



*The John W. Murray (photo by OPP Museum)*



*Charlie Cliffe (obituary photo)*

# CHARLIE CLIFFE

## In Memory of the Father of Cliffe Craft



*Building a classic Cliffe Craft (photo from Cliffe family collection as used in Thousand Islands Life)*

An era ended on February 10, 2017, when Gananoque lost Charlie Cliffe.

Charlie was always enamoured with boats. Not just splashing around in them, but the down and dirty process of building them from the ground up. Starting in the basement of his family's home in Wilstead, he moved on to a job with the Link Manufacturing Company in Gananoque in 1947 when he completed high school.

He started with surfacing board, producing excellent grade lumber for building fine boats. Cedar strip boats were the hot item of the day and he helped produce ribs and planking to make them a reality. For a top quality boat, the milling had to be within tight specs and he took pride in making sure all of his work attained perfection.

The work with the Link factory was the ultimate apprenticeship for Charlie who brought his knowledge home and applied it to his very own boat making business. Using moulds he had purchased from his employer, he joined forces with local woodworker and fishing guide Jack Gray, and they started making their own cedar strip boats.

But Charlie was an innovator. He couldn't be content making simple skiffs – he wanted to do more. He and Jack started developing new boats – more interesting boats. They built moulds, laid out design, became cutting edge. They worked on the lapstrake design, coming up with the "Commander" as well as other interesting models and were among the first to install stern drives. They had an entire network of dealerships extending from Toronto to Montreal, including Kingston, Brockville and the Rideau area.

Eventually, Charlie bought the Link factory and began manufacturing his boats right in Gananoque. He was now able to build bigger craft, and more of them. All of his craft were created the old-fashioned way. An idea in his mind was turned into a sketch, then final drawings before making 1:12 scale models of different designs. Once the idea was perfected, full sized moulds would be made, and the boats manufactured.

The same methods were used no matter what size of boat was being built. Each had to be perfect, or it couldn't be a Cliffe Craft.

Charlie had a good eye for people as well as boats, and made numerous wise

decisions in both business partners and employees. Whether they had backgrounds in engineering or other specialized skills, he was able to work with them to create better quality and more refined craft.

The 70's and 80's saw Cliffe Craft develop into more of a custom order company than one for the mass market. The 25-foot twin engine runabout was extremely popular, and customers ranged from discerning boaters looking for something roomy that could handle almost any conditions, to special clients like the OPP.

Among the patrol boats were the "Joseph E. Rogers" and the "John W. Murray". The former was a 35-foot vessel commissioned for use in Georgian Bay. It was the largest boat built by Cliffe Craft. The latter was a 24-foot boat named after the first permanent detective appointed to the OPP which patrolled the Thousand Islands during the 60's and 70's.

Charlie Cliffe will always be remembered for all he did for boats and boating. Some of his craft may be seen on display at the Thousand Island Boat Museum (125 Water St, Gananoque) in Gananoque. [LH](#)