

Getting to Know the "Saw Man"

Celebrating the Career of Jerry Koskovich

by Melinda Caldwell



Learn more about the man behind the machine that changed the face of the component industry.

at a glance

- Jerry Koskovich, an inventor of automated solutions for truss plants, retired from the industry this year.
- Koskovich's first automated component saw was installed at Villaume Industries in 1985.
- Koskovich is grateful to many people in the industry and will continue to consult for The Koskovich Company.

It's not very often that an **SBC** author becomes the subject of an article, but if you have ever read one of Jerry Koskovich's many contributions to this publication you can understand how we couldn't miss the opportunity when staff learned of his retirement at the beginning of this year. You likely know that in the last 20+ years the name Jerry Koskovich has become synonymous with saw automation in the structural building components industry. He is probably best known for his AutoOmni, the first automated component saw on the market. Most would agree that his innovations have forever changed the face of component manufacturing. What you might not know is how the man Jerry Koskovich built his business from the ground up and positively influenced many colleagues and customers along the way.

From Inspector to Innovator

After receiving a degree in civil engineering from the University of North Dakota-Grand Forks in 1962, Koskovich and his wife, Marlyce, moved to California where he worked as a plan check engineer for the Los Angeles County Building & Safety Department. It was during his time on the west coast that Koskovich got his first look at a metal plate connected wood truss, then a very new concept in home construction. Little did he know that this fledgling industry would shape the focus of his life's work.

The late 1960s brought the couple back to the Midwest, where they settled in Rochester, MN, and Koskovich became the Director of Building and Safety for the City of Rochester. It was in 1973, as Minnesota's first third party inspector under the state's new Industrialized Housing law, that Koskovich once again encountered trusses and the component manufacturing environment. This was also the year that he founded Engineering Services Company (ESCO) (known today as The Koskovich Company) and began building relationships with component manufacturers (CMs) as he provided third party inspection and other engineering services.

"I started taking an interest in machines in the late 1970s because one of my customers wanted me to look into developing a component saw," Koskovich remembered. "After spending a couple of years surveying CMs to see what they were looking for in a saw, I worked with my friend Mike Peterson in his machine shop and the first manual roof truss component saw was put into operation in 1979."

Five manual saws later, after installing a saw at a plant in Winterhaven, FL, the plant manager asked a question that would change the direction of Koskovich's product development. "Bill Sauder had been doing time studies at his plant and discovered that as the PC allowed for more complexity in truss designs, they were spending more time doing saw set-ups than cutting wood," he explained. "Bill asked me one simple question: 'When are you going to automate?' We started as soon as I got home."

In 1985, Koskovich installed the first automated component saw at Villaume Industries in Eagan, MN, where he and his electronic technician/programmer, Kerry Holmberg, spent a number of months on site working with the Villaume staff to get everything just right before the saw went into production in early 1986. The close proximity of this plant to Rochester made it the perfect testing ground for Koskovich and a strong relationship grew over the years.

"I feel lucky to be Jerry's oldest customer," remarked Nick Linsmayer, President of Villaume. "At the time, people either didn't understand Jerry's saw or they didn't think it was necessary. My dad realized that saw capacity was the Achilles' heel of production and that we needed something better. We believed that Jerry was on to something and it was worth it to us to allow him the time and space to figure it out."

"It's a great honor to be the company that purchased and helped develop the world's first automated [component] saw," he continued. "And the proof is in the pud-

ding—that first saw has been retrofitted and is still running at Villaume 23 years later."

Tom Nomeland, General Manager of Operations for Universal Forest Products, Inc. in Minneota, MN, purchased their first automated saw in 1989—the seventh saw in production. "When we first talked about automation, I really wondered how realistic Jerry's approach was," Nomeland recalled. "But after listening to him and watching his early video of the saw, we became more and more convinced that Jerry was really onto something." A few years later, Nomeland's company purchased another saw, making them the first company in the industry with two of Koskovich's saws in operation.

"In my opinion, Jerry's greatest contribution to the industry is his vision of how things should be and his persistence to see it through to a reality," remarked Nomeland. "Every machinery supplier and component manufacturer owes Jerry a hearty 'thank you' for pushing our industry into the world of automation. When many people laughed, Jerry designed and Jerry built."

The Father of Automation

Things took off slowly at first, but Koskovich still remembers the 1988 BCMA show in Nashville, TN, where computer-controlled automation made its debut. "At that point no one had seen anything automated before," said Koskovich. "They were backed up three deep to watch the machine work—it was awesome!"


