

## OMC Canada.....Part II

By: Ken Kirk

### The C. B. Neal Era, 1946 - 1965

Following the end of World War II in Europe, the Outboard Marine and Manufacturing Co. of Canada facilities in Peterborough occupied 90,000 square feet. During war time production the plant had employed more than 800 people but with the resumption of production of outboards for the general public in mid-1945, the employee count was reduced to 500. However it soon became evident that OMMC Canada would not be able to keep pace with the tremendous Canadian demand for outboard motors.

Over the next eight years the Peterborough plant underwent three significant expansions increasing the plant size to 222,735 square feet. By 1953, even with increased mechanization and automation, the employee count had surpassed war time levels to 833 people.



**C.B. Neal, at the helm of OMC Canada for 20 Years**

Much of the credit for the great success of OMMC Canada can be attributed to C. B. Clarence Neal. C.B. was a young rising star with Outboard Marine in the US. In 1946, Hugh Campbell was elected the Canadian President and C.B. Neal came to Peterborough to become Assistant to the President as well as Secretary-Treasurer of the Canadian operation. In 1948 Neal was promoted to Canadian General Manager and in January 1950 Neal succeeded Hugh Campbell as president of OMMC Canada. C.B. Neal's boundless energy, innovative new product initiatives and strong leadership were key in establishing OMMC's position of sustained dominance in the Canadian market for many years.

### ... THE NEW **JOHNSON** *Sea-Horse* "25"



**25 HORSEPOWER**

**... YET IT TROLLS**

**JUST 85 POUNDS ...**

**GEAR SHIFT ...**

**SYNCHRO TWIST-GRIP**

**SPEED CONTROL ...**

**SEPARATE MILE-MASTER**

**FUEL TANK (5 gals.) ...**

**... AT AN AMAZINGLY**

**LOW PRICE**

On the new product front, in 1949, Johnson introduced the breakthrough 10 hp "QD". This motor was the first to have a full gearshift and one of the first with a remote fuel tank system. Neal knew this motor would revolutionize outboarding and made sure that the Peterborough manufacturing facility was ready to handle Canadian consumer demand. In the fall of 1950 the Peterborough plant also began production of the new 1951 Johnson "RD" and Evinrude "Big Twin" 25 hp motors. This, coupled with the great success of the "QD" required even further expansion of the Peterborough manufacturing facilities. C. B. Neal's mission was to have Canadian demand satisfied by Canadian production. He resisted excessive importation of finished product and fought long and hard to increase Canadian production capacity and create

**The Johnson 1951  
25hp**

more Canadian jobs.

In 1950 the demand for the fabled "Iron Horse" utility engines had dwindled. C. B. Neal ordered a survey to find a potential new market for these profitable little engines. The emerging power lawn mower market seemed to be the answer. Neal purchased an example of every power mower then being manufactured. He personally supervised tests and evaluated the performance of all makes at his home just outside Peterborough. Neal went to the OMC board of directors, not only with a recommendation that the Corporation get into the power lawn mower business, but also specific engineering recommendations regarding the design and construction of the new mower.



**Advertisement for waterskiing behind a Johnson 25 hp**

Neals proposal was approved. Evinrude had registered the name, "Lawn-Boy", back in 1937 when they considered making a reel type pusher lawn mower. This brand name was now given to the new power rotary lawn mower. In the US, OMC purchased RPM Manufacturing Company in Missouri to produce "Lawn-Boy" for the US market. Neal and OMMC Canada were rewarded for originating and developing the rotary lawn mower idea. In 1953, 40,000 square feet were added to the Peterborough plant to build "Lawn-Boy's" for the Canadian market. "Lawn-Boy" immediately became a sales and profit success and soon became the best selling power lawn mower in Canada. Two years later, in 1955, the "Snow-Boy" snow blower was added to the Peterborough production line.

Another C.B. Neal initiative was the purchase of Industrial Engineering Limited of Burnaby, British Columbia, manufacturers of the "Pioneer" chain saw. OMMC Canada bought IEL in 1956. In



**Pioneer Chain Saws Logo**

1958 the name was changed to Pioneer Saws Ltd. and C.B. Neal was Chairman of the Board. The same year the Burnaby plant was closed and all manufacturing, engineering and sales functions were moved to Peterborough. OMMC Canada was now a leader in the chain saw market.

