early adopter of metal flake use in the gel coat. The "Fire-Flake" brand by Western Products was their material of choice.



**Wescraft 17' model**

Wes was a builder of necessity. To combat the lack of electricity in rural areas, he invented a portable welder. It was powered by a tractor or other motor vehicle. He received U.S. patent number 2,600,643 for the device in 1952.

Another milestone went into effect on 01 January 1974 when ownership and a name change took place. Wes Hagelgantz and Charles Girton and other stockholders sold the firm. New owners were Jim McQuin, George Bemis, and Gary Hawk. The company name also changed from WesCraft Industries, Inc. to WesCraft, Inc.

Only one and one half boats were completed each week when the ownership changed occurred. It increased to four and one half boats weekly by June 1974. Once the hull and deck was removed from the mold, a single person completed assembly of the boat. The company preferred to have women in charge, as they believed the female workers had an eye for detail.

The new owners dropped the small dealerships and would only sell to large volume dealers. In the end this backfired when a general slump in boat sales caused the large dealers to stop purchasing boats. Sales at WesCraft quickly diminished. Combined with the energy crisis of the time, troubles were brewing.

During the first weekend of November 1976 the company had a factory close out sale on inventory. They had an eighteen-foot Sportsman model with 140 horse power stern drive installed available for \$5,803.86. They had an additional 31 boats for sale at less than dealer costs. The company ceased to appear in the Great Bend city directory in 1977. They most likely ceased operations in 1976. The US Coast Guard Manufacturer's Identification Code database indicated WesCraft was no longer operating by 17 May 1978. They stopped making boats earlier than that date.

Wes Hagelgantz, founder of the boat firm to bear his name, died at his home in Bazine, Kansas on 18 June 1997 at age 81. The farm building used as the original factory is owned by his son Robert. Today he uses it for restoring antique automobiles, his hobby. It is an appropriate use for the one time boat shop!



1960 Wescraft with 1957 Ford Ranchero

The old office at the farm factory still has a 1964 "WesCraft Boats" calendar on the wall and some literature is stacked in a cubby hole in the old shelving unit. Gobs of resin are on the shop floor where the

mixing used to take place. The proof of its tenacity is right there on the floor, 46 years after the last boats were made! Numerous reminders of the boat building days at the farm remain. Molds for the tail fins hang from the wall along with the jig used for making the Glen-L wooden boats. Signs, business cards and other boat building era items are tacked to the walls.

Small regional builders filled a market niche and were important to the overall boating industry. These small enterprises were no less important than the large endeavors such as Chris-Craft or Thompson.

The US Coast Guard assigned WesCraft hull ID after November 1972 was "WCT". Any boat built after that date should have had a 12 character hull ID with the prefix WCT. The serial number system in 1960 was just a sequential four digit numbering. There was no hidden code within the number. Year or model can not be determined from the serial number.

Sources:

- Great Bend Tribune (Great Bend, KS) Hutchinson News (Hutchinson, KS)
- Salina Journal (Saline, KS)
- Western Kansas Press (Great Bend, KS)
- US Coast Guard Manufacturer's Identification Code (MIC) database
- Kansas Secretary of State - Business Entities Database
- Telephone interview of Robert Hagelgantz, 10 January 2010
- Personal interview of Robert Hagelgantz, 17 February 2010
- WesCraft Boat literature

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