



MEET DAVID HANSON

Minnesotan finds success in home state

Sarah Fister Gale

David Hanson would have graduated from Iowa State University in 1951, four years after he started, but about halfway through his industrial engineering degree program he decided to double major. The structural engineering degree added a year to his college experience, but it was worth it for the driven young engineer.

"It was incredibly complicated, but I learned so much," Hanson says of his studies.

The year he graduated, Hanson was drafted into the Army and served in Korea in a heavy construction battalion as a sergeant. During his two years of active duty, Hanson built bridges, roads, and a headquarters.

When he returned to the United States in 1954, he set out to get a job. He and his wife, Betty, had both been born and raised in Minnesota, but they were ready to move someplace new. Hanson set up interviews around the country, driving down to Florida then up the East Coast, stopping along the way for interviews and tours of concrete facilities. Hanson received a few job offers in heavy construction—but in the end, he turned them down.

"It turned out that heavy construction sites were in terrible places, and you ended up living in a trailer," Hanson says.

Eventually, Hanson wound up back in Duluth, Minn., where he was offered a sales management position at Zenith Concrete Products Co., a producer of autoclaved concrete blocks, hollow-core, and machine-made concrete pipe.

He stayed with the company for two years doing sales, marketing, and start-up research on concrete mixtures. Then in 1957, after attending a fraternity reunion in Ames, Iowa, Hanson stopped by the placement office, where he found an ad for a sales manager at Midwest Concrete Industries, a producer of architectural exposed-aggregate wall panels, double-tees, and bridge beams in West Des Moines, Iowa. He sent his resume and got the job.

"Midwest Concrete was a pioneer in exposed-aggregate panels," Hanson says.

A great beginning, an abrupt end

In 1962, an acquaintance who owned Spancrete Midwest in Osseo, Minn., offered Hanson a position as general manager and engineer with the directive to rebuild the business. The company was floundering after two years, and the boss had fired everyone except his 10 best union guys.

Hanson brought one salesperson with him, and by 1967 he had tripled the size of the first plant, added a second plant, and had about 350 employees.

In 1970, the same boss who hired him fired him. "It was the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me," Hanson chuckles. When one of his best customers, Gerald Rauenhorst of Opus Construction, heard what had happened, he offered Hanson \$5 million to start his own company. Rauenhorst wanted to build a new plant in Minnesota to make floors and wall panels.

Hanson credits much of his career success to Rauenhorst's faith in him. "You don't start this kind of business with a pickup and shovel," he says. "His credit built that plant."

Hanson found a plant site in Savage, Minn., and built Fabcon. From the beginning, they did substantial business producing and erecting solid walls and hollow-core wall panels for complete apartment buildings. Then in 1974, during the energy crisis, Fabcon invented the insulated sandwich wall panel, which embedded foam insulation within the prestressed panels to provide instant insulation.

"Sandwich panels were the greatest boon to the precast business," he says. The insulated panels are energy efficient, they are faster to put up, and because the insulation is prepackaged in the panels, it can't be stolen and it isn't a fire hazard on the construction site.

Hanson is proud of the fact that he never took a job over a million dollars. He attributes his ongoing success to a focus on traditional small to moderately sized projects. "One of my goals was never to build a huge stadium," he says, "because if it fails, the company goes broke."

Hanson retired in March of 1996. He worked for another five years as consultant and director of Fabcon and a consultant to the president of Master Builders of Cleveland, Ohio.

David Hanson

Industry improvements Sandwich wall panels

Upcoming challenges Continue to expand the use of precast concrete in all building projects.

Advice Market or perish. "You have to let the public know who you are and what you do," Hanson says.

About the author

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