A Brief History of Brooks Construction Company, Inc.

The Founders

Born in Dunkirk, Indiana in 1882, the company's founder, John Foster Brooks, came from humble beginnings. When he was two, his father moved the family to Logansport and began a career as a "huckster." (In the late 1800's, a huckster traveled to small towns collecting chicken, eggs, and other agricultural products for processing and shipment to New York City via the railroad.) As a young man, John F. Brooks attended two years of college at Purdue University. He worked the following summer as a timekeeper for Moellering Construction Company in Fort Wayne, IN.

Quickly gaining an interest in construction, Brooks began selling liquid asphalt for the Barber Asphalt Company. At the age of 26, he teamed up with an engineer and friend, Lester E. Ginn, and together they sought financial backing of a Fort Wayne businessman, Ralph Magee, who invested $7,000 with only two stipulations. The money was to be paid back as soon as possible and detailed cost-based accounting records had to be kept and provided to Magee upon his request. With those conditions agreed to, Brooks Construction was launched in 1909.

The Early Years (1909 to 1940)

At the time when roads were mostly dirt and gravel, a movement was underway to construct streets out of concrete, asphalt, and brick. The first job was completed by Brooks in 1909 when he convinced the City of Fort Wayne to construct Forest Park Boulevard using asphalt. In the early 1900s, local property owners, then called “freeholders,” were able to vote and select the type of material of which their particular street would be made. This method was not always simple. Brooks had to go door to door and sell each homeowner on the virtues of paving over the more traditional brick.

Within three years, Brooks and Ginn were able to repay Magee for his initial investment. With numerous projects in Indiana and surrounding states, Brooks Construction Company, Inc. received a 50 year charter from the State of Indiana on November 21, 1911.

Brooks Construction got its first big break when the Indiana state legislature passed a “three mile law” to encourage the construction of roads between communities. Doing all work by hand or with horses and steam driven pavers, Brooks Construction constructed a three mile stretch of concrete road between New Haven and Fort Wayne. This was the first concrete road in Indiana and is known as Old Maumee Road today.

Brooks Construction worked mainly with concrete in the early years. At a time when ready-mixed concrete had not even been conceived, all material production took place at the job site. Sacks of cement and truck loads of sand and stone were delivered to the job and mixed together as needed. Often the most challenging aspect of any job was getting the waterlines run for the mixing process.

Innovation came early to Brooks Construction as the company purchased and used one of the first self propelled concrete mixers, manufactured by the Koehring Co. of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Whatever the barrier was, Brooks possessed the drive and intuition to remove it and move forward. For example, when early, unskilled truck drivers were not able to back up to the paver quickly and accurately, Brooks developed a turntable located at the front of the paver. This improvement allowed the truck driver to pull forward onto the turntable which would automatically turn the truck around quickly and accurately for unloading.

In 1917, Brooks Construction purchased its first asphalt production plant. In the following years, this plant and others would be used throughout Indiana, Ohio, Michigan, and even Kentucky to develop the Midwest's infrastructure. The demand for roads, streets and highways was growing at a phenomenal rate with the automobile's mass introduction into American culture, propelled by the Model T from Ford Motor Company.

In addition to concrete and asphalt, Brooks laid brick streets in Fort Wayne that survive to this day. Residents and visitors can see the original pavement on Swinney Avenue, College Street, and other roads.

In 1923, the company built a yard and office at 1123 Barthold Street. The land was purchased from the railroad for $1 in an agreement to move aggregate materials from Huntington to Fort Wayne via rail. Two spurs were installed for loading and unloading of cement and aggregate.

The Great Depression struck hard at the heart of American business, and Brooks Construction suffered with the rest. The company survived in part because of a personal loan from John's wife, Emma, to help cover payroll. The 1930s also brought some personnel transition to Brooks Construction. In 1937, Ginn retired and the concrete division was sold to another local company, but John's twin sons, James E. and Robert F. Brooks, entered the business.

Robert Brooks recalls his first assignment. "In 1937, we were doing an asphalt resurfacing job in Michigan. I was sent there because I only had to be 14 years old to get a license and I was able to drive a truck."

1940s to 1960s

While the company was able to weather the Depression, the start of World War II meant jobs and workers were increasingly hard to find. Brooks Construction spread its geographic reach: several major jobs were completed during the war, including the Crane Ordinance Depot and airports in Bowling Green, KY, and Moline, IL. The employment problems carried over into post war years, and recruiting often included a trip to the local pool hall to recruit unskilled workers and train them to do a particular job.

After serving in World War II, Jim and Bob Brooks returned to Fort Wayne and the family business to begin to make their own legacy in the construction industry. Undeniably, their father's spirit of innovation carried through to the next generation as Bob and Jim made improvements to asphalt construction technology.

For example, Jim and Bob recognized that the older style asphalt manufacturing plants, which had been used since 1917, took 2-3 weeks to move to a new job, costing a loss of time and decreasing production capacity. So when the company was awarded the contract on their first section of the Indiana Toll Road in 1957, the Brooks twins sought a new approach.

