



A little gem by Minnett



Jim Minnett, the owner of *Little One*, is assisted by (from back to front) Mike Shumake, Rob Gerigs, Ian Marr and Paul Brackley of Brackley Boats, who recently restored the launch.

ARTICLE AND PHOTOGRAPHS
BY TIM DU VERNET

Bert Minnett built many large and impressive boats, but there is one diminutive version that continues to draw attention.

Little One, a 1919 Minnett launch of only 21 feet, is more than a scaled down version of 36-foot boats like *Mineta* or *Eaglet II*. It was a custom ordered launch and Jim Minnett, grandson of the builder and owner of this small launch, believes she was originally intended to be a small livery boat.

“For the original owners, who summered on an island in Lake Muskoka, *Little One* was a custom ordered small livery boat designed to take a few passengers and supplies to and from their cottage,” he says.

Ted Johnson, the grandson of the boat’s second owner, says the boat was custom built at the end of, or shortly after, the First World War.

“All we know about the provenance of the Minnett is that she belonged to a lady on one of the Muskoka Lakes who had an island and wanted a manoeuvrable boat,” says Johnson, who summers on Mary Lake.

The Johnsons owned her from 1935 until 1958, when an offer was accepted from a

collector.

"Maintenance had become a big issue. Her hull was sound, but the Buchanan 25-45 engine took some work and varnish technology was primitive, resulting in frequent bubbling and a need for constant attention," Johnson remembers.

For the Johnson family, the boat became known as "the Old Girl."

"She saw quite a lot of use," he recalls. "My father, George Johnson, was 25 when she was acquired, and loved driving alone or with friends. And people around the lake said you could set your watch by the regular appearance of Reverend and Mrs. Johnson, frequently with guests who might include one or two of the Sisters of St John the Divine – who had (and still have) a retreat on Mary Lake – on their after-dinner cruise."

Ted Johnson remembers his summers of wooden boating and has a particularly vivid recollection of one narrow escape.

"We were on our return through the narrow canal from Penn Lake to Fairy Lake when around a bend at a good tilt loomed the steamer *Algonquin* on her daily run from Huntsville to North Portage," he says. "The *Algonquin* blew a loud blast as if she owned the canal. Dad threw the Old Girl into reverse while turning toward the wooden wall of the canal, and the two boats squeezed by each other with little to spare. To a 10-year-old, the *Algonquin* appeared to tower over us like an ocean liner."

Little One came to Jim Minett by accident. He isn't quite sure how, but the little Minett wound up in the possession of his grandfather, Bert Minett, prior to his death in 1966. When Bert died, *Little One* was left to his children, Marjorie, who was living in the U.S. and Bill Minett, Jim's father. His aunt didn't want the boat, so Bill took possession.

She has all the trademark features of the most grand and elegant period Minett boats, but in a smaller package. Jim Minett feels this is what makes her particularly special. Equally remarkable is how stable she is for such a short and narrow boat.

"I have never seen a boat this small be so stable," says Paul Brackley, who recently completed her restoration. "I have not seen another one like it."

It may be because *Little One* is slightly broader near the bow to accommodate the engine, despite her beam of little more than five feet.

Little One is one of those special Muskoka boats that has survived nearly completely intact for close to a century. Owners of Muskoka boats generally use their boats quite often so it is unusual for a boat this age to not have required some work.

She needed one or two planks repaired, but otherwise *Little One* is completely original. Over the years her horn has gone miss-



Rob Gerigs works on *Little One* (above). The boat needed a new bottom after 90 years of use. *Little One*, a 1919 Minett, is powered by a very rare Buchanan Bull Dog engine (below).



ing, but the screw holes showed where it would have been mounted.

Over the last few years, Jim Minett found she was leaking a bit more each summer and the engine wasn't as co-operative either. Eileen Minett, Jim's wife, described one or two occasions where they had to paddle.

