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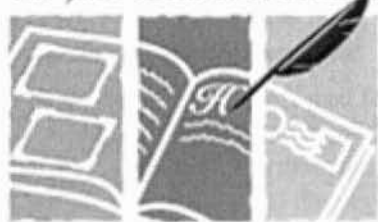
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## Fifty Years of Making Fun: The Story of the Slick Craft Boat Company

by Geoffrey D. Reynolds

The history of the boat building industry in Holland, Michigan is rich with stories of success and failure. S2 Yachts, Inc. is one of the success stories. Its founder chairman of the board, Leon Slikkers, registered the Slick Craft Boat Company name in 1954 and offered production models in 1955. His goal was to build quality boats that were also affordable to consumers. In 1974, Slikkers applied the same quality formula to a second new company, S2 Yachts. Slikkers developed the Tiara Yachts, Grand Slam and S2 sailboats, Slickcraft Sportboat, Tiara Sportboat, and Pursuit Fishing Boat brands into internationally respected watercraft. Today those model lines illustrate his desire to continue building classic boats of quality and integrity.

### From Farm to Factory

In 1946, 18-year old Leon R. Slikkers left his family farm in Diamond Springs, Michigan and began building boats at the Chris-Craft Corporation's Holland, Michigan plant. His desire to avoid a career in farming made his decision to join his brothers Gerald and Dennis at one of Holland's largest factories an easy one. In a 2002 interview, Slikkers explained, "I love working with my hands, and making and creating. So when I got a job at Chris-Craft, I really fell in love with it, because it was making things out of wood, which I like best of all."

Once Slikkers landed a position at Chris-Craft, he was assigned to the joiner department to make cabin tops. As the months went by, he quickly learned and refined his craft with

the help of mentors like his first foreman, Herm Volkers, and fellow employee, Harry Busscher. "[Harry Busscher] taught me an awful lot... he just was careful of helping me to select the right tools, how to sharpen my tools, how to do the job proficiently with good quality. He was a good craftsman." Slikkers learned quickly from his mentors, and by the time he reached the age of 24, he had been promoted to assistant foreman of the joiner department. Some of Slikkers' fellow workers, such as Merle Cook, had noticed his abilities; Slikkers had an uncanny ability to create new designs. "Whenever they engineered a new boat, he was instrumental in a lot of the changes—carrying out and building the mock-ups and cutting the patterns—because he was really skilled," said Cook in a 2002 interview. Slikkers continued his successful career at Chris-Craft

and thought little of changing jobs until he experienced labor strikes.

In 1952, during a company-wide labor strike, Slikkers and fellow Chris-Craft employee Jason Petroelje decided to build their own boats. During the strike, Slikkers and Petroelje



Leon Slikkers Collection/Joint Archives

(Continued on page 2)

## From the Director

This new year has started off well for the Joint Archives for many reasons. The final tally of funds raised during our annual fall solicitation has matched that of last year. I want to thank all of our financial donors for your gifts. Without you, our yearly goals would go unfilled. I also want to thank all of you who have donated archival materials to the archives. Without your donations our mission would also go unfulfilled, as more and more researchers make us their first stop on their research agendas. Lastly, I want to thank all of our volunteers, student staff, graduate intern Rachel Bishop, Hope College faculty and staff, and program secretary Lori Trethewey. I am truly blessed to be working with such fine individuals who make my job enjoyable and fulfilling.

For this issue of the *Quarterly*, I chose to write the article myself since it is a major part of my research into the area's boat building industry history, a subject I never seem to tire of researching, speaking or writing about. The article concerns the history of the longest thriving boat builder in the Holland area, Leon Slikkers. He started his company, Slick Craft Boat Company, officially in June 1954, and it has grown into what we know today as S2 Yachts, Inc. Through the many oral histories and company records that we have collected, I hope to give you a snapshot of one of Holland's most respected companies.

