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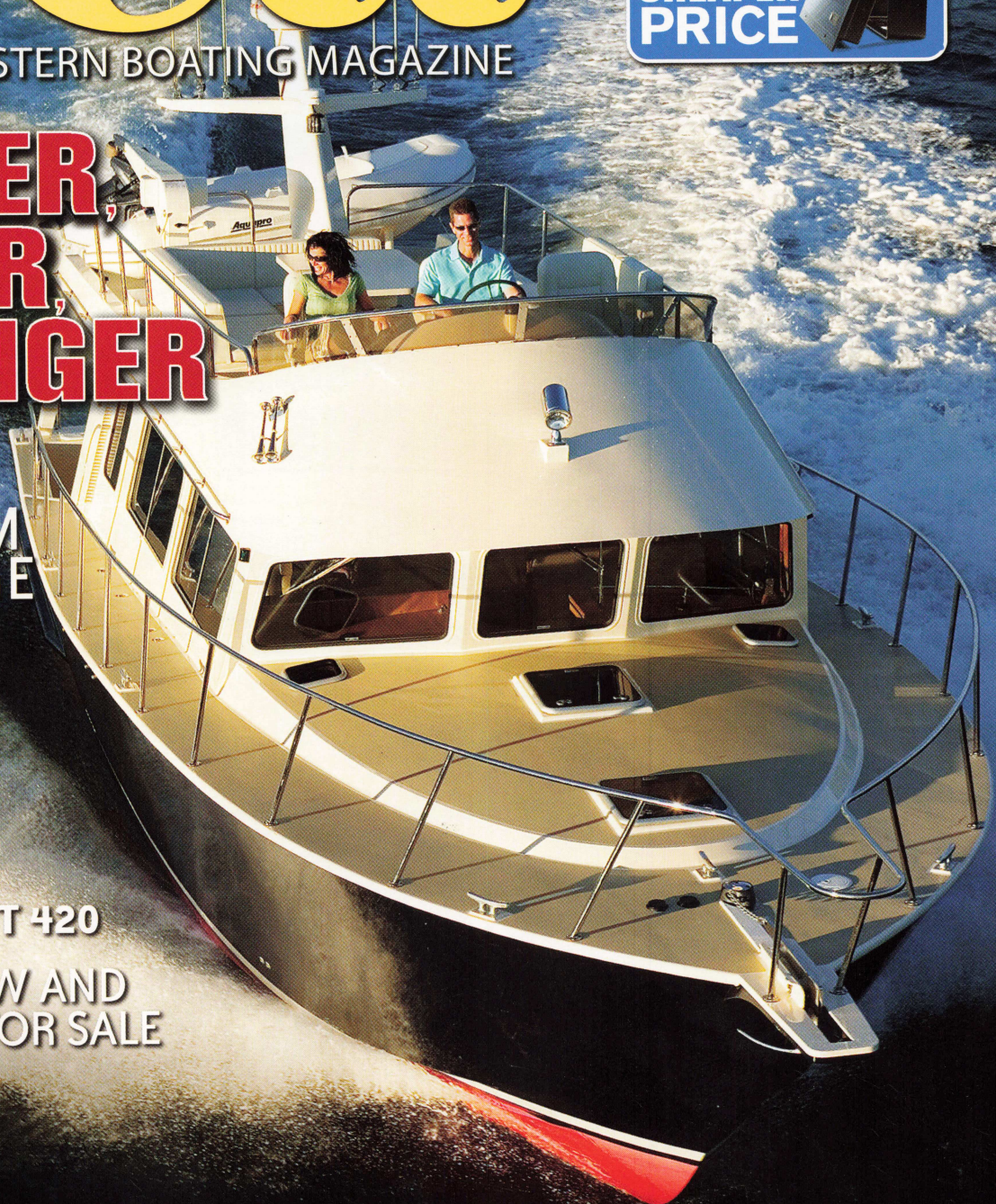
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Breathing New Life Into Old Boats

San Diego's Koehler Kraft has been building and restoring wooden boats for nearly 70 years

BY COTY DOLORES MIRANDA

C.F. KOEHLER GREW UP WORKING in the boatyard his father founded in 1938. There's even a faded photo of him clasping a wrench in his little fist when he was hardly old enough to sit up. Even then, it was evident that Clarence Frederick Koehler Sr. had plans for his first-born son.

