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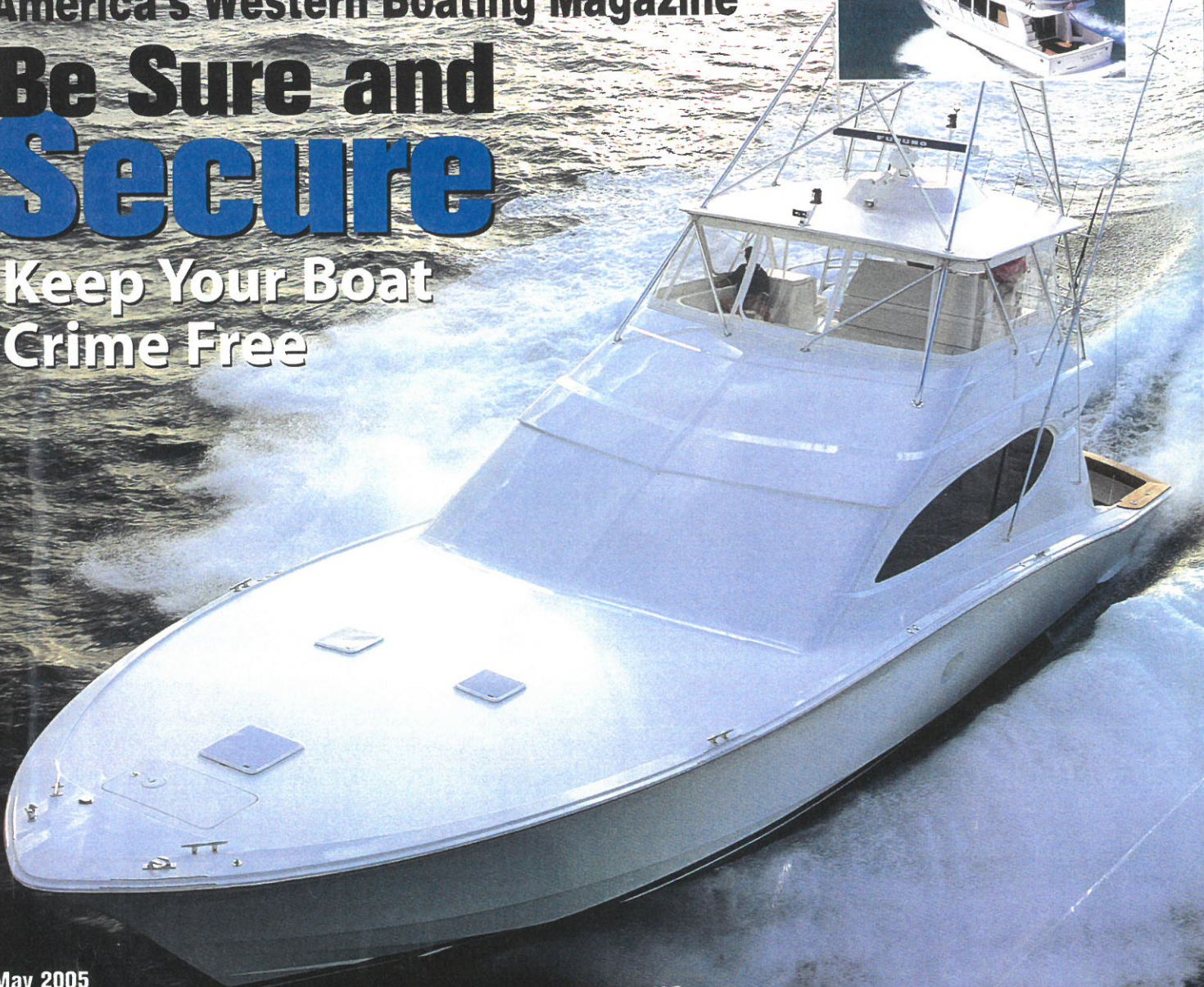
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RESURRECTING A LEGACY