Geoffrey D. Reynolds



Rachel Bishop has joined the staff of the Joint Archives of Holland as an intern from Wayne State University where she recently graduated with a Masters degree in Library and Information Science (MLIS). She is processing several collections at the archives as a requirement for earning a Certificate in Archival Administration. She also works part-time at the Woodhouse Library at Aquinas College. She is married and lives in the area so that has made it much easier for her to work with us until April of this year.

*Fifty Years of Making Fun (continued from page 1)*

produced approximately ten runabouts, made of sheet plywood and averaging 15-feet in length. These unbranded outboard motor powered boats had painted hulls and varnished mahogany decks and were sold out of Slikkers' garage. After the strike ended, the two men decided to end the partnership; Petroelje wanted to leave Chris-Craft to build boats full-time under the Skipper-Craft name, and Slikkers wanted the security of a paycheck from Chris-Craft. Slikkers recalled, "I still kept building some boats from the design we had, and I would sell them and work on the weekends. I started to build contacts and kind of knew of what the industry would be."

By June 1954, Slikkers started thinking more about his future and what he wanted to do next. The periodic work stoppages due to labor strikes combined with the success with his after-hours boat building business finally influenced his move away from Chris-Craft. When asked how much of an impact his years at Chris-Craft had on him, Slikkers thoughtfully remarked, "I often think of those nine years, almost ten years that I worked for them. No doubt it was a beginning of my boat building career. No question about it. If I had not done that, I don't think I would have ever [gone] into the boat business."

By January 1955, the 27-year old Slikkers had left the training ground of Chris-Craft and began making boats full-time on his own. His duel cockpit runabouts were made out of mahogany plywood decks and molded plywood hulls purchased from U.S. Molded Shapes, a Grand Rapids wholesale supplier. "I paid my bills, and I had \$5,000 left... And that was what I started the company with." Slikkers rented a small building with an upstairs apartment and a vacant space below for making boats at 791 South Washington Avenue in Holland. In February 1955, Slikkers settled his wife and two children into the apartment of the boat factory and began building his first official model year of molded plywood runabouts. He then made the critical decision to experimenting with a new boat building material that had been used to build boats since the 1940s—fiberglass.

During the 1955 model year, Slikkers built, and his brother Paul, built thirty-five boats, an ambitious number for his small company. As the company continued to make boats, Slikkers' friends, still employed at Chris-Craft and Mac Bay Boat Company, another Holland-area company, frequently visited Slikkers and inquired about his progress as an entrepreneur. Over time, Slikkers hired many of these men and women because they showed a desire to work in a small, family-oriented factory—a place where craftsmen were valued and management endeavored to build and sell quality boats. Slikkers reflected during a 2002 interview:

"I could see that we were making some affordable toys. I looked at Chris-Craft as a person that had lots of money, and I felt that that was their customer. I was looking at them and saying, 'If we can build a product here for the next level of society, the blue collar worker that maybe has a good job, has his house paid for and wants another toy, needs another toy...and boating at that time was starting to really be attractive to a lot of people.' Water skiing and the outboard engines became a little bigger so you could take it a little more and you could go faster. The larger outboard engine was the key to develop the small boat market. I could see that."

