

BRING IT!!

Steve Vogel

It lives in his memory as a 12 year old boy's ultimate "Mark Twain Day." A young Steve Vogel and his buddy had crafted their first vessel from what they could scavenge. It was a fine raft and the best part was...it floated. This was, of course, a key element of any first-rate craft. Soon, it was launched on the river and the two boys were set to travel in incomparable Twain style. The current took them, and away they went, downstream for some 2 or 3 miles, on an exhilarating adventure.

There was a slight rumbling noise that grew as the day went on for, often, the stomach of a 12-year-old boy can serve as an internal clock. They drew in on the bank when they realized it was nearing dinnertime. In those days, dinnertime was a family requirement. Sons were expected to be present, with clean hands, when the family sat down to supper... or else.

This was, however, the moment wherein the boys recognized a

couple of problems. First, going down river is easier than going up and second, in the ways of a winding river, 2 or 3 miles can mean you end up a lot further from home than you expected. Presently, it became clear that the wonderful raft would have to be ditched and a shank's mare would have to get them home. The trials of being a boy on a river are never easy and the trip home took longer than they thought. The very worst happened and, sure enough, they were late for dinner.

That's the first story in Steve Vogel's history on the water. It stays in his mind for a couple of reasons. It's an incomparable memory as a boy's adventure lit softly by the happy, warm light of a childhood that was well-lived. The other reason is that it taught him the value of solving a problem before the problem exists.

Back in 1996, when he first got the idea for Bennington Marine, Steve took the time to question what a company is made of. After the obvious nuts and bolts, he chased the idea that a successful company is founded

on principles. Principles aren't found on flow charts, the bricks, or the bottom line. Principles are ephemeral and invisible thoughts. They show up in the minds of employees, suppliers, and customers. Principles come from what we are taught, what we have experienced, and what we dream about.

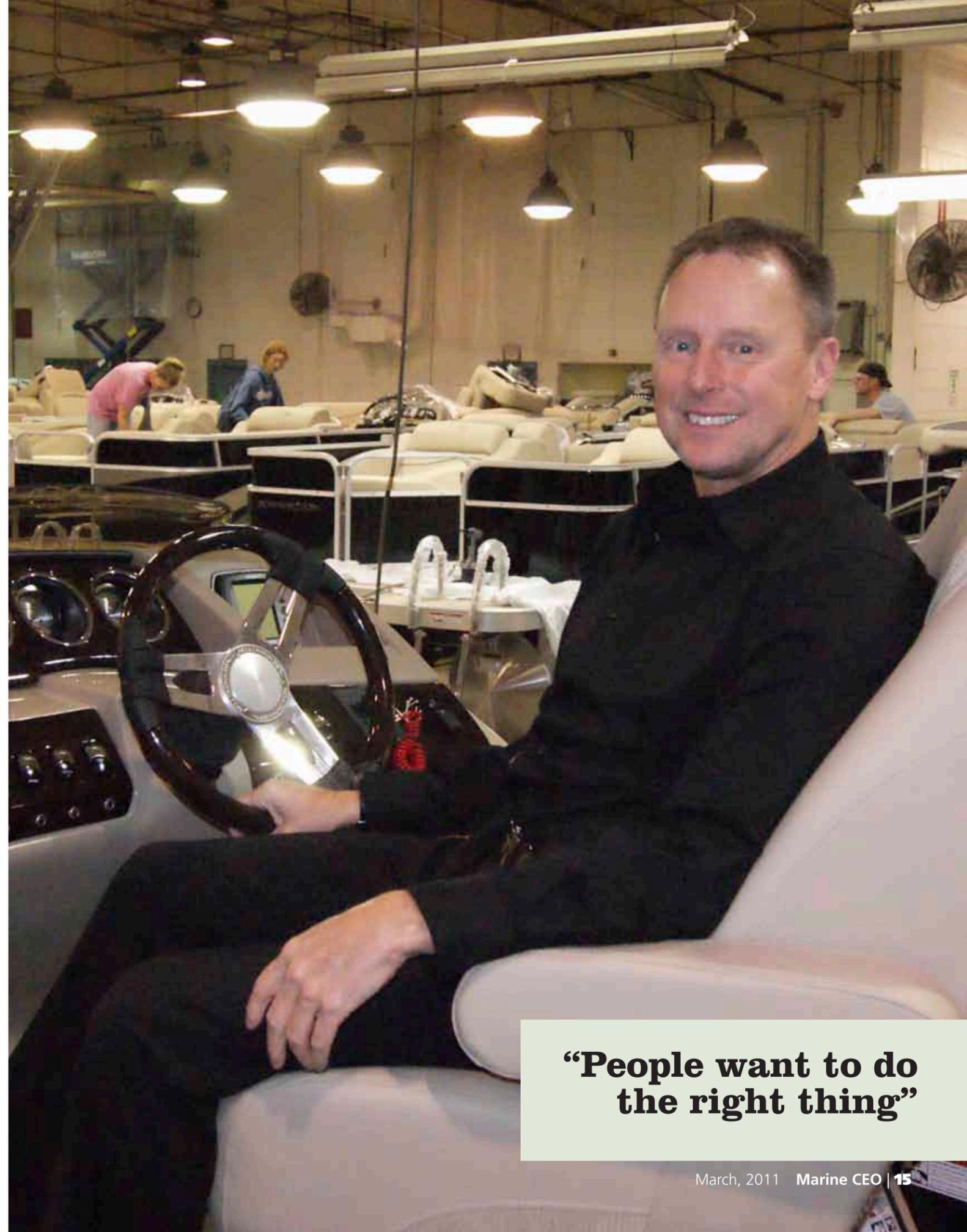
In many ways, Bennington Marine is a legacy to Steve's father who made those golden childhood days a reality. Hard work; doing the right thing for the right reasons.

