

# The Legacy Of The **KNIT WITS**





The *Knit Wits* was the first production power boat over 30 feet to be built of fiberglass. She was completed and ready for shipment to her launching in the incredibly short period of only four months.



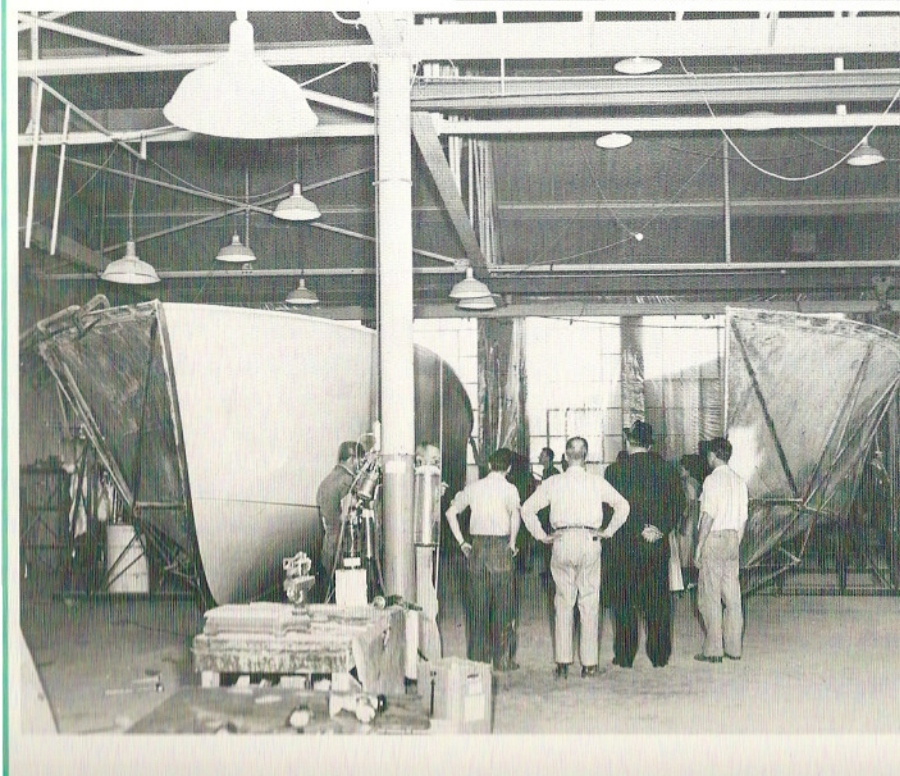
As the wind howled outside the windows that May morning in 1959, Willis Slane paced fretfully across the rustic lounge of the Hatteras Marlin Club. When it came to deep-sea fishing, Slane — one of the club's founders and a hosiery manufacturer from High Point, North Carolina — was a fanatic. He was furious that the nor'easter was keeping him and his friends pinned to the dock when they should be out trolling the edge of the Gulf Stream for billfish.

At Cape Hatteras the cold waters of the Labrador Current collide with the warm waters of the Gulf Stream to create some of the most treacherous seas on earth. With the wind out of the northeast, waves can pile up ten feet and more. The wooden boats then available for sportfishing simply wouldn't stand up to the pounding.

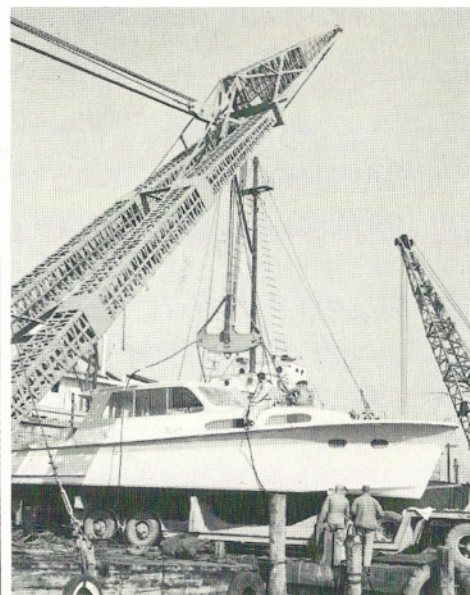
As the group cursed the weather and swapped fishing tales, Slane mused that one day someone would build a sportfishing boat which would stand up to about anything the waters off Cape Hatteras could throw at it and keep on going. It would probably be made of fiberglass, he said, recalling a recent dramatic encounter he had had with the new material.

