



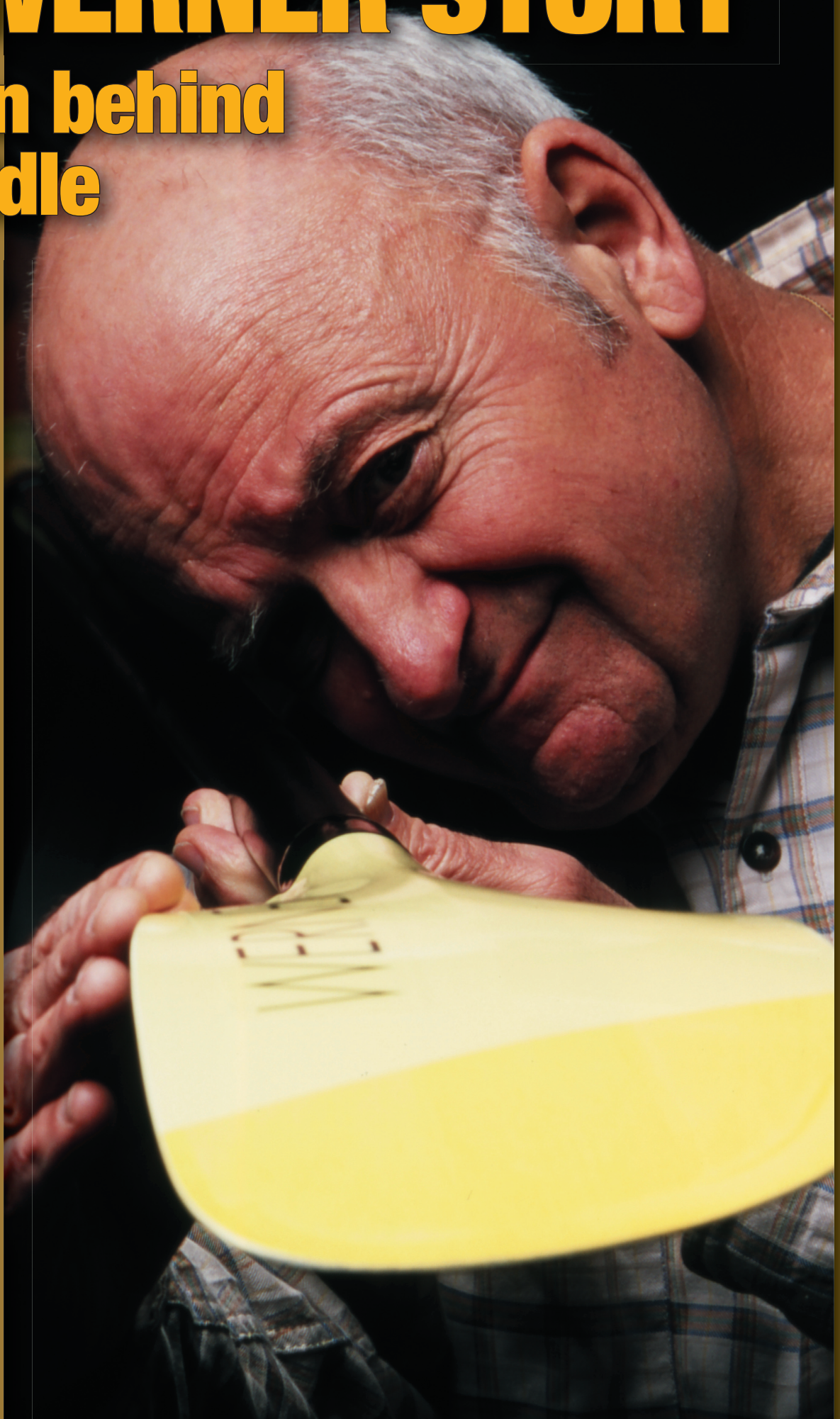
Profile

THE WERNER STORY

The man behind the paddle

The story of Werner Furrer and Werner Paddles is a tale of determination and ingenuity. It is a tale of a bright, motivated, Swiss-born engineer combining his aptitude for innovation with his lifelong passion for the outdoors. It is a story of a family paddling together and working together. It is a story marked by hardship and hard work, but highlighted by inspired successes and milestone creations that produced a brand of paddles now sold around the world.

