FLEA-BITTEN

By Paul McLaughlin Photography Sandy Nicholson

Sharing memories with the next generation is only half the magic of sea-fleas. The rest of it happens with the first face full of water

CHRIS

Taylor steps off a dock and scrunches his six-foot body into the small boat floating alongside. It is a meagre two feet longer than his frame and a scant four feet across. Fifty-two-year-old Chris, who looks a bit like the actor Gene Wilder, can't sit down or stretch his legs; there is just enough room to kneel. Wedged uncomfortably between his knees and the steering wheel is his eight-year-old son, Aiden, his butt flat on the floor of the craft's scrimpy cockpit, his head between his father's arms as Chris grasps the controls.

Built by Chris in 2001, the shallow Minimax boat, or sea-flea, has a 20-hp Mercury outboard and can "top out at around 34 miles an hour," he says. It bears the number 7101, in homage to the first crude sea-flea he and his father constructed in 1971, when Chris himself was only 12. Despite their uncomfortable perch, as the midday sun grins down on them, father and son beam smiles of anticipation.

Nearby, amidst a cluster of sea-fleas hovering around the lake's boat-launch area like bobbing dodgem cars, are Chris's brother, Andrew, 46, and Andrew's 17-year-old daughter, Stephanie. Andrew's just-finished craft is larger than his brother's one-seater. About 10 feet long and five feet wide, *Merlin*, as his Minimost XL is named, has two seats and adequate legroom. Powered by a 30-hp Evinrude engine, it features an internal fuel tank and full nighttime running lights. "I spent the last month and a half working on it for at least three hours a night, every night, to get it finished for today," he says.

Today is Fleafest 2011, the reason why about 50 people have brought some 30 boats to Six Mile Lake Provincial Park,

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1] Many of the boats, such as Predator, *Matt Munro's three-point hydroplane, feature stunning graphics. 2] Tiny Titan and pilot Ellie Godfrey are a familiar sight on Kahshe Lake. 3] Many sea-flea designs make use of auto-racing motifs. 4] A Mercury Super 10 engine owned by Ross and David Wace. 5] Not in fact Woody Woodpecker, this motorsports icon, "Mr. Horsepower," was created in the 1930s by a friend of camshaft designer Clay Smith, who used the image as a mascot for his shop. Opposite: Kristian Luksep opens up in his eight-foot Minimost.*

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Opposite: Ellie Godfrey was given the People's Choice Award for Tiny Titan, *which she built with her father. 1] This eight-foot Minimax's steering cables run over the deck, while some boats hide them below. Others have no cables and are steered by tiller. 2] Tyler Ricketts' 11-foot Pickle Fork shows off a playful logo. 3] The Renton family's Mini-most* Darn'er *was built to seat two—a modification Chris Taylor dubs "XL." 4] Chris and son Aiden in* Fritti IV. *5]* Fritti VII *is an eight-foot Yellow Jacket, also made by Chris. As a kid he'd repaint his sea-flea annually, but now he builds a new boat each year. Previous spread, left: Will Hunter's* Fly'n Eagle, *one of his three boats on Gull Lake in Gravenhurst.*

"IT WAS ALMOST ALWAYS A FATHER-SON THING"

about 15 minutes up the road from Port Severn, on this June weekend. This inaugural gathering of sea-flea aficionados is the brainchild of Chris and Andrew, who have, since 2001, run a website devoted to the small and inexpensive boats of their childhood. The rendezvous can't be considered a regatta because there are no races or prizes, other than a People's Choice Award for favourite boat, a trophy Chris made using a pot light, a plaque, and a Dyna float cover off an old Mercury engine he found in the bush. "The whole thing cost less than thirty bucks," he says, "although that was a big part of our total budget, which was about $220 and change."

The Taylors' idea was to bring like-minded enthusiasts together to celebrate their passion for a boat that was once an integral part of their youths, and today remains a wonderfully idiosyncratic mode of water transportation.

William D. Jackson, a naval architect from Indiana, is considered the man most responsible for the creation and subsequent popularity of the sea-flea. Jackson was the long-time boating editor of *Science and Mechanics* magazine. From the late 1930s to the late 1970s, he created rudimentary plans—or "craft prints"—for small boats and included them in that publication and similar magazines. The prints weren't comprehensive, the idea being that readers would send away, with payment, {*Continued on page 139*}

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for a full set of plans. "But the craft prints gave you enough detail that you could build a boat," says Peter Hunn, who has written numerous books about small boats and outboard engines. Jackson's mission, Hunn says, was to popularize small watercraft. "He once wrote that 'Americans are always worried about the bigness of boats and such when it's the minimum-expense-and-maximum-pleasure boats that really count.' His most famous craft print was for what he called the Minimax." That name, Hunn believes, came out of Jackson's phrase.

