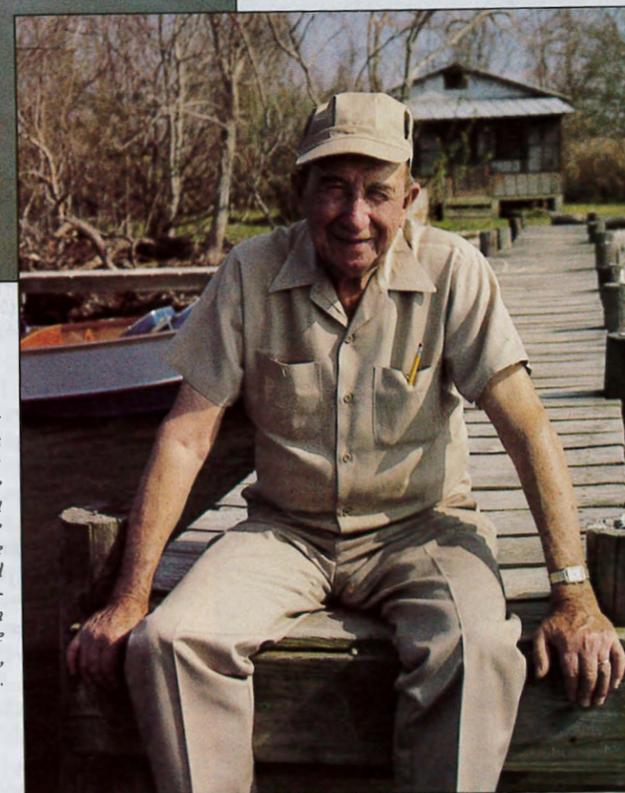




Out of the Delta

The legend of Stauter-built boats

Text and photographs by Morry Edwards



Lawrence Stauter founded his business in 1946 on the idea that local people needed tough, light boats at affordable prices. Today, the tradition is continued under new (but family-related) ownership in boats such as the Cedar Point Special, shown above.

When Lawrence Stauter laughed, they say you could hear him clear from Spanish Fort to Mobile, Alabama, five miles across the bay.

Today, at 74, he is retired and no longer lives or works out on the causeway that links the upper shores of Mobile Bay. The boatworks that made Stauter-built boats a local legend is now in the hands of young and capable kinfolk. "It's their red wagon," he says. But if his pace of life has slackened, Lawrence Stauter's humor remains as robust as it ever was. In a melodious drawl spiced by the twang of his German forebears, he says, "Ah still can do a good day's work." Then he adds,

with a bellow of laughter, "Only trouble is, now it takes me a whole dang week to do it!"

Forty years ago, Lawrence came out of the delta swamp above Mobile with a boat that the working folk of southern Alabama could afford to take fishing. Tall and genial, he came dressed in khaki work pants and shirt, with a rumpled khaki hat crowning his head. Lawrence's attire and manner matched the boats he built: light but dependable; above all, practical. It was a style that suited his customers' needs.

"When I started," Lawrence recalls, "the man wanted a boat to fish with. Aaaaall that fancy stuff and fin-

icky stuff, that didn't make a bit of difference. He wanted a boat that handled good and did him a job." At his peak, Lawrence would sell more than 400 of these no-nonsense craft each year.

His home in the delta swamp was a small house perched on pilings 8' above an Indian shell bank at the edge of a languid slough of brown water called Conway Creek. A couple of miles to the east, the Apalachee River crawled slowly toward the bay. Several miles to the west ran the swifter Mobile River. In the delta between, on scattered nubbins of shell bank and high ground, the Stauters and the Klein-

schrodt's, the Spattles, and other descendants of early German settlers led an isolated and simple life.

With few toys and little dry ground to play on, young Lawrence Stauter included the house rooftop in his childhood haunts. There he could look out over the surrounding willows and fig trees, beyond the meandering brown creek line, and green canebrake clumps to the climbing white fingers of distant chimney smoke that marked the stove fires of his delta neighbors. The smoke also marked old man Willy's whiskey stills.

