

THE PASSION



Bay Harbor dock, 1940s

Walstrom Marine celebrates 70 years of providing unparalleled service, selling quality yachts and sharing a passion for boating. BY SARAH KOLLMORGEN

In *Lakeland Boating's* June 1949 issue, we noted the WWII Navy vets that had purchased the "somewhat run-down" boatyard in Harbor Springs, Michigan, three years prior seemed to be making a surprisingly good run of things in a short amount of time. Our writer noted a few key factors he believed were responsible for the Walstrom-Griffeth Co.'s (as it was originally named) "huge success:" Namely, its modern facilities; sale of Chris-Craft boats; efficient service department and year-round activity; and finally, the marina's hard-working employees.

This year, that same marina is celebrating its 70th anniversary. Walstrom Marine has grown into one of northern Michigan's most respected marinas, with locations in Harbor Springs, Cheboygan and Bay Harbor. Although people have flocked to Harbor Springs for years to take advantage of the deepest natural harbor on the



Great Lakes, they now also come for Walstrom Marine's unbeatable service and knowledgeable, friendly staff. It's true that the company has grown and transformed quite a bit during the past seven decades; however, a closer inspection reveals that the marina still runs on the core characteristics we first noted in 1949.

Modern facilities

When Ward Walstrom, Roma Walstrom and Paul Griffeth purchased the run-down boatyard north of Little Traverse Bay in 1946, it was already 43 years old. It boasted 18 covered slips, storage for 100 boats and one of the largest elevator lifts in northern Michigan. For such an odd grab-bag of amenities to work with, our writer was impressed with the facilities that were added on to this "progressive" marina by Walstrom and Griffeth: There was a lounge with toiletries, a

FOR BOATING



Main dock downtown, early 1950s. Walstrom employees Ty Miller, Vint Cooper, Midge Lenhart (inset).



Walstrom Marine Harbor Springs location (above), and the showroom (left).



Chris-Crafts and Beyond

During its very first three years in business, our writer noted that the marina had sold an impressive volume of Chris-Craft boats. Today, Walstrom Marine continues to sell top of the line brands. Boaters can browse a selection of Hatteras, Tiara, Pursuit, and of course Chris-Craft models. Walstrom Marine has really become a one-stop shop, as it is also an authorized dealer for Garmin and Nautical Structures electronics, FreedomLift, Yacht Controller and Crusader Engines.

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shower, dress and powder rooms, and even an automatic washing machine.

The renovations and improvements to the marina were just getting started. The next few decades saw rapid change: In 1952, Griffith left the company; the following year, the name of the marina officially became Walstrom Marine. In 1960, the marina developed a yacht basin of 100 slips with storage, service and haulout. By 1969, Walstrom decided to really spread its wings and constructed 32 condominiums on land near the basin, named "Marina Village," with the idea of attracting boaters who envisioned a space to park their boats in the front yard.

It was not always easy sailing for Walstrom Marine, however; the marina had its fair share of working through high and low water (metaphorically and literally). In 1985, for example, high waters rose 3 feet over the main floor. In

2002, a windstorm blew the roof off an entire building.

But Ward and Roma Walstrom built the marina to last. Today, Walstrom serves three locations. The original Harbor Springs location now boasts 140 slips, indoor storage, a showroom, a service department and the Walstrom Marine Basin Yachting Center, which has a boater's lounge, bike racks, showers, laundry and a patio. The Cheboygan Marina has 40 slips, outdoor and heated indoor storage, a 70-ton travel lift and more. In Bay Harbor, boaters can stop by the sales office and shop at Propellers, Walstrom's retail store.

"We have deep roots and deep water," says CEO Ward Walstrom Jr. "The history of Harbor Springs along Traverse Bay is a great history of large watercraft that have been coming in for more than 100 years. That's what we're known for."

This fall, Walstrom expects to complete the construction of an additional storage building capable of holding 60-foot boats.

More than customer service

Our original reviewer in 1949 was quite impressed with Walstrom's service department and their unique use of a service request sheet. "This type of scheduled operation has made it possible for the yard to have every boat ready on schedule for the owners as they return to Harbor Springs for the season," we noted.

Today, employees at Walstrom

Marine are just as concerned about customers spending as much time on the water as possible.

"In Michigan we have something called winter, and you can't boat in the winter," says Dave Lyle, the current president and COO of Walstrom. "Every summer day is precious. You don't want to have a down day when you're boating."

