

# Evinrude: The First 25 Years By: Ken Kirk

On May 28, 2020, Bombardier Recreational Products announced that production of the Evinrude brand of outboard motors would be discontinued immediately.

Shocking news to Evinrude dealers, Evinrude owners and outboard boaters in general, who were all so familiar with one of the best known and most enduring of all brand names in the marine propulsion industry.

Putting it into perspective....the Evinrude brand had survived 110 years of uninterrupted production. Prior to 1920 more than 45 different brands of outboard motors were brought to market. Of these early U.S. pioneering brands only Evinrude survived beyond 1935. A tribute to the strength of the brand and its founders and builders, Ole and Bess Evinrude.

In this article we will trace the path of the Evinrude brand from 1909 to 1934...the first 25 years.

Ole Evinrude was born in Norway in 1877. He immigrated with his family to Wisconsin when he was just five years old. His father was a farmer but Ole was much more interested in machines and mechanics. At 16 he left the farm and headed for Madison and signed on with a farm machinery manufacturer. Quick to learn, Ole moved from job to job picking up a wide range of skills and knowledge. He worked in Pittsburgh, then in Chicago and finally back to Milwaukee. In the process he became a highly skilled tool maker and a master pattern maker.

The fledgling automobile business was starting to boom. Ole developed a reliable and easy to start air cooled 4 cylinder automobile engine and formed his first company with a friend...Clemick and Evinrude.



**Ole Evinrude**



**Bess Evinrude**

The partnership did not work out and the company was dissolved. Evinrude then started a second company, the Motor Power Equipment Company but that too failed primarily due to Ole's lack of business management skills. Ole then settled in as an independent pattern maker servicing the needs of the rapidly expanding auto industry.

During this time period Ole had met and fell in love with Bess Cary. Bess had training and experience as a bookkeeper and office manager. With her help Ole's pattern shop was now making money. In Nov., 1906 they were married. Ole was now 29, Bess was 20. In Sept. 1907 they had a son, Ralph Evinrude who would ultimately lead the company and the brand that Ole and Bess were about to create.

Ole had always liked being on the water. He enjoyed sailing and fishing and he still had the desire to build a motor of his own design. In his "down time" he put together a motor that could be attached to the stern of a row boat. Bess called it a "Coffee Grinder". After a successful test run on the Kinnikinnic River both Ole and Bess saw this as potentially being a "side line" to the pattern making business. Ole machined and ordered castings to build 25 motors. Bess wrote the first ad for the Evinrude Detachable Row Boat Motor and placed it in the Milwaukee newspapers. Don't Row! Throw The Oars Away! Use An Evinrude Motor." read the headline. The first 25 motors were sold in a flash. It was 1909.

Seeing the potential in their new venture the Evinrudes secured financial backing and Bess launched an aggressive national advertising campaign. The results were immediate and overwhelming. Sales were well beyond expectations. Over the next five years the Evinrude factory was relocated to larger premises three times in order to keep up with demand. In 1911, in order to secure financing for further expansion, the Evinrudes sold a 50% interest in their company to Chris Meyer, President of Meyer Tug Boat Line.



**Early Evinrude advertising was controlled by Bess Evinrude & often featured women operating the motor.**

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In the era prior to 1910 a total of nine different brands of Outboard Motors had been launched worldwide. These included the Motogodille in France and the Ferro and Waterman brands in the US. The Evinrude was by far the most successful.

Three reasons for Evinrudes early success were.....

- Simple.. easy to run and reliable.
- An aggressive advertising and marketing campaign that built widespread awareness.
- The early development of export sales, first to South America, then to Norway and Sweden.

The export business was developed by Bess. Her very first attempt was in South America in order to keep their expanded manufacturing capability busy during the winter. This resulted in thousands of new orders.

The Evinrudes had developed a well-oiled machine.

Ole was responsible for design and manufacturing. Bess was in charge of Sales, Marketing and Administration. Both were very capable and hard-working people.

By late 1913 the Evinrudes had made a lot of money. They were wealthy people. However, they were also exhausted, and Bess was having significant health issues. The Evinrudes decided to sell their 50% interest in the Evinrude Motor Co. to their partner Chris Meyer. Ole, Bess and son Ralph headed out to tour the country, to rest, relax and to regain their strength and energy.

The Evinrude brand continued under the direction of Chris Meyer. In 1916 Evinrude introduced one of the first 4 stroke outboards, the 4 hp Model AA, 4 cycle twin. Heavy and expensive it was not successful in the market and was discontinued in 1917.

By 1924 the Evinrude Motor Co. was in trouble. They had stuck with the heavy cast iron and bronze materials and had rejected the use of light weight aluminum. The market was now being dominated by lighter, faster and easier to run motors produced by the Johnson brothers and by a rejuvenated Ole Evinrude under the brand name Elto. The ever-creative Bess Evinrude had created the Elto brand name to represent, "Evinrude Light Twin Outboard".

Although every Elto motor referenced Ole Evinrude on the builder's plate they could not use the Evinrude brand name that they had sold back in 1913.

The troubled Evinrude brand was sold by Chris Meyer in 1924 and was sold again in 1926 but never stopped producing Evinrude brand outboards.