There were other experiences and ideas that have become melded into the construction of a Bennington boat. Frustrations in the corporate world, boredom with a job that was a "safe harbor" and seeing employees treated as units rather than people.

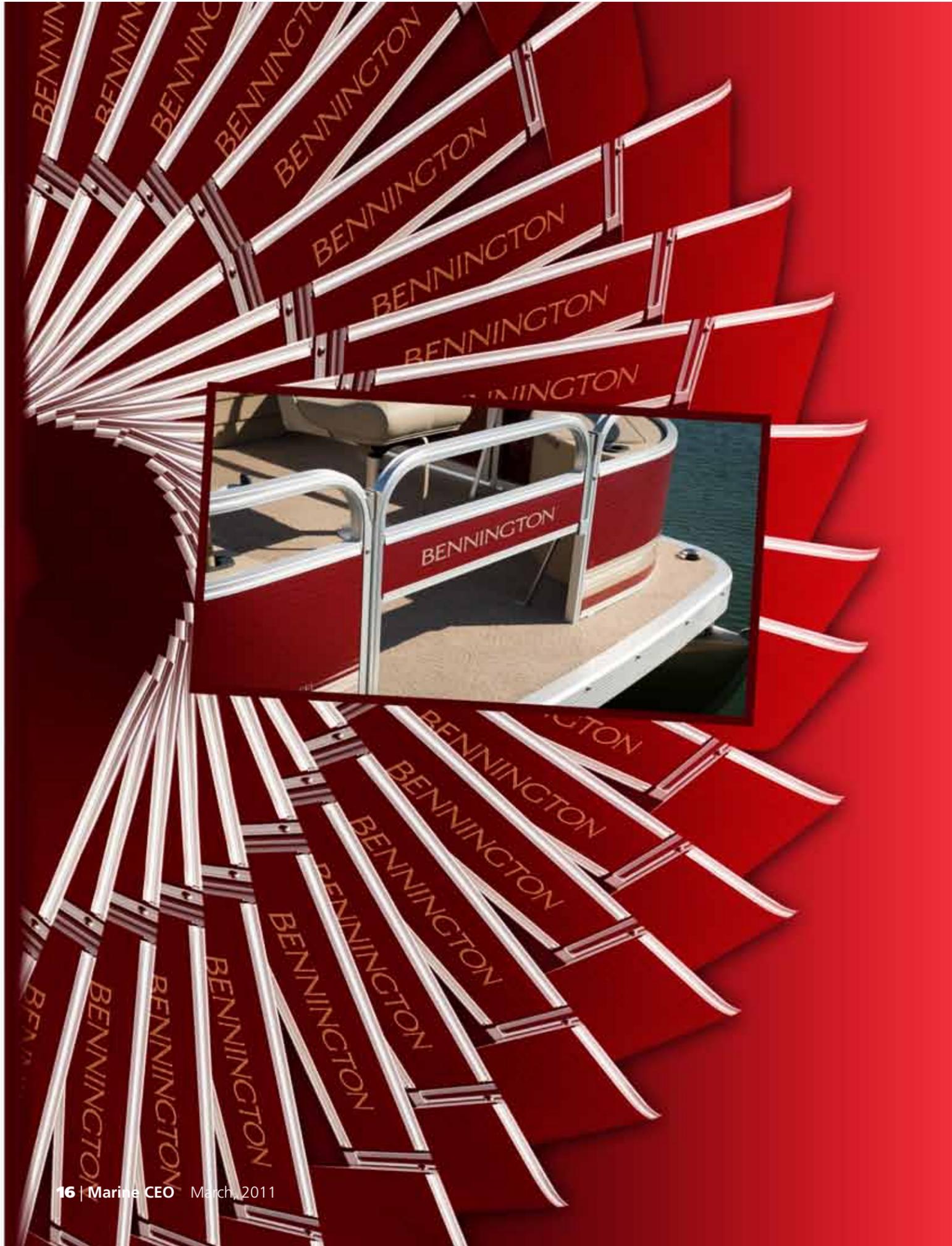
Steve observes that, "People want to do the right thing and if you put them in a position to win, they'll win. Usually, the corporate world doesn't put them in a winning position."

