

BEST YET

Dad started in the wholesale business in the late 40's or early 50's, after spending his first year or two out of the navy working as a carpenter on the payroll of Charlton Forbis (Sanford's brother and Shannon (Shank)'s uncle), who was a subcontractor for TJ Watson, a general contractor who was building houses for the returning veterans in booming Charlotte. There were no precut studs in those days and no power saws, at least none owned by Charlton, and Dad said he spent many an hour cutting studs, window and floor jacks, floor and ceiling joists, and rafters with a hand saw. My partner, Frank Griffin, said he was called to the law following a mule in a cotton field. I guess Dad was called to the mercantile business by an arm tired of cutting lumber.

I don't know how they met but Dad started in business with Curtis Walker selling Dan River dresses. They worked out of an old house on Bland St, just off Mint, across from the Greyhound, or maybe the City, bus garage. I don't know what their business arrangement was or even if it had a name. They took turns traveling a week at a time while the other tended the store. They were wholesalers, selling to retailers primarily in the piedmont Carolinas. On the road, they would take samples to show, which hopefully would result in orders which they would fill from Bland St. At some point they began adding household goods to their wares. Occasionally, I would go to the store with Dad and spend the day. There was a little diner on the corner of Bland and Mint and I remember the first time Dad let me walk over there by myself, and with the 35 cents he gave me, I got a terrific lunch of country style steak, 2 vegetables, one of which was my favorite, pintos (I don't remember the other), cornbread and iced tea. Man, oh, man, I can taste it now!

After several years, Dad left Walker and went into the wholesale household goods (no dresses) business with Bob Hutchinson at another old house around the corner on Jefferson St (seems like it was 225 W Jefferson), now Church. I think the original name of the business was Imperial Sales Co, later, Imperial Mfg & Sales after they got into the business of making chenille bedspreads and then curtains. He may have been making bedspreads with Walker. I remember they had a shop where several ladies sewed and I remember going with Dad to take a load of spreads over to Belmont or somewhere in Gaston Co on a Saturday morning to be dyed. I'm pretty sure Bill was along. Maybe that's where his calling to the textile business began. At some point, and I think this was after he started Imperial with Bob, they started or maybe purchased Princess Curtain. Somewhere along the line, the bedspread and curtain businesses ran their course (whether they crossed the finish line or not, I have no idea) and Imperial settled into strictly wholesaling household goods, which grew to include most everything a housewife would need, other than furniture or appliances.

This intro went longer than I intended. Maybe I'll write more about Imperial at another time, but for now I want to tell about how Imperial indirectly led to one of the hi-lites of our lives. Somebody, a customer of Imperial's I suppose, owed Dad some \$ and couldn't or wouldn't pay, so Dad took possession and ownership of an imperial sailing vessel with it's magisterial name emblazoned on its side, THE BEST YET (henceforth, the "BY") and certainly, to us, it was. The BY was a wooden, and truly an Amazing, if measured by weight and bulkiness, Hulk of a boat, 17-18', powered by twin outboards, 35hp@, if I remember correctly, just enough to pull a skinny water skier slowly, very slowly, out of the water, after

groaning loudly and sucking up half the tank of gas. But to Harry, Bill Carr and me, it was the sweetest ride, read "our only ride", on the river.

I don't know how Dad got it to Rama Rd but we talked him into keeping it (he was an easier sale than Mom who, on winning a shetland pony at Elders Grocery, sold it and bought a living room couch, which we were virtually forbidden to sit, much less lie, on) and springing for a trailer hitch for Mom's Mercury Meteor (some other time I'll talk about Dad's penchant for buying uncool cars). I guess I was probably a senior in hi school when we arrived on the boating scene.

How we talked Pop into letting Carr, Harry and I pull that sucker to Lake Wiley unsupervised, though he certainly wasn't supervisory material in the nautical field (he'd been a storekeeper in the navy; I'm not sure he could swim, though he was a good back floater), but we lit out on Hwy 49 for Buster Boyd Bridge. I'd never pulled a trailer of any kind that I remember. Bill must have started working or maybe was in the army at the time. Too bad he wasn't our leader since he'd been not only a Boy Scout but also a Sea Scout.

