

Memories of Sailing Industry Leader Everett Pearson



The sailing world has lost another legend with the recent passing of Everett Pearson. The “Founder of Fiberglass,” with his dry wit, roll up your sleeves, can-do attitude, managed to convince his cronies in the business to join forces and form what we now know as Sail America. We thought it would be nice to speak to some of those individuals lucky enough to call Everett a friend and hear some of their reflections on the man who contributed so much to the world of sailing.

Sally Helme, *Sailing World & Cruising World Magazines*

Everett was one of the leaders in the 1990s. He touched a lot of people in so many different ways. He was a man with so much energy and passion.

I worked for Cruising World and Sailing World publications at the time when Sail America was being formed. We had a publication called Sailing Business that was all about the trade and we wrote a number of articles about Everett and the founding of Sail America. Everett was one of the co-founders of SA [Sail America], along with Olaf Harken, John Southam and Garry Hoyt. They were the principal movers. At the time, they believed that the sailing industry did not have enough of a voice in the National Marine Manufacturers Association, the NMMA, believing that the sailing industry had different priorities than the power boat side. The feeling was the sailing industry needed to get together and help themselves; business was challenging, and we needed to stick together to survive. In 1990, Everett and the other three men kicked off the campaign initially with a conference at the Miami Boat Show in February 1990. Out of that conference was started the American Sail Advancement Program, ASAP, which later turned into Sail America.

Everett, Olaf and John all chipped in to get the organization started. John, who at the time was the publisher of Cruising World and Sailing World, donated an office in the building and a part time person to help get things up and running. At the time I was working for Lewmar, which makes sailing hardware, I got involved first as a volunteer on a committee, then was elected to the board, and that is when I really got to know Everett.

He was very passionate about the organization, “we will figure out a way to make this work; we need to be our own best advocates; we need to look out for ourselves; no one else in the industry is going to do it for us; we need to come together and be masters of our own destiny.” The concept of SA was that we would create our own boat shows. Initially, it was going to be just one boat show, and we would use the money from the show to turn around and invest in promoting sailing as a lifestyle, to create a PR [public relations] campaign to promote sailing. The theory was we would sell more boats, therefore bigger boat shows, therefore more money to promote sailing—a self-propelling prophecy kind of thing. We decided to create something that was going to be different from all the other boat shows. We called it Sail Expo. The idea was that it would not be just boats and gear for sale but also a coming together of the sailing community. It would be one giant show in Atlantic City. Everyone in the industry would come from across the country and it would be a winter gathering of sailors. We would have parties, social opportunities and also provide education. We had seminars because sailors are crazy about studying the sport and the lifestyle; they read endlessly about the subject, do lots of research. It is as much an intellectual pursuit for them as a sport. This concept was something very different. Up to that point, the boat shows did not really have seminars or social gatherings, and at the same time, it was now an opportunity to showcase their goods without the distraction of power boats.



Everett was the cheerleader. He said, “we don’t have any money, any anything, but we can make this happen.” Even though many of the other people at the table were his competition, because they were building other boats, Everett felt, “we all need to take off our own company hats and we need to put on the hat of the sailing industry,” asking everyone to set aside their own business interests and work together for the greater good.

We did the first Expo in Atlantic City in 1992 or 93 and it was a giant success. It was awesome.

Everett had a great sense of humor, always had a smile on his face, a very positive guy. He was a force of nature, and the people who worked for him were very loyal.

Garry Hoyt, Boat Designer

Back in the early 1990s, there was concern in the sailboat industry that needed growth was being fractionalized and diluted by too many small, local boat shows rather than a major show capable of generating national interest. To counter this, a nascent group, labelled ASAP (as soon as possible) became the American Sail Advancement Program, which eventually became Sail America. It was formed while the sailing industry was having a conference in Miami in February 1990. A small group of industry leaders determined that Everett Pearson would become the president of the organization — his credentials being co-founder of Pearson Yachts and then later president of Tillotson-Pearson. He had so much knowledge and experience in boat building and was considered a pioneer in fiberglass boat building. He was a loyal and trusted businessman. This made him the unanimous choice.

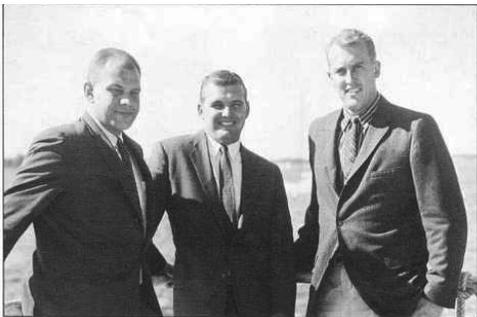
The ASAP group, led by Everett, organized the very successful and well attended Atlantic City Boat Show. It was held in late January-early February at the Convention Center on the boardwalk, and later relocated to the new Convention Center, where it went on for many years.

Everett was a natural athlete, a star football player for Brown University and a sailor all his life. I met Everett back in the mid-1970s and he was a close friend for over 40 years. I had formed my company, Freedom Yachts, and he was the logical choice to build them. We entered into a business relationship with a handshake. We built on our friendship as we built other boats called the Alerion. It was never a big business, but we worked very nicely together. Everett was always very active physically and a great sailor, and we sailed together a number of times, particularly in the Caribbean, to our mutual enjoyment. He was a charming guy. We had a common interest in sports. He was a trusted friend and one of those good guys that you like to have around. He was, I guess you would call it, 'a man's man.' Everett was a serious guy, but he also had a sense of humor. He was a business man and became a sportsman, in the true sense of the word.

