

Southern Knights

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Knight's precast of South Carolina is a family affair.

By Kirk Stelsel

If you ask 100 different precast concrete plant owners how they landed in the industry, you'll get 100 different answers.

Some have grown up in the family business. Others have taken more indirect paths. If you ask Bud Knight, owner of Knight's Precast in Summerville, S.C., whether he thought he'd ever be where he is today, the answer is an easy one. "Not in my dreams could I have imagined anything like this when I started – sure couldn't," said Bud, or Mr. Knight as his employees call him.

Bud's journey began in 1969, and today it has yielded more unexpected returns than he ever thought possible.

A man, a will and a pumper truck

"I was 24 years old in 1969, and I started with one little truck by myself," Bud said. If that sounds like a pretty modest beginning for a septic tank pumping business, consider that the one truck he had he built himself. It wasn't glamorous, but he knew he wanted to go into business for himself ever since he was a young boy.



To get started, he gave up a good-paying job making \$6.30 an hour and a company truck, which didn't make his father too happy. But Bud's business grew, and he soon found himself doing repair work in addition to the pumping. His next move was the purchase of a backhoe so he could start into the installation business, and by 1972 he was successful enough to start bringing on other employees. One of the employees he brought on board early on, at the ripe age of about six or seven years old, was his son Michael.

"Michael has been a part of this company since he was pretty much old enough to walk," Bud said. "In high school he'd come home from school and pump tanks until dark."



Today, Michael runs the company's septic tank division. A lifetime in the business has afforded him an intimate knowledge of the area and his customers' needs. According to his co-workers, a call can come from anywhere in the area, and just from the address Michael can tell what kind of system it's going to require and how often the system will need to be pumped.

"I've been doing the septic tanks all my life, so it's just natural," Michael said. "I've done it all, from sweeping floors on up."

After years in the installation business, the next logical step for Bud was to begin manufacturing the tanks himself. He had started pouring lids in the '80s, which was his first shot at precasting, so the transition was a natural one.

In 1990, he purchased his first molds from Bethlehem Manufacturing and began pouring his own tanks. At the time, he had to order concrete from local ready-mix companies, but that was only a viable option for so long because he couldn't get the concrete when he wanted it, and he would get cut short or get other people's concrete.

Taking matters into his own hands, his first batch plant went up in 1995. At that point, the company that had started with one homemade pumper truck had turned into a full-fledged septic tank business that included batching, casting and installation. But even with all that growth, what would eventually become Knight's Companies was just getting started. The addition of a few more key people, as well as some new divisions, would soon take the company to new levels.



Like a Father

When Bud hired Chuck Layton part time in 1991, he wasn't quite sure what to make of him. He could see his potential, but was never sure whether Layton would be at work the next day or not. "He started working for me in his wild, young days and I never dreamed he'd still be here today," Bud said, "but I've always known he was capable, and he has turned into a big asset to our company."

By 1997, Christianity began to play a central role in Layton's life, which he credits for everything he has since accomplished. Bud could sense the change and had been considering starting a division to expand into other precast products, so he offered him a full-time position leading the effort. Neither one knew much about precast, but Bud promised they'd learn it together.

"Since Mr. Knight and I made that deal, I haven't looked back," Layton said. "He's been a man of his word, and he's been like a dad to me more than anything else. I lost my dad when I was 12 years old, and the trust Mr. Knight's put in me has been a changing factor in my life."

The first step was to construct a building using an overhead crane. Until then, Knight's had stripped the septic tanks out of a modest, open-air structure using a truck. The building they put up was too low, which became one of many lessons they would learn together. They remedied this two years later when they added square footage and height.

After getting started, an acquaintance put an NPCA directory in Layton's hands and put him in touch with Quinn Machine & Foundry, now a division of Besser Company.

"The guy said to me, 'Look, you can get all the information you need out of this directory,'" he said. "That has since been one of our biggest tools because of connections we made through NPCA like with NPC for boots, which is now Trelleborg."



Layton got in touch with Denny Anderson at Quinn who was able to put him in contact with plants outside of Knight's competition area,

which played a critical role in its growth. With the NPCA directory in hand, Layton also recalls telling Bud they needed to become a part of the association. After joining NPCA, he attended his first show in Columbus, Ohio, in 1998 and got his hands on his first issue of MC Magazine, the predecessor of Precast Inc.

“I remember getting the first magazine and looking at it and seeing the cover, and I thought, ‘You have to really be something to get involved with this magazine,’” he said.

A Few Good Men

To help grow the newly formed precast division, Layton hired Pete Johnson, who brought experience in production, and Jim Gowan, a seasoned precast salesman who has led sales efforts at Knight’s ever since.

“I knew we were going to take off, but getting experience was going to be key,” Layton said. “That’s when we approached Pete and Jim. They came aboard and quickly became key people in precast, as far as building our customer base and figuring out where we wanted to go and how large.”