*Fueled by a dream,
Wheeler Yacht Co.
cruises again*

AS SEEN IN
Sea
America's Western Boating Magazine

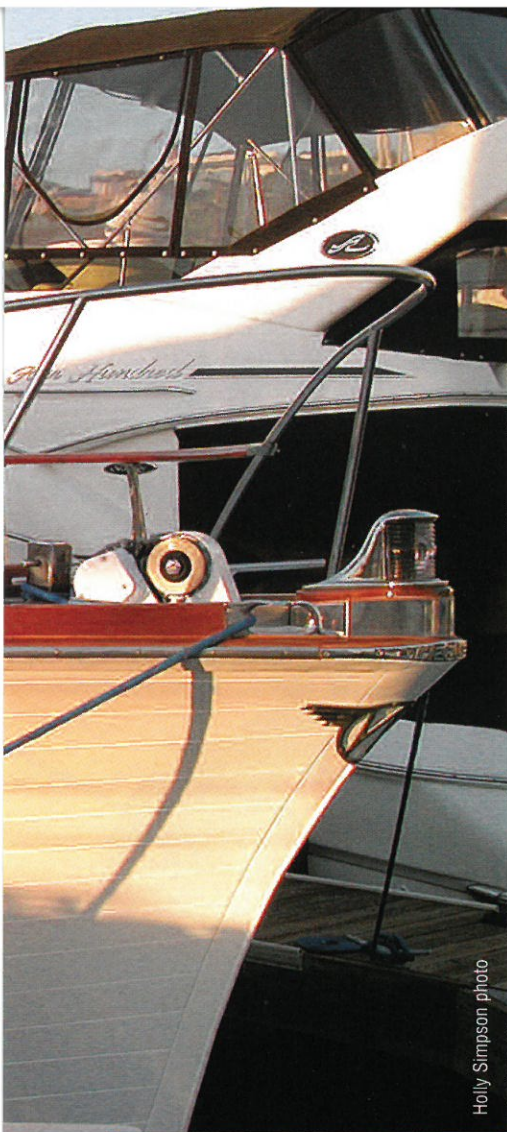
BY HOLLY SIMPSON

It's inadequate to call boating a hobby. For many, it's a passion, a dream or even a way of life; something they were just born into. So when a Newport Beach businessman leafed through the March 2004 edition of *Sea Magazine*, he realized he couldn't ignore his dream any longer. There, in Tom Fexas's Design Review column on page 48, was a wistful account of the boat his great-grandfather built: the 1952 Wheeler 48-foot Sportfisherman.

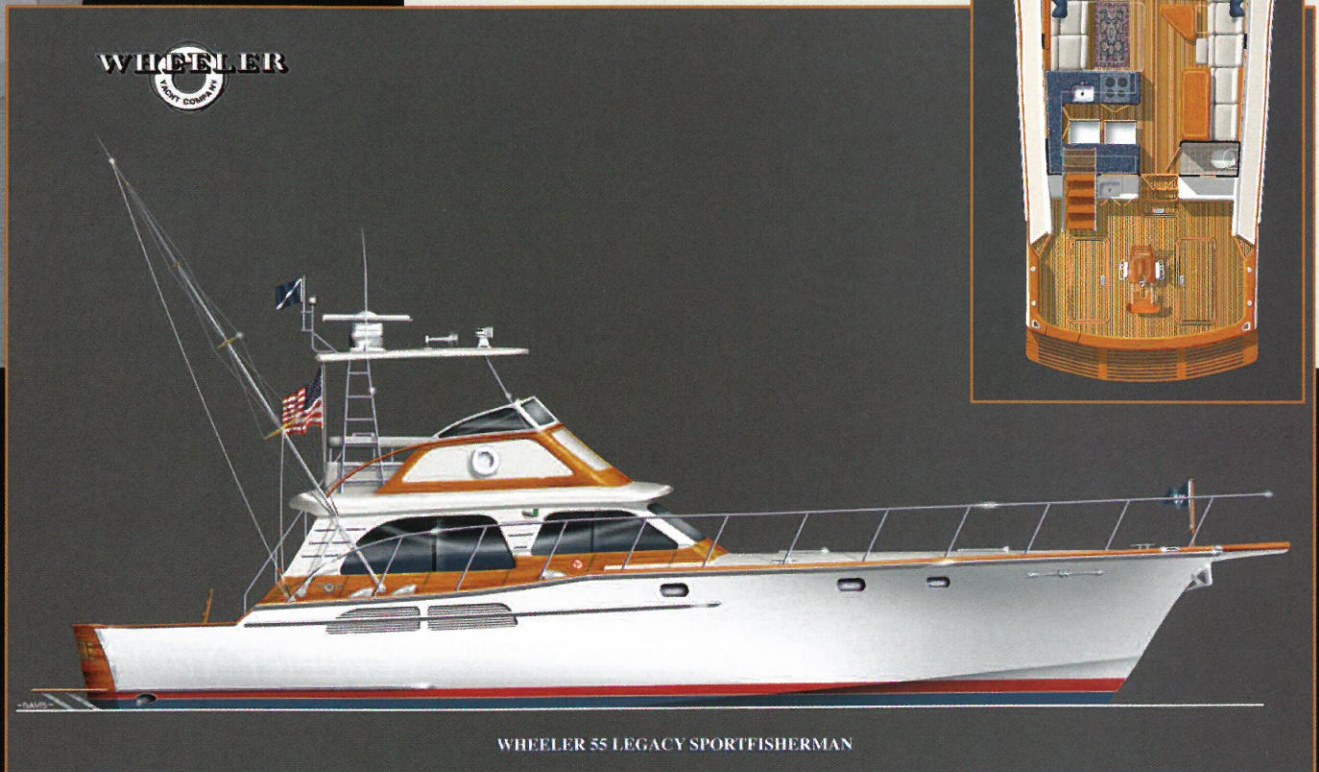
"This article is what did it for me," Wes Wheeler told me as we squinted at each other through a reddening California sunset.