Employees at Walstrom are highly trained. The full-service marina offers everything from repairs to refinishing, carpentry and installations. Plus, everyone on the team simply loves being on the water.

At Walstrom, providing quality service means more than simply putting the customer first, Lyle says. He compares the company's business philosophy to a three-legged stool: The customer is one leg, the employee is one leg and the company itself is one leg. For success, decisions need to be made that benefit all three legs of the stool.

"It's service. That was the foundation for our parents, and now for us," says Ward Jr. "People know what they're going to get with us."

Third-generation boaters who return annually to Harbor Springs aren't the only ones familiar with the marina's top-notch service department. In 2005, Walstrom was selected as the sole recipient of Tiara Yachts Platinum Service Dealer award. That same year, Walstrom was also one of the first marinas to become an official Michigan Clean Marina. For Ward Jr., however, real gratification comes from seeing satisfied customers.

"When we're together as a team and we have a customer come in and say, 'You guys are great!' out of the blue: That's what makes it all worthwhile," Ward Jr. says. "These are all moments that you feel a sense of accomplishment, where all the hard work has paid off."

Building a Community

While Walstrom has many qualities that look good on paper — high-quality boats, a class-act service department, extensive facilities — it's the family atmosphere permeating the business that seems to keep customers coming back.

Walstrom Marine is currently a second-generation run family business. Fred Walstrom joined the company in 1969 after

completing his engineering degree from Michigan State University, and Ward Jr. joined the sales department in 1971 after earning his business degree, also from MSU. The two bought Walstrom from their parents in 1983. Ward Jr. says he's confident the business will stay in the family.

However, you don't have to be blood-related at Walstrom to be part of the family. Lyle became a member of the Walstrom team after befriending Ward Jr. in college. While on his way down to the Bahamas on a sailing trip in 1981, Lyle stopped by to visit his friend for what he originally thought would be a few nights.

"I sailed into town and I never left," Lyle says with a laugh. He still hasn't made it back to the Bahamas.

Many employees stick around Walstrom for a long time — sometimes for 20, 30 or 40 years. Some long-time customers request specific employees by name. In 2015, Bill Blakemore retired from Walstrom Marine after more than 50 years of service. Shortly after, he was inducted into the Michigan Boating Industries Association Hall of Fame.

"The longevity here is remarkable," Lyle says. "We take very seriously offering full-time jobs to our people year-round. That's hard in our business, but we think it's important."

Lyle says the close community atmosphere at Walstrom makes it that much easier to run the business, too. Day-to-day decisions can be made quickly and easily, and don't require bureaucratic red tape that big corporate companies might run into.

"Even though we're family run, we do have a corporate structure so that we don't do anything stupid," Lyle says.

This loyalty to a sense of community extends beyond the employee room. Walstrom hosts events each year for boaters, including its big summer rendezvous. Last year's multi-day rendezvous on Mackinac Island attracted more than 100 Walstrom customers and staff. In early August this year, Walstrom teamed up with Tiara Yachts and SkipperBuds to host a three-day Tiara Great Lakes Rendezvous in Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin.

The Walstrom family has also been active in the Harbor Springs community. Ward Sr. helped build the local airport, Roma was key in building the Hillside



The Walstrom Marine team



2015 Walstrom Rendezvous, Mackinac Island

Apartments for low-income senior citizens, and Fred has been on the city council's planning commission, to name just a few things. Walstrom employees are also involved in a number of conservancy and community efforts.

"We're a strategic stakeholder in the community," Ward Jr. says. "With more power comes more responsibility. When we're successful, we feel the need to give back."

Looking towards the future

To celebrate 70 years (and counting), Walstrom held an invitation-only gala for members of the boating community in late July, featuring food, drinks and a "really good Motown band," says Lyle.

When asked about the future of the Walstrom family in the company, Ward Jr. says he is unconcerned. Although it looks like there will be Walstrom blood



Sales team

working in the company for years to come, what really matters is keeping those core principles intact: Highly-trained employees, top-of-the-line products and facilities, and excellent service.

"Now it's a matter of the next generation," Ward Jr. says. "And if it isn't the next generation, it'll be whoever has the passion to keep it going." ★



Ward Walstrom Jr.



Dave Lyle



70th Anniversary Gala