



At his Shelter Island boatyard, C.F. Koehler hones a part for a 70-year-old Pacific Class racing sailboat, one of four he is restoring.

Crafts man



The vintage wooden yacht Wings (foreground) shows its age as it awaits restoration by C.F. Koehler.

Don Kohlbauer / Union-Tribune photos

Wooden boats share their past and return to the sea under hands that love them

By James Hebert, STAFF WRITER

Forget sailing over the bounding main. The vessel that sits outside C.F. Koehler's office window looks as if it's bound mainly for the landfill.

"You take a look at that boat out there," Koehler says, pointing out the window, "and you say: 'Firewood. Is there a Dumpster big enough for it?'"

But when Koehler looks at old wooden sailing craft like this one — a 1940s-vintage Cal 32 named Altimar — he sees more than a junk heap. And to see what Koehler sees, you have to look beneath the boat's withered skin.

"Look at how close the grain is," Koehler says. He is outside now at his Shelter Island boatyard, scraping flecks of aged paint off the dry-docked Altimar with a pocketknife. The blade reveals lines of still-sturdy planking, stretched like corduroy along the boat's belly.

"These trees were probably saplings before the Civil War," he muses.

Koehler has seen a lot of wooden boats like this, and he has saved more than a few. They are his passion, even if sometimes they are a royal pain in the aft: A restoration can take a year or more and cost \$50,000 to \$80,000.

They are worth it, he says, for the same reason that the Altimar's old timbers somehow speak to him:

"You have a time machine when you have one of these boats."

— C.F. Koehler

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Crafts man

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Koehler's affinity for working with wood started early

"You have a time machine," he says, "when you have one of these boats."

Just as a time machine bridges past and present, so does Koehler's work. At the Koehler Kraft boatyard, founded by his father in the early 1950s, he uses modern methods and materials to restore vintage wooden boats to sailing shape.

"He's known as probably the best at it," says Greg Stewart, a top naval architect at San Diego-based Nelson/Marek Yacht Design. Stewart designs sleek racing sailboats, but he also owns a 70-year-old wooden yacht named Sprig, which he restored with Koehler's help.

"Some people, their hands can touch a musical instrument or their hands can touch wood in a way other people can't," says Richard S. "Rish" Pavelec, a local sailor who has championed the restoration of vintage PC (Pacific Class) racing sailboats.

"It looks different (to them). It feels different ... In my mind, what that translates to is a gift. (Koehler) is that way with boats. It's incredible what I've seen him do."

Family business

Koehler is 36, which makes him about half as old as most of the boats he restores. But if he possesses the skills of a much older salt, it's because he got a very early start.

On one wall of his crow's-nest-of-office hangs a photo of himself, poised over an old engine block. He is about 2 years old.

"The story is they gave me a wrench and I was able to get it on a bolt," Koehler says with a smile.

Apocryphal or not, the tale gives a sense of Koehler's early life: He was all but brought up at the boatyard.

His father, Clarence Koehler Sr., founded Mercury Marine Works downtown in 1938. There, he designed and built Koehler Kraft boats such as the family cruiser seen in another photo at the office.

"There was a huge generation gap between us," says Koehler, noting he was only 21 when his father died at age 70.

The first time the young Koehler had "a speck of whiskers" on his face, he recalls, his taciturn father asked whether he had lost his razor.

But even though dad discouraged son from pursuing boatbuilding as a trade, the two spent long days together at the yard — one working, the other observing and helping out as best he could.

"I would spend hours watching him do his thing," Koehler says now.

By the seventh grade, Koehler recalls, he had his first boat — a "cool little cabin cruiser" made up largely of junk parts from the yard.

In high school, he took wood shop for a time, but "it was stupid for me to stay after school to do a project, when I could be here making wage, helping the family business."

The on-the-job experience, Koehler says, made him "beyond a journeyman" in carpentry and mechanics by his late teens.

The knack for salvage he demonstrated with that first cabin cruiser has served Koehler well, and it goes beyond boats — he also drives "ancient" autos such as a 1952 pickup truck.

Koehler describes his restoration work as "almost a boat-recycling thing." He doesn't try to save them all. "There are all kinds of poster-child boats (out there)," he acknowledges — boats that are crying out for attention and adoption.



Puff heads out to compete in the PC Nationals last weekend off Point Loma. Don Kohlbauer / Union-Tribune photos

As for how to inspire people to care about these old craft the way he does, Koehler says he hasn't a clue.

"I'm not a philosopher or a marketer," he says. "I'm a simple shipwright. I'm also a pretty good sailor. I know how to prepare a boat for the environment it's going to be used in."