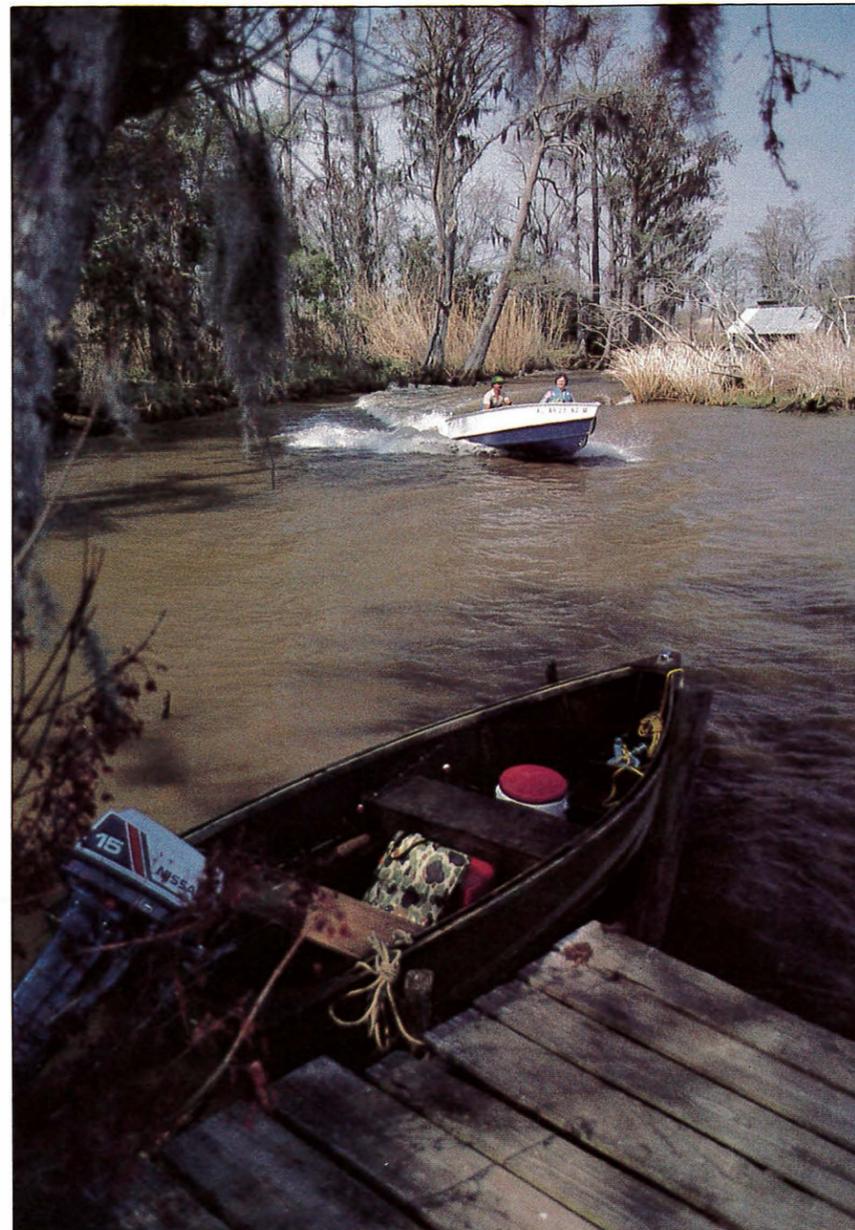
Willy was an outsider. He used the delta to conceal his distilleries, and

"There you are...trying to hit (the 'gator) in the head with a hatchet while he's thrashing around like he's going to tear the boat apart. Yes, sir, I've owned 15 Stauter boats in my time, and not one of them ever leaked."

Right—This 20-year-old photo shows what a little imagination can do to a Stauter-built boat. Below—Appearance counts for little in the 12' semi-V boat (in the foreground), but to lure a younger, more affluent market, Stauter Boat Works also offers larger boats with an array of cosmetic options, including two-tone paint jobs and matching seat covers.



Courtesy: Stauter Boat Works



despite an occasional invasion of the swamp by moonshine agents in search of Willy's boilers and corkscrew tubing, his presence wasn't entirely unwelcome. According to Lawrence, the delta folk studied Willy's techniques and got into the business for themselves. "Eventually, everybody learned how to make whiskey," he says.

