The Making of the Picnic Boat

By Shep McKenney

The seeds of the Picnic Boat were sown at the Atlantic Yacht Basin in Great Bridge, Virginia, in the 1950s. There, my father worked as an engine mechanic, and there, as a teenager, I roamed among the Huckins, Matthews and Ryboviches. Those covered sheds were cathedrals where I could worship the beauty and grace of these elegant craft. The seeds would take forty years to germinate.

In the mid-1990s the Hinckley Company was in search of a new mission. We had survived the luxury tax of 1990-92, but it wasn't clear that we could survive the decline in interest in cruising sailboats. In fact, most of our customers used their Hinckleys as day boats, rarely anchoring, cooking or sleeping on board. It was time to do something different.

In wanting to do a powerboat, I did not see myself as a heretic.

The company had, in fact, started as a powerboat company, and, more importantly, the essence of the thing was not masts and sails but beauty and performance. To stay with that essence, we needed to buck the modern trend toward packing the maximum accommodation in the minimum length. This called for a day boat that was sleek and elegant, designed from the outside in and not the other way around.

I could see the template for that day boat out the window of my apartment on the Hinckley dock every day of the summer. It was the Maine lobster boat. With an arcing sheer, low freeboard and minimal pilothouse, these boats seemed to skim across the water, while their less graceful brethren plowed through it.

To make that template a yacht, we went to three successive naval architects. I will never forget the moment when I unrolled a mailing tube from the last of them, Bruce King, and saw the first preliminary drawing of what was to be the Picnic Boat. I instinctively reached

Rachel **was a 32-foot Hinckley cruiser (here in 1937) owned by Dr. Fred C. Holden. You can see her influence on one of the early Hinckley Picnic Boats (left), cruising on a Maine morning.**

for the phone to call Bruce to lock it in, afraid that this apparition of the boat of my dreams would vanish before my eyes.

The water jet was something of an afterthought. Because a day boat wants to operate in shallow water, a conventional shaft and prop seemed problematical, and it would have been a shame to stick an inboard/outboard unit on that beautiful stern. Ultimately, the jet became a defining feature of the Picnic Boat.

As for the JetStick, the need for it became obvious once we had sea-trialed the first hull. The water jet allows fabulous control authority, but harnessing that authority was fiendishly difficult with conventional controls. It cried out for a fly-by-wire joystick control system. Unfortunately, at that time no one in the yachting world, including the water-jet manufacturers, made joystick control systems. We would have to do it ourselves.

Most of the JetStick development was done on the waters near my home in Maryland, where we went through a lot of joysticks, computer boards, software and near disasters. Having struggled with electronic controls in my present business, I am amazed we pulled it off. If it hadn't been for a polymath named Kent Fadeley, we wouldn't have.

In preparing to write this piece, I dug out the files from that time and realized I had forgotten so much that happened — the tank tests, alternative technologies and equipment, the consultants, the endless memoranda, and all the dead ends and frustration. I also remembered how much doubt there was, both within and without the Hinckley Company, regarding the whole viability of the project. Nascent success has a wonderful way of disguising itself. ■