While C. B. was finding new markets and new products for OMMC Canada, he was also directing a thriving outboard business. In the ten year period 1946 to 1956 OMMC Canada outboard motor unit production had increased by 270% and Canadian dollar volume sales had increased by a whopping 700%. A major achievement.

In 1956 the name of the Canadian company was changed..... shortened to Outboard Marine Corporation of Canada Ltd., ( OMC Canada ).

It is a little known fact that in 1957, the OMC export division was reorganized. It was established as Outboard Marine International S.A. and was organized as a subsidiary of OMC Canada under the direction of C. B. Neal. The purpose was to develop and distribute OMC products to the world market ....largely through Peterborough. It is estimated that by the late 50's about 45% of the Peterborough production was exported to New Zealand, Venezuela, Hong Kong, England and South Africa. Pioneer Saws were also exported from Peterborough to the U.S.

Under the guidance and management of C. B. Neal, three more international subsidiaries of OMC Canada were established in Australia, Belgium and Nassau. C. B., while remaining President of OMC Canada, was elected a director of the Outboard Marine Corporation Board and named Vice President in charge of foreign operations.

In the late 1950's OMC Canada was producing, in Peterborough, 30 different models of outboard motors under 5 different brand names, 14 different models of rotary lawn mowers, and 3 models of Pioneer Chain Saws. It was estimated that by 1958 the Peterborough plant was using more than 1,000 tons of aluminum ingots annually and employment had reached almost 1,200 people.

In 1958 OMC introduced for both the Johnson and Evinrude brands, their revolutionary 4 cylinder V block design. It delivered 50 hp. In 1960 the output was increased to 75 hp. To promote the potential new applications now available to the larger horsepower outboards, C. B. Neal purchased a 32' Shepherd Cabin Cruiser. He had the inboard engines removed and outrigger transom brackets fitted to the stern. Twin V4 Johnson



**An early Lawn Boy**

75 hp outboards were installed for power. The cruiser was named "Sea Horse". She was used extensively by C. B. Neal for PR purposes and was highly visible on both the Trent-Seven and Rideau waterways.

In 1962 OMC Canada suffered it's first real corporate set back. They embarked on the production and marketing of a 17' trihull fiberglass boat marketed in Canada using the "OMC" brand name. They were I/O equipped using a horizontally mounted V-4 outboard block driving through an OMC Outdrive. These boats were different in design from anything else on the market. They were heavy, well built but underpowered. One of the boating press wrote, "the new OMC 17 is as solid as the rock of Gibraltar and just about as fast." Although OMC was manufacturing these and other boats under the Johnson and Evinrude brand names in the U.S., OMC Canada established their own manufacturing facility at Trenton, Ontario. The OMC 17 did not enjoy marketing or financial success either in Canada or the U.S. The boat business was



**1958 Johnson V-4 50 hp**

terminated and the Trenton boat plant closed.

However, in Peterborough, the thriving outboard business rolled on and in 1963 a new 28,240 sq. ft. die casting facility was added bringing the total floor space to 363,683. The next year, 1964, OMC Canada purchased the lands and buildings of the former Peterborough Canoe Company and established a new national parts and service centre in this facility. OMC Canada's powerful PR Department was also headquartered here as was the factory racing support group.

In 1965 the C. B. Neal era, however, came to a premature end. On June 2 after a series of heart attacks, C. B. Neal passed away. He was only 56 years old. C. B.'s vision, energy and management skills had not only put OMC Canada in a dominant position but had also made Canada the key player in OMC's world wide operations. The Peterborough manufacturing facilities were massive, providing stable employment for over 1200 people and providing revenue sources for thousands of people in support services businesses in Peterborough and the surrounding area.

If C. B. Neal had continued to live and work as a dynamic and innovative leader in the OMC organization for another 10 years....one can only speculate how the fortunes of OMC Canada and indeed the outcome for OMC world wide might have been very different. C. B. Neal was a true Canadian industrial hero. 🇨🇦

*Ken Kirk*