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Slikkers, Dolores Oral History Interview: Carl Frost Center Oral History Project

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Oral History Interview

Dolores Slikkers

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Dolores Slikkers

August 9, 1994

1:30 p.m.
RH- To start out, could you state your name, date of birth, and the company you're associated with?

DS- I'm Dolores Slikkers, born on [date removed], 1929, and my husband and I began Slickcraft Boat Company in 1955.

RH- How long have you lived in the Holland area?

DS- All of our married lives. We've lived here since the spring of 1948. We were married in December of '47. The first few months were in an apartment. But we actually built a home here and moved in to it-- a small little garage house in May of '48.

RH- Where did you live before you came?

DS- He lived east of Hamilton, and I lived a little further east of Hamilton. He actually did business in Hamilton. My family lived east of the Allegan-Burnips road, and we did our business in Hopkins and Allegan.

RH- Was there any particular reason you moved to Holland?

DS- Because he worked at Chris Craft, and church affiliation was here, and quite a bit of his family was here. Especially because of the work, it was very natural to move this direction.
RH- Could you describe how you got the idea to start Slickcraft?

DS- Well, Leon worked at Chris Craft for nine years. He’s very design conscious and very good at working with his hands. So, he "putzed" around a lot in the garage and in the basement. During one of Chris Craft’s strikes, he talked about going into business. He was already then making a small boat that he had designed in his garage, but decided that year which was '54, that he was not quite ready. So after the strike, he did go back to work. We did register the name Slickcraft in the summer of '54. In the fall, he said, "I think I’m ready. Can we sell the house and use whatever money we have left to go into business?" By this time, we had moved from the garage into a larger house, a three bedroom house that we had built. I said, "Where are we going to live?" He said, "There’s an apartment above the building that I want to use to build boats in." I said, "I thought we were never going to live upstairs." He said, "Just for a year." So we sold our house, paid all our bills, and had $5,000 to start the business with.

RH- Did moving back into an apartment worry you at all?

DS- No, I’m not a worrier. So it didn’t worry me. I probably didn’t like it because of all the extra work of up and down, up and down. But I was the first "office-girl," accountant, banker, book-keeper, "go-for girl," and all of that for the first ten
years of Slickcraft, as well as mother, and all the other things that take place. We had two boys when we moved upstairs there, and by the time we moved out we had three boys and a girl. So, we added two children while we stayed there, which was not one year, but nine.

RH- Did you receive enough money from the sale of your house to start the business or did you have to take out a loan?

DS- We didn’t need a lot of equipment. A lot of it was craftsman’s tools, saws, band-saws, drills and drivers, hand tools and things like that, and basically to pay some rent on the building, and to get what tools he did need. Probably more of what he needed was to get supplies and materials. That was sufficient to get started with, but eventually you end up going to the bank. At that time, we were building boats quite a bit on a retail basis, people who want to buy a boat, and word of mouth. Eventually he decided that he needed more than that, so he started contacting a few dealers as well, and letting it be known that we had boats for sale.

RH- Did you have any employees when you started?

DS- He started with about four or five people working for him.

RH- How long did it take before you started making enough money
from the business that you could live off of it?

DS- Well, we took out just what we needed right along, probably went through a real bad stretch in '59 to '61, when there was more or less a recession. We did quite a bit of borrowing during that time, had to talk to some vendors and ask for a little extension. But, things turned around in '62, plus we were able to get a good sales person. I would say things really picked up after that time. Up until that time, we still had sufficient funds to get by on.

RH- How did you find customers in the beginning? Did you advertise?

DS- Like I said, word of mouth, and using a boat, letting people see it and ask questions.

RH- So you mainly sold locally?

DS- Local, I think '58 or '59 we had a brochure that we handed out. We also went to some boat shows, put our boats in boat shows to display them and find customers. We did that probably almost right away, maybe not in '55, but I believe in '56 we went to the Chicago Boat Show already.

RH- Are there any other difficulties in the first years of
business that come to mind?

DS- Finances. Today it's a little more sophisticated, and you have more or less of a year-round purchasing program with your dealers. They take so many (boats) each quarter, or on a regular basis they take them. Back then, you had to build and stock boats during the winter because people (retail-customers) just didn't buy until spring. It was more difficult. It helped some when we got dealers because they would take maybe some through the winter and put them on the floor if they had floor planning. Probably one of the biggest decisions he had to make in those early years was when it looked like the trend was going to go from his beautiful, varnished mahogany wood boats to fiberglass. Like I mentioned before, he loved working with his hands, he loved those beautiful varnished boats. But he has always been a visionary and has always kept abreast or ahead of the times, kept up with what was going on in the industry, and knew if he was going to stay in business, he was going to have to make those decisions. To show you a little bit of the difficulty, he began by making a fiberglass haul and still putting a wood deck on it. Eventually, he had to go to an all fiberglass boat. Fiberglass boats, even today, have a lot of wood in them. They have wood inner parts and reinforcements, and a lot of the cabin structure is still wood on the inside.