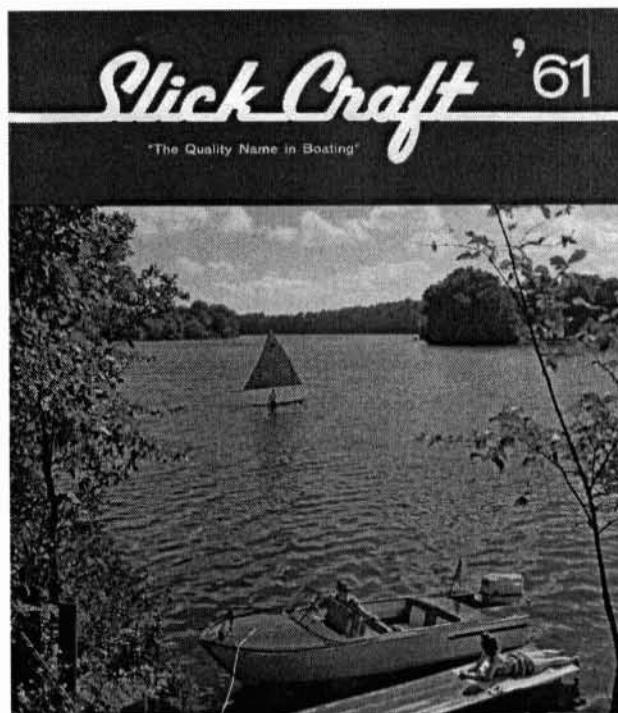
### Fiberglass Era Begins

In December 1955, Slikkers contracted with local fiberglass boat builder Clyde Poll to build fifty hulls for his fledgling company. Poll, in turn, had Jason Petroelje design the plug from which a mold would be made. Slikkers received the hulls from Poll a few at a time and had his employees apply paint to them, as colored gel coat was not used by Slikkers yet. Slikkers crew then added mahogany wood decks, chrome deck hardware, and seats that were produced by a local upholstering company. The final result was either a 14-foot *Caribbean* or *Cubana* model, depending on the options the customer requested. The *Keywester* and *Bermuda* models were also 14-foot, but built of molded plywood. The 1956 model were built exclusively of molded plywood and included the 13-foot *Thunderburst*, 14-foot *Sea Squire*, 15-foot *Premier*, and 15-foot *Continental*. Later that same year, Slikkers contracted with Zeeland-based fiberglass manufacturer, Camfield Manufacturing Company, to make between twenty-five and fifty fiberglass hulls and decks for the 1958 model year. Those hulls, the 16-foot *Victoria 200* and *Victoria 300*, integrated color in the gel coat for the first time. Later on, some deck molds were designed to simulate the striped deck look of the wood decked models, though more color choices were available, like black, white, light green, or salmon. The hull primary color was white. The company also continued to offer molded plywood models, the 15-foot *Sea Squire*, 16-foot *Continental 200*, 16-foot *Premiere*, and 17-foot molded ply-lap constructed *Crusader*.

Following the 1958 model year, Slikkers brought the fiberglass construction phase of the production line under his direct supervision using his own designs and tested techniques for building the 1959 model year 16-foot *Victoria 150* and *Victoria 500*. Those two models were constructed of a fiberglass hull at a plant on Sixth Street in Holland then shipped to the Washington Avenue plant where they were equipped with a mahogany wood deck, hardware, steering controls and seating. The company still made the molded plywood

16-foot *Premiere* and *Continental*, 17-foot *Capitan* and *Sportsman*, but as the year progressed, Slikkers came to understand that fiberglass boats in the same lengths were the future and that making the boats at his plant was the way to proceed.

"I started to read about fiberglass, and at that time there was a company in Minnesota that was offering fiberglass liquid that you could buy in quarts and buy the cloth and you'd cover wooden boats with it. Very early stages. The very next year...I had done a few boats with it. Didn't like the process at all, it just seemed like an awful lot of work. But then I heard that they were molding it with multiple layers, and I said, 'Wow,



Geoffrey Reynolds Collection/Joint Archives

that sounds very interesting." It intrigued me because we were always trying to bend wood that didn't want to bend to some of the curves, and so you'd have to saw it out. And I was thinking, if you could just lay this material in, wow, you could really come up with some fantastic shapes that are more conducive to a boat than to have to bend wood—or cut wood or shape wood. Plus the fact is that the talk was that it would last forever. And I knew that the boating business required a lot of personal attention. You know, when I was making wooden boats, the people actually spent more time working with their boats than using their boats. But that was what they enjoyed. [People were craftsmen themselves]; they like to tinker and all that stuff. You know that's what made that industry—I'm convinced, the small boat industry. The person could take care of the boat themselves."



