



RACING ON THE RIVER: A CENTURY OF THRILLS

RACES ON THE RIVER

The Detroit River has been a hub of powerboat racing since 1916 when Detroit hosted its first Gold Cup. For many years, the site of the Gold Cup was chosen by the previous year's victor. *Miss Detroit*, captained by Johnny Milot and Jack Beebe, brought the race to Detroit following her win on the Hudson River in 1915. *Miss Detroit II*, captained by Gar Wood, kept the Gold Cup race on the Detroit River for five consecutive years from 1917 to 1921. The Motor City hosted the Gold Cup 11 times between 1918 and 1941.

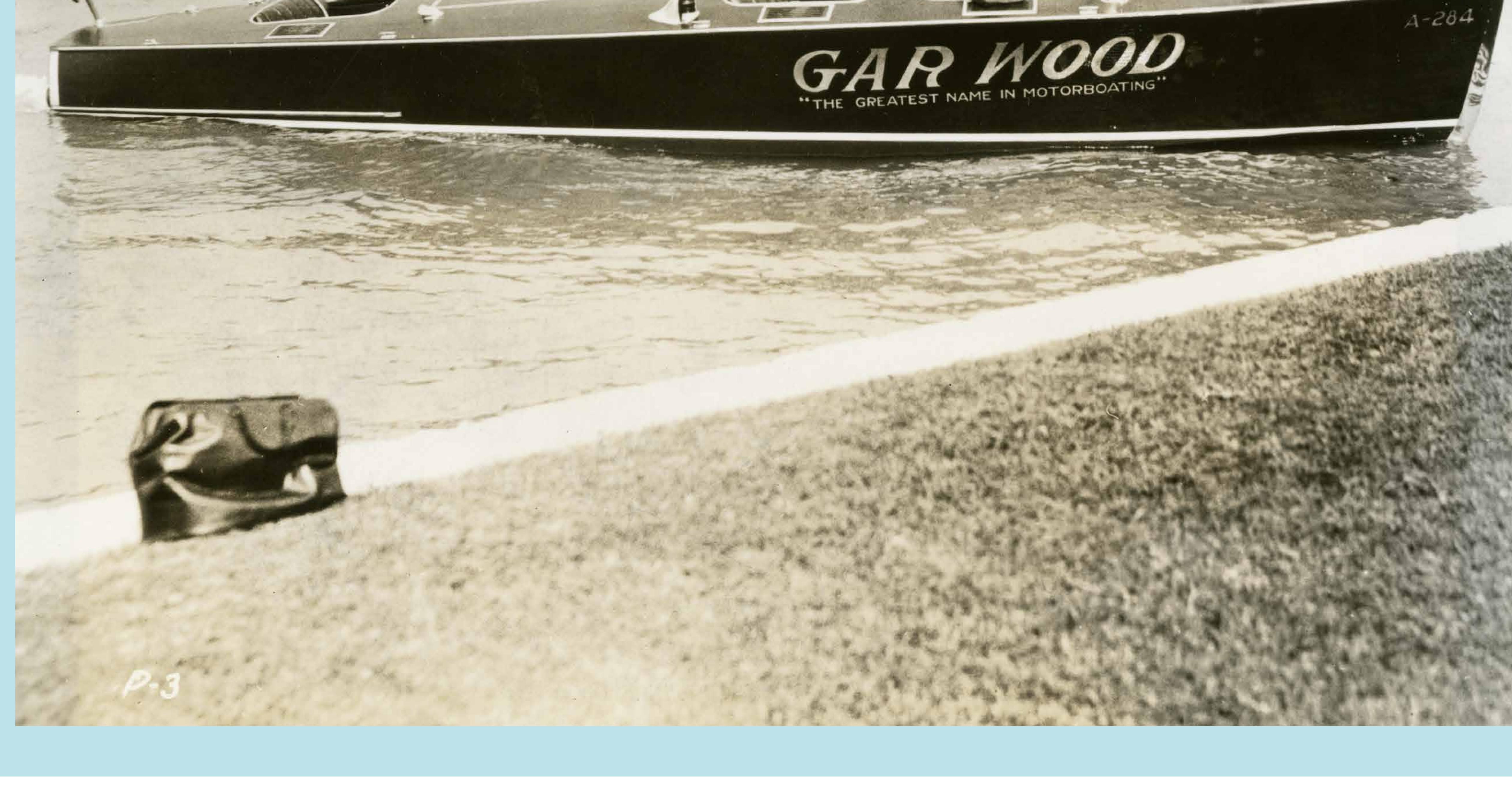


Gar Wood Hydraulic Boat-Wood Hydraulic at Detroit
1916
Courtesy of the Library of Congress

Detroiter raced for more than the Gold. The Harmsworth Trophy was the first international boat racing award and Detroit hosted 10 of the 39 races. In 1946, the Detroit Yacht Club launched the Silver Cup race to keep powerboat racing on the river, especially years the Gold was hosted elsewhere.