Everybody, that is, but Lence Stauter, Lawrence's father. Lence ran trot lines for catfish and took mullet in trammel nets to provide for his family. He also shot ducks and coot, giggered frogs, and trapped the occasional turtle. For red meat, "he'd take and paddle up the creek and kill us a hawg. Shucks, we always had plenty to eat."

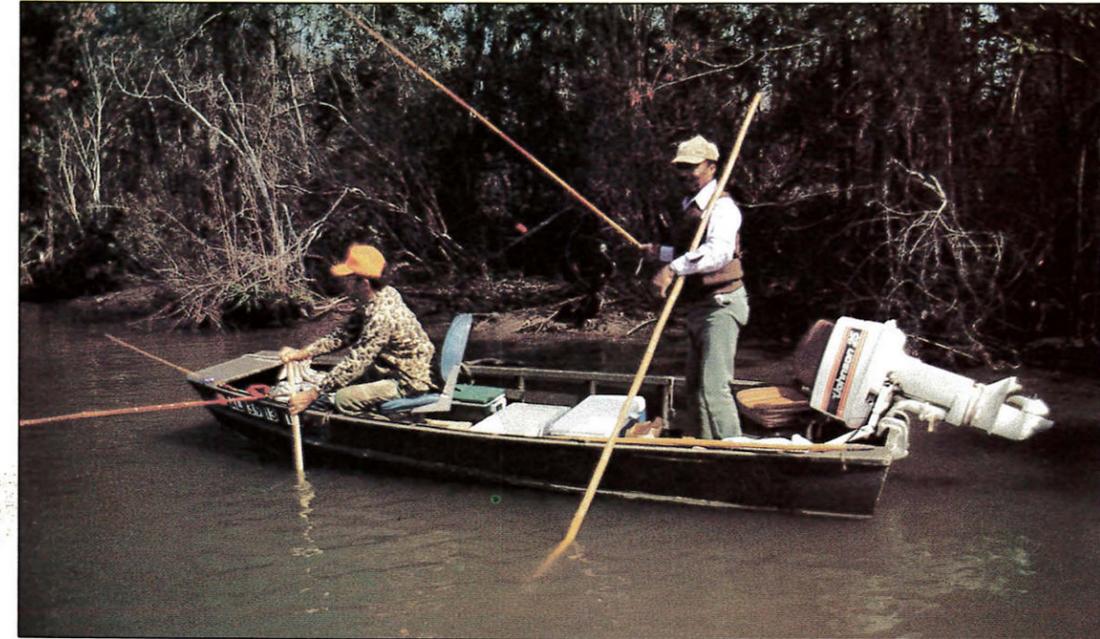
But the family had little besides life's basic necessities, and even these came hard at times. Still, Lence did not approve of illicit shortcuts. "One day, old man Willy come by the house with a new panama hat," recalls Lawrence. "He threw it on the table, and he said, 'Look at that, Lence. I just paid 50 dollahs fo' that damn hat.' Daddy said, 'Willy, you a damn fool.'"

The First Stauter-Built

Willy paid his visits and ran his business by boat, delta-fashion. No roads penetrated the swamp. No pipes carried fresh water to its inhabitants. For electric power, you moved to Mobile. For news, you relied on the visits of friends and neighbors who came to you along the watery alleyways of the swamp by boat alone. Your boat was your lifeline to food and your connection to society. Most families owned several. Of course, Lence Stauter built his own. "Daddy was a good wood mechanic," recalls his son. "He had no schooling. Yet, with nothing but a square and a level, a plane and a hatchet, he could make things fit."

Lence Stauter's largest boat was 32' long, round-bottomed, cypress planked on oak ribs, with a 2-cyl make-and-break for power. It had one throttle setting: wide open, which pushed it along at 12 miles an hour, and sent fiddler crabs scurrying up the creek for cover.

