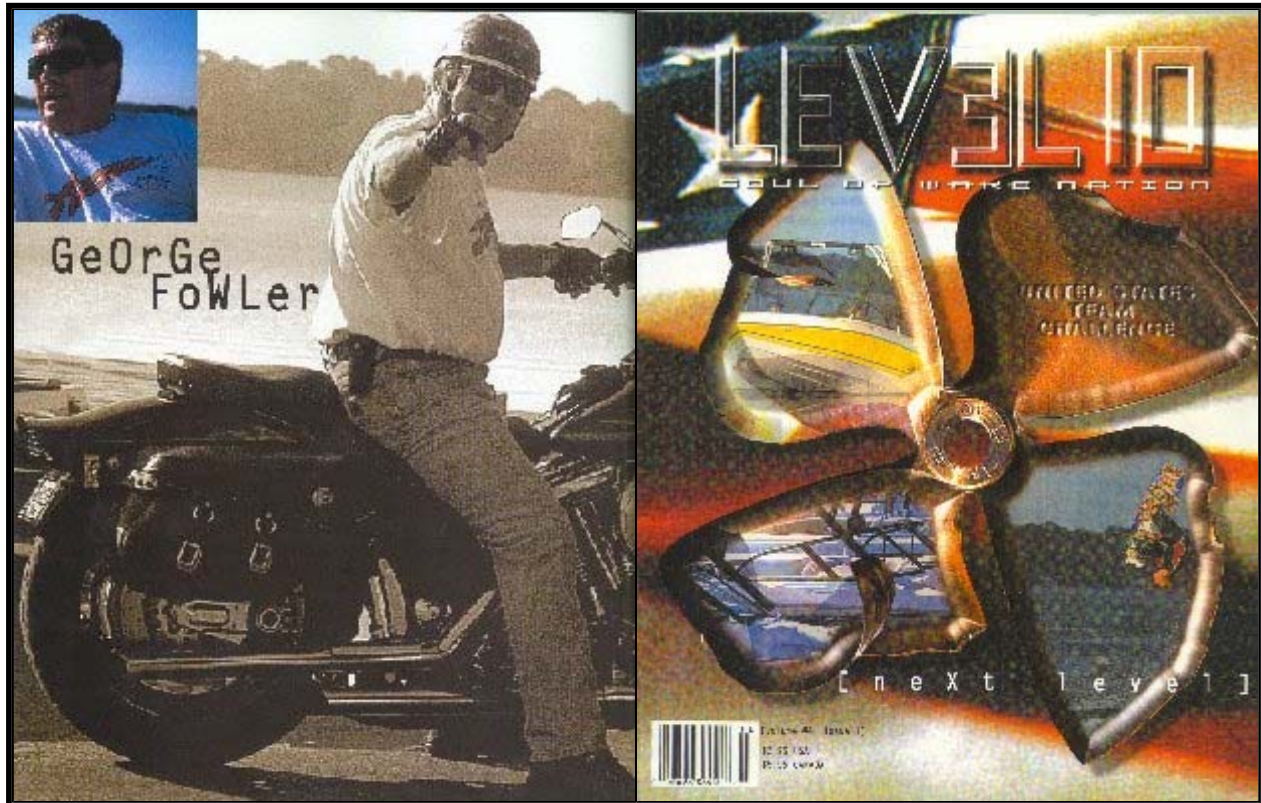


## The Aztec story, from the beginning

### Interview - George Fowler of Aztec Boats

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George Fowler has been part of the boat business since he and Rob Shirley built the first MasterCraft in a garage. He is also the founder of Ski Supreme, Supra, Moomba, Aztec and now, Backwoods Boats. It's been an interesting ride . . .



GF: I was born in Bennington, Vermont in 1943. We lived in New York at Ballston Lake, near Schenectedy. My Dad worked at a General Electric plant as a machinist, but he was actually a carpenter by trade. We lived on the lake until I was nine or ten years old. You couldn't buy waterskis back then, so my Dad and some of his engineer friends that wanted to ski decided to build their own waterskis. They were made out of ash, inner tube rubber and that kind of thing.

