

BETWEEN a suburb of Haarlem in Holland and a delightful glade in the Cape's Tokai is a 40-year span with so much worthwhile achievement by Margaret and Jack Köper that only a bulky book could hold a fair tribute adequately. But the impact on South African sailing is everywhere to see.

The story started with the arrival in the Transvaal during the early thirties of the young lithographer firstly to find work and prospects unknown during those depression years in Holland. Confident of a future in the new, opportunity-filled land, Jack Köper sent for Margaret and, after their marriage, the couple set up the best home they could afford in a love-in-a-garret style which is still a warmly shared memory.

Jack's father, also hit by Europe's slump in the trade which he had passed on to his son, joined the couple to spend his life in South Africa till his death in the late sixties. Most of Jack's family scattered over the world

at this time when economic conditions were causing massive population movements.

The really big chapter in the Köper book would start with the first of 34 years in one five-bedroomed house in Pinelands after a short "permanent holiday-living-style" period at Clifton on first arrival from the Transvaal. Those years added two sons and two daughters, their wives and husbands and grandchildren to the family — and extended, but never loosened, its one-ness.

The big obsession was sailing, but unbroken through the years ran a unity of common creative interests and talents and enterprise flowing into projects which drew and held a family together.

Jack had sketched dinghy designs almost since he could draw and, although untrained in marine architecture, those early drawings show the precision of a professional and, also clearly, the shallow, scow lines which came to feature in all his mature designs.

In Holland he had rowed in coxed fours; in the Cape he became an active, competitive dinghy helmsman — he admits to preferring the helm to the foredeck. Redwings, International Fourteens, Twenty-foot Scows,

Sharpies and craft inspired by anyone's wish to sail were used then.

Sprogs had attracted Jack and, after a string of club sailing successes, he won the 1950 Sprog National championship at Knysna. Fifteen years later his son Gerhard was to start an unequalled run of three successive wins of the same title — at the 1965 Lourenco Marques National, and going on to Saldanha and finally Durban.

But, in 1951, Conrad Gülcher and Uys van Essen of Holland won IYRU recognition for their Flying Dutchman design and the trial results caught Jack's attention. This led to a batch of hulls arriving in the Cape, in response to an order for five shells and one completed hull as a pattern for finishing the shells. They arrived with the shells laid like skin layers round the whole hull and were distributed among owners whose names are all now deeply entrenched in South African yachting records.

