

# Specializing in Specialized Parts

For three generations, family-run Teak Isle Manufacturing has designed and created specialty items for boatbuilders

By Charlie Levine

If you've stepped foot aboard a boat in the past few decades, there's a very good chance you opened a drawer, lifted a hatch, used a cup holder or slid a pair of pliers into a tackle center created by Ocoee, Fla.-based Teak Isle Manufacturing. In the company's 40-plus year history, it has worked with more than 200 boatbuilders, making all kinds of parts for all manner of boats.

Sandy Brown and Wesley "Sonny" Jones started the company in the late 1970s. Brown was working at Winter Park Marine, a central Florida Wellcraft dealership in which he had a small ownership stake, and he was finding it tough to source teak products. He saw an open niche and began building dive platforms, doors and other teak parts. Brown was on Wellcraft's dealer advisory council at the time; when he heard that Wellcraft wanted to close its in-house teak shop and utilize the space to build more boats, he sold the builder on the idea of outsourcing the teak work to his startup. Thus began Teak Isle's growth.

"Sandy is very much a get-your-hands-dirty kind of guy," says Teak Isle president Pat Brown, Sandy's son, who joined the company after graduating from college in the early 1980s. "If he's not bleeding on the wrist from some machine, it was an odd day."

After five years of working at both the dealership and Teak Isle, Sandy decided to focus on his company full time. It was about the same time that Pat joined — he was employee number four — when the company was operating out of a 2,000-square-foot space, making teak parts for a handful of boatbuilders. They decided to make a big investment in a cutting-edge piece of equipment: a CNC router.

The computer numerical control router was more precise than someone cutting parts by hand, which meant fewer mistakes and less waste. It was also much faster than clamping on a pattern and cutting it out, but it came with a price tag of more than \$100,000, a mighty sum for a small company in the mid-'80s. While the CNC router opened new doors, it was much more rudimentary than those used today. The operator had to manually punch in the X and Y axis numbers, and any radius figures, to create a pattern. But once the pattern was entered, it could be saved so the company could cut the same pattern again down the road.

"We saw the writing on the wall, and knew we could use



Teak Isle's busy production floor. The company is expanding to a new, 45,000-square-foot space.

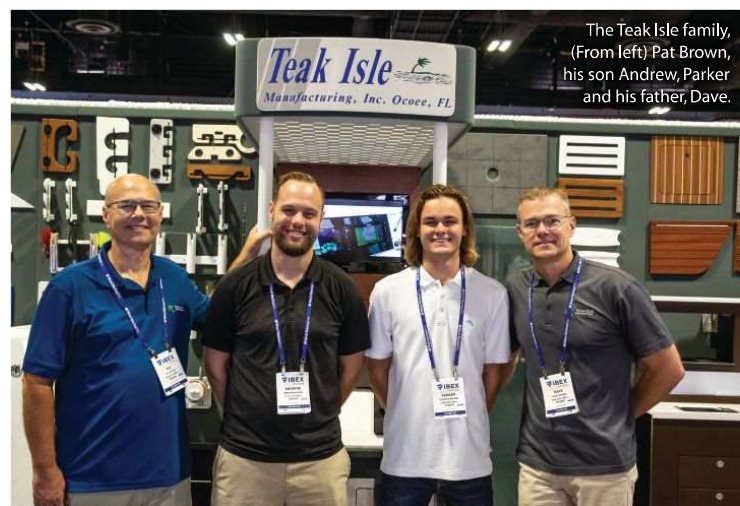
this equipment to grow the business," Pat says. Teak Isle grew its customer base with a reputation for delivering quality parts on time.

That's when Sandy's younger son, Dave, got involved. He too started on the ground level, and eventually he and Pat joined together to focus on growth. "Pat and I were both really involved in sales," says Dave, who is seven years younger than his brother and now co-owns the company with him. "We were pretty much the sole sales team well into the 2000s, handling a lot of the business. We're both really good at sales and engineering, which is a good mix to make a company like Teak Isle successful."