The sport's continued popularity fueled demand for new contests, such as the Henry Ford Memorial race, sponsored by the Windmill Pointe Yacht Club; The Dodge Memorial race, launched in 1925; and The Gar Wood Memorial Trophy Race, first held in 1973.

Gar Wood and Charles F. Kettering Riding in a Gar Wood 28-55 Motorboat
c. 1930
Detroit Historical Society Collection





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CLASH OF THE TITANS

Following the piston-powered *Miss Detroit's* Gold Cup victory on the Hudson River in 1915, Detroit quickly dominated the national racing scene. The

Detroit River

became central to the sport over the next century.



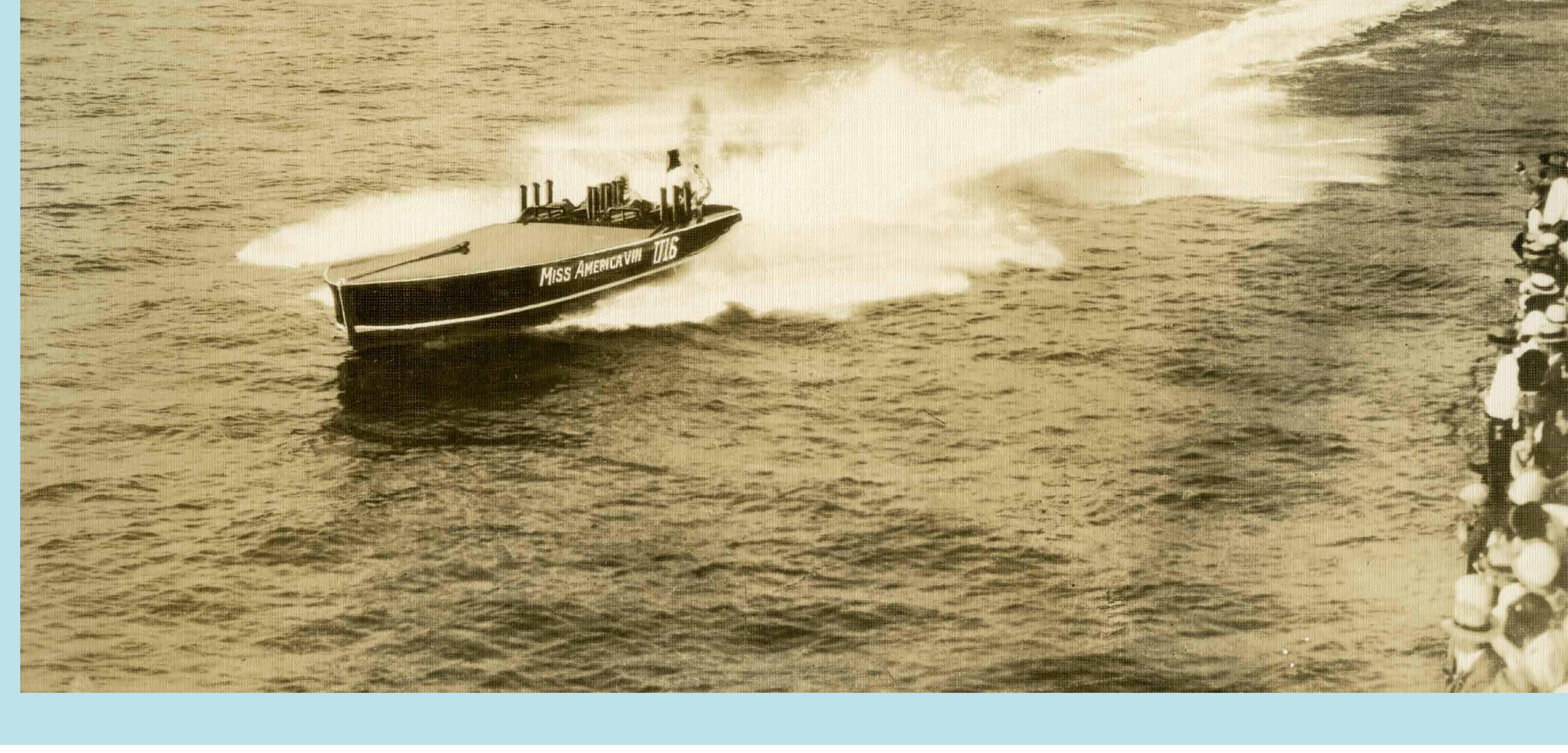
Miss Detroit Gold Cup Race
1915
Courtesy of the Library of Congress

