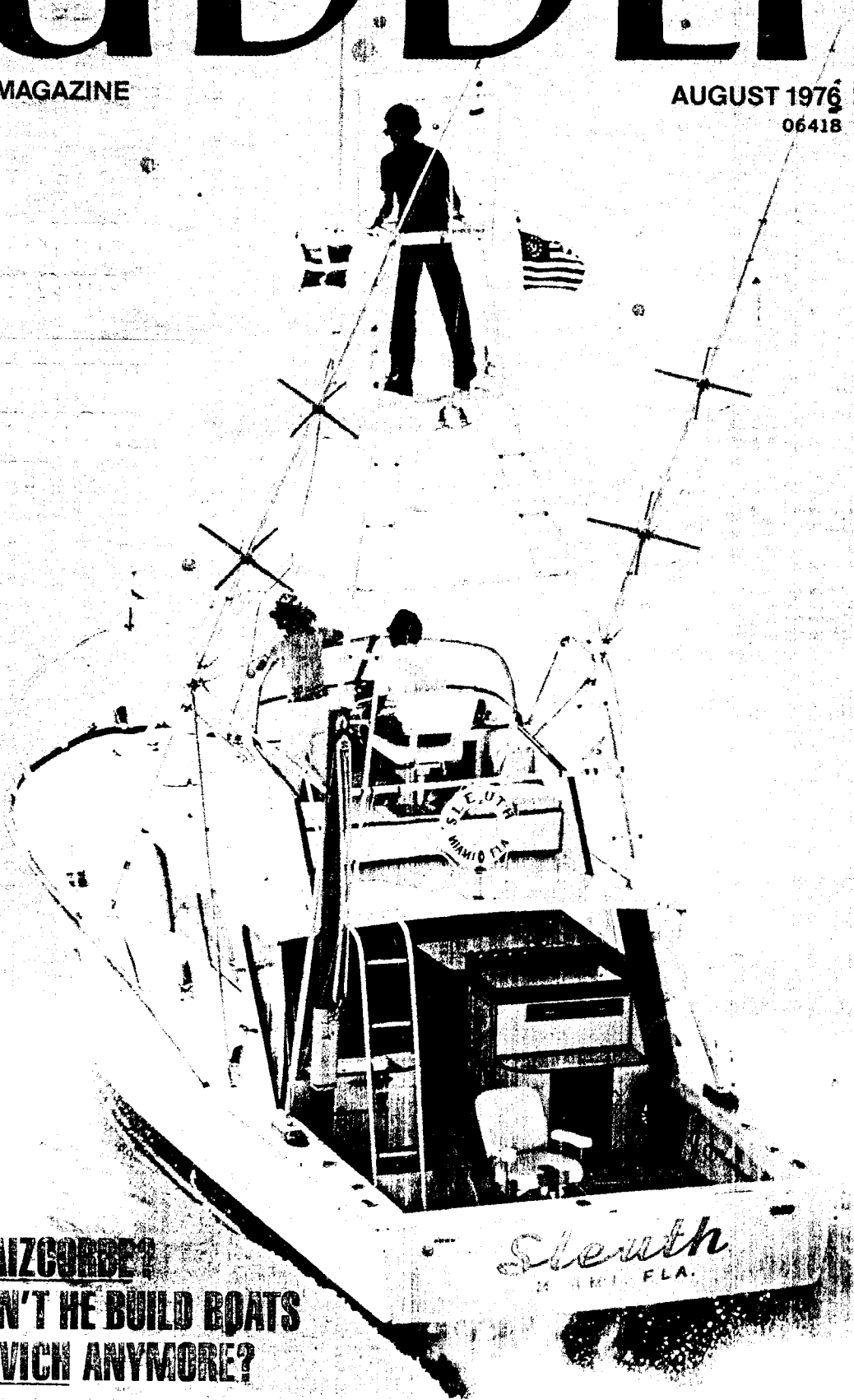


# RUDDER

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**WHO IS PEPIN AIZGORDE?  
AND WHY DOESN'T HE BUILD BOATS  
LIKE THIS CUBAVICH ANYMORE?**