By early 1929 Steve Briggs, President of Briggs and Straton, had a vision to assemble a multi brand outboard group. First Briggs bought the vulnerable Evinrude Motor Co., then he acquired the Lockwood Motor Company of Jackson, Michigan. Now he approached Ole and Bess Evinrude regarding Elto.

The Elto brand was a great success and was the market leader in 1928. However this was an opportunity for Ole and Bess to regain control of the Evinrude brand. So, in March 1929 the Outboard Motors Corporation was formed with Ole Evinrude President and Steve Briggs, Chairman of the Board. Ole now had control of both the Evinrude and Elto brands as well as Lockwood.

**FOUR CYCLE TWIN**

THE two cylinder EVINRUDE (Four Cycle), with cylinders opposed and offset, is supplied for those who desire a two-cylinder motor. The speed developed is slightly better than that produced by the 2 H. P., but on account of its weight, it is not so portable and is not recommended for general use.

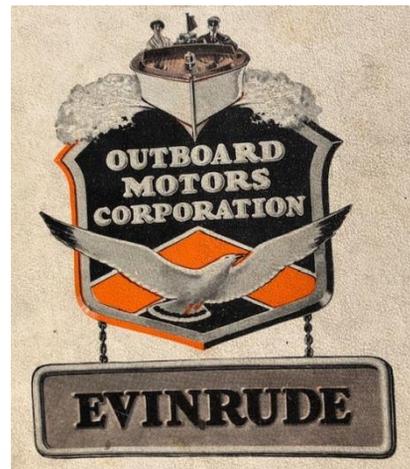
The general description shown on pages 16-20 applies to the Four Cycle Twin except that, on account of its design, a float-feed carburetor is furnished instead of the mixing valve, and a distributor is furnished in connection with the magneto in order to direct the full charge alternately, to the right and left cylinders.

	Weight—Lbs.	
	Net	Boxed
Price . . . . .	\$125.00	95    175

(Not furnished without Automatic Reverse)

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The 1916 Evinrude 4 Cycle Twin was not a success. It was made for less than 2 years. Even the advertising copy seemed to discourage buyers.



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The exhilaration was short lived. The stock market crash in October of 1929 would present new challenges for the newly formed Outboard Motors Corporation and for the Evinrude brand. It was the beginning of the Great Depression.

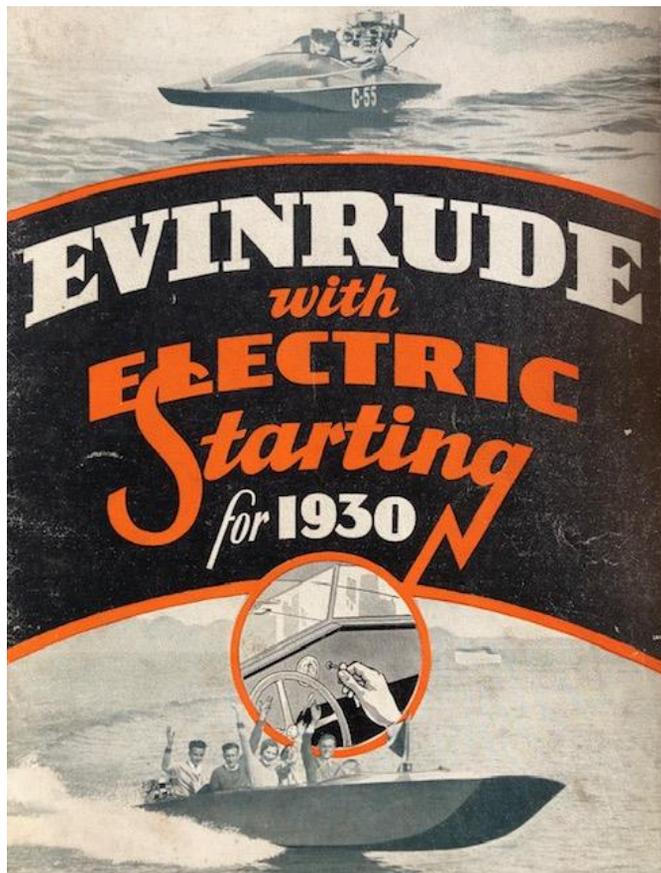
As an austerity move the Lockwood brand was discontinued and full R&D efforts put behind the Evinrude and Elto brands. By the end of 1933, the Outboard Motors Corporation was starting to recover however it had taken its toll on Ole and Bess. In May 1933, Bess Evinrude passed away. Fourteen months later, in 1934, heart broken, Ole also passed.

Ironically, 1934 was the Silver Anniversary year for the Evinrude brand.

Son, Ralph Evinrude, had been actively involved in Elto since 1927 and Evinrude since 1929. He had been instrumental in the R&D for the Elto Quad. This would be the progenitor for a long line of successful Evinrude 4-cylinder motors including the famous 460.

On Ole's passing in 1934 Ralph Evinrude became President of the Outboard Motors Corporation. An Evinrude continued to be in control of the Evinrude brand.

In our next NEWSLETTER we will follow Ralph Evinrude and the history of Evinrude from 1934 to 2020.



**Evinrude was among the first to introduce the electric starter in 1930.**



**Boat racing victories became an important part of the Evinrude brand marketing program during the late 1920's & 1930's. Evinrude was the first to produce a factory racing motor with dual carburetors, the 1930 model 177 Speeditwin Racer.**