Aluminum fins. He also built some outboard boats. They used to ski with a 25 Evinrude when I was a little kid. Basically I got to ride in the boat and watch them waterski on the weekends. When we moved to Florida, to Tampa, in the early, early 50's, my Dad's passion for boats moved on to fishing boats. He built a 25-foot double plank wood fishing boat with an inboard engine.

**L10: Were you helping your father when he was actually working on the boats?**

GF: Yeah, as much as you can as a kid. Just hanging out and handing him screws. In those old wood boats there was a lot of brass screws. [laughing] It took a long time. And they had to soak the wood so that they could bend it to the curvature of the bottom and all of that. So it was a long process. How much I helped I don't really remember. I was just a tag along kid, watching. So I went to high school in Tampa. Worked on a cattle ranch. Was in the AG program in high school. Got out of high school. Decided that it was time to go in the army. So I went in the army for three years.

I was in the 82nd Airborne Division and then I was with the Special Forces until 1964. That was right when the Vietnam thing started. So I got out. I felt lucky I didn't have to go to Vietnam.

**L10: When you got out of the service -**

GF: Then I went to electronics school in Miami. On the GI bill. Back then computers were just kind of getting started real good and so we were going into computer electronics. Then I worked for RCA. But while I was at Miami, in school, I met a guy named Art Koser. He now works for CorrectCraft and has for years and year and years. Art and I were roommates and we skied together. He had a little fiberglass outboard boat with a 50 Mercury on it. We'd have to stand up on the bank and let the boat get a jump start to get started on the slalom because it wouldn't pull us up. When we both left school, we moved to West Palm Beach. There we met Rob Shirley at the ski club at Palm Beach, at his waterski school actually. One day they were out flying flat wing kites from the ski school. Art and I were just skiing and we didn't even know how to approach those guys. But they had a couple of kites up at one time and one wrecked.

We went over to help them pick up the aftermath of the kites, that's when I met Rob. I got to know Rob and then started hanging out at ski school with him. And then I got involved in the ski club, and I ended up being the clown on the ski team. At the time I was still working at RCA. One day I came home from work and went to the ski school and found Rob ripping the engine out of his Nautique.

**L10: Now what year was this?**

GF: This was in '67/'68, right around that time period. Rob was a draftsman of sorts. He had been for Pratt Whitney. He had been involved in boating and waterskiing in Tennessee prior to moving to Florida. He was a waterskiier and he decided to design a different boat. We started in an old CorrectCraft and cut it up and modified it and built the first MasterCraft boat while we were in West Palm Beach.

**L10: Built the first one?**

GF: Yup. The first MasterCraft in West Palm Beach. Actually out of Boynton Beach, I believe is where the little fiberglass shop was. We didn't have our own fiberglass shop so we had to do it somewhere. I just had become friends with Rob. Art and I would go down and work at the fiberglass shop helping him out with whatever he was doing. He was running the ski school during the day and we'd work on the boats at night.

**L10: So that first boat popped out.**

GF: Yeah. It was an orange and white one. It had an orange bottom: tangerine orange bottom, white deck. I remember the first time we put it in the water we didn't know where all the drain plugs went. We had the motor box up there was water squirting out of it like a sprinkler system. He was going to Canton, Ohio, to the National's with it. So they got all of that fixed.

**L10: Now did he name it MasterCraft back then?**

GF: Yeah! We were trying to think of a name and we were just popping names back and forth all the time. Somewhere along the way he and I were talking one afternoon and I don't remember just who's idea it was for MasterCraft, but it popped up and it sounded good to us. That's the way it started. Just kind of out of the blue. So then he went to Canton, Ohio, to the Nationals. And then he'd go through the process of building one boat at a time and find somebody to buy it and then build another one. I left West Palm Beach and went to Boston and went to work for Honeywell.

I had been dating Rob's sister, so she came to Boston and we got married up there and then decided that we'd go back to Florida. So on the way back to Florida we stopped in Tennessee to see her folks. And lo and behold, we got there late one Saturday night, and Rob and his family had arrived in Tennessee the night before. There had been an accident at the ski school in Florida, where a girl had been up on the ski ramp and somebody went by with a boat, and skied around the ramp, threw the rope up and the rope wound around the girl's neck. Apparently it jerked her off the ramp by the neck. There were lawsuits flying everywhere and everyone was down on him.