From this point forward, Koskovich continued to build his reputation in the structural building components industry—both in the U.S. and overseas. Alan Kearon of Pryda Pty. Ltd., a supplier to the component industry in Australia, remembers meeting Koskovich in early 1992. Later that year, he hosted a group of CMs on a fact-finding trip to the U.S. to learn more about the saws available to them, which resulted in the sale of Koskovich's first two saws in Australia.

"His greatest contribution to the industry was that he was, in my opinion, the catalyst to change in the industry," said Kearon. "He pioneered the computer controlled saw and later truss jiggging technology. One must also remember that he did this without the aid of being a nailplate supplier and having a constant supply of a commodity. Quite simply, he raised the bar."

Linsmayer agreed. "Jerry came in from the outside of the industry, built his company from scratch and fought against the inertia of the establishment in the industry," he stated. "Someone had to come in and ask 'how can we do this better.' The battle was to do it with a vision and total understanding of customer service.... Business is about making money, but more importantly, it's about doing the right thing—how to be fair and honest and live by the golden principles. Jerry's a joy to work with because that's his motto...."

Gene Ellingson, General Manager for The Koskovich Company from 1995 until his retirement in 2004, came into the industry


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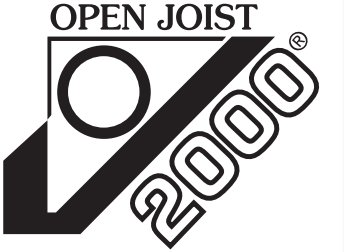
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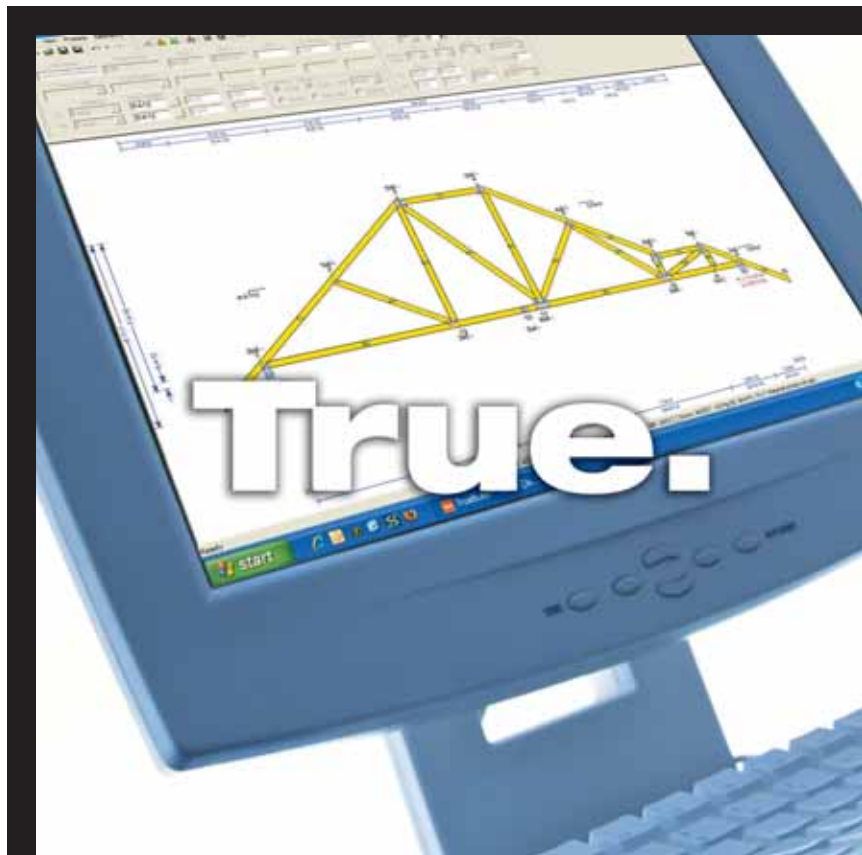
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after a 30-year career with IBM and was immediately struck by Koskovich's status as a fixture in the industry. "Jerry is widely recognized for his leadership and prominence in introducing and fostering the idea of automation in the industry, along with the efficiencies and cost-savings that automation brings," stated Ellingson. "In many ways, he was ahead of his time, but that didn't stop him from planting the seeds of automation."

Gene Toombs, CEO of MiTek Industries, Inc., agreed: "Jerry clearly is the 'father of automation' and the industry is much better positioned due to his innovation."

The rest, you could say, is history. Koskovich continued to listen to his customers and did his level best to work their suggestions into viable, automated solutions for their manufacturing operations. In the last 20 years, he has developed automated jiggging equipment, an automated linear saw with an inkjet printer for marking and an automated solution for dealing with crooked lumber, along with a variety of enhancements and upgrades, including inkjet printing in 1989, to the original automated component saw. In addition, Koskovich pioneered innovations in saw in-feed material handling, such as magazines and bunk feeders.