Pepin Aizcorbe

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**RUDDER**

AUGUST 1976

# Day of White Marlin

*Spanning four decades, the tale of Pepin Aizcorbe includes two revolutions, 13 of the most controversial boats ever built and a cast of characters that would fill a 1950s Havana version of Ragtime*

by Jim Wright



JIM McNITT

*From all outward appearances, Sunday May 15, 1960, looked as though it would turn into another fine Havana day. Pepin Aizcorbe awoke at seven to the sounds of the bedroom curtains rustling in a soft morning breeze. The sun was just scraping the horizon, but it portended a good day for fishing on this, the final day of the Hemingway Fishing Tournament.*

*Something else was in the air that May morning, an ill political wind that left Pepin's palate dry as he slipped his fishing clothes onto his wiry frame and went downstairs to help his family pack their belongings.*

*Storm clouds had hung over Cuba for more than a year now, ever since Fidel Castro's 26th of July Movement had come to power. Perhaps Pepin should already have headed to the sanctuary of Florida, 100 miles to the north, but there was still one personal goal he wanted to achieve before leaving Havana: to win the Trofeo Hemingway for a third consecutive year and retire it and, even more, to fish the Gulf Stream off Havana one last time.*

Sportfishing had been in Pepin Aizcorbe's blood, or so it seemed, ever since he was old enough to go with his father down to Havana Harbor to watch the motor yachts and fishing boats as they returned from a day of chasing marlin and other gamefish on the Gulf Stream, that huge blue river that runs through the Straits of Florida and made Havana, in its day, the sportfishing capital of the world.

As he sat on the waterfront and studied the boats, six-year-old Pepin Aizcorbe said to himself, "Someday, I'm going to have one of those." There was an old fisherman, a friend of Pepin's family, whom Pepin would visit to learn of the world beyond Havana Harbor. After a few such sessions, Pepin told the fisherman, "I want to catch me a white marlin," and the

old man told Pepin what he would need. Piece by piece, Pepin accumulated the necessary gear: a squatty-looking dory his father had bought him for ten dollars, oars, manila fishing line and baits, mullet and Spanish mackerel.

At sunrise one April day in 1929, Pepin enlisted the help of one of his father's employees and set out to sea. The two of them, man and boy, rowed out of the playa Havana for three quarters of an hour, rowed now in his glory, felt as though he were in the middle of the ocean. He tossed the three handlines over and, as the boat drifted a mile offshore, waited for his first marlin to strike.

It didn't take long for the lines to drag bottom. When Pepin's tiny hands felt the tugs, he exclaimed, "Look! Already we caught three fish." This would not be the last time he lost a fishing battle; he was hooked.

Nor, in 1933, would it be the last time he and his family went into exile. His father, a member of Cuban gentry and then Treasurer of Cuba, was one of the first to flee to America when an army revolt led by Sergeant Fulgencio Batista put the regime of Gerardo Machado into power. After Batista himself had supplanted Machado, in 1936 the Aizcorbes returned to Cuba. Pepin enrolled in the Belen School and in spare time honed his skills as a marksman at a local pigeon-hunting club. Another student at Belen, three years Pepin's junior, was a boy named Fidel Castro.

*It came as no surprise to Pepin on this, the final day of the tournament, to see Fidel Castro admiring the sportfishing fleet at the docks of Barlonvento a Marina del Rey-style development on Havana's west side and headquarters for the tourney. Aside from being a master politician, Castro considered him-*

*continued on next page*

## White Marlin *continued*



Flanked by his teammates, Pepin Aizcorbe displays his third Trofeo Hemingway. The next morning he would go into exile.

self a sportman. Even though he wore army fatigues and heavy boots, Cuba's new ruler was after the Trofeo Hemingway and the laurels that came with it. Not the least of which was to receive the loving cup and some words of praise from Ernest Hemingway himself.

For Hemingway, Cuba and his estate on the outskirts of Havana, Finca Vigia, had been a refuge since the early Thirties, a place to write in solitude, to hunt and to fish for tuna and marlin from *Pilar*, his 38-foot Wheeler.