Words - Tyler Williams
Photos courtesy of the Furrer family

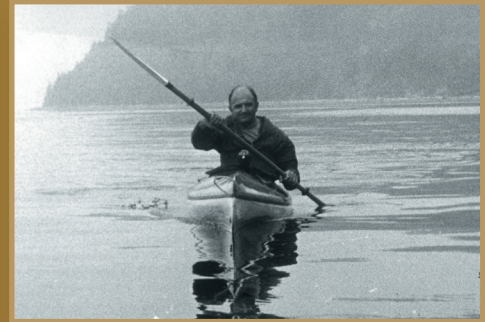




Northwest rain in the summer of '66 when the family is still small.

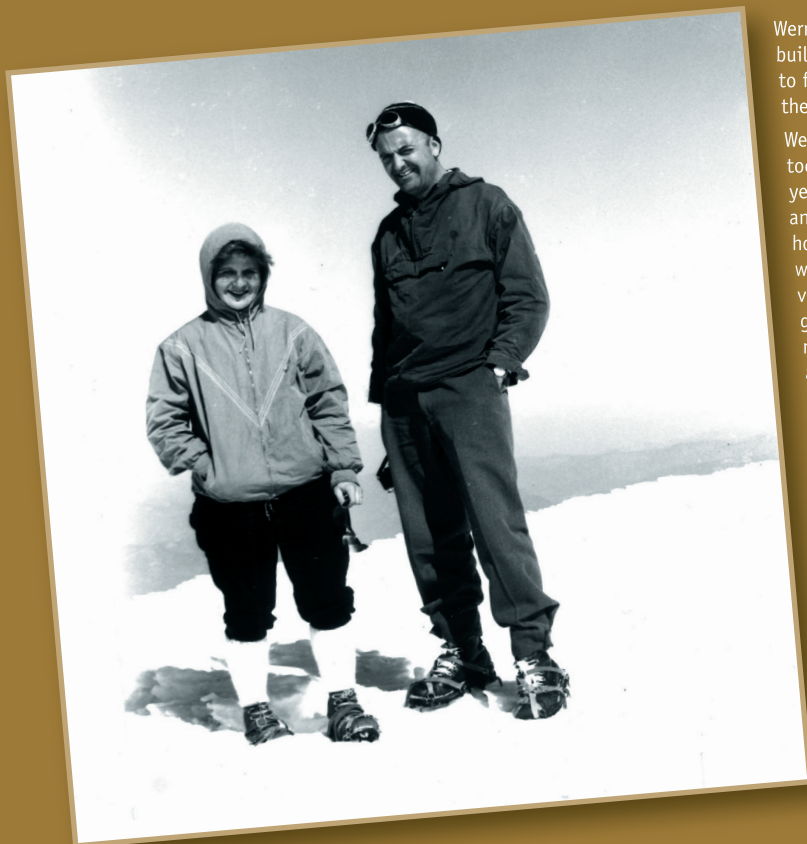


The following year and a bigger truck is needed for more boats.



Werner Sr. in his T-500 touring kayak, 1970.

The view from the summit of 3,700-meter Mt. Adams was stunning. To the west sat the perfect white cone of Mt. St. Helens. South of that loomed Oregon's unmistakable Mt. Hood. The triad of snowy peaks surrounded a sea of hazy blue ridgetops that hid innumerable river canyons leading to the not-too-distant ocean. The two mountaineers sharing this vista, Werner and Martha Furrer, each held ice axes with inscriptions on the wooden shafts. The engravings consisted of a W and an M joined bottom to top in a mirror image, so that the peaks of the letters conjured the mountain pinnacles where the axes were used. Along with being their initials, the W stood for water and the M for mountains. Married as one, the two letters symbolized the couple's passion for the outdoors as well as their unfailing commitment to one another. The summit of Mt. Adams was a moment of triumph for the team of two, but one thing was noticeably missing: Junior Furrer. As much as the Swiss immigrants loved mountain climbing, they realized it wasn't an activity they could readily share with their growing family. Their moment of triumph became a moment of epiphany. Mountaineering would take a back seat. Paddling would become their next outdoor passion, and the entire Furrer clan would be included.



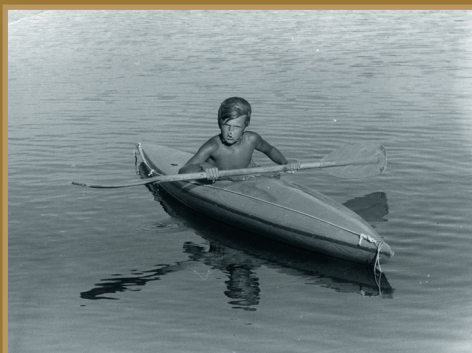
Martha and Werner stand on top of Mt. Adams, Washington State in 1964.

