

"Summer 1999 "Miss Oklahoma City"

1956 Larson Falls Flyer restored by Fred and Lana Lou Daniel in 1998 and named after Lana Lou's title, Miss Oklahoma City, held in 1969.

While looking for an engine to use on another project, I received a call from a man with one for sale, and was told that he would not sell the engine unless I took the old boat with it. When I saw the boat I knew that it was not like any that I had seen before, but I remembered a classic boating article describing the same type of boat. The boat had all the standard trash in it that people throw in old boats, and was parked under a tree collecting leaves. It had been stripped of all the hardware, but luckily the parts had been stored in a barrel. After I brought the boat home and cleaned out the trash I found out that most all of the interior wood parts had to be replaced, which on this boat meant the stringers, transom, seats, some rib braces, mahogany side panels, and mahogany dash boards.

This was my first restoration project and it took about three years, but it was a good learning experience, and I made a lot of new friends during the process. I learned how to steam bend the wood that the cockpit crash pads attach to, paint and varnish techniques, (sanding, sanding, sanding), and upholstery installation.

But instead of talking about all the details of the project it might be more interesting to talk about the history of the Falls Flyer.

Paul Larson began building boats in the small town of Little Falls, MN in 1913. He built his first, doubleended duck boats with hand tools during spare time between shifts at a lumber mill. He also built traditional looking, utility, and race boats.

The Falls Flyer name came from the town of Little Falls, MN where he first opened shop (and which is still the home of Larson boats), and the town's most famous native son and Paul's school chum, flyer Charles Lindbergh.

Some of the following comments were taken from "THE REAL RUNABOUTS" book by Bob Speltz.

Probably the all time favorite boats built at Larson were the "Falls Flyer" runabouts. These little beauties were built in sizes from 14' through 22', both inboard and outboard versions.

The Falls Flyers were first built about 1938, they reminded me of a canoe as they were built with thin cedar strips screwed and nailed onto oak ribs, bent in the shape of a wide freighter type canoe. Over this wooden "skin", aircraft canvas was tightly stretched and glued, and this in turn was painted black and off-white above the spray rails and bright red below. All three colors were separated from each other by contrasting pinstripes. The boats were painted to a point where barely a board showed through. In fact to all but the most trained eye, the boats resembled fiberglass in their smoothness of finish.

In 1955 they started building the Falls Flyer with a fiberglass skin, and it was patterned exactly after the wooden model. The boat still had the white oak ribs, stringers, and mahogany interior side panels, dash boards, and cedar seats. 1957 was the last year for this "Art Deco" style. In 1958, after 20 years they changed to the new modern stylish all fiberglass designed boats with "Fins".

One unique feature of a Falls Flyer was the motor set up into the transom, with an aft planing section on either side and extending back a foot or so beyond the motor. This extension was so designed that when you opened the throttle of the boat to go fast, she rose up on the water with the help of these two lifting points that were behind the motor on each side.

Hardware on all Falls Flyers was special designed and custom built. They have a most unusual bow handle flowing into a cut water which was like a duck with outspread wings. That's a pretty rare type of bow handle. Another feature on the outboard included steering wheel mounted either forward or aft, depending on the owner's preference.

Though low sided and not very wide, it is a very safe boat to drive and handles like a sports car. The bottom is flat, and three keels help hold them under control in sharp corners, etc. Although they do lean extensively on the corners, they never show a tendency to flip.

In 1949 the Larson plant was destroyed by fire, and many outboard, and inboard Falls Flyers were lost. After the fire no more inboard Falls Flyers were built.

There is a museum in Willmar, MN that features some of the finest inboard, and outboard Falls Flyers that the Larson Boat Company built.