

The Incredible Mr. K

The editor and photographer Brian Dewey visit CARL KIEKHAEFER at the Kiekhaefer Aeromarine Plant in Fond-du-Lac, Wisconsin, U.S.A.

In January 1970, the man whose name is probably the most respected in marine engineering resigned his post with the world famous Mercury engine corporation. After 31 years service, originally as the company founder and latterly as a hired executive, Carl Kiekhaefer broke away from almost half a lifetime's deeply involved working association with the organisation to restart the company now known as Kiekhaefer Aeromarine, builders of the successful Aeromarine offshore powerboat engines.

Born the son of a Midwest farmer in 1906, Carl Kiekhaefer spent most of his early years working the land. "It was a damned hard life" he said. "We lived seven and a half miles out of what was then just a little town called Cedarburg, twenty miles north of Milwaukee. I used to walk those seven and a half miles into school every day, and then walk back again to the farm after school was out. And when I wasn't at school, I spent most of my time around the farm shovelling horseshit".

In those days, when the world's first cars were rattling, banging, and backfiring their way into the start of the technological age, it would have seemed inconceivable that this 'protégé'

of a hick-town farmer would become the world's Number One boat engine builder.

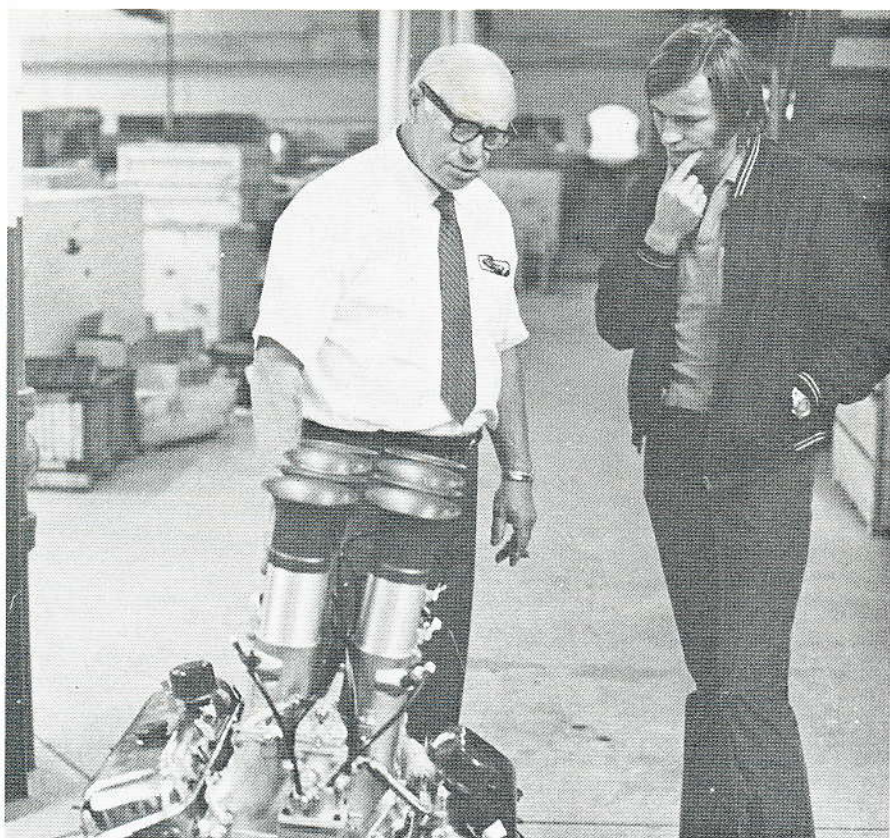
Oddly enough, the company which he now owns, Kiekhaefer Aeromarine, was founded back in the 1930's. After a tough course in engineering at one of America's renowned learning institutions, he was engaged by the government of the day to do research and development on target engines, for those unmanned target planes. When the contract came to an end, Aeromarine Inc. became dormant but not legally dead. As far as United States law is concerned, it was nearly forty years old and a going concern when Carl Kiekhaefer had cause to physically re-establish it in 1970.