Everett continued with his own company (TPI) building J-boats, Alerions, True North (powerboats) and a variety of other fiberglass products — the other products being windmill blades, bus bodies, Disney's Tree of Life, and flag poles. He retired about 15 years ago, and once he sold the company, TPI, to the Walton family, he maintained a spectator interest in the boat business only. His son Mark is in the fiberglass piling business, Pearson Pilings, and has carried on the tradition in that sense. In October I saw Everett for lunch. We would see each other at least once a month, have lunch, chat over things. He was interested in politics and everything in general, and we had mutual interests. He was a trusted friend and a good friend, and those are hard to come by, and I miss him.

Bentley Collins, Sabre Yachts

Everett was a pioneer in fiberglass boat building. He was one of the very first to build boats in fiberglass — when the whole boating industry was still building in wood. In the late 1950s and early 60s, he started building fiberglass boats and recognized the potential in it. They had great longevity and low maintenance. He wanted to be part of it. His original Pearson yachts were one of the first fiberglass boats. And today, of course, almost everything is fiberglass. It may have some different composite structure in one thing or another, but Everett was really the pioneer that got the fiberglass boat building business off and running in the U.S.



I think what people should remember about Everett is he was really the one who started it all, and not only started it, but unlike a lot of people who start things and let it just happen, he stayed with it the whole way. All the way through the 1990s and early 2000 he was very active as a boat builder and was always trying to keep up with the technology. People who worked for him talk about being out on the shop floor and not understanding the way something needed to be done, and Everett, regardless of his seniority in the company, would go out there, roll up his shirt sleeves, and show how it was done. He had a keen mind for techniques and the best methods of building fiberglass boats. He was very active and always keeping up with the latest and

the greatest and was a driving force for 40 years.

Everett had an extremely dry sense of humor. You never knew when he was telling a joke or not. If you didn't get the joke, he'd always give you a smile out of the corner of his mouth, and then you'd think, 'oh yeah, OK, he was trying to be funny!' Probably the most fun we had was that first show in Atlantic City. We could never convince everybody that Atlantic City was the place to go. Eventually we sort of all got together and said 'well that's the only place that a show like this can happen.' I remember we decided that what we would do is have a big dinner party and invite all our customers. People would sit at the



Sabre table or the Catalina table or the Hunter table or whatever. Everett was the master of ceremonies at that event, and I think that was when the whole thing sort of gelled and people realized that this is something that could really be a lot of fun. There was a tremendous amount of camaraderie, this was a place and an effort we should continue.

You know, I have warm, fond memories more than anything else. Warm memories of competitors who all compete in the same market, for the same customers, yet could sit down for a meal together, enjoying it as a big family of sailors.

The big fear was whether we could do it every year and be as successful. The big risk of that show of course was that people would come and they would spend a lot of money, not make sales, and then make an immediate judgement that 'I am not going back.' Keeping the sailboat builders focused on the fact that the repetition of going year after year was the key to its success was the hard part. Over time, Atlantic City thing changed. We were in that beautiful old building where the Miss America contest was. Then the Atlantic City Convention Center was built, and we were in a very modern facility, and the cost of the exhibits went up dramatically. Unfortunately, that did a fair amount of harm to the whole idea. We didn't have a big marketing budget. Sail America had to agree that it was a boat show organizing committee or a group that had the ability to draw people into sailing and the whole concept of having seminars at these shows came to be. And that was a big part of Sail America's life moving forward. Having these seminars, where you had experts in certain aspects of the business coming in to talk to people, that was what Sail America eventually became. But it was an evolutionary process over maybe 10 to 15 years to understand what Sail America needed to be.

The last time I saw Everett was maybe 10, 15 years ago. I think he came down the docks at the boat show in Newport just to see what was going on in the boat industry, keeping himself current. My lasting memory of him is a keen smile and a man of great integrity who really believed in what he was doing as a professional and who treated everybody, including his competitors, as friends. I really think of him as the mayor of the sailboat business. He really kept people going all in the same direction.

Jon Rotenberg, President of Eastern Yacht Sales

Everett Pearson did probably as much as anyone in America to promote the sport of sailing and help the sailing industry. He was paramount in helping create Sail America and the importance of how an infant organization can create strength in sailing. We had all been involved in the NMMA and the sailboat industry had been basically backwatered. Everett understood that and helped create the whole concept of having a sailboat show, promoting sailing, going around the country with special projects. Basically he did everything that he could to help promote the industry.

What I loved about Everett is he would be willing to take chances to do things, in the sense of investing in another boat show, investing in special boats that were easy to sail. So when Garry Hoyt had ideas on how to make the boats easier to sail, Everett was willing to take the chance and provide the funding. Just a remarkable man. He truly was a visionary. He was the Henry Ford of our fiberglass boat industry.

I met him when I was thinking of buying Freedom Yachts, in the early 1980s. In a business deal it always looks good when there are no problems. But when there are problems, you recognize when you are dealing with a fair and honest person. He and Garry Hoyt really brought our sailing history into the 21st century. An example was his scrimp process, which enabled him to make fiberglass products without having the fumes go into the air. He was probably one of the most gifted on the use of fiberglass and was able to do so many things with it, like building boats, building wind blades, building cars for Disney World and the airport terminal shuttles to transport people inside the terminals.

He was a great business man with a strong moral character. His word was his bond.

I remember being with him in Washington, DC, when he spoke at the hearing on eliminating the luxury tax on boats. I remember him talking to the mayor of Atlantic City, when we tried to have the boat show in Atlantic City and we successfully did that. He was very good that way. Fantastic personality.

I spoke with his wife and children and told them how much respect I had for him as an ethical business person and what a good leader he was for the board. He had three great kids and a wonderful wife. He was a very lucky guy and they were lucky to have him.