

Gold Coast

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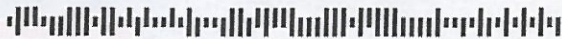
THE WATER ISSUE

PREVIEW
THE FORT LAUDERDALE INTERNATIONAL BOAT SHOW

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BOB DENISON
OR CURRENT RESIDENT
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> FEATURE // DENISON

Family Ties

The Denison name has become synonymous with the South Florida's boating industry.

By Bernard McCormick
Photography by Jason Arnold

Kit and Bob Denison are fixtures in the boating business.

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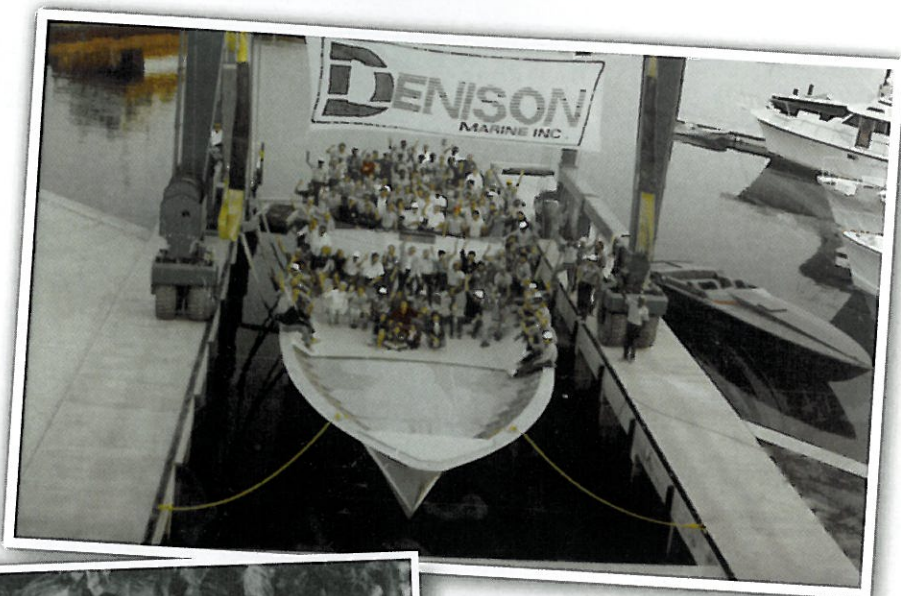
Almost from the day in 1896 when the FEC Railway reached the New River in downtown Fort Lauderdale, the marine industry has been an essential part of the Fort Lauderdale economy. Over the years, as the city earned the nickname "Venice of America," those engaged in building, selling, decorating and fixing boats have been among our most prominent citizens. One of them, Bob Cox, became a memorable mayor of Fort Lauderdale in one of its periods of dramatic growth in the 1980s.

To list those who have contributed to the marine industry would fill half a phone book. You might begin with Frank Stranahan, whose house on the New River, from which he ran a trading company, is one of the city's premier historic sites. Among those many names who followed there are few, if any, which endure to this day as the name Denison.

It began with Frank Denison in 1948, when he honeymooned in Fort Lauderdale with his wife, Gertrude. He already had made a name for himself in the nautical world by being the first person to install a diesel engine in a yacht. That was up in Michigan. In Fort Lauderdale he found a place called Dooley's Basin & Dry Dock. He bought it and renamed the 20-acre facility Broward Marine.

Initially the yard did service and repair work, but in 1953 it built its first custom wooden motor yacht. The Korean War was winding down, but it brought an order for four wooden minesweepers under a NATO contract. Contracts for the U.S. Navy followed, making Broward Marine for a time the largest private employer in Broward County. When military contracts ended, Broward Marine continued to build private yachts, achieving a national reputation for quality. Gertrude Denison did her part by building a company that made outstanding yacht interiors for Broward Marine's vessels.

Frank Denison was joined by family members over the years, and the family was proud that no two of their



(Left) This photo of the Denison family, taken in 1958, includes Ken, Gertrude "Shooshie," Kit, Frank and Skip Denison. (Above) The entire Denison family is pictured.



yachts were identical. A family slogan was "If you build two boats the same, you haven't learned anything."

The company was sold in 1999, but that was hardly the end of the Denison name in the boating field. Denison Yacht Sales continues to be a leader in marketing boats. It has more than 50 employees in a number of offices around the world.

Running that operation as president is Bob Denison, grandson of Frank and son of Christopher "Kit" Denison, who founded and is still a consultant with the company. He is also the founder and president of Marine Realty, where he handles selling, purchasing and consulting for marinas and shipyards. Kit Denison says it is no surprise that 35-year-old Bob runs the company. He became president in 2002.

"He was the one who was always hanging around, sweeping floors, doing anything that needed to be done," Kit says.

The headquarters is in downtown Fort Lauderdale, just off the New

River. The original boat building facility was several miles west. The successor to the boat building company built aluminum boats, but hasn't done any in recent years because of the economic slowdown. Kit Denison points out that real estate for boat building along Fort Lauderdale's busy waterways is increasingly hard to find.

"With condominiums being built along the water, there's a danger that boat builders will have to move north to find space," he says. "And that would be a shame."

He adds, however, that in other markets developers have put their towers a bit in from the waterfront, but overlooking marine industries.

"They discovered that people actually enjoyed looking down on the activity in the yards," he says.

The Denisons favor nicknames, and so it is that Kit's brother, Skip, whose real name is Frank, also works as a yacht broker. Then there's a younger brother, Ken (he prefers that to Kenelm) who is the founder of Denison & Daves, a superyacht broker. Rounding out this den of Denisons is Eddie Denison, Bob's brother who works with him in accounting for the firm.

Don't count on getting rid of the Denisons any time soon. Recently married Bob has a son on the way.

"He'll be the next generation in the business," Bob says. "He doesn't know it yet, but he will be, whether he wants to or not." ■

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ess.