

*Glenn Gardner felt suffocating despair
as he realized help was not on its way*

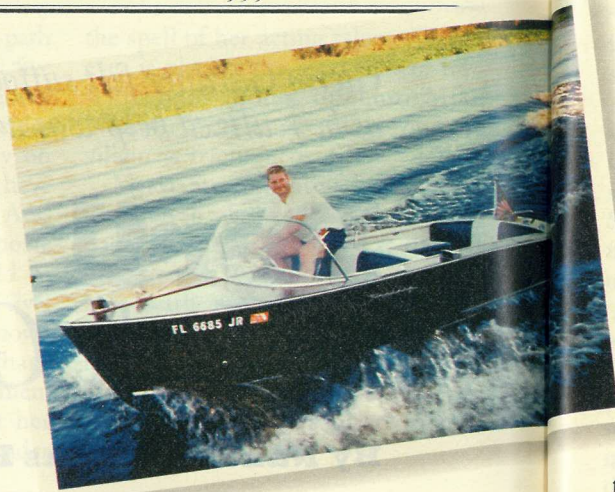
Peril *on Lake George*

By Nanette Woitas Holt

STANDING at the railing of the rented houseboat, 29-year-old Glenn Gardner gazed out across the gently rippling water. Before him lay the vast expanse of Lake George, an 11-mile-long freshwater lake in north Florida. It was an overcast Sunday morning in October 1997, and the boat's passengers—nine adults and two children—had gathered to throw a surprise 40th-anniversary party for the parents of Glenn's wife, Kris.

Deciding to grab some breakfast, Glenn left the others on deck and stepped into the

boat's cabin. Inside, he paused to examine a newspaper clipping that his brother-in-law, Mike Byerly, had taped to the wall. Like everyone else in the family, Mike was well aware of Glenn's special sensitivity, and he savored every opportunity to rub it in.



Classic Craft— Glenn Gardner on his antique boat, *Shameless*, the day before his ordeal.

THE PHOTO SHOWED two trappers posing beside an enormous alligator. Glenn didn't need to read the caption to know that less than a week had passed since the 14-foot creature was pulled from a nearby waterway. Nor did he need reminding that Lake George was home to many alligators—so many that once a year Florida authorities allow hunters to thin their numbers, even though the species is protected.

And they make fun of me for not wanting to go in the water, Glenn thought as he plucked a muffin off a plate and stepped back outside to rejoin the others.

Soon they noticed the sky was

darkening. Wind gusts tugged at clothes, knocked hats into the water and sent paper plates skittering across the deck. Whitecaps flecked the water as surging waves slapped against the boat's hull.

The revelers decided it was time to fire up the houseboat's cantankerous old engine and head in. They aimed the craft toward the mouth of the St. John's River, on the far side of the lake. The marina lay four more hours upstream.

Tethered to the houseboat's stern was a small antique boat that Glenn had restored with his own hands. As the storm blew closer, waves began to slam the craft repeatedly against the larger vessel.

Glenn winced. He had rescued

the classic mahogany runabout a year earlier, just before his only daughter, Carlin Joelle, was born. Even his wife had grown to love the dependable little boat, which Glenn christened *Shameless* after the song that was played for the couple's first dance at their wedding.

"That's it," Glenn told Kris after *Shameless* took a particularly rough blow. "I've got to keep her from getting pounded to death."

He made his way back to the runabout, climbed in and started up her motor. Dressed only in navy-blue swimming trunks, Glenn untied *Shameless*, settled in behind the wheel and revved the engine. "I'll see you where the lake meets the river in about an hour," he called, then roared away.

The rain pelted Glenn and stung his eyes as he struggled to keep the runabout's bow planing above the waves. He quickly lost sight of the houseboat.

Soon afterward, Glenn heard the engine making an odd gurgling sound and felt the boat slowing abruptly. He turned to see seat cushions floating behind him. The runabout was taking on water—fast. The pounding it had taken against the houseboat must have cracked

the craft's hull. He felt the cool water lapping at his ankles and creeping up his leg. In the time it took him to stand and turn off the motor, the water rose above his knees and climbed toward his waist.

Within seconds waves crashed over him. He groped for a bumper to mark the spot where his boat was sinking, but couldn't find one. A lightweight ski vest floated past, and he lunged for it. Splashing wildly, he snagged an escaping paddle and a seat cushion just as the boat whooshed out from under him and



Worst Nightmare— The newspaper photo that struck terror into Glenn's heart.

sank into the black water. Glenn's mind raced. He was alone, treading water and stranded miles from shore.

