St. Louis Belle nears completion

By Bill Brown
Business Writer

JENNINGS — The first World War — the one that was to end all wars, remember? — had not started, when G.B. Zigler staked out a place for himself on the Mermanteau River, five miles east of Jennings, and began to build boats and barges.

The year was 1913. Zigler added a machine shop to the yard, and included tug boats to his production line. He recognized that Acadians were artisans when it came to building seaworthy ships.

The company stayed in the Zigler family until the mid-sixties, when it was purchased by Lee Vaccari and George Conner. In 1974 Vaccari bought Conner's interest in the company and operated it until his death in 1978.

In 1980 the holdings of the Lee Vaccari estate were brought under the Leevac name. The company was operated in trust for Vaccari's heirs until 1989, at

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The St. Louis Belle, above left, was a 280-foot paddle-wheeler that cruised the mighty Mississippi in the Civil War era. The $7 million replica vessel under construction will be certified to carry 1500 passengers. At Leevac Shipyard, David Richard, above, welds on the paddle wheel cover. Elisha Lewis, at far left, stands guard for welder, in the propeller hole, at left, Nathaniel Lampkin and Luther Clement weld a piece that will hold the shaft.
St. Louis Belle

which time three of the children assumed management of the firm.

With the change, all of the holdings were placed under the CARI Corporation. Jon Vaccari became chairman of the board, Christian Vaccari, president and chief operating officer and Nori Vaccari was named executive vice president.

Fifty years ago, the company has continued to grow on the reputation started by G.B. Zigler and the traditions of quality craftsmanship. Leevac vessels are constructed from three-sixteenths to three-quarter inch steel, and are recognized worldwide for their endurance. The Leevac name originated in the waters of the oil industry, but more lately, excursion craft, built by the company have received accolades.

W. Fred Stokes, who’s been with the company 13 years, was named president in 1989. He has been instrumental in leading the company into diversified ship building endeavors, such as the St. Louis Belle now nearing completion at the shipyard. The 280 foot excursion-diner ship is a replica of the Civil War era paddle-wheelers that cruised the Mississippi. The vessel, certified to carry 1,356 passengers, is being constructed at an estimated cost of $7 million. It will have three enclosed decks and an elevator.

The concept of building a separate power unit and excursion barge, and integrating the two so that it would be almost impossible to identify as such, was developed four years ago, he explained.

"There are sound reasons for doing this," Burrell stated. "In case of repairs, it would be easier to dry-dock an 800-foot power unit or a 194-foot barge than a single 280-foot vessel."

Burrell added that in the event of a fire, which in all likelihood would start in the power unit or the galley (which will be in the power unit), the two sections can easily be separated, isolating passengers from a fire.

The Belle of St. Louis is being built for Gateway Riverboat Cruises, a company from St. Louis. They own four excursion boats, and "The Belle" will become the flagship of their fleet. One ship, "The President," will be transferred to Iowa and operated as a gambling vessel.

Leevac will also build a second ship for Gateway’s company, Gateway Clipper Fleet, headquartered in Pittsburgh. This ship, identical to "The Belle," is expected to be used in Rock Island, Illinois.

Burrell said, "The strongest market in our business today is for the oil industry. We are designing vessels that are being built for the oil industry."

The company built two boat buildings in 1988. Another vessel, a 200-foot supply boat, was built in 1985 and another was built in 1982. That boat was sold in 1985. Another vessel, a 200-foot supply boat was started in 1982 and 10 percent of it was constructed. A contract was signed seven years (2,764 days) later to complete the plant and sell the launch.

That vessel, the Cape Haterras, a 3000 hp supply boat was delivered to Sea Mar Operators of Lafayette a few days ago, on Dec. 27. Gulf service boats were converted to excursion, fishing and surveillance vessels, used to assist the Coast Guard. A 90-foot tour boat was converted for use in Minnesota and others converted for use in Minnesota and Cleveland, Ohio.

With the workforce back to 160 employees, most from Acadia and Jefferson Davis parishes, Leevac has streamlined its methods by acquiring CAD-CAM drafting and design capabilities.

Burrell does not see a quick return to new construction in the industry. He expects to see more repairs and renovations.

"But," he says, "at least now you hear talk about building new boats. That's encouraging." Burrell believes that new construction will begin when operators start receiving $1,000 more a day for their vessels. Operators are receiving an average of $3,900 per day now for supply boats of this size. The average supply boat is 185 feet in length and costs approximately $4 million to construct.

"What happens in 1991 will determine what that might happen," he said. He foresees growth in excursion boat building and Stokes agrees with these assessments.

"Right now there is too much uncertainty in the oil industry for financial institutions to lend money in this area. Remember, a lot of banks were burned, not that long ago," he pointed out. He said he is confident that the oil industry will be back, "it will just take some time," he says.

With a staff consisting of Operations Manager Terry Lee, Engineering Manager David Hinte, Burrell, Purchasing Manager Jeryl Bertrand, Personnel Manager Pat Guidry and Accounting Manager Sharon Taylor, there is a cumulative total of 118 years of experience filling key positions.