At the Hunting Club of Cuba, Papa Hemingway met two budding riflemen by the names of Luis and Pepin Aizcorbe. Though a generation older, Hemingway gradually developed a friendship with the young Cubans and often went hunting with them when he was in Cuba. Along with the Havana Harbor-master, he taught Luis and Pepin the ways of the fisherman, how to rig a bait and how to troll for the gamefish that swarmed so near Havana.

The brothers Aizcorbe, by the turn of the half-century, had become top anglers. They bought a new 43-foot Norseman, *Lurana*, to replace a 36-foot Chris-Craft they had been using. They joined the Cuba Fishing Team and made the annual trip to Nova Scotia to compete against an international field for the Alton B. Sharp Trophy, the grand prix of tuna fishing.

When they weren't working for their father's land-developing and construction business or fishing for big game, Pepin and Luis would hunt in the Cuban countryside. On one such trip in the early 1950s, the brothers invited Hemingway to hunt doves with them. They arrived at Hemingway's farm at dawn. A houseboy ushered them into Hemingway's room on the second floor. Ernest was standing over his desk, finishing a paragraph on a first draft of a new project. He turned to the brothers and said, "Here, I want you to read this." He would later publish the manuscript under the title, *The Old Man and the Sea*. The book would win him the Nobel Prize and later be made into a movie. Some of the scenes would be filmed from a 48-foot Norseman, *Lurana*.

An upshot of the Aizcorbes' friendship with Papa was the Hemingway Fishing Tournament, held every year in Havana. With Hemingway's approval and the help of other members of the Cuban fishing fraternity, it became the island republic's most prestigious fishing event. It would attract sportsmen the likes of Johnny Rybovich, who organized a fleet of a dozen boats from Florida's Gold Coast to make the annual pilgrimage to Havana, and Howard Anderson, a transplanted American

who owned a chain of Texaco stations across Cuba.

One of those gas stations was located across the street from the Aizcorbes' boathouse, along the Almendares River. As a side line, Pepin, Luis, and a friend, Manolo Socias, began building a few 20-foot wooden fishing craft in the boathouse. These rigs were undistinguished, save for the master craftsmanship that went into them and their unorthodox helm layouts. No one in Cuba had seen center-console boats before.

Anderson, a tall man with blonde hair, blue eyes and connections in Washington, D.C., would stop by to watch the proceedings from time to time. As he did, an idea for a new powerboat began to take shape in his mind.

On that Sunday morning in 1960, Pepin joined his friend and fishing partner Julio Branco Herrera aboard *Crystal*, which had been built by Pepin's small boat company less than a year before. The 37-foot *Crystal* eased out of her slip at 8:30. The silver lettering on her transom glistened in the sunshine of Barlonvento as she headed for the Gulf Stream.

Another Hemingway tournament, one of four years past, marked the beginning of a new venture for the Aizcorbes, Manolo Socias and their foreman, Joaquin Fernandez. Howard Anderson wanted Socias to build him a custom sportfisherman. Not any sportfisherman—he wanted a Rybovich, the Stradivarius of that exclusive breed. Nor did the American want to wait the three years that the back-logged Rybovich & Sons Boat Works needed to complete an order.

