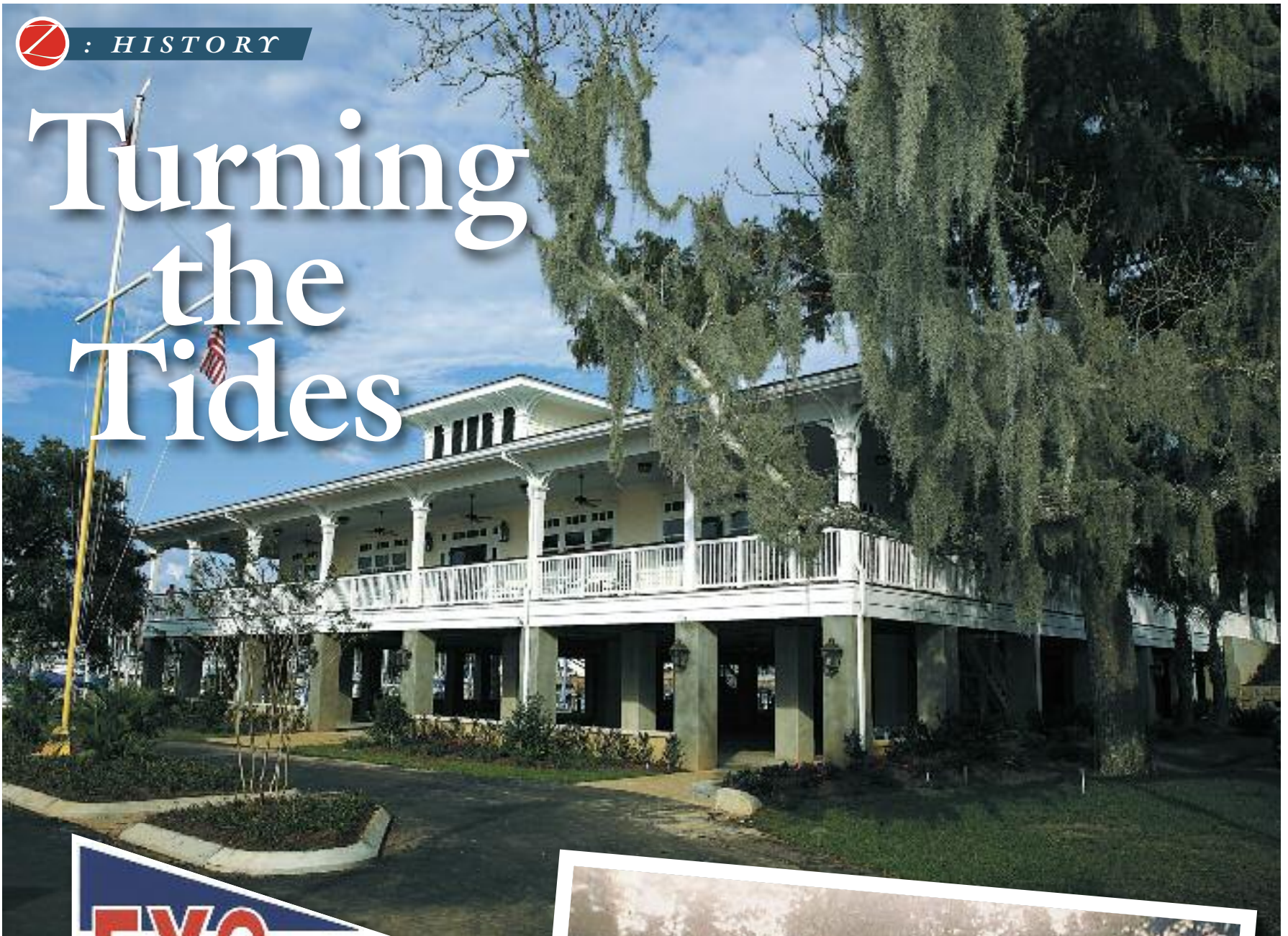




: HISTORY

Turning the Tides



Fairhope Yacht Club
opens its new clubhouse
on the third anniversary
of Hurricane Katrina

