

Elegant Elgin's

Article & Photos: Dave Morrison

It starts right up, has good power and idles way down! Love those Mercs or was it a Johnson? Let's see. Wait, it says *Elgin*. Are you kidding me?

Now let me ask you if you have an Elgin in your collection – voluntarily – not as an unavoidable throw-in on some other deal? I'll bet the answer is “no” but read on and you may want to change that.

Well anyway, one time when I was watching outboard videos on *YouTube*, I stumbled across one for an Elgin and I decided to watch it. The motor ran well, and the guy really liked it. Plus, it had a script saying ELGIN in italics stylishly embossed on the aluminium starter housing. I just had to go deeper.

It turns out that there was a real following for these Elgin motors, largely because they were about 30% cheaper than the big names. Also, they were well-built, reliable and had some unique features and outboard “firsts,” belying the brand's no-name image.

When I was a kid, I turned up my nose at any outboard that came from Simpsons-Sears because they looked funny and couldn't possibly, in my mind, compete with “real” outboards. Of course, the big boys did nothing to discourage this perception in their advertisements.

The first thing to realize about Elgin outboards is that there never was such a thing as an Elgin outboard. They were all West Bends. Sears commissioned West Bend to develop and manufacture its own unique outboard line, Elgin, just after the war and, as part of the deal, West Bend was not to market these motors anywhere else or under its own name. This exclusivity started in 1946 and ended around 1959 when West Bend started marketing its own brand at the expiration of the contract.

Prior to the war's end, West Bend engineers spent a good deal of time in developing and testing these original motors at Pike Lake, Wisconsin, and Fort Myers, Florida. Sadly, there appears to be no known Elgin guru, like Carl Kiekhaefer or the Johnson brothers, just a team of dedicated engineers. Consequently, there are no legendary stories about the “Elgin Founders.”



1946 Elgin 1.25 hp with sculptured exhaust.



1950 Elgin 16 hp with fiberglass hood.



Stylish 1959 Elgin 7.5 hp

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Rare 1958 Elgin 35 hp "Skipper".
Have you seen one?

Interestingly enough, almost all the Elgin's up until about 1957/58 were green. But I have two brown ones. I think that the brown ones were largely for the Canadian market and sold by Simpsons-Sears. From about 1957 onwards, Elgin's came in a variety of colours and the iconic "green period" was over.

During this 13-year run, lots of 2's, 3's, 5's and 7.5's were produced and, in 1955, Elgin joined the horsepower race with a 25, then a 30 in 1957 and, finally, a 35 in 1958. I can't find any production data on the various models, but judging from the pictures and stories online, the offerings at 7.5 hp and below were by far and away the most popular. The bigger motors don't seem to be around, or at least not plentiful (see photo with question from an Elgin site). The 12 hps (1955 to 1959) were well-received and plentiful, and some are still in regular use today.

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156 . . . SIMPSONS-SEARS

But the "signature" and most collectable Elgin is the tiny 1946 1.25 hp air-cooled model. It has a sculptured exhaust pipe arrangement that is quite unique. It weighed 21 lbs, but was a fully featured outboard, not a toy. These were produced from 1946 to 1951. During this period, other air-cooled models like the 2 and 3 hp, were supplemented with water-cooled models and the water-cooled 5 and 7.5 arrived with a neutral clutch that worked well.

What should have been a revolutionary motor – the 1950 Elgin 16 – seems to have been a bit of a flop. Elgin came out with a fiberglass hood on its flagship 16 hp model in 1950. This model also had needle bearings, a full gearshift, and a separate tank. Additionally, the 16 had the first vertical recoil starter, very similar to the familiar OMC ones, but at least 10 years earlier. Production numbers for this 16 seem low. I wondered why there were no racing references to this model (similar to the Champion 16). A bit of digging provided the likely answer: its displacement was a hefty 24 cubic inches, 20% more than the allowable B racing class maximum. But the ads claimed that it would pull two skiers. Not sure on that one, although it was heavy enough at 91 pounds.

The 7.5 and 5 had a unique tilt up clip that automatically held the motor up when beached. These models had both built-in gas tanks and a fuel pump with a switchable fuel delivery choice. Also, they featured rubber powerhead mounting for vibration isolation, another Elgin first.

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Internally, all Elgin motors had a high quality top main bearings and many had needle bearings for the rods. Elgins used Wico ignitions and Tillotson carbs, similar to Scott-Atwater. The Wico coils are usually ok as are the points, but the condensers can be bad, and originals are tough to find. However, others will work fine if they fit the clamping style. OMC coils can be fitted over the Wico laminations fairly easily and they work well.

As a policy, Elgin models were improved over the years, but most new parts and improvements were backward compatible – a real boon to Elgin owners.

Getting an old Elgin to run is not a very difficult task. Maybe I'm just lucky, but 4 of my 5 Elgins started on the first or second pull after years of storage and no work by me to ready them. (Well, I did dust them off first.) These motors run smoothly and idle quite well. Very fun to have and put to use.

So, what's not to like? Well. . . impellers for the 5s and 7.5s: they're easy to replace, but all known NOS is gone. There is one guy who will remanufacture your old one in the states. These are splined. Lately guys have taken to getting two (currently available) Mercury impellers and stacking them up to form the 1" tall necessary replacement. Also, apparently because no primer was used, the paint was prone to peeling a bit. Luckily, replacement decals and paint are readily available.

Currently I have two of the 1.25 air-cooled 1946 models, a 2 hp (also air-cooled) and a 5 and a 7.5, both water-cooled. All of them have run in my barrel, but their own water tests will have to wait until spring.

The air-cooled 2 hp has a copper "water ram tube" that takes water from behind the propeller and sprinkles it over the hot exhaust leg to protect the user from getting burned and the motor's lower main bearing from getting too hot.

These tubes were used by West Bend on its own 2 and 3.5 hp motors right up until Chrysler took over West Bend around 1959-60. You can tell them by looking for a small copper tube protruding from the exhaust housing, facing the prop.

Chrysler later bought out West Bend and perpetuated these small air-cooled with water tube models under its own name and later under the Eaton's Viking label in the early 60's. So, that 1964 Viking 3.5 that you have (built by Chrysler in Brampton) is really a West Bend!

This article addresses mainly the "green period" (1946-59) of the Elgin dynasty. Pretty much the golden age. The following years are a mish mash of Elgin, West Bend and Chrysler and will be covered in a future article. Hint: These later West Bends are quite interesting. The Elgin name after around 1960 was never again a unique brand of its own, but was from then on a rebadged motor.

For now, I hope that this article has sparked your interest in Elgins. Keep your eyes open for these sleeping beauties and, best of all, they don't fetch high prices. So . . .

Author's note: I have read everything I could find on Elgins, but there really isn't much out there. If you have any additional facts, stories or corrections, forward them to me and I will update things in a future article. Contact Dave Morrison at motorman@rogers.com



1956, all Elgin's had fiberglass hoods.