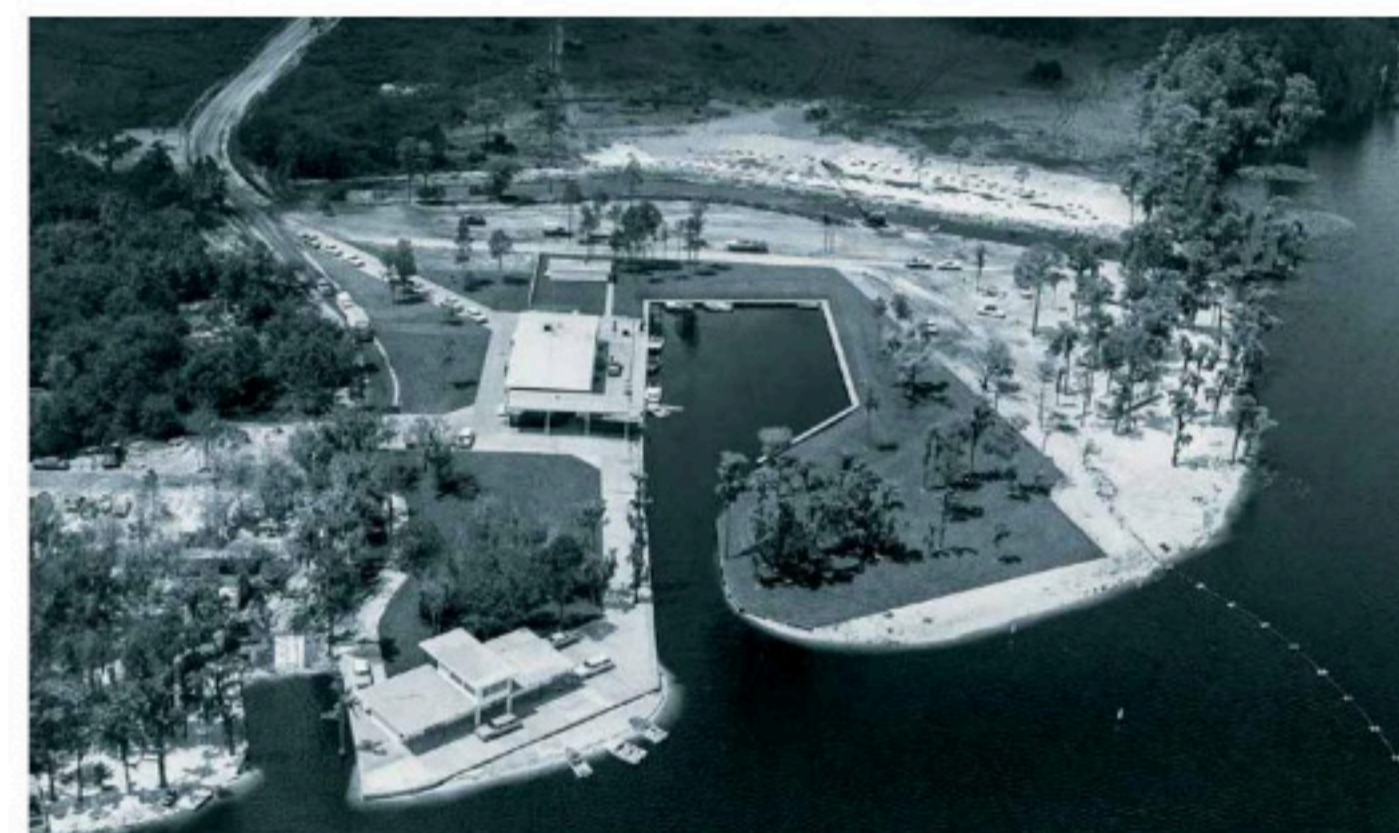


X MARKS THE SPOT

Sometimes the path forward is framed by the past, as Mercury Marine demonstrates with a triumphant return to its iconic R&D centre and engine proving ground, Lake X.

feature

Heritage



LEFT Aerial view of the Lake X operational centre – circa late 1960s.

OPPOSITE On their way to the record books in 1957 – 25,000 miles non-stop.