The company had started with 48-in.-diameter manholes and some knockout boxes, but with Johnson on board that quickly changed. Soon, the biggest challenge became keeping up with all the forms he wanted to order.

The next year, 1999, proved to be another big year for personnel. Layton hired Joey Thomas, known as JT, to be plant manager, and Bud’s younger son, Pete Knight, joined the company full time after graduating from high school. With them on board, Layton was able to step out of the precast division for a while to get his general contractor license and help the company with expansion.

“I don’t see us being where we are without any of those guys,” Layton said. “Like with a clay pot, the hands forming it shape it, and they’ve helped shape the company.”

A “can do” Mentality

With Pete Knight leading the precast and ready-mix divisions, the company has never been afraid to take a few risks in the pursuit of greater rewards. Whether that’s a new plant, new product lines, mix designs or filling a niche in the custom market, the company is always moving forward.



The single biggest investment the company has made is the development of its current location in 2004. With enough land for a ready-mix operation, an office building that can house 40 employees, and six additional buildings for fabrication, maintenance, the septic tank division, precast division and a block division, the Knight's Companies footprint is much bigger than ever before.

“This expansion was all Pete Knight,” Layton said. “With him and Pete Johnson on board, all of a sudden you had to buckle up because it was like we put jet packs on.”

Another big change the company made was to begin pouring its products with self-consolidating concrete (SCC). Knight's Precast began experimenting with SCC in 2004, and has slowly ramped up the use of it ever since. Today, the revolutionary mix has come to play an important part in almost every product line it produces.

“We started experimenting with SCC with Master Builders (now a part of BASF) and in the last three or four years we've come a long way,” Layton said. “Without the right management and watching it close, you can ruin a whole load quick, so you have to have key people in place to implement it, but it's a whole other ball game.”

The company also prides itself in its ability to meet the needs of just about any customer when it comes to custom boxes, storm drains and wet wells, thanks to longtime partnerships with companies like Western Forms and ConSeal.



“Cookie cutter things, anybody can do,” Layton said. “Western Forms has helped us a lot with our versatility, and ConSeal we’ve known about for ages because we’ve used them since the day we poured our first tank. With these custom projects we can hardly keep up, which is a good place to be.”

A Good Knight

There’s no shortage of stories when it comes to Bud and the company’s past. Stories like how he couldn’t sleep at night after he had to make payments on his first backhoe or how he used to keep everyone’s hours in his shirt pocket are told with admiration. That’s because everyone at the company has a deep-seated respect for him and the way he built the company from scratch with dependability, quality and dedication always coming first.

“His heart’s as big as Texas and he’d do anything for anyone,” Layton said. “When he tells you something, you can bank on it. Knight’s Precast has been successful because if we say we’re going to do something, we’ll make it happen. That’s what people remember.”

When he looks back, Bud can hardly fathom how fast the time has gone, but he’s happy with how everything has turned out.

“What’s kept Knight’s going is a lot of hard work, seven days a week, 24 hours a day and having my kids working here,” he said. “I guess that’s why we are where we are today. We’ve got some good guys that do good and we try to do good by them. We’ve grown to be like a family, and I wouldn’t trade it for anything.”

The Boeing Lift

After the bottom of the economy dropped out, Knight’s Companies pushed through two hard years that tested the resolve of the entire team. Pouring dropped from a peak of 100 yds a day in 2007 down to 10 in 2009, and that led to a reduction in the work force.



“For Mr. Knight, one of the hardest things we ever had to do was to let people go when things went south,” said construction manager Chuck Layton. “Nobody has taken a pay cut like Mr. Knight – he’s all in. He’s liquidated assets and he’s sacrificed to keep people employed through the down times.”

Bud Knight echoed those thoughts. “Letting people go hurt my heart,” he said. “It’s not so bad to let a sorry person go, but it’s hard to let a good, dedicated person go. It’s what it had to be, and fortunately we’ve been able to hire back some of those people.”

As things began to improve in 2010, the company received exactly the lift it needed when Boeing Co. came to the area. Its big presence brought big-time needs, and although Knight’s had never poured anything of the magnitude Boeing needed, the team found a way to make it work.

With little time to plan, Knight’s Precast was pouring mega structures of 80 tons that could accommodate 108-in.-diameter pipe. The original specs had called for poured-in-place, but the pace of the job and the stringent safety regulations wouldn’t allow it. Using precast not only met those requirements but also saved Boeing on cost.

With the biggest gantry crane on site able to lift only 50 tons, Knight’s found a partner to do tandem picks and remained innovative throughout the job to stay at a competitive price. The job went about three or four months right through the hottest months of 2010, but the end result was truly impressive and earned Knight’s more jobs with Boeing down the road.

“We’ve got a lot of great employees from management down who allow us to make these projects work,” Pete Knight said. “It’s more so a family than a company. It’s not about one, it’s about a team. We try to instill the team atmosphere out of the gate, which has played a great deal into the success we have today.”

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