

The Lafitte Story by Bob Perry

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The Lafitte Story

By [Robert Perry](#) on December 27, 2011 9:54 AM



When I tell these "histories" of my projects I am working mostly from memory. So from time to time I may get some facts and dates wrong but I will do my best to convey accurately the character of the project and the personalities of those involved.

Obviously I am still struggling with the image management part of the blogging process. Some of these old hand drawing make huge files when digitized.



The Lafitte project began in mid 1976. I was just 30 years old but my yacht design business was going great guns and I was feeling pretty good about myself and my output of new designs. We had projects lined up. Valiant was quickly making a name for itself with the Valiant 40. Islander was producing the Islander 28 in impressive numbers and I had just started on the Islander 32. Ta Chaio was building the CT 54. Ta Yang was building the Tayana 37. Also in Taiwan the Perry 47 was underway and I was becoming increasingly aware of other boats building in Taiwan that were, to use the colloquial, "rip-offs" of my work. One builder simply took my drawings for the CT 54, put their logo on my sail plan and produced a brochure for their new 54'er. This caused awkward moment in my normally smooth relationship with Ta Chaio. But it passed when I told them I had absolutely nothing to do with that project and I had not sold them the same design. "Intellectual property rights" was a novel concept in Taiwan. Settling down in my business class seat for the flight home one time I noticed that almost every man in the section was wearing a gold "Rolex". I quickly took mine off. You could buy a "Rolex" ("Fauxlex") in Taiwan for \$35 in those days. It was clear that the real action for a young designer trying to get established was in Taiwan. But established designers were afraid of Taiwan quality. I wasn't. I needed the work and I could see the potential in the Taiwan yards. The very first boat of my design that I sailed was a CT54. It was my first grp design.

One of the Taiwan rip-off projects was the Polaris 43. I had been contacted by a fellow, Al Liggett, from Guam. He said he wanted to build a one-off boat in Guam and had in mind a flush

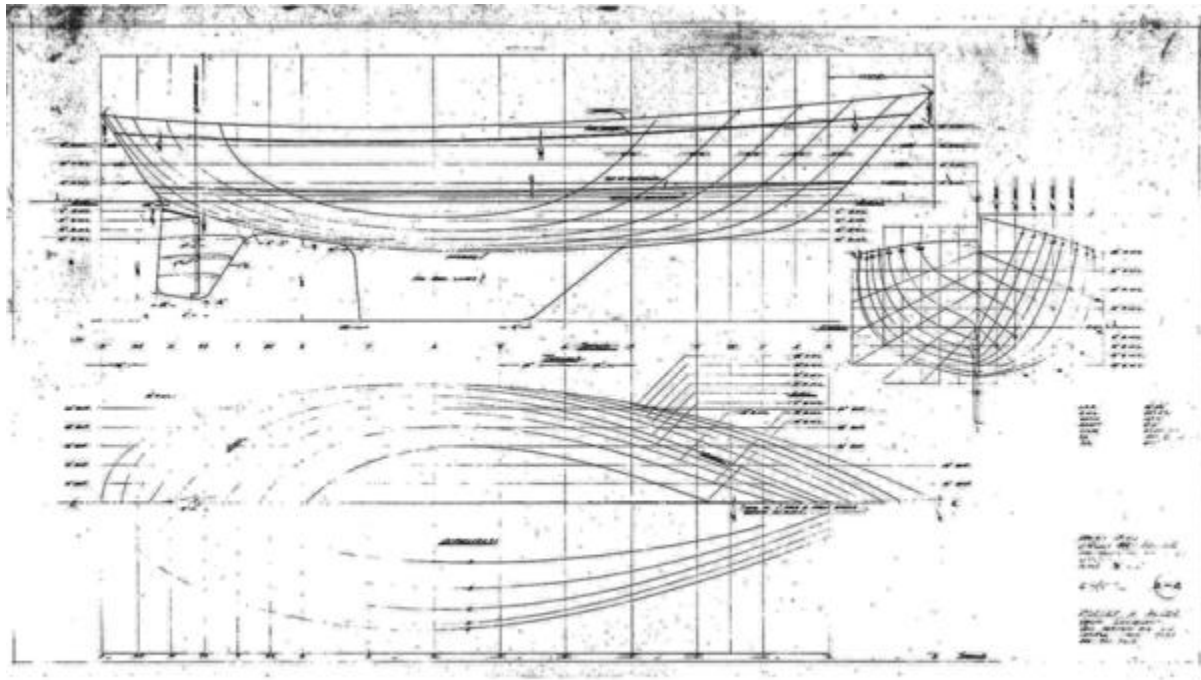
deck version of a hull like the Valiant 40. I charged him a really stupid low fee and drew up a design that was essentially a modified Valiant 40, with 12" more freeboard so we could do a flush deck forward. I explained to the client that he could only build one of these boats. It was far too close to my Valiant design to let him build the 43 in series. My contract with Valiant prevented me from designing any other fin keel, canoe stern boats for anyone but Valiant. He said that was no problem. He would build one boat in Airex core construction on the island of Guam. Later he called and announced that he was going to build a mold in Taiwan and produce the 43 is series. I objected and once again explained to him why he could not use my design for this project. But this did not stop him, he was an attorney and production of the Polaris 43 began. It was not a well built boat but it did sail well and Liggett's own boat SUNFLOWER is featured in one of Steve Dashew's books as a well designed offshore cruising boat. That was salt in my wound. I was not being paid any royalties for the Polaris 43's. But the 43 project was at best only limping along so I felt vindicated.

