

SPECIAL FEATURE



By Pat Anderson

C-Dory's Fall From Grace

C-Dory was an icon of success until management yanked up the grassroots connections. Can the brand rise again to reclaim its former glory?

2005 was a banner year for C-Dory, which had recently moved to a large new production facility in Auburn, Washington. That January, C-Dory had every model on the floor at the Seattle Boat Show. C-Dory 16s, 19s, 22s and 25s, all wonderfully staged and loaded with options at "Boat Show Special" pricing.

That year, my wife Patty and I and two other couples sat down with Jeff Messmer, then C-Dory's sales directory, and did a "three-fer," all of us moving from our C-Dory 22 Cruisers to new C-Dory 25 Cruisers. That year, Nor'westing ran regular ads for the C-Dory 25 Cruiser, hailed as "the Trallerable Trawler." We took delivery of our 25 Cruiser in May 2005. Andrew Custis was our "go-to" guy at C-Dory for the build, and he made sure every little thing was exactly right before he allowed us to tow our new boat away. C-Dory hosted a wonderful owner appreciation party at the factory in Auburn during the Seattle Boat Show.

Fast forward to the 2011 Seattle Boat Show: Jeff Messmer and Andrew Custis were still there, but now selling Ranger Tugs along with John and Dave Livingston. They were showing the entire range of Ranger Tugs from the R21 to the R29, and the brand new Cutwater boats including the C26 and the C28. The boats were all nicely staged, with tables set



The C-Dory 25 Cruisers *Daydream*, *Anna Leigh* and *Halcyon* at Eagle Harbor, Cypress Island. The owners bought the boats together in a "three-fer" deal in 2005.

"Buyers traveled from as far away as Texas to purchase their boats factory direct because they valued the direct connection with the manufacturer."

and floral centerpieces. The entire Ranger sales force was smartly dressed in freshly-pressed black Ranger logo shirts. There was a "Boat Show Special" price for a fully loaded Ranger or Cutwater with all the goodies, ready to cruise. They were writing contracts and taking deposits, and by the second day they could already say they were having a good show. As busy as they were, they took the time for a warm exchange with their many former C-Dory customers.

Not too far away, at a dealer's display, was one lone C-Dory 22 Cruiser, a colorless gray hull. It was devoid of any staging, had no options, and there was no "Boat Show Special" package.

The base price was a long way from being ready to cruise. There were no easels with big posters showing CD16s, CD22s, CD25s and Tomcat 255s, no TV playing a video loop, no brochures, and no gregarious sales force out front welcoming prospective buyers.

The C-Brats — an intensely loyal owners group with a website that has 4,344 registered users ("A Home for C-Dory People," www.c-brats.com) — had provided a large collage of their C-Dorys for the dealer to display, and were sporadically in evidence chatting up the handful of Boat Show goers who showed the remotest interest in the lone C-Dory.

The dealer said he had written no orders. Many C-Brats privately expressed the view that it would have been better had C-Dory had no presence at all than this half-hearted effort.

What happened? More importantly, can C-Dory come back? There is a glimmer of hope, but the answer is far from certain.

A Proud History

The first C-Dory was introduced at the Seattle Sportsmen's Show in 1979. The bread-and-butter C-Dory, the 22 Cruiser, was introduced in 1987. These were steadily produced at a small factory on Pacific Highway South in Kent, ironically about 1,000 yards away from the Ranger Tug factory. This factory, we were told, had the capacity to produce about six boats per month.



A banner year — the Andersons (foreground) and their friends the McKibbens sign the paperwork to purchase their C-Dory 25s at the 2005 Seattle Boat Show.

The C-Dory 25 "Cruise Ship" was introduced in 1996, with only six being built. These are highly prized today. A re-designed C-Dory 25 Cruiser was reintroduced in 2003, and quickly became a very popular boat among C-Dory aficionados. In 2006 C-Dory introduced the Tomcat TC255, which quickly gained a good reputation and a loyal following.