Some months earlier, in Miami, he had met Don Mucklow whose Crystalliner Corporation was building a 27-footer of fiberglass equipped with souped-up Corvette engines. One of Mucklow's boats had won the punishing Miami-to-Nassau powerboat race in 1957. When Slane evidenced skepticism at the material's strength, Mucklow had invited him to take the boat out and try to break it up. Slane was not one to pass up such a challenge. He jammed the boat's throttles to the firewall and slammed it into the nasty chop running in Government Cut at better than 40 miles an hour. "I quickly learned," he would say years later, "that the boat could take far more than I or my passengers could take. It was a very dramatic demonstration."

As he warmed to the idea of the perfect boat, he said it should be about 40 feet in length which would be large enough to accommodate a party of four fishermen. It







The boat — designated the Hatteras 41 Convertible Yacht Fisherman — was conceived by Willis Slane, an ardent deep-sea fisherman. She was launched at Morehead City, N.C. March 22, 1960.

should have a roomy main salon, a complete galley and two separate staterooms to allow its use as a comfortable family cruiser as well.

Such a boat, he said, could be built in High Point, long recognized as the center of the wood furniture industry in America, to take advantage of the area's renowned woodcraftsmen.

"You're crazy, Willis," one of his friends scoffed. "Fiberglass may be okay for small boats and bathtubs, but you could never build a forty-footer out of the stuff. And you sure as hell couldn't build an ocean-going yacht in High Point. It's two hundred miles from the sea!"

Slane narrowed his eyes, leaned his 190-pound frame forward and said, "You wanna bet?"

Thus was Hatteras Yachts born.

#### "Four Months to Build Her"

Slane persuaded 20 of his friends — several of whom were also in the textile industry — to put up the money to start the company. He rented a garage on Wrenn Street in High Point which formerly had been a Pontiac car dealership and plunged into what is still today considered the most exhaustive study of the large yacht market ever conducted.

Once he had the basic concept for his boat in mind, he hired Jack Hargrave, a young naval architect in West Palm Beach, Florida, to put her lines on paper.

While Hargrave was drawing up the lines for the boat, Slane began assembling his production crew. He hired Don Mucklow as general manager; C.L. Everhart as production manager; Ray Myers as carpentry supervisor; and a 17-year-old youngster named Curley Cook as general laborer, along with several others.

By December, 1959, Hargrave's plans were finished. The boat he had designed would be 41 feet overall and 14 feet in the beam. She would be powered by a pair of 275 horsepower Lincoln block V8s, would carry 324 gallons of fuel and 200 gallons of fresh water.

Slane laid the plans before his production crew and said calmly, "We've got four months to build her."

Sarah Phillips, a life-long friend of Slane's, signed on to handle the secretarial work. "We only had one desk," she recalls, "so we took turns using it. It was not unusual for Willis to call me at four in the morning. He was down at the office and couldn't find some report or other. Did I know where it was? But the long hours didn't matter. We were doing something many people called impossible — a great thing — and we developed a fierce pride about it."

Throughout the building process, Slane kept meticulous records. When the boat was finished, his estimate



While the *Knit Wits* was designed primarily as a rugged sea boat to fish the treacherous waters off Cape Hatteras, N.C., she also had comfortable on-board accommodations to allow her to be used for family cruising.



of her cost was off by only \$145 — less than one-half of one percent.

### Slipping Into History

March 20, 1960 dawned cold and blustery. The doors of the garage on Wrenn Street were blocked by snow and ice, and heavy equipment had to be called in to scrape it away. Inside, a truck coughed to life and pulled its load out onto Wrenn Street. From that moment on, American yacht building would never be the same.

Emblazoned across her stern was the name *KNIT WITS* — an appropriate name for a vessel whose construction had been financed largely by a group of textile executives. She was hauled to Morehead City, N.C. for her launching.

On March 22, Slane's wife Doris smashed the traditional bottle of champagne across her bow and the *KNIT WITS* slipped down the ways and into yachting history.

### A Home at the End of the World

She was used briefly as a company demonstrator, then purchased by Sam Robinson, a lumber dealer from New Orleans, and three members of the Fox family — father W.B. and sons Richard and Brooke.

"Fishermen around New Orleans had just recently found out there were blue marlin in the Gulf of Mexico off the mouth of the Mississippi River," Robinson says. "The problem was that you had to run out about a hundred miles offshore to reach the hundred fathom curve. The water out there can get pretty mean, so we knew we needed a really well-built boat." They re-named their new prize *Sabalo*, then the name of Robinson's company.

"We kept the boat at Venice, La.," Robinson remembers, "which was the last jumping off place before you got to the mouth of the river. We had to get the pilot boat to haul gasoline down there, and we refueled by pumping the gas out of fifty-five gallon drums with a hand-cranked pump."

It didn't take too many hundred-mile trips out to the fishing grounds for Robinson and the Fox family to pile up a lot of hours on the boat. They replaced her original engines with a pair of 285 horsepower Chryslers.

