

# A Wonderful Adventure

Eldean Shipyard celebrates 50 years of serving boaters in Holland, Michigan. *by Chuck Warren*

**F**or any business, 50 years of continuous operation is an impressive feat. But for a family operation, that anniversary is full of reflection on a half-century of fond memories, difficult times and incredible milestones.

For the Eldean family in Holland, Michigan, 2023 marks the 50th anniversary of the founding of their namesake marina — Eldean Shipyard.

Located on the southwestern shore of West Michigan's Lake Macatawa, Eldean Shipyard, or "Eldean" to most area locals, sits near the end of South Shore Drive about five miles west of downtown Holland.

On the water, Eldean Shipyard is the first full-service marina boaters encounter when entering Holland harbor and Lake Macatawa. The marina's convenient location provides boaters with easy access to Lake Michigan and the beautiful West Michigan lakeshore.

The property has been the site of a marine business since the Jesiek brothers moved from Grand Rapids to the lakeshore in 1905 and began constructing small boats on the Lake Macatawa waterfront. It is one of the oldest active boatyards in the United States. Originally operated by brothers Joseph and Otto Jesiek, the facility was used to build a wide variety of watercraft, including hydroplanes, sailboats, launches and yachts. After the end of World War II, the Jesiek brothers turned their focus to expanding the marina operations by offering expanded service, storage and even new boat sales.

When Jesiek Brothers Shipyard was offered for sale in 1973, Chicago native Herb Eldean, Jr. was sent to facilitate the purchase for a group of investors. However, when the original investors pulled out of the deal, Herb and his brother, Roger, found the backing they needed to buy it themselves.

## A new opportunity

The Eldean brothers had a reputation in Chicago as a couple of enterprising, hard-working men. Their father, Herb Eldean Sr., founded the Monroe Street Harbor and mooring field on the Chicago waterfront where he and the boys worked out of a small shack at the nearby yacht club. Herb Sr. provided water taxi and grocery delivery services to the yachts that anchored in the harbor. As he saw the need increase, he began adding mooring buoys to accommodate more visiting vessels.

The two boys often came up with their own enterprises. At 8 years old, Herb Jr. caught and sold perch from the pier. By the age of 12, Herb Jr. and Roger were running a launch around the harbor as a water taxi to ferry people in from, or out to, their moored vessels.

By the age of 24, Herb Jr. was appointed the Federal Harbormaster for Monroe Street Harbor and, shortly after, he became the first non-member of the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary to be awarded its Certificate of Merit in recognition of the lives and property he had directly protected or saved.

When the City of Chicago decided to purchase the mooring field equipment from the Eldean family, Herb Jr. and Roger found themselves in search of a new opportunity. With the purchase of Jesiek Brother's operation, a new chapter began with the launch of Eldean Shipyard.

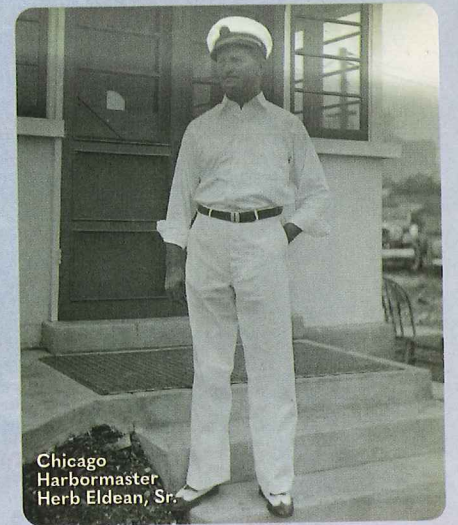
## Growing up at a growing business

At 70 years old, the property was in need of repair. Early renovations and improvements included upgrades to many of the wooden storage barns. Eldean Shipyard was one of the first marine facilities in the Midwest to provide heated storage, which also created a way to keep its staff employed year-round.

The marina also included a small,



Aerial of Eldean Shipyard on Lake Macatawa in the 1970s



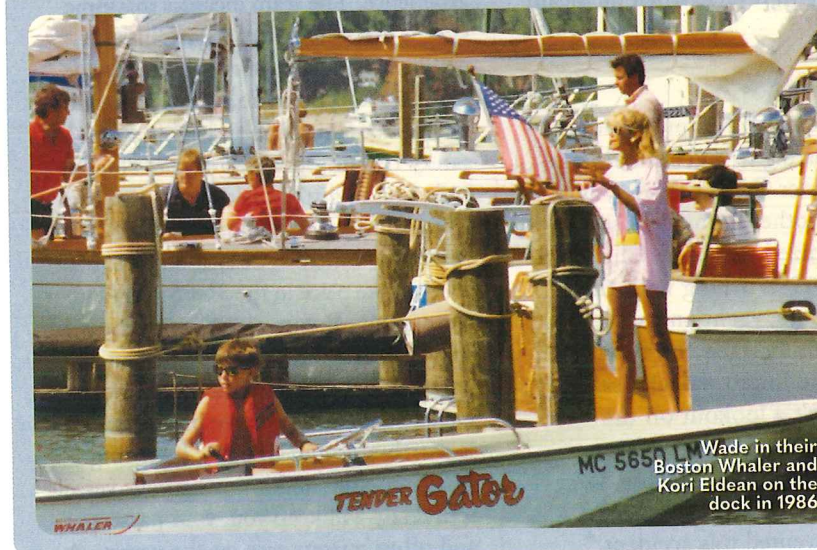
Chicago Harbormaster Herb Eldean, Sr.



