

three years post-storm

Story and photos by Lindee Anderson

Ask any Gibson owner who has bought a boat from the Tennessee builder in the last year and they'll likely agree that there will come a day in the near future when Gibson boats are classified by two different categories: pre- and post-storm. The force of nature that tore through the Goodlettsville, Tenn., plant that day in early April, 2006 may have lasted a couple of hours, but it managed to alter nearly 40 years of Gibson's history, not to mention its fiberglass molds, documents and the building itself. The shelter of a boat hull—hoisted and in production—saved the lives of several Gibson staff members that day. While little of the business survived the brutality of the tornado, company president Bill Brummett III had no idea that the storm still to come was an even greater one.

Complete **Loss**

Walking among the aftermath, surveying the extent of the damage, it was easy for onlookers to recognize that the plant had suffered a total loss. Brummett quickly discovered, however, that the insurance company he'd been paying diligent premiums to for decades didn't view things from the same vantage point. The very company who had been given the stewardship to insure and protect the Gibson heritage was the same entity that was about to make the claim process an excruciating and frustrating one—seemingly intent on forcing Gibson to simply give up. However, the adjusting firm had no concept of the level of determination they were up against. Frustrating to be sure, but tragedy is not what this story is about. Not even close.

TOTAL DEVASTATION. To see the old plant today has been described by some as eerie. Everything is gone except for some tile flooring left over from a bathroom.



The decision to reconstruct the Gibson facility was a heavy one for the company president. Following in his father's footsteps with a family legacy and the welfare of his 40-plus employees weighing heavily on his shoulders, Brummett faced some dark hours and excruciating decisions. Many of his employees were part of the Gibson heritage, some with 30-plus years at the plant, finishing boats, crafting hulls and upholstering interior. With the insurance adjusting firm pressing its hard knuckles into Gibson's back and taking its easy time, Brummett watched his employees and their families draw closer to the jeopardy of losing everything they had worked their entire lives for.





Taking Inventory

The paperwork file of the Gibson claim alone weighed over 80 pounds and Brummett spent excruciating hours logging every nut, bolt, screwdriver and paperclip lost in the devastation.

“It was such a process to remember 40 years of inventory,” said Brummett. “Can you imagine? Every tool, every tiny bolt and screw had to be accounted for. It was impossible. We had everyone racking their brains to think of the items they used day in and day out.”

Worse yet, business wasn’t allowed to resume in a different location until the claim process was finalized and a decision was reached on its outcome. Gibson employees weren’t even allowed on the property—they couldn’t move or touch anything for the duration. Brummett watched and was helpless and frustrated as the molds, tools, blueprints, documents and supplies that could have been salvaged within a few days of the storm were finished off by the weather of the coming months.

“In our darkest hour, there was a moment when I realized I could just take the money and run,” explains Brummett. “But I couldn’t do that. I couldn’t put my employees out of work. They built this business and their lives around the work at Gibson. Many of our staff have been with us for decades and were losing everything—cars, houses. Yet, they didn’t lose



heart and were ready, waiting to come back to work when we got the green light.”

Finally after a long and tiresome battle, Gibson found its new home and slowly began putting the pieces of its legacy back together. Two years after the storm, the heartland builder was producing its first post-storm boat from the new plant just miles down the road in Portland, Tenn. In determining the best location for this new site, Brummett got out a map and drew a circle, including the homes of his employees. The new site was selected with the proximity of his staff in mind. Brummett wanted to be sure that the commute to work was a reasonable distance—his primary objective from the onset was to get his employees back to work as quickly as possible.

Gibson builders take pride in their work and it’s easy to recognize that when you walk through the doors of the new facility. Spotless work areas and efficient organization are impressive. Attention to detail as they hand-lay the fiberglass hull is impeccable. Before a Gibson boat leaves the plant, it undergoes an extreme quality control process to ensure every detail is just right. The new plant must run a tight ship; after all, its accommodations are considerably tighter than the old facility. But even though the space is smaller, its energy is bigger than ever before.




Proud Past, Promising Future

The Gibson heritage was conceived in 1968. Its first model, a 30-footer, met the need for a boat that would accommodate an entire family comfortably with the performance of a cruiser. At the height of its manufacturing output, the facility produced upwards of 150 units annually. These popular Gibson boats were built in mass-production, driven by demand for comfort and performance packaged with several floor plans to choose from.

Now, after the storm, Gibson's manufacturing mission has changed with far more emphasis on custom-built boats. Today, the Tennessee-based builder produces 15 to 24 units a year with the philosophy that "If you can dream it, we can do it."

"I had no idea what that concept would bring to Gibson," explains Brummett. "It's opened up a whole new realm in designing our boats. Our customers have come up with incredible and amazing concepts that I never would have thought to attempt. It has presented a host of new challenges and helped foster a new philosophy for the Gibson boat."

Gibsons are sold through a network of dealers and their owners are thousands-strong. There is an undefined sense of pride and a recognized camaraderie among their circle of fellow Gibson owners. Whether it's cruising the ICW, the deltas or a favorite lake, time spent aboard these boats is invaluable. Celebrating its 40-year anniversary in 2008, Gibson still proudly stands for all the same tradition, quality and performance that it always has, but things have changed somehow. There is a feeling within the walls of its new manufacturing facility, a realization among its builders that crafting these boats means something more. It is also a passion—building its

customers' dreams is a purpose that will surely make it possible for this Tennessee boat builder to endure another four decades and weather just about any storm. 

For More Information

The phone number listed in the January Buyer's Guide for Gibson Boats was incorrect. For information on Gibson, please call 615-325-9320 or visit www.gibsonboats.com.