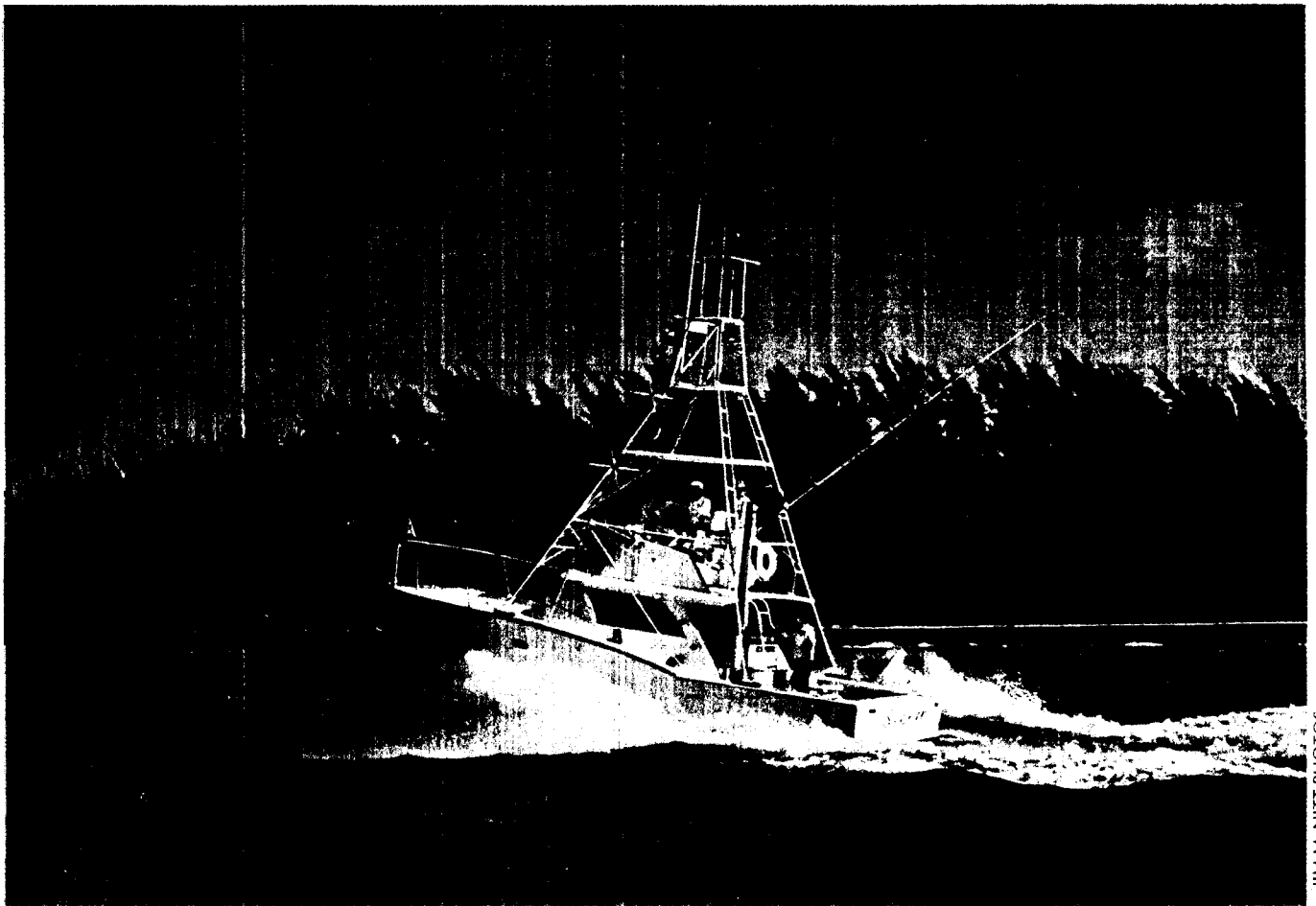
Anderson's plan was as simple as it was underhanded: one night during the Hemingway match, they would haul a Rybovich and copy the lines inch for inch, nail for nail. On the night of the foray, Socias took the Rybovich's skipper to the Tropicana Night Club and plied him with Cuban rum. Meanwhile, the boat was clandestinely put on the ways, where its lines were transferred to plywood forms. The Rybovich was then returned to its slip with no one the wiser. A few days later, the Aizcorbes were asked to help build the bastardized Rybovich. Pepin wanted to revamp the lines, but Anderson got his way. He wanted a Rybovich lookalike without the pedigree.

In September of 1956, Johnny Rybovich went to Havana for some fall marlin fishing. A friend took him to the Aizcorbes' boathouse and told Johnny he wanted to show him something. As the doors swung open, there sat what appeared to be one of his hulls, three-fourths completed. Rybovich was angry and disappointed. After he had fished with the Cubans so often and after he had worked so closely with them to make their Hemingway tournament a success, this was how they repaid him.

