

ACBS MEMBER MEMORIES



Herb, Barbara, Betty & George G. Hall, November 2012

Mooers Photo

*“In 1976 we set out to buy a classic boat at Sierra Boat Co.
Somehow... we ended up buying the whole company.”
George G. Hall, December 2012*

*ACBS NC/LT Chapter Historian Wayne Mooers interviews and
presents George G. Hall and his Sierra Boat Company memories.*

He invited me into his Orinda home and shared his 90 some years of family and boating stories with me. And with due respect, George (Dode) Hall agreed to also let me share some of his special memories with his classic boating friends and customers alike. Dode celebrated his 92nd birthday this year. He is a 1983 founding member of our Northern California / Lake Tahoe Antique & Classic Boating Society Chapter and together with his Sierra Boat Company family, he has played a major part in regional and national classic boating's growth and enjoyment over the past 40 years.

He's also the guy who went to Italy, put his money down, and started importing the classic Riva boats into North America in the 1980's. He's the gentleman who for 20 years opened his company doors and marina to the Concours d' Elegance in the past, and in September 2016, welcomed our ACBS International Show into his facilities. Today his company is still the caretaker of the largest "collection" of classic boats stored (some 250 wooden boats) on his Carnelian Bay, Lake Tahoe California property, more than anywhere in the country. Please join in with your fellow ACBS friends in honoring the man - George G. Hall, and his Sierra Boat Company's family classic boating story.

About our family:

“I grew up in the San Francisco East Bay community of Piedmont overlooking San Francisco Bay” Dode smiles. My grandfather and father were attorneys, and most likely I was suppose to follow “suit”- literally. Yet when I graduated from Cal with my MBA, I went to work as the Chief Financial Officer for the San Francisco landmark Tubbs Cordage Company – manufacturers of “quality rope and twine since 1856.” I married my college sweetheart Betty, settled down in Orinda, and along came daughters Wendy, Suzette, and son Herb. After leaving Tubbs Cordage, I became a San Francisco based stockbroker where I continued to meet many of our clients and boating friends. Looking back, there were always boats and water in our family ‘picture moments’ long before Sierra Boat Company happened into our family story.”

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About my Boats:



I can remember my youthful excitement of building my first kayak with my dad in our garage when I was about 12. Many of us remember a like story - about Dads and garages, and some tools to mess around with. Later on in my high school years I built a larger one, and off I went exploring the Ben Lomond resort area (Santa Cruz) waters from our family vacation home there. Over the years we also had both sail and power boats we enjoyed on San Francisco Bay, and we even put together a 16 foot Chris Craft Kit boat in our garage in 1955.

Those special bonding times working on that kit boat went pretty well until we got around to fiberglassing the bottom. It seems all the resin vapors found their way into the freezer's air exchange system, which was also in the garage next to our boat project. Betty will always remember, and be equally glad to tell you, about the "special" flavors all the freezer's contents absorbed! Yet we were pretty proud of that little boat; it has a lot of very simple family smile hours on it, and it's still up in the company's second floor loft. Looking back, I never did buy another classic boat until I purchased my Riva Ariston in 1979. It seems the company had all the classic boats.



About Sierra Boat Company:

You ask how we came about buying it? Like I said, we were looking around for a boat to use on Tahoe and Sierra Boat Company was the place to go for classic boats. I knew Ollie Meek and Stan Dollar Jr. who owned the company at the time. They purchased the company back in 1952 out of bankruptcy of Ballard

Marine - a boat building enterprise, and under the management of Dick Clarke, they primarily kept their "fleet" of racing boats stored and maintained there along with storing and servicing the Tahoe summer customer's boats. Yet Stan passed away in 1975 and there I was having lunch at the Bohemian Club in July of 1976 with Ollie. We were talking about boats, and he mentioned he and the Dollar family were now going to sell the company. It kind of perked my ears up a bit; the stock market was "iffy" at that time, and I probably got thinking about the company because of my interest in boating over the years.

During the following months I talked with various boating friends about buying the company together; there was little interest from them - who would want a boat business with a collection of 'old wooden boats'? Yet a year later we formed a family corporation and together with my brother and sister we purchased Sierra Boat Company in August of 1977. The purchase consisted of 3 acres of Lake Tahoe's Carnelian Bay water front land, a 110 berth harbor, 3 buildings and a 'bunch' of old boats, which were under our care and storage custody.

"But we really didn't buy Sierra Boat Company. We purchased Dick Clarke's Sierra Boat Company, and we knew and respected this going into the deal. My friend Ollie had partially clued me in on Dick; he was a workaholic, largely self taught, articulate, and completely honest. What he didn't tell me was he (Dick) had a passion for old woodies (his girls) to the point that he was sometimes reluctant to sell them to buyers he didn't think would really appreciate and take good care of them." So under Dick's rein our (his) Sierra Boat Company started collecting and storing some very unique and later valuable boats, which Dick would buy on his annual trips to the East Coast and drag them home to Tahoe. "There was never a question about who was running the company, and he did it so well, we seldom had to interfere.