After much discussion, it was determined that a new plant would be purchased for $93,000. A Standard Steel, 90 ton per hour, portable tower plant arrived by railroad and was assembled at the Barthold Street yard. Bob Brooks went to work on plans he had been designing for years. Through Bob and Jim's innovative spirit, many modifications were made to this plant including the placing of wheels under literally every component and utilizing new quick disconnects for generators and asphalt tanks. This new, ground-breaking design enabled the plant to be moved in 3 to 4 days, increasing Brooks' ability to do more work in a more efficient manner. Within 6 months, all manufacturers had portable plants for sale based on Brooks's design.

John F. Brooks, founder of Brooks Construction Company, actively worked until his death in 1958. Much early infrastructure development in Fort Wayne is credited to John and his company, including Southwood Park and the Hillcrest area. John was an outstanding civic leader and well respected for his drive to succeed and his high ethical standards, traits that still remain central to the company today.

In the early 1960s, the Federal government commissioned a study to analyze 25 asphalt plants throughout the United States for efficiency in operations. Brooks Construction and its new portable plant were chosen based on the Indiana State Highway Commission's recommendations. This customized asphalt plant ranked third overall in the nation. Brooks was later notified that the plant would have been ranked first if it hadn't experienced truck delivery delays during the two week testing period.

While their innovative plant design was a success, there were unfortunately few significant paving projects available. Bob Brooks said, "There was hardly any work in the early 1960s – maybe 10 significant hot mix jobs. Brooks kept active as subcontractors on most major highway projects and completed the shoulder work on the toll road in all of Steuben County." To increase business, Jim and Bob Brooks hired one of the first true salesmen in the industry in 1963. By demonstrating high quality products and strong customer service, the trio quickly developed a large business base, primarily in northeastern Indiana. Jim and Bob carried this experience to the National Asphalt Paving Association (NAPA), where they helped create the Marketing Department that promoted asphalt mix as the pavement of choice to government agencies and commercial contractors.

Brooks Construction became known as a total site development company. At a time when many construction companies used subcontractors, Brooks gained a competitive edge by undertaking all aspects of infrastructure construction, including dirt and earthwork, water and sewer lines, curbing, trucking, and pavement. Without the constraints of "subs", BCCO was able to better control costs and construction schedule and provide higher quality products and services. The red, white and blue "Brooks 1st" logo was developed by Don McDermott to remind customers to think of Brooks "first" for all their infrastructure development needs.

1970s to 1980s

The economic boom years of the 1970s created many opportunities for Brooks Construction. Concrete reemerged as a production line with the hire of Steve Hinen in the mid 1970s. Since then, Brooks has become a leader in curb, retaining wall and concrete construction. Today, with multiple concrete crews and automatic curb machines, Brooks has cemented its position as a quality concrete contractor.

During the early 1980s, International Harvester Company moved its operations from Fort Wayne to Springfield, Ohio. The resulting economic downturn in Fort Wayne presented Brooks Construction with challenges and opportunities. Brooks Construction expanded its geographic market and purchased new stationary and portable asphalt plants. By the end of the decade, Brooks Construction was a familiar name in Allen County and the surrounding counties, bolstered by its operations in Steuben and Elkhart counties. The company moved on February 1, 1988, to its new main office and current headquarters at 6525 Ardmore Avenue, Fort Wayne.

In 1986, it was time for the next generation to take over. Bob's son, John R. Brooks, and Jim's son, Andrew F. Brooks, had begun working as laborers for the company in the 1970s, and their abilities and responsibilities had grown. Bob Brooks recounts how he and his brother Jim spent a decade trying to figure out the best way to turn the business over to their sons. In the end, their strategy was to "just walk away and let them run it."

1990s to 2020

In the 1990s, Brooks stretched its lead as the premier highway contractor in Northeastern Indiana. Winning numerous awards on the State and National Levels annually for quality highway construction and specialized commercial work, Brooks Construction continued to earn its reputation as simply the best.

With its strong emphasis on quality, Brooks Construction was actively involved with the testing and construction of one of the first SuperPave highways in Indiana. Additionally, Brooks created the first private AASHTO Accredited Laboratory in the State of Indiana in order to ensure the highest quality pavement for its customers.

Brooks Construction also looked to decrease its carbon footprint and environmental impact. On September 17, 1997, Brooks Construction and National Serv-All announced their innovative Landfill Gas Energy Recovery Project. This clean energy approach utilizes natural gas produced from the decomposition of the landfill as fuel burned at the Ardmore plant location for asphalt production. Additionally, Resource Recovery and Recycling (3R), a company-owned division, was developed to provide construction materials recycling services, including concrete, asphalt and shingles. Aggressive commercial recycling keeps what would otherwise be waste materials out of landfills and in use in our economy.