Bill White (left) and Herb Eldean Jr. (right)



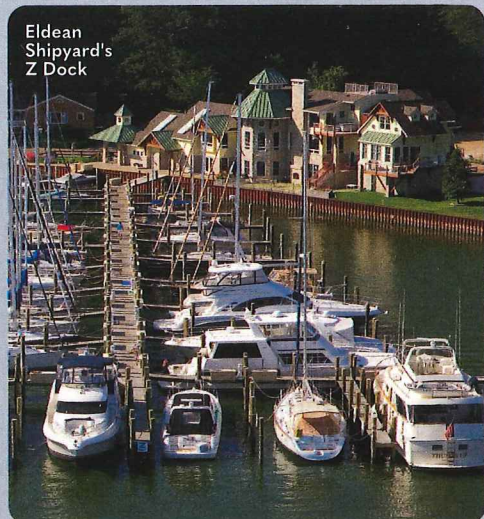
Brothers Roger (left) and Herb Jr. (right) on HERO, Monroe Street Harbor, Chicago



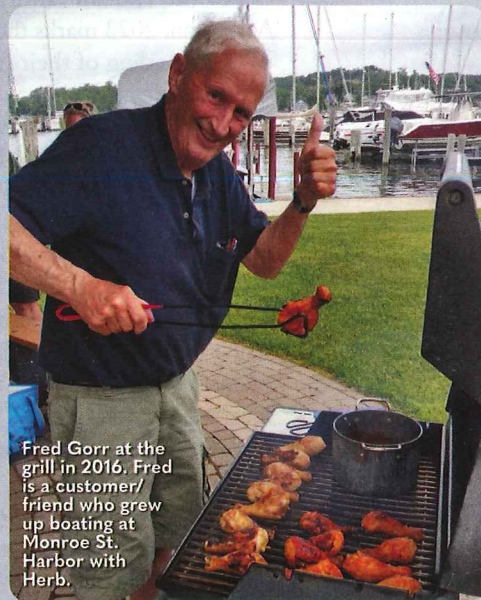
Wade in their Boston Whaler and Kori Eldean on the dock in 1986



Wade on his 13 foot Whaler in 1986



Kris, Herb, Wade and Patricia Eldean in 2016



Fred Gorr at the grill in 2016. Fred is a customer/friend who grew up boating at Monroe St. Harbor with Herb.



Pool in 2010



D & E Dock Party event in 2010

single-story diner called The Galley, originally built to feed the shipbuilders during World War II. When The Galley closed down in 1984, Herb's wife, Pat, who taught cooking classes for years, decided to expand and remodel the restaurant. In 1985, she opened a three-story waterfront restaurant called The Sandpiper.

Pat's excellent cooking and attention to detail quickly made the establishment a local favorite and, in 1997, the restaurant underwent another makeover. With a new theme and menu, the restaurant reopened as The Piper, feeding locals and visitors until Pat retired in 2015.

The Sandpiper was also the first source of employment for Pat and Herb Eldean's son, Wade, who has been involved in the marina operations since he was 11 years old. His first job was cleaning the restaurant's bathrooms.

"I've heard other people describe growing up in a marina as a terrible experience," Wade says. "I don't know what they went through, but I thought it was great!"

The Eldean family lived across the street from the marina and Wade spent most of his time playing or working on the waterfront. Punishment for any childhood infractions was simple.

"When I was in trouble, I wasn't allowed to cross the road to the marina," Wade says.

With a 300-slip marina as a playground, Wade has endless childhood stories that revolve around the boatyard. Pilings became diving boards and the marina waters were the pool. An event once led to stitches in his tongue, and a sudden storm led to a frightening rescue out on an angry Lake Michigan.

Wade's early responsibilities encompassed everything from working in the ship's store, to assisting with winter haul-out and spring launch, to becoming a captain and delivering boats throughout the Great Lakes and out to the East Coast. After graduating college with an MBA, Wade's self-described role at the marina became "whatever it takes," or "constant improvement."

### The next chapter

Several years ago, Wade assumed the role of Eldean Shipyard president and now oversees all marina operations. With Herb Eldean's passing on May 9, 2022, at the age of 80, a new generation is at the helm of the shipyard.

Over the years, the shipyard has seen a great number of improvements and innovations, replacing the old, wooden buildings with insulated structures and adding solar panels to reduce the marina's carbon footprint. The Eldean crew kept watch for opportunities to expand the marina, purchasing nearby waterfront as it became available and increasing the number of slips from 140 to more than 310.

The marina has also added seven vacation rental properties in prime locations throughout the property and offers access to chargers for electric cars.

Today, Eldean Shipyard has 35- and 75-ton travel lifts, a service facility, an extensive parts department and a well-provisioned ship's store. Eldean also has the closest fuel dock and pump-out station to the Holland channel on Lake Macatawa. Slip customers enjoy beautiful restrooms and shower facilities, two laundries, a clubhouse with a swimming pool and jacuzzi, and playgrounds and picnic areas for families and kids.

Eldean Shipyard has also received a variety of awards, including the very first "Marina of the Year" award presented by *Marina Dock Age* magazine. Remodeling efforts won the American Buildings Company's "Building Design" award, and the marina has won the "Holland Area Beautiful Award" three times. The shipyard has also been repeatedly certified as a Michigan Clean Marina.

Wade, his wife, Kris, and his mom, Pat, have plans to celebrate the marina's 50th anniversary with several events this year, including a Memorial Day party complete with a live band. Although the Eldean family usually cooks for such events, this time there will be catered food.

"We're going to invite past employees who have retired or moved on, and try to bring back a lot of former customers who may have retired from boating," Wade says.

The Eldean family hopes to make the marina's 50th anniversary a day to remember.

While once talking about moving from Chicago to the then-sleepy town of Holland in 1973, Herb Eldean was once quoted as saying, "we weren't very familiar with the community, but we decided to take a chance. It has turned out to be a wonderful adventure." ★