2010 Alumnus of the Year

Adviser
Industrialist
Veteran
Innovator
Fred Gibson Jr. '51 (metallurgical engineering)

Life began on May 24, 1927 in Golden, Colo. My father, Fred Sr., had graduated the previous year from Colorado School of Mines after his college education was delayed by serving as a Marine in World War I.

“Our” first home was in Leadville, Colo., followed by time in Durango, and then Parral, Mexico, all courtesy of American Smelting and Refining Co. Because of concern with Mexican revolutionary activities, father accepted a position with Kennecott Copper Corp. in McGill, Nev., where we lived for four years. With the Great Depression in full bloom, father was recruited by the State of Nevada to be a state-wide instructor teaching mining, metallurgical and geology courses to prospectors and other interested citizens. That assignment began a life-long love for Nevada and its many diverse communities.

During one of his trips to Clark County, my father was introduced to several prospectors who were in the early stages of developing a gold mine located in the Gold Butte district located approximately 60 miles by boat on Lake Mead. Although the gold mine was a successful venture for father and his Clark County partners, the impending World War II resulted in a shutdown of most gold mining operations.

Father was subsequently employed by Basic Magnesium Inc. in the fall of 1941, to help manage the initial field engineering of one of the world’s largest magnesium production plants, utilizing power from Hoover Dam, water from Lake Mead and magnesium ore from Gabbs, Nev.

This critical defense plant, with the help of more than 10,000 construction workers, engineers and employees, was extremely successful, with first production in August 1942. By late 1944, sufficient magnesium was available for the remainder of the war and various sections of the plant were shutdown. Other critical defense operations, including Western Electrochemical Co. (WECCO) of Culver City, Calif., were recruited to relocate to Henderson, WECCO, owned by a small group of stockholders including father, was sold to American Potash and Chemicals Co. in 1956.

I joined my father and several of his WECCO partners in a new company, Pacific Engineering and Production Co. of Nevada (PEPCON), which started operations in Henderson in 1956 and constructed its first facility in 1958. PEPCON later merged with American Pacific Corporation (AmPac) in 1982. I retired as its CEO in 1997.

As a high school student I was inclined to pursue a career in law. However, like millions of others, I joined the Army after graduation. Following basic training, I was assigned to an ASTP (army specialized training program) Unit at Yale University where I completed the accelerated Japanese language and related cultural subjects course in 1946. In 1947 I enrolled as a prelaw student at Colorado College. At the completion of my sophomore year, it was clear that my real interest was math, science and engineering. I transferred to the Mackay School of Mines at Nevada in September 1949.

I view my time at Nevada as one of the more productive phases of life, where I made lasting friendships with fellow students, faculty and administrators and, most importantly, received a superb education. The quality of education was greatly enhanced because of the private enterprise work experience of most of the faculty, including Jay Carpenter 1906 (mining engineering), director of the Mackay School. Faculty experiences provided, in many cases, examples of practical approaches to problems.

Since mining opportunities were often situated in remote and foreign places, the mining/metallurgical engineer was confronted with a broad range of challenges, including those that were business-related. Carpenter was directly responsible for my introduction to accounting and bookkeeping—knowledge that was paramount to my successful management career.

Although a substantial portion of my courses at the University related to geology, metallurgy and mining, I also received a great chemical education that was particularly helpful to me at the very beginning of my new business career. All three companies, WECCO, PEPCON and AmPac were, basically, chemical manufacturers. AmPac manufactures oxidizers for solid propellants in Utah, pharmaceuticals and drugs at Rancho Cordova, Calif., satellite thrusters and systems at Niagara Falls, and satellite-related equipment in two plants in England and one in Ireland.

In summation I would say that I have enjoyed a great life of successful experience in business, community affairs and personal relationships, as a result, in many ways, to my time at Nevada both as student, but also as a friend of the University.

From a conversation with Char Hagemann, director of development for the College of Science, and Crystal Parrish, director of foundation operations. Gibson is director of American Pacific Corporation and previously served as its president/CEO and chairman. He graduated in 1951 with a degree in metallurgical engineering and received an honorary doctorate in 1999. Gibson serves on the Mackay School of Earth Sciences and Engineering’s Advisory Council, and received the school’s Alumnus of the Year Award in 2006. For nearly two decades, Gibson has supported numerous scholarships and faculty endowments at Mackay and is a Friend of the Library. He recently was recognized by the Nevada Alumni Association as the 2010 Alumnus of the Year.