



A young Phil Keeter (left) with his first two employees at Romer Marine.

A serendipitous marine landing

Phil Keeter had never been in a boat when he began a career that would lead him to the top echelons of the industry



By Ben Sherwood

Phil Keeter, the retired president of the Marine Retailers Association of the Americas, says he was fired only once in his career — by me! That's right. Phil says I fired him. And he kids me about it each time we talk. As the owner of Romer Marine in Tulsa, Okla., Phil was an outstanding Johnson outboard dealer and served on my dealer council when I headed up OMC's outboard sales. He says that one day I called him to the front of the room at the end of a meeting, thanked him for having served on the dealer council and presented him with a gold pen and pencil set with Johnson logos on them.

Today he jokes that I was tired of him criticizing Johnson programs and making suggestions that I didn't care for. Actually it was standard practice to replace dealers after they had served on the council for a couple of years. But Phil has too much fun telling me that I fired him.

We are good friends today.

Phil and I have a couple of things in common. Neither of us had been in a boat until after college, and both of us spent our entire career in the boating industry. Phil actually started in the boat business during his senior year at the University of Tulsa.

"In my senior year at the university, I met and married my wife, Marilyn," he says. "Her dad worked for Standard Oil of Indiana as their pipeline superintendent in this area. He had a passion for boating, so on the side he started distributing Fleetform boats made in Saginaw, Texas, to dealers at night and on weekends. Fleetform was

a flat-bottom, hard-chine outboard-powered boat — 14-foot and 16-foot.

"After I married Marilyn, her dad and I got to talking about opening a boat store. We finally agreed that he would finance and open the retail store, and I would work there as a salesman. I had no boating experience at all and knew nothing about the boat business. I was born and raised in Tulsa and have lived there all my life. My dad was a machinist, and our family didn't boat, and I had never even been on a boat."

During the last semester of his senior year, his father-in-law opened the boat store, and Phil started working there. "And it just grew from there. So I learned the business from Marilyn's dad."

Talking about his college days, Phil says, "When I met Marilyn my senior year, I really fell in love with her. One semester we were in an English class together. She was sitting

in the back of the classroom, and I was in the front. I kept looking back at her during the class ... couldn't take my eyes off of her. After several days of this, our teacher finally asked Marilyn to move up front. He said, 'I think that is the only way I can get Mr. Keeter to pay attention in class.'"

Phil graduated in 1959 with a degree in economics. "After I got the degree in economics, I realized it was pretty much worthless." He laughs and adds, "It only works in theory, not in reality. A few years later I told the president of the university that economics needed to be taught by businesspeople, not just teachers, by private entrepreneurs. But I don't think he has bought into my idea at all."

Keeter says he has remained "real close" to the university since graduation. He has been president of the alumni association and president of the booster club and has held "season tickets to basketball and football games all these years." It is also noteworthy that he has been chairman of the board of the fifth-largest Methodist church in the United States — one that has more than 8,300 attendees weekly.

"The dealership my father-in-law and I started was Romer Marine," he says. "It started growing, and soon we had a service department and then became a Johnson outboard dealer. Then after a few years my father-in-law said, 'I think I am going to make you a half-owner of the business.' Ten years after that, in about 1971, my father-in-law said, 'I want you to buy my half of the business, and you and Marilyn can run it from here on.' So we bought him out, and Romer Marine became our business."

Over the years Romer Marine sold Fleetform, Glastron, Arkansas Traveler, Kayot, Newman and Chaparral boats, plus Johnson outboards. It was about 1971 when Phil met and got to know other dealers such as Don Galey of Galey's Marine in Bakersfield, Calif.; Hubert Spradling of Sprad's Boat Town, Orange, Texas; and Dominic Bonfanti of Bonfanti Marine in Baton Rouge, La., through dealer meetings. And in 1972 he and 11 other dealers got the idea of founding the Marine Retailers Association of the Americas.

"Early on, we made a deal with the National Marine Manufacturers Association to have use of one of their offices in Chicago for a couple of years," he recalls. "But we soon determined that we needed our own office, so we moved out of the NMMA facility. Then we hired Matt Kaufman to be the executive director, working in our new Chicago office. Matt continued as executive director until I took over in 1986."

After 27 years as a dealer, Keeter had sold Romer Marine that year. "I had an offer that I just couldn't refuse for the business and grounds consisting of a whole block," he says. "Turned out the property value was greater than the business. We considered relocating and looked at property along one of the major highways where so many car dealers and other businesses were locating, but the cost was a lot more than we wanted to spend. So we sold all the inventory, including accessories, parts and shop equipment."

Keeter was a Glastron dealer at the time. "I sold my boats to another Glastron dealer," he says. The dealership also had sold the Chaparral, Arkansas Traveler and Johnson outboard lines.

"Until I sold my dealership I had been on the MRAA board from its beginning and served as chairman of the board in 1978-79," he says. "I became vice president for a year, then president for a year."

After he sold Romer Marine, he went to work for Glastron for two years as a regional sales manager, covering states that included Illinois, Missouri, Indiana, Oklahoma and Arkansas. "After two years at Glastron, Larry Russo recommended to Dick McClintock, president of the MRAA, that the board consider me for the position of executive director. Dick McClintock then contacted me in

1988 and said, 'Keeter, you need to be our executive director.' I was asked to fly up to Chicago to be interviewed. After a day of meeting with the board, they hired me.

"In those years the membership was around 300, top 400," he says. "After I became executive director we hired Jerry Martin, who had a public relations business, as director of development. We really began to grow — up to as many as 800 members. Jerry was pre-

viously a sales promotion manager at Johnson Outboards and knew the business very well. Then we soon were over 1,000. When I left, we were up to 3,600 to 3,700 members."