From the standpoint of trying to achieve an objective, the boat that the Aizcorbes and Socias built for Howard Anderson was an unmitigated success. Orders from other Americans soon poured in. For Pepin, Luis and Manolo, however, this would only be a hobby. By now they had become successful land developers and didn't want to get preoccupied with boats. Thus they founded the Neptune Boat Company with the intention of building three hulls a year for friends. They refused \$10,000 in deposit checks that first year alone. The boats would be built under the aegis of Socias and his foreman, Joaquin Fernandez. They would be sold only in Cuba and not as any great profit-making enterprise.

Over its four-year existence, the Neptune Boat Company built 13 classic sportfishermen from 34 to 42 feet. Though all of them bore more than a passing resemblance to boats built in Palm Beach by the Rybovich boat company, Pepin would later insist that only the first Neptune was a direct copy. Rybovich bottoms, he maintained, were fine for fishing off Palm

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TIM MCGNITT PHOTOS

Eleven of the Neptune Boat Company's Cuban-built sportfishermen are currently in the United States. Most, such as the 34-foot Sleuth (above), are kept in the southern Florida area. Silver transom lettering is a Neptune tradition. From the flying bridge, Pepin Aizcorbe (below) maneuvers Sleuth in a Key Biscayne marina. Owned by Miamian Frank Rubino, Sleuth celebrated her 18th birthday in May.



To build a wooden boat the likes of Sleuth now (some detail work is shown above), Aizcorbe estimates labor alone would run \$80,000.

## White Marlin

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Beach, Cat Cay, Bimini and Montauk, but a different set of conditions prevailed off Cuba. Havana fishermen headed east for their morning fishing and, because a northeasterly breeze would usually pick up before noon, they would usually head back to port in a following sea. As a result, Pepin commissioned John L. Hacker and Lindsay Lord to design a different hull shape for the Neptune boats, one with more beam and a bit of V.

There were surely other differences between Pepin's boats and the Ryboviches—in the shape of the windows, the flare of the bow, the cabin doors, the flying bridge supports—but even veteran boatmen couldn't tell them apart at a glance.

As the Neptune Boat Company progressed, that first sting felt by John Rybovich subsided for a time. His company furnished the Cuban firm with equipment, and through a third party, technical know-how on mechanical and electrical systems. In the ensuing 20 years, Rybovich's yard would, at one time or another, handle most of the 13 boats built by the Aizcorbes in Havana. After the Neptune boats began to be nicknamed "Cubaviches" by Florida fisherman, for Rybovich that sting would return.

The fishing on the third day of the 1960 tourney couldn't have been better. The temperature had climbed to 80°F. A four-knot breeze picked up from out of the northeast. *Crystal*, with Pepin on board, ran into a school of whites. Before the afternoon was out, the anglers on *Crystal* boated eight marlin. Still, Pepin wished he were fishing from his own boat, *Crystal's* sister. The two sportfishermen were nearly twins, but just as a baseball player has a special mitt or a pianist his favorite keyboard, for Pepin there was only *Luranita*.

She was the fourth boat built by Neptune, *Luranita*. From the keel up she was destined to be someone special. The Aizcorbes had just purchased a dilapidated estate on the fringe of Havana as the site for a new apartment house. The stable on the property, two centuries old, was solid Cuban mahogany. When it was torn down, Pepin asked the workmen to save a 38-foot-long beam he had discovered. One day soon it would serve as *Luranita's* keelson and set the standard for the rest of her.

She was built of mahogany, then sheathed to the waterline with epoxy fiberglass. Every instrument at her three helm stations was recessed and sealed. Each bit of metal work, from the hatch moldings to the instrument panel trim, was one-piece seamless stainless steel. Her tanks were Monel. All of her teak appointments were fastened from underneath so that no plugs would be visible.

*Luranita* took 15 months and 11,500 man-hours to build. She was created with the pride of workmanship that had all but disappeared on lesser craft. Pepin would reflect nearly two decades later, "It wasn't a matter of dollars to my men. It was a matter of patting them on the back and telling them they had done a good job."

