

Willie Illingworth's Driftboats **By Dennis Powers**

Willie Illingworth was a fishing guide on the Rogue River and thought that an aluminum driftboat would certainly be easier to work with. Maneuvering a twenty-foot, heavy boat made of cedar or plywood was tortuous to row or handle in the rapids, not to mention the constant maintenance due to splintered wood, rot, and leaks. The design in use then was from the McKenzie River near Eugene with a pointed bow at both ends.

His design of a high flared bow, squat stern, and steep curves would work well in the Rogue's swift, shallow rapids--but welding aluminum together was a difficult task at best. Willie asked the acclaimed Glenn Wooldridge, then building his boats with wood, to make an aluminum one. Wooldridge said "no". Although he had no money, no welding experience, and only one hand (due to an accident as a child), Willie decided to do it himself.

He convinced Jim Parsons--an Ashland sawmill owner and fishing client--into loaning him \$4,000 to build six driftboats. Illingworth then spent the first three months in 1971 in shearing out patterns and welding the first aluminum boat in his Medford shop. When the prototype proved to be a success in being lighter and easier to handle on the Rogue, Willie set up in White City his boat-building company, Alumaweld, just as the name implies. He had figured out how to leave cedar planks behind and use welded aluminum.

He sold his interest six years later and in 1981 formed Willie Boats that continues to the present. Illingworth was as much a maverick in person, as he was in coming up with the idea that he could build an aluminum boat with nothing in his favor. Bill Monroe--for the *Oregonian* and whose article is linked below--wrote that Willie was: "A loud, mischievous, party-hearty, hard-drinking and often profane exterior (that) masked a private generous, caring and delightfully intelligent personality."

When Willie knew that he was dying from brain cancer, he held his own living wake in January 2007. Passing around a sign-up sheet for vials that would contain his ashes, he said then, "I don't want to miss my own party." More than sixty friends signed up. After he died two months later, his friends took the vials of his ashes for when fishing on the Rogue, guiding clients, traveling outside Oregon, or even halibut fishing in Alaska.

Willie Illingworth is credited with being the first among the many aluminum boat manufacturers of the 1970s. His determination and approach created a huge boat-building industry in the Pacific Northwest with Medford still being a center of the aluminum driftboat and powerboat industry. Willie Boats now manufactures 300 driftboats annually at its Central Point facility, and Willie would still be proud.

Sources: See generally, "Willie Boats," at [Willie Boats](#); Mark Freeman, "Willie's Legacy," *Mail Tribune*, April 14, 2010 at [Background on Willie](#); Bill Monroe, "Where's Willie? Everywhere, and always with us," *The Oregonian*, May 29, 2010, at [Willie's Vials \(and Image\)](#). A fine driftboat article is Bob Woodward, "The Oregon Driftboat," *Oregon Magazine*, October 1, 2010, at [Driftboats \(With Images\)](#).