Murray A. Wilson, Founder

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An 85-Year Stroll Down Memory Lane

Murray A. Wilson was born in Palmyra, Iowa in 1894. He grew up in Lyons, Kansas and graduated from Baker University in Baldwin. He became a teacher and high school principal in Oswego. World War I interrupted his education career. He served as a first sergeant with the 152nd Aero Squadron and returned to teach mathematics in Neodesha. He soon decided on a career change to engineering, and earned a degree in civil engineering at Kansas State in 1922.

Murray and Edith Coffman were married in 1919 and had two daughters, Mary Helen (Mrs. Donald Hayman) and Dorothy (Mrs. Merrill Werts). Each daughter had four children.

Murray became City Engineer at Hays for two years, Research Engineer for the U.S. Bureau of Public Roads for two more years, and then Chief Engineer for the Kansas Forestry, Fish & Game Commission for six years. In 1932, the early days of the Great Depression, found Murray and friend Bob Paulette, Salina's city engineer, out of jobs.

The two started their consulting engineering practice in Paulette's Salina home. They developed a municipal engineering practice, designing streets and drainage systems, water, and sewer systems for Kansas communities. Their work during the Depression included many WPA-type federal grant projects to build lakes and dams, swimming pools, parks, streets, and utilities. Project #1 (1932) was 2,280 ft. of 8- and 10-inch sewers for the City of Glasco, Kansas. The construction cost was $3,115.43.

Thirty-eight days after the attack on Pearl Harbor, Murray and 20 engineers and technicians stepped off the train in Pueblo, Colorado with a contract to design a huge ordnance depot, which project cost was estimated at $17 million. Design was to be completed in 60 days, and construction in six months. Wilson & Company's project staff quickly grew to 125.

Kansas Turnpike Construction

After the war, Murray returned to Salina with just a few employees, down from the hundreds employed during the war. They rebuilt a growing engineering practice with some military contracts and a large waterfowl area development at Cheyenne Bottoms. The 1950's started off with another war, and Murray again responded with quick development of an engineering staff, this time in Wichita, to support rapid expansion of McConnell Air Force Base and Boeing Plant Facilities. At the same time, other Wilson & Company teams were working in Wichita on the Kansas Turnpike project.

In the late 1950's, defense work shifted to missile silos and Strategic Air Command (SAC) bases, including Schilling Air Force Base in Salina. The company also started design work on the new interstate highway system.

Murray retired in 1959, transferring ownership to Nathan Butcher and Bruce Roberts. He stayed involved with many clients until his death in 1969.

Murray was a recognized leader in consulting engineering. He was president of the Kansas Engineering Society, and received its Outstanding Engineer Award. He was president of the Kansas Section of the American Society of Civil Engineers, and president of Kansas Consulting Engineers.

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WILSON & COMPANY

Panama Canal

Murray was elected president of the National Society of Professional Engineers (1961-62), the nation's largest engineering society. He also was named "Engineer-of-the-Year" by that society, the profession's highest national award in 1967. In that recognition, he was described as "outstanding talent, competence in leadership as a professional engineer; distinguished and unselfish service in the field of education; significant contributions to his professional and technical societies; devotion and outstanding service to his community, state and nation…. Untiring efforts to make this world a better place for all mankind."

Always a supporter of education, he received a distinguished service award from Baker University, a distinguished service award and an honorary degree of doctor of science from Kansas State University, and an honorary degree of doctor of humane letters from Kansas Wesleyan University. Wilson Hall at Kansas Wesleyan, where he served as a trustee for many years, was named in his honor. He was inducted into the Kansas Wesleyan University Hall of Fame on February 17, 1976. Murray Wilson Conference Room, in the Department of Civil Engineering at K-State, bears his name because of his support of his alma mater, the Murray Wilson Engineering Scholarship Fund, and for helping furnish the department's conference room and library.

Tyler Ashton (L) and James Lopez designed a volcano to help the Albuquerque Metropolitan Arroyo Flood Control Authority (AMAFCA) resolve erosion problems on the West I-40 Phase IV project in Albuquerque, NM.

Murray was respected and emulated by his employees and associates, who carried on with further accomplishments such as designing highways in Saudi Arabia, railroads in Mexico and Panama, and establishing offices in as many as 15 states in the U.S.

In conclusion, Wilson & Company has prospered and enriched communities across the country and the lives of our employees because of the courage and grit of our founder, Murray Wilson. As an unidentified writer reminded us in 2002, we should remember

Pecos Street Over I-70 Bridge Replacement, Denver, CO

UPRR Santa Teresa Terminal, Santa Teresa, NM

that change has always been with us, and certainly will be in the future. The challenge for us as productive beings is to be flexible, to be eager to grow personally and professionally, and to seek out those opportunities which so often accompany change. To close, here is a quote from a forward-thinking person who always met changing times cheerfully and confidently:

"We shall have change whether we want it or not. Whether it turns out to be progress depends on how we use those changes that appear to be inevitable, and toward what end we guide the changes as they develop."

"Change or Progress?"
The American Engineer, June 1962
Murray A. Wilson, P.E., NSPE President

discipline | intensity | collaboration I shared ownership | solutions

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