



MEET CHARLES WILSON

Concrete Destiny

Sarah Fister Gale

*Retired president of Wilson
Concrete sets standard of excellence
for industry.*

It has always been Charles Wilson's destiny to become a concrete industry icon. His father and grandfather started Wilson Concrete Co. in 1905—14 years before Wilson's birth—bringing the first reinforced concrete pipe to the United States, and he knew, even as a child, that he would follow in their footsteps. "I was born into the concrete business," he says.

Wilson earned a civil engineering degree and a general engineering degree from the University of Iowa in the summer of 1941 but didn't start working for his father right away. "I took enough time to drive home from college, so I started the next day," he jokes.

Three weeks later he married his longtime sweetheart, Norma, and his life was on track.

He spent the next two years working with his father. Then he took the only significant time away from the company in his 60-year career when, in 1943, he joined the Air Force.

He left the service in early 1946 and returned to Iowa, where he became foreman of the Wilson Concrete plant, which at the time employed six other people. Four years later his father retired and he was put in charge.

It was during this time that Wilson expanded the business into the architectural and structural precast concrete industry. "I had drive. I wanted more to do," Wilson says of the move. He also liked the portability of precast concrete products, noting that concrete pipe can

only be shipped within a 75-mile (125 km) radius, but precast concrete products can be shipped as far as 150 miles to 500 miles (250 km to 840 km). That meant he could bid on projects as far away as Chicago, Ill., or Minneapolis, Minn. "It allowed us to be more competitive," he says.

Over the next couple of years, Wilson built a second plant in Grand Island, Neb., then another in Omaha, Neb. Eventually he had 11 plants in Iowa, Nebraska, Kansas, and Missouri, with 750 employees. He also joined the Mo-Sai Institute, an organization of precasters that adhered to the Mo-Sai method of producing exposed-aggregate architectural panels. He eventually became president of the Mo-Sai Institute in 1962.

Quality is key to success

Wilson credits much of his success to his commitment to quality. He has never had to rework a project because he always made sure the work was done right the first time around. "Without quality, you are sunk," Wilson warns.

Proud moments

Although Wilson considers no one project his greatest achievement, he is especially proud of the ballparks and athletic fields his company built in St. Louis, Mo., and Kansas City, Mo.

Wilson also marvels at the many changes that have occurred over the years in the precast concrete industry. He considers the introduction of prestressing strand to be the greatest advancement in the business in his lifetime.

Wilson Concrete was one of the first companies to use prestressing strand in its products, which enabled the company to build precast concrete elements that spanned 100 ft to 200 ft (30 m to 60 m), instead of 20 ft (6 m).

"It extended the potential use of precast way beyond what it had been," he says. "We were able to compete against architectural and brick and stone companies for all kinds of projects, including bridge work."

Wilson retired seven years ago, but he still stays connected to the industry, attending the occasional PCI meeting when he is not golfing, traveling, or working with the Boy Scouts of America. Even though he is not active every day, his commitment to quality continues to resonate with the many people whose lives he touched over his nearly 60 years in the industry. ■

Charles W. Wilson

Industry involvement Wilson was president of PCI from 1969 to 1970, chairman of the International Committee of PCI, and chairman of the PCI Plant Certification Committee from 1968 to 1969.

The family business Wilson's son Randall Wilson worked with him in the business and is now retired, and his son Robert Wilson works in the industry in Grand Rapids, Mich.

Most significant mentor Wilson says of his father, who started Wilson Concrete Co., "He guided me for many years."

Upcoming industry challenges "Quality is always a challenge. It has to be a part of everything you do," says Wilson.

Advice to future industry icons "It's extremely important to know which parts make money and which parts lose money," says Wilson. "If you don't, you will forever be dependent on your accountant."

About the author

Sarah Fister Gale is a freelance journalist based in Chicago, Ill.