Along with the classic boats, we were the Century Boat Company dealer and also sold Donzi Boats for a long period of time. Yet our short Tahoe summer season made it hard to place new boats. It mandated we focus on keeping our customers' wooden boats serviced and ready for their summer use, and then maintain and restore them during the winter months - which still is our primary business. Over the years, we have been fortunate to have some very talented and dedicated people associated with Sierra Boat Company to accomplish just that: Tony Brown, Curtis Bauman, Jay Thelin and Todd Jeffries are all "alumni" and played an important part in our early success stories.

Dick Clarke passed away in December of 2001. We will always honor his foresight within our company along with his ongoing contribution to preserving and perpetuating the classic boating community in general. Dode eulogized Dick as the man who "...realized early on that unless someone did something about it, most of the wooden boats would end up in the fireplace and their beauty lost forever. Gradually he turned Sierra Boat into being a company specializing in the maintenance, restoration, and preservation of these beauties, and we can be ever thankful to him for that." We are also fortunate to have had Pat Bagan "school" under Dick's era, and we credit Pat accordingly with keeping our customer service, parts, mechanical, and restoration departments the 'go to' source and "world renowned." Pat was our very capable Vice President and General Manager for some 49 years until his recent retirement in 2013. His facility improvement "success stories" are all over our company! We recognize and appreciate Pat accordingly.. Currently, we have a core group of 23 full time employees, and during the summer months we run a crew of about 35 on hand.

It's Still ... All About People:

My son Herb joined Sierra Boat Company in 1978 to perpetuate Dick's legacy in the promotion of our boat sales and management areas, along with overseeing our family interests. Herb is currently corporate President as I moved into my coveted Chairman role. Herb is known for his overall classic boat knowledge and restoration expertise, yet unknown to many, Herb is also a very good mechanical and engine man. Herb is active on a regional and national level with the classic boating associations and related customer base, and together with his wife Barbara have two adult children. If Dick Clarke is recognized for bringing home his era's classic "launches," one of Herb's noted contribution is bringing "home" the Riva boats to our classic boating marketplace.

Today we are also privileged to have an experienced young team who have a passion and thorough understanding of classic boats. In 2013 we appointed Chris Brogna our general manager. Chris 'schooled' with us for years in our restoration departments and also has excellent management skills. Mac Scott, our service manager, quite literally has generations of family history with classic boats on Lake Tahoe. (His grandfather wrote the book "Saga of Lake Tahoe," and his great grandfather started Hall Scott Motors). And so the Scott story continues! To quote Mac: "I want every boat in our marina to be a wooden boat."

Another "important veteran" with us is Carl Milke who manages our parts department. - He's the 'no problem' contact when you're looking for that hard to find old boat part. If Carl can't find it - it doesn't exist! Rounding out our management team is Brian Richards, a "graduate" of our restoration operations and Cooper Stubbs, our master mechanic and vintage engine specialist. I recognize and thank our crew accordingly.

About our Italian Riva Era



In 1979 we ventured into importing the Italian built wooden Riva and the Riva Marque Class was kind enough to give me credit accordingly for this during the 2012 Concours. There were 20 Riva boats displayed in our harbor - the largest collection of Rivas brought back together in one showing. Our involvement with the Riva came about because Eric Schmidt, who was a good customer of ours, had two Rivas on Tahoe and he couldn't say enough about them. He continued to talk with Dick and I about the classic wooden Riva and what was then available in Europe - because the Europeans at that point in time were buying the all the new fiberglass Riva editions.

Our Hall family, - including my brother and sister, went over to the Riva plant on Lake Iseo, Italy - which is about 25 miles north of Milan. We met with management and told them of our interests, and quickly found out they didn't have any used wooden boats...at least *there* they didn't have any. All the older

wooden Riva sport boats were at their Monte Carlo service center. So off to Monte Carlo we went. During that first trip we were impressed with the boats that were available, found a 1968 Ariston, and brought it back to Tahoe. Eric was right, there was an interest in these beautiful Italian boats, and all the other factors - boat availability and dollar exchange rates were in our favor at that time.

