

Fifty Years of Making Fun: The History of the Slikkers Family and Boat Building, Part Two

by Geoffrey D. Reynolds

Note: This article is the second of a two-part series concerning the history of the Leon Slikkers family and their boat building from the early 1950s to present. The first part was published in the Winter 2005 issue of this publication.

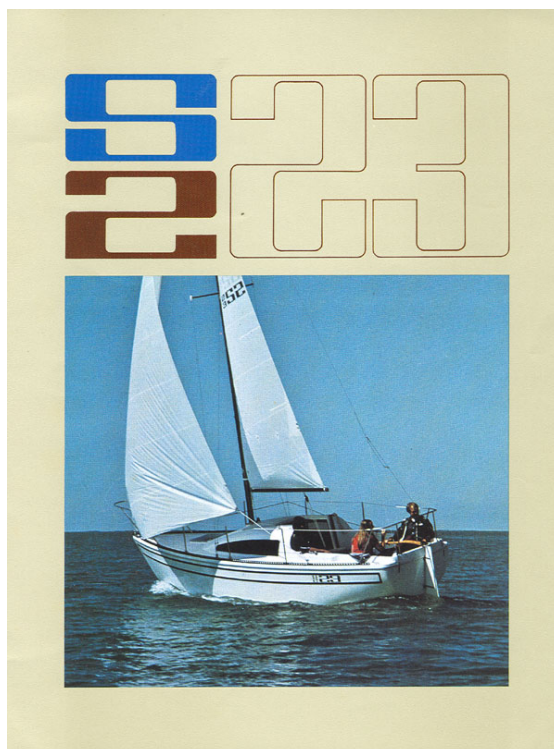
Slickcraft Division of AMF Corporation

Throughout the late 1960s, the Slickcraft name became synonymous with quality and affordability. It also attracted the attention of conglomerates interested in acquiring boat building companies in attempts to diversify their holdings into the recreation market and attract potential stock holders. After much thought and prayer, the Slikkers family decided to sell the company to the White Plains, New York based AMF (American Machine and Foundry Corporation) in September 1969. As part of the sale agreement, Slikkers would stay on as president of the Slickcraft Division of AMF. A further stipulation required Slikkers not to build powerboats for five years from the date of the sale, should he leave AMF. After only a short time with AMF, Slikkers began to see that the new company did not plan on using the same quality materials and careful craftsmanship in their Slickcraft boats that he had. In November 1973, he left AMF and immediately began experimenting with a fiberglass sailboat design that would not violate his non-compete clause with AMF.

The S2 Yachts Era

After Slikkers left AMF, he implemented his plan to begin a new Slikkers family boat building company. On February 18, 1974, S2 Yachts (Slikkers' second company) was born. Along

with the new company came longtime employees, like Ed Wennersten, whose creative mind helped propel the company to new heights in design and him to vice president of engineering. Robert Egan also returned to help Slikkers with sales as vice president of marketing. With the help of these men, family members, and others, Slikkers began a new chapter of success that year that continues today.



Not long after S2 Yachts began operation, its first sailboats were ready for shipment. The type of boats they were now different, but so was the generation of Slikkers family colleagues, as David and Robert, Leon's two oldest children, were now part of the team. The two sons had grown up in a small apartment above their father's business, a place where boats were

always the topic of conversation. When asked whether their father had ever shared a vision of his boat building future, David Slikkers, the eldest child remarked "I think it was osmosis... Dad talked about the business at the dinner table and at the breakfast table." Long before the AMF purchase,

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From the Director



Fall has arrived in Holland and I welcome it! This past summer proved to be the sunniest and hottest in my memory. Even a boater like me has greeted the cooler weather with thanks. The fall also seems to bring more researchers to the Joint Archives. It must be the redirecting of priorities toward the research projects many of you push aside during the summer months. Regardless of the reason, we are open and ready to help you with your latest project.

As you can see from the cover, I have decided to present the second installment of the history of the Leon Slikkers family boat manufacturing business. I have thoroughly enjoyed researching the boat manufacturing history of Holland since my arrival in 1997 and have presented that history many times over the years. I enjoy researching and writing about the individual companies even more because it allows me to dig deep into Holland's historical resources and conduct oral history interviews with past employees and family members. For this project, I interviewed Leon, David, Robert, and Delores Slikkers, and many former and present employees so that I could present the most accurate history to date of this very successful family. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I had writing it.

I am also pleased to announce that former archival assistant Michael Douma's book, *Veneklasen Brick: A Family, a Company, and a Unique 19th Century Dutch Architectural Movement in Michigan*, has been published by Eerdmans Publishing. Please see the insert to order your copy of the most comprehensive study to date of the Veneklasen family and their distinct brick making.

Geoffrey D. Reynolds

Fifty Years of Making Fun (continued from page 1)

David, who spent so much time around the boat factory anyway, began custodial duties there after school. During school vacations and breaks from grammar school and then college, David climbed his way up to the lamination department and from there to assembly, stock room, transportation, and finally accounting. Robert, the second son, followed a similar path of ascension. By the time the brothers had finished taking college courses, they had become knowledgeable about the boat building business. They also

desired to become very much a part of it. They had been around the company long enough to know that quality, not quantity, was the driving force behind their father's steadily growing business and the respected place he held in the marketplace.

