

RYC ROOTS



A Historical Perspective of the Racine Yacht Club Through Time.

Chapter 12 • March 2016

RYC Notables: Otto Wadewitz



Otto Wadewitz, probably in the late 1930s. RYC archives

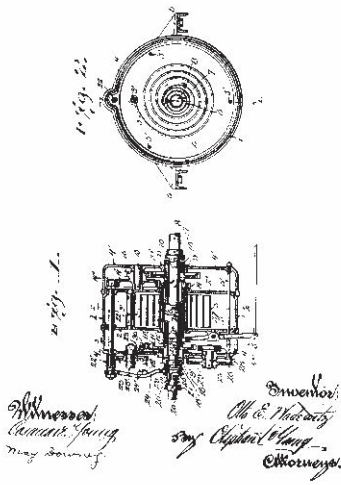
Otto Wadewitz (1876-1946) was one of the Racine Yacht Club's most important members in its early years, as both Commodore and benefactor. But, how did this come to be? He was born on April 1, 1876 and was the oldest of five surviving children born to Henry and Augusta Wadewitz in the small farming community of Waubeka, Wisconsin. Henry, a mason, was a native of Germany and Otto and his siblings all spoke German at home, only learning English after enrolling in grade school. At an early age Otto learned the importance of working and studying hard for success in later life. His father was killed in a mining accident in 1889 and, after some years

and several moves, the family finally settled in Racine. Otto, as a teenager, helped support his widowed mother and siblings. Some years later Otto met and courted Mary K. Caspers and they were married in Racine on July 28, 1896; about this time Otto, with the help of two friends, built his first sail boat. The couple would eventually have six children, five of whom survived. Mary was a devoted mother who stayed at home with her children while Otto was either busy at work or involved with his boating passion. By 1906, Otto and his growing family were living in Milwaukee, Wisconsin where he was one of the organizers of the Kinnickinnic Yacht Club, which was later merged into today's South Shore Yacht Club. In 1912, he moved back to Racine to join his brothers, who had earlier founded the Western Printing & Lithographing Co. in 1907. Otto's machinist skills were needed to operate and maintain the stationary steam engines that powered the fast growing printing plant. He was one of the few people able to operate the large engines that powered the printing machines with belts and drive shafts. A talented machinist, Otto was also an inventor who patented a spring

powered engine starter. His patent for the device, used as a starter mechanism for internal combustion engines, was filed in 1912 and the patent (number 1066868) was granted in July of 1913. Whether it was actually manufactured or used is not known.

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1,066,868. O. W. WADWITZ. SPRING POWER ENGINE STARTER. APPLICATION FILED MAR 11, 1912. Patented July 8, 1913. 7-1913-1066868



The first page of Wadewitz's patent (number 1066868) for "A Spring Power Engine Starter." Image from the United States Patent and Trademark Office website, which can be used free of restrictions.

Otto's fascination with boats continued to grow after he joined his brothers' printing business. He is remembered as having two great passions: work and boats. If he was not working, he could be found on the Racine waterfront watching the boats and steamers come and go. After moving to Racine, Otto became interested in power boats. Finally, his mechanical nature and boating passion had intertwined themselves; he was a pioneer in the early days of speed boat racing with