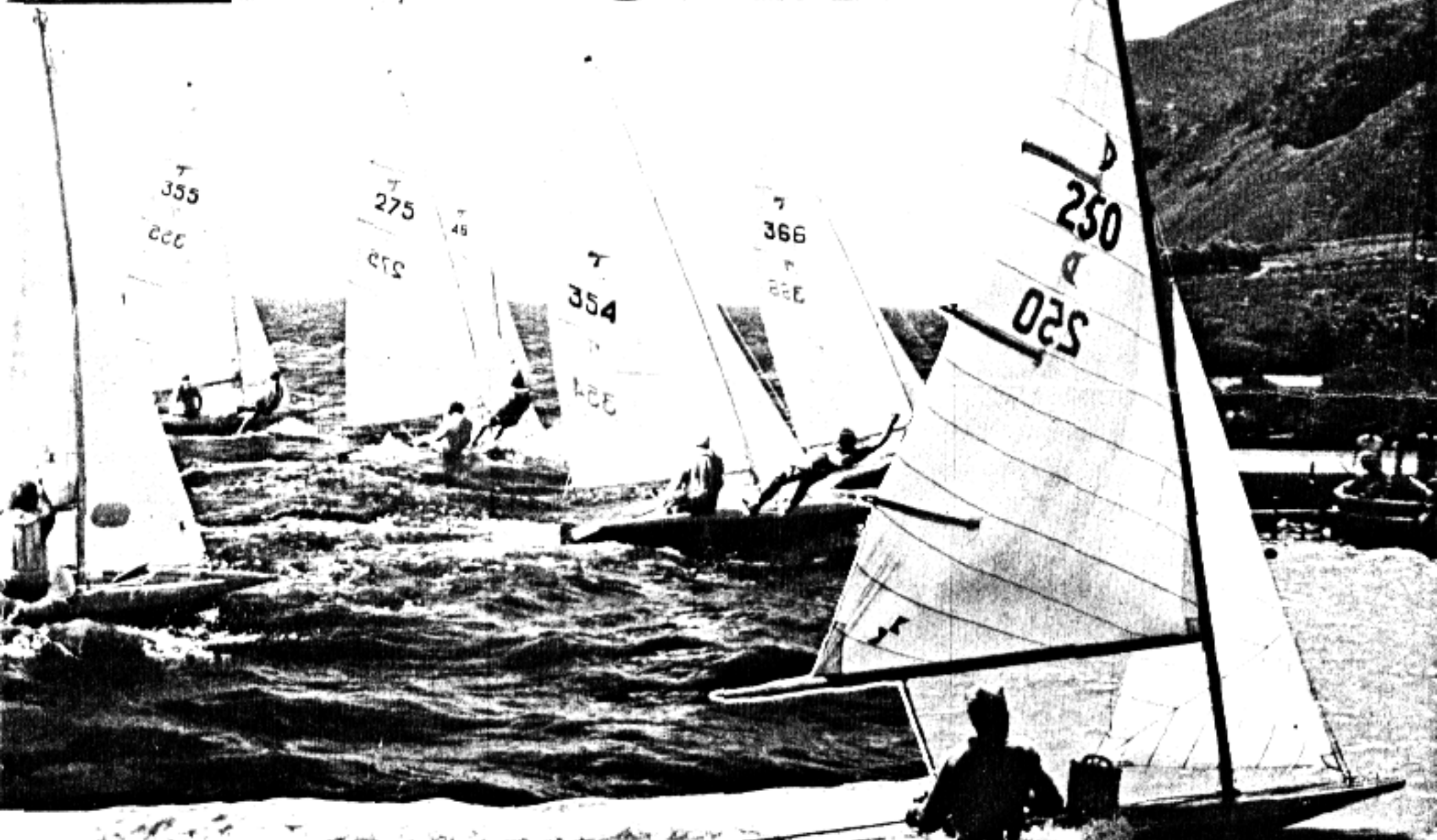
An unconfirmed legend is that the completed hull in this batch was Van Essen's prototype Flying Dutchman, sent out to meet the South African order because it was the biggest received and the prototype was the only complete hull in existence. This internationally-historic hull is reputed to be still on the hard at Hermanus Yacht Club.

Jack launched Cape Town's first Flying Dutchman — a class which confirmed his judgment by becoming the aristocrat of dinghies in Olympic, International and South African competition and still holding the status 22 years later.

Jack's family are bound into the South African Flying Dutchman saga.

In 1957 his sons, still at school and dedicated sailing enthusiasts, pumped 15 000

a tribute to JACK KÖPER



* The sailing saga of Jack and Margaret Köper, top left, started with Flying Dutchmen No. 1 and South Africa's first "youth boat", the Dabchick, right; but Tempos, middle, gave international-class sailing. Then

... sail making and more designs — writes TIM COW

Jack Köper

33 staples into locally-bought wood veneer and, at far less cost than the present-day Optimist, made two Flying Dutchmen. One went to dad and the other they sailed till it was sold to a satisfied customer who was happy to pay enough to set the youngsters up financially for their next venture.

The Flying Dutchman project taught them all a lot about veneers and glues and working in moulded ply.

It is hard now to appreciate that junior yachting just did not exist 20 years ago. The Köper sons' need for a performance boat for youngsters was answered by their father in 1956 with the Dabchick design and South African yachting started the unlimited, vigorous generation of youngsters which will keep the sport thriving as long as wind and water have movement.

With the launching of the Dabchicks a new phase started in the Pinelands household.

The design was intended as a boat which youngsters could build and sail at reasonable cost. The cost limit in the plans was £25, and it could be done because adequate fittings and sails could be home-made like the hull and spars. School handicraft classes used the plans successfully and it was obvious that the Dabchick had brought junior sailing to stay.