I was in Newport Beach, California, doing business with Islander when I got a phone call at my hotel. The caller said they were in a position to acquire the molds for the Polaris 43 and wanted a meeting with me to see if we could work on the project to resurrect it. I told them that I had no interest whatsoever in being any part of the Polaris 43 project on any terms and further more I would do what I could to undermine their efforts to market my stolen design. The caller asked if I had any ideas on how his "group" could work with me on a boat building project in Taiwan. I explained that I would be happy to meet with them and go through the design steps required for them to have their own, new design that we could build in series. The caller suggested a meeting immediately as his group was all in Newport Beach. I was not convinced this was a real lead. Something smelled a bit fishy so I told them I was too busy to meet with them unless they wanted to meet me at the airport prior to my flying back to Seattle. Fine he said.

As I waited in the tiny terminal of the old Orange County airport a young guy came up to me, introduced himself as Skip and directed me towards another guy who stood with his back to me. It was all very mysterious. As I recall it I keep thinking this guy was wearing a trench coat with the collar turned up. But it was Orange County and there was probably not a trench coat in town. But in my memory he was wearing a trench coat. The other fellow was Rick Lewis. It was an awkward meeting because I thought they were still on the edge of taking over the Polaris project and I was defensive and a bit combative in that meeting. But it became evident that they were serious about working with me when Rick suggested that they fly me back down for a day's meeting with them to see how we could get a new project started. I loved the Newport Beach area. I loved shopping at Fashion Island. I was a bit of a dandy. I liked cruising my rental car down PCH. I loved visiting Islander and seeing my boats lined up in their shop. I said I'd be happy to come back down.

A short time later I came back to Orange County where I was met by what would become the Lafitte group, Mike Lewis, his brother Rick Lewis, Skip Reilly, Pauly Roesti and, Gene LaForce. The one missing member of the group was George Olivit and I would meet him later. George was the one holding out for a totally new design. Gene was a bit older than the other guys. George would turn out to be a bit younger. The rest of them were all close to my age, 30. We had a productive meeting and they were most anxious to get the project started. They said over and over that they wanted to build a "high quality boat in Taiwan". I'd heard that before and I was

dubious but I liked the guys and like 30 year olds in 1976 we had some fun with our meeting and it appeared to be a good fit so I went along with their idea. They were very serious. They did want a double ender, a 44', fin keel, double ender. This posed a problem for me as it meant I would have to come up with a hull shape that got around my contract with Valiant. The new 44 could not have my signature tumblehome canoe stern. I'd come up with something.