In 1939 — three years before America became involved in the last world war — he founded Kiekhaefer Mercury, now known simply as Mercury Marine. With gross capital assets of twenty five thousand dollars (at that time, Kiekhaefer himself was not far short of penniless; the money was borrowed in the odd thousand dollars here and there from the butcher, baker, candlestick maker) he built his first outboard motor — a two stroke, 2½ h.p. affair. Although Outboard Marine (builders of the Johnson

and Evinrude range of motors) were then holding the outboard market monopoly and not too worried about their new, under-financed, and little known rival they began to realize the very real threat he represented when, three years later Kiekhaefer had orders for 30,000 of his 2½ h.p. engines in the pipeline.

His first major setback came early on in the company's history when his partner, a Mr. Willis Blank by name, was killed in a level-crossing accident when his car collided with an oncoming train. Apart from the human aspect, Mr. Blank was the business brain behind the operation, while Kiekhaefer was the master-mind behind the engineering design. However, it's amazing what one can do when one has to, and from then on, Kiekhaefer went it alone. The fact that he was immensely successful needs hardly to be written in this article; suffice to say that in 1961, having built up the company into a fifteen million dollar concern, he agreed to a takeover offer by one of the world's big, big businesses, the Brunswick Corporation. However, he retained his position through a service contract as president of Kiekhaefer Mercury, and by the time he resigned three years ago, the





Explaining the intricacies of his 468 cu. in. race engine.

Mercury assets were allegedly running at seventy million dollars.

When asked why he sold out in the first place, he answered: "It was at a time when the company needed the backing of a big corporation in order to advance. Outboard Marine had grown in strength, and we needed investments of many millions to expand, produce, and compete".

So for the next nine years, Kiekhaefer presided over a company, which in 31 years had grown to be one of the world's major outboard, inboard, and snowmobile manufacturers. But for the last year, he saw the writing on the wall. Changing management and ideals amongst the executives of the parent company, resulted in a changing Mercury organisation, and when Carl Kiekhaefer was moved from one office to another (at a separate part of the plant in Fond-du-Lac, Wisconsin), it finally resulted in his departure from the company which he founded.

As a journalist, it is not for me to go into the politics of the situation, but it is widely known anyway that the parting of the ways was by mutual agreement. Mercury in fact agreed to sell him part of the premises he had occupied for those final nine weeks (which they had used for some snowmobile work) knowing that he was going to restart Kiekhaefer Aeromarine;

although it is perhaps at this point significant to note that he is still a major shareholder in Mercury.

So by the time myself and photographer Brian Dewey went to visit him at the Aeromarine plant late last year, the company had been in action again for nearly three years. It now employs a full time staff of seventy, and just like the early days of the Mercury company, is on the way up, and in no small way.

We were first of all herded to a large reception room which must house at least a hundred million trophies for various powerboat racing and snowmobile racing successes. The walls are littered with documents of one description or another, including one highly complimentary letter from Willie Von Braun, the United States space programme director. After a while, we were ushered up some stairs, through a design office full of intense looking draftsmen, through another large room with Aeromarine snowmobile engines on display, and eventually into a sort of boardroom. Then the man himself enters and the interview begins — which incidentally lasted all through the working day, over early evening drinks in his nearby house, over dinner in a Fond-du-Lac restaurant that night, finally winding up with an early morning telephone call to my motel

room the next day.

With the highly successful introduction of the Aeromarine 468 cu. ins. inboard racing engine (the 1972 performances of Doc. Bob Magoon in *Aeromarine II* and Italy's Carlo Bonomi in *Aeromarine IX* were truly splendid), the conversation inevitably got round to America's top offshore racing promoter, Red Crise. The moment his name was mentioned, out came a sheaf of Red Crise's regular bulletins, many of which contained passages claiming these engines to be illegal since fifty of them had not yet been built. Throughout the season, both Doc. Magoon and Carlo Bonomi experienced difficulties with this controversy, but Kiekhaefer firmly stated that they didn't contravene the U.I.M. rules in any way.