C-Dory had been owned by Roy Toland, Inc. until October 2000, when a group led by Scot Reynolds purchased the assets. There were not too many noticeable changes until 2005, when C-Dory moved to a large new production facility. This new facility, we were told, could produce up to 60 boats a month. We visited frequently during the build of our 25 Cruiser, which was ordered at the Boat Show in January 2005 and delivered in May. There were signs of stress at that time: There was a sign on the wall that said "Saturday is a mandatory work day for production workers." A number of small (and a few larger) issues with build quality were popping up, but C-Dory still took very good care of its customers.

Until 2006, most C-Dorys were sold by the factory sales force at the Seattle Boat Show. There was a dealer network from Portland south, and in various locations throughout the country, but facto-

ry direct sales and service was the primary business model, and it was very successful. Some buyers traveled from as far away as Texas to purchase their boats factory direct because they valued the direct connection with the manufacturer. Jeff Messmer was accessible, posting frequently on the C-Brat website, sharing his cell phone number and taking personal responsibility for our ownership experience of C-Dory boats. C-Dory provided the best customer service of any boat manufacturer.

A little detour here — in 2006, C-Dory and Ranger entered an arrangement for a new boat to be known as the "C-Ranger." It resulted from the long friendship of Jeff Messmer of C-Dory and John Livingston of Ranger Boats. Ranger would manufacture the new boat, a 25-foot tug, and it would be marketed by C-Dory under Jeff Messmer's direction. The company showed a bare hull and a brochure at the 2006 Seattle Boat Show and wrote a number of contracts, mostly sales to owners of C-Dorys.

A Changing Tide

The wheels started to come off in 2007. C-Dory hired a new chief operating officer, who had a very different busi-

ness model in mind for C-Dory.

The boats were changed to reduce costs, the first victim being the custom Decraguard cabinetry which had always allowed a high degree of owner customizability but which was replaced in favor of a molded fiberglass interior. There were other changes too, none to improve function or quality but only to reduce cost.

The biggest change, though, and a huge shock to many of us who had enjoyed a close personal relationship with C-Dory folks, was the announcement that there would be no more direct factory sales or service, and that all sales and service would be handled through a dealer network, led in the Seattle area by Lake Union Sea Ray.

The dealers would provide warranty work. The new COO posted on C-Brats that "the size of our organization now prohibits frequent communication with this forum."

One C-Brat replied (with what, in hindsight, was incredible prescience) that "Maybe in a few years when they're smaller again they will be able to provide more frequent communication (if they're still around)." In one fell swoop, C-Dory intentionally cut itself off from its fanatically loyal customer base.

We soon saw a dozen or more C-Dorys lined up beside I-5 at Lake Union Sea Ray in Fife, all rigged with shiny new Mercury outboards. Some C-Dory owners were immediately critical of the new program, myself included, while others defended these moves as business necessity, asking us to give the new program a chance. I simply replied that you had to know what you had to appreciate what you just lost.

The new business model was doomed to failure from the start anyway.

A Fish Out of Water

The purchase of a C-Dory is never an impulse purchase. People don't drive by a line-up of C-Dorys alongside the freeway and say "Oh, honey, look at those! I want the red one!" Jeff Messmer told me when he was with C-Dory that the company knew that over 90 percent of C-Dory purchasers saw a C-Dory somewhere



Daydream under construction in the large new production facility that the company moved to in 2005.

and then found the C-Brats website via Google. We C-Dory owners know that we cannot stop at a gas station, rest stop, launch ramp or dock without somebody asking us about our boats. Prospective purchasers typically spend considerable time on the C-Brat website asking about the pros and cons of the brand, one model or another, single engine or twins, Honda, Suzuki or Johnson engine, canvas, Garmin or Raymarine electronics, Wallas or Webasto heater, and myriad other choices. They get candid answers and advice from real owners. Often owners will offer a person considering buying a C-Dory to take a test ride with them. By the time the purchaser is ready to buy, he already has a very good idea of what he wants.

The C-Dory in stock at a dealer is never exactly the right boat — not the right color, not the right engine, not the right options. A C-Dory is by its nature a build-to-order, custom rigged boat. The

C-Dory brand must have been a bit puzzling to Lake Union Sea Ray and their typical customers as well: A C-Dory isn't luxurious, well appointed, spacious, fast or sexy. It can't pull a wakeboard. It is simple, plain, reliable, seaworthy and economical. It was a VW among Ferraris at Lake Union Sea Ray. You either "get" the C-Dory or you don't. It appeared that Lake Union did not. Lake Union Sea Ray and C-Dory soon parted company.

