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Frank Willis Butler



January 17, 1928

Birthplace: Glendale, California

“Working with my hands always came more easily to me than schoolwork.”

Sailing's Henry Ford

Let's say you are running a machine shop in North Hollywood, California, and you've taken up dinghy sailing at the age of 30. You decide to buy a larger boat so your family can enjoy the sport, and when you go to pick it up, the builder hasn't even started on it. Most of us would be in a quandary. Not Frank Butler. He took on the job himself, ended up with the tooling in lieu of

money he had loaned the builder, then he became the builder. He designed a 22-foot sailboat of which he sold 15,000. “I’ve always been able to draw,” he says by way of explanation. Today, the company he started is a waterfront word. Catalina has produced more than 60,000 boats. At one point, demand was so great Catalina dealers had a quota.



How did a machinist, an engineer, design such a successful boat? “Frank has an eye for style,” says Ron Frisosky, who has worked with Butler in sales and marketing for 25 years. “I’ve seen him look at a plug that was sanded and ready for gel coat, shake his head and say, ‘it doesn’t look right, start over.’ ”

As a younger man on the tennis court or skeet range, Frank Butler was known as tenacious. He had a reputation for tackling something with total focus, then moving on to the next challenge. With the boats, he was able to come in under the competition with a comparable product because of innovations like the first, one-piece modular interior that included everything from tanks to furniture; a molded head liner; and a “shoe box” deck to hull joint. Every element in a Catalina, including engine, will fit through a hatch.

But the real key to Butler’s success has been his personal involvement with customers. At Catalina, the operative word is “family.” Butler listens to people, and understands market trends. He has a file on every boat the company ever made, and handles all warranty issues personally.

Customers are overwhelmed to get a call from this man with the deep voice who might mispronounce their name – the CEO – at eight o'clock one night to answer their questions. At 85 he still does it.

Friends and competitors appreciate Butler as a character. "When he moved his operation to Florida," says yacht designer Charlie Morgan, "Frank announced he was going to show Pinellas County boatbuilders how it was done. He saw, he came, and he produced." After buying Prindle and Nacra catamaran companies in the late 1980s, Butler attended an industry dinner in Hawaii where he presented Hobie Alter with a dozen black roses. The card read, "From your new competition." Butler liked to approach competitor's tables at boat show dinners and offer to flip them for who paid the entire bill.

"Catalina is a landmark boat company," Ron Frisosky says. "Frank Butler got a lot of people on the water."

- Roger Vaughan

Links of Interest:

["Cruising at 80" article on Frank Butler in *Cruising World Magazine*](#)

[2012 Profile on Frank Butler: *SAIL Magazine*](#)

[Catalina Yachts history page](#)

[2001 article from *Good Old Boat Magazine*](#)

[Frank Butler wikipedia page](#)

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