RH- How long did you stay in the original building?
DS- From '55 til '63, then we moved into what was the old roller rink up on Washington Avenue where Brimmer and Baumen is now. We were there from '63, and we built our own building on Brooks Avenue, which is now Thermotron. We built that in '66.

RH- How long did your husband stay in the plant, actually working with the boats? Did he eventually have to start spending more time in the office?

DS- Probably after moving to Brooks Avenue he spent some more time in the office. But because we had someone on the road, he didn’t have to do as much of that. He always prided himself at Slickcraft that he could walk through the plant and could call everybody by name. That he knew them all, and an open door type policy that anyone was welcome to come and see him as well. They were welcome to come to the office.

RH- Did you ever consider having the business located somewhere other than Holland?

DS- I’m sure that that’s been a question. I don’t know that you are aware of the fact that we did sell Slickcraft in '69 and he worked for them (AMF Inc.) for four years. He had a five year covenant not to compete. He decided that he would not stick out the fifth year, left them in November and by February of ‘74 had a new company up and going. Because he couldn’t make power boats
right at that moment, he went into building sailboats. In searching for a name, it was difficult to decide on a name, so S2, which means Slikkers second time around became the name of the new company. And S2 is still the corporate name of the company which has two divisions—Tiara and Pursuit Fishing Boats. As far as another location, we do have another location. The Pursuit Fishing Boats are made at Fort Pierce in Florida. In the last three years, he has spent about 75 to 80% of his time down there running that operation. Then in ’84 our oldest son David became President of S2 and the Tiara division here. Actually President of the whole thing, but he more or less runs this plant and my husband oversees that one down there.

RH- Is Slickcraft still in operation?

DS- When we sold, AMF still used that name and they still were a viable company for a number of years. I do not know the exact year that they finally closed down and did not make any more Slickcrafts. Perhaps when you talk to David, he will know that. We purchased the name back in ’84. We did make, I don’t know if it was one or two years that we did make a Slickcraft model again. But because the value of the name had deteriorated under AMF, and because it had closed down, you now had to basically start over to build a reputation. It was finally decided that that was not economically a worthwhile effort to go through because the new generation of boat buyers were not recognizing or
did not know the reputation of the old Slickcraft.

RH- Did you have to borrow money to start S2?

DS- No, because we had sold the previous company, we were able to go ahead and start up a new company. Some of the major challenges were that we had never built a sailboat before. But in going to boat shows and seeing them in the water shows, my husband was confident that he could build as good as or better than some of the ones that he had seen. Particularly sailboats that would have a little bit more of the amenities inside that would make women enjoy sailing a little more, and make it a little more comfortable for her. So, he just went to work in doing his designs. As time progressed, we had some very good boats. In fact today, we have brought back in this year, the past '94 model year, we brought in one of the models that was an excellent racing boat and have made a number of those boats again this past year. As far as I know they are continuing to do that.

RH- Is this factory here where you started with S2?

DS- We started in just a little place on 6th Street, a little building down there, just making up the first models and mock-ups and things like that. But at the same time also purchased this property and began building a building. As soon as it was ready, we moved the operation out here.
RH- What were some of the most difficult decisions you've had to make over the course of the business' lifetime?

DS- Like I said, probably the change from wood to fiberglass was one of the bigger ones. Selling Slickcraft originally was certainly a huge decision for us to make. We feel that it gave us many opportunities. In doing that, it gave us financial stability so that we could go ahead and do many other things. Probably along the way there has been other decisions as far as going overseas or not going overseas. We have done a lot of international business as well. We've even participated in some of the boat shows overseas. There's always decisions where you have to weigh the pros and cons. Probably one of the more difficult times was from '89 through '93. The luxury tax, not only did we have a down economy, but the boating industry, the whole industry faced the burden of the luxury tax. We're grateful that we were in a financial position so that we were not leveraged like many of the other companies. We were able to hold our own, and continue to do research and development to come out with some new models, even though that was more difficult at that time. Probably one of the hardest things to do was to lay-off people. We had grown up until '89, we had grown to 750-780 employees, and during that four year downturn we went down to probably 300 between the two companies. That was very difficult. It's very hard to have to let people go and know that there's families there that have been dependent upon that income. We
have probably now increased back up to 500. So, this past year has been an excellent year.

RH- That basically answers my next question. Has the company ever experienced a crisis situation?

DS- That was probably more or less the crisis situation, to go through that much of a downturn.

RH- What effect has owning a business had on the family?

DS- I think at times it's probably been tough. My husband has been a very dedicated committed person. He spent a lot of time in the business. I think some conversations with my kids would say, "I'll never give that much time, devote that much time." But all four of the children are now in the business and all live here in Holland. All four of them are pretty much as well committed as their father.

RH- What changes have you seen in the market and your business in the last twenty years?