This boat took Lence and his son fishing in the delta, or, come summertime, down the bay. When a ground rattler bit Mrs. Stauter as she weeded beans in the garden one morning, the make-and-break sped her to a doctor in Mobile. ("None of us ever did get bit by



The 14' butt-nosed johnboat suits Willie Kim and Ulysses Stallworth perfectly for poling shallow creeks in search of elusive bass.

a moccasin, thank Gawd. The alligators, they never bothered you.") Every few months, the boat carried the Stauter family to church in Mobile. And when a late summer wind held steady in the northeast, Lence readied his 32-footer for its most crucial hour. The wind signaled an approaching hurricane, and the hurricane, often as not, presaged a deadly tidal wave. The boat was the family's only means of escape.

Dogs and chickens were put aboard; the cow stayed behind to fend for herself. "The pot we had to dye our nets in, we'd fill it full of water, 'cuz, hell, it wouldn't float then. You didn't worry about your woodpile. Your farming tools, you'd put them up on the back porch of the house." The worst storms were liable to sweep the house away, too.

As the gale whipped through the swamp cane and churned the broader stretches of creek and river, Lence Stauter did not run for shelter in Mobile. Instead, he pointed his boat north. In the delta tradition of self-reliance, he ran deep into the swamp, up narrow creeks where cypress trees would afford secure mooring. The creek might rise, but the tidal wave would not reach so far inland. Dogs and children, chickens, parents, and sometimes a visiting relative or two would make a home of Lence's open boat for at least a day and sometimes

three, until the danger had passed.

Not to flee could prove fatal. When Lawrence was just five, his family had a perilously close call. A fierce and early northeast wind—the great storm of July 5, 1916—pushed the water out of the swamp, grounding their boat before the Stauters could leave the shell bank. When the wind hauled around to the south, the water roared back and was soon a foot above the floor. A huge cypress log fetched up against the house. Lawrence remembers his father desperately trying to fend it off, pushing at it with an oar through an open bedroom window. "Mama said, 'The bed is getting wet.' Daddy said, 'Damn the bed; if I don't get this log away, you ain't going to have a house to put the bed in!'"

In better weather, the swamp's interior shallows demanded a variety of boats for fishing and travel. Lence built flat-bottomed rowboats to carry nets and snaglines where the big boat couldn't go. As outboard motors became available, he began to add some vee to his boat's forward bottom section for better handling. For duck hunting, he built a lightweight duck-sneak: 12' long, round-sided, and extremely narrow.

During the school week, Lawrence stayed in Mobile with his grandparents, whom the storm of 1916 had driven from the delta. Summers he fished with his father, or helped build a

boat. The first craft he tackled on his own was a ducksneak—a boat to be personalized, like a sports car. He sawed its ribs from mulberry roots and formed its sides with thin cypress planking.

He finished high school in 1930, and, with no prospect for work in town during those lean years of the Depression, returned to Conway Creek to fish with his father. It was a matter of necessity, not choice. Lawrence quickly scorns any suggestion that the swamp offered a romantic or adventurous alternative to city life. "There weren't no damn adventures. You had to work. In those days, you didn't do what you preferred; you did what you could."

What Lawrence could do was build an occasional boat for pocket money. He charged \$25 for a 12' boat, \$35 for a 14-footer. Using A-C-grade exterior plywood, galvanized nails, and arm power, he built one a month. His profit on each was about \$10. "And ten dollahs was a hell of a lot of money in those days."

When the war came, plywood disappeared. Lence Stauter had suffered a stroke and could no longer fish. Lawrence found himself with a medical exemption from service and with two parents to support. He quit the swamp for a construction job in Mobile.

He worked overtime during the labor-hungry war years, bought land, and built a house on the bay cause-



Tough enough—20-year-old Stauter-builts at the Shellbank Fish Camp, last rental fleet on the causeway. Six dollars a day for the boat, bring your own motor.

way—at that time, a soggy thread of land without utilities or drinking water. The one amenity which the causeway could boast over the nearby delta was a road and tunnel to Mobile. It was a spot handy to the region's best fishing and hunting. Looking ahead to the end of the war, and to a time when the working folk of southern Alabama could afford to relax on weekends and holidays, Lawrence foresaw their need for boats. He built a workshop behind his house and in 1946 bought a load of plywood and quit his job. "People thought I was crazy. I dropped from 85 to 50 dollahs a week. But that was all right; I was happy with what I was doing." Confident of success, he had no expectation of becoming rich. "As far as making lots of money, I never had anything all my life, so hell, if I made a living, I thought that's all I was s'posed to have."