There are times when the best way to see the path ahead is to study the path behind. Just ask Mercury Marine. As the manufacturer of Mercury outboard motors, MerCruiser inboard and sterndrive engines and a vast range of marine accessories, Mercury is the backbone of Brunswick Corporation, a global giant with unequalled technical resources and US\$3 billion in annual worldwide sales. Yet the company's most-coveted asset these days is a renewed lease on a 5,000ha swamp.

Located in central Florida, that swamp is the home of Lake X, Mercury's ultra-secret engine test facility and technology proving ground. Abandoned by the company 16 years ago in the face of painful budget cuts, the facility sat unused until last year, when Mercury renewed the lease on the coveted site.

Although its buildings today may sport a bit of peeling paint and evidence of hurricane damage, everything otherwise remains exactly as the day the company left. The structures are now being restored, testing has resumed, and Mercury is ready to once again leverage its legendary R&D muscle back where it all began.

Established by Mercury's then-president Carl Kiekhafer in the late 1950s, Lake X gave the company a key competitive advantage

over its competitors by enabling product testing all year round – something that was impossible to do back at its home base in the US Midwest, where sub-zero winter temperatures limited boating activity to no more than eight months per year.

Beyond that, it also gave Mercury complete and total privacy, something it hadn't previously enjoyed while developing new engines on public lakes back home under the incessant scrutiny of its competitors' prying eyes, binoculars and telephoto lenses.

BUILDING LAKE X

In 1956 Kiekhafer felt he had a world-beater of a new engine on the drawing boards, one radical enough in design that he shuddered at the thought of testing the prototype on local lakes. Wishing to keep his new six-cylinder, 60hp 'Tower of Power' outboard under wraps for the moment, he began searching for a more secluded place to conduct the requisite on-water development. That location turned out to be in central Florida, where aerial reconnaissance revealed a large, remote plot of swampland that completely encircled a medium-sized lake.

Measuring about 5km long, 1.6km wide and about 10km in circumference, the 580ha lake was shielded from sight at ground level by a vast expanse of trees, while a substantial

population of alligators, snakes and blood-thirsty mosquitoes provided a natural deterrent against any would-be corporate spies. Kiekhaefer appropriately dubbed the property 'Lake X.'

The first order of business was clearing a path for road access, then a security gate and buildings for the R&D team. A long wooden dock with a fuel pump and an observation gondola was built, with shoreline foliage beside it cleared to provide a crude but functional launch ramp. By early 1957 Lake X was fully operational, just in time to test the Tower of Power prototypes.

Out on the water the new engine exceeded expectations. Never one to let a good PR opportunity go to waste, Kiekhaefer decided to publicly announce not only the new engine, but also the existence of Lake X – a decision that set the table for one of the company's most remarkable PR initiatives.

The top speed of its engines had long been a point of pride for Mercury, and when competing outboard brands found it difficult to match that performance, they responded by suggesting the engines would quickly burn out. "Mercury's fast, but it won't last" became one competitor's catchphrase. This infuriated Kiekhaefer, who was determined to prove them wrong.

