

Industry Veteran Remembered for His Colorful Character & Contributions to the Industry

by Melinda Caldwell

Ronnie Wright (1937-2005) lived the kind of life few have the courage to live and made many contributions to the structural building components industry along the way.

It has been said time and time again, that everything is bigger in Texas. By all accounts, this adage holds true when it comes to the life of truss industry veteran, Ronnie Wright. Wright, 67, passed away on February 17 at his home on the Brazos River. Very few who encountered this John Wayne meets St. Nick character ever forgot the impression he made. Even fewer in the truss industry who encountered his equipment forgot his commitment to quality and durability—in many cases because they are still using the equipment they bought from him more than 20 years ago.

Indeed, Wright was one of the pioneers of the truss industry, going back to the late 1950s when he started with Clary Corporation building saws and truss production



equipment in Fort Worth. His entrepreneurial spirit led him and Mike Rosser to start Production Equipment and Engineering in nearby Haltom City in 1968. There he started building and maintaining truss production equipment in the same shop where he grew up a welder's son. According to Wright's only son-in-law, J. Lynn Lunsford, Wright held a number of patents on the machinery Production Equipment built, though he didn't like to brag about it. "What everybody in the business knew was that it was the best around—bulletproof," Lunsford said.

One-time employee and long-time customer Don DeGroot, President of R.E. Sweeney Company in Fort Worth, still has one of Wright's roller presses that dates back to the late 1960s. "Ronnie built the toughest, longest-lasting roller presses in the industry," Degroot recalled. "We have one from the early years that still gets used every day." That roller press is actually the first one Ronnie ever built. It even bears the Serial No. 1.

"Heavy-duty" is a common adjective among those describing Wright's equipment. Murray Beasley and Henry White, retired component manufacturers with 75 years of experience between them, both remember the quality, durability and innovation that Wright's equipment brought to the early days of automation in the industry. "Ronnie manufactured the best equipment on the market at the time [late 1970s]," Beasley remembered. "His floor truss machine was so easy to operate that he once had my wife doing demonstrations at a tradeshow."

White owned Construction Components in Tampa, FL, and bought a lot of Wright's equipment during his 40 years in the industry, most of which was still in use when he sold his business in 1988. "Ronnie came up with a lot of great ideas for the truss industry," said White. "He was the first to put two motors on his roller press, and he developed the most efficient truss tables around. In my opinion, Ronnie gave so much to the truss industry that he was right up there with Carol Sanford. Any time I was ready to upgrade or expand my business, I would consult with Ronnie. He was a dear friend and an honest businessman."

at a glance

- ❑ Ronnie Wright was a bigger-than-life presence in the industry.
- ❑ Wright's equipment was innovative and built to last. His commitment to quality and durability remain a lasting legacy.
- ❑ Friends, customers and family remember Wright's humor, compassion and his one-of-a-kind personality.

“Be who you are and say what you feel, because those who mind don’t matter, and those who matter don’t mind.”

In the mid-1970s, Wright began a decade-long association with Alpine Engineered Products, manufacturing equipment on his own and stamping Alpine plates. It was during this era that Alpine’s Charlie Vaccaro and John Carpenter got to know the already renowned Ronnie Wright.

“Ronnie was the most colorful character in the industry,” Vaccaro reminisced. “I remember my very first meeting with Ronnie. I knew that he was notorious for trying to crush your hand the first time he met you, so when I was introduced to him I gave him a dose of his own medicine. His eyes widened a bit and he commented on what a strong handshake I had. We were friends from that moment on.

“I sold Ronnie’s roller presses in Florida for Alpine during the ‘70s when the construction industry was booming,” Vaccaro continued. “I must have sold 250 of Ronnie’s presses in Florida before the bottom dropped out of construction in the early 1980s. Most of the roller presses I sold are still in operation. There are none that wore out. The few that are not in operation have been stripped for parts; replace the parts and they would be operational.”

Carpenter also remembered Wright as an individual who left an impression: “Ronnie was bigger than life in every way—his souped-up Suburbans, his airboat, his Cadillac-cooker and his heart. His equipment was the same-bigger, heavier, stronger and often first. He started the shift from pole to roll-off trailers. He set the standard for roller presses. He had the first wing-jig that I ever saw as well as the first roller-type floor truss machine followed by the ‘Fat Man.’”

The big heart to which Carpenter refers gave way to Wright’s softer side on many occasions, especially when he was around children. “Ronnie loved kids and they loved him,” Carpenter remembered. “When my daughters were about two and four years old, Ronnie visited my home in Austin. He told them that he lived with the tooth fairy. They believed him.”

During his heart-warming eulogy at Wright’s memorial service in February, Lunsford expounded on his father-in-law’s special way with his grandchildren:

He was tough and solid from years of working with wild horses and heavy steel, but he could get his new grandbabies to sleep when no one else could...A lot of people were curious how Ronnie would do as a granddad. To him, the name was important. He didn’t want to be Grandpa, or Papa, or anything that made him feel old. His final suggestion: Grandfather the Omnipotent Human Being. We called him Bear-Pa, which seemed to fit...His grandkids thought it was normal to ride in his lap as he drove the airboat, and that everybody had a Bear-Pa with a truck named the War Wagon.

Anytime they spent more than a couple of days with him, we called it going to Camp Yes Sir, No Sir, because they came back so much better behaved.

When it was all said and done, Ronnie Wright lived the kind of life that few have the courage to live. Some described him as a force of nature, abrasive and unsentimental, profane to the point of being poetic, a personality force in the industry. Regardless of people’s opinions of him, he lived life on his own terms, even when his way wasn’t the most popular. After ending his working relationship with Alpine in the mid-1980s, Wright continued to produce equipment on his own. He fabricated equipment for the wood I-joint industry and the wood furniture industry as well as some machinery for other industries.

In the early 1990s Wright began a working relationship with Robbins Engineering. It was during this time that his sons Riff and Toby helped manage the company. Riff was aware that many people saw his father as being rowdy and unorthodox, but he also learned where his reputation for running a good business came from. He recalled one story in particular:

We got a call from a man who had a truss plant in the Northeast. He said he had a big truss project, but his machine was broken and his business was in a financial bind. He said he didn’t have the money to buy a new one, and that other companies weren’t willing to deal with him. He said he didn’t have money to put down even a deposit, but if he could run the job, he would be able to pay for it.

I was skeptical because everybody else had already turned the man down. Dad got on the phone and talked to him for about an hour, and after that call, he had me load up a gantry head on the trailer. Then Dad drove it up to him personally so the man wouldn’t even have to deal with the freight costs of getting the machine up there. When I asked him why, he said. “When you’re up, everybody wants to help you. When you’re down, nobody wants to help you, but that’s when a person needs the help the most.” Four months later, the man paid for the machine. Two years later, he replaced all the equipment in his shop with our equipment.

In 1994, Robbins Engineering purchased Wright’s operation. He retired from the industry in 1998, leaving a legacy of durable equipment that has stood the test of time and a mark on the industry that was as unique as his own fingerprint.

Lunsford ended Wright’s eulogy with some eternal wisdom from the beloved Dr. Seuss. There just doesn’t seem to be a better way to sum up Ronnie Wright’s life than with these words: “Be who you are and say what you feel, because those who mind don’t matter, and those who matter don’t mind.” **SBC**

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