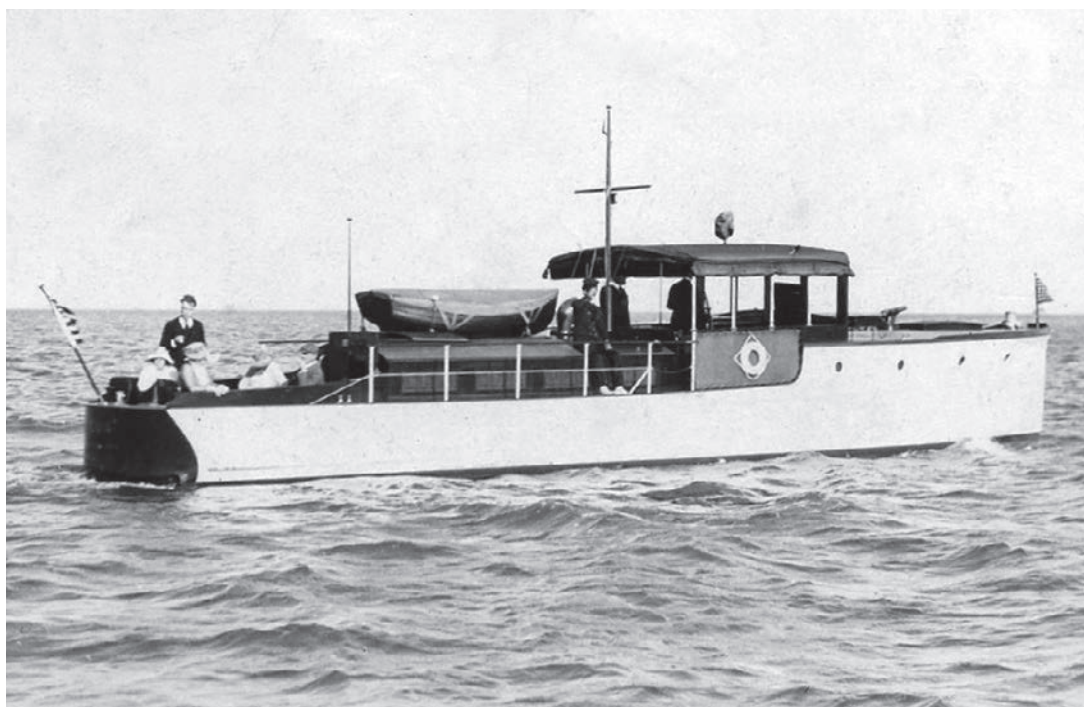
the hydroplanes *Jay-Eye-See I* and *Jay-Eye-See II* in contests across the United States. He and Ed Surendonk had bought the first, which was designed by Walter Beauvais (the origin of the second is not known). Both were named in honor of a famous race horse of the same name that Jerome Increase Case, founder of the J.I. Case Co., raced in the 1880s and 90s. Case, in the 1920s, also named a race car the "Jay Eye See" and the name was later used on a Racine Street, too. Jay Eye See Avenue is two blocks west of South Memorial Drive, between De Koven and 21st Street. The Case Company benefited from the name brand publicity and paid the railroad freight charges to move the boats from race to race. One of them, *Jay Eye See II*, was powered with a 100 horsepower Curtis 8-cylinder aircraft engine having straight stacks that shot fire into the air; it raced in the "510 Class" for boats with engines of 510 cubic inch displacement and held the championship in that class for two years. There was no muffler and it was reported to be deafening when it went by.

Wadewitz was an early member of the Racine Power Boat Club, which had been founded by Martin Draeger, and both promoted and took part in high speed boat races on Lake Michigan off the Racine shoreline. The club was affiliated with both the International Power Boat Association and the Mississippi Valley Power Boat Association (which had at least fifteen member clubs in 1922). Complaints about the noise from those racing boats were being heard and, although he continued racing into the mid-1920s, speed boat racing on Lake

Michigan eventually came to an end. Available records on how Wadewitz did in these races are sparse, but we do know that he placed second in his class in Cincinnati in September 1923. This was serious racing. During time trials in Oshkosh in 1924, *Jay Eye See II* made 43.28 mph in the 510 Class and *Jay Eye See I* ran at 33.63 mph in the 151 class, fast for 1920s hydroplanes. Both boats, driven by Wadewitz, were entered in the Mississippi Valley Power Boat Association race held on Lake Winnebago at Oshkosh, July 3-5, 1924. A huge grandstand was built at the foot of the lake between Washington and Merritt Avenues and a crowd of 8,000 was expected. On the 4th of July, the actual crowd at Menominee Park was estimated at between 50,000 and 70,000 people, according to an article in the *Oshkosh Northwestern*, dated July 5, 1924. A local Racine newspaper was quoted as saying "Messrs. Wadewitz and Surendonk are experienced race drivers and can be depended upon to

uphold the honors of this city in the classics," which they apparently did, racing the boats in many locations all over the country, some as far away as Florida and Kentucky.

In the late 1920s Otto joined the struggling Racine Yacht Club and then changed gears and purchased the *Rex*. *Rex* was a 49 ½-foot wood motor yacht powered by a 96 hp Buda diesel which drove a single propeller. She had been originally built as a 37-foot cruiser by the Chris Somers Boat Yard in Milwaukee but after Otto had purchased her, he found that she squatted badly at speed--nearly flooding the stern. He then cut her in two, and added 12 ½ feet amidships. She performed well after the surgery. *Rex* slept eight guests in comfort, had a complete wheelhouse, salon, full galley, two heads and was wired for electric lights. The boat had an excellent reputation for mechanical reliability, probably because of Otto's affinity for mechanical things.



This is the *Rex*; the date of the photo is unknown. RYC archives



Wadewitz was instrumental in bringing the Racine Yacht Club out of the Great Depression. In 1929 the water was high and a storm flooded the Club yard and nearly wrecked the building itself. Members gave up on rebuilding. Wadewitz became Commodore in 1933 and began to push for a new beginning. The clubhouse was repaired, many improvements were made, and it was put on a foundation that had a waterproof basement. Otto was also the Club's benefactor; he and his family donated much time, money, and effort to the project and, in the view of many, saved the Yacht Club. He would serve as Commodore for five terms, something that has never been repeated.

Otto was an animal lover and was physically stout. He was nearly six feet tall and weighed close to 200 pounds in his prime. He had sandy gray hair and a dark sun-tanned complexion; he was also a heavy chain smoker whose fingers were stained with nicotine. He was somewhat authoritarian in nature, which may account for his talent in taking over and getting things done, he was outspoken and, reportedly, a man who enjoyed a strong drink. Otto's personality probably had a large part to play in his revitalization of the Racine Yacht Club.