Continued on page 16

Bennington Marine



**"People want to do
the right thing"**



Fresh out of college, Steve, with the insouciance of youth, took a risk that first landed him in the boating industry. He was working in a huge company with great prospects and a solid beginning to a great corporate future. After about a year, however, he walked in to Human Resources and handed in his notice. He didn't discuss it with his boss. He didn't even discuss it with his wife, Sandy. Human Resources wanted to know why; the answer was that he was bored out of his mind. Soon after—the next week in fact—he landed a job with a little fishing boat company as a comptroller. It was less money, but he didn't leave for the money. As a green kid, he might not have been able to explain it, but years later, his dad put it into words when he said, "Do what you love."

This is what Steve set out to accomplish with his company. He wanted to create a company that not only would be something he loved to do, but also one that his employees would love to work for, that suppliers would love to work with, and that customers would love to buy from. He wanted to do the right thing for the right reasons for each of those groups of people. His gift, (born, perhaps, in part of having found himself down-river without a paddle) is problem-solving. In fact, Steve gets a lot of his motivation from solving these kinds of problems. He embraces this stuff with an attitude that says "Bring it!"

Many people pay lip service to those kinds of ideals but often they don't know how to carry them out on a daily basis. They don't get "lived in" until they

are as natural as an old shoe. Steve lives them so he's able to create them in each product they produce. Steve has been able to also let a little creative juice flow into the product line. He gets involved in the look and function of his product line from a design standpoint. All in all, there's a little bit of his integrity, vision, and sweat equity in each boat.

"A CEO," Steve explains, "is very much like the conductor of an orchestra." Of all the things that might keep him up at night, the number one thing is people. It's important to do right by the people that make, use, sell, and buy his company's products. That's a pretty big orchestra.

It turns out that Mr. Holland's Opus is one of his favorite movies. Mr. Holland, sadly, wasn't aware of the symphony he was really conducting until the end of the movie. It was the lives of the people he touched. That was just a feel-good movie, but the inspiration it produced was real. Plus, Steve Vogel is aware of his symphony. He also gets inspiration from many sources. The Black Eyed Peas album titled *The E.N.D.*, which are the initials for "Energy Never Dies" is another source. The thought behind that title made an impact. In fact, if there were a movie made of Steve's life he'd want the title to be "*This is the E.N.D.*"

So, how does all of this talk of ideals, principles, and music play out when the doors open and the employees come to work? Well, once he's had to ask an eager employee to stop getting to work at 4:30 in the morning and, oh yeah, over the course of the economic

downturn Bennington Marine grew by around 16%, give or take a point.

It took some thought and careful planning, and a couple of drastic actions here and there, but it worked. Steve decided to take a risk and fly in the face of the experts touting gloom and doom. He thought that the product—spelled as the c.u.s.t.o.m.e.r.—shouldn't suffer a loss of quality. Instead, Bennington packed value into the product line. They added quality without charging more. They didn't cut corners, reduce amenities, or use cheaper materials. Now, a Bennington consumer gets more "in the box" than before. The company cut back on their own overhead and they increased efficiency. Essentially, they looked for ways to trim the pork.

As the future rolls toward him, he hopes to do more mentoring. He's gained insight and knowledge over the years. His experiences have taught him and he doesn't jealously stand guard over his knowledge. He passes it along.

Steve Vogel has earned his place in the boating industry and he doesn't forget where he came from, or where he's going. He's made something beyond a few boats. He's made a difference in the lives he's touched. It's a legacy any man's father would be honored to have. 