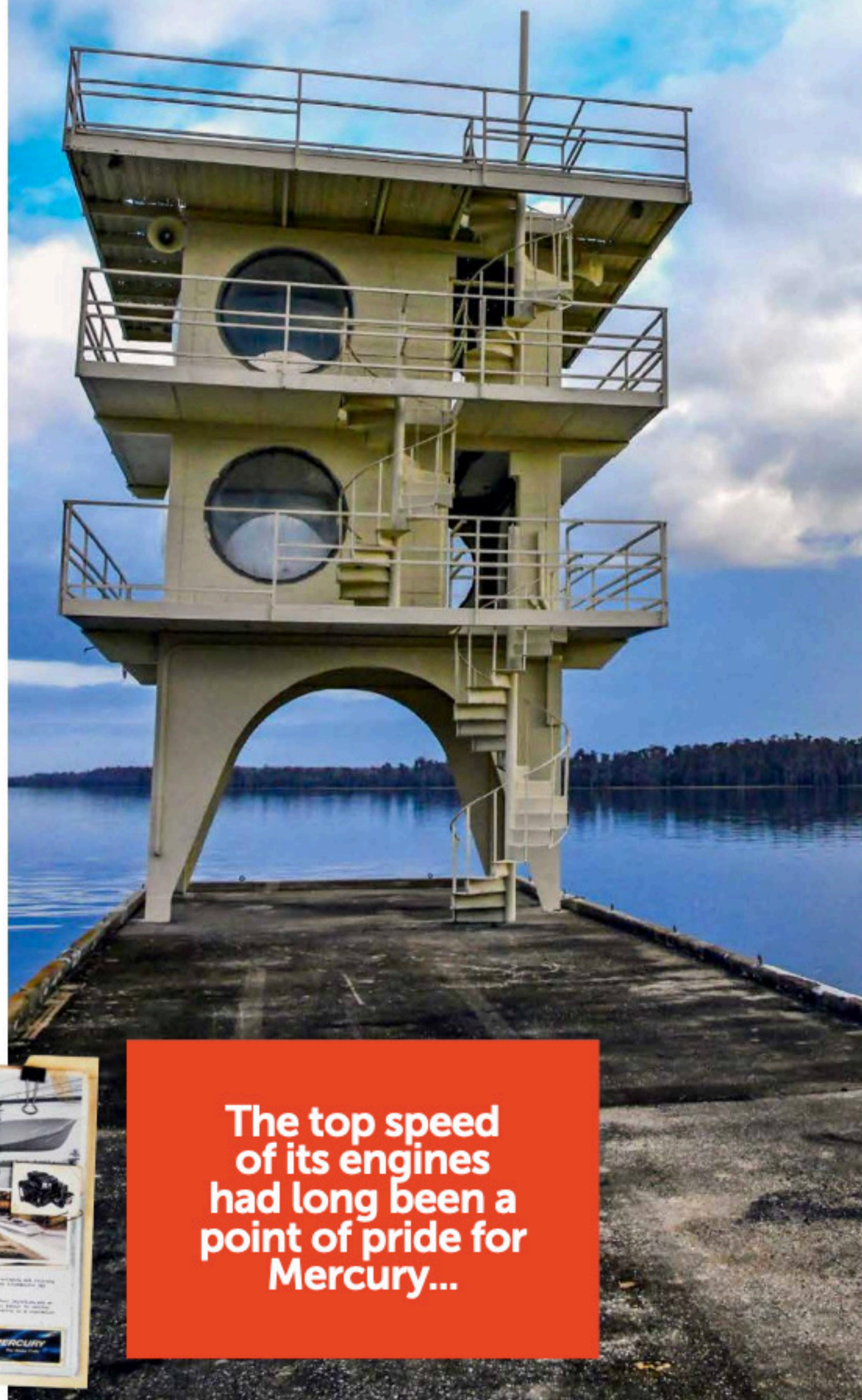
His answer involved an endurance run at Lake X around the all-new Tower of Power Mark 75 engine. Kiekhaefer set up two identical boats to run continuously over a measured course, 24-hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week, until they each clocked 25,000 miles (more than 40,000km) of continuous operation. He set the 25,000-mile target because that's the approximate circumference of the earth – he wanted to be able to say the Tower of Power could run around the earth non-stop, proving it really would last.

He rigged a pair of 15-foot Raveau runabouts with the new engine, then invited several members of the United States Auto Club to stay at Lake X to independently witness and verify the endurance run. The boats ran, non-stop, around the clock – averaging about 50km/hour.

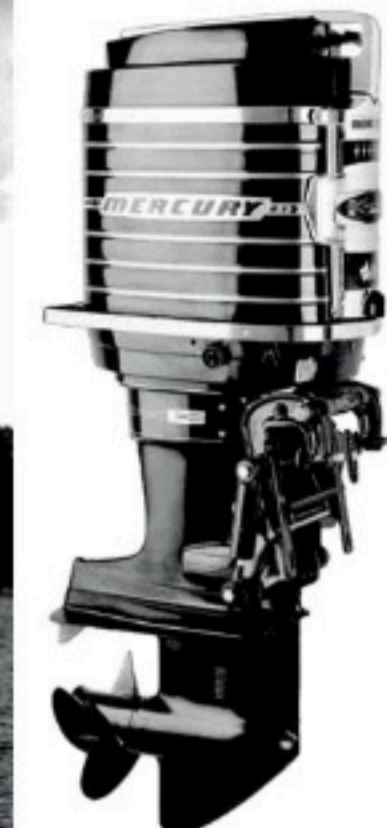
Crew changes were conducted at full throttle every four hours, while the boats were similarly refuelled on the fly from support craft rigged with 200-litre drums mounted on an elevated framework, allowing fuel to be transferred by gravity.

