

Sister Ships

Blount siblings carry on their father's legacy.



Blount Boats is known for building quality passenger vessels.

By DALE K. DUPONT,
CORRESPONDENT

Capt. Luther H. Blount is a tough act to follow. The engineer, innovator, shipbuilder and cruise operator was the personification of **Blount Boats**.

Nearly three years after his death at age 90, his spirit is quite tangible.

"He's still around," said Julie Blount. She and her sisters, Nancy Blount and Marcia Blount, now run the Warren, R.I., business founded over 60 years and 300 boats ago.

"I'm always saying when I'm making a decision, 'What would Dad have done?'" Nancy said. "I think he'd be surprised and thrilled. He always thought nobody could do it as well as he did."

The three are determined to carry on his legacy and build a solid reputation of their own for building ferries, water taxis and other workboats.

They're doing some things a bit differently than their father, such as putting more emphasis on marketing. But they're also trying to heed his lessons, perpetuating his business tradition in other areas. "Dad always made sure he paid his vendors on a timely basis," Marcia said.

Another piece of his advice has stuck with Nancy. "My father always used to say, 'Never say no, always say maybe,'" she said.

Customers have noticed the subtle changes. "They're more open to different things now," said Capt. Mike Borgstrom, president, **Wendella Sightseeing Boats**, Chicago, whose new 89'9" x 30' x 7'3" excursion boat *Wendella* was built by Blount. "They seem to be more aggressive in going out and getting business."

But tradition is a plus, too. "One of the reasons

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we were attracted to Blount is that it is a family operated business just like mine,” Borgstrom said. “They build a tremendous boat.”

The Blount sisters grew up in the shipyard. Their playground was between the house and the boatyard’s office. They were always involved in the business, whether participating in family discussions or out on boats their father built.

“I’m not sure we knew we were going to be running the companies,” Marcia said. But their career paths eventually brought each of them back to the family business.

Marcia, 61, president and chief financial officer, is a certified public accountant who worked for a large accounting firm. She returned to the company full time after her dad died in September 2006.

Nancy, 57, is vice president of the yard and also heads up **American Canadian Caribbean Line**, the small ship line their father built. She’s worked in the business for 30 years, leaving briefly in the ‘70s to work in advertising. She came back as vice president of the cruise line and eight years later, her dad made her president.



Delivered last year, the *Cayo Largo*, a 165'x45' passenger/cargo ferry, was named one of *WorkBoat's* 2008 Significant Boats.

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Julie, 55, is the company’s executive vice president and human resources manager. She’s been with the business 21 years after working in the jewelry industry in New York City. She wanted to launch her own jewelry making business, but the plan was derailed by the

souring economy in the late ‘80s. Their older brother is a commercial fisherman, and another sister is a teacher.

ALL IN THE FAMILY

Following Luther’s death, they received inquiries about possibly selling all or parts of the business. “We told them we wanted to remain a family-owned company,” Marcia said.

“I think there was some question as to how we would all get along,” Nancy said. “Everyone was surprised. We all get along very well.”

Research shows that succession from father to daughters “is the easiest succession of all,” said Joseph Astrachan, executive director of the **Cox Family Enterprise Center**, Kennesaw, Ga., and an expert on family business. Women who own businesses together tend to be less competitive with each other than men.

Multigenerational businesses that do well are the exception. The second generation has a 30 percent chance of success, and the odds get even longer for later generations, he said.

Being raised in the business doesn’t guarantee success either. “It’s really more an issue of the family dynamic,”

THE FATHER OF SMALL CRUISE SHIPS

Founded in 1949 by Capt. Luther H. Blount, **Blount Marine’s** first boat was a 77’ steel catamaran. The Warren, R.I., yard, now busy working on vessel No. 329, built the famous *Miss Liberty* for New York’s **Circle Line** and the innovative stern trawler *Narragansett*. Blount received

patents for retractable pilothouse and bow ramp ship designs, adjustable-pitch props, water conserving marine toilets, and more.

Blount operated dinner boats and the small-ship, U.S.-flag sister company **American Canadian Caribbean Line**. He was “one of the biggest contributors to the American-flag cruise ship fleet,” said Lawrence Dessler, executive director of the **Niche Cruise Marketing Alliance**, whose members include small cruise lines. “He was probably the father of the industry in a lot of ways.”