**L10: Was she badly injured?**

GF: No, it didn't kill her, luckily. So, with all the lawsuits going on, and everybody scared to death of what was going to happen, Rob had to bail out of West Palm. He'd got a rental truck and moved his family back to Tennessee. We decided to stay in Tennessee and I went to work for Oak Ridge National Laboratories with Union Carbide. In the meantime, Rob got the molds up there and I started helping him in my spare time. We were building one boat at a time

out of this little two-car garage that we could barely squeeze in to. We'd put the mold in the garage, paint it and lay it up, built it. And then we'd order all of the parts.

**L10: How many people were helping besides you and Rob?**

GF: Pretty much just Rob and I at the time. His Dad was there and his wife and his sister, but we did most of it.

**L10: Good times? Good days?**

GF: Oh yeah. Except for the resin on our bellies setting up because the building was so narrow that when we were laying up the glass there wasn't enough room to back away from the mold so we'd have resin all over us. But we built boats. When he'd get one finished he'd head for Florida and drive around until he could find somebody to buy it. He'd have enough money to come back home, buy enough parts to build another one. So we did that for a while. Then on his Dad's place up on the corner of Binfield road where the old plant still is today, he built a little 30 by 100 metal building and moved into it. When we moved into it I quit Union Carbide and he and I built boats out of this huge 3000-foot square building.

**L10: Still just you two guys?**

GF: Yup. We'd build one boat a week and suffer through the process. We'd have to build our own trailers. Do our own fiberglass work. Rig the boats. And then Rob would go down the road and sell it to somebody.

**L10: Who did what at the factory?**

GF: I learned to do everything there. I welded the trailers. I painted the trailers. Rigged them, rigged the boats, gelcoated, fiberglass work, woodwork. When there's only two or three of you, you do everything. That went on for a number of years.

**L10: Now at that time did you have a monetary interest in the company or were you just an employee?**

GF: No, I didn't have any money in the company. God, it's a long time ago. I was thinking that maybe Rob had borrowed a little bit of money from the SBA or somebody. I don't remember how we had enough money to get going. But I never had an interest. I was supposed to have gotten an interest, but I never did. I was just on salary and I just worked fifty or sixty or seventy or eighty hours a week; whatever it'd take.



Lots of times on Tuesday afternoon I'd leave for the Carolinas to go pick up an engine. Drive all night, come back, get the engine started on Wednesday morning. Take a nap, get up, go back to work. Get the boat rigged and on Thursday I'd start building the trailer while they were finishing up the boat. And then by Friday afternoon or Friday night or whenever it was that we got the boat finished I'd hook up behind my truck, take off for the weekend, get it delivered and to get back to put the money in the bank Monday morning to make payroll for Friday. So we lived pretty much hand to mouth on a day to day basis for several years.

**L10: Now how long did that last? You said several years.**

GF: I was there until 1977. At the time that I left, I'd already gotten a divorce from his sister. At that time, Rob and I had kind of got on the outs with each other. And I decided that I wanted to go on and do something else. When I turned in my notice to Rob and told him that I'd work for four or five or six weeks, however long it took to get everybody up to speed on what I was doing. I didn't want them to have trouble with my leaving. I told him that on Sunday and on Wednesday Rob flew out of town and left a week's paycheck on my desk with a note telling me not to be there when he came home that evening. I guess he flew out of town so that he wouldn't have to face me and tell me that I was gone.

**L10: That made you feel a little bitter?**

GF: I was pretty pissed off about that whole thing. And to back track a little bit, I had gone to the MasterCraft attorney's in town a month or two prior to that to set up a contract to get an outside source to build some boats for us because we couldn't produce enough in our facility. We thought we'd farm out some of the fiberglass work. While I was at that meeting getting the agreement set up with the attorneys, and they asked me if I would be interested in getting in the boat business with one of their business partners. I told them I didn't think so, but I'd think about it. So when Rob shoved me out of there without even talking to me or paying me any severance I was pretty pissed off about it. That afternoon I went to see those attorneys. They put me in touch with their business partner and within a week they wanted me to put together a business plan to start another boat company. They actually wanted to get in the inboard ski boat business. That's how the ski Supreme was born in '77.