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Early powerboat racing in Detroit was driven, in part, by friendly competition between Detroit's industrial giants. Thousands of fans gathered in Downtown Detroit and Belle Isle to cheer on boats sponsored by Fisher, Packard, and Dodge. During World War II, the race was paused due to security concerns and fuel shortages. Postwar, the re-introduction of more powerful, low-cost army surplus airplane engines dramatically changed the racing scene.

Detroit was a testing ground for new technologies, often to mixed results. At the 1948 Gold Cup race, 7 of the 22 entrants failed to start and only one completed the race. Even the victorious *Miss Great Lakes* sank on the return journey. Detroit powerboat teams continued to strive for new speeds and popularity. The Detroit River remained a center of American powerboat racing throughout the latter half of the 20th century.

Miss America VIII Racing to the Finish Line of the 1929 Harmsworth Race
1929
Detroit Historical Society Collection

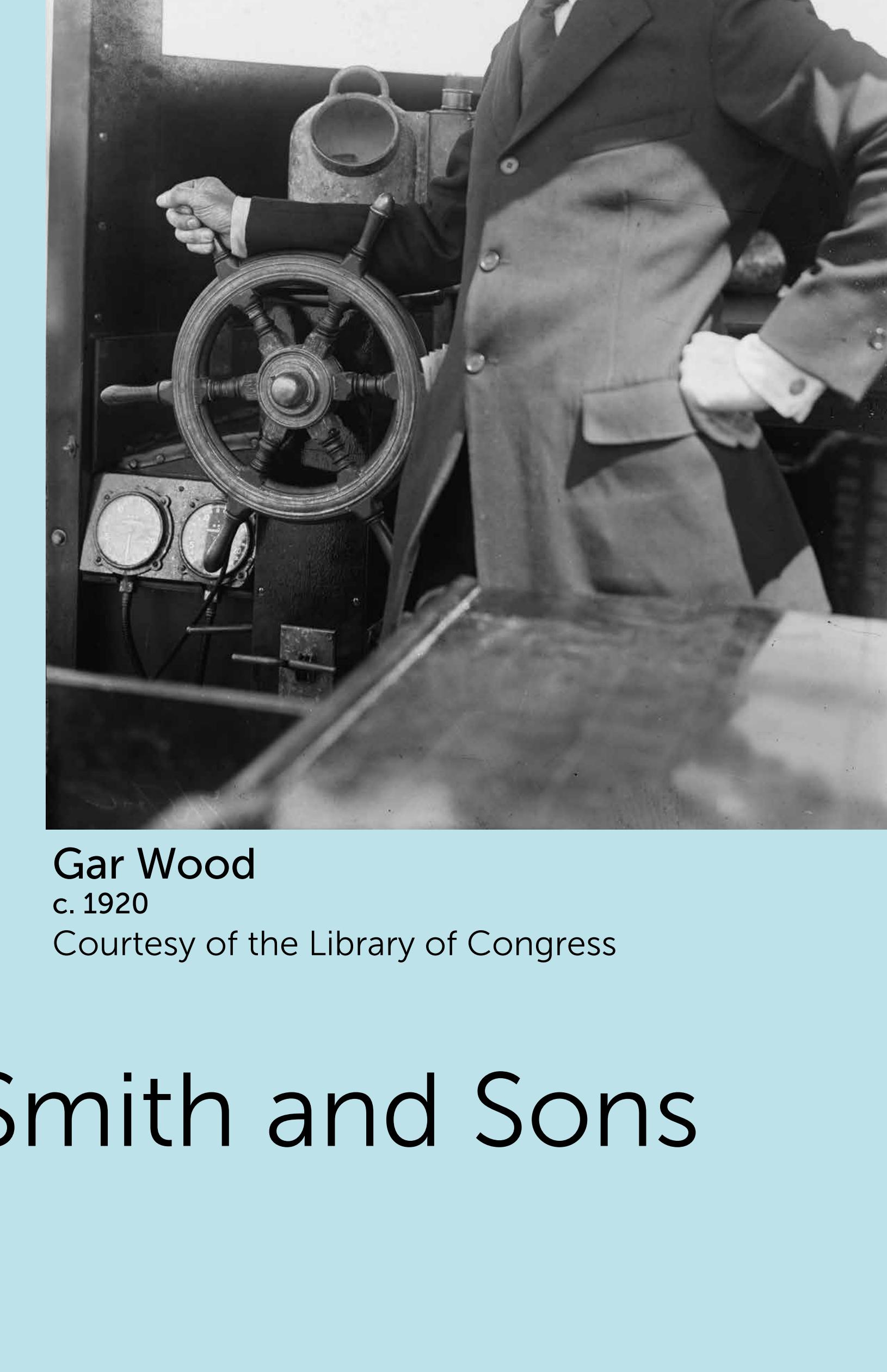




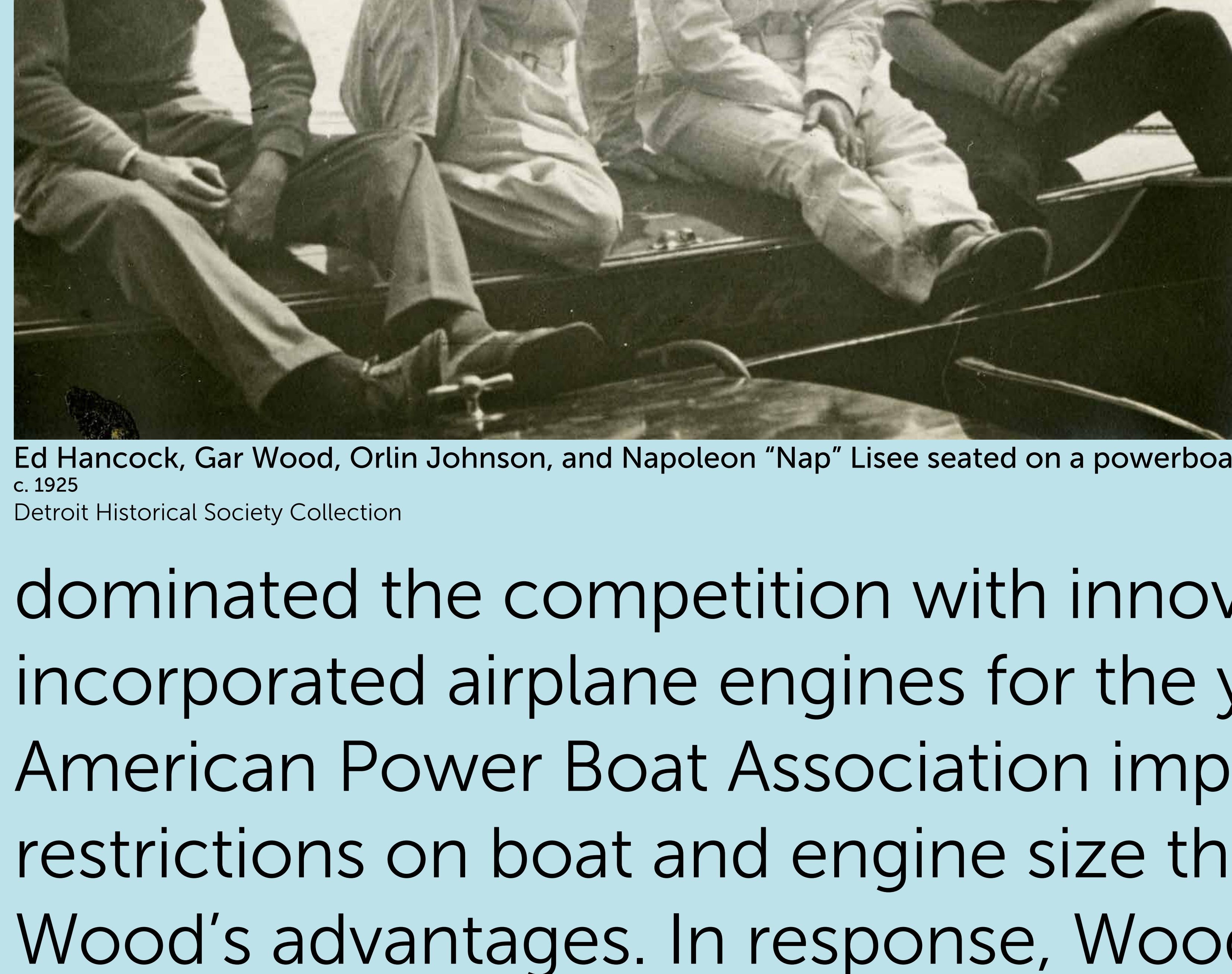
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THE BOAT KING OF DETROIT

