

# Ingenuity & Survival in the Canadian North

By: The late Bob Kerr

## Editor's Note:

*Bob Kerr was a long-time member of MLAOC. Bob passed in Dec. of 1999. He left behind this amazing story of ingenuity and survival by an Inuit person and his Johnson OK-15. This written account was given to Owen Aho by Bob Kerr many years ago. Owen has now forwarded it to our Club for publication. Here is the story in Bobs own words...*

After discharge from the Canadian Armed Forces in late 1945, I got a job with Breen Motor Co. Ltd. In Winnipeg, Manitoba, who sold & serviced the full line of Chrysler produced cars & trucks. In addition to the Chrysler franchise, Breen was also an Outboard Marine Parts Distributor and a Johnson Motor Dealer. They were also a full Service & Warranty headquarters because of their fully equipped Outboard Service Shop. Although I had joined Breen as an apprentice Auto Mechanic, there were many days during the boating months when the Outboard Shop was unable to keep up with the work load. When those periods occurred, a notice was usually posted in the Auto Shop, stating that if any of the auto mechanics were interested in some extra work & income, they could inquire at the Outboard Shop. This was evening work only, and meant another \$4.50 in the pay envelope for each night worked. (a welcome addition in the 40's). I signed on whenever I could & became quite intrigued by some of the unusual "Iron" that, when repaired, would actually run quite well.

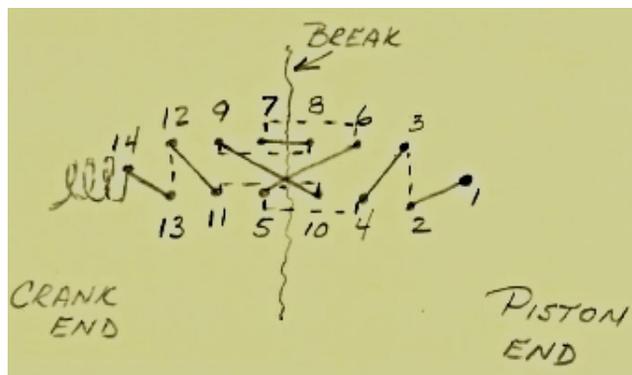
During these early years & up until the early 60's, the largest single customer of Breen Outboard Division was the Hudson Bay Company Merchandise Depot which had their Head Office in Winnipeg, just south of Breen on Main St. They were the buyer of almost all of the goods requested by any of their Northern stores or remote Fur Trade Posts, no matter where they were located in Northern Canada, including the Artic. Therefore, all orders they received for parts, for any OMC products, was sent to Breen for filling. Although many orders had an unusual description for the parts required, one order that was received in 1957 stands out in my mind to this day. It involved a replacement connecting rod for a 1947 OK15.

**Bob's drawing of sinew stitching repair pattern.**



**The Breen Motor Co., in Winnipeg, Manitoba, were full line Chrysler car and truck dealers plus OMC Parts Distributors and Johnson Outboard Dealer. This is how their Johnson Outboard show room looked in 1954 complete with Miss Johnson Motors.**

It was for an Inuit person who operated out of Tuktoyaktuk which is located on the north shore of the Northwest Territories on the Beaufort Sea in north western Canada. The rod from the engine was sent in as a sample and had been broken in half. The amazing thing was that the break had been spliced together using 2 pieces of whale bone that had been perfectly fitted into the channel on either side of the "I" beam shaped bronze casting of which the rod was made. The bones were also shaped to conform exactly to the designed offset of the rod. Several small holes has been made through the bone "splints" as well as the bronze rod, and the whole unit was stitched together to form a surprisingly strong repair. I am only guessing when I say that the stitching appeared to be dried sinew or gut of some kind & was very thin. The presence of black blow-by on the bones, indicated that this rod had been put back in the motor after the splice had been made & was exposed to an unknown amount of operating time.





**A 1938 picture of an outfitters store in Alaska with the two most popular outboards in the far north. Johnsons, which were easy to repair and would always get you home and the air cooled Bendix single and twin that would never freeze up and break. No water cooling system to drain.**



I made an enquiry back through the Hudson's Bay Merchandise Depot to try to get more information surrounding the incident. About six months later, word came back that the failure had occurred away from Tuktoyaktuk & the Inuit in question had arrived at the docks with the motor running slowly and missing one spark plug. No other information was available.

At this point it was concluded that after the splice repair was completed, far from home base, the Inuit reassembled all parts. The repaired rod and piston assembly was installed to seal the crank case compression/ vacuum as well as balance the rotating weight mass. The spark plug was left out of the repaired side so the spliced rod would not be subjected to any firing forces. The trip back to Tuktoyaktuk must have been slow & anxious, wondering if the repair was going to hold together. I kept the spliced rod on my desk for a few years until I left Breen to get back in the automotive business. It made a great conversation piece as well as a good paper weight. I sure wish I had kept it when I left. It is amazing what can be done when your options are limited or non-existent.

The Johnson OK series of motors were a ruggedly built 2 cylinder opposed engine rated at 7 to 8 HP in 1930 to 1932 (depending on whether you had an OK55 or an OK60).

It was at this time that this "opposed" design was dropped from the Johnson line-up in the United States in favour of the "K" series of alternate firing engines which ran smoother because of their higher RPM and alternate design. However, in Canada because of the large fresh water fishing industry, the demand for the high load pushing capacity and ruggedness of the OK remained high. It was, therefore, continually produced in Peterborough, Ontario plant up to & including 1949. It was a particular favorite of the fishing camp operators & fresh water commercial fisherman in many parts of Canada. Some OK's also found their way into the far north through the Hudson's Bay Fur Trade Stores. The "OK" was one tough engine & highly regarded by all who used it.