

Who Remembers the Pells Island Amphicar?

During the 1960s, there was a most unusual watercraft plying the lake. It was an amphicar --- an amphibious car that could be driven down the boat launching ramp straight into the water, thereafter chugging its way merrily to its destination out near the far tip of the island.



The amphicar, the first and ultimately the most successful amphibious automobile, was a vehicle of German design and manufacture that was produced for a relatively short interval between 1961 and 1965. Less than 4,000 vehicles total were made. However, due to the highly collectible nature of these cars and their overall quality, over 700 of them have survived.



Driven by a British Triumph engine, the car was capable of achieving a water speed of 7 miles per hour and could cruise on the highway at 10 times that rate. And just in case it managed to take on some water along the way, it was equipped with a bilge pump, although most of them managed to remain afloat while tied up to a dock for several days at a time.

They were sturdy vehicles. Indeed, several of them were able to cross the English Channel, at times battling up to 20-foot waves and gale force winds without sinking. Relatively small in size, they measured about 14 feet long and 5 feet wide, weighing a little over 2,000 pounds. Equipped with both a forward and a reverse gear during operation in water, these little cars could be backed into boat slips quite easily. As shown in the accompanying photograph(s), they were “convertibles” equipped with folding cabriolet tops...and those of us who watched our Douglas Lake amphicar as it plowed through the waves held our collective breaths assuming the water would somehow flood the interior, although it never seemed to do so.



The Douglas Lake amphicar was owned by Ronald and Evelyn Wilson, who stayed out on the island from roughly 1955 until their final journey together in the early 1970s. When not in use, it could be found parked near the shore line, causing passersby to stop their boats and gawk.







PRESIDENT LYDON B. JOHNSON DRIVING HIS AMPHICAR 5-30-65