



## THE DAYS OF STEEL BOATS STEEL SHIPBUILDING IN VERMILION

Location: Liberty Avenue (U.S. 6) west of Grand Street, on the right when traveling west in Vermilion. It is at Friendship Park which is on the grounds of the public library.

*Photographed By J. J. Prats, February 14, 2020*

### Inscription:

By 1920 it was apparent that the building material of choice was steel. Between 1920 and 1957 over 25 steel boats were built in Vermilion. The establishment of the American Ship Building Company in nearby Lorain and other supporting industries such as steel mills and railroads, drained Vermilion of blacksmiths, carpenters, and ship carpenters — a workforce necessary for crafting wooden boats.

1920s: Building materials changed from wood to steel for smaller vessels as engines became more powerful. Captain Peter Full built two steel fishing boats along the river in 1923, the Ray F. and the Merle J. More complex than wooden construction, building with steel required skilled engineers, construction workers, bolters, machinists, laborers, foremen, ship fitters, plumbers, painters, marine riggers, tinnerns and others. While the rise of the steel boat industry led to the fall of the small wooden shipyards it did create jobs and strengthened the economies along the water.

1930s: Marks Welding Company brought steel building techniques to the Vermilion River during this decade. Boats were built on Douglas Street and launched at Lee's Boatyard, the present site of Vermilion Power Boats. The first trap net tugs, Rich (1935) and Don (1939), were built by the Parsons Fish Company.



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A series of boats built for commercial fisherman included gill netters; *Beatrice* (1944), *Alma* (1946), *The Marie M.* (1947), and *Robert* (1947), and trap netters; *George L.* (1945), *J.C.S.* (1946), *Mystic II* (1946), *Verlyn H.* (1946), *Valiant* (1947), *Karen Lee* (1950), and *Verlyn H. II* (1953).

1940s –1950s: The expansion of the lake carrier business was driven by increased boat and freight traffic on the lakes and rivers. Tight schedules and heavy workloads left little time for shore excursions by the crew. The solution was to bring the store and provisions to the workers aboard bumboats. Marks Welding Company built and sold several to Hyman Kaner in Duluth, MN who operated three bumboats on Lake Superior, the *Kaner*, *Kaner II* and *Ted*, each measuring 50 feet long and 52 tons.

Steel fishing tugs were built locally for local fisherman and sold throughout the Great Lakes as well. They prominently and proudly represented Vermilion's steel boat craftsmen.

The Vermilion Engineering Company (VECO) operated a boat facility on Route 60, later moving to East Liberty Avenue, manufacturing open fishing boats in the trap netter tradition. Parsons Fish Company also built two trap net boats, *The Pat* (1945), and the *Alma III* (1945).

The fishing industry was beginning to decline so transitioning into pleasure boat manufacturing was a logical move. VECO produced a small cabin cruiser, the *Coronet* (1950), a 26' runabout (1954), and the following year a 26' cruiser, and a large cruiser *Northern Cross*. At the same time they moved into the entertainment market with a class of passenger "party" boats such as the *Helen K.* (1954), *Mary K.* (1954), and *Sea Hawk* (1955). Parsons followed suit by building a steel cruiser, *The Alma IV* (1957).

Smaller boatyards and businesses including Marks Welding Company and VECO were limited to building smaller vessels consistent with the depth of the Vermilion River. Larger shipbuilding was left to bigger shipyards in Lorain and Cleveland where there was deep river access.

By the late 1950s the steel boat shipyards and the workforce that supported them phased out. Lightweight fiberglass construction for small and large commercial boats and pleasure craft had arrived.

This information came from: <https://www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=149457>