As the great-grandson of Howard E. Wheeler, who founded the Brooklyn, New York-based Wheeler Shipyard in 1910 — which churned out about 3,400 boats, 2,500 of them recreational Wheeler Yachts — Wes grew up hearing plenty about boats. His father, Wes Sr., had planned, with cousin Eugene, to attend college for the sole purpose of running the family boat business. Wes Sr. obtained a mas-

Updating a Classic — Until Jonathan Wheeler (opposite left) bought the classic 1959 42-foot Wheeler Yacht named *Legacy*, neither he nor his brother Wes (opposite right) had spent any quality time aboard the boats their great grandfather's business had built. Prompted by a lifelong dream to revive the family name, Wes has relaunched Wheeler Yacht Co. with the introduction of the Wheeler 55 *Legacy Sedan* (at right).



Holly Simpson photo



WHEELER 55 LEGACY SPORTFISHERMAN



Holly Simpson photo

Definitely a Wheeler — Classic Wheeler Yachts have a very distinctive look — the name on the bow gives it away. Wanting to retain those classic lines while updating the look slightly and the systems greatly, Wes Wheeler and Jim Scandura asked designer Tom Fexas to envision how the new generation of Wheeler yachts would look had the company remained in business the past 40 years.

ter's degree in naval architecture and marine engineering, while Eugene (or "Tut," as was his nickname) completed his MBA.

But after a spiraling series of unfortunate events — not the least of which was a crippling strike at the shipyard, followed by a suspicious fire that destroyed the shipyard — the dream was put on hold indefinitely.

"When they got out of college, it

was too late. The company was already on its way out," Wes reflected, explaining that by then, the patriarch and founder, Howard, had died, leaving Wes's grandfather and great uncles to head the company. Though the Wheeler company continued from the late 1940s through the early 1960s to acquire new production companies and business interests, even attempting a public stock offer-

ing on a newly leased fiberglass boat building plant in 1960, it was too late.

"You can imagine spending your whole life in the boating business — going to college to take over the family business — and (my dad and his cousin) got out to find that the company had basically gone down.

"So my dad, for 40 years, has been a fairly ... reflective man," Wes said, with a grin.

The companies finally folded in 1965.

But not for good.

WHY NOW?

Despite his busy and successful career as North American regional president and global commercial head for Valeant Pharmaceuticals Intl., Wes was determined to bring back the family tradition — and tack one more title onto his name: president and CEO of the Wheeler Yacht Co. He told his father of his plans, and the "icon," as Wes and his brother Jonathan Wheeler, a doctor based in Newport Beach, endearingly refer to their father, gladly jumped on the bandwagon.

"My dad built ships in Spain for a couple of years and has always wanted to restart the Wheeler company,"

WHEELER YACHT CO. OVER THE YEARS



Howard E. Wheeler greets New York City mayor Fiorello La Guardia.

c. 1870: Founder Howard E. Wheeler born in New York.

1910: Wheeler Shipyard incorporated in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, New York.

1915-16: Wheeler Shipyards builds Navy subchasers.

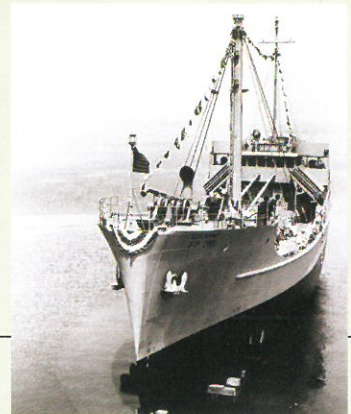
1920-39: Wheeler builds Playmate Series pleasure yachts, including *Pilar*.