The first model in the new Stauter-built line was the design he knew best: a semi-V, but with not too much vee; light, but strong. "Main thing, you wanted a boat that didn't tear up from rough water, but where you could sit up front, cast with one hand, and hit a lick with the paddle." To move an outboard-powered boat around the swamp's shallows, delta custom was to paddle from the bow. In deeper water, the boat had to plane off easily and run fast with the low-horsepower motors then popular. Minimum weight and just the right amount of bottom rocker

gave the Stauter-built her planing performance. "On a 14' boat, a 10-hp motor would get that rascal up and just run like the devil."

The boats proved immediately popular. Lawrence built 12', 14', and 15½' versions with two options—a foredeck, and an extra few inches of side height. Then, as outboard motor sizes increased and trolling motors replaced the paddle forward, Lawrence worked out new designs. He built a deep V-bottomed boat for use on the rougher waters of Mobile Bay and the Gulf—the 15½' and 17½' Cedar Point Special—and a shallower V-bottomed boat with rolled chines in 12', 14', and 15½' lengths to handle the bigger motors in river and swamp water. He built the semi-V and rolled-chine boats in butt-nosed configurations, too, for fishermen who needed the forward platform. During the dozen or so years of their postwar manufacture, Lawrence also finished off a line of round-bottomed, molded-plywood hulls.

He combined the right design with an affordable price, but what cemented his position in local folklore was an uncompromising attitude toward quality. "If there was any sap in the plywood or frames, I'd rip it off, throw it away. That was my rule." He allowed only heartwood in his boats, and the employee who let any sap past, or otherwise displayed imperfect craftsmanship, had to redo the work on his own time. This fussiness extended equally to his suppliers, whose lumber piles he

repeatedly pulled apart in search of the best sawn cypress. In the early '60s, when first-growth cypress became too expensive for the framing of an affordable boat, he told his dealer to find good imported mahogany, instead. Marine plywood, on the other hand, was not then the problem it has become more recently, although it, too, fell under his scrutinizing inspection for voids and sap. Mr. Stauter gave each boat a soaking in wood preservative. Many owners never applied any other type of finish, and it was rare indeed when a boat left Stauter Boat Works encased in glass.

"Once in a while, a fellow came along, wanted a boat fiberglassed. If I couldn't talk him out of it and couldn't outcharge him, I had to do it. You take a darn 12' boat don't weigh but 175 pounds, add 25 pounds of fiberglass.... I didn't relish doing it. One of the reasons people liked the boats was because they were light."

By the end of his second year, Lawrence was selling 30 boats a month. He had eight men working for him; the best stayed with him until the end. "People ask, 'How you keep 'em that long?' I says I ain't seen but one way to keep men—pay 'em. I had men drawing \$18,000-\$20,000 a year. They got to live, too."

Fish Camp Business

If Lawrence had foreseen the postwar revival, he was nonetheless pleasantly surprised by the extent of its early demand for his boats. Orders came not singly, but by the dozen. On either side of his causeway shop, fishing camps sprang to life and were soon outfitting a flood of weekend anglers from Mobile. For their rental fleets, the camp owners turned to Stauter Boat Works, and it was commerce of mutual benefit. The camps received a safe boat that would stand up to the punishment of inexperienced or careless customers. The builder was just next door, listening to their needs, handy for repairs. On Lawrence's side, fleet sales meant steady orders to help his business through its formative years. And it didn't hurt his later sales that many thousands of rental customers left the causeway fish camps with a belief that Stauter-built was synonymous with recreational fishing.

Today the camps are a ghost of their former selves, places to buy fresh bait and launch your boat. At Autrey's camp, for example, rising insurance premiums and a more affluent, boat-owning public have put an end to the rental business. Owner Billy Rice and

his wife Queen Bee once had a fleet of 60 Stauter-builts. "People came here because they liked the boats," Queen Bee reminisced recently. "And we liked them because they were safe and because Mr. Stauter stood behind them."