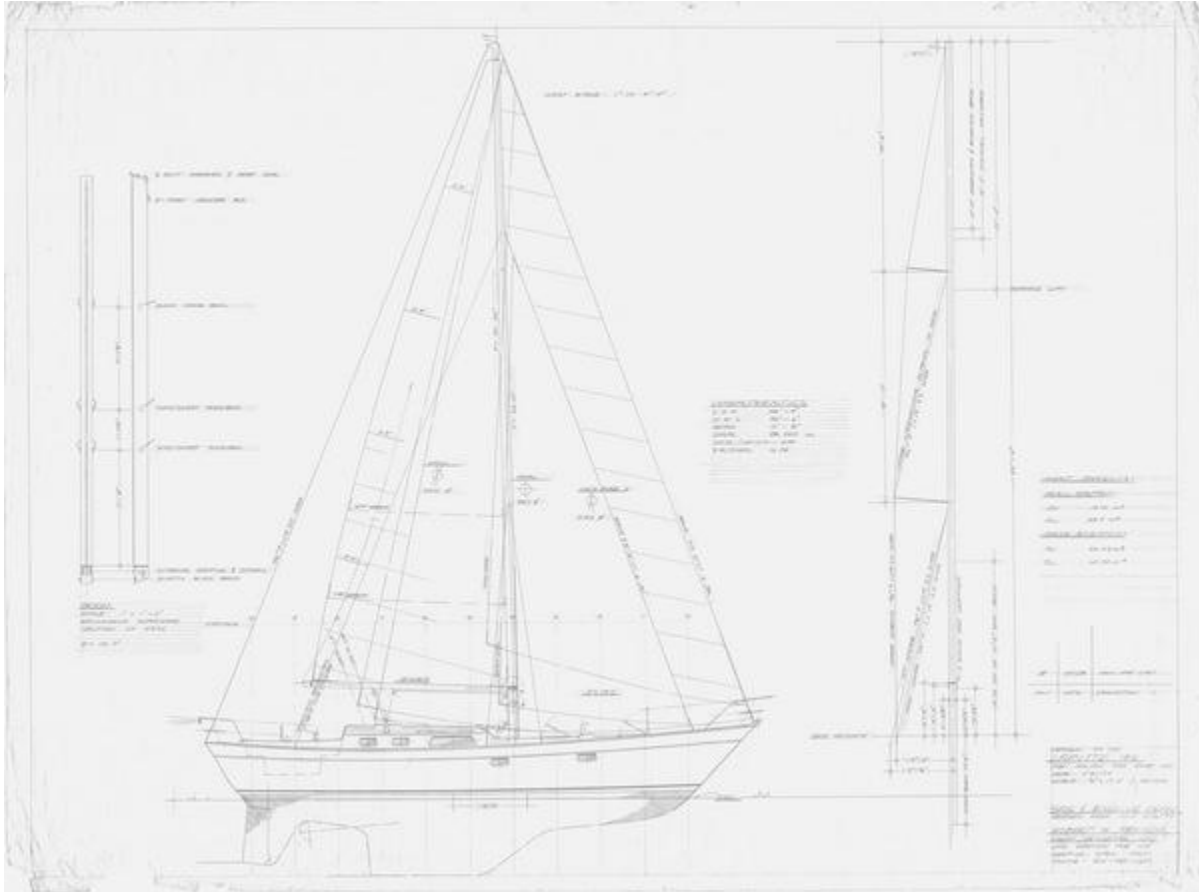
These old drawings are very hard/light pencil and ink on Mylar. They do not digitize well so I apologize for how feint this lines drawing is. But if you click on it maybe you can see it more clearly

The Lafitte 44 has a stern unlike any other I have designed. I consider it to be a true double ender but not a canoe sterned boat. There is a subtle difference and I was hoping for that difference to keep the Valiant people happy. The Lafitte is heavy by today's standards and had arc-like sections through the middle of the boat. Note the slight hollow to the stem profile. This is reflected in some hollow in the bow sections. When I first walked into the yard building the Lafitte, a subsidiary of Chung Hwa, I looked at the astern on the plug and I thought, "Hmmmmm, it didn't look quite like that on the half model." Seeing both sides of the boat together for the very first time I was struck with the roundness of the upper waterlines through the stern. The Lafitte represented the most complete set of plans my office had ever done. Why? Because we knew they would make sure the boat was built exactly as drawn. We used outside lead ballast which was expensive in Taiwan. George did a masterful job in laying out all the systems for the boat. Having been a "marine domestic" he had a real sense of laying out gear so you could actually get to it and have room to work on it. We specified each and every joinerwork detail on the boat. Lafitte would use only the best components and no expense was spared to make the boat top quality.

That was my very first trip to Taiwan. The Lafitte guys wanted me to check the plug. In those days boats were hand lofted from small scale, in this case .75" to the foot, lines drawings and so there was room for error. It was always good for the designer to go over the lofting. So off I went, First Class on a Pan Am flight stopping in Hawaii, where George Olivit would get on the plane and from there proceed to Tokyo and on to Taipei. I had still not met George so when I re-boarded the plane after a short stop in Hawaii and looked across the aisle the guy in the adjacent seat said, "Are you Bob?" I said yes. George looked young, the typical SoCal surfer type with blond hair and a "who gives a shit" attitude. I think George was the person to ever call me "Dude". That was what you saw on the surface with George. George turned out to be one of the very best boat builders I had ever worked with. George could do any job in the boat yard from laminate layup to electrical wiring and layout. George could grab a piece of teak, walk over to the band saw and shape exactly what he wanted while the workers watched. On top of that George had worked previously in Taiwan, was familiar with the culture and had a respect for things Taiwanese that quickly won over the boatyard workers. At the yard he was "Georgy". He was perfect for the job.