**L10: How did you come up with your first design?**

GF: There was an old bodyshop complex and we rented three stalls in it. I took a friend of mine, a doctor who had a MasterCraft and we took his boat, stripped it down and then I modified it. I added some different things that I wanted to try on the bottom. My idea was to make the boat ride a lot smoother so it didn't pound so bad and I wanted it to track a little different. I then built another deck for it.

And that's kind of how Ski Supreme started. At the time or shortly thereafter we got that started and got producing boats. Then Rob sued me personally and sued Ski Supreme and my partners and everybody. That went on for about 18 or 20 months. Essentially him accusing me of copying the MasterCraft and stealing all of his trade secrets.

**L10: OK, so they sue you guys. Did it stop production?**

GF: No. We didn't stop production but we were starting to do real well. When I built the Ski Supreme I put a lot of innovations onto this boat. I already had decided that we would probably not do as much of the tournament scene and we would go after the more recreational buyer being that the market is much broader there. I wanted to start putting in creature comforts to make it more appealing. We put on a swim platform and pads on the inside and basically dressed the boat up. The changes I made to the bottom of the running surface made it run better, run smoother. So, overall we had a very nice boat.

**L10: What was the name of that first model?**

GF: It was a Ski Supreme. It was just an 18 foot- 18 and a half foot -I don't remember just how big it was, direct drive, inboard standard.

**L10: What type of power?**

GF: I had established a relationship with Paul Fletcher and Chuck Thurman at Pleasurecraft (PCM) when I was at MasterCraft. So I used the PCM pretty much all the time until this year.

**L10: How long was your involvement with Ski Supreme?**

GF: I started it in '77 and it lasted until January of '80 when my two partners, after the lawsuit decided that they wanted out of the boat business. They sold it off to another fellow, and he and I couldn't really come to any kind of terms that were acceptable. So I finally decided to leave in January of '80.

**L10: What's next on your agenda?**

GF: I left and I took my \$25,000 and started Supra in February of '80. At that time, when I started Supra, we were going to make a real recreational inboard ski boat. A cross between maybe a Sea Ray and a Ski Supreme or a MasterCraft.

**L10: Now where was this at? In Tennessee still?**

GF: In Tennessee. Right outside of Maryville, a little town called Greenback.

MasterCraft was in Maryville. One of the little communities outside of it was Louisville, that's where Ski Supreme was. And then a little to the south of where MasterCraft was Greenback. I rented an old farmer's co-op warehouse where they stored fertilizer. I started Supra there.

**L10: Now you had no partners at that time?**

GF: No. I didn't have any partners. In '80 we were in another recession, big time. I liked that because if you try to get in a business when everything's running hard, it's like trying to get on a merry-go-round at full speed. It's hard to grab it and jump fast enough. So I felt that the best time would be to start in a real down economic situation so when the economy got better we could grow with the economy. So we started. We built a wide, high sided, fat looking boat. And it was a closed bow. We made three models of that boat by just changing the windshield style.

**L10: What was the first model?**

GF: It was Supra. One was called the Sport. One was called the Star. And the other one was called the Beast. In the Beast we put a big 454 in there. The side windows was what we changed on the windshield to make them look different. And of course the graphic name on it. We kind of broke new ground with this fat model. We even advertised it as just a family run-about and ski boat. After the lawsuit with Rob Shirley and MasterCraft I couldn't afford to retain an attorney for somebody coming after me again. So I went off in the southern area where CorrectCraft and MasterCraft and these other guys wouldn't even think at all. I wanted to get established before I did anything to invade their territory. So we started with this fat thing. They all laughed at it. But the people that still have them love them. The old ones.

**L10: They're almost reminiscent of the boat that's now known as the Supra Launch, aren't they?**

GF: Yeah, they sure are. They were all closed bows. So in '83 we cut the front of the boat out and made a bow rider.

**L10: Now that was the first example -**

GF: We called it the Supra Rider. And it was the first open bow inboard family ski boat at the time.

**L10: The first inboard open bow?**

GF: Yes. A friend of mine had a Sea Ray open bow. I sat and watched him and his

family for two weekends using their bow ridge. And I thought, "Well, this makes good sense. We can waterski with the rope on the tow line.

Everybody's got to get up in the front, out of the rear seat, so we'll just open the bow up. It'll work and we'll make this open bow and families can still have a ski boat, and high sides will make everyone with kids feel safer. We were all comfortable with that so we went that way.

