

The Huckins Yacht Corporation History Still Being Made

BY JON ROBINSON

If Norman Rockwell had composed an illustration depicting an American company, Jacksonville's Huckins Yacht Corporation could have been the subject. It would have been one of those salty dog flavored illustrations, full of humor, and the sea, with invention, pain and irony, with struggles and success, anger and elation...and family. It could have had a tomboy in it, and of course, working men and women. It might have depicted the war effort, and it would have had a bottle of scotch thrown in just to make sure that everyone understood that it all really happened, and that most of it didn't happen in Sunday school. (Not that Norman thought there was anything wrong with Sunday school).

If you live in Jacksonville, Florida, Huckins Yacht is a reason to be proud, and if you were ever crazy enough to want a yacht, a Huckins yacht is the only one you will want. It was revolutionary when it was designed in the 1920's and the same design is just as groundbreaking today.

The current President, Cindy Purcell, was the tomboy. At age six, Purcell famously told her dad, Kenneth Archibald, that she would one day run the plant, and by the 1950's a ten-year-old Purcell could be seen in her 16 foot boat motoring or water skiing the St. John's River. She had begged her father to build her a boat like he had for her sister, and he had put her off by telling her he would once she could swim across the St. John's. On July 4th of her ninth year, Purcell swam the river, which was a mile and one-half across. Her dad built her the boat.

Huckins Yacht Corporation was started in Jacksonville by Purcell's grandfather, Frank Pembroke Huckins (FPH), and hull number one was purchased in 1928 by David M. Goodrich, of Goodrich Rubber Company. That boat, and subsequent Huckins were innovative in the fact that the hull design allowed the seagoing boats to plane. Seagoing motorboats before Huckins were all displacement boats, meaning that they plowed through the water at relatively slow speeds. Much of a planing boat rises out of the water and skims along the surface at well over twice the speed of a displacement boat. In 1928, FPH, dubbed his revolutionary yacht, The Fairform Flyer.

The Huckins hull design played an important part in the war effort during WWII. The PT Boat, one of which was famously commanded by John F. Kennedy, was designed by FPH. Though Kennedy's famous

PT 109 was built by a competitor, PT 102, was built in Jacksonville by Huckins, and was also captained by Kennedy himself.

Because of a smaller production capacity, Huckins was only able to build 2 squadrons (18 boats) for the

US Navy. However, the US Navy's specifications for all the PT boats included the Huckins Quadraconic Hull design. This design allowed PT Boats to operate at full speed in rough seas because it eliminated destructive pounding. Many a downed American pilot was plucked to safety out of the Pacific Ocean from a PT Boat with a hull designed by Huckins. The fastest boat in naval history at the time, the 70 and 80 foot PT Boats were clocked at up to 52.5 knots per hour.

Frank Pembroke Huckins piloted Huckins' first PT boat himself in design trials conducted by the U.S. Navy off of New London, CT in July of 1941. The course was a 190 mile offshore high speed run in which several competitor's designs were also competing. Powered by three Packard engines, FPH described the ride as such, "You can hit your head alternately on the ceiling and the floor five or six times before you can again get a hold of something. And the Navy Renegotiation Board is allowing me nothing whatsoever for the bumps."

This event was known famously as the Plywood Derby, the competition ended with Huckins besting the second place company's design in every category...including speed, maneuverability, and impact (pounding). Huckins had invested \$115,000 of his own money with no guarantee of winning, and when it was all said and done the PT experience netted the company a grand total profit of \$28.60. FPH wrote later, "If our contributing a form of hull that eliminated destructive pounding and saved the PT boat from failure or oblivion has contributed to the war effort and victory by ever so small an increment, then such was my purpose."

In times of peace, Huckins Yachts has seen its ups and downs, and in the last 40 years, the company has survived three recessions, the



luxury tax, and the great recession. It has always stayed true to its roots. When solid fiberglass construction became all the rage in boat building, Huckins saw the weight of fiberglass as the antithesis to their lightweight design. (If you built an ocean liner out of fiberglass it would weigh more than if you built it out of steel). But all-wooden boats had seen their day. So, in the 1970s, Huckins began building their boats out of a lightweight space-age material called Airex. Purcell's husband, Buddy Purcell, said the first sample looked like a BLT, and the name "club sandwich" stuck. The first one was built for Harriet Sayre and it turned out to be a little faster than its wooden counterpart, and according to Buddy, "brought confidence back to the yard."

The company also went through a time when the classic lines of their yachts did not coincide with the sleeker, rounder boats brought about by fiberglass craze. Purcell wrote in the book Huckins, *The Living Legacy* "We began to lose the kind of customer who buys a new car because of its contemporary styling." Purcell explained that they then began to build more modern styled boats. They were great boats, but not one was recognizable as a Huckins Yacht.

Today, they still build the sleeker designs, but they also build boats that still look like a Huckins. Purcell wrote, "Today, we are fortunate that styling is doing this "retro" thing and going back to the 1950s, in clothes, boats, cars, just about everything. We don't have to copy anything, we can just get out our old drawings and provide modern interiors."

Huckins Yacht also maintains many of the Huckins fleet built well into the last century in their full-service boat yard on the Ortega River. According to Buddy, "Service is something that we do better than any other boat yard on the East Coast. We know how to service a boat better because we know how to build it from the ground up...even if it's not a boat we built."

The room next to Cindy Purcell's office at Huckins, is the design room that contains rows and rows of wide drawers which contain the original drawings of every boat ever manufactured in their plant. Second-hand Huckins Yacht owners, in need of a particular detail replicated, have been surprised to see drawings of their own boats pulled from the drawers. You can even see drawings of the Huckins PT Boat among the archives.

History lives at Huckins, and is still being made, so the next time your boat (no matter the brand) is hauled out at Huckins to get the hull painted, be sure to take the grand tour. Also, in case you don't already have a Huckins Yacht, you can go ahead and add one to your bucket list. We have. It will certainly be the same style that Norman Rockwell could have illustrated...a classic and custom, Fairform Flyer.

You can find out more about Huckins Yacht at www.Huckinsyacht.com. One of a kind. One at a time.

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