



MEET BILL GWIN

Opportunities for Success

Sarah Fister Gale

From childhood, Bill Gwin liked to design and build, and he took great satisfaction in seeing a project through to completion.

When he graduated from the University of Alabama in 1961 with a civil engineering degree, he took a job at a large structural engineering firm where he thought he would be able to put his dreams of building into action. Within a few short months, however, he discovered that he would spend much time at a desk performing the same tasks.

“There was too much sitting, and I never got to see the results of my work,” he says of that first job.

His first encounter with precast concrete occurred when Underwood Concrete Products in Mobile, Ala., offered him a job. From sales engineer, he was eventually promoted to vice president and general manager.

The early days of precast concrete did not include specializing, so Gwin participated in every aspect of the business. “It gave me great insight into all phases of the business,” he says.

In 1972, Jim Lazenby invited Gwin, along with Alan Hudgins, to open their own precast concrete company, called Lazenby Precast.

“It was a great marriage of partners,” he says. “Alan was very production oriented, Jim was engineering oriented, and I was marketing oriented.”

The company was a success, and in 1984, Gwin and two others from the company bought out Lazenby and continued to grow the business. At that time, they had 70 employees and the industry was booming. Four years later, when they sold the company to Gate Petroleum Co., it had 300 employees.

During his role helping Gate develop the precast concrete side of the business, Gwin met Joe Luke, the owners’ representative who became Gwin’s mentor. Luke taught Gwin and his partners good business practices, such as the importance of formal record keeping and how to determine what jobs would be the most profitable.

It was during this time that computers entered the workplace. “The advent of the computer was one of the most significant improvements to everyone’s business. It took the drudgery out of our work.”

A job well done

Gwin says that the Jefferson Pilot Insurance Building in Greensburg, N.C., put Gate on the map. The project, which won PCI’s outstanding building award, was exciting because it was so intricate. “That building proved that we could successfully compete doing intricate precast work, and it helped launch many bigger and more intricate projects in the years to come.”

Industry dilemmas

Despite his success in the precast concrete industry, Gwin admits that he also faced challenges.

He would hire and train staff during an economic boom only to have to lay them off when the economy softened. “It was a problem I never solved.”

Another issue Gwin confronted was the varied skill sets of many new employees. The company developed a Precast Concrete 101 course to teach new employees the basics of production. “It ensured that our people had the skills necessary to do the job, and it showed them that the company cared,” he says.

The future

Gwin says that the work done by trade associations such as PCI has dramatically helped to improve the industry by facilitating information sharing among different companies and disciplines.

“In my generation, you got promoted based on time served, but now it’s all about talent,” he says. “Once you find talented employees, invest in developing them or they will go to someone else who will.”

Gwin also urges business owners to allow employees to train and participate in all aspects of the business to learn the nuances of the operation. “You need to go through all of that before you can choose your specialty.”

Bill Gwin

The family business Gwin’s son Vern Gwin is a civil engineer with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and son Dean Gwin is the president of marketing for Gate Precast.

Upcoming challenges for the industry Managing the economic ups and downs of the construction industry.

About the author

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