1940: Wheeler Shipyards awarded \$1.9 million contract to build all 300 83-foot U.S. Coast Guard cutters.

1940: Wheeler begins building minesweepers. Wheeler Shipbuilding

Corp. is formed and a new shipyard is built on a 40-acre site in Whitestone, New York.

1945: Brooklyn shipyard closes and



Wes explained as he shared his dad's career experiences following the demise of the Wheeler companies. Wes admitted it hasn't taken "a ton of resources" to get the boats back off the blocks and into the water, so to answer the question as to why his father didn't do the same thing 40 years ago, he had to think back and remember what things used to be like in the boat business.

"The mindset back then was that if you were going to be a boat company you had to have a shipyard. To buy a shipyard, you have to raise capital and hire lots of employees." Back then, the idea of outsourcing was a pretty foreign concept.

"You should also remember, for about 10 to 20 years, the boating industry was struggling," Jonathan added. "You had a few big companies making most of the boats, and then, when luxury taxes came around, some companies went out of business."

Wes went on to explain his now-or-never motivation: "Long story short, my dad has spent a lot of his life wanting to do this. And now that we've succeeded in other businesses, we realize it's not that difficult, given that we already have a brand to rekindle," Wes said. "In a way, this is a gift

to my dad, from us."

He's not doing it alone though; Wes's longtime friend and now business partner, Jim Scandura, also jumped in, taking with him the title of vice president and COO of Wheeler Yachts. Jim and Wes founded the company, provided the initial capital and the business plan. Wes Sr. is on the board of directors, offering guidance, advice and a wealth of company and family history. Jonathan provides moral support (and free cruises aboard his classic wooden Wheeler yacht, aptly named *Legacy*), and there are plans for their sister Debbie, who works in advertising, to come aboard at the opportune moment.

"The world headquarters of Wheeler Yachts is impressive," Wes joked. "Our first board meeting was in my living room, and the world headquarters is my desk."

OLD VS. NEW

Though it would seem that Wes must have spent his whole life aboard one of the floating family classics, he hardly had the opportunity to experience the boats that had formed so much of his family's collective experiences. With the exception of his earliest years as an infant, neither he nor his siblings, including brother

Jonathan, had spent any time on the family's boats.

"I didn't set foot on a Wheeler Yacht until I bought my boat four years ago," Jonathan said. "I spent 41 years of my life living in the shadow of a legacy, being involved somewhat in boating, hearing all these people telling me these wonderful stories about their Wheeler boats." Jonathan convinced his wife, whom he calls a saint, of his ambition to buy a classic wooden Wheeler. The result is a head-turning, 1959 plank mahogany beauty, with a 42-foot LOA.

"It's a lot of money and a lot of work," Jonathan said, figuring that for every 100 hours he spends on board *Legacy*, he gets about an hour of actual playtime.

Though he does not regret his decision to buy *Legacy*, he is looking forward to the new generation of Wheeler Yachts, which will incorporate the classic 1950s Wheeler lines in a low-maintenance state-of-the-art package.

HISTORICAL CRUISE

Though company founder Howard Wheeler always intended to build recreational boats, it didn't stop him from camping out in the halls of the U.S. Navy building in Washington until he managed to land a contract to build



all operations transferred to Whitestone.

1945-48: Whitestone plant is converted from an assembly line operation to a yacht-building operation. The sun lounge is designed for high-volume module production. Wheeler borrows \$2 million from Brooklyn Trust Co. for the conversion. Shipyard

strike results in building delay and foreclosure. Wheeler Shipbuilding goes bankrupt and closes Whitestone. **1948:** Wheeler purchases Dawn Boat Works in the Bronx and estab-



lishes Wheeler Yacht Co. Inc. **1948-59:** Wheeler Yacht Co. builds successful custom pleasure-boats (Playmate series and the Sportfisherman).