The Lafitte group did everything first class. At our business luncheons we drank bottles of Chateau Lafitte 1966. No amount of money was going to be spared to insure that we produce a quality boat and have a damn good time doing it. So I sat back and enjoyed the comfort that my long legs needed on that flight. We arrived at the small, old downtown Taipei airport and it was jammed with people. There was no way in hell I was going to be able to get to the baggage carousel to get my bags. George just said, "Watch me." He then proceeded to push and shove his way through the crowd until he emerged with his bags. "That's the way you have to do it here." From the airport it was off to our suites at the Grand Hotel owned by Madam Chang Kai-Shek. And I assure you, this hotel was grand in a very classical Chinese architectural way. It was huge and my suite was huge. I remember calling my wife and telling her I'm not sure what room to sit in by myself. I had an expansive balcony looking out over the jungle that surrounded the hotel. The hot and humid air was full of loud insect and bird sounds and smells that were all new to me. "You are not in Ballard anymore Bob". The Lafitte yard was in Kaohsiung at the other end of Taiwan but we would spend a few days in Taipei so I could visit Ta Chaio and the Universal yard where the Perry 47 was being built. I had a great time taking the taxi around Taipei and eating exotic meals. I loved it. But the third morning I woke up with a major disturbance in my stomach. I barely made it from my bed to the bathroom. Whatever I had eaten wanted out and it wanted out NOW! I quickly found out why they put a phone right next to the toilet. I was prepared to conduct my business from there all day if I had to. I was certainly not leaving the bathroom. But things calmed down after what I remember as about two hours and I thought I'd go down to the tiny drug store in the basement of the hotel. I'd go look for something that would cure my stomach ills. The drug store was dark, about 10' square and stocked floor to ceiling with medicines, mostly Chinese, in no particular order. There was a little Taiwanese lady working there. I pointed to my stomach and said "This not good." I spoke no Mandarin at that time. She nodded knowingly and said, "You need **Ex-Rax!**" NO! Not Ex-Lax! Just then an American woman came in and realized what was going on. She said, "You need Pepto Bismal." I was soon cured and that was the only time I ever got sick in Taiwan. I may have been showering with my mouth open. I don't know. I was always a pretty adventurous eater in Taiwan but I did not drink the water and I avoided the food carts on the streets that served from bowls washed between

customers in a bucket of grey water. I just ate smart. In time I found a small hotel in Taipei, the Santos Hotel, San Der in Mandarin. It was more to my liking than the huge Grand Hotel and the staff at the San Der was always very willing to help me with my efforts to learn the language.