By the 15th of May in 1960, *Luranita* was sitting securely in Richard Bertram's yacht yard in Miami, Fla. In anticipation of the day when the storm clouds over Cuba would burst, the Pepin had taken her to Florida a year earlier.

As *Crystal* headed back to Barlonvento that afternoon, her skipper took Pepin aside on the flying bride and confided, "I can't understand why Julio [*Crystal's* owner] hasn't taken his boat out of the country like you did. If I were Julio, I'd leave you right on the dock and take the boat to Florida." For a friend of Pepin, there would have been room in Bertram's yacht yard.

Pepin had been introduced to Dick Bertram in the early 1950s through mutual friends, and the pair saw each other frequently as the decade unfolded. When Pepin first met Bertram, the yacht broker's headquarters were on Miami Beach in a second-floor office so small that Pepin had to enter sideways. By the end of the Fifties, when Cuba's political climate had prompted Pepin to phase out his boatbuilding operation, Bertram was doing a million dollars of brokerage business in Cuba alone, often flying over to Havana to eye some 60 or 80-foot prospect.

On one visit, an excited Dick Bertram stopped by Pepin's house. Bertram had just returned from a recent America's Cup trials, and he wanted Pepin to see plans for a new 31-foot offshore racing powerboat designed by Ray Hunt. Pepin looked over the plans for a minute, then wrinkled up his nose and said, "Dick, this looks like a turtle upside-down. Are you sure it will work?" Bertram replied, "I've seen it, and it runs."

Shortly after, since the Neptune Boat Company was shutting its doors, Dick Bertram brought over Pepin's top talent to help him build the 31-foot racer in his yacht repair yard in Miami.

At 4 p.m., *Crystal* and her anglers arrived in port triumphant. They had won the Trofeo Hemingway for the third time in a row. At dockside, Pepin was presented the trophy by Ernest Hemingway as photographers clicked away. Then, as was the custom for the winner, Pepin had his picture taken with the angler who had caught the biggest fish of the tournament. The man was Fidel Castro.

The next day, May 16, 1960, Pepin and his family would leave for Key West. He had seen his friend Hemingway for the last time.

*Luranita* would be sold a year later to Mr. Procter of Procter & Gamble. She would eventually be destroyed by young vandals at her slip on Long Island.

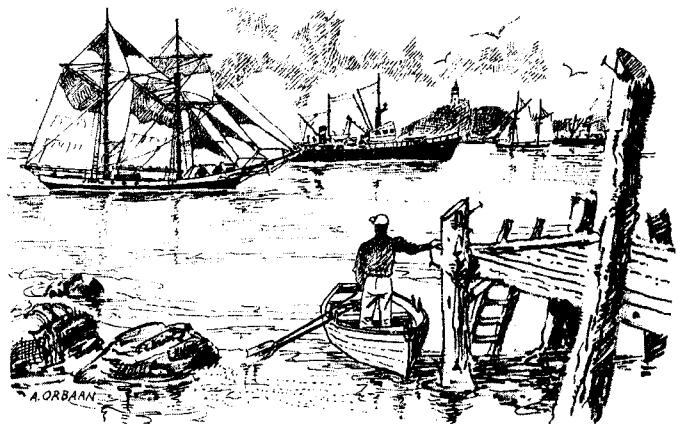
*Crystal* would soon be appropriated by Fidel Castro for his personal use. Sixteen years later, she would still look the way she did the day she was launched, save for a pair of Russian diesels.

Dick Bertram would complete his 31-foot racing boat. She would have a deep V and be called *Moppie*. Her success would launch the Bertram Yacht Company.

Johnny Rybovich would continue to build the most famous fishing boats in the world.

Howard Anderson would be arrested by the Cuban government and executed as a C.I.A. agent.

Pepin Aizcorbe would settle in Coral Gables, Fla., and continue his work as a successful land developer. Keeping a promise he had once made to Johnny Rybovich, he would never build another powerboat. Nor would he return to his native land of Cuba again. ⊕



I THINK THIS WAY MY BOAT?  
WAS BOUGHT BY MURRAY BROS