Racing time

Right now, the Shelter Island yard is dotted with a prime focus of Koehler's attention — the PC boats.

Over the past few years, two of the 32-foot-long boats have been restored to racing form at Koehler Kraft. Two more are in advanced stages of rehab, and another two are just beginning the process.

One of those is believed to be the oldest PC boat still extant — Hull No. 8, better known as Wings.

Built in 1931, Wings was owned and sailed for some 40 years by Paul Hartley Sr., and became a fixture on San Diego Bay until its "retirement" in 1983. Among those who reportedly took their first sails on Wings was future America's Cup hero Dennis Conner.

The San Diego Maritime Museum eventually acquired Wings, but was unable to fund a restoration. Last year, it handed custody of the boat to Pavelec, who says that "from the day I got the boat, it has been my dream to give it back."

To that end, Pavelec has been raising money for the restoration. He has received donations from the Maritime Museum itself and from the Kettensburg family, whose boatworks designed and built the first PCs beginning in 1929.

Pavelec, a semi-retired UCSD heart researcher and a member of the San Diego Yacht Club, fell for the PCs about 15 years ago, when a family friend took him and his wife for a sail on one.

He barely knew how to sail at the time, but that didn't stop him from immediately setting out to find a PC of his own.

He wound up with Hull No. 63, Puff, first launched in 1947 and returned to the water after a complete restoration in 1998.

Last weekend, Puff was among a dozen or so boats that competed in the PC Nationals, hosted by San Diego Yacht Club. Pavelec had both Koehler and yacht designer Stewart aboard as crew.

To Pavelec, the allure of the PCs is part history, part pure aesthetics.

A PC, he says, is "exactly what a sailboat should look like. I can't explain it any better than that."

His own way

To purists, Koehler's method of restoration might cause some cringes. He uses modern materials



C.F. Koehler works on La Cucaracha, another PC being restored with the help of modern methods and materials.

such as epoxy and fiberglass "rope" for strengthening and water resistance.

The process is not exactly authentic, which doesn't exactly bother Koehler.

"Authenticity is a bunch of crap," he says, in typically straightforward style. "What is it really worth, anyway?"

The important thing, he says, is to get the boat sailing again. Authenticity doesn't always fit that formula.

"It's hard to convince people to pay twice as much for something that will last half as long," he says of doing more traditional wood restoration.

Koehler doesn't have a PC of his own, but he does have Sally, a 10-meter-class boat he bought 15 years ago. Now restored and running regular charters, the 70-year-old Sally is one of only two of its type left sailing, so far as Koehler is aware.

Sally is also Koehler's personal time machine. He tells of sailing into Channel Islands Harbor in Ventura some years back, and being approached by an older man who was curious about the boat.

Turns out the man had been a hired gun — a professional crew member — aboard Sally during its long-ago racing days.

As proof, he produced a commemorative belt buckle — a gift from the boat's wealthy owner of yore, and an artifact that to Koehler had been only legend until then.

Even if saving old boats seems a futile task sometimes, moments like that make Koehler want to keep trying.

"You want to talk about practical," he says. "I don't know what's practical about what are basically toys."

But, he adds, "humans have a need for recreation. And we have a way of destroying things faster than we can learn from them."

The boats have that Pacific class

The Pacific Class boats began as a homegrown answer to the swift S Class yachts of the East Coast. Now some of these vintage wooden craft are being resurrected as a part of San Diego history.

The PCs were born in 1929, built by George Kettensburg Jr. and his brother, Paul, at the urging of Joe and George Jessop, local yachtsmen and members of the prominent jewelry-business family.

The first PC — Hull No. 1 — was christened Scamp. It belonged to George Kettensburg Jr. himself. Between the late '20s and the late '50s, more than 80 PC hull numbers were assigned, although not all those boats wound up being built. Most of those that were came from San Diego's Kettensburg Marine.

PC owner and historian Richard S. "Rish" Pavelec has compiled a registry of known PCs (posted at www.kettensburg-boats.com). Four of the boats are now being renovated at the Koehler Kraft boatyard on Shelter Island.

C.F. Koehler estimates that restorations could bring the number of active PCs to 25. "That's pretty good for a 1930s-vintage boat," he says.

The oldest PC in existence (and the most famous) is Hull No. 8, Wings, one of the boats Koehler is restoring. Some history and info on other notable PC boats, from Pavelec's registry:

- **Jade:** Built for Joe Jessop in 1931, Hull No. 9 has a long and illustrious racing history. She was relaunched in 1997, and is berthed at San Diego Yacht Club.