OPPOSITE TOP Up and away – one of the stunts staged by the Mercury team. She's a brave lady...

BELOW Lake X today – the observation tower will no doubt receive a facelift.



The top speed of its engines had long been a point of pride for Mercury...



RIGHT The Lake X team in 1957.

BELOW Refuelling-on-the-fly – all part of the 1957 25,000-mile Endurance Record.



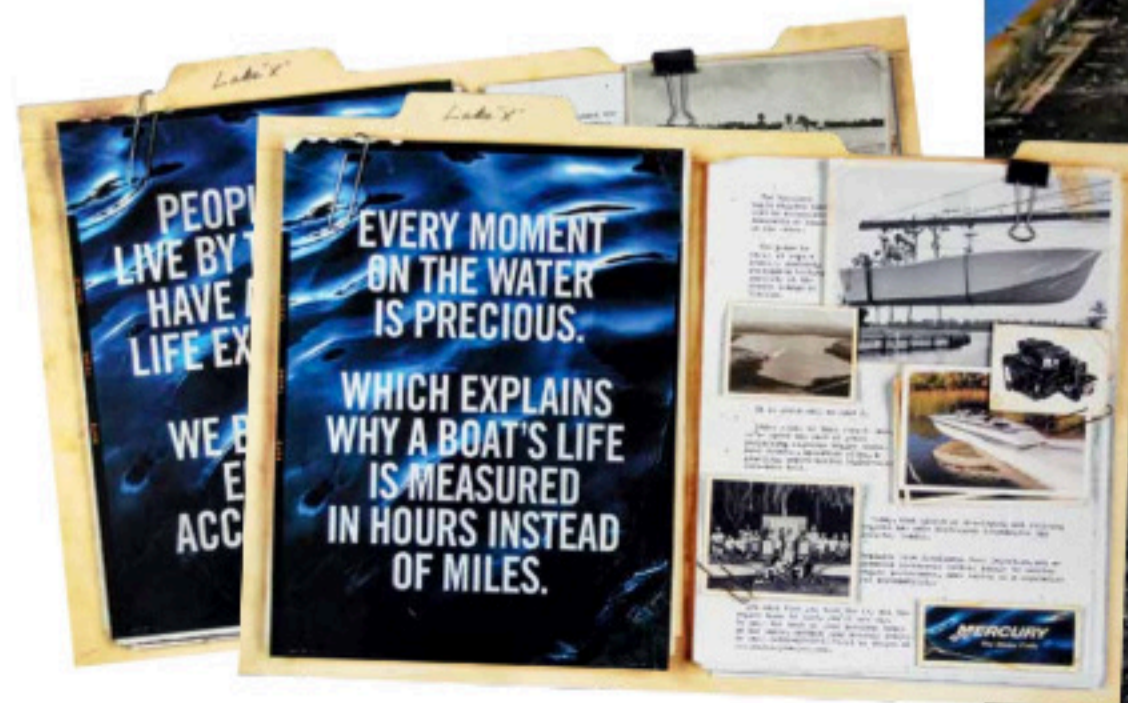
Some 68 days and 18 hours later, both vessels crossed the finish line having run continuously for the target 25,000 miles – and without any problems. Rather than earning a cushy retirement, the engines were pulled from the water, inspected, then sent back out to do it all over again and complete another 25,000 miles each – just to guarantee that the results weren't a fluke.

What subsequently became known as the 50,000 Mile Endurance Record at Lake X not only put the competitor's derogatory catchphrase to rest, but firmly established Mercury as the world's number one outboard manufacturer. (Ed's note:

original film footage of this event can be seen by scanning the QR code on page 37).

While the endurance run catapulted Lake X into the public consciousness, it was only one of many publicity events staged at the facility over the next 30 years. A series of advertising images promoted the 'secret' facility, showing boats pulling up to 31 water-skiers simultaneously, pulling a water-skiing elephant named Queenie, jumping over cars parked on the dock or using Mercury outboards to power a variety of wildly unseaworthy craft – such as inverted kitchen tables – across Lake X.