Born in Iowa, Garfield (Gar) Wood's family moved to the banks of Lake Osakis in Minnesota where his father operated a ferryboat. Growing up, Wood developed a talent for inventing and a passion for boating. After initial success in Minnesota, Wood brought his innovations to Detroit's burgeoning auto industry and founded the Wood Hoist Company (later Garwood Incorporated). In 1916, Wood purchased the *Miss Detroit* and the company that built her, the Chris Smith and Sons Boat Company.



Gar Wood
c. 1920
Courtesy of the Library of Congress



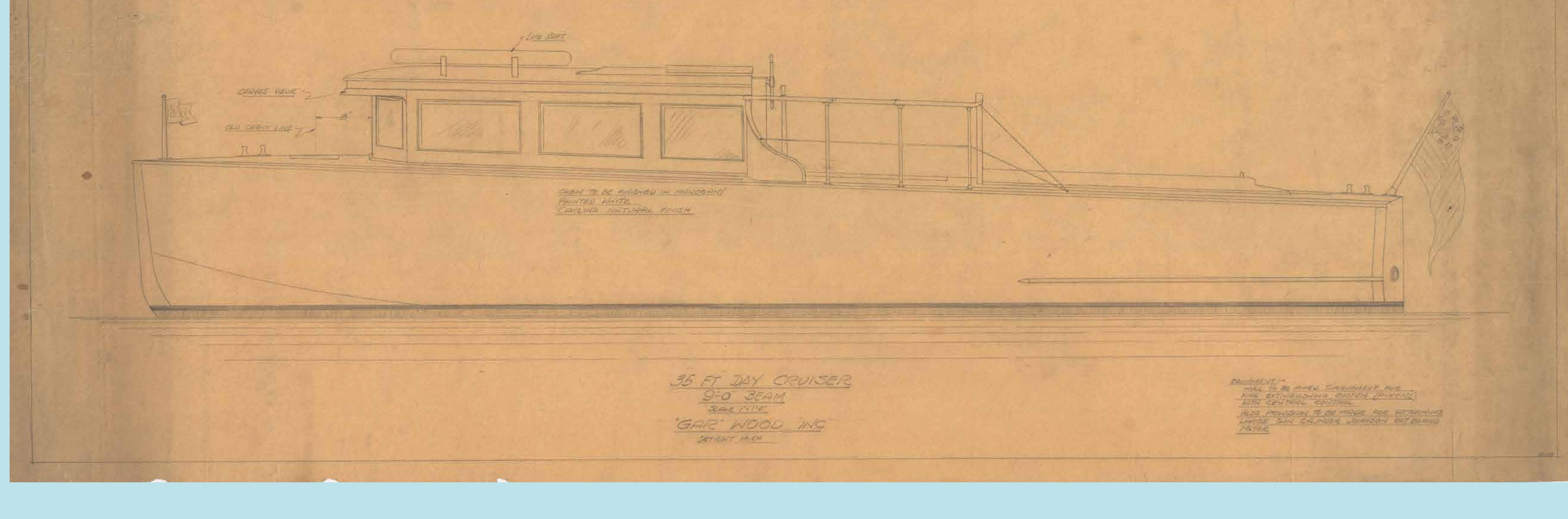
Ed Hancock, Gar Wood, Orlin Johnson, and Napoleon "Nap" Lisee seated on a powerboat
c. 1925
Detroit Historical Society Collection

