

# This tiny South Jersey town has built stunning boats for 60 years at Viking Yachts

7–8 minutes



BASS RIVER TOWNSHIP - At 4 p.m., the workday is over for the 1,500 or so craftsmen at the Viking Yachts boat works. The line of cars waiting to make a left out of the factory parking lot onto Route 9 is long enough to require a police officer to direct traffic.

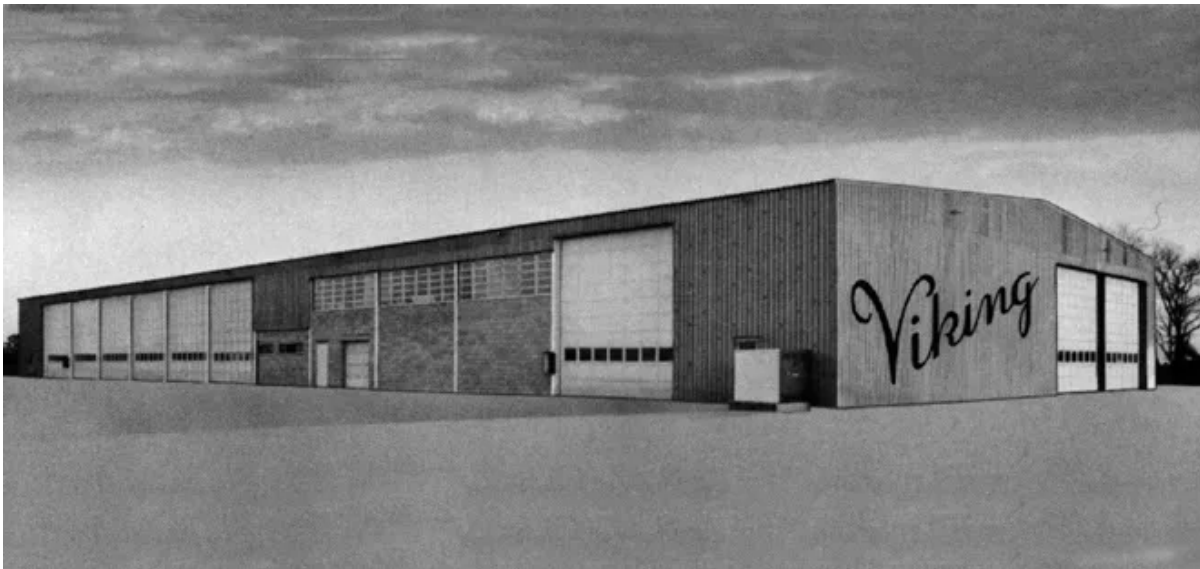
Of course, it wasn't always this way. Nothing rarely is. Greatness doesn't often start out great. Viking Yachts, now celebrating its 60th year in business, invested a ton of blood and sweat equity to summit the proverbial top of the luxury boat builder's mountain.

"We were the laughingstock of the industry. Originally, I didn't think we'd survive," recalls Rudy Dalinger, an 80-year-old German immigrant who hasn't shed his thick accent or long hair tied in a

ponytail — now silvery grey.

Dalinger, who is Viking's new product development manager, was one of the first craftsmen hired by Bill and Bob Healey in 1964 when the two brothers purchased the ailing Peterson-Viking boat company. Three years before, the Healeys had built a marina with a vision of adding condos to their spot on the Bass River in the Pinelands, an out-of-the-way place in the 1960s. It still very much is.

The condo plan did not pan out. Instead, they became boat builders.



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## **Building better boats**

The center of the boat building business then was Egg Harbor City. When the Healeys bought out Peterson-Viking they brought the company's boat fixtures north to their marina in New Gretna and set up in the dirt-floor warehouse that was used for storing boats. Then they went to work.

Dalinger was hired in September for \$2.10 an hour, five months after the acquisition. A carpenter by trade who built his own home and had formerly built hulls in Egg Harbor City, Dalinger worked

with an initial small crew of about a dozen boat builders. Their first boats were 37-foot wooden yachts with teak cockpits and hand-painted hulls.