- **Dawn:** Hull No. 16, launched in 1934, was once known as White Myth. She is owned by Pavelec, and is being restored at Koehler Kraft.

- **Celeste:** Hull No. 40 is a boat of many names. She was launched in 1946 as Briny, but later sailed under the names Lee and Scorpion. She eventually returned to San Diego from Newport Harbor, taking the name Mandalay. After restoration by Koehler, she was relaunched as Celeste last fall.

- **Harp:** Hull No. 53 resides in Marina Del Rey. According to Pavelec, owner Mike Lally introduced the epoxy method to PC restoration. The boat was first launched in 1947.

— JAMES HEBERT

Eddie Bauer got into the retail racket back in 1919

By Todd Camp
FORT WORTH STAR-TELEGRAM

His signature is on the SUV next to you at the traffic light, the car seat your well-off college friends strap their kids into, the sunglasses your doctor wears, the Compaq Presario notebook your co-worker is still paying for and the wallpaper in your neighbors' tastefully decorated living room filled with his special-edition furniture.

And don't forget your closet full of his clothes.

But for millions of devoted Eddie Bauer customers, the man behind the label — the son of Russian immigrants who built an empire off personal fishing tips and a talent for stringing tennis rackets — remains a mystery.

"I didn't even know he was a real guy," says Scot Swinburn, a devoted Eddie Bauer customer for more than a decade. Pulling out his wallet, Swinburn explains that after purchasing several designer-label ones for more than \$100 each, Bauer's simple, \$30 model had lasted longer than any of them.

"When we first drove home in our Eddie Bauer-edition Ford Explorer, my relatives were like, 'Well, you've really made something of yourself,'" he says.

And there's no debating the appeal of the Eddie Bauer brand among the well-to-do yuppie set. Label-conscious new parents proudly show off their complete Eddie Bauer baby product line — from diaper bags to strollers to fold-up play yards — while casually cautioning you not to leave drink rings on their new Eddie Bauer coffee table.

It's all part of an ingenious 81-year transformation from a scrappy sporting goods shop to a multimillion-dollar "lifestyle brand."

"We recognized that hunting and fishing was about 10 percent of customers' lives, but their lives were so much more than that," says Jane Loeb, Eddie Bauer's manager of public relations. "We look to fill all of their lives. You don't just wear us on the weekends, you can wear us to work or the theater."

Rackets to down

In the fervor to own all things Eddie, few lifestyle-minded folks know much about the man whose signature is emblazoned on everything from their prescription eyewear to their knit boxer underwear.

Born in 1899 on Orcas Island in Washington state's Puget Sound, Eddie was the last of six children. In his youth, he developed an interest in hunting and fishing, and a formidable skill in racket-stringing (he won a national contest for speed and proficiency in stringing tournament-caliber rackets). After working for a popular Seattle sporting goods supplier, Piper & Taft, he decided to open his own racket-stringing business in Seattle in 1919. His reputation as an outdoorsman made him popular with Seattle sportsmen as well as local socialites, and his business thrived.

He eventually opened his own tennis and golf store, Eddie Bauer's Sport Shop, and later expanded into firearms and fishing tackle. In 1929, he married Christine Helborg, who shared his passion for outdoor activities.

Bauer's next innovation came after he nearly froze to death during a fishing expedition. He developed a down-filled jacket, quilted to keep the down in place, something no one at the time was doing. He secured more than 16 different U.S. design patents, which allowed him to dominate the quilted clothing business, a technology that would prove invaluable to the military when the United States entered World War II.

Bauer's Seattle headquarters became ground zero for a massive national campaign to outfit the armed forces with cold-weather equipment, and his insulated flying suits created enormous good will and loyalty among military personnel.

The stress of wartime production and running several businesses took a toll on Bauer's health, prompting him to bring in William F. Niemi to oversee the company through postwar times. Though Bauer went out of the retail business in 1951, mail-order sales remained steady. The first Eddie Bauer catalog was released in 1945, and that business kept the company strong through 1970, when it opened its first large store in downtown Seattle.

While Bauer remained a powerful figure to the company, he sold his interests to Niemi in 1968. In 1986, at the age of 86, Eddie Bauer died, just two weeks after the death of his wife.

The company continues to thrive, with five Web sites and more than 600 stores in the United States, Canada, Germany and Japan.

What future goodies might we expect with the EB sig? Apart from announcing plans to expand the outdoor and home product lines, the Eddie Bauer folks remain tight-lipped.



Alexandra Gonzales of Koehler Kraft works aboard Blue Water, a 1930s-vintage Alden cutter.