### "We Loved that Boat"

In August of 1968 they sold the boat to Dr. Leslie Warshaw of Lake Charles, La. who used her for both sportfishing and extensive family cruising. "We loved that boat," Dr. Warshaw says today. "My wife and I would load the kids on board and we'd take off. As





After a quarter of a century of fishing and cruising in the Gulf of Mexico, the Bahamas and along the Caribbean and Pacific coasts of Panama, the first Hatteras was repurchased by Hatteras Yachts in 1984 and shipped back to her port of origin for restoration.



I remember, we made three cruises to the Bahamas during the years we owned her.”

During his ownership of the boat, Dr. Warshaw replaced her gas engines with a pair of Detroit Diesel 6V-53Ns.

### A Cloudy History

In 1972 Dr. Warshaw traded the boat in on a new Hatteras 45-foot convertible. Within a few days she was purchased by Miguel Carco of Panama who used her to fish Pinas Bay. Here her history gets a little cloudy. For an extended period, she was left largely unattended on a mooring at the Balboa Yacht Club in Panama City. At one point, a hose gave way and she sank. She was raised and later purchased by Ted Albrighton who worked for the Panama Canal Company. Over the next eight years, Albrighton worked on her, but never got to the point of being able to put her back into the water.

### Dave Parker's Idea

By now it was early summer of 1984 and Dave Parker, one of the original investors in the company who had become president at Willis Slane's death in 1965, had an idea. As a part of the company's 25th anniversary, he wanted to try to find the first boat Hatteras had built, purchase it, restore it to its original condition then use for promotional events.

Parker asked Ray Myers, who by that time had become head of the company's customer service organization, to see if he could locate the boat and find out who owned it. The company's records traced it as far as Miguel Carco's ownership, but there the trail ended. Myers called Rick Vera in Miami, a Cuban-born yacht repair expert who had wide contacts throughout Central and South America. Vera called back two hours later. He had located a relative of Carco's who told him that the boat now belonged to Ted Albrighton. Myers assigned Curley Cook, who had had a hand in building the boat a quarter of a century earlier, to try to contact Albrighton and see if he would be interested in selling her.

After talking to Albrighton by phone, Cook was convinced he would be open to an offer and was on the next plane to Panama City. "It took some negotiation," Cook says, "but after talking it over for a couple of days, Albrighton finally agreed to the sale."

Cook and the crew he had flown in from North Carolina fixed the boat up enough to be able to put her in the water, had her towed to Colon, Panama on the Caribbean coast and loaded her aboard a freighter for shipment to Savannah, Ga. There she was transferred to a truck for the trip to High Point.



Once again in showroom condition, the *Knit Wits* prepares to embark on her second quarter century of serious billfishing and family cruising.



## Home at Last

At 10 a.m. on Friday, September 7, 1984 — a quarter of a century after she was first pulled out of the garage on Wrenn Street — the *KNIT WITS* returned to the city of her birth. A host of Hatteras employees were lining the road outside the plant to welcome her home.

For Sarah Phillips, especially, it was an emotional moment. Her words seemed to echo in the air: "We were doing something many people called impossible — a great thing — and we developed a fierce pride about it."

Ed Baldwin, who had joined the company in 1961, was given the job of putting her back in like-new condition. Baldwin and his crew encountered some interesting challenges in trying to restore a boat built a quarter of a century earlier. "We found that the window frames in the salon and the trunk cabin were beyond salvaging," he says. "We contacted William Bonnell Company in Newnan, Ga. which had made the original frames and explained our problem. We sent the old frames down and they used them to make new dies to extrude the aluminum, then they made new fixtures to bend it into the correct shape." The cork floor covering for the galley and the head had to be imported from Portugal. The Philippine mahogany plywood had to be special ordered. All of her deck hardware was intact. It was removed and refinished, including her Lee outriggers and rod holders.

As part of the restoration she was outfitted with a pair of Detroit Diesel 6V-53TIs rated at 320 horsepower, her fuel capacity was increased to 400 gallons, she was equipped with a holding tank to meet today's environmental regulations, and she was given a state-of-the-art electrical system.

## The *Knit Wits* Legacy

Even Willis Slane himself could not have envisioned the legacy the *KNIT WITS* would create. She proved that fiberglass was, indeed, the boat building material of the future and in that alone revolutionized the American yacht building industry. Her basic hull shape would be modified over the years, but her influence is still evident in the Hatteras yachts of today. From a single sportfishing model in 1960, the company would expand its line to more than 20 models incorporating sportfishermen, motor yachts, and long range cruisers. In the process, it would become the largest builder of yachts over 40 feet in the world.



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