

All in the sailing family



The Genco boys in the early seventies (right to left) Nick, Nat Jr., and Nat Sr. feel it is all the family way.

Canada's Three Stooges? Our answer to the Marx Brothers? The Genco trio call themselves the former, but I see them as the latter. For example, even after four decades in Canada, Nat Sr. has that same Italian accent, just like Chico Marx. They even have a downstage brother Jim, who works at their loft but is not centrally in the fray, just like Zeppo Marx, whom classic movie buffs will remember as an innocent bystander to the insanity of the three principals.

Call them the Stooges or call them what you will, but as Nick Genco pointed out to me, "the little people are still here" while a lot of others have come and gone. The Genco persona is all about Italian emotion mixed with immigrant work ethics, combined with all that's good and bad about a family business. It has all added up to something of a sailing empire that includes a loft, a large canvas and upholstery business, two retail outlets (in Pickering, and the main operation on King Street in downtown Toronto), plus importation of sailing hardware and electronics.

The Genco legend (the word "legend" is perhaps a bit of a stretch) is based on the adventures of Nick, Nat Sr., and Nat Jr. That's less confusing once you realize that Nick and Junior are brothers, but Senior is their *cousin*. Senior is older (64) than Junior (55) and they're both Nat, but if you're among the many who have stumbled over the Jr. - Sr. relationship, now you know. To make things even less clear, Family 1 - Nick, Nat Jr., and Jim (the Zeppo-like unknown Genco) - are the sons of Vito Genco, a farmer who lived in Vita, Sicily (yes, Vito from Vita). Family Two - Nat Jr., and his sister Nardina - who worked in the loft for 32 years as a seamer and only retired last year - are the children of Vincenzo Genco, also of Vita. That in itself would make them cousins, but their mothers are *also sisters*. Stay with me here - Nick, Jr. and Jim (whose name is really Vincenzo, but let's not go there) are the sons of Michelina, while Sr. is the son of Caterina.

But enough of that. Nick, who is now 62, came with his family to Toronto in 1953 in the wave of Italian emigration. Leaving

school out of boredom at the age of 16, he decided he wanted to pursue an enthusiasm for boats. He headed from the Little Italy family home on College Street down Bathurst to JJ Taylor's, which stood then at the Western Gap. JJ's sent him to Tom Taylor (there's no relationship between these historic Toronto sailing institutions, although by coincidence, Graham Taylor, great grandson of JJ himself, now works in the Genco store - six degrees of separation, or what!). Taylor's was Toronto's principal sail maker and chandlery, where Nick apprenticed under the also-legendary Charlie Smith, who at the time ran the loft.

In 1960, Senior also headed towards Canada in pursuit of the immigrant dream, and joined his cousin at Taylor's. In 1965, Paul Swartz - who appears in early company photos as camping rep - took the reins of the enterprise, and the Genco brothers headed for their own happy operation at 539 King, right across from their current location. The upholstery component of the empire took root in 1968 when the Gencos partnered with Tony Monaco Upholstery, and Nat Junior joined the family operation as the upholstery and canvas king. That partnership came undone, but Junior still reigns over the world of canvas and foam, which three decades later makes up roughly 35 per cent of the company.

From King, Genco moved around the corner to Brant Street where the three principals boomed in the decade of wild sailing expansion between 1970 and 1980. That was the period of the Canadian builder explosion (C&C, CS, Hinterholler, DS, CL, Whitby etc. etc.) and rock star-led rival lofts mushroomed around Genco. Each had their turn in the racing sun - North, Ulmer, Horizon and so on, - while the 'little guys' at Genco stuck to the immigrant theme of cutting costs to service the cruising market. Nick protests that they won many races too, but purists have to consider them outside the racing rival core. But business is business and the Gencos got their share.

In 1981, they moved to their current, even larger spot on King, and not much has changed since. They still cater to cruisers and build sails on the floor, rather than in cyberspace. "Tell them it's 100 per cent Canadian technology," Nat Sr. laughs. "It's in our heads!" But they can laugh to the

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Raves, games, and sailing legends

Some people will never get it

Controversy surrounds the rave scene. Healthy venting? No worse than their parents did? *CY*'s intrepid reporter takes you inside the scene of sailing rave at a yacht club known only as 'RCYC' to protect its true identity.