Werner and Martha turned from the breathtaking summit with a new resolve to build a strong family. They glissaded off the snow dome of Mt. Adams and began to follow the water downhill, off the glaciers, through the forests, and back to the sea from where they had come, and where their future lay.

Werner had always had an appreciation for nature, instilled by his father who took him paddling for the first time in the 1930s, when Werner was seven years old. At the time however, the Nazi movement was gaining momentum and recreation took a back seat to simple survival. War surrounded Werner's homeland of Switzerland. Food was in short supply, and the entire country was on edge. The Furrer's household flower pots were re-planted with edible vegetables. Werner's father, who was dark and non-Aryan looking, stood a good chance of being sent to a concentration camp. This dire potential never came to pass, but young Werner learned quickly to make the best of a difficult situation.

His knack for turning a negative into a positive surfaced after the war, when at age twenty-one a military jeep accident landed him in the hospital for weeks. Lying invalid with severe head trauma and a badly damaged left arm, Werner's very existence was at stake, his future uncertain at best. During this difficult time, he met a student nurse who not only nurtured his recuperation, but also delved into his philosophical views, keeping his mind active from the life-draining sick bed. The nurse turned out to be Werner's soul-mate, Martha. He remembers, «Our courtship was filled with long talks that often chased romance to the side.» But the two were in love, and marriage was on the horizon.

“Out of practicality, Werner Jr. found a stick in the forest along shore that suited his small hands, and with the help of dad, nailed wooden house shingles on the ends for blades.”



Bruce in a custom designed kids' kayak, 1972.



Martha in front, Werner in back, Melinda the passenger.



Getting ready for the river 1965 style!



In the late 1940s, however, things weren't so simple. Martha was raised Catholic, while Werner was Protestant. The couple would have to align religiously before marriage, and even then members of their families were sure to be deeply offended. A life together meant a life encumbered with family strife, and there was seemingly no satisfactory solution. Their coupling appeared to be destined for failure. So, they exercised the only real option they had left. They eloped across the ocean.

Their first night in North America was spent in the basement of a friend of a friend in Toronto, Canada. Mice scurried across their blankets as the young couple tried to rest in the cold, unfamiliar new land. Despite their vulnerability, Werner's positive confidence persisted. «I thought,» he relates, «If I'm worth something, I'll make it somehow.»

Before his jeep accident, Werner had trained in engineering, so he pursued work in that field, and luckily got an interview with a Toronto firm. His knowledge was there, they said, but his English was not, and they sent him

to actually get married.» Werner and Martha wasted no time. Within the week, they found the neutral Church of England and made it official, Mr. and Mrs. Furrer.

Werner eventually found an engineering job in Canada, and soon his work took him across the border into the United States. The Furrers lived in New Haven, Connecticut, where Werner was a design draftsman for Sergeant Locks. Now making a livable wage, they settled into American life and started a family, first with Werner Junior in 1954. New Haven provided a satisfactory existence, but it offered too few opportunities to explore the natural world that was so important to them. When a summer hot spell essentially forced the family into the Adirondack Mountains to escape the heat, they realized that their lives were missing something—mountains and water. They left the crowded Atlantic Seaboard within the year, moving instead to the rural countryside of upstate New York.

Here in the idyllic Adirondacks, Werner and Martha regularly went lake paddling in a double Klepper foldboat

Werner saw the pollution first hand during a precious weekend trip to a nearby lake. As he prepared to launch his boat on the blackwater pond, he noticed a rank odor just as a park ranger approached. "Don't worry about the terds in the water," the ranger nervously assured him. Saddened and disappointed with his new home, Werner put his kayak back on his car, returned to town, and proceeded to get thoroughly drunk, a rare event for him. «I decided then,» he says, «that we had to move.»

They loaded up the family wagon and commenced a three-week road trip to find a new home. When the Furrer's landed in the small fishing and logging town of Hoquiam, Washington, Werner noticed something he'd not seen the entire trip—fathers and sons working together. That family cooperation, along with the natural beauty of the nearby Pacific coastline and the Cascade and Olympic Mountains, was enough to convince them that they had found the right place. The Furrers were moving west.

Werner furthered his engineering credentials, they moved one final time to the Seattle area, and the family grew.