"It depends on how you interpret the rules" he said (somewhere I've heard that before). "Literally thousands of them have been built by Chevrolet from where I purchase them. All we do here is to modify them for powerboats and add one or two completely legal trimmings. To say that fifty of them haven't been built is ridiculous". He went on to tell me a few other things which cannot be printed for libel reasons. It's not that they were untruthful, *but in the eyes of the law*, they are allegations rather than fact. Perhaps it is enough to say that there are undoubtedly a few individuals in the world who would rather not witness Kiekhaefer racing victories.

During a leisurely tour round the factory, we came across the engine testing unit where an employee was running up a sweet sounding 468 before it left the plant. Carl Kiekhaefer took over the controls; his face became tense with concentration; those of us around him were temporarily forgotten; we didn't exist. To say that this man has an undying affinity with performance engines would be the understatement of the year. Gradually the engine wound up to peak revs, Kiekhaefer suddenly jotted something down in the logbook on the bench, then slowly brought her down to idling power and switched off. With a beaming smile on his face, he scrawled the letters L.G.R. across the logbook page. "Do you know what L.G.R. means?" he asked me, "It means 'Let's Go Racing!!' It means that this engine is completely ready for installation in a raceboat."

The 468 is indeed a beautiful looking and beautiful sounding motor. It has no fan belts to snap, and



As another Aeromarine motor completes its time on the testing bed, the letters LGR will be scrawled across the logbook on the bench. This means "Let's Go Racing".

according to the Boss Man, will not need to be fixed with superchargers or turbochargers (forced aspiration becomes legal under U.I.M. rules this season). He feels that with his engines installed in the right hulls, they will more than hold their own against boosted engines with that much more cubic capacity. That is confidence in the extreme.

Both Mercury and Outboard Marine build snowmobiles as well as boat engines and Kiekhaefer too has an Aeromarine model on the market. Snowmobile racing is a very popular winter sport in the northern parts of the United States, and I was amazed to learn that they achieve speeds of well over 100 m.p.h. "They shunt each other, slide out of control, roll over, the works" he said. Then, with a couple of shakes of the head, commented: "Well, it takes all types to make a world".

He has designed a special chassis on wheels for his snowmobiles which makes the complete unit resemble something out of a James Bond movie. Somehow the drive shaft on the snowmobile tracks connects with a drive shaft on the chassis, making in effect a two seater, four wheeled motor bike. This enables the machine to be used during the summer months when there's no snow on the ground. "I don't know if it will sell very well" he remarked, "Some of these guys don't much care if there's snow around or not. They drive on the tracks anyway!"

But it's not just snowmobiles or inboard racing engines which make up the total production of Kiekhaefer Aeromarine Motors Incorporated. In a written answer to one of the Red Crise's allegations against powerboat engineering standards in general Kiekhaefer revealed the following

thirty two improvements introduced by his company in 1971 and 1972.

- 1.) Low-level transom-mounted water pick-up.
- 2.) Successful application of stock-design open-chamber heads.
- 3.) Non-preigniting surface-gap spark plugs.
- 4.) More efficient exhaust headers. More horsepower. Minimum ear-damaging exhaust noise.
- 5.) Fuel injection system perfected and competition-proved.
- 6.) Transmission drive damper plate for severe-duty dependability.
- 7.) High-capacity torsional damper to minimize crankshaft strains and stresses, thus achieving longer crankshaft life.
- 8.) Heavy-duty transmission for replacement.
- 9.) Transmission with integrated power steering pump drive.
- 10.) Heavy-duty 600-h.p. primary drive gears for stern drives.
- 11.) Heavy-duty 700-h.p. primary drive gears for stern drives.
- 12.) Heavy-duty vertical drive shaft for stern drives.
- 13.) Steering tie-bars (inner and outer) for stern drives.
- 14.) Reinforced power steering support for stern drives.
- 15.) New crankshaft from Chevrolet (1973 Mercury Marine), replacing original crankshaft discontinued by Chevrolet.
- 16.) Heavy-duty, lightweight connecting rods eliminating special cylinder blocks.
- 17.) Reliable engine oil cooler. No failures to date.
- 18.) No-belt, all-gear accessory drive.
- 19.) Reliable power steering oil cooler. No failures to date.
- 20.) Single-ram and dual-ram trim-tabs. No failures to date.
- 21.) High capacity oil pan; no need to add oil in 200-mile race.
- 22.) New propeller line for 1973; tougher, more efficient, faster.
- 23.) Stronger, more reliable universal drive lines (long and short).
- 24.) Custom-designed fuel system and cooling system fittings.
- 25.) New 454/468 engine.
- 26.) New 482/496 engine.
- 27.) New C.D. ignition system with overspeed limiter.
- 28.) New deck-mounted windshield.
- 29.) New bell housing.
- 30.) Heavy-duty cylinder head stud kit.
- 31.) Air scoops for improved venting of engine compartments.
- 32.) Beefed-up outer transom plate and gimbal ring for stern drives.