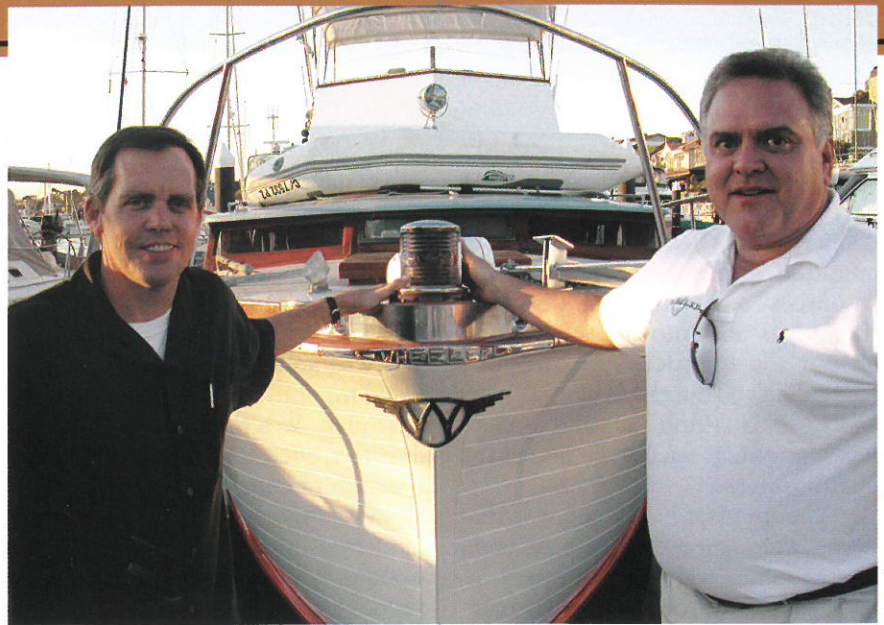
Partners in Crime — Wes Wheeler (left) and Jim Scandura, longtime friends and colleagues, put up the initial capital to get Wheeler Yacht Co. back up and running.

boats for the war effort in 1914. The company would be involved heavily in military boat building throughout its history, as it landed millions of dollars in government contracts to build everything from subchasers during World War I to minesweepers and 83-foot wooden Coast Guard cutters in World War II — all while continuing to create recreational yachts such as the Playmate Series (one of which Ernest Hemingway snatched up and named *Pilar*) and later, custom pleasure yachts, including the popular 1952 Sportfisherman.

Because the original Wheelers were built on the East Coast, West Coast boaters probably are more familiar with the famous owners and occupants of Wheeler yachts than they are with the boats themselves: In addition to Hemingway's *Pilar*, *SS Minnow*, featured on the television series "Gilligan's Island" (the one cruising out of the harbor at the beginning of the three-hour tour — not the one up on the beach), was also a Wheeler. It's still happily afloat in Washington state, restored after it sank a number of years ago. The owner is said to take visitors out for three-hour tours.

THE NEXT GENERATION

To bring back the old classic in



Holly Simpson photo

style, Wes decided it was time for a makeover. He called none other than Tom Fexas, who wrote the article that inspired him to become a boat builder in the first place. After Tom got over his initial feeling that he was dealing with a prank caller, he gladly accepted the invitation to create the first Wheeler yacht in about 40 years. Wes and Jim tasked him with answering this question: What would a Wheeler yacht look like today had the company carried on and the boats had never been on a building hiatus?

Enter the Wheeler 55 Legacy Sedan.

When Tom emerged from the drawing board with hull number one of the brand-new line of Wheeler Yachts, a picture began to form of a boat that Wes and Jim hoped would

be a high-quality dual-personality yacht that would appeal to a niche market.

"You see boats out there that are motoryachts, and you see boats that are sportfishers, but we feel like the sportfisher doesn't cater to somebody who wants to bring the whole family out for a cruise," Jim said. "So what we're looking for is a high level of finish and a high level of equipment so that the owners of the boat can use it for fishing, for entertaining, for family time — whatever they want to do."

To illustrate this point, the owner of hull number one won't even have a fighting chair; he is opting for an outdoor barbecue instead.

This boat comes nicely loaded: While owners can't move the bulkheads, they have a choice of finish-

WHEELER YACHT CO. OVER THE YEARS



Legacy, a classic 1959 Wheeler yacht.

Photo courtesy of Jonathan Wheeler

1957: Howard E. Wheeler retires at age 88. Wheeler Yacht Co. handed

over to three sons, Wesley L., Robert C. and Eugene M.

1960: First fiberglass boat — a 26-footer designed and built by Wheeler — debuts at the New York Boat Show. Wheeler Fiberglass Boat Corp. floats a \$400,000 stock offering after spending \$250,000 to lease a new building. Funds were unavailable to complete construction and the fire department shut the operation down due to lack of upgraded fire protection systems.