The COO's experiment was an abject failure. It spelled the end of the Scot Reynolds C-Dory Company as we knew it. Another short detour — just about the same time this COO was leading C-Dory down the path to failure, Jeff Messmer exited C-Dory.

We can only speculate about the reasons, but obviously Jeff's vision for C-Dory and the ownership's and COO's visions did not align. Remember the C-Ranger project? Jeff happily moved it over to Ranger Boats and the "C-Ranger"



The last C-Dory owner appreciation party, held at the C-Dory factory in January 2009.



Jeff Messmer, Pat Anderson and Patty Anderson with the C-Ranger display at the Seattle Boat Show in 2006.



C-Dorys all lined up at Squalicum Harbor for the annual C-Brat Get-Together. C-Dory continues to have a tremendously loyal existing customer base.

became the Ranger R25, the first of the incredibly successful Ranger Tug line. Andrew Custis moved to Ranger Boats as well, and this is where we came in at the top of this story, with Ranger at the 2011 Seattle Boat Show, writing contracts and taking deposits like crazy.

A Glimmer of Hope

The C-Dory assets were sold to Fluid Marine LLC in 2008, which was not only saddled with the existing unworkable business model but also walked right into the Great Recession.

Having a factory set up to produce 60 boats a month, and having orders for one boat, if that, Fluid Marine hosted the last owner appreciation party at the C-Dory factory in January 2009. Shortly after that, they were gone, and we thought C-Dory was a goner. But once again we learned that the C-Dory assets changed hands, this time to Sea Sport of Bellingham.

C-Dory owners were pleased that Sea Sport had acquired the C-Dory assets. We met the owners in Bellingham that summer at our annual C-Brat Get-Together at Squalicum Harbor. There is small family resemblance between Sea Sports and C-Dorys from a great distance. Sea Sports were like C-Dorys on steroids. Sea Sport boats would now have a smaller, less expensive little brother. It seemed a wonderful match.

What we did not know in the summer of 2009 was that Sea Sport itself was troubled. Before the dust settled, Sea Sport had lost the molds for Sea Sport boats, the Wright Brothers factory, and the Boondocks retail outlet. C-Dory seemed out for the count this time. The

fall of C-Dory seemed complete.

But miraculously, out of the ashes of the fallen Sea Sport company arose Triton Marine in 2010, somehow still having the C-Dory, Tomcat, Skagit Orca and Osprey molds. Opening up in Ferndale, they once again are building C-Dorys.

So there is a glimmer of hope for the survival of the C-Dory line. Can it rise again? That is very uncertain. But C-Dory's best sales force is and always has been its existing customer base, the very same people the COO of C-Dory decided to cut off from any direct contact with the company from in 2007. Existing C-Dory owners are also the brand's best advertising and sales tools, always visible out and about with their boats and on the C-Brat website.

The owners of Triton Marine really appear to get that. They have solicited owner input on how the boats might be improved. They have participated on the C-Brat website. They have sponsored a gel-coat repair class for owners

at the factory. They have plans for sales materials to give to owners to pass out when we are approached about our boats, as we always are, at gas stations, rest stops, launch ramps and docks. They are trying to figure out how to leverage the asset of a large existing customer base with brand loyalty approaching fanaticism.

So 2011 will be a watershed year for C-Dory. Triton Marine needs to make some tough choices about whether it will stick with the ineffective dealer sales business model or return to the successful direct factory sales and service model. They need to figure out how they can marshal the resources to have an effective sales presence at the Seattle Boat Show in 2012. We hope to see C-Dory 16s, 22s, 25s and Tomcats, all nicely staged with tables set with floral centerpieces, "Boat Show Special" package prices, and people on the floor ready to write contracts and take deposits once again.



Triton Marine, which rose out of the ashes of the fallen Sea Sport company, retained the C-Dory, Tomcat, Skagit Orca and Osprey molds and has opened up in Ferndale, once again building C-Dorys.