With all this production activity going on, one big question remains to be officially answered: will there, or will there not, be an Aeromarine outboard on the market in the foreseeable future? I pumped him dry on this topic throughout the long interview, and was greeted with a series of grunts, coughs, convenient telephone interruptions, smiles, arm scratching, whistles, scowls, frowns, and snorts. All he would say was that if and when he does go into outboard production, the first one will be a racing engine — and it will be a pure Kiekhaefer machine too. At one time there was some talk of him teaming up with one of the Japanese engine firms regarding joint outboard production, but that possibility came to an abrupt halt when Mr. K (as he is affectionately called) learned that it meant spending an initial six months in Japan. "I'm sixty six, Goddam it!" he asserted, "and that's too old to move out there for six months. Anyway, I don't speak Japanese".

Power Point



with
Tony Williams

The racing season is fast approaching once more. Panic will gradually set in over the next few weeks as drivers scramble around deciding which classes to race. The decision to change to cats must be facing all those in the smaller circuit classes, but which to choose?

We have a fair selection of racing hulls including the Clerici that won in SE at the Windermere Grand Prix and took the SE, SF and OF speed records. We want £600 for her complete with steering etc. We have a very fast Schulze cat at £500 that has only completed a few club races and is in exceptional condition. My Bristol that won its class and was second overall at Rouen last year is back at the factory for refurbishing and is for sale at £175. A 1972 version that was built especially light for me will cost you £325 complete with cover, steering

etc. I didn't get time to race her myself and she was only used for NE club races.

For the beginner/impecunious we have an ever-so-unique Bristol that we took in part-ex against one of the new Regulation Life jackets. She is one of Charlie's early machines but at £75 it is cheaper than an 8ft rowing boat. For those of you that are going to have a go at inflatable racing why not have the fastest one in the country if not the World (62 mph at the speed trials at Windermere and UIM National championship). We need £350 or if you want a new one we have three scheduled for delivery from Aerazur in March at £399. For the off-shore people we have a V140 Tremlett, a 16 Avenger both very reasonably priced. Phone me for a chat, we may well be able to work out a deal.

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One of Kiekhaefer's latest designs — a dry-land chassis for the Aeromarine snowmobile.



This photograph should dispel the myth that Mr. K has no sense of humour!

Whether he speaks Japanese or not, Mr. K is a man with strong ideas of his own and quite honestly it doesn't take a great deal of imagination to see him at loggerheads with others, be they Japanese, Moonmen, Martians or even British. It is my opinion (rightly or wrongly) that a joint venture of this nature wouldn't really work out in the best interests of all parties, so if an outboard is to be born, it will be a pedigree Aeromarine motor.

Personally, I'm convinced that such a project is already under way, though in what stage I really wouldn't know. If this is so, it will be very interesting to see what brand of racing hull and which racing names appear under the Aeromarine flag. I know for certain that he commands a deep loyalty from many of those working for the rival organisations who at one time or another have worked under him. I sincerely doubt that he will be short of the necessary personnel when the time comes.

The revival of Kiekhaefer Aeromarine is not only a healthy sign for the boating world in general, but for its boss, it's probably a blessing in disguise. He hasn't (apparently) had a proper holiday for twenty years or more, so one can reasonably assume that this incredible, enthusiastic, and very energetic man needs the new challenge it represents. And when I concluded the interview by asking how he now felt about the final Mercury episode, he took a munch at an enormous cigar (he smokes one a day and chews five) and replied with a chuckle: "It's just a nit on the nut of a gnat".