



MEET JIM CLARK

Building a Legacy

Sarah Fister Gale

Clark Pacific president mentored into precast concrete industry

Jim Clark started preparing for a career in construction when he was still in high school. He spent summers working as a boilermaker's helper in a structural steel shop.

When he attended college at University of California, Berkeley, he learned even more about building, not just in his civil engineering classes, but in his summer job as a logger. He spent three summers as a choker, setter, and tree bucker, learning what it takes to rig a tree to fall correctly.

"It all taught me a lot about how to build things," says the semi-retired president of Clark Pacific and third-generation Californian.

When Clark graduated in 1953 with a civil engineering degree, he joined the Marine Corps and spent two years on active duty. When he was discharged in 1955, he took his first official job in the industry as a junior structural engineer for John A. Blume and Associates. Clark spent seven years at John Blume.

Meeting a mentor

In 1959, Clark registered as a civil engineer and two years later registered as a structural engineer. Clark had always imagined himself working in construction, so he set out to find a job that would give him more hands-on opportunities. He found that job at Continental Heller in Sacramento, Calif., a general contracting company where he worked as an estimator and project manager for three years. It

was at this company that Clark also met the man who would help guide his career.

"The person who had the most significant influence in my construction career was Mike Heller, founder of Continental Heller Construction Company in Sacramento, California," Clark says. "Mike Heller is the smartest businessman I've ever known."

Heller eventually founded Tecon Pacific, which later became Clark Pacific in the mid-1960s. The architectural precasting company was struggling because it did not have a capable, experienced manager. At that time, even though he had no precast concrete experience, Clark asked for the chance to turn the new company around.

"He gave me the opportunity to be a manager for his company even though I didn't have the experience," Clark says. "It was great to have someone like that believe in me, to believe I wouldn't put his company at risk."

At that time, precast concrete panels were a relatively new technology. All of the decisions for bidding, fabrication, erection, and bottom-line results fell on Clark's shoulders.

"Mr. Heller greatly risked his good name and obligated himself to considerable financial risk when he banked on me to make the right decisions and manage the company properly," Clark says. "For this trust he placed on me, I want to personally thank him."

Even though Clark had little experience as a general manager, he helped put the struggling company back on the map by winning a \$5 million bid for the San Francisco Towers.

"The success of that job is why I'm still here," he says.

Building a legacy

Clark ultimately became vice president and general manager of Tecon Pacific. In 1978, he became Heller's 50% partner, and in 1988 Clark and his two sons bought Heller's interest in the company. Today, Clark is semi-retired and his sons, Don Clark and Bob Clark, have taken over active management of the company. Two of Clark's grandchildren also work in the company, making it a three-generation business.

Through it all, Clark Pacific's secret for a healthy company has been to understand customers' needs and to train and challenge employees to produce a constructible, top-quality precast concrete product. The product is continually developed and improved through research, new technology, engineering, craftsmanship, quality control, and hard work.

Jim Clark

Most significant mentor Mike Heller, president of Continental Heller in Sacramento. "He is a great businessman," Clark says. "He gave me the opportunity to become a manager of his precast plant."

Advice to the industry "Working in the precast industry is a great opportunity. You can't find a better career than architectural precast concrete because there is always a new challenge. If you learn as much as you can as quickly as you can you'll have a great career."

About the author

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