A few months shortly after their father left AMF they joined him. They both had been employees of AMF and could sense that it was time to leave and join their father in his new venture. As the new S2 Yachts continued to roll sailboats out the door of their 7th Street location, Leon began construction of a new 72,000 square foot manufacturing facility at 725 40th Street. As soon as the roof and walls of the new structure were completed, Leon moved the boat manufacturing there. Even though it had no windows and doors, he needed the space to keep up with demand. Each night, one of the sons, or other workers, guarded the plant and its contents against theft. In addition to building a new line of Arthur Edmonds' designed sailboats and building a new factory, Leon had to reshape his niche in the marketplace—this time with sailboats. He began anew by addressing marketing, manufacturing, engineering, distribution, and human resources issues. It was 1955 all over again, except that this time his two sons were at his side, and he was equipped with much more capital and experience to compete in a tough industry. Before long, Leon's new company was doing well with the assembly line approach to sailboat building, a method that resulted in custom quality sailboats without hand-fitting everything. The new company grossed 1.6 million in sales that first year. Leon had 53 employees hard at work, dealers were enthusiastic about the product, and the sailboat line, comprised of a 23-footer and two 26-foot models, was becoming well known in cruising and racing circles. By the time (1987) Slikkers had ended production of the two sailboat lines, S2 and Grand Slam performance series (introduced in 1979), his racing models had taken several national and two international titles. They would win a third international title in 1998. Due to its popularity, the S2 7.9 meter sailboat was re-introduced on a limited edition basis for the 1990 model year.

In 1976, while still manufacturing the sailboat line, Slikkers and his company decided to enter the powerboat manufacturing industry for the second time as they searched for more return to their investment dollars. In doing so, Leon created the Tiara Division of S2 Yachts. Like the headpiece worn by royalty he hoped his boats would be treasured by his customers. Soon the new line was gaining strength in the powerboat market and Tiara boats became sought after by customers and dealers alike. Robert Slikkers, Leon's second eldest son, remarked during a 2005 interview that most of S2 Yachts' success comes from its attitude toward manufacturing finely crafted boats. "I love coming to work.

I love the boats. I love the people. It's not all about the boats. It's all about the people. And we do very well making boats with that attitude."

In 1977, Slikkers added the Pursuit fishing boat line to the S2 Yachts line up. This new line sold so well that in 1983 the company built a new 72,000 square foot plant in Fort Pierce, Florida, and in Holland concentrated on building the Tiara line alone. In 1979, the company added the Grand Slam performance sailboat series to the S2 Yachts division and manufactured them at the Holland plant.

In 1983, Slikkers purchased the Slickcraft brand name from AMF since they had stopping using it when they ceased production of Slickcraft boats in 1980. Slikkers then used the brand name when producing a line of sport boats during the mid and late 1980s. Eventually the company phased out the Slickcraft Sport Boat line in favor of the newly designed Tiara Sport Boat line, which was, in turn, phased out as the company began concentrating on larger, luxury boat manufacturing.

The following year (1984), brought changes in the leadership structure of the company as Leon Slikkers became Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of S2 Yachts, David Slikkers became president of S2 Yachts, and Robert Slikkers became president of Tiara Yachts. A third son, Tom, would eventually become president of the Pursuit division, and a daughter, Susan, would serve the company in sales, marketing, and customer relations. As the changes in administration were finalized, so was the construction of a new 200,000 square foot two-level facility near the existing Holland plant. This brought the combined Holland facilities to nearly 500,000 square feet. By 1986, the company employed 500 workers and a reorganization of its brand names meant separate dealer franchises for each product line: Tiara Yachts, Pursuit Fishing Boats, Slickcraft Sportboats, and S2 Sailboats. By 1988, their employee base had risen to 650 people companywide. Leon Slikkers became the president of Pursuit in 1991 and gradually shifted administrative responsibilities to his third son, Tom, starting in 1994. Prior to that, Tom had worked in the international sales end of S2 Yachts. Tom became president of the Pursuit division in August of 2001. He left that position in late 2003 for a personal sabbatical and the administrative helm was taken over by Leon.

In 1994, the 20th anniversary year of S2 Yachts, the company received the Manufacturing Division of the MCI/Inc. Magazine's National Award for Positive Customer Service. Two years later, Leon Slikkers was named Manufacturing Entrepreneur of the year by Ernst & Young. Then, in 2000, Leon Slikkers was inducted into the Michigan Boating Hall of Fame, securing his place in state boating history.



Robert, Leon, David, and Tom Slikkers, c. 2003

In 1998, the same year Leon Slikkers was named Manufacturing Entrepreneur of the year by the National Marine Manufacturers Association, Tiara Yachts purchased and renovated the former Outboard Marine Corporation (OMC) manufacturing facility in Swansboro, North Carolina. There they produced the new 50-foot yacht line, a size of craft which was beyond their manufacturing capabilities in Holland. The North Carolina location was also ideal for their East Coast customers to take delivery of their new boats via the water.

Slikkers' company began the year 2000 with an expansion at its Pursuit factory in Florida. After the terrible events of September 11, 2001, the company, like many other luxury manufacturers in the United States, saw a decrease in sales. Two years later, another shift in titles occurred when Leon Slikkers became Chairman of the Board, David Slikkers became CEO of S2 Yachts, and Robert Slikkers became President of Tiara Yachts. In 2003, during what most people would refer to as a recession in the boating industry, S2 Yachts bounced back and in Holland added an additional 100 new employees to its already large staff of 580. The company was preparing for a record year—the best since 1974. That same year they introduced two new models, the *3200 Open* and *Sovran 3600* to their Tiara line up. The entire Tiara line, ranging in price from \$120,000 to \$1.2 million, gave employment to approximately 1,100 people at the three plants combined. In 2005, the company added another 300,000 square feet to its Holland plant in anticipation of closing the North Carolina plant and centralizing its Tiara line.

Today, S2 Yachts, one of the few privately-owned production boat building companies in the world, continues to succeed with its uncompromising quality, cutting-edge design, innovation, customer service, and with pride from its employees and owners.



Drawing of planned expansion at the Tiara Yachts plant at 40th Street and Waverly Avenue in Holland, c. 2005