In partnership with Christopher Columbus Smith, the pair created a series of powerboats – all but one named *Miss Detroit*. The boats, captained by Wood,

dominated the competition with innovative designs that incorporated airplane engines for the years. In 1921, the American Power Boat Association implemented new restrictions on boat and engine size that limited many of Wood's advantages. In response, Wood and designer Nap Lisee crafted the *Baby Gar*, a new streamlined powerboat that quickly took dominance.

In 1923, Smith dissolved his partnership with Wood and founded Chris-Craft Boats, with support from Wood, to focus on mass production. Gar Incorporated's boat division kept its focus on crafting and producing only the finest powerboats.

"35 Ft. Day Cruiser" Drawing, Designed by Gar Wood, Inc.
c. 1928
Detroit Historical Society Collection





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THE BIG ENGINES THAT COULD

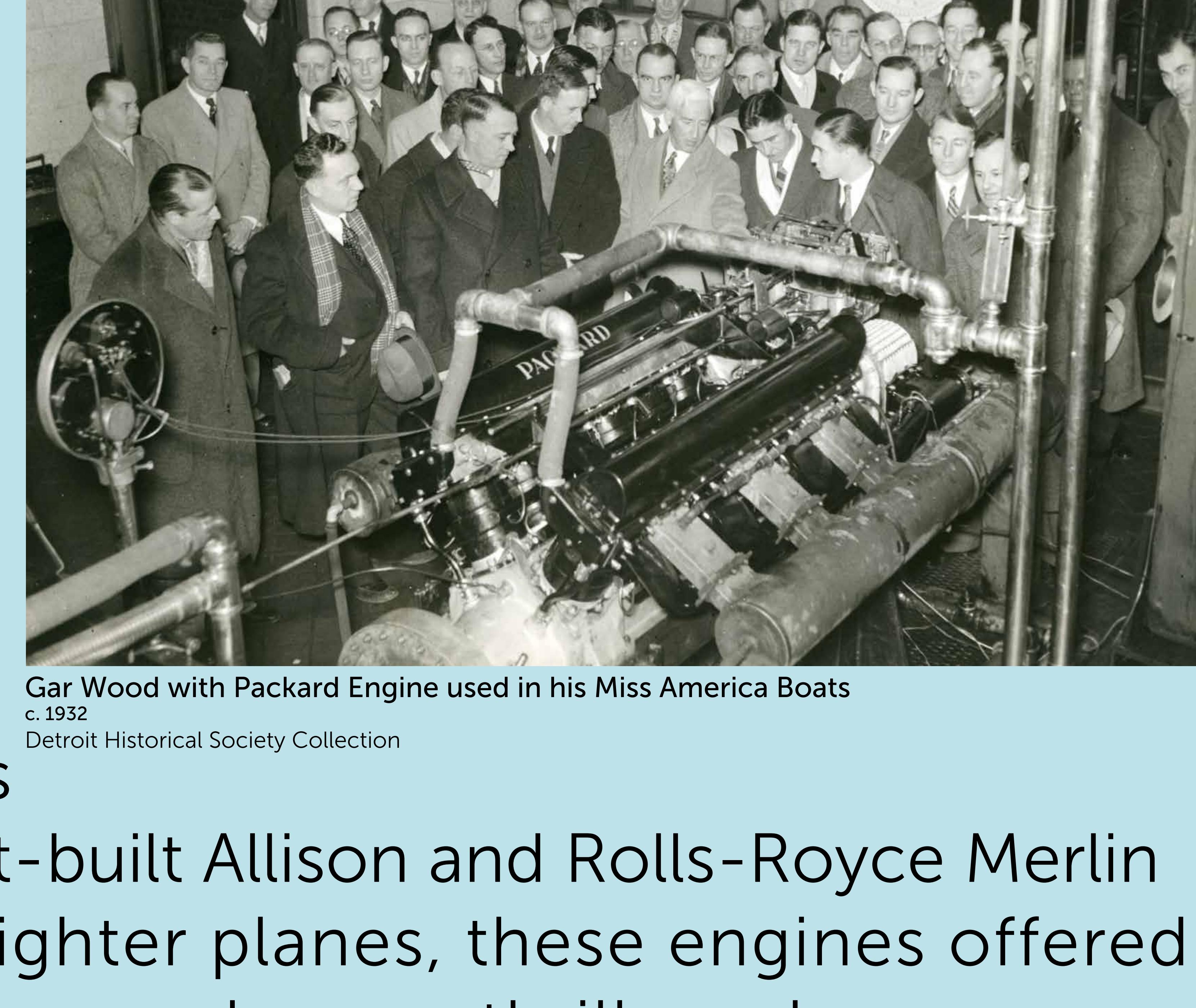
Piston engines such as Sterling and Packard marine racing engines powered early hydroplanes; some racers attempted to use automobile engines but achieved little success. After

World War II, racers coveted the Detroit-built Allison and Rolls-Royce Merlin engines. Built for fighter planes, these engines offered more power, more speed, more thrill—and more danger. Both engines had flaws but dominated the river equally. Between 1946 and 1974, the Allison and Merlin engines battled it out for the Gold, Silver, and Harmsworth trophies.

In 1974, a new era dawned when hydroplanes powered by turbine engines hit the river. Surplus engines from Vietnam-era Chinook helicopters offered more stability, consistency, and safety. However, the high cost of turbine engines prevented widespread adoption of the technology. Gradually turbines increased in popularity as piston engine parts became scarcer and turbines became more affordable.