For the 1960 model year, Slikkers eliminated all of his molded plywood models and offered only fiberglass models with the 15-foot *Catalina 100* and *300* and the 16-foot *Victoria 100*, *125*, *150*, and *500*. Deck and seat color choices included Titan Red, Ermine White, Honey Beige, Tropical Turquoise, and Black. The hulls were only available only in white according to the brochure and prices ranged from \$795 for the *Catalina 100* to \$1295 for the top of the line *Victoria 500*.

The 1961 model year brought with it the last of the historic wood decked models. The 16-foot *Premiere*, incorporated a brand new V-hull design, which transitioned Slick Craft boats to a more modern style. This new hull design was used again the next year as the company focused exclusively on fiberglass hulls and decks, to great financial reward. Other models that year were built completely of fiberglass and included the 15-foot *Catalina*, *Holiday Sport*, and *Holiday Custom*, as well as the 16-foot *Victoria Custom* and *Victoria Sport*, and 18-foot *Sportsman Offshore* and *Royal Express*. But the economic recession of 1960-1961 finally caught up with the boating industry and stunted the growth that Slikkers had expected with his salesmen. His troubles were indicative of the stressful times in the boat building industry as sales slumped throughout the country. Even the best boats could not be sold in this economic climate.

### Success Forces Expansion

During the 1962 model year, Slikkers moved production few blocks farther south to a former skating rink, located at 1145 South Washington Avenue. There, his growing staff enjoyed a much larger building totaling 29,000 square feet. This building would be expanded two more times totaling 42,000 square feet by 1965.

In addition to physical expansion Slikkers hired two individuals who would be key to expanding boat sales. He hired a successful boat salesman, Robert Egan, from outside the family who promised to set up a network and to drive sales throughout the country.

"Well, naturally when a company starts out, I was hoping that the product would be so good that it would sell itself. And I think part of that was true at first. But as the company grew, I recognized at times that I would have to go out into the marketplace and set up dealers and work with the dealers and so forth."

Egan had recently left the troubled, Pennsylvania based, Skee-Craft Boat Company. "I went to the Chicago [boat] show and I looked around at all the builders. I saw Leon's boats, and they were very well detailed. Soon after, I started there as an independent representative," said Egan during a 2002 interview.



Geoffrey Reynolds Collection/Joint Archives

*Slikkers introduced the inboard/outboard models in 1963*

Slikkers then sought additional design assistance when he hired Ed Wennersten away from Chris-Craft with a substantial raise in pay and a promise to play a key role in the research and development area. Slikkers further solidified family involvement employing his three brothers, Gerald, Paul, and Dennis, to oversee the design and production of the boats.

For greater sales efficiency, that year's models were trimmed to the 15-foot *Catalina* and *Holiday Custom*, 16-foot *Premiere* and *Victoria Sport*, and 18-foot *Royal Express* and *Sportsman Offshore*. The only changes were the striking solid colors offered for both the deck and hull for the ever model except the *Catalina* and 18-footers. Prices ranged from \$795 for the *Catalina* to \$1995 *Royal Express*. By October of 1962 the 18-footers came with the relatively new technology of the inboard/outboard motor (I/O).

In 1963, Slikkers introduced the inboard/outboard motor as an option on three of his company's 9 model line. Motor options included Mercruiser and possibly OMC brands. The I/O equipped models included the 16-foot *Premiere* and *Victoria* and 18-foot *Offshore Sport*. With this new technology and the proven outboard line of boats, company production grew, and the business continued to expand to include its first cabin cruiser model, the 18-foot *Royal Express*.

