

OUR HERITAGE

He molded a family tradition

His desire for a new type of boat made Hudson a pioneer in Fiberglas

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BAYVIEW — When Willis Hudson began building glass fiber boats in the 1950s, he knew what his competition was saying about them.

They were still building wooden boats and warning their customers, "Those Fiberglas boats won't last. They'll break apart on you."

Willis took a hammer to a boat show. He beat on his Fiberglas boat with the hammer to show its toughness. Then he offered the tool to the crowd that gathered and suggested they ask some of the other boat builders if they could beat on the side of their wooden boats.

Nobody took him up on the offer, said his son, Rex Hudson. But they all got his point.

They got it well enough that Willis Hudson was able to make thousands of boats and pretty much retire in 1968 before he was even 50.

It was a long retirement. Willis passed away Jan. 26 at the age of 79.

Willis was in glass fiber boat building at the beginning.

"He claimed to have built the first molded Fiberglas boat in this country," Rex said at the offices of his own boat company, Shallow Sport.

A Life Story: Willis Hudson

Born: March 16, 1924, Abilene, Texas

Died: Jan. 26, 2004, Harlingen

Services: Arranged by Delta Funeral Directors, Brownsville

That was in 1952. There was another company in California working on Fiberglas boats at the same time, but they also used wooden parts.

"My dad developed the walk-through windshield," Rex said. "He was the first one to put a cushion on an Igloo ice chest.

"What a claim to fame,"

Rex added with a chuckle, "What a claim to fame. Now, everybody does it."

Willis was born March 16, 1924, in Abilene, the son of an executive for Standard Oil. It meant the family moved a lot.

By the time he was in junior high school, Willis' family moved to Houston. Willis and his buddies used to spend their free time on Galveston Bay. For \$5 a day, they could rent a rowboat and oars and get a bucket of bait.

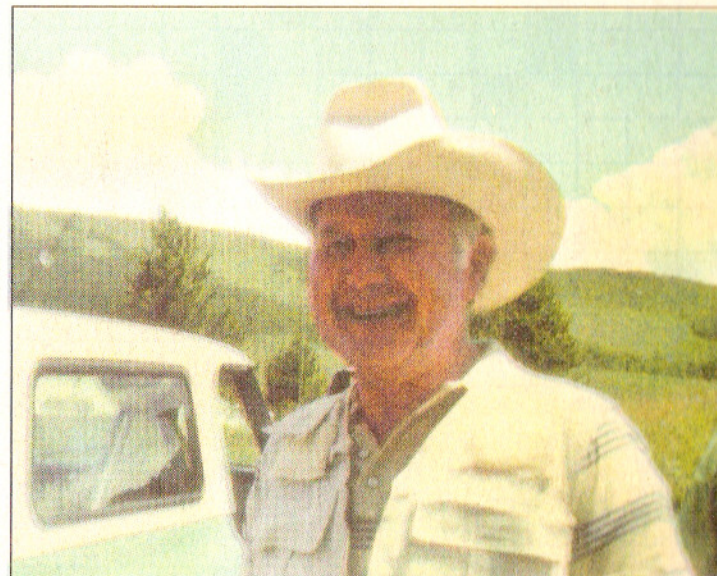
After service in World War II, Willis graduated from Rose Polytechnic Institute in Terra Haute, Ind., with a degree in engineering in 1948. That same year, he married his wife, Mackie. They stayed together for the next 55 years and raised three children: Rex, Maria and Barbara.

Willis didn't stay with his first employer, Union Carbide. He transferred him to Niagara Falls, N.Y. That was too cold for the Hudsons and they headed back to Texas.

Willis went to work for a company making corrugated Fiberglas roofing.

"That's where he began getting interested in Fiberglas," Rex said.

"I remember that first boat



Community photo

Willis Hudson during a trip to Colorado in 1984.

sitting in our garage," Rex said.

Rex said his father never really intended to be in the boat business. "He just figured that he could mold a boat out of Fiberglas," Rex said. "He did, and somebody saw it and they wanted one, too. That's how it all started."

Willis formed a boat company in 1954 called Glass Jet.

In those days, cars had a certain flair and Willis designed his boats the same way.

"It wasn't that big a boat — only 17 feet (long) — but it had these big ol' fins on the back like a Chevy," Rex said.

In the late 1950s, Willis went into a venture with Houston oilman John Mecom Sr. to make boats to ferry supplies to offshore oil rigs. At 45

feet long, they were the largest molded Fiberglas boats of their time, Rex said.

Willis formed Falcon Boats in the early 1960s. Within a few years, he was making five to six boats a week and had 40 employees.

"The secret of his success was that he was a prolific boat designer," Rex said.

Falcon made all types of boats for both saltwater and freshwater fishing.

"Several of them were really big hits over the years," Rex said.

In 1968, Willis sold Falcon Boats and retired to Bayview. He began fishing a lot in Mexico.

After a few years, he got bored and got into the boat dealership with a friend in Houston. Four to five years later, he got tired of selling boats and retired again, this time to South Padre Island. In the late 1970s, Willis got the itch again for city life and they moved back to Houston.

Like his father, Rex got into the boat business by accident.

"I never set out to be a boat builder," Rex said. "I was doing some boat repair out in my barn."

About 20 years ago, Rex



Community photo

Willis Hudson speeds across the water in Galveston during the 1960s in one of his glass fiber boats. Hudson's boat-building hobby made him a pioneer in building Fiberglass craft.

About 20 years ago, Rex decided to build his own scooter — a bay fishing boat with a flat deck and no gun-wales.

"I told him I didn't want to build a scooter that was flat bottomed," Rex said. "They were all flat-bottomed at the time."

A month later, Willis came down from Houston with a design in hand.

"I built the first one in my barn and it just went from there," Rex said. "People saw it and they said, 'Build me one.'"

One boat became 2,000 and now there are three barns out back, 15 employees and several designs made by Shallow Sport.

Willis and Mackie moved back to the Valley shortly after Shallow Sport was formed. But this time he spent his time fishing and hunting.

History will not repeat itself again. The next Hudson generation won't "accidentally" get into the boat business.

Rex's son, Weslee, is about to graduate from Texas A&M University.

"He can't wait to go into business with me," Rex said.