Not long after the company purchased its first CNC router, they came across King StarBoard, a product that could be used to make components similar to the ones they were building out of teak, but that required no maintenance. This marine-grade polymer came in sheets and quickly changed the industry.

"I grew up at the dealership washing boats and oiling teak," Pat says. "When I saw King StarBoard for the first time, I thought, *This stuff is great*. You didn't have to worry about the grain, and you didn't have to oil it."

Boatbuilders began to shift their thinking, with more offering StarBoard parts as standard while teak became the op-



The Teak Isle family, (From left) Pat Brown, his son Andrew, Parker and his father, Dave.



Teak Isle has 11 CNC routers in operation and plans to add four more.





(From left) Teak Isle manufactures as many as 1,500 unique products a week; its pontoon folding table won an IBEX Innovation Award in 2019; pallets of King StarBoard sheets await the CNC router.

tion. Within three years, Teak Isle was selling more acrylic and polymer-based products than teak. “[We], Wellcraft and Grady-White saw the advantages of the material early on,” Pat says. Today, Teak Isle is the largest end-user of King StarBoard in the world.

Because StarBoard comes in large sheets and there is no grain, pieces can be cut for various customers out of each sheet. The trick, the brothers say, is to nest the parts to maximize as much product as possible, especially when the material costs up to \$30 or more per square foot. While the company always looks to minimize waste, it recycles whatever pieces go unused. Last year, Teak Isle recycled 1.2 million pounds of material.

In any given week, Teak Isle will build 1,200 to 1,500 different products. The average order is only eight or 10 at a time, making the business strategy sound strange to some people. “If you’re a manufacturer, you want to build two things, and you want to build a gazillion of them. That’s how you make the most money,” says Pat’s son Andrew, who joined Teak Isle 10 years ago and played a pivotal role building the company’s e-commerce business. “We’re the exact opposite. We build a couple of things, and we only build a couple of them. But there’s major advantages to that. It’s not something you could really do overseas, so we’re protected in that regard, but we had to develop systems and organizational structures that allow us to do this profitably.”

By staying abreast of the latest design trends and using software to organize decades’ worth of patterns, Teak Isle has continued to grow. The company employs 18 engineers who provide design support for boatbuilders that may need a specific door, hatch or spacer in the engine room. The builder can focus on building boats and let Teak Isle create the part, produce it and hold on to the patterns. That way, when something is needed again, getting that part is fast and efficient.

“We can find that part and make it quickly,” Andrew says. “So we can make money doing that, but we couldn’t if we had to spend a half a day or more trying to find a particular part. We’ve taken significant steps on that front in the last five or six years.”

And because Teak Isle doesn’t require boatbuilders to order in bulk, it gives the builder more flexibility. For example, instead of using the same console door for several boat models, the builder can focus on creating a part that fits the look of each individual boat. “That’s a big thing for the builder,” Pat says. “We make the part so it looks like it fits the boat. We want it to look as nice as it can.”

In 2012, the company launched Boat Outfitters, an online consumer site where boaters can purchase replacement parts as well as custom items. “When a part on the boat breaks, that’s a problem, and we know how hard it can be, especially for first-time boat owners,” Andrew says. “They’re used to owning a car, where they can go to any car dealership and get an exact replacement part. They’re shocked that it’s not always like that in the marine industry. We knew we could help with that.”

The ability to cut and make parts so quickly means Boat Outfitters doesn’t need to stock every single item. It also has designers who work directly with boat owners to make custom items such as tackle centers and stowage units. “Space is so constrained on a boat,” Andrew says. “You can now customize your boat in any way you want. Say you have too

much cooler space but not enough tackle storage. We allow people to leverage our design team and customize parts.”

When they first launched Boat Outfitters, there was some fear of upsetting existing OEM partners, but the family quickly found that boatbuilders want to build boats. They don’t necessarily want to sell parts. The company had patterns for boat parts dating back 30 years, and the Internet provided the perfect platform to connect with customers who may need an oddball hinge or hatch at a reasonable price.

