

Ray McLeod Jr: 1932–2018



COURTESY HEART OF GLASS

Ray McLeod Sr., left, built wood boats with his son Ray Jr. until the advent of fiberglass, when they commissioned Sparkman & Stephens to design one of the earliest fiberglass auxiliary sailboats, the Tartan 27 (8.3m), launched in 1961.

Last February we lost Ray McLeod Jr., who told me many years ago while I was researching a history of fiberglass boatbuilding, that he joined his father's modest boatbuilding and painting business in 1941 sweeping floors. After a few years of college and service in the U.S. Navy during the Korean War, Ray Jr. returned to Grand River, Ohio, to help expand the business beyond the few 35' and 40' (10.7m and 12.2m) commercial fishing boats his father, Ray McLeod, had built. They teamed with one-design racer Gordon K. "Sandy" Douglass to form Douglass & McLeod (D&M). Their first model was the 17' Thistle, designed by Douglass, followed by the Highlander, and International 21 (originally the Great Lakes 21, borrowed from an East Coast club design). Hulls were molded mahogany plywood supplied by U.S. Molded Shapes of Grand Rapids, Michigan.

The McLeods began experimenting with fiberglass in 1960 and formed a separate company, Douglass & McLeod Plastics Corp. in partnership with Charlie Britton, an ex-Navy man also from Ohio. They commissioned Sparkman & Stephens to design the Tartan 27 (8.3m), later the 37' (11.3m) Ted Hood-designed Black Watch, and then the Tartan 37, again by S&S. Misfortune struck in 1971 when fire destroyed the facility, and cancer claimed Ray Sr. the next year. "In the early '70s," Ray Jr. said, "I did a small S&S design called the D&M 22 [6.7m] and continued the Thistle and Highlander until the end of the 1970s. With the start of the small boat decline, and after a 15-year battle with a local union, it was time for a major change." At that juncture he decided to focus his business on their marina, repairs, and surveying, selling his share of D&M to Britton.

Ray Jr. was one of a very few remaining builders who actually made the transition from wood to glass, a seminal point on the timeline of modern boatbuilding.

—D.S.

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