

Klobucars have been builders of Beloit

By HILLARY GAVAN Senior staff writer | Posted: Saturday, October 1, 2016 10:00 am

BELOIT — As Ferd Klobucar, 90, drives around Beloit he realizes there aren't many buildings he hasn't constructed.

While many companies have come and gone since 1966, Klobucar Construction has stood the test of time, celebrating its 50th anniversary on Sept. 15 with an ever-growing portfolio of success stories.

“Our industry has hardworking and loyal people. There are good times and tough times, but we were very fortunate. Through thick and thin we were able to survive,” Ferd Klobucar said.

In an interview on Thursday, Ferd and his sons, President Jerry Klobucar and Vice President Jim Klobucar, shared some of their memories about the company and what has been a challenging yet joyous ride.

“It became a way of life,” Ferd said. “I miss it everyday.”

Ferd already had a burgeoning career before he started his own business. He worked as a field engineer in Indiana steel mills and in Illinois. He then took a job as an estimator for Paul Kennedy Construction in Beloit and later worked for Cunningham Brothers, which built many structures during the 1950s and 1960s in Beloit.

When Ferd and his wife, Barbara, had seven children and one on the way, the couple decided it was time to start their own company, something son Jerry still marvels over.

“It took amazing entrepreneurial spirit and guts,” Jerry said. “I can't imagine leaving a comfortable and well-paying job in a leap of faith like they did.”

Ferd noted he founded the company the same date as his wedding anniversary. Ferd and Barbara recently celebrated their 65th wedding anniversary.



Celebrating a major milestone

(From left): Klobucar Construction President Jerry Klobucar, his father and company founder Ferd Klobucar and his brother Vice President Jim Klobucar gather for a photo outside Regal Beloit. Regal Beloit is one of many projects Klobucar Construction has done. The company is celebrating its fiftieth year of business this year.

After getting a hearty pledge of support from Beloit State Bank's Art Adams, Ferd forged ahead with the company. However, he didn't take out any large loans, as he didn't want to over-invest in equipment which he often saw rusting away at other company's yards.

Ferd started with two or three employees at the corner of Wisconsin and Woodard avenues with a yard on Elmwood Avenue. His first employee was Jerald Nordlee of Janesville who would stay with the company until he retired in the 1990s. The second employee, the late Harold Hanson of Beloit, also was with the business during its formative years. Other early employees were Lyle Woodard and Gary Garetson.

Ferd said his experience pouring concrete for steel mills in Indiana prepared him for one of Klobucar Construction's first projects, pouring large machine foundations for Fairbanks Morse as it retooled its machinery. Soliciting concrete work would become a focus of the company in its infancy.

Klobucar then moved to Sixth Street in the early 1970s and to Shopiere Road by the mid-1970s where the company headquarters remains to this day.

"We did between 80 and 100 projects every year for loyal clients and we still work for many of the same ones we started working for 50 years ago," Jerry said.

At some points, the company had as many as 50 to 60 employees. The boys in the family all worked in the field at various times as well as other tasks.

"I remember riding my bike from East Ridge Road to Sixth Street to clean the office," Jim said.

Klobucar poured many of the foundations for the former Beloit Corporation as well as built some of its additions. Klobucar built Beloit City Hall, Regal Beloit's world headquarters and subsequent additions.

Klobucar has done a variety of projects at Beloit Health System, most recently building the Beloit Cancer Center. Currently, the company is working on NorthPointe's ambulatory surgery center in Roscoe.

Some of the most rewarding projects would be those which brought Ferd full circle. After he helped build the original science building and Neese Performing Arts Center for Cunningham Brothers, his company would subsequently tear down the science building and build Beloit College's Center for the Sciences in 2008.

Klobucar Construction would also build the new Our Lady of the Assumption church in 2003, after Ferd once helped with the original campus with Cunningham Brothers in 1953.

The most challenging projects tended to involve Mother Nature or historical structures. Ferd recalled using dynamite to break up an ice block as the company repaired the Indian Ford Dam in Edgerton in winter. He might have been smoking a cigar at the time.

Jerry fondly recalled the challenge of rehabilitating the Logan Museum at Beloit College, where the building had to be shored up and the basement had to be lowered two feet in 1992. The museum, originally a hospital where Civil War veterans convalesced, was built in 1865. The walls had to be taken down and the stones had to be numbered before being stacked back in their original positions.

“There were a lot of sleepless nights hoping the wind wouldn’t blow,” Jerry said. “That building gave me an appreciation for working on historic structures that I still have today.”

In August of 2015 Klobucar built Chicago Fittings. In 2012-2014, it build an array of projects for the School District of Beloit referendum including Converse and Todd elementary schools and converted Beloit Memorial High School’s original pool into a fitness center. In 2015, it did work on Aldrich and McNeel intermediate schools and it just finished work on Beloit Memorial High School’s auditorium renovations. Over the years, Klobucar would do work for 20 school districts.

There were a few challenges over the year such as downturns in the economy. However, the company had a good base of customers which gave it repeat business to carry it through the slow times.

Through it all, there was no shortage of laughter as the crews worked hard but played a few pranks along the way.

Today Klobucar Construction has 18 full-time employees . The work area radius is 100-150 miles in every direction from Beloit, although its gone as far as South Dakota and southern Indiana for specific clients.

Ferd retired in 1991. Tom Ptacin, a brother-in-law and former president retired in 2015. Brother-in-law, and superintendent William Geissler still works for the business.