The fanciful term "sea-flea," which Hunn defines as "the small, outboard runabout-hydroplane type of craft that basically prefaced the present-day personal watercraft," wasn't Jackson's invention. Lou Marsh, the legendary athlete and *Toronto Star* sportswriter, coined the word in a story published in the late 1920s describing a new class of compact outboard-powered crafts that skimmed over the water like "a bunch of sea-fleas." The phrase caught on and has since become a generic term for any small, inexpensive, low-to-the-water outboard-powered racing boat. "There's no way of knowing when the first sea-flea was built," says Hunn. "I've heard people say it wasn't until around 1960. But I've seen pictures of similar boats built in the '20s. Boatbuilders didn't use plywood, just clapboard, but they were cheap to make and went fast."

Chris Taylor's decision to revisit his youth and build a sea-flea was prompted by William D. Jackson. "I came across plans for a Minimax from an old *Science and Mechanics* and used them to build my sea-flea." As so many had before.

When Chris and Andrew Taylor decided to throw the first sea-flea get-together, they immediately enlisted the aid of their cousin Rob Renton, 45. "Our mothers are sisters, and we had cottages beside each other on Kahshe Lake," says Rob. The three boys would head to the lake, just south of Gravenhurst, the day after school ended and stay for the entire summer. "Once we were old enough, say 11 or 12, we all had sea-fleas, and we'd be out on them as much as we could." Rob, however, is not part of the flotilla about to take a tour of the south end of Six Mile Lake. He graciously cedes that opportunity to his daughter, Sarah, a 20-year-old university student, who is at the wheel of *Darn'er*, the two-seater Minimost "XL" Rob built in 2004 with help from his children. In the passenger seat is his other daughter, 15-year-old Rachel, who would be just as comfortable at the controls as her sister.

The integration of the fathers and children in the event is not happenstance. No matter when the sea-flea originated, historian Peter Hunn says one aspect of building the small craft was pretty much a given. "They were almost always a father-son thing," he says. "That was the most important part of it."

"Many of the people here built a sea-flea with their dads when they were kids," a ritual he wanted to share with Aiden, Chris explains. "They were mostly just two pieces of four-by-eight plywood and a small motor, maybe five

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or up to 9.9 horsepower. We could put one together for a couple of hundred dollars plus the cost of the motor."

Constructing the boat was simple and fast. "You could do it in two weekends and paint it with Canadian Tire spray paint, and it would float and it would run and you'd have a heck of a good time," says Andrew.

In 1978, when Rob was 12, his father, whose job consumed most of his time, bought him a sea-flea. Rob didn't grow up learning how to use tools, so he was particularly proud when he was able to finish the Minimost XL seven years ago. "I essentially wanted to build it for my kids," he says.

Stephanie Taylor has only recently become interested in helping her father with his hobby—"I've been really busy with high school"—but since she has chipped in, she too has caught the bug. "I am definitely into it now," she says, as she helps set up for the event. If one goal of holding the first annual Fleafest was to help parents bond with their children, then the rendezvous was a success.

Why are sea-fleas making a comeback? Andrew says one reason is new boating regulations. Boat operators must be at least 16 years old to drive a PWC today, but kids under 12 (with a Pleasure Craft Operator's Card) can drive a sea-flea, with a motor up to 10 hp. Another is the nostalgia felt by men who built sea-fleas with their fathers and now want to share that experience with their own children. "Sea-fleas were definitely part of yesterday," Andrew says. "We're trying to make them part of today."

At first glance, it would appear that the costs for building and running boats like these have risen compared with their early days. "You could build a boat for twenty bucks," says Fleafest attendee Bill Shorney, 66, referring to a time more than five decades ago when a sheet of plywood cost a few dollars and gas was around 30 cents per gallon. Though materials for the most tricked-out boats now can exceed $400, according to Chris a basic boat can be built for as little as $200. Either way, by today's standards it's still a very inexpensive way to get on the water.

"Two sheets of plywood, over a weekend, with a 3.5-hp Johnson," says Bill's brother Richard, 63. As boys growing up in Port Credit on Lake Ontario, the pair shared a basic eight-foot Minimax. "We didn't put anything on the bottom, never a turn fin. It would take you half a block to turn the thing," says Bill. "And when it turned it'd just slide sideways. The thing would go on forever."

