

## From PCA to CPA

Sarah Fister Gale



Walter Prebis was born and raised on the northwest side of Chicago, Ill., where he spent his youth playing football. He was good enough to be offered a number of scholarships and clever enough to accept one from Colorado College in Colorado Springs, which sits at the foot of the Rocky Mountains.

“On my first day, I looked out my dorm window and saw Pikes Peak,” he says. “I knew I would never want to leave.”

Prebis planned to get a civil engineering degree and immediately got to work. Then one of his fraternity brothers gave him a fateful piece of advice. He suggested Prebis sign up for the Navy Reserve to help pay his fraternity dues. He did, and two weeks later the Korean War began. Prebis was called up. Fortunately, his athletic abilities served him just as well in the Navy as in football. He was sent to the Great Lakes Naval Training Center, where he played football for the Bluejackets and later ended up in Pensacola, Fla., playing for the Goshawks.

“It wasn’t a hero’s career, but it was a lot of fun,” he says.

In 1953, he returned to Colorado College to finish his degree, then spent a month with the Baltimore Colts in Maryland at their rookie camp. Professional football didn’t pan out, though, so he returned to his beloved Colorado, where he has lived ever since.

Prebis’s first job was with Glen L. Martin Co., a missile and aerospace company where he worked in the ground support stress group.

“It was boring as all heck,” he says. So he left after about a year and took a job in the engineering department at Adolph Coors Co. in Golden, Colo. He loved that job and the fact that the engineering department worked directly with the construction group. If his team designed something that was deemed unbuildable, the construction superintendent had no problem calling them on it, he says. “That’s where I really learned engineering.”

It is also where he learned a lot about cement because Coors owned shares in the Ideal Cement Co. at the time. It made sense, seven years later, when the Portland Cement Association came calling. It was opening a downtown office in Denver, Colo., and wanted Prebis to run it.

He took the job, and for the next seven years, Prebis promoted PCA across New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, and Idaho and got deeply involved in code work. At the time, the industry was having trouble with city leaders in Denver, who banned the use of prestressed double tees for load-bearing walls because they hadn’t been tested. Prebis ended up designing and conducting many of the fire tests that eventually demonstrated the durability of the double tees and led to the city removing the ban.

Prebis had been a member of PCI since the 1960s, and the organization ultimately recruited him away from PCA to represent precast, prestressed concrete in Colorado. In 1971, he opened the Colorado Prestressers Association (CPA), which he led until he retired in 2010. It was a one-man operation, where Prebis dedicated his career to educating and promoting precast concrete to stakeholders across the industry, as well as educating the next generation of engineers.

At the time, many engineers didn’t want to work with precast concrete because no one on their team was familiar with it, he says. “Most universities were not teaching prestressed concrete design at the undergraduate level.”

That was a big obstacle that Prebis helped overcome by creating a four-hour training course on using prestressed concrete, which he taught at Colorado State University in Fort Collins and the University of Wyoming in Laramie for the next 40 years. “That course gave them enough of a feel for the material that they felt confident using it,” he says.

Throughout his career, Prebis was very active in PCI. He attended most of the meetings, chaired the fire committee for years, and helped write many of the fire codes. “PCI brought tremendous value to my career,” he says. “The meetings brought together the best brains in the industry, and they were always willing to share ideas and help each other out.”

That collaboration helped the industry mature during Prebis’s career, and it will help the next generation deal with a new set of challenges, including increasing competition from other material industries, he says. “You have to be tuned into what’s going on in the industry and be willing to work with your peers so you have the information you need to fight back.” **D**