

Show boats big and small

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Detroiters are familiar with the city's history as the birthplace of the automobile industry. Few know Detroit played nearly as big a role in developing the first powered pleasure boats.

It was 100 years ago this month that a Detroitier named Cameron Waterman bought a three-horsepower, single-cylinder engine from a young New Yorker, Glenn Curtiss, soon to be one of America's most famous aviation pioneers but then a pioneer in building motorcycles.

Waterman rigged up a chain drive to the engine to turn a propeller at the end of a shaft, clamped the contraption to the transom of a 14-foot steel rowboat, launched it at Belle Isle and within a few minutes was dodging ice floes in the Detroit River in the world's first boat powered by an outboard motor.

Another Detroitier, R. McDougal Campau, watched that maiden voyage and came up with the idea of calling it an outboard motor. Today's residents of the Motor City can see that wonderfully prescient engine at the Dossin Great Lakes Museum booth during the 47th annual Detroit Boat Show, which runs Saturday through Feb. 20 at Cobo Center.

The show will bring more than 1,000 boats from 10-55 feet, 200 exhibitors offering everything from anchors to zinc electrolysis protectors, and 85,000 spectators to Cobo. Included in the new boats are three that are among the smallest, but they will be of interest to anyone who owns a place on a lake or river.

Escape Watercraft of Grand Rapids has introduced three models that apply the technology from electric trolling motors commonly used in fishing to power these little boats at low speeds (maximum 3.7 m.p.h.) for up to eight hours.

"We're trying to make it easy for people to get on the water," said Sandy Spielmaker, general manager of Escape. "We did some research and found that five million people own waterfront property, and another 25 million said they love the water. And nearly all of them said they'd like to engage in water sports more frequently, but often they don't because it's too complicated or takes too much time.

"I'm a perfect example. We live on a lake, and we've had a speedboat for four years, but I've never driven it. I always wait until my husband comes home to take me out. But these little electric boats are so easy to use and so simple I'm out in them all the time.

"Our idea isn't to replace the bigger boats -- it's to complement them. These boats are also great for

BOATS ON DISPLAY

What: Detroit Boat Show.

When: Saturday through Feb. 20.

Where: Cobo Center.

Schedule: 11 a.m.-9 p.m. Saturdays and Wednesday; 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Sundays; 3-9 p.m. Monday-Tuesday and Feb. 17-18.

Tickets: \$11 adults, 12-under free with adult, 62-older free Monday. 800-224-3008.

getting children into boating.

"I've found that the electric boats really extend the season. I grab a cup of coffee and go for rides around the lake on crisp, fall days when the bigger boats have been put away for the season. I'm out there all by myself at one of the most beautiful times of the year. But they're so simple to launch and beach. You just put a charged battery in and go, without any noise or smell."

The electric boats were a natural fit for Escape because the company is owned by Johnson Outdoors, which also owns Minn Kota, the world's biggest manufacturer of electric trolling motors (as well as Necky and Ocean kayaks, Old Town canoes, Scubapro diving gear and Eureka tents).

The three electric boat models are the Chaise Lounger (\$3,999), big enough for two adults and two children; the oval, seven-foot Fun Boat (\$1,999), a play platform that includes a water cannon that can spray 30 feet (a dubious accessory in the eyes of most boaters), and the 13-foot Touring Boat (\$2,499), which is big and stable enough to earn serious attention from anglers and waterfowl hunters who would like to get into places they can't reach with conventional craft.

The Touring Boat looks like a kayak but is stable enough for an adult to stand in it. The 140-pound boat (minus battery) will carry 600 pounds, and with a motor that produces 30 pounds of thrust, it will allow anglers or a couple of duck hunters to cover about 10 miles.

The boat has five forward speeds and two in reverse, and the engine tilts up out of the water so it can be beached.

The boat show also will include the biggest fishing displays and seminars in decades.

"We know that 50 percent of the reason for having a boat in this state is for fishing," said Nicki Polan, a spokeswoman for the Michigan Boating Industries Association. "The exhibitors told us they'd like to see more of a fishing orientation, so we accommodated them."

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