Since Luther’s death in 2006, three of his daughters have been running the shipyard, now called **Blount Boats**. Recent deliveries include the *Cayo Largo*, a 165'x45' passenger and cargo ferry, one of the latest for service in Puerto Rico, and *Southside*, the second of two 101'x39' passenger/vehicle ferries for **South Ferry Co.**, Shelter Island, N.Y. — *D.K. DuPont*



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Capt. Luther H. Blount

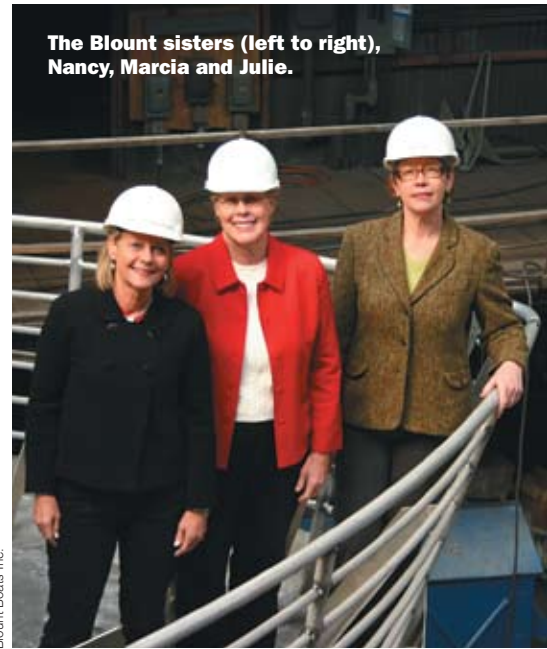
he said. If family members don't like being around each other, the business won't succeed no matter how well it's doing.

The Blounts make big decisions together. "We don't have any major disagreements," Nancy said. "The few that we have been resolved by just having a meeting."

Still, there are plenty of challenges,

such as keeping the order book full. Annual production depends on the size of each vessel. "The one good thing, especially in this economy, is we have no debt," Marcia said.

Blount has several boats under way and has recently hired six more people to bring the yard's total workforce to 58. They're looking for more aluminum welders and are interested in taking



The Blount sisters (left to right), Nancy, Marcia and Julie.

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advantage of the Maritime Administration's beefed-up grant program for small shipyards.

"The shipyard is much, much busier than it's been in a long, long time," Marcia said.

Among Blount's recent deliveries was the 101'x39' passenger/vehicle ferry *Southside* to South Ferry Co. in February. The boat, which makes the run between Shelter Island and the South Fork of Long Island, N.Y., is a sistership to the *Sunrise*, which Blount delivered in 2002.

BUILDING KNOW-HOW

Capt. Bill Clark, who co-owns South Ferry with his brother Cliff, talked to different people at the yard before they signed the contract. "The thing that really impressed us was that every single person we talked to seemed to have a tremendous depth of knowledge," he said. "They struck us as very competent and very interested in building our boat."

On the *Sunrise*, they received eight to 10 bids. "Blount at that time was not the low bidder," Clark said. "We just made a decision. We think this is the right place to build a boat. It's not always about the low bidder." They did not seek bids on the *Southside*.

"We want them to succeed, and given

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any kind of chance, they ought to do well. They're hands-on. They're just good to work with," Clark said. "I see them willing to try things. They're appreciative of the fact that it's a very competitive business. You can't stick your head in the sand and do everything the way your dad did it."

That said, Clark wishes he had known the elder Blount longer. "I certainly remember him riding to work at age 87 or 88 on his bicycle," he said. And at the first boat launching ceremony, Blount played his trombone.

Capt. Dave Anderson, general manager at **Fire Island Ferries**, Bay Shore, N.Y., was also a Luther Blount admirer. He first met Blount in 1984.

"We have a relationship with the family. They've always built a superla-

tive boat for us," said Anderson, who is expecting delivery of an 85', 382-passenger ferry from Blount this spring.

Dealing with the daughters is still

dealing with the family. So, what's different since the patriarch died? "You can't tell, which is a good thing," Anderson said.

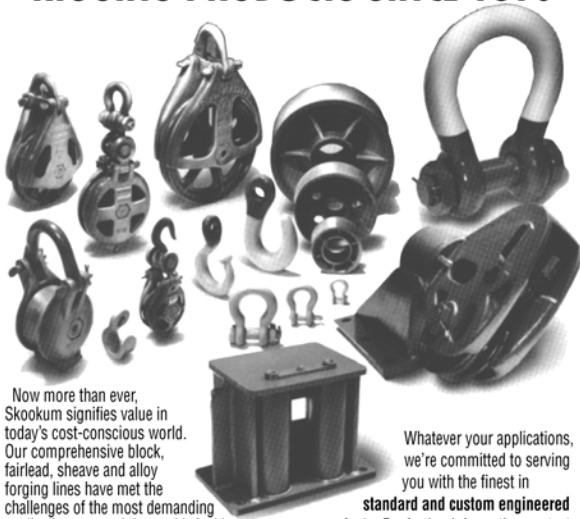


American Canadian Caribbean Line

The 84-passenger *Niagara Prince* is one of three boats operated by Blount's American Canadian Caribbean Line.

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