Those years spent learning every facet of wooden boat building and wooden boat restoration under his

father's tough tutelage have put him in good stead as the head of Koehler Kraft Co. — originally called Mercury



Marine. And San Diego's oldest full-service boatyard, boat repair facility and marina is still in operation.

MOVING FORWARD

As the company moves toward its 70th year, a \$2.2

million development is nearing completion. The 5,450-square-foot building constructed when the company moved to then-newly established Shelter Island in 1953 was recently demolished to make way for a



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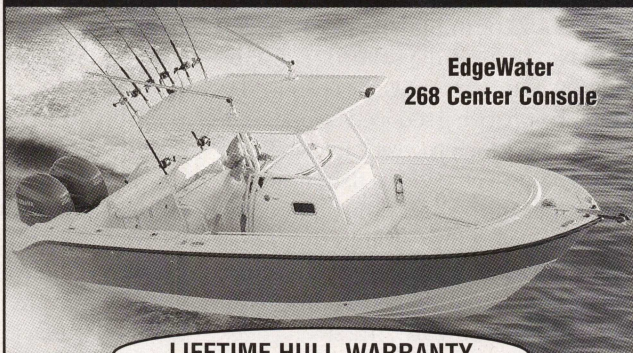
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10,800-square-foot airline-hangar-inspired steel industrial building with eight indoor bays, state-of-the-art environment controls and the ability to accommodate 20 boats up to 70 feet. This increases the company's yard capacity by 50 percent.

A dredging project on the 1.5-acre land and water leasehold property and a 200-foot seawall were also enhanced by new marina dock construction — all in place to make the 69-year-old business one of the most modern small craft repair and boat building facilities in San Diego, if not all of Southern California.

The company received a 30-year leasehold extension last year from the San Diego Unified Port District.



Under the leadership of C.F. Koehler Jr., the company's focus has shifted toward restoration work.

FROM NEW BUILDS TO RESTORATION

The location on Shelter Island was a fortuitous move by savvy businessman Clarence Frederick Koehler Sr. When he successfully garnered the leasehold — one of the first from the Port of San Diego in the early

1950s — Shelter Island was a near-barren spit of land surrounded by San Diego Harbor and connected to the northern part of Point Loma by a causeway.

In the early days, Mercury Marine was located in downtown San Diego, first on India Street and later on Front

Street on property now occupied by the high-rise Meridian Condominiums. In that simpler time, surrounded by other maritime and building materials businesses, Mercury Marine was best known as the builder of fine mahogany fishing boats and runabout sport racers.

In 1956, the company built the first Harbor Patrol rescue boat — a modern vessel with radar and firefighting capabilities. With their experience racing sportboats, the Koehlers also assured the craft could hit a top speed of more than 40 knots.

"All they did back then was build wooden boats from scratch," said C.F. Koehler Jr., 42; himself a hands-on, in-the-yard man. "Most of our work now is restoration; if my

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dad were alive now, he'd probably come up and slap me."

Those restorations are often nearly rebuilds, Koehler said, but beauties like the 1929 Cal 32 or the 1940s' Alden in the yard attest to the masterful craftsmanship and patient attention they receive.

"You get the look and feel of the old wooden boats, but you don't have the maintenance they once required because we incorporate all new materials," said Koehler, looking about at several ongoing projects. "To really do this business well, you have to know so many things about the different aspects of the boat — electrical systems, various mechanical works. Before you start you really need to know what you're getting