"Jim was spending a lot of time under the engine hatch putting liquid metal over the holes in the manifold," explains Eileen. Adding to the problems, Jim adds, "Engine compression had dropped to 60 or 70 lbs."

As a 65th birthday gift, Jim chose to begin the process of restoring his cherished launch to her former glory. The Minetts knew the engine and bottom needed attention and they asked Paul Brackley, of Brackley Boats in Gravenhurst, to check it out. Eileen describes the artistry of his craftsmanship as "a plastic surgeon in wood."

While *Little One* had survived her 90 years surprisingly well, like a doctor giving a patient a thorough physical, Brackley's inspection revealed some serious repairs were needed below the water line. Jim could take comfort in knowing everything else but the engine and seat covering was in good shape.

Except for the horn, *Little One* retains her original flagpole light globe, which could never be replaced, the original Minett plaque and gauges, including an operating wind up clock.

Looking at *Little One*, it would be easy to miss some of her unique features. Bert was always very particular in his choice of wood and the hull of *Little One* is made from Spanish cedar and her decks are mahogany supported with oak ribs. Her bright work is nickel plated, which Jim thinks has a more



Jim Minett, with his wife Eileen, concentrates as he brings *Little One* into the boathouse after coming home following a recent restoration.

interesting, richer yellow colour, although the cutwater is aluminum.

Her windscreen is very similar to that of *Mineta*, built in 1918 and *Marie*, a 1917 Minett. The wood-framed windscreen hinges forward and the slightly curved side panels are removable and typically stay off the boat most of the time.

In her restoration, Brackley and his crew worked to preserve as much original wood as possible.

“The boat is so old; it’s amazing how long this original bottom did last – almost 100 years. If the keel hadn’t rotted out, it would have gone much longer,” explains Brackley.

In addition to a completely new bottom, the restoration of *Little One* included refinements to her running gear, including fixing the steering linkage, straightening the rudder strut and manufacturing a new footplate to replace the original that had been altered over the years. Her seat coverings will be replaced too, but the coil seat springs will be retained.

The original motor had been replaced in 1925, shortly after her delivery with a now very rare Buchanan Bull Dog engine. Normally, an engine sits on a special frame built in the hull, but this replacement Buchanan had been installed directly on to the stringers. This was corrected in the restoration with a

new engine bed.

During the engine restoration, Jim discovered that Parry Automotive, located in Orillia, had the original invoice for both the motor and the water pump, installed in 1932.

“Dad always had a little box of tools for each boat, just in case. Hopefully I won’t need it now,” Jim says.

Little One certainly isn’t alone in terms of small boats. Ditchburn made a “utility” launch of this length, the longest Dispro was 18 feet and the 1909 Minett canoe stern launches *Skipjack* and *Floss* were less than 21



The dash has a Minett plaque, simple gauges and a removable wind up clock.

feet. But Brackley and Minett believe she is in solitary company when it comes to the long deck style Minett boats this length.

“*Little One* is fun to drive and easy to manage,” Jim comments. “She is just the right size and easy to manage.”

Her narrow beam and short cockpit means a tight fit for passengers though. Apart from the two front seats, a bench behind the driver will hold three passengers in a pinch. Being small also means that space around the engine is tight, making it very awkward to service.

With a displacement hull design, *Little One* is not about speed. She cuts through the water as gracefully as a 36-foot Minett, up to a top speed of 18 mph. At speed, the two front seats remain protected, but the rear two or three squeezed passengers might be refreshed with her Minett spray. A rather impractical and rarely used canvas cover had been intended to snap around the cockpit, over the windscreen and protect passengers.

During her time with Jim Minett’s family, *Little One* has endured snowstorm cruises in the fall, engine failures and informal parades with the *Segwun*. With eager anticipation of her June re-launch, Jim anxiously awaits delivery of his little Minett so he and his family can enjoy her unique character and renewed prized appearance.