"It's like taking a flat plate and skimming it across the water and expecting it to turn sharply," echoes Richard.

"You'd hit a wave and you'd submarine," says Bill.

Many of the nostalgia buffs at Fleafest 2011 share a devotion to the craft that borders on, if not trespasses right into, obsessiveness.

A case in point is an attendee who mixes his pleasure with a little business. During the day-long event, Wain Trotter, a 67-year-old former hydroplane racer from Brechin, Ont., negotiates the sale of a red Mercury Mark 30H, a 30-hp racing engine manufactured in 1957.

"I bought it in 1967 for $50, all the parts in two bushel baskets, from a guy north of Montreal who was about to get married," he says. "With my father's expertise we rebuilt it to a point that it won the Canadian High Points Championship in '69 and was second in a US national outboard competition in 1970. Serial number 998377. She was *la crème de la crème*. One of the best."

"He can remember every engine's serial number but not his own phone number," his wife, Carol, jokes. "Very selective memory." Wain sold the engine in 1973 and didn't see it again until two years ago when a friend mentioned that he had a red 30-hp Mercury engine in his basement.

"Is its serial number 998377?" Wain asked. It was indeed, and Wain eventually bought the engine back. He brought it with him to Fleafest, where he sells it for $3,800. He also parts with a Fralick 1979 conventional B-class hydroplane, one that he found in a garage about a year and a half before. Constructed in 1979 by boatbuilder Rick Fralick, it had been sitting on its side for 15 years. "Fralick only made three of them, all record-setting boats. It's worth a couple of hundred more, but I gave this to a close friend for $600," he says. The sea-flea community is not large; the members tend to know each other and are willing to offer their friends good prices on boats and engines.

Indeed, friendships between Flea fans and loyalty to the boats play a large role in the transactions surrounding the craft. Erik Luksep is a 49-year-old lifelong cottager on Six Mile Lake who had a big part in making this first Fleafest happen by suggesting the location and orchestrating many of its logistics. When he got his first sea-flea at age nine, his boat had a tiny motor, "about a three-and-a-half," he says. "I think when I was about 12 we put a 10 hp on it, and that was a big deal. It could go about 30 miles an hour."

Erik's first boat, later driven by his son, Kristian, is part of Fleafest, albeit with a new owner. Erik recently sold it to a fellow cottager, because Kristian had outgrown it, on condition that the buyer's son would use it. "We wanted to be sure it stayed on the lake where we could see it," says Erik. "We also agreed that if he ever sold it, it would be to another youth on the lake."

Erik recalls, of that first boat, that he'd be out on the water from dawn till dusk, coming home only for lunch and dinner. "Some people look back on those as the good old days. As kids, being captains of our own boats, sometimes we felt like we were taking risks, riding on the edge, but those were learning experiences. Today, you have helicopter parents, who constantly hover over their children and worry. I think they're too protective these days."

During Fleafest, Erik isn't fretting about his son, a tall and mature 14-year-old, who zips his eight-foot Minimost around the lake he knows so well. Weighing about 100 pounds, the tiny boat is able to get up to around 30 mph with a 15-hp Evinrude on the back, about half of a fast outboard's maximum speed. But speed is subjective, and perhaps that's why these slower boats appeal to speed-demon teens. "Because you're closer to the water," says Kristian, "they seem really fast. And if you're racing side by side with someone and you get a face full of water, it's amazing."

Partway through the first tour of the lake, Aiden's legs begin to cramp from sitting in such an awkward position. His father calls over a spectator boat and helps his son into it. "How was it?" Aiden is asked. "It was great," he says. "So much fun."

Chris is beaming. "He'll be out there driving himself soon," he says, adding, somewhat sheepishly, "although his mother thinks he needs to wait for a good few years before that happens."

Later, Chris reminisces about days spent scooting around Kahshe Lake in his humble sea-flea. "I'd have my dog, Smoky, on the bow, and every now and then we'd hit a big wave and he'd fly into the water," he says. "You know what it was for a 12-year-old? Out on the lake by yourself or with your dog, and no parents? It was freedom. Total freedom."

The only boat Toronto freelance writer Paul McLaughlin ever built floated perfectly the first time—in his bathtub.

See more photos and find out about 2012's Fleafest (Aug. 25) at cottagelife.com/seafleas