**L10: What was the market response?**

GF: Oh, it was real good. The biggest thing that I did different was that I didn't really make it a true walk through like you would see in a Sea Ray or in a lot of the boats today. I made a padded "playpen" area up in the front so that I could use the room that the walkthrough takes up for storage. I built in a cooler and made storage underneath the bow area. My goal was - is still - to make a smoother riding direct drive inboard ski boat with lots of room to put all your towels, pocketbooks and stuff.

**L10: Still exists today?**

GF: Still exists today. I still use it. I'm using it at Aztec. I still believe in it. Most people that have ever had one with a playpen in it really like it. It is different but it works good and it makes a lot of storage.

**L10: How long did you stay with Supra?**

GF: Supra lasted 'til about 1990, when I took it public. In the meantime, after '83 we did the open bow. Then I was working on the Comp TS6M. I was ready to enter the hard-core tournament waterski market with MasterCraft and CorrectCraft with a true ski boat. So we introduced the Comp TS6M. In 1987, we pulled the World Championships in London with it. We pulled three World Cups with it. We pulled three or four European Championships with it. We took it to Russia before the Iron Curtain came down and pulled the European Championships over there. So we were doing real well with the Comp TS6M. I'd also made a longer, narrower, 21-foot Mariah open and closed bow. Then I made a Saltare 23 footer.

**L10: Now the Mariah eventually became it's own boat company?**

GF: Yeah, Mariah boat company - I was building that Mariah model and they were going to be in the IO business and they called me and wrote me a letter and asked if they could use my name. I said go ahead, it won't bother me, as long as you stay out of the inboard business, I'll stay out of the IO business.



**L10: Well, they've kept their promise.**

GF: Yeah, they have. They have. Then I built the 23 footer in an open and closed model. Then in 1987 we had a dealer meeting in Calloway Gardens, Georgia. We took two V-drives, open and closed. We put the V-drives in the 23-foot model and took two prototypes to the dealer meeting.

**L10: V-drives were not that common in those days.**

GF: No. I'm not saying there weren't any V-drives, but there wasn't any in the waterski business. The V-drives have been around for years and years. Anyway, we took the V-drive to Calloway and the dealers liked it. The company was growing as fast as I could handle it.

**L10: when did you decide to take it public?**

GF: In '90. We never really finished developing the V-drive because I wanted it to be a 60-mile per hour boat. We were at 58 miles per hour and I was looking for two or three more. I really didn't have enough time and resources to finalize that boat. In '88 I got worried about the economy, by that time we had grown to doing in 1989, eight boats a day.

**L10: So you were producing a fair number of boats?**

GF: Yeah. We produced seventeen hundred and sixty boats that year, but I knew the economy was about to take a flop. And I knew I didn't have enough cash reserves to get us through the big recession that was coming. I decided to take the company public after failing to raise any interest from acquisition brokers. When we went public we raised some money and got things going but shortly after that our chief investment bank sustained some losses in the marine industry and started tightening up on us. Finally, they pulled our loan and said that we were in a distressed industry, that we were a high risk company.

And to back track a little bit, while I was at Supra, I had started Moomba in a friend of mine's garage. I knew someday I was going to have to sell Supra off, so I was going to start Moomba and it was going to be my retirement project for me and my son, David. We were going to build this economic line of boats. Simple, inexpensive, keep the company small. This really never happened because I was forced to merge all of my companies into one when we went public with Supra. It was done so I wouldn't have a conflict of interest. Of course, I never got paid for any of that so I was down to nothing.

**L10: The bank forced your company into receivership?**

GF: They told us that we really needed to go bankrupt or liquidate. So we decided to liquidate our inventory and pay the bank. Well, we did that. But the problem is, when you liquidate like that you've actually just given away your profit just to liquidate. You end up not owing the bank, but losing all of that profit. After that it was back to the day to day, trying to find some more investors. Then we merged with another company that was a marine related company to get listed on NASDAQ. So we went through that process. But in the meantime, the investment bankers out of Denver were slowly but surely taking over, taking charge. Bottom line is, the company became insolvent in '94, early '94.