“They need to buy specific part? They can get it here,”

## Quick Pivots

At the tail end of the Great Recession, circa 2010, Teak Isle got news that one of its largest customers on the boatbuilding side was about to close three production plants for several months. “We had 20 or 30 employees working in a cell for that one builder,” Pat Brown says. Teak Isle didn’t want to lay off any of its employees, so the company went through its product designs looking for something else it could sell.

The answer was nativity scenes made out of King StarBoard for a local Christmas tree stand. The designs were not meant for shipping, so the engineering team created scenes that slid together like a 3-D puzzle to be shipped flat. The company offered the scenes online, through eBay and Amazon.



For seven years straight, the scenes became the top-selling outdoor Christmas decoration on Amazon. The company never laid off a single employee. Those folks continue to produce the nativity scenes, and this side of the business just so happens to pick up as the boating season wanes.

“The success of the nativity website also gave us the confidence to pull the trigger on Boat Outfitters,” Andrew Brown says.

The company used the same type of thinking at the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic. “Last April, when many of the boatbuilders shut down for a while due to Covid, we started making face shields for the state of Florida and area hospitals,” Pat Brown says. “We ramped production up to 13,000 shields a day during that time, supplying over 200,000 shields. Once again, this allowed us to keep all of our people working.”

Andrew says. “They’re also getting it engineered and styled just like the part the builder is getting, in the same color so it looks like it’s supposed to be there. It’s not a random part.”

By supplying parts to boatbuilders as well as boat owners, Teak Isle has been able to weather dips in the market when sales of new boats may slow and boat owners opt to fix up their older boat. “For us, it’s kind of like having some suntan lotion and an umbrella,” Dave says. “If the sun is shining, we have some suntan lotion, and if it’s not, we have an umbrella. If the OEM side turns off, a lot of times the Boat Outfitters consumer side turns on.”

Boat Outfitters now makes up 25 to 30 percent of the overall business, with 7,000 active SKUs. The next step in the growth of Boat Outfitters is offering boat dealers a wholesale program so they can offer customizations that might fit a certain region or use case. “Teak Isle has been in business a long time, servicing builders. Boat Outfitters is doing an awesome job servicing boat owners. The middle step is boat dealerships,” Andrew says.

Through Boat Outfitters’ dealer program, the dealer can take feedback from customers and offer such items as custom dash panels for various electronics packages, or an integrated trash can, or a step pad as an option. “It’s boat customization at the dealer level,” Andrew says. “We see that as becoming a big piece of business.”

Teak Isle has won several Innovation Awards from the National Marine Manufacturers Association, and it only attends trade shows, such as IBEX, if it has some new products to put in the booth. “Coming up with innovative products is absolutely the most fun part for me,” Pat says. “We won’t go to a trade show just to go. We’re bringing innovative ideas.”

As the company looks to the future and wrestles with rising material prices because of supply-chain constraints and the freeze that occurred this past winter in Texas, it remains positive. The family expects more growth and recently acquired a fourth building, a 45,000-square-foot space that will house Boat Outfitters production and distribution, four more CNC routers — the company has 11 in operation — and another 3,000 square feet of office space.

“With the growth in the market, we really need to get Boat Outfitters out of the main plant,” Dave says. “On the OEM side, at least we have some lead time and foresight with what we have coming. With the e-commerce, you have very little forecasting. It’s a day-to-day event. We may have a big order for a boatbuilder and all of a sudden you have to drop in 50 custom parts from over the weekend. It takes additional planning and scheduling to get that done right. We’ve put a lot of effort into understanding the loads and limitations of what we can do, and shifting capacity to handle that. Otherwise, this place will eat you up.”

While the company now has more than 300 employees, Andrew says it still feels small. It’s very much a family business. Dave’s son Parker, a college student, is now working part time and learning the business. He recently moved from the “dirtiest jobs,” as his dad says, into a larger role of scheduling teams, making sure they’re on track and getting them the materials they need to deliver on time.

“That’s what I did, that’s what Pat did, and that’s what Andrew did,” Dave says. “It worked out well for us, and hopefully it will work out well for him.” ■