

## **Big Al – A St. Albans Bay Original**

**by Stephen Russell Payne**

Like so many people, I met Big Al after my lawnmower broke down twenty years ago. Three outboards, two lawnmowers, and a weed wacker later, I can attest to not only what a great mechanic he is but also to what an interesting and lively character.

Al Bluto grew up in the 1950's in an old brick house in the small Vermont hamlet of St. Albans Bay on Lake Champlain. Originally the local stage coach stop, Al's home was part of a tight-knit community where most dads commuted up the hill to St. Albans City where they worked either for the Central Vermont Railroad or they manufactured batteries for the Union Carbide factory. After work, everyone gathered back in the Bay where they enjoyed boating, swimming, and bonfire parties along the shore. Al had four brothers who did gardening, lawn mowing and other odd jobs for neighbors to help support the family.

From an early age, Al was intrigued by anything that had an engine in it. When he was eight, his dad acquired a rather primitive, two-wheel tractor which the family used to plow and maintain their two acre vegetable garden behind the house. It was on that machine that his dad taught Al how to keep a machine running well, a task he took very seriously.

Around this time, Al became friends with two older neighbors who ran their own mechanical shops. Mr. Phoenix repaired all kinds of small engines from lawn mowers to chainsaws and rototillers. He didn't, however, work on the fussier outboard motors,

which were taken care of by another neighbor, Mr. Monet, who had a small shop right on the water where people could pull their boats up to his dock for repairs. Al started hanging around the shops and soon became an apprentice to both men who recognized Al's mechanical abilities. Soon, they started calling Al when things got too busy and he would do maintenance and repairs on engines for \$1.50 an hour, which, as Al says, "was a darn good wage for a kid in the '50's"

Al loved growing up in the Bay and certainly had his share of fun. Back in those days, large tankers came up the lake from Albany, New York and tied up at the oil pier just off Mr. Monet's outboard shop. It would take a ship three days to pump its load through an underwater pipe to the huge oil tanks on shore. Though they weren't supposed to, Al and his friends loved to swim out and dive off the tall oil pier. They'd also outfit their bicycles with foam floats and "ride like hell" down the long town pier where, at the end of the cement, they would fly off a jump out into the lake. Al recalls: "It was a lively neighborhood to grow up in and in the middle of these goings on there was also an old hermit woman who lived in a little shack up on stilts attached to the town pier. She lived there all year round, using kerosene lamps for light and keeping warm with a little woodstove during the brutal winters when the Bay was completely iced in." Though she was quite a recluse, she liked Al and sometimes in the summer would let him fish off the end of the pier with her.

By the time Al was a teenager, and a self described "hell raiser," he built a powerful go cart in which he was often seen tearing around town. That was great fun until the sheriff chased him down one day and warned him he had to stay off the main roads.

Not one to be deterred, the following winter he built an ice boat using three sets of hockey skates for runners and some old bed sheets his mother gave him for sails. He was amazed at how fast the boat could make it from shore out to the Champlain islands and back. One February day he was careening back into the bay on smooth ice with the wind blowing like crazy at his back. Al says, "I must've been going better than 50 mph when I tried to land, but I lost control, glanced off the hermit's house and smashed into the big oil peer. I'm sure I scared the hell out of her but that was an amazing run!" He smiles and shakes his head. "Lotta' people thought I was crazy back then but boy did I have fun. I have to admit, though, a lot of the time, I lived right on the edge of fearless and dangerous, but I'm still here, alive at 65."

Al became a sought after local mechanic, but at the urging of his mentors left the area after high school to get professional engine training. He read an ad in a magazine that said companies were looking to train marine mechanics down in Florida. He soon headed South where he attended schools and worked on the big names in marine engines and boats, but eventually headed back to Vermont, which was still the only place that felt like home.

Happy to be back in St. Albans, Al stayed with his folks and worked for a specialty wire company over in South Hero where he coated rocket wire with gold, silver and platinum for aerospace companies like Rockwell and Raytheon. He saved up enough money to buy a place of his own and in 1980 opened Al's Small Engine Marine in his garage on the North side of the Bay. Soon people were bringing him their machines from all over northern Vermont. Some days he'd come out in the morning and have a hard time

maneuvering around his small yard because there would be so many lawn mowers, yard tractors and outboards left off for servicing and repair.

Before long, he bought a boat and started making some pretty interesting “house calls” out on the lake. One time he went out to Ball Island where an out-of-state fellow’s boat had died. After he got the engine going, Al asked the rather nervous owner to start slowly driving the boat so he could adjust the carburetors. Instead, the guy floored the throttle, throwing Al backwards in the boat. Suddenly a gas line sprung a leak and caught fire. Afterward, Al supposed that it was lucky they were going that fast as it forced the flames to shoot off the back of the boat. The panicked owner “just froze on the wheel and couldn’t do anything to help.” Fearing the boat would explode, Al struggled to get hold of a fire extinguisher and was able to put out the flames. When they made it back to land, the wide-eyed owner said, “Boy it’s a good thing you caught that in time. We could’ve been in trouble!” Al just rolled his eyes.

Another time at his shop, Al accidentally picked up the deck of a running lawn mower and it almost chopped off a finger. He said blood sprayed all over the place and while he grabbed a rag to wrap up his dangling finger, the customer turned white and started to pass out. Al had to revive him so he could get driven to the emergency room where a local surgeon sewed it back together.

Over the years, Al got so busy he sold his motorboat because people recognized it while he was trying to fish and would chase him down and ask him to fix something. He finally realized the only way he could truly relax was to head to his camp up in the mountains where there’s no electricity or phone. Despite how busy it can get, however, Al

says his favorite part of life has been the all the good people he's gotten to know. "I never get tired of helping people out. It's very satisfying and often challenging. Sometimes I get into a tricky problem with an engine that I can't quite figure out. I'll work on it in my sleep and if I figure it out in the middle of the night, I get up and go out to the shop and fix it while it's still fresh in my mind. Besides, the moonlight is beautiful on the Bay at night."

Visiting Al's home, you realize what a diversely interesting fellow he is. Next door to his classic mechanic's shop, his house is surrounded by vegetable and flower gardens, all kinds of bird houses and an assortment of fruit trees. Inside is an intriguing collection of Indian symbols and artifacts including a faded photograph of his Abnaki great-great-grandmother, Rachael Half Moon. Al says that he lives in the "Indian way," deeply respecting the earth, staying close to nature, hunting, fishing and growing much of what he eats.

Though he's in his mid sixties now and despite the urgings of his family, Al has no interest in retiring. "What would I do?" he asks with a grin, "sit in the house, look out the window through the geraniums?"

Though he doesn't terrorize the Bay with go carts or ice boats anymore, Al still has a wild streak in him as evidenced by how he likes to liven up the neighborhood on special occasions. Many years ago he built a powerful stainless steel cannon and when he and his brother were first figuring out the maximum amount of black powder they could fire in it, the tremendous concussion from one test blast actually blew all the windows out of his shop! They decided to use a little less powder after that.

For many years, Al has been a special part of the St. Albans Bay Fourth of July celebration. Before dark, he drags his cannon over to the shore and partially buries it in the sand below his shop. Across the water, the firemen wait on the town dock for a signal from Al. When he figures the last of the hundreds of boats have arrived for the fireworks show, he lights the steel beast and runs like hell before a tremendous blast fires confetti over the Bay. The huge crowd on land and in their boats erupts in cheers and horn blowing and then the fireworks begin, breaking in brilliant splendor out over the water. “This is the best place on earth,” Al says with a smile. “I’m a very lucky man.”

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