

Bay View Founding Member and First Commodore



Victim of Early Piracy



In early June of 1905, Frank M. Underwood was one of seven founding members who signed the Articles of Incorporation bringing the Toledo Power Boat Club into existence. One week later at the club's first meeting, he was elected to the first of his three terms as Commodore. Within three months, the commodore's flagship vessel would be gone. Feared lost to the lake, the mystery remains.

The September 13, 1905 issue of the Toledo News Bee carried headlines reading "Boys Steal Naphtha Launch". It was the latest caper of a gang of river pirates that had plagued the Toledo waterfront for months. The perpetrators had been seen zigzagging the river in playful delight that evening aboard the stolen craft, before heading out towards the lake near dusk. Darkness and inexperience apparently swallowed the early power boat. It was the flagship of the Toledo Power Boat Club, owned by F. M. Underwood, stolen from the waterfront near his home and machine shop at 412 Front Street, just southwest of the modern MLK Bridge.

Either the young pirates survived the ordeal, or the gang was much larger than originally suspected, for the pirates struck again in six days. This time they targeted Noah Bowlus, Past-Commodore of Toledo Yacht Club, and his naphtha launch, *Delta*. The destruction caused in this second attack was so severe it prompted Underwood and the Power Boat Club to call an emergency meeting among all boat owners in the region for ferreting out the criminals and securing the vessels throughout Toledo and western Lake Erie.

The river pirates were indeed a recurring menace for the entire first decade of the 20th century. They began making headlines in 1901 but the ringleaders were quickly rounded up by authorities and the matter appeared to be closed. But the ugly troubles returned beginning in the fall of 1904. Now with attacks at Harrison Boatworks (modern Brenner 75) it seems the pirates were arming themselves with pistols, blackjacks, and other brutal weapons. For reasons still unknown, they seemed to heavily target the new breed of power boats becoming evermore present on the lakes. But skippers felt some relief for the coming season when two pirates were arrested on the east side docks in April 1905. It was false hope however as the terror only escalated in July of that year with the theft of the tug *Miller Brothers* which was smashed aground in the night off Grassy Point. The *Miller Brothers* docked at the foot of Monroe Street and was the supply ship that serviced all the freighters and lighthouse keepers with supplies and groceries. This now put a pinch on the economy of Toledo. The pirates seemed to have the knowledge of handling the intricacies of steam engines but not the navigational skills to avoid the various shoals of our lake front. The September attacks mentioned above were right in step with their nefarious activities.

Frank M. Underwood was an early designer and developer of gasoline engines, particularly for marine use. This author finds it difficult to believe that his stolen craft and flagship was a naphtha launch as the newspaper article made claim. Considering he had already built at least three gas powered marine engines for use in Sandusky and it was entirely his business once settled in Toledo. For motorheads and engine history enthusiasts, Underwood is quite a renowned and respected name. Though consistently employed, he led a roguish life moving constantly and never with any one company for more than a year, though usually the President or chief stockholder for each company founded. From Columbus to Union City, Indiana, to Bucyrus, Upper Sandusky, Sandusky, Elmore, Delta, and finally Toledo, where he founded the Toledo Machine and Motor Company. He left his mark and refined his designs everywhere he went. It is unclear whether it was frustration over his engines or a disagreeable personality that continually severed his companies. It is known that the constant re-settling took a toll on his personal life as his wife Laura and adult son William, both abandoned him. Having arrived in Toledo in the first years of the 20th century, he lived alone in his machine shop on Front Street. (The building is still there just before the curving turn onto Oak St. by the East Side Cantina.) In the end, leading the Toledo Power Boat Club was probably all he had.

Underwood applied for many patents during his career, including one for the first carburetor, which he simply named a “mixer”. Ultimately, he would only be granted 4 patents in his lifetime and he lost the bid for the carburetor to his former employer in Indiana. The first automobile ever to grace the streets of Sandusky ran on an Underwood engine and the Sandusky Motor Works manufactured and utilized his design for years. In his travels, Underwood could and would put a gas-powered engine on anything, from a bicycle to an oil rig. As mentioned above he outfitted at least three watercraft with low horsepower engines while moving through Sandusky.

In January of 1904 Underwood’s car was a novel sight as the first to drive out on a frozen Maumee Bay. Nowadays we take vehicles traversing the ice as commonplace, but in 1904 with the automobile a new machine, someone had to be first to experience this bizarre undertaking. He had been setting markers for the iceboat races. Underwood was soon joined by fellow auto enthusiast Ray Lipe, and with no wind for an iceboat race, the two engaged in the triangular course themselves in perhaps Toledo’s first auto race on ice. Underwood and fellow TPBC founder E.T. Affleck broke through the surface near shore and were thrown from the vehicle nearly drowning. Remarkably the automobile was completely undamaged. But the experience prompted Underwood to attempt development of a motor-powered ice boat. By the following winter he had his machine out for testing and publicity, the first of its kind ever invented. The *Toledo*, as it was called, was capable of maneuvering at speeds of 40mph. The inventor had plans for a future craft he hoped could transport 25 passengers at speeds approaching 100mph! It is not known if he ever completed the dream.

Information on the Toledo Motor and Machine Co. is difficult to come by. No examples of their work seem to remain in existence and the number of engines they built was likely small. The company made marine single-cylinder, two cycle engines. Though inventive at first, the speed of engine development at this time probably overwhelmed the aging machinist and he slowed to general repair work rather than manufacture.

During his second term as Commodore of the Power Boat Club (1907), Underwood was instrumental in getting the club moved into new accommodations at Bay View Park. Previously the club had used the Riverside Park Boathouse for their meetings and anchorage.



Underwood piloting his gas powered ice boat *Toledo*

January, 1905

Motor Boating Magazine

At that time the infant club had 90 members and boasted a fleet of 65 craft. Underwood personally invited the members of the Toledo Service Board and the Toledo City Council on a boat ride down to the Bayview lagoon to review the club’s proposed lease of the land and investigate the condition of the harbor pilings and seawall. That winter the members of the club would indeed shore their boats on the property we currently enjoy.

F. M. Underwood was found unconscious in his machine shop on August 6, 1912. He died on route to the hospital. Once before he had nearly succumbed to gas fume inhalation but was dragged to fresh air by an arriving customer. In his final year he was still serving the Toledo Power Boat Club as the membership committee chair. The organization he helped to found would, a decade later, be rechristened Bay View Yacht Club. Cmdr. Underwood would have lived long enough to see the first clubhouse erected in autumn of 1911. Some of his early engines can still be found in small regional museums. One is said to still be rusting somewhere in a field beside the oil drill it once powered. As of the writing of this article, the author has been unable to locate the Commodore’s grave.