He recalls the decision to hold an annual convention that has evolved into today's Marine Dealer Conference & Expo.

"In 1980 we had a meeting in Chicago at the Conrad Hilton that we called a Dealer Congress. We had 100 dealers at

the meeting, two dealers from each state. We had them sitting in tiered seats with state flags behind each state's dealers. A lot of ideas were suggested and voted on at this meeting, and finally we ended up with the decision to have an annual Dealer Congress that later became the MRAA convention, and it is now known as the Marine Dealer Conference & Expo.

"For years it was held in Las Vegas, and attendance kept growing. But after sev-

eral complaints from dealers who didn't want to go to Las Vegas, we decided to move the convention to Orlando, Fla. The Orlando location turned out to be much better than Las Vegas because there were just too many distractions in Vegas. These conventions became very popular. Dealers loved it because they were able to get together and talk to other dealers. The first convention was held in about 1978, 1979."

Phil remained a Tulsa resident, spending Monday through Thursday at the Chicago MRAA office except for the weeks when he attended industry or state dealer meetings. "I am a 78-year veteran of Tulsa," he says.



Ben Sherwood (left), the author of this piece, and Keeter are former colleagues and have long been friends.

Keeter retired as MRAA president at the end of 2011, the year he turned 75.

Phil and I have both been involved in the marine industry for 56 years, and it has been a pleasure to know him as he grew the MRAA, which began as a group of 12 dealers, to a vital and prominent national organization. In my opinion, Phil Keeter has done more to benefit dealers and the industry than anyone else I know.

Three dealers who have achieved icon status contacted me with comments about Phil when they heard I was writing this article. Here is what they had to say.

John Underwood

Former owner of Lockwood Marine in Shellman Bluff, Ga.

A lot of folks make an effort to give back to our communities, schools, churches, professions, etc. The success of those efforts is largely governed by the person spearheading them. MRAA had the benefit of Phil Keeter's unique talents for 23 years. As organizations go, it is far from an easy one to steer. The expression "herding cats" comes immediately to mind. The members have always been very independent entrepreneurs — each capable in his own right, but long accustomed to doing it his (or her) own way. Phil managed to herd these cats by exhibiting resources not often found in even the best association executives:

1. An unflagging drive to keep MRAA a relevant and powerful force in the marine industry. Boat dealer influence on the path of the industry always remained strong with Phil at the helm.

2. The ability to maintain working contacts and friendships in all parts of the industry. There was no way to cross the floor quickly with Phil at an industry event. We continually stopped to greet and strategize with his unbelievable quantity of industry friends.

3. A talent for making hard work fun

for all of us who have served MRAA on a shorter term. Working in small groups with Phil toward MRAA's many goals has always been a challenging yet pleasant experience. There has always been a lot of talent in the MRAA membership, and Phil knew just how to extract and apply it.

4. A genuine love of boating and the folks who make it happen. Without this, Phil would have been a good but not really great boating industry leader. He

was able to accumulate dealers' knowledge of what boaters want and need, then use MRAA resources to impress it on legislators, manufacturers and even government regulators — no easy task, but he did it unbelievably well. I think I speak for all of his former dealer "henchmen," as well as the rest of the industry, in saying, well done — it was a great voyage and a pleasure to share it with you, Capt. Phil.

Don Galey

Galey's Marine, Bakersfield, Calif.

Phil Keeter and I first met in a small group of dealers that had a desire to create a national marine association. Our primary emphasis was on one strong, consolidated voice for our industry. Phil and I were on the first board of the newly formed Marine Retailers Association of America, and we each served a term as chairman. Phil and I became great friends

over time and shared many ideas in promoting stronger, more efficient and profitable dealerships. Phil became the association's key adviser and promoter after the sale of his dealership, Romer Marine. Thank you, Phil, for your continued insight into the future of our industry.

Larry Russo

Russo Marine, Danvers, Mass.

I believe there is no one in this industry who has spent more time with Phil Keeter than me. I first got to know him through Jerry Martin at the MRAA Dealer Congress in Chicago in 1980. Phil was a founding member of MRAA and a past chairman. He was the panel moderator at that Chicago meeting, and I was so impressed by his charming nature, his speaking ability and how he managed the agenda and controlled the audience. He was so professional. (Most dealers I knew back then still had a shop rag hanging out of their back pocket.)



(From left) Phil and Marilyn Keeter and Bee and Larry Russo.

I became hooked on MRAA as a result of going to that meeting and getting to know Phil Keeter. He was magnificent — well-dressed, well-spoken and very knowledgeable and passionate about the concerns of marine dealers. Over the next several years I got to know him quite well as I worked my way up the ladder at MRAA. When I became chairman in 1988, my first task was to hire a new executive director to lead the association forward. Phil had sold his family dealership and was working as a sales representative for Glastron. I submitted his name to the search committee, and the rest is history. MRAA hired him in 1989, and we became inseparable — best friends working together on industry issues for the next 20 years.

I've had a good run in this business, but I must say the highlight of my career was being the master of ceremonies at Phil's retirement party (and roast) at the MDCE in 2011. All of his good buddies were on hand to give him a "proper" send-off.

When I reflect on the marine industry side of my life, I have been blessed to have known Phil. Early on, he was my role model, and then he became a trusted co-worker, colleague and mentor. Now he's just a dear friend. It doesn't get any better than that. ■

Ben Sherwood, a 50-year veteran of the marine industry, was head of sales and marketing for the Evinrude and Johnson outboard brands for several years during his career at Outboard Marine Corp. After retiring from OMC, he was a marine trade magazine columnist for 18 years and a consultant to the industry. He wrote the book "How to Succeed in Marine Retailing." He can be reached at ben@bensherwood.net.