

Paxson St. Clair – Cobalt Boats

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

The beautiful boat gleams in the sunlight as the owners enjoy the thrill of skimming across the water. Not only are they enjoying a beautiful boat, they are wearing fashionable clothing and preparing to enjoy a high quality vintage wine. Remarkably, the boat, the sportswear, and the wine all bear the same name: Cobalt. This is today's Kansas Profile.

Paxson St. Clair is CEO and co-owner of Cobalt Boats, one of the nation's leading boatmakers. His brother-in-law Sean Callan is company president. Paxson's father, Pack St. Clair, grew up at Independence and enjoyed boating at Grand Lake in Oklahoma with his father. After college, Pack and a friend started building boats.

In 1969, Pack went to a big marine industry trade show in Chicago. He didn't sell a single boat or sign up a single dealer, but he came back with an idea. There were big companies selling mass-produced boats, but Pack saw an opportunity to target the high end of the marketplace. Essentially, he asked: What if we were to produce a super high quality, high-value boat?

Pack came back to Kansas to put his idea to work. Then he had to find prospective boat owners who were willing to pay extra. It was a hard sell at first, but then a dealer in San Francisco gave them a try. The reaction from boat owners was so positive that business began to build.

In 1970, Cobalt Boats moved to the closed Standard Oil Refinery in Neodesha. At that point, the company had twenty-plus employees. Today, Cobalt Boats employs more than 500 people and sells boats from coast-to-coast and around the world. Wow. Neodesha is a rural community of 2,652 people. Now, that's rural.

Paxson St. Clair joined the company in 1989 and became CEO in 2007. His father Pack is in the plant each week but not as involved in day-to-day operations.

Today the company's product line includes various types of luxury boats, from 20 foot bowriders up to 32 foot cruisers. Boats are sold through a network of dealers around the nation and around the globe. Dealers can be found in 32 different nations, from Australia to the United Kingdom.

"I travel to lots of boat shows," Paxson St. Clair said. "People ask me where the boats are made. When I tell them Kansas, they think I'm joking." And what does Paxson think about that?

"We could not build these boats anywhere else," Paxson said. "The people, the work ethic, and the pride they have in being the best is something that we don't think can be duplicated anywhere else in the world." He points to the company's long-term work force with pride.

"What makes Cobalt quality is the hearts and minds of those 500 people who work out there," he said. "It boils down to craftsmanship and attention to detail." As the company's website says, "We never aimed to be the biggest boat company, just the best."

In 2001, J. D. Power and Associates began an annual evaluation of quality and customer satisfaction in the marine industry. The annual evaluation continued until the economic downturn in 2009. Not only did Cobalt Boats win first place in quality and

customer satisfaction in every single year, J. D. Power informed them that they had never had anybody win over second place by such a large margin.

The Cobalt commitment to quality has carried over to the creation of a line of sportswear, such as polo shirts, caps, t-shirts and sweatshirts bearing the Cobalt name. There is even a high quality Napa Valley wine, a Cabernet Sauvignon, which bears the name Cobalt.

“My dad has only one hobby besides boats, and that’s making wine,” Paxson said. “He worked with a friend in Napa Valley. They produced a serious wine that was ranked a 93 by Wine Spectator magazine.”

For more information, go to www.cobaltboats.com.

The Cobalt boat skims across the water, as the owners proudly wear their Cobalt shirts and prepare to enjoy some California Cobalt wine. We salute Paxson and Pack St. Clair, Sean Callan, and all those involved with Cobalt Boats for making a difference with a commitment to quality – from wineglasses to watercraft.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.