Then I started going over there (Italy) a couple more times and buying the choice boats - the Aquarama, Aristons, & Florida models. We bought about 10 boats and shipped them back as the dollar was very strong so we could buy them at a reasonable price, fix them up good as new, and resell them at a fair price. On one of Herb's scouting trips he found another 20 boats, and then we later started ordering boats over the phone through our Italian contact that knew our quality expectations. To this date, I think we have imported some 30 plus boats of which most are still on Tahoe waters. We liked the 60's era Rivas for design, workmanship, and best of woods and materials, yet Riva built the wooden boats through the mid 1990's. The Riva Aquarama's are the big 28' boats and still commanding considerable market attention and dollars.

We discovered restoring the Riva boats required new shop and woodworking systems than we were accustomed to on our traditional plank-on-frame western built boats. One of the problems we found is that when you hole the Riva hull or deck, it isn't easy to patch. You can't pull a plank out and replace it because you have this piece of molded plywood panel part that was built in sections - they built the whole panel part in a 'mold' first, then screw and glue it to the frames and keel parts. The Europeans started "cold molding" and using "engineered wood" components long before we did here, and the Rivas were quick to incorporate these construction advantages into their wooden boats. Repairing and restoring these Rivas does take special skills and equipment.

The Riva boats have been an important part of our Sierra Boat story. Many people have participated in this 'story' with us, and it should be noted that Marty Feletto (Sacramento) and Alan Weinstein (Florida) were instrumental and collaborated with us on the growth of the Riva class in the US market. Yet, as you will recall from the introduction, I never bought a boat for myself, and over the years I always had my eye on the 30 foot, "Venice" water taxi.





“My favorite boat, *GIOVANNI* – is a 1975 Cantiere Cucchini built Venetian ‘motor launch. She came along in 1982 when I was introduced to Gino Macropodio, a 4th generation gondolier in Venice. I told him I was looking for an Italian Motoscafo (water taxi). Our Venice stay went by real fast, and Betty and I were just getting ready to leave the next day, when Gino called me and said he’s ‘founda me a boat!’ “Gino”, I said, “I’m about ready to leave.”

“Itsa’ ok Mr. Hall, I have the boat in the water out in front of your hotel! What could I say! Down the stairs I went and there was “my” boat! Based on the short time left, I didn’t have a chance to haul it out and do a real survey job on it, but as I looked it over it was obvious the owner had done a super job of taking care of it.”

So the taxi’s owner and I talked - just before I was ready to fly out - and we came to a purchase agreement. In the short time left, I also talked with Gino asking him to help me package and ship the boat to Oakland, and telling him and the owner I had opened up a letter of credit at the bank of San Marco, Italy. Gino - in his very calm Italian way - kept saying ‘no problem, no problem, don’t worry Mr. Hall’. I told him to take the bill of lading to the bank, and they would get paid. Again, Gino said ‘don’t worry....no problem Mr. Hall’. At that point I was starting to worry, and I questioned Gino “what do you mean don’t worry”? Well... he replied, I’ve already paid the owner for the boat, so don’t worry!” “You’ve already paid him?” I exclaimed. Why?

Well, I paid him first Mr. Hall because well,... “the taxi’s owner didn’t trust you!” What could I say, but thank you Gino! In all my stock brokerage business years, I was trusted with a significant amount of clients money, and I still smile thinking the taxi’s owner didn’t trust me! I also think back about finally buying the boat I set out to buy a long time ago, and so my personal boat story continues! I paid my new ‘trusting’ Italian friend Gino on a bank account he has in Illinois, USA no less. And, with great childhood “new toy” anticipation on my behalf, my Cucchini Taxi successfully arrived in Oakland just as Gino said it would. No problem!

ACBS Classic Boat Profile:

Name: GIOVANNI – a Venetian Motor Launch
 Builder: Cantiere Cucchini, Venice, Italy
 Year built: 1975
 Dimensions:
 Length 30’, Beam 7’4”, weight 5,500 lbs.
 Materials: African Mahogany, copper riveted.
 Restored: Winter 1982
 Seating: 12
 Power: Crusader Marine 454, 350hp
 Speed: 30 MPH

Owner’s comments: “These boats are a common site on the canals of Venice and are used for taxi service as well as private use, yet only a small number of “water taxi” models are known to exist in the United States. GIOVANNI represents the last of the ‘long deck mahogany launches’ built in Venice. Later examples have shorter front decks - due to the change from straight inboard engine drive systems forward under the front deck, to stern drive I/O propulsion, with the engine in the stern. Sadly, the era of wooden launches in Venice is fading, with newer examples being built of fiberglass construction.” Herb Hall, 2016

About Tomorrow:

Our Mission Statement reads: “Sierra Boat Company is dedicated to preserving maritime heritage for future generations. Our employees are committed to excellence in customer service, delivered with integrity, friendliness,, individual pride and company spirit. We believe this is essential to preserving the skills, stories and history of classic boating.”

My name is George G. (Dode) Hall. Thank you for letting me share my company story and classic boating memories with you.

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