1961: Wheeler buys Van Breems Boat Building Co. to continue wooden boat production. Howard E. Wheeler dies at age 92.

1963: Wheeler shipyard completely destroyed by suspicious fire.

1964: Wheeler Boat Corp. and Wheeler Yacht Corp. formed.

1965: Wheeler companies fold.

2004: Wheeler Yacht Co. is incorporated in California by Wesley P. Wheeler, son of Wesley D. and great-

es, joinery, fabrics, colors and just about every other interior design element they wish to select.

The new Wheeler 55 Legacy Sedan features a wide beam — 17 feet, 11 inches — and lightweight fiberglass construction, bringing the vessel to a total of about 64,000 pounds. “We’re using heavy power and a more efficient hull to get better speed,” Jim explained, citing the Wheeler 55’s Davidson Laboratory tank test, in which it clocked 44 knots at half load. (I just heard your ears perk up, anglers.)

I’m particularly in love with the galley. It’s pretty standard as far as appliances and overhead cabinet space is concerned, but the galley’s location sets it apart: smack in front of the cockpit instead of forward of the saloon, which opens up the interior living space and makes it more accessible to those outside. A power-retractable window is located just over the countertop, so the cook can pass snacks and drinks back and forth through the window — or simply observe the action in the 143-square-foot cockpit without getting injured in the process.

There is also a day head just opposite on the starboard side, which solves the problem of wet feet trampling over the teak flooring to access the other two heads.

Accommodations include a comfortable master stateroom with a king-

size berth, a VIP guest stateroom with a queen-size berth and a third stateroom with twin bunks — and, there is more closet space than you can throw a well-appointed shoe collection at.

The boat does not have an interior helm station, which may deter some Northwestern boaters who are envisioning some of the rough cruising grounds they’re used to. However, the flybridge — which comes with an L-shaped seating arrangement and is accessible by a pitched ladder/stairway with hefty grabrails — has isinglass enclosures that are reinforced by another rigid product that will help to keep it sturdy and sealed in breezy or chilly conditions. Climate control comes standard.

A teak sole graces the saloon, and you can relax in one of the recliners in front of the 42-inch plasma-screen TV. A settee folds down to become a double berth.

Standard Caterpillar C-18 engines at 1,000 hp apiece can be accessed in the engine room via the cockpit. If C-18s still don’t cure your need for speed, you can upgrade to the Caterpillar C-32s. An Onan generator comes standard, with an option for two if you’re planning to run a lot of hair dryers.

“We could not think of any additional equipment that they would be wanting on this boat,” Jim said.

The company expects to build three

the first year, and plans to bring the drawings to life for a Spring 2006 boat show debut. In the meantime, you can drool over the artist’s renderings.

Just in the nick of press time, the builder was announced: Bennett Brothers Yachts Inc. of Wilmington, North Carolina. With almost 20 years in the custom sailboat building business — in addition to turning out sport-fisher designs — you can imagine that little space will go to waste aboard the American-born 55 Legacy Sedan.

LIVING A DREAM

“Our grandfather and his brothers built great boats,” Wes said. “They spared no cost. The new boats, like the old, will be built with the same thing in mind: American-designed and American-built.

“We’ve got a fantastic legacy here,” he continued. “We have a brand that’s worth something. Boating is running through our blood, and we are perfectionists. We’re going to build boats that are perfect.”

After watching the way Wes’s eyes lit up as he told me about his ambitions, and accompanying Jonathan on a tour of his carefully restored Wheeler, I’m inclined to believe them. One thing is certainly clear though: There are no dreams like boaters’ dreams. ♡

📞 **CONTACT: WHEELER YACHT CO.,** NEWPORT BEACH, CA; (949) 302-1087; WWW.WHEELERYACHTS.COM



grandson of founder Howard E. James L. Scandura joins as co-founder.

SPECIFICATIONS

Wheeler 55 Legacy Sedan

| | |
|--------------------------|----------------------------|
| LOA | 55 ft., 3 in. |
| Beam | 17 ft., 11 in. |
| Draft | 4 ft., 6 in. |
| Displacement (half-load) | 64,909 lbs. |
| Fuel capacity | 1,490 gals. |
| Water capacity | 253 gals. |
| Standard engines | Caterpillar 1,000 hp C-18s |
| Optional engines | Caterpillar 1,652 hp C-32s |
| Estimated price | \$2,500,000 |

Builder: Bennett Brothers Yachts Inc., Wilmington, NC; (910) 772-9277; www.bbyachts.com