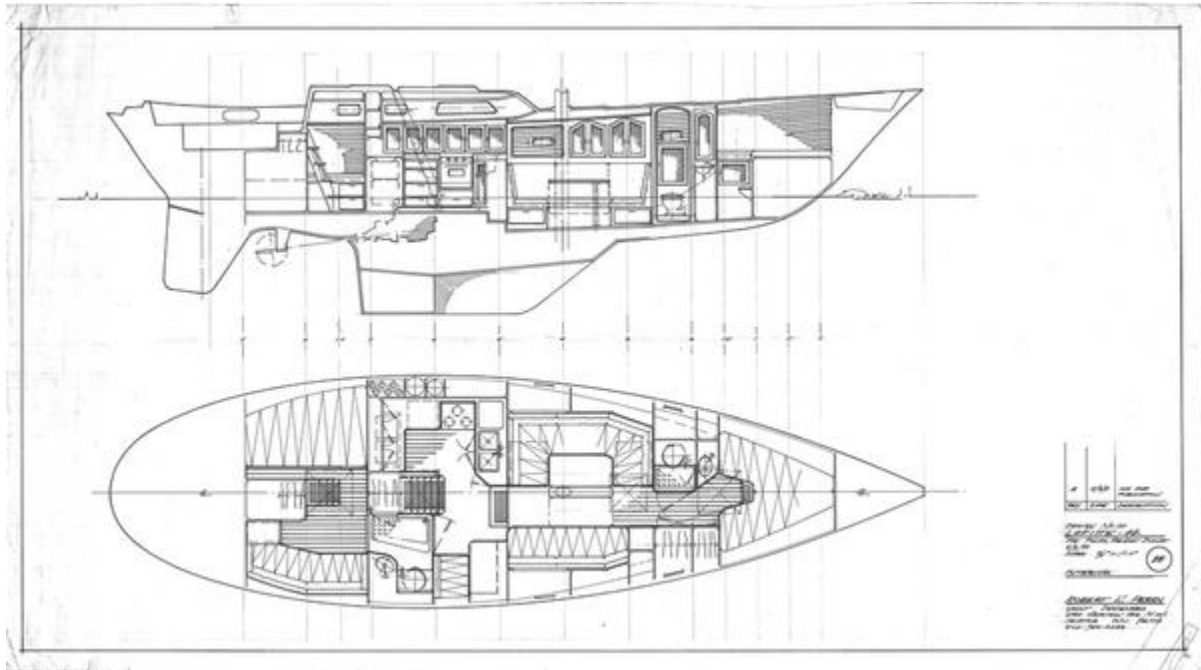


I would hook up with George every time I went back to Taiwan. George ended up living there for quite a while during the build of the first 44's and then again when we did the Lafitte 66. George had no trouble learning the rudiments of the language and may have been the reason that I took on that challenge too. Sadly and for reasons I'm still not sure of George and some of the other Lafitte guys eventually went to jail. It involved a "conspiracy" conviction and I'm pretty sure it involved pot. George went to prison in Arizona where he sowed thumbs on leather gloves for 6 months at the same time he was managing the Lafitte projects. Gene and Rick both died some time later. Not sure why Gene died but Rick had a very bad car crash that he pretty much never recovered from. Mike Lewis, who was the actual President of Lafitte, and I have stayed in touch and visited each other several times.



The Lafitte 44 layout was unusual in that there were two companionways. One lead down into the owner's cabin aft and one lead down forward into the galley area. To go forward from the owner's cabin you walked through the aft head. But I designed this area so that with the doors in the open position they closed off the w.c. and the basin so you did not know you were in a head. It was just a passageway. And the quality that George got out of the yard was amazing. It was the talk of the industry when the boat first came out. It was good enough that Ted Hood's Little Harbor Yacht Sales became the dealer. When the Lafitte 66 was introduced at the Annapolis Show Ted Hood came aboard and spent an hour on the boat. When he came out into the cockpit I said, "How did you like it?" Ted is very taciturn to say the least but he looked at me and said, "I think it's as good as a Huisman. I said, "A lot of people think Huisman is as good as it gets." Ted said, "That's right." And that was that. I felt like I had received the Papal blessing. Within months Ted was setting up his own Little Harbor yard in Taiwan. You see, Taiwan could produce a quality boat. I don't have any drawings of the Lafitte 66 digitized but I'll get some and edit the blog to include them. Only one 66 was built and it was bought by Bob Mosbacher, brother of the famous 12 meter sailor Buzz Mosbacher. This was a feather in our caps and Mr. Mosbacher was very happy with how the 66

sailed. One of the really stupid things I did preparing for my first trip to Taiwan was to buy a camera. I knew almost nothing about cameras so I thought I'd be fancy and get a Polaroid, i.e. instant gratification. The result of that is today I really have no decent photos of those early trips.