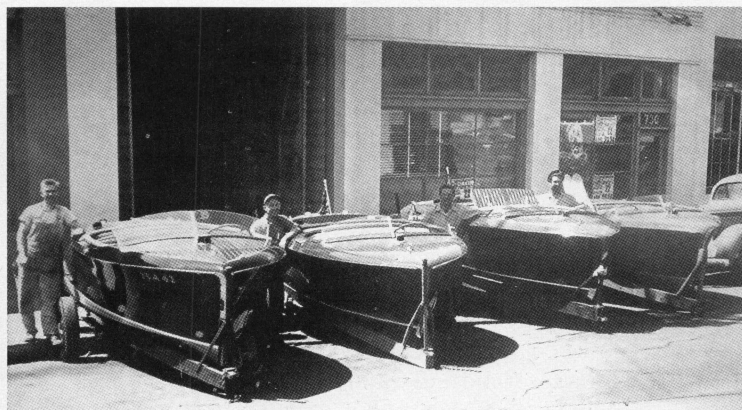
Koehler Kraft Co. founder, Clarence F. Koehler Sr. (third from left), with employees outside the company's original storefront.

into.

"My father was a very hands-on guy and I learned a lot from him," he continued. "If you didn't get something right, he'd just give you 'that look.' I've spent my entire life in this boatyard, and I'm not a fanatic, but there are very few problems we can't immediately solve."

A FULL-SERVICE YARD

When Richard "Rish" Pavelec wanted his 1946 Kettenburg Pacific Class (PC) restored, he asked around the San Diego waterfront and was directed to Koehler Kraft.



"The expert Koehler Kraft team stripped her down completely to the bare frames, then replaced all ribs, decks and planks," he said. "*Dawn* was launched in 2004 and won first place at the San Diego Yacht Club Opening Day."

As a volunteer with the San Diego Maritime Museum, Pavelec suggested Koehler be given the task of refurbish-

ing the 1931 Kettenburg PC *Wings*, believed to be the oldest Pacific Class sailboat in existence. The extensive and detailed work was completed in 2003, and she is now on display at the museum aboard *Berkeley*.

The company still constructs boats, though these newer boats incorporate more composite and fiberglass materials with accent

Photo provided by the Koehler Kraft archives.

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touches of wood.

Boats from 20 to 80 feet are brought onto the full-service yard with a 90-ton crane and a 50-ton marine railway system.

Koehler Kraft also has two vessels used for charters: *Sally*, a 59-foot Starling Burgess 10-meter classic racing sloop with an 80-foot mast built in Germany in 1927, and *Finesse*, a 52-foot Sparkman & Stephens classic motorsailer built in 1958.

The two well-maintained vessels are used regularly for day sails and sunset cruises around San Diego and Coronado.

WOODEN BOAT FESTIVAL

For the past 17 years, Koehler Kraft has celebrated wooden boats, and life in general, during its annual San Diego Wooden Boat Festival, held over Father's Day weekend.

Traditionally, nearly 100 wooden boats gather at the docks to offer the public the opportunity to appreciate their construction, and in most cases, refurbishing done by Koehler Kraft. Seminars are offered on a wealth of wooden boat topics.

During the past two years, hosting the Wooden Boat Festival has been challenging, Koehler said, due to construction delays, first on the dock replacement and this year on the new building.

In 2006, a mountain of sand greeted festival-goers as the dock replacement and dredging was behind schedule. This year, the new dock was in, but the erection of the new steel building was touch and go.

"We were planning for everything to be ready for the show this year, but now we're planning on showing off all the renovations at the 2008 show. And yes, we believe the show must go on."

FAMILY TIME

C.F. Koehler and his wife, Carolyn, welcomed a son, William Clarence Koehler, in March. Even with the increased work the expansion may herald, Koehler said he works hard to make time to be with his family.

"I'm really lucky if I have a workday when I'm out of here or not physically working when it's still light," he said. "I'm not sure I've done myself a favor with this new boatyard — there won't be any rain days or the chance to say it's too dark to work."

But the weekends are spent on the water with the family.

"I'm not a fanatic, but I do have

more boats than I know what to do with," Koehler said. "But it's great to be with my wife, and now my son."

For more information on Koehler Kraft, call (619) 222-9051 or visit www.koehlerkraft.com. ♥

COTY DOLORES MIRANDA is a freelance maritime journalist and a frequent contributor to *Sea Magazine*.


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