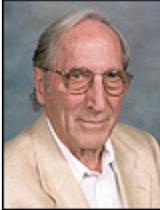


Robert and James Brooks

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In the early 20th century, automobiles were a luxury and interstate highways didn't exist. There weren't many hard, paved surfaces in the region, and it would be after World War II that the automobile would become a common mode of personal transportation.

In the early 1900's, John F. Brooks was looking to a future when he convinced the City of Fort Wayne to construct Forest Park Boulevard using asphalt. He also constructed an Indiana portion of the Lincoln Highway linking New York City and San Francisco, the first concrete road in Indiana as part of the state three-mile law. For 49 years, John Brooks nurtured and developed Brooks Construction.



As he built the company, John Brooks also built a family, including twin boys James (Jim) and Robert (Bob) Brooks. Jim and Bob grew up as siblings and friends, graduating from South Side High School, attending Carleton College in Minnesota, and serving in the U.S. Navy at the beginning of World War II.

"We were close as brothers and as friends, and we did things together all through our school years," says Jim Brooks. "We even shared a room our freshman year at college, but later we became more independent. For both of us, even though our college educations were interrupted by the war and our service, we returned to complete our degrees."

After earning their college degrees, Jim and Bob say they both knew they wanted to return to Fort Wayne and work in the family business, although in different areas. Bob had always been most interested in the field operations, while Jim found the business and financial aspects more compelling. Bob says he saw how many of the technological advances that came from the war effort could be applied to the paving industry, and Jim says he knew he could apply his business coursework and his experience as a Navy supply officer experience to that aspect of the company.

"We had worked in the business during the summer of 1946, and so when we returned to college after the war, we had a sense of the business itself. It also meant that as we had employees doing work for us, we knew what each job required because we had done it," Jim says. "We agreed when we returned in 1947 that Bob would work in the outside areas of the business and I'd work on the inside. That worked well for both of us and capitalized on each of our strengths."

The men worked under their father's direction until he passed away in 1958. Both acknowledge their father's influence on their work and their determination to maintain his philosophy of integrity. They say their father allowed them to do their jobs, and they learned from him that when one gave his word, it was vital to keep that promise. They also credit their mother Emma's ambition and visionary efforts as their inspiration for looking at new opportunities and developing them without questioning the negative "what's happens if" scenarios.

One of their first projects was Brooks Construction's involvement in building the Indiana Toll Road in the late 1950s. Under their direction, the company continued to grow, and in the early 1960s, it was included in a federal government study analyzing the efficiency of asphalt plants throughout the nation. Brooks Construction was proud to be cited as the third-most efficient plant in the United States in that study. The distinction was a direct result of the brothers' creativity and ingenuity.

“As we worked in the industry, we saw a field that was doing the same things, in the same ways it had for years,” Bob says. “We looked ahead and saw challenges in production efficiency and surface smoothness, for example, and we moved ahead with our ideas, which subsequently proved successful.”

The innovations credited to Brooks Construction include the use of the front end loader instead of stationary cranes for loading raw materials to increase efficiency, and the change to using hot oil for heating asphalt instead of using boilers and steam that generated dirty black smoke.

A key innovation was the company’s development of the portable plant in the early 1960s. Whereas in the earlier years it could take nearly three weeks to disassemble, move and reassemble an asphalt plant at a new worksite, Bob designed a system that included putting wheels under every plant component and using new quick-disconnect hardware for generators and asphalt tanks. It was a revolutionary idea that allowed Brooks to perform in three days the same move that previously spanned three weeks. Within six months of the development of this Brooks Construction “Portable Plant,” every major plant manufacturer had copied the design and begun selling the plants to others.

Under Jim and Bob’s leadership, Brooks Construction also became the first asphalt manufacturer to elevate the asphalt plant control booth. This new way of doing things offered a better view of the manufacturing plant. They also placed delicate control instruments into environmentally controlled rooms, a new idea at the time as well.

“The innovations we could make are the beauty of owning your own business,” Bob says.

“We were able to see a need and fill that need through our developments,” Jim adds. “In addition to the technical developments, in the 1960s we also saw the potential for our estimators to become salesmen. While before the industry wasn’t sales-oriented, we saw an opportunity to begin selling our services to those who needed it instead of waiting for them to come to us.”

Also in the 1960s, Jim and Bob introduced the “total site development” concept to the Fort Wayne area. Instead of using subcontractors, Brooks Construction gained a competitive edge by being able to complete all infrastructure construction, such as earth moving, water and sewer line installation, curbing, trucking and paving, without the constraints of subcontracting. This gave the company more control over costs, schedules and quality.

Through the 1960s, Jim and Bob led Brooks Construction into the commercial market in addition to the previous focus on government work. By the end of the 1980s, Brooks Construction had operations in nearly all of the counties in northeast Indiana and the company had become one of the Midwest’s first asphalt recyclers.

The Brooks 1st emblem was developed in the late 1970s and continues to be used today. It allowed Jim and Bob to “brag a bit about our quality, reliability and our reputation in the Fort Wayne community.”

In the late 1970s, Bob wanted to do more with the company and Jim was ready to take a background role. This worked well until the time came in 1987 when both men were ready to retire. By then, they had also each brought one son into the business. In May 1987, they passed the Brooks Construction torch on to Andy and John Brooks, who purchased the company.

“We watched our sons come into the business and we knew if we stayed on, we would have been an anchor to them. Andy and John had the knowledge and ability to run the business and we wanted them to be able to do that without our intervention,” Bob says. “When we retired, we even left the area for the first year so everyone would know they were in charge. We had seen too

many other father-to-son business transitions challenged because the son wanted to do something new but the father wanted to do things the old way. We wanted Andy and John to be able to do their own thing, and they certainly have done an admirable job.”

By the time they retired, Jim and Bob had built Brooks Construction from a small company employing up to 35 people to one that employed 100 in one of northeast Indiana’s largest paving companies. The men say they “recognized that there were plenty of opportunities in a 60-mile radius of Fort Wayne and we wanted to keep our work here.”

During their 30 years of company ownership, Jim and Bob stayed involved in state and national asphalt industry organizations. Bob served as President of the Indiana Asphalt Paving Association and as Chairman of the Marketing Committee for the National Asphalt Paving Association, for instance. Jim was active on the Indiana Highway Construction Board and was also involved with the Fort Wayne Chamber of Commerce, Jaycees, Rotary Club, Fort Wayne Charities and Plymouth Congregational Church. He also served on the Indiana Institute of Technology Board of Trustees.

“These activities got us involved in our industry and in our community, and each was a learning experience,” Bob says.

In addition to being generous with their time, Jim and Bob were generous with in-kind services to local organizations. For example, when a local organization for the disabled needed to purchase equipment and hand tools for a sheltered workshop, Jim approached other suppliers with whom they had worked over the years and enlisted their cooperation in donating and/or selling the tools at cost. Brooks Construction regularly donated paving materials and services to area organizations, too, and without publicity, the company built tennis courts at the YWCA and paved church parking lots.

“So many people influenced us over the years, and Fort Wayne was good to us,” Jim says, “Through these contributions, we could give something back to the community.”

Both Jim, now a full-time resident of Florida, and Bob, who divides his time between Florida and Fort Wayne, have made an impact on Fort Wayne and northeast Indiana. Through sound business practices, innovative designs, and a strong sense of loyalty to the region served by Brooks Construction, they developed the successful business of which they continue to be proud.