

Little One: A Gem of a Minett

By Tim Du Vernet

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

Little One, a 1919 Minett launch of only 21 feet, is more than a scaled down version of 36' boats like *Mineta* or *Eaglet II*. A custom ordered launch, just as most of Minett were, Jim Minett, 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.”

Her second owner, the grandfather of Edward (Ted) Johnson, who summers on Mary Lake, explained, “all we know about the provenance of the Minett is that she belonged to a lady on one of the Muskoka Lakes who had an island and wanted a manoeuvrable boat. Our information was that she was custom built at the end of or shortly after the First World War.”

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”, remembers Ted.

For the Johnson family, explained Ted, “the boat became known as 'The Old Girl'. She saw quite a lot of use. 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's Lake, on their after-dinner cruise.”

Summers of wooden boating are memory-filled times and Ted has a particularly vivid recollection of one narrow escape.

We were on our return through the narrow canal from Pen 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. 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 ten year old, the “Algonquin” appeared to tower over us like an ocean liner.

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

She has all the trademark features of the most grand and elegant period Minett boats, but in a smaller package. Jim feels this is what makes her particularly special. Equally remarkable is how stable she is for such a short and narrow boat. Paul Brackley, who recently completed her restoration says "I have never seen a boat this small be so stable, 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 5'.

Little One is one of those special Muskoka boats that has survived nearly a completely in tact 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 never used to leak", says Jim. She needed one or two planks repaired, which was done by Ames, but otherwise *Little One* is completely original. Over the years her horn has gone missing, but the screw holes showed where it would have been mounted.

The last few years, Jim found that 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", explained Eileen. Adding to the problems, Jim explained, "engine compression had dropped to 60 or 70lbs."

As a 65th birthday gift, Jim chose to begin the process of restoring his cherished launch to her former prime. The Minetts knew the engine and bottom needed attention and they asked Paul Brackley, of Brackley Boats in Gravenhurst, to check her out. Eileen described 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 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”, explained Paul. 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. Fortunately, Parry Automotive could remanufacture or find alternative parts to rebuild the motor. 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. Parry Automotive took over from PAL Engineering the service and repair of Buchanan engines and retained many of their historic documents. “Dad always had a little box of tools for each boat, just in case. Hopefully I won’t be need it now”, remarked Jim. She was launched for pre-delivery testing in mid-June.

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 19091 Minett canoe stern launches *Skipjack* and *Floss* were less than 21 feet. But Brackley and Minett believe she is in solitary company when it comes to the long deck style Minett boats this length.

In the water, where she is meant to be, “*Little One* is fun to drive and easy to manage”, explained Jim. “She is just the right size and easy to manage.” Her narrow beam and short cockpit does mean 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 get in and service.

Just as the Minett long deck launches had a small bow seat, *Little One* has an even smaller front hatch and seat that now takes the form of a round gas tank.

In her petit 21', "*Little One* has "got the classic lines of a Minett", says Jim. "Just in a miniature version." Eileen finds *Little One* is very convenient for taking small groups during a cruise." A typical summer order of events is for Jim to take summer guests to their Minett area cottage out for a cruise while she cleaned up in the kitchen. "I'm always worried about the boat engine quitting", explained Eileen. "But I know the sound of the engine and can hear the boat returning.

With a displacement hull design, *Little One* is not about speed. She cuts through through the water as gracefully as a 36' Minett, up to a top speed of 18mph. 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 huddled passengers.

During her time with Jim Minett's family, *Little One* has endured snowstorm cruises in the fall, engine failures, cocktail cruises and informal parades with the *Segwun*. With eager anticipation of her Father's Day launch, Jim anxiously awaited delivery of his little Minett so he and his family could enjoy her unique character and renewed prized appearance.