BUILDING A BETTER BOAT
KARL TRAHAN'S BOATS ARE EXPENSIVE, BUT WORTH IT

Kararl Trahan Sr. began building boats more than a decade ago as a means of diversifying his Maurice-based oilfield supply company, Aluminum Products Inc.

The sideline is not a big business, and it is not the kind of business that services a large clientele. Very few people can afford one of his fishing boats, the most recent of which he finished after a four-year hiatus. It takes more than a year to get one out, especially since his oilfield supply company is now more successful than ever.

The company is called Little Yacht. Because that's what Trahan builds, smaller versions of yachts.

"I used to do boats, primarily, all of the time," Trahan says. And while he has just finished a 22-foot by 8 1/2-foot wide center console style that went for about $55,000, Trahan says his next customer will have to be willing to wait more than a year for the order to be filled.

At one point, however, Karl W. Trahan Sr., 47, seemed close to a deal that would have made him known throughout the country and kept him consumed with boat building.

In its infancy during the early '80s—or as long as the local economy was good—the boat business prospered; but about the middle of the decade, orders and inquiries began thinning out. "In '85 and '86 you had to hustle. You had to do a lot of selling. The boat purchases were indirectly related to the oilfield economy." Trahan says.

"I wanted to go with the top end. Nobody was doing that," says Trahan.

He showed Striker his constructions and said the company was interested. Striker representatives came here a couple of times, and Trahan made several trips back to Ft. Lauderdale. At one point, Trahan was negotiating to build the 33-foot Striker, and the company was going to start marketing an outboard version.

Negotiations lasted a couple of months, but when the deal didn't seem to be going anywhere, Trahan backed off. "Nothing ever panned out," Trahan says. "They had too many projects on the board.

"Striker would have fit in perfect. Ours would have fit right in with their product," it was about 1988 when the deal fell through; Trahan built only a couple of more boats after that. Unbeknownst to Trahan, it would be another four years before he would be commissioned to build another one.

After completing that last boat in 1989, Trahan moved back into the oilfield, even closing Aluminum Products for about a year and going to work for someone else in an oilfield-related business.

He reopened the business, and a few years later, in 1993, the company—more diversified than ever—had a banner year. "And this year will be better," Trahan says. "We've had incredible growth periods."

Trahan's belief in diversification, even before the telltale signs that the local economy was in trouble, actually led to his boat-building business. About 1980 he saw that total dependence on the oilfield could be costly, so he started thinking of ways to diversify Aluminum Products Inc, his and his wife Monica's company.

"I saw all my eggs in one basket, dependent on one industry," Trahan says. The company's primary business is precision sheet-metal punching, shearing and bending. "We wanted to have our own product [of aluminum], something we could actually build and market," he says.

Trahan had completed course work, including such training as mechanical drafting, at Delgado College in New Orleans and subsequently managed his father-in-law's machine shop in Abbeville for about eight years. Shortly after that he formed KAR Fabricators, the company that within a couple of years would have its name changed to Aluminum Products.

Through his schooling he had acquired the skills, and because of his involvement with aluminum, he had the materials. "Boat building seemed almost a natural extension," Trahan says, a perfect way to diversify the company.

Trahan got his hands on every thing he could and studied the business. "It took me almost six months of research," he says. He also talked to a number of builders and was able to talk at length with a representative of the company that builds the cigarette line of racing boats. (In describing this boat, Trahan says the cigarette is to the water what the Porche is to the highway.) "I figured if anybody knew about bottom design it would be Cigarette," he says.

Another person he talked to was Jake Gilbreath of California, a famous offshore powerboat racer and one of...
the brains behind the Gil Bracket, a unit that is bolted onto the boat and upon which the motor is attached, mainly for increased speed and better fuel economy. "He gave me a lot of information on bottom design," Trahan says. This, Trahan believes, is the most important aspect of boat construction.

Still not knowing exactly what it was he wanted to build, Trahan went out on some aluminum boats that had been built in the area and carefully evaluated them on the water. "They were good boats. They just didn't do what I expected them to do," he says.