There was one "hang-up" in output rate because people seemed happy to tackle boat building but were scared to try sail-making - and this fact really re-shaped the whole existence of the Köper family.

They had made the first sails, so became obvious targets for people in need of sails for their Dabchicks. Calico was used, for lack of anything better at reasonable cost, but it still was not easy to buy. The original plan to have every sail in different colour combinations meant home dyeing with petrol tins of dyes scattered round the house, calico drying on the garden lines and, of course, sewing machines and cutting floors fitted into the home as the demand for sails grew.

Sail making for Dabchicks became a thriving home industry with full family participation. It contributed substantially to university educations, established worldwide connections and, ultimately, to a new career at a time of life when most men are on the run-down towards retirement.

Terylene came in 1958 and the struggle to find calico or cotton was replaced by a struggle to find and develop the techniques of working these new fabrics. Threads had to be found, sewing methods tried and tested and pattern cutting adapted to new stretch responses. All this was done from scratch, with just the first sample of the material and the problem and the increasing demand for more production.

By now Dabchick plans sold were well into four figures, a class owners' association was booming, title competition was planned and the Tempo design was reaching the drawing board.

Flying Dutchman sailing had changed. Three-man boats, insisted on to keep the class competitive with the scows and Sharpies, had gone - to line up with international practise.

Jack was taking sails seriously and had even survived pinning the luff of an Flying Dutchman sail, cut in the new Courtauld fabric, temporarily and making final adjustments on board as Louis van Winsen tried each sailing point on Zeekoe Vlei.

It was Peter Barrett, however, the American holder of the International Finn world championship title, who first suggested sail making as a full time profession when he came to the Cape for the 1966 national regatta at Saldanha.

At that time a countrywide firm, SA Canvas, had no yacht sail-making interest but Jack was able to convince the directors that a loft in Cape Town was a worthwhile project and, far more difficult, convince himself that he was the man to run it.

So one day Jack came home to Margaret to tell her that, at the age of 55, he had abandoned his career for another untried one in a completely unknown venture. Margaret, as ever, "went along with him" and Köper sails with their stylised "K" symbol were soon powering sailing dinghies throughout Southern Africa.

It did not stop at dinghies. The editor of SA Yachting saw to it that Voortrekker's first sails were Köper made. Albatros 2, winner of the first Rio Race, carried the Köper symbol. Since then every international and national offshore event has meant long extra hours for the whole loft staff. Dabchicks have always inspired more orders, and still do even though sail numbers are now well into the fourth thousand. It is a pity that the present trend is towards plain white sails of heavier material, as a compromise with manufacturing problems, and the colourful Dabchick fleets are losing their character.

In 1964 another purpose-built boat, the Tempo, was launched to fill the need for an economical dinghy with a possible appeal to the racing crew. The design was still for home builders and it offered spinnaker and trapeze practise and surprising stability. It is not surprising that when, in 1970, the Sonnet came along it was assured of success by the reputations of its predecessors.