Clutching the paddle and the seat cushion, he pushed himself through the churning water, wave after wave washing over him.

He swam for perhaps half an hour as the flash storm slowly subsided. Finally, he spotted a wooden post that was poking ten feet above the water. On top was a grid of crisscrossing boards.

The post, part of an old bombing range, was splintered and covered with sharp barnacles. Glenn worried that cuts might attract alligators. Then he spotted a nail near the top of the post. Raising his paddle, he hooked the nail with its rope handle. Then he slowly shinned up the paddle's narrow neck.

Safe but uncomfortable on his flimsy foot-wide perch, Glenn sat and sulked about the loss of his beloved *Shameless*. The storm had lifted, and the lake now seemed larger than ever. To his eyes, the shoreline in every direction was a thin strip of green where the water met the sky. He felt almost invisible as he scanned the horizon for rescuers. *How could they possibly see me?* Then he thought about his family and how worried Kris must be about him.

BUT FOR ALL KRIS KNEW, her husband was having better luck than

the rest of the family. Shortly after Glenn set off on his own, the engine on the houseboat failed. It took three hours to get it running again. During the delay, Kris assumed he had made it to the rendezvous spot at the river mouth.

Her brother guessed that Glenn had then wandered into a riverside café for lunch. "He's living it up, and we're stuck out here in the middle of this lake," he joked.

HUNCHED on his platform above the water, Glenn could barely make out shadowy specks on the horizon—boats traveling near the meeting place, some five miles away. At a closer distance he saw what looked like other posts. He decided to swim toward them and get closer to the boat traffic in hopes someone would see him.

Just as he began to make a move, he stopped abruptly when a large dark form swam lazily by. Two unblinking eyes regarded Glenn casually as his heart pounded.

Glenn watched the alligator slowly swim away, then sat back to ponder his next move. He could stay put and wait. But days might pass before someone spotted him. Besides, he was much too anxious to see his wife and baby daughter to simply do nothing.

Closing his eyes, Glenn dropped

He stopped abruptly when a large dark form swam by.

into the murky water and started to swim.

For hours he pushed through the waves, clutching the paddle and trying not to imagine what unseen shapes might be gliding beneath him. Still, his thoughts filled him with a terror that quickened the movements of his arms and legs.

Finally he climbed, exhausted, onto another wooden post and stared at the boats, which still seemed impossibly far away. He pulled off his swim trunks, ripped out the white inner lining and tied it to the paddle. Then he stood there, vigorously waving his makeshift flag until his arms were too sore to continue. Afternoon turned to evening, and still no one came.

AS DARKNESS APPROACHED, Kris and the others on the houseboat began to worry. Suspecting that Glenn might also have had engine trouble, she radioed the marina. Sure enough, his truck and boat trailer were still there. Kris asked the marina operators to notify the authorities. "My husband is missing," she said, her voice tightening. "Please help me find him."

When the houseboat finally chugged into the marina that evening, there was still no word from Glenn. Hours passed as dozens of rescue boats scanned the lake.

An officer approached Kris and showed her some blue-and-white

seat covers. She recognized them instantly. "We found them floating with some life jackets," he said. "It looks like your husband's boat sank."

Kris started to shake. She found a telephone and called Glenn's parents in New York. She told them what had happened and began to cry. They immediately began making plans to come down to Florida.

AFTER THE SUN DIPPED behind the forest, Glenn began to see the far-off lights of search-party boats. Before long he heard a roar and saw helicopters scouring the lake with floodlights. The choppers buzzed about for hours, but no one spotted him.

The next morning one helicopter passed so close to Glenn that he was able to read the numbers on its side. Sleepy and stiff, he felt a suffocating despair as he realized help was not on its way—and might never come.

Normal boat traffic resumed in the deep-water channel in the center of the lake. Glenn was east of the channel. He felt strong enough to swim, but his thoughts once again turned to gators.

Remembering that the animals hunt by night and sleep by day, he waited a few hours to let them settle down. Then, taking a deep breath, he dived into the water and made

Two unblinking eyes regarded him casually as his heart pounded.

his way toward the middle of the lake.

For five hours he swam, playing mental games to keep his mind off his fatigue and fear. He aimed for a long line of crab traps and rewarded himself for each one he passed. *When I get to the next one, I'll start swimming backstroke. At the one after that, I'll rest, take a break, then switch to breaststroke.*

As he became more exhausted, he used the vest like a surfboard and fought to keep moving, to remain alert. Kicking to lift his head, he scanned the horizon for approaching boats. Nothing.