DS- Probably some of the major changes in the business have been consolidation of companies. The big conglomerations and especially the big engine manufacturers getting into the boat business by either buying companies or developing a company.
That has been pretty strong competition because of the money that they can generate, the money behind those kinds of things, major changes. And of course, the luxury tax did cause major changes in the industry because there were companies that went under that are no longer around. There are dealerships that went under and are non-existent. Again, a lot of that because of the financial side of it. They did not have their own financing. They were dependent on banking financing. When there's a crisis like that, banks pull back. They don't want any part of something that's going to be that shaky. So, there was a lot of loss in the industry. I know that they thought what they were trying to do is tax the rich. Well, that didn’t happen because the rich man didn’t have to buy a boat. He maybe owned two or three, and he could just keep it a little longer. He didn’t have to buy a boat. But what that did was, say a dealer, if he had just one of the major sales, one large boat that he could sell in a season, if he lost that one sale in his area, he couldn’t sell enough smaller boats probably to make up that difference and still keep up what he always had sold in smaller boats. So, it was a real hardship, the industry as a whole.

RH- How have you financed the companies growth?

DS- Probably the only time that we’ve done much as far as borrowing is when we built the building. Other than that, we ourselves have not had to borrow as a company. We know that the
Lord has played a big part in helping, giving wisdom in decisions, helping us through all of these things. We just know that He is one of the reasons that we are able to be where we are.

RH- What changes have you seen in the Holland business climate as Holland has grown and developed?

DS- Probably in these few more recent years, the biggest change is in the labor market. You just don’t find that many workers out there looking for jobs. All of the manufacturers are looking for help. So, there’s just not a ready labor market, just sitting there waiting to work. It’s been a struggle. Particularly in the last year and a half, as far as finding good employees.

RH- Has the business turned out the way you originally envisioned it?

DS- Probably much larger than we two little country bumpkins thought that it would ever grow. We both grew up out in the country. And we both grew up you might say, not in poverty, but certainly in poor circumstances, both families coming through the recession of '29, depression of '29. In my family, there were five children, in my husband’s there were nine children. Those were big families to support at that time. I never believed that
it could get where it is today.

RH- If you could go back and change any of your business decisions, would you make any changes?

DS- I’m sure there would always be a few places where you would turn this way instead of that way, but I don’t think any of the major decisions that he would change. One thing that he did feel, perhaps we would not have stayed in sport boats. We had that as a third line, as well as our Tiara and Pursuits. We had a sport boat line. We probably would not have stayed in that as long as we did.

RH- So you’re totally out of the sport boats now?

DS- Right.

RH- What course would you like to see the company take in the future.

DS- We hope to be able to continue the high quality, which is always been what we’ve strived for, not quantity, but to maintain quality of the product. Our company probably has one of the best reputations in the industry for quality, continued growth, and possibly in time even larger models. A forty-three footer is our largest model at the current time, and perhaps to stretch that
and go on up.

RH- A lot has been said about western Michigan's "work ethic." Do you feel there is a difference, and if so has it helped S2?

DS- I think that as far as work ethic, West Michigan has had many advantages because of the ethnic backgrounds of the people here. I believe some of that has been diluted in more recent years because of a migration of many other cultures or ethnic people into the area. Dutch and German background were all very hard-working people, and that doesn't say that some of these others weren't. But some of these other peoples come from places where there's not as much industry. Their hard work was in the field making enough food to eat in many instances. I think that has changed some of the labor market, some of the working force.

RH- Has the company been involved in any community service projects?

DS- We were quite involved when Holland built the Evergreen Commons, the senior center. There's been other projects that we have helped with, but probably not to the extent that we did with that one. I talk about Evergreen Commons wherever I go. I just think that's one of the most tremendous centers that I've ever heard or seen in this country. I just think it's terrific.
RH- If you could give a mission statement for the company in your own words, what would it be?

DS- Probably one of the important things to us as a family and through the business is to represent Christian values. Individually and through the company to be able to do outreach work to share Christ with other people. Beyond that, then to be representative by being known for our high Christian standards even in the company, with our employees, with our dealers, and with our vendors, to have a reputation that is know for it's integrity, and honesty, and fair dealing.

RH- Would you like to add anything else?

DS- Adding to the question you asked about the work ethic in western Michigan, and what has made West Michigan what it is. Probably the fact that there are so many self-made entrepreneurs. There's not very many areas that could duplicate what's been done here in western Michigan, particularly in Holland, Zeeland surrounding area with Mr. Haworth, Mr. Prince, Mr. Batts, the DePrees from Herman Miller. You have Howard Miller. You have Leon Slikkers. You have the original Chris Craft family, the Smith family that started the original Chris Craft, the people that started Trendway. You just have so many, and the list just goes on, Louis Padnos downtown that has been here forever. There's just such a long list of people that have been there to
go after business and have done it in a great way.

RH- Well, thanks a lot.