

# Planks for the Memories

An unusual shipment of four replacement planks to an influential Oklahoma oil man confirms extraordinary customer service by Chris-Craft.

by David Kanally

When Vance Sparks climbed a ladder to get at the ancient wooden crate that had hung from the cob-webbed rafters of his great-grandfather's garage since before he was born, he had no idea what stories



From the day it was received in the late 40s until Vance Sparks found it in 2012, the plank crate hung from the center garage's rafters at the Franklin family home in Ardmore, OK.

it held. Vance was cleaning out his family's ancestral home in Ardmore, Oklahoma, making ready for its new owner. He had already come across the kinds of things he had expected to

find...early 1900s ledgers from the land and equipment acquisitions pertaining to Wirt Franklin's expansive oil interests, records of Franklin's years as founding president of the Independent Petroleum Association of America, and documents from WWII detailing Franklin's activities in the wartime Office for Petroleum Administration.

But this find was different. It was a pine shipping crate, over nine feet in length, darkened, stained and dusty. It bore shipping labels from the Chris-Craft Corporation in Caruthersville, Missouri, addressed to Wirt Franklin,

P.O. Box 966, Ardmore, Oklahoma. Scrawled in grease pencil on the crate were the barely discernible notations, "COD

\$15.75". The labels were not only glued to the top and bottom of the crate, they were fastened with a copper nail in each corner. Probably shipped by rail, the crate had done its job and more, protecting the contents not only for the journey, but for the 65 years of subsequent storage in Wirt Franklin's garage.

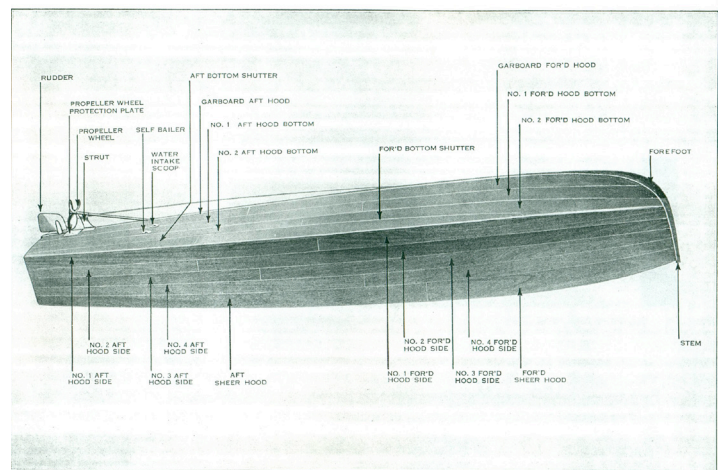


Shipping labels were glued and nailed to the crate. This one is the original, the address on the other label was in blue carbon-copy ink.

Hesitantly and carefully, Vance Sparks pried the cover, fastened with 6-penny box nails, from the crate. It would appear that the crate had not been opened before. Inside, he saw the first of what would be four planks. Quarter-sawn cedar, clear and flawless, 5/16" thick and a little over 8 feet long. There were two forward planks, pre-shaped with the curve characteristic of the bow, and two straight planks marked "aft". All four were labeled #3, likely the third



plank up from the chine, based on this illustration from a 1930 Chris-Craft Brochure. Although this brochure



HULL BOTTOM AND SIDE PLANKING

is for 22-24 foot models, it is likely that the numbering convention for planks was consistent throughout the Chris-Craft line.

Vance was not a wooden boater, but he knew one: Dave Parker of Houston, who is a member of ACBS and the Wooden Boat Association. Dave began inquiring on Vance's behalf, and soon had me hooked on the history of this unusual shipment. Vance agreed to donate the planks to the Wooden Boat Association, with the understanding that the WBA would research their provenance and find a permanent museum home for them. My job was to gather and document enough informa-





Chester Franklin at the wheel of the 1934 Chris-Craft runabout sometime before WWII.

tion for the planks and the crate to make an interesting artifact for a museum to own and display.

Vance knew of his great-grandfather's wooden boat, based on a photo of Wirt's son, Chester, Vance's maternal grandfather, at the wheel of the boat. Based on Chester's age in the photo, it was likely taken before the war. Details on the boat like the hatch handles and air scoop, left-hand steering, and the relative size of the boat to Chester's average stature would indicate that the boat was a 1934 Chris-Craft 15-1/2' Runabout.

But the crate was shipped from the Caruthersville, MO Chris-Craft plant, which didn't open until 1946. So, assuming the planks were for Wirt's boat, those planks would have been sent to him at least 12 years after the boat was made.

Did Chris-Craft actually do this? Send replacement planks for a 12-year-old boat to an individual owner? Probably so, as indicated in this excerpt from the 1934 Chris Craft Runabout brochure.



NOTE: Any wood parts can be supplied but it is necessary that we know the Hull Number, name of piece and location of part wanted. Prices can be furnished on application.

## Wirt Franklin: Oil Man, Politician, Chris-Craft Owner

In 1913, lawyer Wirt Franklin brought in the first well in what became a very prolific and profitable Healdton oil field for virtually every oil company in business in the early decades of the 20th Century. The Healdton field's oil was close to the surface, less than 2000 feet down, keeping drilling expenses low. The discovery set the stage



Wirt Franklin at the height of his career in the 1930s.

for Franklin's rise in wealth and power in Oklahoma, and his political influence on a national level. He would go on to found the Independent Petroleum Association of America in 1929 and serve as its president until 1935. The Association is still active today. He lobbied Congress, testifying before the House Ways and Means Committee in 1930, and secured passage of a tariff protecting independent oil producers against the global giants.

Franklin enjoyed his prosperity, frequently buying and selling automobiles, including three Pierce Arrows. He owned many farms for their oil potential, headed several corporations, and at some point around 1934, in the middle of the Great Depression, as the plains of Oklahoma became the epicenter of the Dust Bowl, he bought a Chris Craft runabout.

Wirt's only son, Chester, followed in his father's footsteps, worked in the family oil business, and became successful in his own right. Chester would inhabit the family home where the planks had been stored and he would live there until his death in 1962. Chester's only daughter, Wirtaine, would have a son named Vance



The wellhead from "Franklin #1", the well that marked the beginning of production of the Healdton oil field west of Ardmore, OK, has been moved to the main drag of Healdton as a lasting monument to the industry that created the town.



Sparks. Vance works in the oil business too; the family legacy lives on.

It's easy to imagine that the Chris-Craft runabout that the Franklin family had so enjoyed during the years prior to World War II fell into disuse during the War, as Franklin was pre-occupied with the activities of the Office for Petroleum Administration, and Chester, along with the rest of the country, was supporting the war effort. After the war, it could be that Franklin took a look at the boat and decided that it needed four new planks. So he contacted the Chris Craft Corporation and arranged, whether through normal channels or exceptional negotiations, to have the four planks shaped, packed and shipped to his home in Ardmore. The precise logistics of the transaction remain to be discovered. They could be recorded in the mountain of Franklin's documents that Vance donated to the Healdton Oil Museum, where docent Cleo LeVally has begun the labors of sorting and filing.

But even without the documenta-

tion, the planks and crate tell a story of their own...a story of extraordinary customer service by the Chris-Craft Corporation. The planks now have a permanent home at the Antique Boat Museum in Clayton, New York, where visitors can see them, and read the story that they tell. Perhaps this story will serve to uncover others, with memories of more families, more Chris-Crafts, and more legacies.



*Above, the Franklin family home, Ardmore OK, 2012. Below, the adjacent garage, where the crate of planks was stored from 1946-2012.*