As he swam, fragmented images played randomly through his mind—of Kris, his baby, his boat. Suddenly he saw a shape coming toward him. A houseboat. Glenn could see no one on deck, so he waved and yelled, hoping to make himself heard over the engine.

But the boat simply glided past him, then faded to a speck.

GLENN kept swimming, but the disappointment and fatigue made lead weights of his arms and legs. Six hours after he had left his perch, he knew that he couldn't pull himself through the water much longer. His muscles ached and were knotting up. He was sunburned, exhausted and hungry.

He thought of his comfortable bed at home. He longed to squeeze his

tiny daughter and tell Kris once more that he loved her. He wanted simply to rest. But with every minute, every stroke, he realized he might not leave this lake alive.

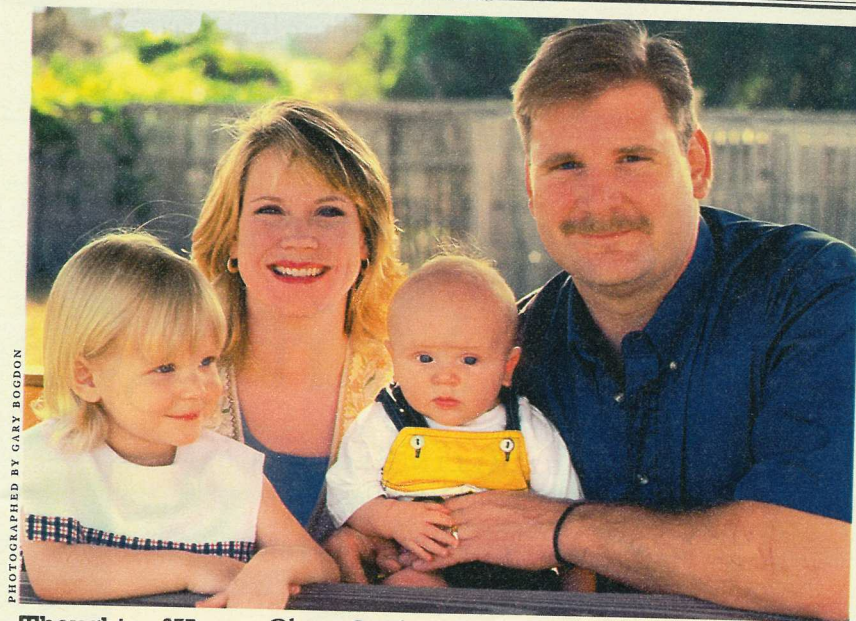
Time dragged on, and his movements slowed. It was all he could do to keep his head above water. Just then, his eyes were drawn to an elongated smudge on the horizon. As it moved closer he could see it was a barge, and behind, pushing it, was a tugboat.

For the crew to see him, Glenn knew he had to put himself directly in the barge's path. He also realized that, should it fail to stop, the barge would slam into him and thrust him deep underwater. Even if he survived the impact and did not drown, he very likely would be sucked into the whirling blades of the boat's propeller.

But it was a chance he had to take, because he wasn't sure how much longer he could last out on the lake. Summoning what energy remained, Glenn forced his limbs to work harder. Then, feebly waving and struggling to hold his head above the water, he watched as the enormous barge bore down on him.

An eerie calmness settled over him as he thought again of his wife and daughter. It had been 30 hours since he had seen them last. It felt like 30 years. *I hope they know how much I love them.*

A deafening blast from the tug's horn—then another and another—



PHOTOGRAPHED BY GARY BOGDON

Thoughts of Home—Glenn Gardner, with wife Kris, daughter Carlin and new baby son Mathias, clung to the hope of seeing his family again.

shook the air around him. Glenn's mind whirled, then two tug workers reached down for him and pulled him aboard.

IN AN OFFICE near the marina, Kris steeled herself. Fortunately, she was not aware that, according to friends, television had just reported that a body had been pulled from Lake George. A short while later the phone rang. "Miss," a voice said stiffly, "a tugboat crew pulled your husband from the water. We don't know his condition."

Kris returned to her room and tried to stay calm as she waited for

more news. She paced nervously, her eyes darting from the clock to the phone. The wait was excruciating, interminable. Then she heard a knock at the door. She opened it and gasped. There, standing with his friends, was Glenn—bright red and blistered from the sun.

Kris rushed to her husband and wrapped him in her arms. "I missed you so much," she said.

Glenn buried his face in her long, wavy hair. "I was sure I'd never see you again," he said. "I'm so glad I was wrong." He pulled back from her and gave a weak smile. "Now all I want to do is go home." ■