Western Printing & Lithographing Co. became one of the largest commercial printing businesses in the Midwest. The company was originally started in 1907 and by 1910 it had moved to Racine's Shoop Building. In 1916 the firm expanded, buying a publishing company which was renamed the Whitman Publishing Company; during the 1930s and 1940s Whitman produced such well-known names as Golden Books, Big Little Books, Dell Comics and paper backs, much early Disney material, and a wealth of magazines, publications, and advertising. Otto was an important

piece of the business and in the late 1930s he was attracted to Fairhope, Alabama while looking for a site on which to build a woodworking factory to supply small toys and game pieces for the company. He bought a defunct cannery in Fairhope and, expert machinist that he was, assembled all of the woodworking machinery himself. The new business was named the Western Woodworking Company and it mass produced countless numbers of wooden pieces for use in popular games such as bingo, chess and checkers. Western Woodworking also made small wood toys and everything was shipped back to the plant in Racine. In October 1939, Otto and his friends informally organized themselves as the Fairhope Yacht Club; it was formally incorporated in 1942 and he and other founders donated land on a dredged channel off Mobile bay for a new club building. Otto was elected Commodore and would serve for three years until the close of World War Two. One of the surviving members of that early group remembers that the first Club constitution and by-laws were patterned after those of the Racine Yacht Club.

Otto had wintered in Fairhope in the early 1940s and moved there permanently after retiring. The *Rex* had been requisitioned by the government during the war and served on Lake Michigan as a patrol boat with all of her paint, bright work, and brass covered in wartime haze gray paint. At the time she was requisitioned, the Coast Guard had agreed to restore her to "as-acquired" condition upon her return. The refit left her good as new. She was brought down to Fairhope



The Shoop Building, home of Western Printing & Lithographing Co. from 1910 to 1928. Postcard image

in 1945 and Chester Krusienski, long time Racine Yacht Club member, was part of Otto's crew on its voyage down the Mississippi River. Chester recalled that his trip was an adventure. They were always dodging logs, steamboats, and barges and the river was in spring flood with many of the navigation pilings and marks missing. One night, they became lost and then seemed to go hard aground. At sunup, they discovered they had strayed out of the channel into a flooded farmer's field where the boat's propeller had snagged on a submerged barbed wire fence. Fortunately a U.S. Coast Guard picket boat saw them and one of the Coasties dove over the side with a wire cutter and freed the prop so they could continue on.

The *Rex* was the largest yacht at its time to be berthed at Fairhope. She is still remembered as being tricky to turn in the 50 foot wide dredged channel. Otto and his crew and Club members ashore all had to work together handling

the lines to get the yacht safely in and out of her berth just to the rear of the Clubhouse. Otto spent much of his free time with Club members and friends aboard *Rex* cruising the waters of Mobile Bay but he and Mary returned to Racine to celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary on July 28, 1946. Not feeling well, Otto traveled to the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota where he was diagnosed with terminal cancer. He was ill for a little over one week and died at age 70 on August 6, 1946. Otto was buried in Graceland Cemetery in Racine; his wife Mary survived him by 12 years, passing away in 1958. Otto's son-in-law Floyd later sold the *Rex* to settle the estate. There is no record of her eventual fate. While there is much information available on Western Printing and Lithographing and the Wadewitz family in general, there is, unfortunately little on Otto himself. His Racine residence was listed as 1430 Villa Street, a modest single family home (which still exists).

Otto Wadewitz is remembered both at the Racine Yacht Club and the Fairhope Yacht Club. In Racine, the first Yacht Club pier, built in 1955, was named after him; Mary, his widow (then 79), returned to Racine to attend its dedication. The Yacht Club office is also named in his honor and races for the "Wadewitz Trophy" were held for many years; Carly Tomasek and Herman Jansen Jr. won it in a Star boat in 1948; the location of the trophy itself is unknown. Fairhope Yacht Club still holds an annual event in his name: the first Wadewitz Regatta was held there in the fall of 1947. In addition, a bronze bust of him resides in Fairhope's Clubhouse near a 1:12 scale model of the *Rex*; both were created by Fairhope Yacht Club member Paul Ring. A second casting of the Wadewitz bust was made and it is now in the library at the Racine Yacht Club.



The bronze bust of Otto Wadewitz, presently in the library of the Racine Yacht Club. *Steve Wheeler photo*



A publication of the RYC Historical Committee, a volunteer group dedicated to the preservation and dissemination of RYC's rich history. Written by Steve Wheeler using source material from the Racine Yacht Club archives and an article on the internet entitled "Otto Wadewitz and the Founding of the Fairhope Yacht Club" by Louis Zadnichek II, 2005; that article includes Zadnichek's interview with Chester Krusienski.