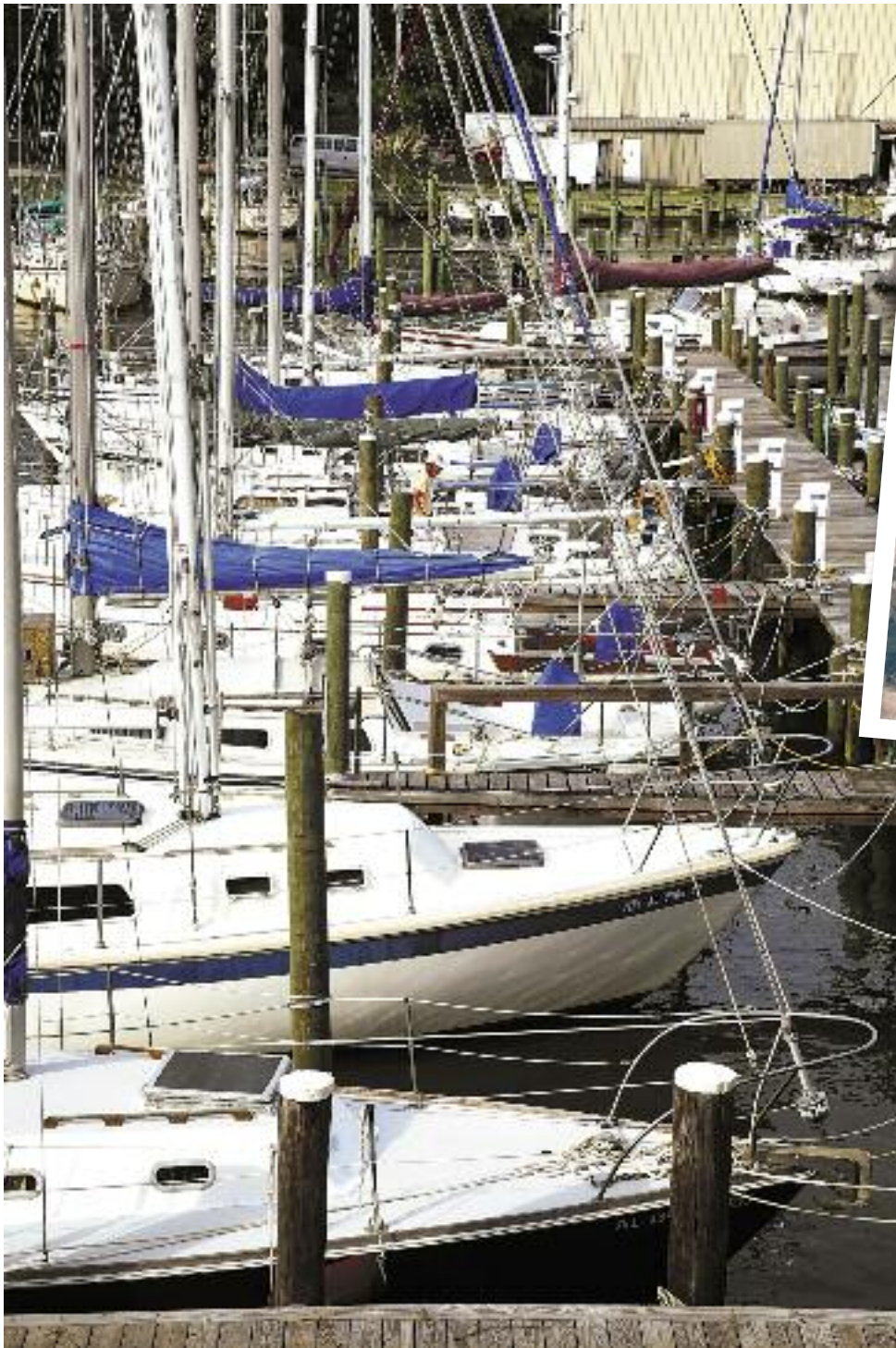


▲ The old clubhouse shown in the bottom photo from the 1940s was destroyed during Katrina, giving way to the stately plantation-style structure shown at top.

By **MIKE ROSSETTI**

Photography by **COURTLAND W. RICHARDS**

Historic photos courtesy of **BOB BUNG COLLECTION**



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: First Commodore Otto Wadewitz is shown inspecting the FYC Star Fleet in the early 40s; Wadewitz's 49.5-foot cruiser, *Rex*, pictured in 1945; Today, sailboats fill the slips at the club's harbor.