In the garage, Werner Sr. with Bruce and Erich building the plug for the form of the first fiberglass kayak in 1966.

“Ideas from Europe were taken back to Washington State, and design principles from Werner Senior were applied. The result was the production of quality paddles that are now sold worldwide”

away.

Undeterred, he got a job through the Canadian employment office washing venetian blinds, laboring in the same high rise offices where he was fully qualified to have his own desk. At night, he took English classes.

The customs of the new country were even more foreign to Werner and Martha than the language. Shortly after arriving in Toronto, they went to city court to get married. Publicly professing their commitment was important, but also practical. No landlords would rent to an unmarried couple in 1952.

The judge presented them with paperwork, they signed, and that was that. The two had a picnic to celebrate, then Martha left for her night shift at the hospital (her foreign accent precluded her from the more popular day shifts). Several weeks later, a new friend questioned the validity of their legal marriage, and they proudly presented the paperwork they had received from the judge. «This is just a marriage license,» the friend chided, «you've still got

with Werner Junior in tow. Even at age four, he was using his own paddle, but his hands were too small to manage the one he had been given. Out of practicality, young Junior found a stick in the forest along shore that suited his small hands, and with the help of dad, nailed wooden house shingles on the ends for blades. The little Werner had apparently inherited his father's engineering gene. It was a crude beginning, but a harbinger of things to come.

Werner Senior's career was thriving. He designed air conditioning units for secret military projects, then developed load cells to measure thrust on centrifugal compressors. It was heady stuff, and the same aerodynamic concepts would come in handy years later. His next job transferred the family to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, a move Werner Senior calls «a total calamity.»

In the late 1950s Pittsburgh was at the center of American industrialism. The environmental movement of the 1970s had yet to begin, and the degradation of the natural world in the Pennsylvania steel belt was at its peak.

Following Werner Junior were Erich, Bruce, and a baby girl, Melinda. As time went on, the entire clan could often be found paddling together, a menagerie of boats zig-zagging across the waters of Puget Sound. A favorite destination for longer trips was spectacular Barkley Sound in nearby British Columbia.

On an excursion there during the drug-ripe sixties, Werner Senior noticed some of the kids sneaking suspiciously on the fringes of camp. Thinking father was unaware of their shenanigans, the teenagers were quite surprised when their conservative dad sprung into the group and grabbed a smoldering marijuana joint. After taking a slow toke, Werner Sr. looked down at the wide-eyed kids and asked, «So this is what the big deal is all about eh?»

An open and honest discussion on drugs, sex, and responsibility ensued. The generation gap that was so prevalent during the era found no roots here. Clearly, the Furrer family was different.

As the kids grew, the family gravitated from ocean tou-



ring toward river running. Whitewater boating required more specialized equipment, so the household garage was transformed into a manufacturing center with the smell of fiberglass ever present. Werner Senior remembers, «For flotation we used beach balls. Life jackets? The ones made with kapok were cumbersome, so we made our own with modern foam. Spraycovers? We made our own using wetsuit material. Helmets? We made our own by first wrapping plaster of Paris around Werner Junior's head and making a mold out of fiberglass. Footrests? Not available! We tried several designs and then made workable models.»

Naturally, paddle evolution took a step forward too. «Since no suitable paddles were available I made one myself, using a wooden curtain rod and a piece of plywood. The emblem I painted was the same W and M as on the ice picks, with a circle added to symbolize the growing family.» Werner paddles had begun, but they were still a long way from being a commercial venture.

Sales of the Furrer family paddles began almost by ac-

But success didn't come overnight. Werner Junior had returned from Europe with a vision of the paddles he wanted to make, but his father's engineering and business acumen were needed to bring the ideas to completion, and the process took years.

Many days were spent along the rivers of Washington testing various paddle blades. Werner Senior would place the blades in moving current and observe the hydrodynamics at work. Reciting his observations to his son Erich for transcription, he would then call for the next blade design, which was at the ready from young Bruce. The various prototypes and Werner Senior's notes were then brought back to the garage, where Werner Junior would carve out the design refinements with the assistance of little sister Melinda. Of course mom Martha was the single-handed support crew to the whole operation. It was a team operation the entire way.

Martha played a key role in the distribution of the paddles too. Having been an avid climber, she maintained ties with legendary mountaineer Jim Whittaker. Whitta-

a methodical puzzle of fiberglass, resin, and trial and error. The demand for Werner boats never matched the increasing paddle requests, and the labor time on boats was inordinately high. By the 1980s, plastic kayaks almost entirely eliminated the demand for fiberglass boats. The Furrers decided to stick with paddles.