Sometimes referred to as "brains and brawn," Bob Healey was the attorney and Bill Healey was the hands-on construction guy and a hard-nosed former marine. Bill was in there everyday, covered in sawdust with them. He was at the door to shake everyone's hand at the end of the day, too.

"We started with nothing. He'd keep asking us, 'what do we need to make it easier, to build a better boat,'" Dalinger said. "And he went out and got it. Table saws, routers, planes, sanders. They may have been second-hand or bought at auction, but they worked."

**Invited on the boat?** [Safety tips, advice for being invited back](#)



And that became the Viking Yacht modus operandi: to build a better boat everyday. They made it through the 1960s. The company's first major milestone came in 1971 when they launched a fiberglass 33-footer. The next year Viking made its industry mark with the 40-foot Sedan Convertible, which remained in production for 16 years, selling more than 600 models. Nobody was laughing at Viking anymore.



"We made our breakaway from Peterson-Viking then. Their boats had all been wooden. When we came out with the 40 footer, that really rocketed us up," said Pat Healey, Bill's son and the CEO and president of Viking Yachts.



**Boating safety:** [Hundreds of people die every year in boating accidents. Follow these 12 tips to stay safe](#)

Viking Yachts enjoyed smooth seas for most of the 1980s, bringing in top talent like Lonni Rutt at the end of the decade, who was building nuclear subs for a government contractor in Newport News, Virginia, before joining Viking Yachts. He was part of the core design team responsible for building the modern Viking sportfishing yachts beginning in the mid-1990s.

"They had just finished the first expansion, the first expansion of the buildings, what we call our old lines 2, 3 and 4. They had just added the beginnings of the mill." Rutt said.

## **Luxury tax flops**

Then Congress and the George H.W. Bush administration introduced a luxury tax in 1991, seeking to hit the rich with a 10% surcharge tax on purchases over \$100,000. The luxury-boat building business grounded on a shoal. Rather than create \$9 billion in tax revenue, the rich stopped buying, and the tax cost production workers their jobs.

In 1990, Viking sold 90 boats. When the tax went into effect, sales

dropped to 32. A year later, the company sold just 12 boats. Rutt and many of the craftsmen who worked at Viking were temporarily out of work.

Enter Bob Healey's talents. He took the fight to Washington, busing in unemployed craftsmen and got national attention on the issue by burning a boat on a barge in Narragansett Bay. Two years after the tax was introduced, it was canned by Congress and President Bill Clinton.

"I watched as my father had to lay off people that had been here 15, 20 years for something that was completely out of our control," Pat Healey said.

**Hook, Line & Sinker:**[Fishermen use ballyhoo to land Yellowfin tuna in Hudson Canyon](#)



By 1994, Viking Yachts was back on the ascent. Pat Healey, who was out on the front lines at the boat shows and winning at prestigious fishing tournaments, showcased a 55-footer in 1997 that sold 115 models in five years. The Healeys would soon vertically integrate their business.

**Wind in their sails**

Fast forward to today and they've has grown into eight different companies in several states that form the Viking Marine Group. Their subsidies include Princess Yachts America, Palm Beach Towers and Atlantic Marine Electronics — the latter two allows them to deliver a fully outfitted luxury craft. They've added another boat works called Valhalla just a few miles away in Egg Harbor City on the Mullica River.

All told, they employ 2,005 people. Their New Gretna headquarters has over 880,000 square feet of manufacturing space and production line nearly a quarter-mile long making boats from 38 to 90 feet. The Mullica River plant has 106,000 square feet of manufacturing space, and makes center consoles from 28- to 46-feet in length.

These are no modest watercraft. Prices can range anywhere from \$300,000 for a 28-foot Valhalla Bay boat to \$12.5 million for the 90-foot Viking.

**Strange catch:** [Fish falls from the sky, smashes Tesla car windshield in Atlantic Highlands](#)



Since 1964, they've sold 5,500 boats. Bob has since passed away and Bill is retired. The future of the company lies in the hands of

Pat and his three adult children. And they're in it for the long haul.

"We're all in. Totally committed," Pat Healey said.

**Hook, Line & Sinker:** [Bluefin tuna, golden tilefish landed in the deep offshore](#)

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