THE JACKET STORY
Part 1 of a 2-Part Feature

By David Kanally
WBA President & Chris-Craft Antique Boat Club Member
Mac McDerby worked for Andrew Jackson Higgins in New Orleans before and during World War II. Not only was he Higgins' personal yacht captain, he was a seasoned river man who knew the landing craft that Higgins built inside out. McDerby designed and delivered the training programs for the operation of the vessels; by war's end, more than 30,000 servicemen had completed the rigorous programs that McDerby designed and oversaw. Many veterans would send him letters of thanks after their tours, crediting McDerby's demanding high standards with their very survival. Dwight Eisenhower would dub Higgins "the man who won WWII." That designation was due in part to the tireless contributions of Richard "Mac" McDerby.

Following Victory in Europe in 1944, attention turned to the Pacific Theater, and the nation was asked to see the effort through by buying War Bonds. Higgins, with Mac leading the charge, staged a series of mock invasion demonstrations in June of 1945, beginning in Denison, TX on the shores of Lake Texoma. Landing craft, speed boats, aircraft and even a lifeboat dropped from a B-17 would participate in the the large-scale demonstration, with 35,000 Denison area residents cheering from shore. The event would be repeated at several venues along the Red River and the Mississippi, concluding in New Orleans, where more than $300,000 in War Bonds were sold.

At the New Orleans demonstration, both Andrew Higgins and Mac McDerby would be struck by burning sulphur from one of the mock bombs that were detonated. Higgins escaped injury as Mac extinguished the flames on his boss' clothing, but Mac would suffer burns on his shoulder and arm that left lifelong scars.
During his time in Denison planning the “Mighty Seventh” mock invasion in April, 1945, Mac had the very good fortune of meeting Catherine Conatser. The blind date was arranged by Denison’s mayor at that time, Bill Marisco. Things apparently went very well, because shortly after the War, Mac and Catherine married. Mac moved to Denison and opened a marine supply business. It was from that business that the idea to build boats grew. By 1949, Mac and Catherine’s brother Bill Conatser had formed the McDerby-Conatser Boat Company and built the first Yellow Jacket Boats, using innovative molded plywood hulls purchased from Industrial Shipping in Mahone Bay, Nova Scotia. Deck designs, seating configurations, and hardware were of their own choosing. Almost immediately, they outgrew their downtown location and acquired a site just downstream from the Denison Dam that would become the permanent home of Yellow Jacket Boats.

As noted in Yellow Jacket’s first brochure in 1950, the innovative molded hull design was the work of one Richard Cole of Miami. Cole, a Briton, had moved to Miami after a few years in Halifax, Nova Scotia, where his hull design work was done for the Industrial Shipping Company. Industrial Shipping provided molded hulls not only to Yellow Jacket, but also to Watson, Dunphy and others during the post-war boom years through the 1950s.

By 1955, Wesley Theakston, an executive at Industrial Shipping in Halifax, saw the opportunity to spin off his own hull manufacturing operation in Denison, supplying the fast-growing Yellow Jacket Boat Company. Theakston co-located his facility with Yellow Jacket along the Red River just downstream from the Denison Dam and Lake Texoma. Their common business continued to grow. In 1957 alone, Yellow Jacket turned out more than 7,000 boats. At its peak, Yellow Jacket Boat Company employed 400 people.

From a few runabout and utility models in the early years, the Yellow Jacket offering encompassed a wide variety of cockpit and
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Richard Cole

deck configurations in 12-, 14-, and 16-foot models. Occasionally, an inboard model was produced, using the famous Fageol 4-cylinder engine. But the Yellow Jacket hull, designed for the 1950 model year by Richard Cole, remained largely unchanged during the company's ten-year run. Only the choice of veneers changed, from birch to mahogany in 1957, once dry-rot problems arose in the early boats.

The design and speed of Yellow Jackets were surely strong points, but the publicity and sales of the marque were nothing short of genius. Mac McDerby was a consummate promoter. When Steve Allen was given an Evinrude outboard motor on the Tonight Show, Mac was quick to give him a Yellow Jacket to put it on. When Denison's native son Dwight Eisenhower became President, Mac made sure that Ike had a souvenir of his birthplace—a Yellow Jacket Boat. And when Mac learned of TV and movie star Roy Rogers' love of boat racing, Mac provided him with the fastest boats on the water, and enlisted him as Yellow Jacket spokesman, eventually Vice-President.

Yellow Jacket Boat Company produced fast, popular and affordable boats for ten years before being overtaken by the advent of fiberglass. Unable to successfully adopt the new technology, the company folded in 1959. But in Denison, the Yellow Jacket Boat Company lives on in memory. Children and grandchildren of the company's workers still live there. A number of restored Yellow Jacket Boats are carefully guarded in Denison's garages and barns. And here and there, in a lobby, a store or a church, a Yellow Jacket bench donated in loving memory of Gene Ramey, reminds the townspeople of the Yellow Jacket legacy.