The boat-building era did introduce an important tool into the mix, however. Werner Senior recalls, «To design new kayaks, better drawings were needed. Learning that computers might help in lofting, I bought an HP-85 computer, modern at that time.» It was 1980, and computers were a rare sight in most homes. Werner, again, was ahead of his time.

The new business tool didn't come without frustration however. After spending hours figuring out the new computer technology, he would take night classes in commercial bookkeeping to keep the business running efficiently. Of course he was still a full time engineer at Scott Paper Company, too. With his driving work ethic and recognizable Swiss accent, Werner Senior had gained



Training on the Eiskanal in Augsburg, Germany 1972.

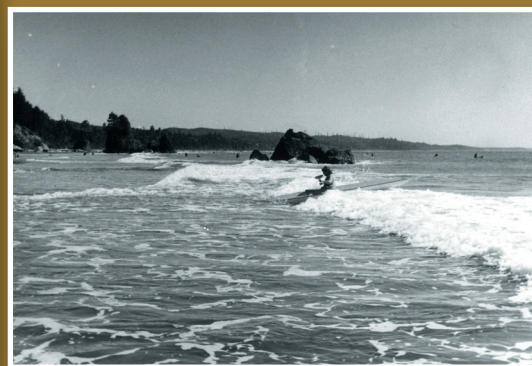


Little Werner, 3 years old, helping to set up the Klepper Foldboat, Adirondack Park, N.Y State during the summer of 1957!



Werner Sr. on his first try in Pacific Ocean saltwater, Washington State, 1962.

“When a summer hot spell essentially forced the family into the Adirondack Mountains to escape the heat, they realized that their lives were missing something—mountains and water.”



Of course Martha had to give it a go too!

cident. Werner Junior was pursuing whitewater racing during the period, and as his skills increased, so did his paddle making technique. Fiberglass blades were added to the wooden doweling rod shafts, and the paddles began to attract attention at local races. As an informal side venture to slalom racing, Werner Junior began taking paddle orders, selling them for \$17 a piece. He sold enough to help fund a trip to Europe during the summer of 1971, and the evolution of modern day paddles took another huge leap forward.

At 18, Werner Junior was the United States junior K-1 slalom champion, and he had his sights on the 1972 Olympics. In Europe he trained with the German national team, where he honed his racing skills and saw various European boat and paddle designs. His return from Europe in the fall of 1971 signaled a seminal moment in the saga of whitewater globalization. Ideas from Europe were taken back to Washington State, and design principles from Werner Senior were applied. The end result was the production of quality paddles that are now sold worldwide.

ker was a board member at Seattle based Recreational Equipment Incorporated, the climbing equipment co-op that is now one of the largest outdoor retailers in the world. When Whittaker caught wind of a hot new paddle made by Martha's family, he put in an order to get them into REI stores, and the retail arm of Werner Paddles had begun. REI continues to be one of Werner's biggest accounts today.

Just as the first paddles made it into REI stores, the Furrer family delved deeper into boat building. That interest, like paddle construction, had been spawned out of necessity when Werner Junior was a toddler. With a growing family, Werner and Martha saw the need for more boats in the Furrer quiver, and Werner Senior unhesitatingly took to the task. He reminisces, «That first kayak took 30 hours to build, cost 30 dollars, and weighed 30 pounds.»

Boat designs had been refined somewhat by the time Werner Junior and his brothers got into the game twenty years later, but the process remained the same. It was

quite a reputation at the large company. Of his day job, Werner off-handedly recalls, “I made a few inventions for them.”

Werner Junior and his brother Erich were also inventing. With input from their father, they were continually tweaking paddle designs for less flutter, using new materials for lighter weight, and adding reinforcements for more durability. The paddles became available through the Seattle paddling shop Pacific Water Sports, and demand soared. When orders exceeded production capacity, brother Bruce was formally made the company manager, and the business continued to grow. Werner Junior reflects, “It was a case of being in the right place at the right time.”

