

Thunderbird's future remains uncertain



America's most recognizable wooden speedboat, the iconic Thunderbird yacht, is celebrating her 70th year on Lake Tahoe. Since America's Great Depression, Thunderbird has transported guests in opulent luxury between high-mountain estates and luxury resorts. While her past is privileged and legendary, her future is uncertain.

Thunderbird's 70th birthday initiates a fundraising campaign to preserve Thunderbird operating on Lake Tahoe for generations to come. Annual operation costs, such as insurance, fuel and maintenance to keep the Thunderbird afloat are more than \$250,000. For information about sponsorships and how to save this historic vessel, please visit ThunderbirdLodge.org.

A glimpse into Thunderbird's past will help to understand her future. In 1939 George Whittell Jr., a character and raconteur, commissioned John Hacker, a Naval architect, to design an express commuter yacht in the style of Whittell's personal DC-2 aircraft and his many Duesenberg automobiles. Thunderbird was constructed at the cost of \$87,000 (more than \$3.3 million in today's dollars), and was launched in the pre-dawn hours on July 14, 1940, in Tahoe City. Since then, Thunderbird has arguably become America's most famous wooden boat. At 55 feet, she boasts Honduran mahogany hardwoods, polished stainless steel and elegant crystal. Her two vintage V-12 Allison Aircraft engines power her across the Lake-in-the-Sky at speeds approaching 70mph.

In 1962, Bill Harrah set out to acquire two of Whittell's Duesenberg automobiles for his auto collection, but when he

returned from his meeting with Whittell, he not only had the two automobiles, but the infamous Thunderbird. Her new owner made extensive modifications, adding a deck cover, expanding the deck and installing her dual V-12 Allison Aircraft engines. Harrah was quite the entertainer, and always had his "70 mile-per-hour cocktail lounge" poised and ready to entertain the celebrities from his casinos.

Thunderbird's rich history includes transporting sports legends, recluses, stars, scientists, U.S. presidents, artists and terminally ill children. Some of the celebrity guests include Ty Cobb, Jack Dempsey, Dean Martin, Tony Bennett, Liberace, Frank Sinatra, Bill Cosby and Howard Hughes.

Thunderbird yacht and Thunderbird Lodge were transferred to Foundation 36, a 501(c)3 public charity with a mission to preserve and protect Nevada's cultural, historic and natural treasures, in 2007. Foundation 36 has raised half the necessary funds needed to restore, rehabilitate and preserve the Thunderbird for the benefit of the Thunderbird Lodge Preservation Society.

As part of her year-long birthday celebration, Thunderbird will command center stage at the 3rd Annual South Tahoe Wooden Boat Classic, July 30-31, where more than 65 antique and classic boats will be on display at Tahoe Keys Marina in South Lake Tahoe. (www.TahoeWoodenBoats.com).

For more information visit Thunderbirdlodge.org or contact Bill Watson at (775) 828.3536 or Watson@ThunderbirdLodge.org.