*Editor's Note – references to the founding of the Fairhope Yacht Club, and the three paragraphs that follow, were summarized from Otto Wadewitz and the Founding of the Fairhope Yacht Club, with permission of the author, Louis Zadnichek II.

It is August 29, 2005, and Hurricane Katrina is ravaging the Mississippi Gulf Coast and the city of New Orleans, causing nearly 2,000 deaths and more than \$80 billion in property damage, making it one of the deadliest (and the costliest) natural disasters in United States history.

Approximately 200 miles to the east, the dangerous right side of the storm is spewing between 12 and 16 feet of storm surge into Mobile Bay at high tide and is pounding both its eastern and western shores. Homes are flooded and destroyed, and streets are completely inundated as south Alabama residents are shocked by the force of a storm that made landfall so far to their west.

At the foot of Volanta Avenue, the Fairhope Yacht Club is taking the beating just as hard as any other business or residence along Mobile Bay. Many boats are sunk. The storm surge is causing boats to float up on top of

each other and on top of pilings, essentially impaling them. Boats are floating completely across Fly Creek and up onto the bank, some as much as 20 or 30 feet up on the shore. Most of all, the clubhouse is completely destroyed.

“It was incomprehensible that something like this could happen, and when it did happen, everyone was stunned,” says Louis Zadnichek, a senior equity member at the club. “The club had flooded before, but it was just six inches or so – a big nuisance. But that structure had been built in various phases, and it was something like 50

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◀ A wraparound veranda offers incredible views of Mobile Bay and the entrance to Fly Creek.

or 60 years that the club had been there – three generations and nothing like this had ever happened before. The water just blew through the building. You’d drive down there, and the place was just shattered.”

Barbara Brown, commodore at the time of Katrina, took a four-month leave of absence from work so she could be at the club every day. Days were spent maintaining contact with city officials, health department officials and insurance adjusters; working with volunteers to clean up, salvage, repair, replace and rebuild the facilities; laying the framework to begin the rebuilding process including establishing a building committee and finance committee; creating a temporary structure for meetings, parties and general fellowship; and maybe most importantly, building a strong camaraderie amongst members who had previously not known each other or had not actively been involved in club activities.

With the help of entertainment committee chair Sarah Johnston-Cox, the club provided ongoing social events during the three years of rebuilding, mainly utilizing the old boat barn, which had been converted to a temporary clubhouse. The barn hosted many cookouts and parties during that time, basically utilizing a single

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power pole, spigot and barbecue grills.

“That barn brought people together,” Brown said. “We salvaged wood that had washed up during the storm, sorted it, and had work parties. Members put windows in,

helped with the electricity, and nailed down the hardwood floors. It was a fun place to be, to help build. It was a wonderful opportunity for people to come together.”

That unity, Brown says, is what makes the club so special. As important as the new clubhouse is, both to the yacht club and to Fairhope and the Eastern Shore, she says it is the people within the club that make it the great organization that it is, and the devastation brought on by Katrina and the three years of rebuilding – and bonding – that followed have only served to emphasize that point.

A landmark to the Eastern Shore in many ways, the Fairhope Yacht Club was formally incorporated on May 5, 1942, by founding members Otto Wadewitz, the club’s first commodore, Herbert Forster, Marvin Berglin, Robert Faulkenbery, Dr. C.J. Godard, Rudolph Tuveson, Homer Vincent, Walter Forster, John Greggs, Roy Meyers and L.W. Schnitzer. The Wadewitz, Godard and Berglin families donated parcels of waterfront property on both sides of Bayou Volanta to the new club and helped to ensure that future generations of boaters would enjoy the benefits of membership to the yacht club.

The club’s first regatta was held in September of the



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◀ Photos of past commodores adorn the walls in the club’s ballroom.

following year, and in 1944 the Fairhope Yacht Club became the 11th member of the Gulf Yachting Association. Membership reached 225 that year and fundraising began to build a new clubhouse, one that was never constructed due to wartime manpower and material shortages.

An old fish house, built of Fairhope clay tile and measuring 10-feet by 12-feet served as the first clubhouse. Over time, the fish house was enlarged several times, eventually adding areas that would become a ballroom, a bar and a main dining room.