"Hey man, can I score some 'b'?"

"Sure man, my Dad has a two-four in the *Nonsuch*."

"Cool. That Cathy, man. Does she look hot in her Henri's or what?"

"Those foul-weather bib overalls are really hot, man."

Elsewhere, as seen on TV....

"The Boom Vang is a) an exploding cigar; b) a Dutch philosopher; c) an instrument for locating seismic disturbances d) that line with the faded green trace over there - no, pull on it. Not that one - *that* one, stupid."

"I'd like to call a friend, Nick Bailey at Bristol Marine."

"OK, Nick, what is your answer?"

"(d)"

"Is that your final answer?"

"Yes, lord knows I've had it screamed at me under a variety of mark rounding circumstances."

Meanwhile, back at Canada's largest-ever sailing rave Scott and Jason are achieving incredible happiness dancing wildly, faster, and faster, to the sounds of Jimmy Buffet. The kids beside them know that what they are doing is not wrong. Sure, these sailing raves have received a lot of bad press and, sure, their parents are worried and, yes, there is 'b' around. But is it really so bad? Didn't Dad and Mom do much the same thing at the Port Credit Regatta 25 years ago? Heck.

The phone rings again at Bristol Marine. Nick, in the middle of explaining to a customer that he

shouldn't flush out the bilge with rat poison, no matter what's grown down there, has received another Lifeline call.

Is it: a) a rapidly rotating chunk of lumber b) a garden ornament c) support for the tack of the spinnaker or d) an east European immigrant?

Nick hangs up and suggests the customer clean the bilge with a welding torch.

It's convocation at the university and time for the traditional honorary doctorates. Stompin' Tom, of course, but look, isn't that Hans Fogh? No, it's Frank Mahovlich. But isn't that Paul Howard and Fiona McCall, the famous around the world sailors? No, it's Jane Stewart, the Minister of whatever, getting an honorary degree because she gave the university four million dollars for a centre to study grant allocations to post-secondary institutions.

The above incidents are fictional. Sailing will never be the subject of a cultural icon game show and although *CY* editor Amy was once invited to speak at a Grade 6 graduation, that seems about as famous as we get. Sailing raves will live on only in our imagination. That's the fantastic, wonderful beauty of sailing - no one else cares. It's not on *anybody's* radar. And while your land-based friends may acknowledge that photo of your boat on the wall, they really don't begin to get it. Sailing is the answer to the question that no one is asking - maybe even the final answer. □

anchor snubber to add stretch, and keeping anchor watch and guarding against chafe on any rope rodes if conditions get nasty.

Finally, anchor for the conditions. All these boats were well anchored in a protected anchorage - until the wind rose to become a strong onshore gale. Then they were trapped against a leeshore. Anchoring in a pretty cove has to be one of the most rewarding privileges we all have as sailors, but we have to earn it by treating the anchoring process with respect. □

Paul and Sheryl Shard have cruised to 24 countries aboard their self-built Classic 37 sailboat, Two-Step. They are the authors of Sail Away! A Guide to Outfitting and Provisioning for Cruising and the co-producers/hosts of the television series, Exploring Under Sail, which airs across Canada on CLT starting this September. Visit their website at www.searoom.com/shard

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bank - most of their hotshot rivals went away when the boat bubble burst in the late '80s and they now have at least the downtown market pretty much to themselves. Who runs the place? "We're all Indians, and chiefs," Nick tells me, "Italian Indians."

So these guys did pretty well. Nick, who still lives in Little Italy, has three kids, all of whom have worked for the company. Nat Senior's daughter Patricia works in the Pickering store with son-in-law Ron. Junior has four kids, but uncharacteristically, they have nothing to do with the company.

Theirs is a success story of an immigrant business that still runs like a family corner store. The Gencos have been doing their own sailing thing in their own non-scientific way, but after forty years together, it's still working. You might call it sailing's Canadian Dream. □



**COMING
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- Cowes race week
- A review of a Catalina 36
- Do sailors howl at the moon?