With the larger facility in place and national sales booming, international sales soon followed. To boost foreign sales, a

production facility agreement was arranged with Grew Boats Limited, located in Penetanguishene, Ontario, Canada, in 1964. In 1969, a similar arrangement was made with Vator Oy in Helsinki, Finland. These two companies produced a limited line of outboards from molds designed by the Slick Craft Boat Company, as well as carried the Slickcraft name.

For 1964, Slikkers introduced two new models with new hull designs, the outboard powered 15-foot *Sun Sport* and I/O powered 16-foot *Sea Sport*, 18-foot *Sea Sport*, and 18-foot *Surfcaster*, with a deep V hull design that added speed, style, and size to the 15 model line-up. Other models continued to use the designs from the 1963 line: the 15-foot *Holiday*, 16-foot *Premier*, and the 18-foot *Offshore* (available with an I/O or outboard power). Most of the outboard models included the "Sport" or "Custom" option which allowed the consumer to have either fold down seats (Sport) or bucket seats (Custom).

The following year Slikkers eliminated the practice of naming its models and simply used the SS designation along with a number that denoted its length. The slicker and sharper lined models included the outboard powered *SS 140*, *SS 150*, *SS 160*, *SS 170*, and *SS 180*. The I/O models included the *SS 175*, *SS 185*, *SS 195*, and the extremely popular cabin cruiser *SS 235*. Prices ranged from \$995 for the *SS 140* to \$5995 for the new *SS 235*. Late in 1965 SlickCraft boats were so well respected that the Century Boat Company, located in Manistee, Michigan, contracted with Slikkers to build their first fiberglass boat, the 17-foot *Fibersport*. This was an attempt by Century to hold on to their classic wooden boat designs, but also catch up with the fiberglass trend that had started 20 years before.

In November 1966, growth once again caused Slikkers to expand his company, and he decided to build a 65,000 square foot factory designed for boat building at 500 East 32nd Street, in Holland's industrial park. For the construction of the larger cabin cruiser models, Slikkers later bought another building just down 32nd Street. His 7 model line of boats included the outboard powered *SS 150*, *SS 160*, and *SS 170*. The I/O powered models included the *SS 175*, *SS 195*, and *SS 235* with a choice of Interceptor, Volvo, Mercruiser, or OMC engines.

The 1967 model year saw the company in its new quarters where they continued to offer the outboard powered models *SS140* through *SS190* and offered new models with the I/O powered *SS165* and *SS215* to round out the 13 model line. A major change to the line included the introduction of the cathedral/tri-hull design which was supposed to offer a more stable ride, but also caused the boats to ride over the waves adding to the rough ride on water with any wave heights. The sole model with this hull configuration was the *SS 180*.

By 1968 Slikkers had eliminated the *SS 150* and *SS 215* and added another tri-hull, the *SS 185*, to the 9 model lineup.

In 1969 the company offered the outboard powered *SS 150V*, *SS 160V*, *SS 170V*, *SS 180T*, *SF 180T* (fishing tri-hull), and *SS 210V*. The I/O powered models included the *SS 175V*, *SS 195V*, *SS 215V*, *SH 235V* (hardtop), *SF 235V*, *SS 235V*. This rich offering of well-built designs at an affordable cost gave the boating enthusiast 12 models to choose from as the decade came to a close.

#### SlickCraft Division of AMF Corporation

Throughout the late '60s, 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, NY 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.

After Slikkers left AMF, he implemented his plan to begin a new Slikkers family boat building company. On February 18, 1974, S2 Yachts was born. Along with the new name 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.

Author's note: Due to a fire most of the records for the Slick Craft Boat Company were destroyed and production numbers can only be estimated at best. I would like to record as many SlickCraft boats, built between 1954 and 1970, as possible in attempt to establish a rough estimate of production numbers. Please contact me at [reynoldsg@hope.edu](mailto:reynoldsg@hope.edu) to record you classic SlickCraft boat and ask about the archival materials we have concerning your boat.

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*Interior view of the East 32<sup>nd</sup> Street plant, c. 1966*