During this time, it was the membership’s boundless enthusiasm for boating and recreation, as well as the hard work and passion of many people that fostered the yacht club’s growth and furthered it toward the proud day of opening its new clubhouse last month.

Zadnichek gives a large amount of credit to Tom Yeager, commodore from 2006-07, and says Yeager’s role in the building of the new clubhouse is comparable to the effort put forth by the founding members when they initially created the organization.

“Past Commodore Tom Yeager is being favorably compared to founding Commodore Otto Wadewitz,” Zadnichek said, “as without Tom’s leadership, devotion,

attention to detail and critical focus upon rebuilding this organization, it might not have happened.”

If it had not happened, the Eastern Shore could have lost one of the elements that make it so unique, he said.

“The yacht club means a great deal to the community,” Zadnichek said. “It’s a landmark, and Fairhope is only a little over 100 years old. So the yacht club has been around for some 65 years. Fairhope’s never really had a country club, although they had a golf club back in the 40s. But the Fairhope Yacht Club has been the social bastion of Fairhope and the Eastern Shore, second only to the Grand Hotel.”

In addition to being a landmark, the yacht club provides so much more to the community, says current Commodore Erik Schmitz, including hosting numerous regattas for charities over the years, holding sailing camps for juniors, which are available to members and non-members, and serving the local area in many other ways.

The junior program has proven extremely popular and provides children with an excellent learning opportunity and a great life experience – one that helps them develop strength and confidence, says Tony Chavers, chairman of the board for the club.

“When you watch them learning the skills involved in sailing, you can really see a sense of independence and confidence that shows in their faces,” he said. “They’re in control, and you can see the confidence as they’re able to do it themselves – sail a boat.”

Schmitz says the new clubhouse, and the fact that they can utilize the boathouse as it was originally intended, offers much more flexibility in scheduling club functions and other kinds of events.

“The thing that this new building affords us over the old building is the availability to have different events inside here without affecting the bar or ballroom,” he said. “And there are ways that you can come in here and go straight to the dining room without going through the meeting room or bar. It’s much more efficiently laid out than the old building.”

The club opened the doors to the new clubhouse on Friday, Aug. 29, intentionally coinciding with the third anniversary of Katrina. Schmitz estimated more than 1,000 people passed through the club during the weekend, whether for the Dedication Ceremony that Friday evening, or on Saturday, Aug. 30, when the club opened the dining room to two seatings, serving more than 450 dinners.

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It's certainly a big change from the past three years, and it will take a while for any thoughts of the yacht club to be directly tied to the new building. But what hasn't changed is the family feel of the club and the fact that so many members are second or third generation members, Yeager said.

"When you think about it, it was so good when it started, and it hasn't really changed," he said. "It's just gotten better. When we have a regatta down here, it's all volunteers that run the committees at the club, and it takes a ton of volunteers to run a regatta. The member interaction and the social atmosphere are what make the club."

That social atmosphere and how apparent it is that everyone has such a good time just being there would explain the club's waiting list for membership, and the fact that even after the old clubhouse was destroyed during Katrina, the club lost less than 10 percent of its members.

"When you're a part of it, it just gets in your blood," Yeager said. "It's really an incredible experience, being a part of a yacht club. A lot of people think it's a rich man's club, but the club owns 36 boats and if you know how to sail, you get to use those boats. You don't have to have a boat to be able to race and sail and participate."

Zadnichek said he feels the same way, especially about the sentiment that the club "gets into your blood." His mother's family has been involved with the Yacht Club since it was founded, and it is obviously very close to his heart.

"I was carried into the yacht club in my mother's arms when I was six months old, and I just turned 62," he said. "So I have 61-and-a-half years direct connection to the Fairhope Yacht Club. I had my 12th birthday party



► "The island" serves as the site of the club's swimming pool and is surrounded by numerous boat slips.

there and my 62nd birthday party there, and there have been a lot of changes during those 50 years.

"We have grandchildren, a lot of members that are dynastic, and memberships have been handed down through the family. The club has been a Mecca for the sailors, a Mecca for the society, and it's been all things to all people. We certainly expect that will be the same in the future." 