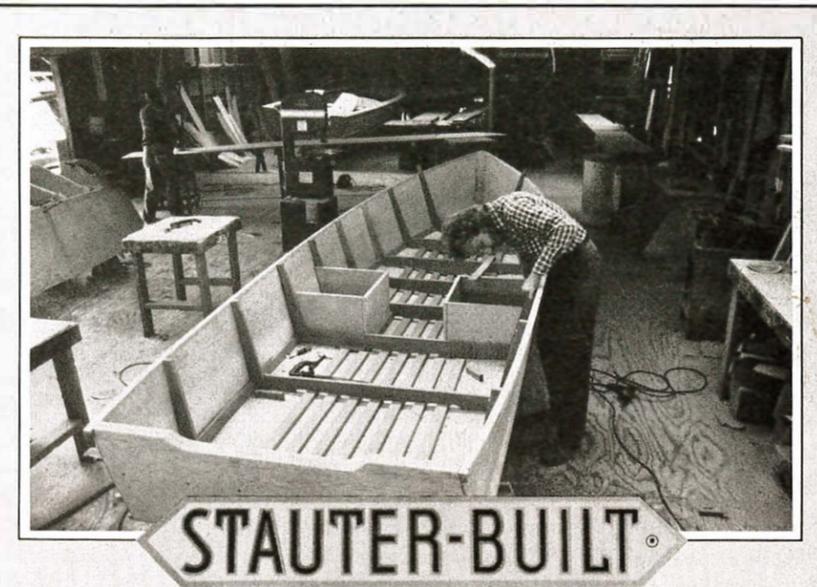
At Autrey's, you now see young fellows rocket off into the delta in glitter-painted fiberglass wedges that leave giant roostertail plumes of spray behind. Their roar and misting spray lingers in the shade by Billy Rice's bait tanks, where old-timers in the 40-and-over set are sipping beer and telling the stories that keep the legend of Stauter-built alive. It was here, at midweek on a warm spring day, that we encountered Walter "Slewfoot" Milne. He had just returned from the delta in a weathered 14' Stauter-built which rode low under the weight of coolers filled with blue crab, mullet, brim, and catfish—a good day's fishing, by any measure. Milne identified himself as a retired major in the Mobile police force. But, he said, "All police have part-time jobs, and I've been going up that delta for I don't know how long." His moonlighting has involved gillnets and trot lines in winter, crab traps in the summer. It has been a source of both pleasure and profit. "I have pulled 40,000 pounds of fish out of that delta in good years," he said.

According to Maj. Milne, it was when alligator hunting was still legal in Alabama, some years ago, that Stauter-built boats proved themselves without equal. "You get a 12' gator that you shot and think is dead," he said. "Then, a quarter-mile down the river, he comes to, beating and banging on the sides. There you are at three in the morning, trying to hit him with a hatchet in the head while he's thrashing around like he's going to tear the boat apart." Milne paused while his listeners nodded appreciatively. "Yes sir," he continued, "I've owned 15 Stauter boats in my time, and not one of them ever leaked."

High Water at the Boat Works

September brings hurricanes to Mobile, and with Frederick approaching the coast in 1979, Lawrence once more went through the familiar ritual of removal to safety. He emptied his shops, transferring his building supplies and tools by truck to higher ground.

On the night the storm struck, he went to bed early at the home of relatives, exhausted from effort at relocation. His wife came upstairs later and found him still awake, listening to the wind. She asked if it had slackened any.



Stauter Boat Works builds its boats upside-down from framing to fastening of sides and bottom. Then they're flipped upright for finishing, and spun 180° on rotating boat jacks in the paint shop for final dressing. A 12-footer comes from the hands of master builder John Shewmake at the rate of one boat every two days; larger boats take up to four days.

Marine plywood of 3/8" thickness forms the bottom and sides on all except the 12' model, which has 1/4" sides. Transoms are made of double 3/4" marine plywood, angled 15° from the bottom and tied to the sides with quarter knees overlaid by 1/4" plywood caps.

Framing, floor runners, and keel strip are mahogany, 4/4 or 5/4 nominal thickness, according to the size of the boat. Framing is on 16-20" centers, varying again by boat size and interior appointments. Runners are 2" wide, set 2" apart. Sprayrails, inwales, and outer stem facing are oak. If a boat needs extra stiffening (to pull a shrimp trawl, for instance), the Lami brothers will add oak railcaps and outwales.