Trahan wanted something with top-notch performance and handling capabilities. It would have to perform as well as the newest, most high-tech fiberglass boats being manufactured, but his would be made of aluminum. They'd be more durable than fiberglass and would last longer. "That's where the concept came about," he says.

Trahan envisioned a top-of-the-line yacht that would be scaled-down only in size. Like Striker, the boat would be constructed of the most expensive aluminum, and all of the hardware, such as the wiring, instruments and switches, would be of premium quality.

Local boat builders were offering enough entry level and intermediate fishing boats, and Trahan saw a niche. "I wanted to go with the top end. Nobody was doing that," he says. "Nobody was building a modern, deep-V bottom in aluminum."

To this day, his type of boat is not mass marketed, he says.

To build such a boat, Trahan knew it would be very demanding. Constructing a boat, especially the high-quality boats Trahan is known for, takes time, and lots of it.

One of the bigger boats, about a 27-foot by 10-foot wide version he did a number of years ago for $100,000, required 600 man hours to complete. Trahan says this is where most of the cost comes in, with the remaining cost structure in the hardware and aluminum, respectively. "The hardware is often two to three times the cost of aluminum," he says.

"I wanted to build them to where they're almost indestructible," Trahan says. When the word got out, someone put in an order.

The boats, most of which are used for close- to mid-offshore fishing of mainly speckled trout, are capable of traveling at high speeds in rough waters with a range of 50 to 60 miles per hour.

The prices of boats he has built range from about $10,000 to $100,000. He says the same boat he built for $100,000 a number of years ago would be about $130,000 today. While these prices do include installation of the motor, they do not include the cost of the motor or trailer, neither of which Trahan sells.

Because they are custom-built to customers' specifications, each boat presents a new challenge, Trahan says. "If it's within range of their budget, we can put just
about anything on it," he says. Some of the amenities can include a sleeping quarters and dinette in the cabin, a depth sounder, a cellular phone, live well, tackle cabinets and built-in electronics box.

No two boats are ever alike. Factors such as how fast the customer wants the boat to go, what type of fish he'll pursue, how far out he will travel and the type of floor configuration he wants all play a role in the design. "I take those factors and his personality and try to build something around it," Trahan says.

Trahan says instinct plays a major part in coming up with what will please the customer. He says it's an art, and he compares it to the vision of an artist. "It's something you feel," he says. "It's like a painting."

Those who have either purchased Trahan's boats or are familiar with them saying he has taken his craft to the next level. In fact, some fishing enthusiasts say Trahan's boats are the finest aluminum boats on the entire Gulf Coast.

All of the boats are what most people would call trailer boats," Trahan says. That means they are easily mobilized and kept at home, usually indoors or under cover. "They're rather small for the dollar," Trahan admits. "It's just that there's so much packed into a small item."

The pickup in Aluminum Products' business coupled with an improving economy has made it a real struggle for Trahan to build even one boat a year. He doesn't have any on order and says the turnaround time could be as much as two years. "It's very difficult to try to squeeze a boat in," Trahan says. Since completing his last boat—he builds them at Aluminum Products, on the river road less than a mile south of Milton—he is now playing catch up on his Aluminum Products work, some of which had been put aside to finish the boat.

Even though the economy has improved and more people may be able to afford the boats, Trahan acknowledges that there isn't much of a market for the types of boats he constructs. "I don't sell as many boats as a lot of other people... There's not a big market at all."

"Most of the time when I do the boats, I'm by myself. I could not hire somebody, give them a set of drawings and say, 'Here, work.' It's just not that easy," Trahan says that even the best equipment or machinery is of little value when it comes to this business. "On a boat, there's nothing square. Everything is done by hand," he says.

Trahan is still very interested in building more boats, even though he insists it is not a big money-making proposition. In the beginning, he wanted only a finished product and a market. Now, what drives him to continue is closely related to his initial interest—the rewarding aspect of selling a finished product.

Says Trahan: "Twenty years down the road people still remember you by that product. When you see it in the water, there's a lot of satisfaction in that. Knowing it's going to be around a long time, it makes you feel good."