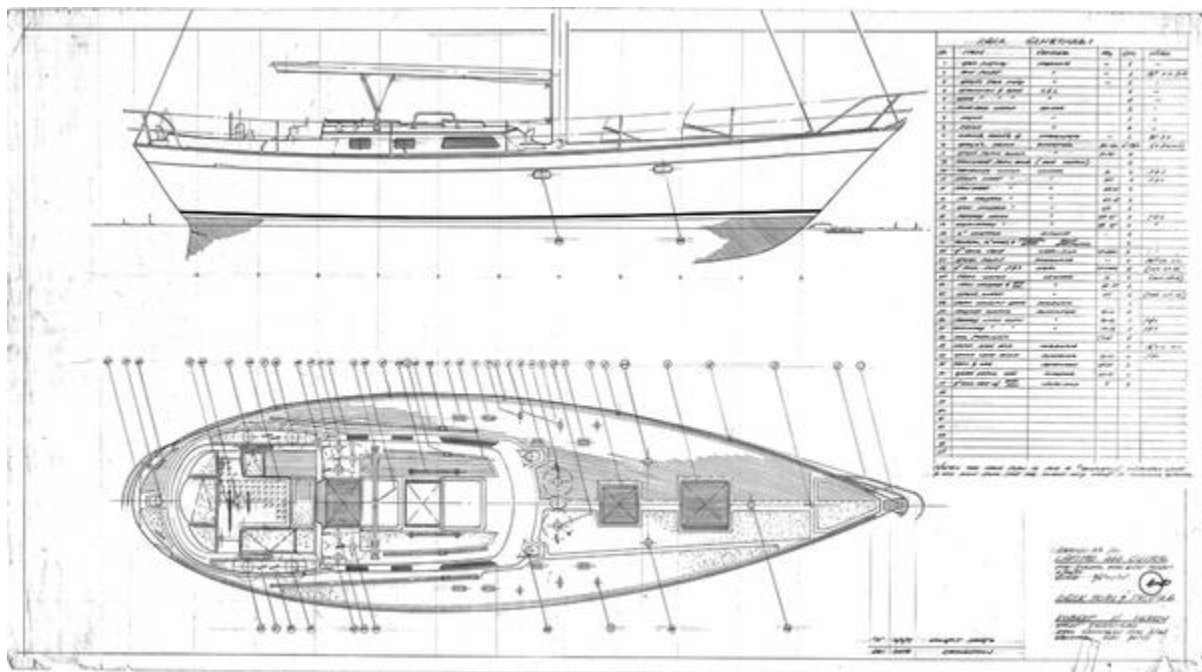


I loved working in Taiwan. I wasn't too keen on the humidity and the heat but it was just part of the exotic atmosphere. Taiwan beer is very good and I drank a lot of beer. I loved the food. I spent as much time as I could hanging out at the various boat yards and I particularly enjoyed working on the deck plug with the workers who almost never spoke English. One Sunday I went to see the deck plug of the Lafitte 66 with George. We were met at the yard by the owner of the yard and the foreman. George and I after studying the plug decided we would make the opening gate into the raised cockpit 2" wider. I picked up a piece of chalk and in my very best Chinese characters wrote on the plywood plug "plus 2 inches". The foreman looked at my writing and looked at the yard owner and said, "I think he is God." I have seldom felt so proud. "Gate" happened to be one of the very few Chinese characters I knew and I got a chance to use it. I look back on the Lafitte days very fondly. We were young guys doing what young guys like to do and while we were doing it we built a great boat.

One Lafitte 44 owner was an English gent, Mike Hardy, who was the Director of Operations for Cathay Pacific Airlines. He would come to Seattle to be wined and dined by Boeing. Part of his regular "entertainment request" was dinner with Bob Perry. So off Jill and I would go to the swankiest restaurant in Seattle to drink the swankiest PNW wines and eat the swankiest PNW foods while I had to sit there and listen to this sailor rave about his Lafitte. I loved it. The photo of the Lafitte beating up the coast of Scotland under full main and staysail is Mike's boat.

The Lafittes are getting a little old now and most need a good amount of upkeep. But they are

very strong boats. When Lafitte wanted to do an Airex cored version they simply split the single skin laminate and added the Airex in the middle. Now that is strong. And expensive. Lafitte was eventually bought by Bernie Wahl in Buffalo NY. Bernie owned the company in its last days and he was a good owner and a nice guy. He was about as different as the young guys who started the company as you can imagine. But he got along well with them. George went on to marry a lady from Singapore and become a yard manager in Malaysia at a yard that serviced mega yachts. The last I spoke to George he was sailing around the world with his family in a 45' ketch. Pauly became a commercial pilot. Skip was an attorney and I lost track of him. He left the Lafitte project in the early days. Mike Lewis left Lafitte, did nothing for a while then took a job as a manager of a small northern Californian airport. While there he did some small grp repairs on private planes and this lead to working on race car bodies. Then he was called in to help with a "secondary containment" problem for a gas station that was having trouble getting their new tanks up to EPA standards. Mike looked the situation over, gave it some thought, called them back and said, "You are doing it all wrong." Mike went on to get numerous patents in the field of gas station secondary containment and related areas and founded a company called Western Fiberglass. He did very well but is pretty much retired from it now. He's a great guy.



P.S.

I just got off the phone with George Olivit. He is now an organic farmer in Maui with two teenage daughters.

Pauly runs a large car dealership in Arizona.

George confirmed that Pacific Far East Industries the company that the Lafitte guys set up was there to give the group "legitimate" incomes while they went about their "import" business. I knew something was going on back then but I was too naive to figure it out and I never felt it was my place to ask directly.

