

View From The Islands: June 2011

By Bruce Fraser

Three Horsepower

It was Christmas 1953 in the house of a single mom earning 256 dollars a month as a receptionist. So what did a thirteen-year-old boy in that house expect anyway? Nothing much! In the depths of winter, when the coal was running low, it was extra blankets and a hot chocolate, not turning up the thermostat – mainly because there wasn't one. Slowly, the agonizing wait between wakefulness and enough light to justify going downstairs to check the tree passed like the proverbial molasses. Finally, my sister anticipating girl things and me expecting a nylon stocking full of interesting lumps, crept down to look. What she found fades from memory but what I found was three horsepower.

There, dwarfing the tree, in a massive cardboard box labeled "Evinrude", was a three horsepower, two-stroke outboard motor. Mere words cannot render the wonder or the excitement of a kid that had rowed from Behnson's boathouse, where our heavy lapstrake was stored, to Isla del Sol and back until the calluses had calluses. Visions of lightning speed on the water filled my imagination. I could run to the Galley in mere minutes to watch Mr. Hamilton building his boat and get a gallon of mixed gas. I could run up Shawnigan Creek at the south end of the lake, where oars were impossible. I could troll quietly in the blowing mists of a summer morning and handle a rainbow without stopping dead with shipped oars. I could make waves to turn and run over with abandon.

OK, so three horsepower was a step up from a rowboat, but the Boak boy had access to a 12 horse and the Wheatons had a Peterborough runabout with a 25 horse Johnson that planed with nary a ripple on the water. People could water-ski behind those boats – I could just fish! I had arrived in the motor world, but there was still lots of room for envy.

Well, that was then. As I look out now from Isla del Sol in 2011, I see 300 horsepower boats creating wharf eating waves as boarders leap and kids get whiplash on towing tubes at speeds that our old Austin Somerset couldn't achieve going down the Malahat at pedal-to-the-metal speed. Summer is a maelstrom of lashing waves, criss-crossing towlines, pounding surf and fogs of motor exhaust. Summer evenings, when an acoustic guitar chording "Red Sails in the Sunset" was the loudest human sound, have turned into thumping boom box serenades and proudly trumpeted profanity. Boats with poisonous marine bottom paint and through hull toilets have appeared. Boats that could break speed records are breaking them on the lake along with breaking the sound barrier. Shawnigan has shrunk from having mysterious corners that a boy with three horsepower could still explore to a racetrack that can be consumed repeatedly in a few fleeting minutes.

If that thirteen-year old boy were to be coming down those darkened stairs on a twenty first century Christmas day, what on earth would he expect to find?