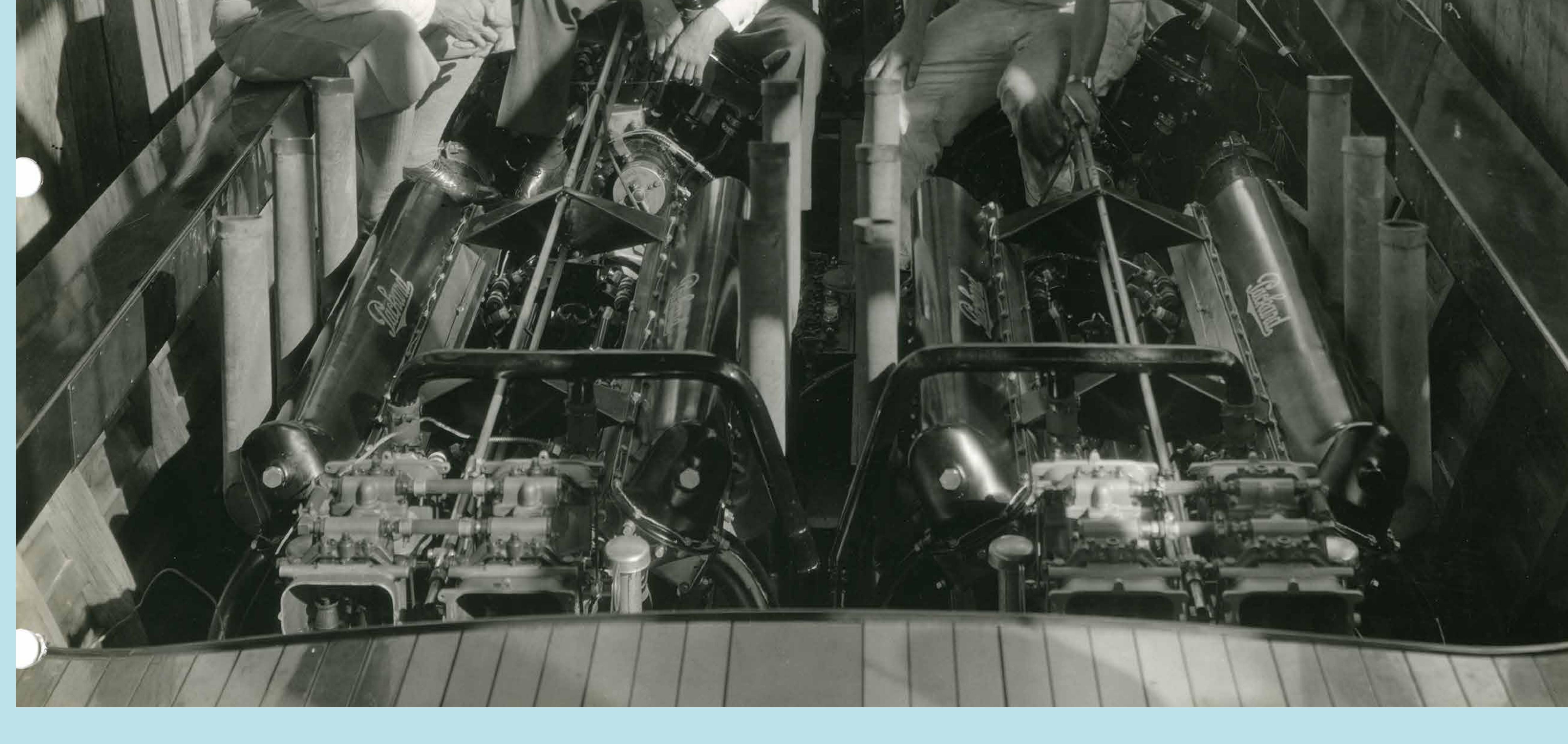
Fox Hills Chrysler-Jeep/Sun Coating, captained by Mitch Evans, was the last piston-powered hydroplane to make a splash in Detroit, winning the Gold Cup in 2003. Hobbyists and enthusiasts continue to enjoy the nostalgia of piston power while turbines dominate professional races.

Gar Wood, Marvin J. Steele, and Orlin Johnson Inspecting Miss America X's Four Packard Piston Engines
c. 1932
Detroit Historical Society Collection



Gar Wood with Packard Engine used in his Miss America Boats

c. 1932
Detroit Historical Society Collection





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THE DECLINE OF POWERBOAT RACING

Under the stewardship of the Spirit of Detroit Association (SODA), Detroit was declared the permanent home of the Gold Cup in 1990. But Detroit's powerboat racing community was affected by the sport's decline in popularity and SODA went bankrupt in 2003. The Detroit River Regatta Association (DRRA) managed the Gold Cup for the next 13 years until the organization disbanded in 2015.



Nitrogen Too Driven by Ron Musson at Detroit Memorial Race

1960
Detroit Historical Society Collection

Detroit has been host to sporadic races in the past 10 years. The Gold Cup returned to Detroit in 2018, but organizers decided against hosting in 2019. The last Detroit River race was 2019 Hydrofest. The COVID-19 Pandemic forced the 2020 race's cancelation. Since 2021, Detroit Riverfront Events has been working to restart Hydrofest and revive hydroplane racing in Detroit.



Gar Wood Trophy Race Program
1973
Detroit Historical Society Collection

1975 Gar Wood Trophy Race Program
1975
Detroit Historical Society Collection