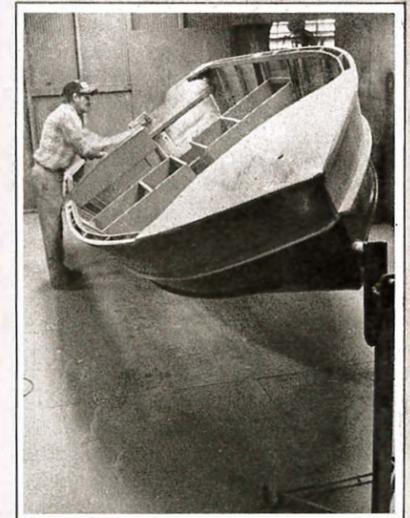
Fastenings are brass ring nails and brass screws, and all joints are further bonded with resorcinol (epoxy is the preferred agent for repairs). This winning combination hasn't changed in almost three decades, and the lack of problems with corrosion may be due to the local custom of keeping unused boats on trailers or slung up under tin-roofed boathouse hoists.

Plywood quality, says Joe Lami, is the number-one headache so far as materials are concerned. Size and frequency of voids was a dilemma they've solved by switching manufacturers.

Checking in the surface veneer remains a problem which the Lamis have countered by substituting a coating of epoxy resin for the wood-preservative treatment that was standard heretofore.

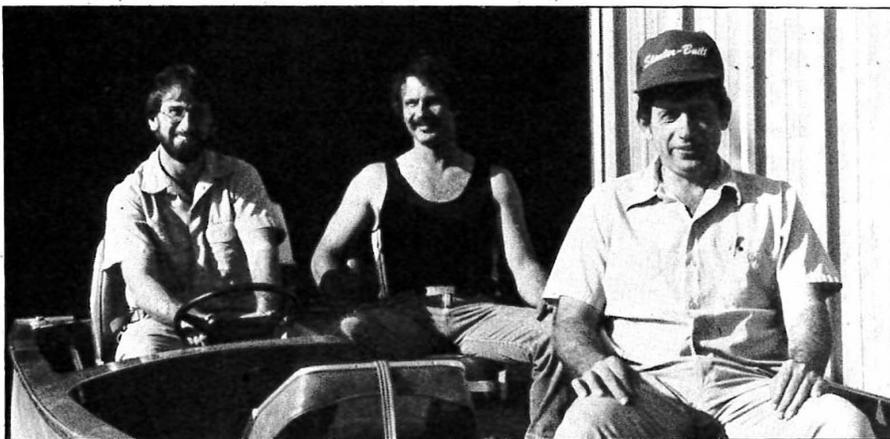
Options include live-bait wells, lowered and strengthened foredecks, cut-out sterns for net fishermen, dog boxes for hunters, and virtually any change or addition a customer wants and is willing to pay for.

For more information, write to: Stauter Boat Works, 6004 Clearview Rd., Mobile, AL 36619; tel. 205-666-1152.



Top—In a shop set up to construct boats in as little as two days, David Bryson brings a 14' semi-V boat to near completion.

Above—Painter Russell Smith puts a Cedar Point Special through its prep stages.



The Lami brothers—from left, Vincent, Joseph, and Gene—take Stauter Boat Works into the future. "They're young," Mr. Stauter observes, "so naturally they got to get some young ideas into it."

He told her it hadn't. His humor was at low ebb. "Stauter boatworks is gone to hell," he said. "That tin building over there has disintegrated, and the water's gonna come after a while and wash the whole thing away." He was right. The tidal wave came shortly after midnight, rolling with it the logs and trash gleaned from 30 miles of bay shoreline. The next morning all that remained of the Stauters' home and shop was a cluster of snapped pilings.

Lawrence Stauter was 68 years old. He drove back onto the causeway and looked at the stumps where his boatworks had been, and decided it was time to retire. Word spread quickly, bringing offers for his inventory, patterns, and goodwill, and for the copyrighted name of Stauter-built boats. He favored delta kinfolk to continue the tradition, and in January, 1980, only four months after Hurricane Frederick and exactly 33 years after he had first opened on the causeway, his boatworks had reopened. Gene, Joseph, and Vincent Lami, grandsons of Lawrence Stauter's first cousin and delta neighbor, Frank Kleinschrodt, were the new owners.