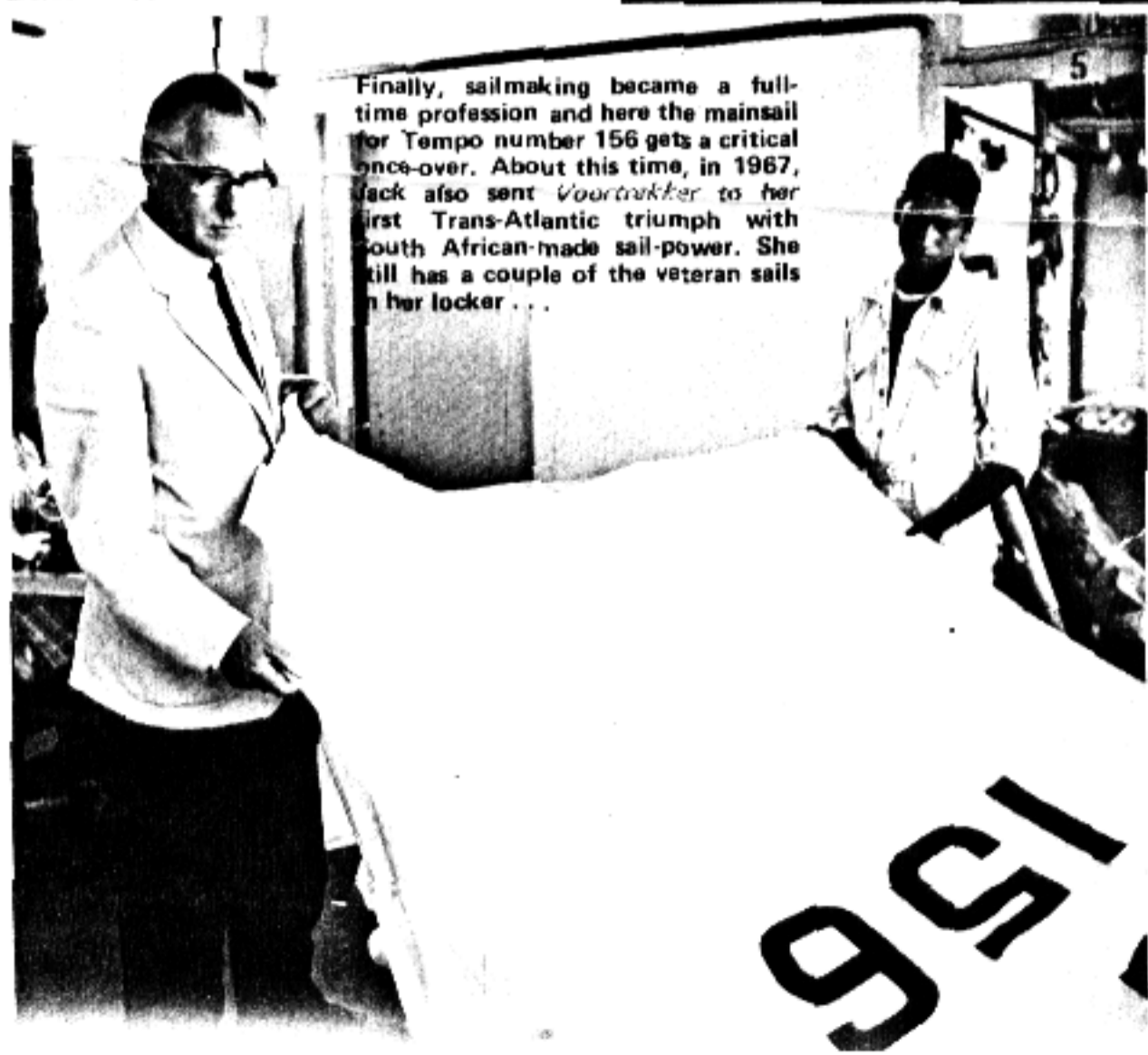
This time the design offered a smaller scow, drier than the Dabchick, with adaptability to one or two-man sailing but - more important and almost revolutionary in South Africa - the Sonnet was rigidly "one design" and a storm broke as voices were raised for and against.

Heads shook in horror at the thought of no "fiddling" with fairleads, no choice of gear and fittings, no gimmicky masts or booms and no super multi-fall tackles or gadgets on sheets. But slightly ahead of the "fiddlers" were people who wanted a boat to stay competitive for the foreseeable future without needing expensive updating to match the current champion's "go fasts".

This was Jack's thinking exactly - and it

41 TOP: Margaret Köper bore the brunt of the first sally into sail-making, as a home-industry supplying the Dabchick explosion (now 4 000 sail numbers!) and she discusses the never-ending question of "cut" with son Chris.

RIGHT: The future Flying Dutchman champion of South Africa, Jack's young nipper Gerhard, with one of his many models, a Dragon. No wonder he ended up as an architect...



Finally, sailmaking became a full-time profession and here the mainsail for Tempo number 156 gets a critical once-over. About this time, in 1967, Jack also sent Voortrekker to her first Trans-Atlantic triumph with South African-made sail-power. She still has a couple of the veteran sails in her locker...

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