We crossed BB Bridge into SC and turned into the boat launching area and I backed the trailer in the water while Bill and Harry stationed themselves in the water to hang onto the BY when it presumably would slide easily into the water. When it didn't slip right off the trailer, I eased it on back until the Meteor tailpipe was blowing bubbles and water was several inches deep in the back floorboard before it reluctantly exited the security of its trailer to venture into the deep, manned by its landlubbered crew. I pulled the trailer up out of the river while Bill and Harry held onto it. By the time I'd parked and come down to the water, they were frantically yelling "It's sinking", thereby calling attention to our plight by the many experienced boaters waiting for us to get out of the way so they could launch. As we panicked, someone asked if the drain plug was in, to which I feel sure we replied something like "what the heck's a drain plug?". Luckily, we were pretty fast learners, as ones tend to become when their boat's sinking, so we found the drain hole and while Bill or Harry, I don't which one got the honor, plugged the hole with his finger, I ran up to the marina and bought a plug. Thankfully, plugs must be universal in size. It fit the hole, stopped the BY from taking on more water, and gave us the respite we needed to drag the boat away from the ramp and try to figure out how to bail all that water out of the boat. Somebody probably told us that once we got the boat planing we could pull the plug and the water would drain out, which we probably did, and, I assume, remembered to reinsert the plug before slowing down.

Somewhere we'd gotten an old pair of wooden water skis, about the width of a 2x8 and as heavy, and a ski rope and a life jacket or two. Dad probably got his debtor to throw them in with the BY. I don't think he owned it but Jackie Gill had access to a nice ski boat, maybe his wife, Joyce's brother's and Bill and I and maybe Harry had been out with them a time or two and had probably learned how to ski a little. So, I guess by that time we knew a little about boating and skiing, very little. All 3 of us got so we could usually get up the first time. Once it was my turn and I was in the water, ready to go, they taken the slack up in the rope, and yelled that the steering mechanism had come loose. Well, I swam back to the boat, pushing the skis, climbed in (I think we had a ladder) and crawled under the dash to see what was wrong. The steering wheel was connected to a shaft which had 2 pulleys on it and a cable was supposed to be wrapped around each pulley. The cables then ran back along each side of the boat and attached to each motor so that a turn of the wheel would cause the motors, which were connected some way, to turn, thus turning the boat. The cables had come off the pulleys so I wound them back on, jumped back in the water, swam back to my ski position, yelled I was ready and they gave it the gas. We were

parallel to and fairly close to the shore and when whoever was driving turned the steering wheel in the direction to move the boat away from the shore, the boat turned the opposite way and ran aground. I'd wrapped the cables on the wrong pulleys. Attaboy, Tom!

We got to where we could ski outside the boat's wake where the water is much smoother and learned to whip the snake, or some such term, which meant turning the boat as sharply as possible which would allow the skier to shoot across the wake in the opposite direction of the turn-you could really fly when you got outside the wake. I guess Harry knows how close he came to getting maimed or killed when I was driving back in a cove and made a sharp turn and he whipped across the wake and missed the end of a pier by a distance of only a few feet. Harry, you do know that I didn't see the pier, don't you?

Dad had a buddy, I think his name was Proctor, who had a little house on the NC side of Lake Wiley that you turned by the Red Fez Club to get to. Proctor had a little pier and let us tie the BY up there for a while and use that for our home port. One Saturday Dad went out to the river with us to take a ride in HIS boat and after riding awhile, decided to drive HIS boat. There's not a whole lot to it; you have a lever to put it in gear, forward or reverse, and a lever/accelerator. So, he's driving as we're coming back into port, and he backs off the gas appropriately to make the turn in by the pier and then, rather, than decelerating and putting into reverse in order to stop, he reached down with his foot to press the brake pedal, and once again, the BY gained the shore. I don't remember what he said but he never set foot in the BY again!

Spring my senior year at Davidson I pulled her up to the little house we were renting in the edge of Iredell Co and refinished the BY's deck. Bill had gotten out of the army and came up and we took it out to Lake Norman. Bill will probably remember why better than I, but for some reason, we took the prop off one of the motors and dropped it in the water. I'm not sure if we ever found it. Soon thereafter, Janet and I moved to Chapel Hill. I don't know what ever became of the good old girl. I hope she's still afloat and giving some kids as much pleasure and experiences as she gave us. She was and, to me, though I've owned another, still is, The Best Yet.