In 2003, Brooks Construction expanded into the South Bend and Mishawaka area with the purchase of Gage Asphalt and Mishawaka Asphalt Supply. Brooks was privileged to serve this region for 7 years before selling its plants to concentrate on other aspects of company growth.

In the new millennium, Brooks strengthened its management team by adding executives, including Bill Stevens now Chief Operating Officer, and Cindy Riebersal as Chief Financial Office, who brought deep and lauded experience to the leadership of the company. Bill started with the company in 1990 and exemplifies significant integrity, excellence, and experience in his position of overseeing operations. As a CPA, Cindy oversees our accounting department and was instrumental in the creation of the Northern Indiana Chapter of the Construction Financial Management Association.

In 2001, Junior Achievement of Northern Indiana honored Brooks Construction Company, Inc. by inducting second-generation owners, Robert and James Brooks, into the Greater Fort Wayne Business Hall of Fame. It was a further honor when John and Andy were inducted into the Hall of Fame in 2019, following their fathers' distinguished footsteps.

Brooks Construction proudly celebrated its 100 year anniversary in 2009 by hosting three events:

- A kickoff celebration at the new Tin Caps stadium in downtown Fort Wayne;
- A family fun day at Indiana Beach; and
- A one-of-a-kind charity demolition derby for its business partners and the community held on September 22, 2009. This event culminated the 100 year celebration and served to thank the community for its support and business over the last 100 years. In the end, Brooks Construction donated $50,000 to five different local charities.

In the first 100 years, Brooks Construction established itself as a company dedicated to innovation and excellence. Unsurprisingly, our next 100 years have begun in that same vein. While the Great Recession took its toll on the construction industry, Brooks continued to put out high quality infrastructure throughout northern Indiana, working on significant projects such as Parkview Regional Medical Center, the Wal-Mart Milk Processing Facility, the Hoosier Heartland Corridor, the reconstruction of I-469, Sweetwater's ever growing campus, the Indiana Tech Sports complex, and the Indiana Toll Road. Brooks moved asphalt plants to locations near major highway projects, continued to purchase new and updated equipment technology, unveiled a new high-recycle product (HyRAP), and invested in training and development for its employees. We have been among the first contractors in the state to run jobs focused on new material technology, such as cold central plant recycling, cold in-place recycling, and SuperPave 5.

Brooks took huge strides in its safety culture in the 2010s, winning numerous awards as we prioritized "everyone going home in the shape they came in" and "Safety Before Anything." In 2019, the company held a great opening for its newly expanded and refurbished office after working through an 11 month construction project. Customers, vendors, competitors, employees, and their families were all welcomed to participate in kicking off the company's reinvestment in its future.

Our third generation owners were joined by the fourth generation of the Brooks family: Margi Brooks and Andrew Brooks. Both have served in various roles in recent years, learning the company from the ground up. Margi worked in the Lab, Sales, Operations, and was the Manager of the company's Technology Division before becoming Vice President, Margi is a graduate of Duke University (psychology) and the IU Kelley School of Business (MBA in entrepreneurship and corporate innovation). Likewise, Andrew served numerous roles including working in the field, sales, project management and most recently managed the company's equipment and logistics. Andrew is a graduate of High Point University with a degree in business administration.

2020 to present

As the decade turned, the COVID-19 Pandemic continued to disrupt everyone's life. New procedures and protocols, the loss of loved ones, and even disruption to supply chains loomed over America. Brooks Construction was fortunate to be identified as an essential business and was able to continue working with a renewed focus on keeping our employees safe. Work from home and social distancing changed the way the leadership team managed and operated the company. Mobility and technology initiatives accelerated like never before at Brooks and positioned the organization for the decade ahead.

2022 brought prestigious honors to the family's third generation ownership. John Brooks was named a Sagamore of the Wabash for his work in advancing infrastructure in Indiana and his creation of the LC Nature Park. Just a few months later, Andy Brooks was honored to be inducted by his peers into the APAI Hall Of Fame for significant and extraordinary lifetime contributions to the Indiana asphalt pavement industry.

Under nearly 40 years of John and Andy's outstanding leadership, the company grew stronger and larger, weathered several economic storms and improved the lives of not only their employees, but also the communities they served through high quality infrastructure, support of numerous non-profits and an unending drive to advance northeast Indiana as a great place to live and work.

In February of 2023, Brooks Construction transitioned to its 4th generation of family leadership when Margi Brooks and Andrew Brooks II became co-CEO's of Brooks Construction. Andy Brooks continues to serve the organization as an Executive Advisor and John Brooks maintains his role as Chairman of the Board. Our leadership team continues to include Bill Stevens, Chief Operating Officer, and Cindy Riebersal, Chief Financial Officer. With this depth of experience at the executive management level, it's no wonder that Brooks Construction continues to demonstrate its dedication to quality product, customer service, and innovation. Brooks Construction is a company where legacy matters and people are highly valued.