**L10: So that was the end of your involvement?**

GF: That was the end of my involvement. At one time, for about three weeks, my stock was worth a little over fifteen million. At the end, it was worthless. So I essentially left. I lost my house and lost my boat, my everything. And left with my furniture.

**L10: Heartbreak?**

GF: Heartbreak. So I went to Florida to lick my wounds and to rest because I was just absolutely wore out from three or four years of this constant battle over going public and going through the process and traveling around the country for the company. Over the next nine months I worked with Paul Fletcher at Iruette Marine and with Bob Jessen and Roger Cruiser at Ski Brendella. Eventually I went to Nashville. I just hung out in Nashville with a friend of mine named Gordy McKelvy. He used to be a Supra dealer for me and we were good friends. I stayed at his house putting another boat company idea together. I did some drawings and did some research. We put a whole prospectus together, but we never really could find suitable partners.

**L10: What's next?**

GF: I went to the Chicago boat show, looking around and I met a guy named Bob Smith who owned Sea Sprite and some other companies. He was also wanting to get into the inboard ski boat business. He offered me a job under the pretense that he either wanted to buy an existing company or start a new one. My preference was to start a new one. His preference was, and he had the money, to buy Supra.

**L10: What year are we at now?**

GF: '96, somewhere in there where I went to work for Bob Smith. I worked up at the Sea Sprite factory for a while until he finally got around to buying Supra. When I got to Supra, I really thought that I was going to be the general manager. That's what had been alluded to me. Actually, what they really wanted me to do was to

sell the boats that were in inventory in the field. It didn't work. I left.

**L10: So things weren't so smooth?**

GF: That's right. Later I go to dinner with a friend of mine that had been my chief financial officer at Supra years earlier. He said he had some friends that would like to be in the boat business. Because there was just a lot of boat business manufacturing in and around the Knoxville area. And so I said, well, that's fine. Why don't you do whatever you got to do. I'm open to do whatever. And so I told them to go ahead and get it set up. That I had too much contingent liability because Supra and the public company of (Aspen Marine Group) were in bankruptcy. I said I don't want any ownership because I've got this public company lawsuit going on.

**L10: So how do you meet the guys at Viper?**

GF: Originally, a friend of mine who had been my chief financial officer at Supra years earlier mentioned that he had some friends that would like to be in the boat business. Well, these guys got some partners together and we started the Aztec company. They had their own business plan put together, how they wanted to do it. I was doing the boat, getting things set up. And little by little, their business plan was different from where I thought we really ought to be going. Their investors got sour on the thing, and they sold it off to some other investors. And then they didn't want to see it through either. So a friend of mine called a businessman, Charles Luna in Mountain Home, who owned Viper Boats. He was looking to do an acquisition. So he bought Aztec Marine last December and moved us out to Mountain Home, Arkansas into the bass boat plant where they built Viper Boats.

**L10: What's your position at the company?**

GF: I'm the ski boat division manager.

**L10: When was it decided that Aztec would enter the wakeboarding market?**

GF: Well, it came on pretty quick. I'd been watching it develop and I became convinced that it was going to be big. The first thing I did was start with a tower design with a built-in bimini top. We fit it to our open bow and began our entry into the wakeboard business. I'm real excited about wakeboarding. I've always wanted to be on the recreational, family boat side of boating, rather than being in the tournament market end of it. Wakeboarding fits this style. Coming down to the LTen boat test and being around a lot of really good wakeboarders has been very educational for me. I believe it'll help me improve our boat and its wake performance.

**L10: You're implying that we'll see some new things happening at Aztec?**

**GF: Definitely. I have some ideas I'd like to implement. Particularly with bottom shape. We'll probably consider V-drives in the next year or two as well. But right now we're trying to develop the customer base, our dealer base, and get distribution going. Then when we bring new products on, we'll be in good distribution form.**

**L10: When it's all done and said, what does George Fowler want to be remembered for? Certainly it could be a variety of things, but what do you want to be remembered for most?**

**GF: Oh, that's a hard question. I don't really know that I've even thought about that. I'd like to think that along the way that I've been fair and open minded and haven't stepped on people's toes. I guess one of the things I've always considered myself as a developer of new ideas. I like doing new things. I like bringing new things to the market place. I like innovating. I like designing new products. That's pretty much who I am.**