

MEET JACK COWAN

Representing the industry

Sarah Fister Gale



When Jack Cowan was still just a teenager, he made a bold decision that changed the course of his life. The oldest of five sons born to Irish immigrant parents in East Cleveland, Ohio, he joined the U.S. Navy in 1950.

Cowan spent four years in the service, where he achieved petty officer first class rank, and spent three years at sea as an antisubmarine warfare specialist in Navy destroyers. After being honorably discharged, he pursued his dream of becoming an Ohio State Highway Patrol field trooper and pilot.

“It was an exciting job,” he says, but eventually he realized that he was more suited to the private sector—in particular, the precast concrete industry.

In 1961, Cowan left the highway patrol to take a job as a North American representative for the Jayhawk Fiber Form Co. in Lawrence, Kans. In that role, he dealt in a variety of products, including void forms, which became the standard for box-beam bridge girders and cast-in-place voided slabs in the years to come. It was during this time in his career that Cowan first got involved in PCI.

“It was obvious to me that all the winners in this industry belonged to PCI,” he says. “That is when I decided that all the products I would sell in my career had to be associated with PCI.”

Cowan stuck to that conviction. In 1964, he left Jayhawk and founded John D. Cowan & Associates Inc., a manufacturer’s representative organization for suppliers to the precast/prestressed concrete industry throughout North America. For more than 50 years, Cowan has led his company, representing premier products and services developed by several PCI members and developing many of his own products for the precast concrete industry. Over the years, he has secured five patents and multiple trademarks, including patents for a device to

drain water and methane gas from prestressed concrete bridge girders and a flexible highway delineator.

“A good association makes the whole industry better. If you are not supporting its work, you have no skin in the game,” he says of his decision to represent only PCI members. “We all depend on each other.”

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Cowan has remained an active member of PCI since his early days at Jayhawk and was named a PCI Fellow in 2010. He has been a member of the Marketing Committee, Bridges Committee, and Membership Committee, which he chaired. He championed the creation of the Associate Member Award program, which he and his then-partner A. L. Patterson later received in 1988 as Patterson & Cowan Associates. He was also active with the Ohio Prestressed Concrete Association and was a founding member of PCI of Illinois and Wisconsin.

Along with running a successful business, in 1983, Cowan launched *Concrete Trader*, a trade publication targeting management within the plant-manufactured concrete products industry in North America and the Caribbean, as well as some foreign subscribers. He eventually sold the publication in 1990 to Aberdeen, which continues to publish it as *Concrete Producer*.

His advice for the next generation: “Quit whining, and just get out there and work.” Cowan also says has no interest in retirement. “I’m having too much fun.” 