



A new warehouse opened in June 2014 — 15 months after fire destroyed the company's old facility.

The Kellers of Keller Marine

Four generations have turned a 1950s wooden boat shop into a tech-savvy leader in the field of marine distribution

By Ben Sherwood

Over a span of four generations and 65 years, the Keller family has gone from a builder of wooden boats to a leading marine and RV parts and accessories distributor replete with a sophisticated digital operation.

Along the way, Port Trevorton, Pa.-based Keller Marine & RV has introduced innovative distribution practices and fought its way back from a major fire in 2013 that destroyed its principal office building and warehouse. The company did not close after the fire and missed only two shipping days.

The family journey into the marine industry began its circuitous route when Flanders Keller, born in 1908, began working in a silk mill for a dollar a week during the Great Depression. He later found a construction job in Virginia, lived away from his family during the week, and drove 10 hours each way on weekends to see them. When he had saved enough, he built a planing mill to turn trees into lumber. He also started a business removing coal from the nearby Susquehanna River.

Keller turned to wooden boats in 1952. His brother-in-law, Leroy Ferry, a carpenter, had built some Chris-Craft boat kits. This got Flanders interested in building boats as a business and having his brother-in-law do the design and construction. Keller financed the business and provided the wood; Ferry brought the boatbuilding expertise. That was the birth of Keller Kraft boats.

Along comes fiberglass

Flanders said to his son George, "I'm not sure we'll make any money in this boat business, but at least we'll have some fun." And fun they had. They built 2,000 Keller Kraft wooden boats until 1958, when Flanders realized that fiberglass was the future and shut down the wooden boat business.

That also was the year George completed his Navy service after graduating from Penn State University. George knew from his involvement with Keller Kraft that service at the parts and accessories level was sorely lacking in the area. He had worked with his father and experienced firsthand the difficulty of obtaining parts for the production line. Sensing an opportunity, George and his wife, Margaret, formed Keller Marine Service, putting them



Mike Keller is president of the company and his sister Lori Keller Morrow is secretary/treasurer. Mike's son Michael T. Keller, now 25, is sales manager, a position he has held for the past year.

into the marine parts distribution business.

Margaret was a teacher, and her income helped fund the business at the beginning. They started with two employees. George bought a Suburban van, loaded it with parts and accessories and visited boat dealers. The service caught on, and growth was rapid.

Also in 1958 Keller, taking his cue from the appliance industry, held the marine industry's first distributor show in his small warehouse and had a good dealer turnout. The following year, he invited manufacturers' representatives to work the show. The tradition carries on today; the

2016 show occupied 75,000 square feet in the Lancaster County Convention Center in Lancaster, Pa.

In 1959 George also became a distributor for Starcraft aluminum boats. At that time Starcraft was the best-known brand in the aluminum boat category. As the parts and accessories business continued to grow, George, who continued his focus on dealer service, decided that his sales team could make deliveries to dealers as well as sales calls, saving time and money for the dealers and for Keller. This enabled him to give his dealers better service and pricing, and the practice continues today. Twenty Keller sales reps drive 20 trucks to make dealer sales calls and deliveries.

In 1968 Starcraft Boats encouraged Keller Marine to enter the recreational vehicle business with pop-up campers. The business name changed to Keller Marine & RV. That year, Keller Marine installed its very first computer system to handle all of the company's inventory and accounts receivable. Like their counterparts in marine, RV dealers loved the delivery of parts and accessories via company trucks. This led to very steady growth in the RV aftermarket business. Because of the growth in that business, George Keller decided in 1979 to stop selling Starcraft Boats and campers so the company could focus solely on distributing parts and accessories.

Enter Mike and the Internet

Mike Keller, the third generation to run the company, started working at Keller Marine & RV in May 1986. He had a degree in business administration, with minors in computer science and finance. George and Margaret retired from the company in 1993 at age 59½. At that time Mike Keller, who at the age of 29 had been vice president, took over as president — the position he holds today. Mike's sister Lori Keller Morrow is secretary/treasurer.

In 1993 Keller introduced what it describes as the industry's first CD-ROM accessories catalog for both marine and RV, which allowed dealers to look up all Keller Marine & RV products. It included parts breakdowns, full-color enlarged photos and thousands of pages with much more detail than could be provided in a paper catalog. The system was state-of-the-art in 1993 and was the forerunner of Keller Marine & RV's B-to-B Internet tool, now known as its KWEB ordering system. By 1999 Mike Keller realized how quickly the Internet was changing the business and retail landscape and knew the company had to embrace it even more.

"We knew that for over 40 years we had operated behind the scenes in our dealers' stores. We never tried to promote the Keller Marine & RV name; we always just focused on serving the consumer through serving the dealer. We did not think the Internet was any different, and we created stores that would allow the dealer to be successful on the Internet."

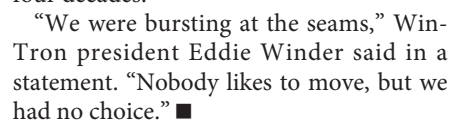
The program became known as K-Merchant 8.0. From the program's inception, it offered dealers a total custom website that allowed the dealer to be the merchant of

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The 2013 fire at its height. The business did not close — even for a day — and rebuilding began immediately.

After more than four decades on Route 71 in Spring Lake Heights, N.J., Win-Tron Electronics has moved to an "ultra-modern" office/warehouse facility in nearby Manasquan.



With KWEB, a dealer can become an on-line retailer. The dealership picks the products to feature on its website and sets the prices and any specials for its site. When the consumer places an order on the dealer's website, Keller Marine & RV ships the order to the consumer and bills the dealer, who

George Keller and his wife, Margaret, launched Keller Marine Services in 1958.



On March 22, 2013, a fire broke out in the main warehouse and office building and set in motion one of the toughest times in the company's history. Apparently Keller had a contractor repairing the roof when a spark caused by a steel cutting saw started the fire. Keller lost its main office building and warehouse. The product loss was huge — almost 14,000 stock-keeping units — but the company did not close. It

The result was a new state-of-the-art warehouse that was completed in June 2014.

Keller services about 1,000 independent marine & RV dealers in the Mid-Atlantic and New England states and is still growing. ■

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