



# FOX POINT'S BROOKS STEVENS

## *and His Industrial Design Revolution*

By Douglas H. Frazer

When industrial design became an important feature in product manufacturing in the late 1920s, Brooks Stevens was poised to make his mark. Stevens entered the field in 1933. He owed much to his father, William Clifford Stevens, who as an engineering executive at Cutler-Hammer, a major manufacturer of electric controls for industrial machinery, was prominent in Milwaukee's business community. The elder Stevens asked his son to redesign the controls and give them a more modern look: a "spiffy-looking switchbox" likely would be better for sales.

Stevens advanced quickly. By 1940 he had five staff members and 77 clients, including major companies. This was the new trend in manufacturing. Without compromising quality, smarter appearance and functional beauty would lead to greater sales. "The industrial designer in today's business world," said Stevens, "should be basically a businessman, an engineer, and a stylist—and in that direct order." By 1954 he began to articulate a concept of planned obsolescence ("instilling in the buyer the desire to own something a little newer, a little better, a little sooner than is necessary"), a term he coined although probably not invented.

Stevens was born in 1911 in Milwaukee. At age 8 he was struck down by a severe case of polio. With great effort he eventually regained the use of his limbs.

Stevens attended Milwaukee Country Day School (now the Milwaukee Jewish Day School and the Bader Hillel Academy at 6401 N. Santa Monica) and graduated in 1929. High school pals included Ralph Evinrude, the future head of the Outdoor Marine Company and Fred Stratton, the future head of Briggs and Stratton. Evinrude and Stratton each became an important client—and a Fox Point neighbor. From 1929 to 1933, Stevens studied architecture at Cornell University. Returning to Milwaukee, he persuaded a grocery supply firm to let him redesign product labels and won a blind contest to redesign the corporate logo for Cutler-Hammer. In short order he had a substantial book of business.

In 1937 he married Alice Kopmeier from Milwaukee-Downer Seminary and a State tennis champion. Alice's mother was the daughter of Henry Uihlein, the President of Schlitz Brewery.

Stevens valued surroundings that embodied sleek modernity. This is illustrated by the house he and local architect Fitzhugh Scott, Jr. designed and built in Fox Point at 8041 N. Gray Log Lane. The house, completed in 1940, mirrored the Bauhaus-Art Moderne styles: it has a spare, undulating façade, flat roof, and unbroken lines that included a tall window of glass bricks lighting a dramatic circular stairway and smaller windows resembling port holes with sliding metal shutters. Several details of the interior were innovative, including a radio built directly into the wall of the basement, a bedroom table that swiveled over the bed, and a built-in art deco-style dining room server made of Lucite. The severe outward effect was softened through vegetation. In the large backyard, Stevens built a pool, entertainment pavilion, rock garden, and tennis court.




Here Brooks and Alice raised four children, David, William "Steve," Sandra, and Kipp. Brooks traveled the world on business—Steve recalls he did not see his father much growing up but knows he came home every four years—the length of time between each child.

Brooks Stevens is most well-known for his transportation designs, including Harley Davidson motorcycles, the Jeep Wagoneer, the Mercedes (custom made for the Studebaker Corporation) which became the Excalibur sports car, the iconic redesign of the Oscar Mayer Wienermobile, the Milwaukee Road Twin Cities Hiawatha Skytop Lounge train car, and the Zephyr Land Yacht, maybe the first luxury RV. But Stevens designed hundreds of other products: home and kitchen appliances, watercraft, marine hardware, lawn mowers, tractors, chain saws, and juke boxes. Even the Miller Brewing logo that continues to be used today.

Stevens also created the Fox Point logo, his gift to the Village. When you think of Fox Point, think Brooks Stevens.

*\*Douglas H. Frazer is a Fox Point resident.*

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