

MY MOST UNFORGETTABLE CHARACTER

by Kiko Villalon

September 5, 2010



JACK AND KIKO IN 1963 AT LAKE MAUMELLE, ARKANSAS

Jack Riggleman passed away at 0900hr. on Friday, September 3, 2010. He was 82 years old.

Jack hired me on June 25, 1962 to work as a draftsman in the engineering department of Arkansas Traveler Boats in Little Rock. Typical of Jack, it took

him three weeks to make the decision. He claimed that, as an engineer, I was overqualified to be a draftsman. I pleaded with him several times and finally he gave me the job. A couple of weeks later, while lighting his pipe at the office, he repeated his litany about my being overqualified. I asked him if he would like to know why I wanted the job so badly (as if being a hungry Cuban refugee with wife and three kids were not enough). When he responded affirmatively, I told him that the day Ernie Avra showed me around the plant, I decided this was the place for me. It was such a managerial disaster that I figured one day I could have a big chance in this company. Three months later, a man by the name of Robert G. Brave showed up at the door as the new president, sent by the parent company Standard Railway Corporation (STANRAY), from Chicago. Brave fired everybody on the spot except Jack and his department, and I wound up as assistant chief engineer. Jack taught me everything I know about boats and the way they run, and his death marks the end of a chapter for the boating industry as well as for me. I last visited him three weeks ago, after his wife Joyce had had to take him to a nursing home due to the advance of his disease.

Jack started, after graduating from the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor, with Chance & Co. Then he went to Little Rock as chief engineer for Traveler. When the company decided to combine five plants into one, they chose Danville, Illinois; Jack and I decided to stay south. Jack went to Austin as chief engineer for Bob Hammond at Glastron Boats, where he worked with Bob, Mel Whitley, Jim Black and other old-timers in the industry. From Austin, he accepted an offer to run the marine laboratory for Sears Roebuck & Co., where all marine items to be sold in Sears stores were tested. There he developed a relationship with Ted Williams and Sir Edmund Hillary, both of whom were advisors for Sears. During this time, after he had moved to Fort Myers, I decided to start on my own business, and it was Jack who encouraged me to move from Arkansas to Florida to start Marine Concepts. I made Jack my partner for two reasons: To say Thanks, Jack, and to take advantage of his enormous experience in the field. When Sears decided to close the marine lab during a recession, Jack went to work in Memphis, Tennessee with Dick

Holtzendorf of Alpha Chemical, a guy who had sold us polyester resin to make boats in the Arkansas Traveler years. Dick was part owner of Alpha and had started another company to design and make composite covers for the large Mississippi River barges. They also made "spun" light poles for city lighting, as well as circuit boards. Here Jack showed his enormous engineering capacity, and I believe he was one of the pioneers of the technological mushrooming of FRP development over the years. In 1968, when the Coast Guard was asked by Congress to review the Boat Safety Act of 1940, the boating industry, led by BIA and ABYC, assembled a group of engineers who did all the legwork for what became the Boat Safety Act of 1971, that today is the federal law known as 33 CFR. Although by then we had been separated when we each took different jobs, Jack and I kept in touch almost weekly. Jack recruited me to work with that group while I was with Caravelle Boats in Little Rock, and I joined others like Ralph Lambrecht, Jim Lippman, Don Reed, Don Kuney, Don Kinsey, Med Smith, Grant Thompson, Dick Gemp from Chrysler Boats, and others. Jack was the leader in the creation of what today is ABYC H-5, Flotation in the Event of Swamping, which in those days of BIA we simply called level flotation. Jack was president and a long-time director of ABYC, and he chaired the hull performance committee for many years. In 2005 ABYC presented Jack with its first Life Service Award for a lifetime dedicated to furthering boating and boating safety--a signal honor. In about 1970 Jack began doing marine defense expert-witness work, and some of the leading attorneys in this specialty, such as Alex Marconi, Frank Manchisi, George Mitchell and others, called him the greatest expert witness they had ever known.

Jack was such a "deliberate" thinker and had such a vast store of knowledge that at times we used to joke that Jack, in a dire emergency, could make a decision in 48 hours. Many times, while describing Jack to others, I would bring up a Cuban saying that translates into: Jack was the kind of man who "doesn't see shadows around him," by which I mean that he was never afraid to share his knowledge with anyone. He was generous to a fault. He taught me to "feel" a boat, and to "wear" safety. And I very seldom saw him lose his temper or get agitated. One morning in 1964, he and I were driving back to the factory

from testing a new "pocket cruiser" we had developed. He was driving his white Nash Rambler and I was sitting co-pilot as we came down the steep Cantrell Road hill that swerved down to the banks of the Arkansas River. At one point I looked out the left window and saw the "Venus" model boat and trailer passing us on the left. I screamed.. "Jack, that's our boat there"! Jack looked out the window and replied calmly, "Indeed it is...." as the boat crashed bow-first into the telephone pole that ripped through it right back to the windshield. Never a dull day around Jack and his pipe (which, I must say, annoyed me to the brink--the pipe, that is). It took Jack at least ten minutes to scrape the pipe clean, fill it with tobacco, and light it--just to puff on it for two more minutes and put it back into his pocket again.

Jack is survived by his wife Joyce and sons Ski and Kenny.

Should you wish to write to the family, the address is:

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Kiko