Throughout, the company continued to grow and expand,





merging with Brunswick Corporation in 1961 and unveiling its first MerCruiser sterndrive engine that year, followed by its first 100hp outboard – the 1000 Phantom – the following season. For years it seemed like every new product announcement contained some reference to secret testing at Lake X.

Over the years the Lake X facility was duly expanded and enhanced. The narrow, finger-shaped bay at the southern end of the lake that had been selected for the centre of operations was dredged, widened, and encased in a sea wall, providing a far more inviting, protected and durable work space than the original long wooden dock represented.

The bay was expanded further with a large turning basin, and an illuminated dealership sign which read 'Kiekhaefer Mercury Outboards' was erected to mark the entrance channel. A new rigging building, a new double launch ramp and an additional

...there was a massive push within the company to right the only wrong in its history, and find a way to return to Lake X.



two-level building with office space and accommodations for engineers were added in the mid-60s.

A few years later an all-new rigging building that extended over the water was constructed across the end of the turning basin, eliminating the need for technicians to pull boats from the lake simply to perform minor work. With its numerous round bubble windows and massive aircraft hangar-type doors, the new R&D building boasted a decidedly late-60s vibe, and looked far more like something that might have been built by NASA as part of its moon quest.



TOP Engineers devised somewhat unusual tests for the engines.

LEFT The new 2020 Lake X team is back where it all began.

RIGHT The table stunt – not particularly streamlined, but it will get you across the lake.



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BACK TO THE FUTURE

The holder of more than 200 patents, Kiekhaefer retired as president of Mercury Marine in 1969, and subsequently sold the Lake X property – which he had owned personally – to the Kirchman Foundation on the condition that the site be maintained in perpetuity as a nature preserve. Mercury continued to use the Lake X facility for engine testing until 2004 when, in the face of financial pressure and difficult budget cuts, the company chose to not renew its lease.

Fast-forward 14 years and Mercury knew that it had made a mistake in walking away from Lake X. As it approached its 80th anniversary last year, there was a massive push within the company to right the only wrong in its history, and find a way to return to Lake X.

“We hear stories all the time about folks who worked for Mr. Kiekhaefer and their wonderful experiences at Lake X,” says Michelle Dauchy, Mercury Marine chief marketing officer. “We want to create new memories and build on our heritage of performance, reliability and to merge together our new Go Boldly brand cache with 80 years of history.”

And that it did – going boldly forward to sign a brand-new lease on the property that it had made famous the world over. Wasting no time, Mercury promptly resumed R&D testing at Lake X within weeks of signing the lease.

Untouched since Mercury’s 2004 departure, the Lake X site today is an extraordinary and fascinating place. On one hand it’s a hub of constant activity as the manufacturer’s primary R&D centre, and at the same time, parts of it remain an absolute time capsule.

The main R&D building, with its three-panel aircraft hangar doors and numerous Plexiglas bubble windows, has clearly seen its share of hurricane damage and needs a new roof, but remains otherwise structurally sound and in comparatively good shape. Long-term plans are to restore the building to its original glory.

The iconic control tower on the end of the pier is still there, its uppermost deck also showing some evidence of storm damage, but still



BELOW Back to the future at Lake X.

RIGHT A trio of Verado 400s will release a little adrenalin.

LEFT Brunswick Corp CEO David Foulkes.



very much the preferred spot for monitoring the proceedings on the water with its commanding 360° views. It, too, is slated for full restoration.

With the surrounding swampland carefully managed as a nature preserve, wildlife abounds. Wild turkeys and white-tailed deer walk through the property on a regular basis, completely unconcerned by the human activity.

Alligators must occasionally be shooed from access roads and launch ramps, while the healthy snake population protects the property from rodent issues. They, and the ferocious mosquitoes in the surrounding swamp, continue to ensure Mercury’s R&D efforts remain hidden from the prying eyes and camera lenses of any would-be corporate spies.

Brunswick Corporation CEO David Foulkes summed up Mercury’s return to Lake X matter-of-factly, as the two of us sat talking in the bow of a new Boston Whaler, enjoying the view of the historic turning basin, the entry channel and the iconic tower.

“When you consider the incredible history that has been made here, the decision to return was a no-brainer,” he said. “If you stand on the end of the pier the lake looks exactly the same as it did in 1957. You can feel that energy and that spirit today. It feels like anything is possible, and that truly is an amazing thing.” **BNZ**

WATCH IT