The Lami brothers were in their 30s, three of ten children raised by their mother after the early death of their father. They had grown up on the outskirts of Mobile, where an uncle let them hang about his woodworking shop and taught them the fundamentals of woodcraft. Their Grandpa Kleinschrodt had taken them to his camp on the old homesite in the delta. There, he taught them the ways of the swamp: how to gig frogs and trap turtles, how to fish and hunt and build ducksneaks.

The three brothers joined together in a cabinet business after high school. Cooperation was never a problem. Gene, the eldest brother, says that

growing up as one of 12 people in a three-bedroom house instilled in each of them the value of compromise and consideration. And, he says, each brother brings his own special talents to the business. "Joe works in sales because he's good at talking to people, spending time with them. I'll spend hours on the telephone, calling around the country to find better products, cheaper products. Vincent does a lot of everything."

As the Lamis took over his boat works, Lawrence Stauter gave them just one bit of departing advice. "Hold your quality," he told them, "and don't let your price run away. The reputation is there, the business is well established. You don't have to worry about a darn thing."

In fact, though, they had several immediate problems to worry about. Location, for instance. New building codes made reconstruction on the causeway prohibitively expensive. Instead, they took the boatworks to their cabinet shop off Three Notch Road, 12 miles west of Mobile. Would customers drive the extra distance? The Lamis hedged their bet by opening a second store in Fairhope, on the east side of Mobile Bay.

Who would build the boats? Cabinetwork, two marine retail shops, and an outboard dealership have kept the Lami brothers busy enough. Mr. Stauter's employees were older men, but three agreed to stay on temporarily. Two remain today—builder John Shewmake and his brother, Ed, a master painter. Joseph works in the boatshop when he can, but finding new help has proved difficult. According to Gene Lami, "It doesn't seem like the young fellows take pride in their work." Still, they have managed to turn out over 100 boats each year, though orders are often backlogged for several months.

The marketplace was another challenge. The older designs are less in demand, less profitable. The smaller semi-Vs, for instance, and butt-nosed boats have lost their competitive edge against cheap aluminum-and-glass equivalents. And the Lamis quickly learned that today's buyers, younger and more affluent than in Lawrence Stauter's day, are more concerned with the appearance of their boats. Many of Lawrence's customers did their own painting—"olive drab, often as not; they didn't give a dang"—but younger fishermen tend to agree with Joe Lami. "It's a conversation piece when you have a boat that's well appointed, well dressed out, and finished real nice. You spend more time talking to people about the boat than you do actually fishing." Two-tone paint jobs with matching seat cushions and varnished brightwork are among the more popular cosmetic options the Lamis now offer.

As they take Stauter Boat Works into a future of new markets, bigger motors, and younger buyers, the Lami brothers insist they have not forgotten the essence of the Stauter legend: a good boat, reasonably priced. Gene puts it this way: "Our aim is for the average man to be able to come and buy a boat that will last him, together with a motor and trailer, and not go way out of his means." Thus far, their record points to success in this aim. In the six years since Hurricane Frederick, the Lami brothers have raised the price of a 14' V-bottomed, rolled-chine boat with center deck and steering options from \$1,050 to \$1,490, or about 6% a year. That's less than Lawrence Stauter's average price rise over three decades, and less than recent rates of inflation.

And the man who started it all still watches from a discrete distance, nodding with approval at what he sees. "They're young," Lawrence observes, "so naturally they got to get some young ideas in it." The boats are like scattered grandchildren to him now; without getting too involved in their production, his delight is in hearing and talking about them. "I had a fellow the other day who told me, 'You know where I seen one of your boats? New York! There was a boat, motor, and trailer going down the street in New York, and damned if it wasn't one of your boats!'" Lawrence shakes his head and fills the room with his laughter. Then he wipes his eyes, and adds, "I says, God darn...."

Free-lance writer Morry Edwards specializes in marine subjects, and lives in Rockport, Massachusetts.