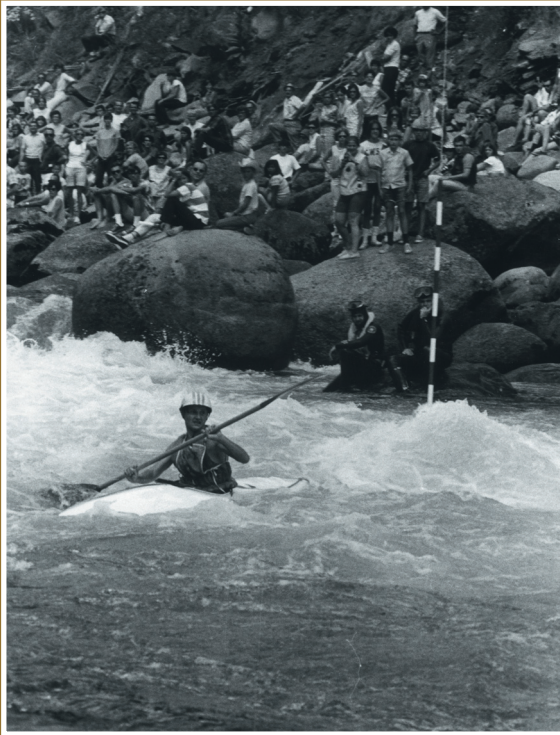


With the boys occupied in paddle manufacturing, their little sister Melinda took over the reigns as the family's leading paddler. She became a fixture of the Seattle area whitewater scene in the 1980s, running an array of the regions innumerable steep creeks and big water rivers. When she needed a change of pace from whitewater, Melinda took up flatwater racing, always with her trusty Werner paddle in hand.

the trip, Werner Sr. recalls bluntly, «The mosquitoes were three layers thick.»

After moving to Washington, Werner Sr. split his paddling time between river and ocean. In 1972, he circumnavigated Puget Sound's tide-riddled Lopez Island in a voyageur canoe. Eight years later, he circled all of the Sound's San Juan Islands, this time by sea kayak.

and it will be understood—you're talking about a paddle. Looking at the logo on the blades, it will become clear that it's not a just a paddle, but a story: Werner, Martha, Water, Mountains, and Family.



Werner Jr. on the Wenatchee River in 1970 with a homemade helmet!



The whole family and one guest on Deep Lake, Wash. State, 1970.

“The entire clan could often be found paddling together, a menagerie of boats zig-zagging across the waters of Puget Sound.”



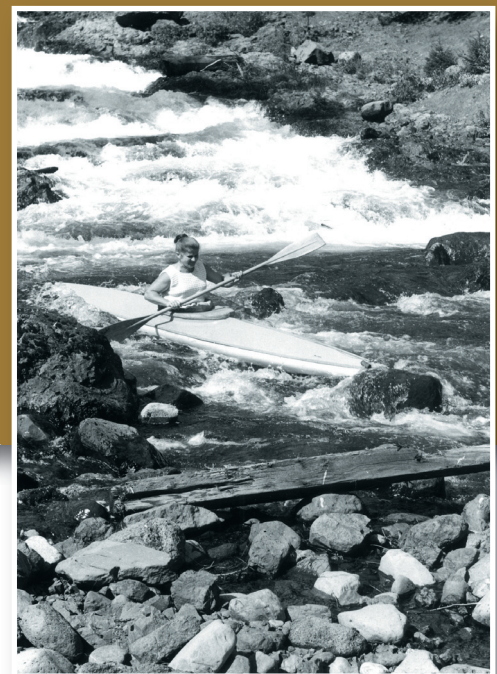
Gearing up for winter conditions.

His children were effectively carrying the paddling torch in the family, but Werner Sr. was never far behind. Throughout his many changes of residence, the development of his engineering career, the growth of Werner Paddles, and retirement, Werner kept paddling.

His greatest expedition was perhaps a kayak trip on the Missinaibi River in eastern Canada during the summer of 1958. In a two-man kayak, Werner and his partner followed the winding river for over 200 miles through the endless northern forests of the Canadian Shield. Two weeks later, they emerged at the tiny outpost of Moose Bay on the shores of James Bay. When queried about

When the need arose for a guidebook to area rivers, Werner Sr. of course took on the challenge. Again calling on his European background, he studied the formats of guidebooks from his old continent, and applied the best layouts to his new book. Werner Sr.'s classic Watertrails in Washington became the first river guidebook ever published for the water-logged region.

River paddler, ocean paddler, slalom coach, engineer; there could hardly be a more qualified individual to produce paddles than Werner Furrer. Today, Werner paddles are a part of paddling lexicon. Go to any paddler's gathering in the world and say «Can I borrow your Werner?»



Martha testing out some gear in 1966 before lifejackets and helmets!

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