The Man behind the Machine

While it is the introduction to automation that is repeatedly cited as Koskovich's greatest contribution to the industry, his personality and character have also made a significant impact on many over the years—business associates, employees and customers alike.

Long-time friend, colleague and fellow wooden boat aficionado, Paul Harmon, remembers meeting Koskovich at the Lake City Marina in 1976: "Jerry was walking down the dock with parts from his old boat, covered from head to toe in grease. I said to myself, 'I've got to get to know that guy—he's my kind of crazy.'"

"This was right before he started working on his first saw and we talked a lot about what he was doing, how he was going to do it, etc.," recalled Harmon. "Jerry is unbelievably persistent and tenacious, but it is his character of integrity and his respect for those around him that attract people to him."

The Koskovich Company was Harmon's first client from the component industry at his marketing firm, Harmon & Associates. "Jerry allowed us to establish an image for his company that was congruent with who he is—a dry wit, embarrassingly honest," he said. "We grew together and he gave us the opportunity to do things that other companies might have shied away from, such as cartoons."

Now also retired, Harmon cited one of the most important things he learned from Koskovich: "The way he treats people around him—the way he gives credit and shows respect—causes you to want to make that part of your own person."

"Jerry's on the top of my list as someone I treasure and honor. More than business, it's just one of the great relationships I

have," said Linsmayer of his 20+ years knowing Koskovich. "His deep faith and sense of groundedness are at the base of his personhood. There are few with his passion...to be loyal to his customers and build the better mousetrap and become the legend that he is. He is deeply committed to people and who they are."

"Jerry has been a trusted friend, one you can always count on and who has helped point the way," commented Nomeland. "I love his no-nonsense approach to things. He's always straightforward and totally honest."

Kearon summed it up in one sentence: "Jerry has taught me what a good person really is!"

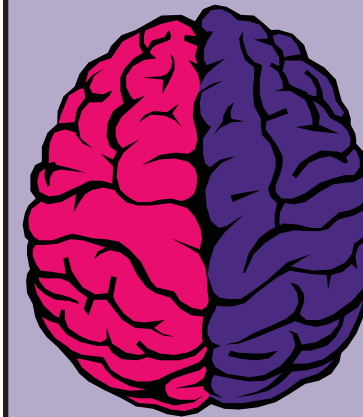
When Blessings Meet Hard Work

When you talk to Jerry Koskovich, it is easy to ascertain that he is one of the industry's success stories in large part to the fact that he has spent his life doing what he loves. While he has many warm memories of his years serving this industry and forging relationships with customers and colleagues, when asked about his fondest memories, two things came to mind. The first was recalled with a deep sense of pride: "Whenever I go into a truss plant that is running one of my component saws, I still get a great deal of satisfaction out of watching the machine articulate its movements—that machine just has a special place in my heart."

The second memory came with a crack in his voice and a tone of humble appreciation. "DePauw saws are still being used and have a great reputation," said Koskovich. "About 10 or 12 years ago at a BCMA show, Art DePauw paid me the ultimate compliment when he said, 'Jerry, they used to call me the Saw Man—now you're the Saw Man.'"

At the end of the day, Koskovich is thankful for many things—more people than machines. He's grateful that he started his company in Rochester, MN, a city flush with brilliant engineers and programmers who cut their teeth at the largest IBM plant in the country and were then willing to come work for him—ironically, a man who hates computers. He appreciates all of the people who believed in his ideas when they were little more than that, especially his wife of almost 50 years, who worked diligently behind the scenes to keep things

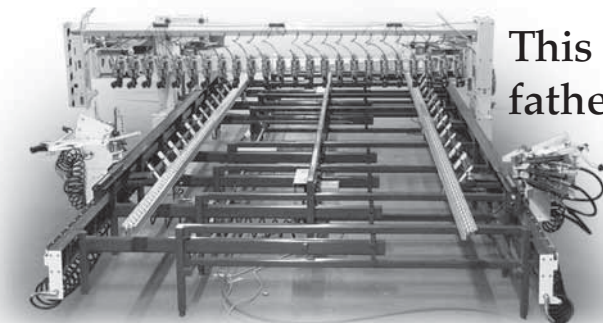
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going (many said he couldn't have done it without her). And most of all, Koskovich says he could not have conceived how God would direct them in all of this and bless them beyond measure. **SBC**

Koskovich will continue to work as a part-time consultant as The Koskovich Company carries on as a subsidiary of MiTek Industries, Inc. He also plans to enjoy his vintage wooden boats and vintage airplanes and time with his wife at their vacation home in Montana. With any luck, SBC will be able to draw him out of retirement for the occasional article. He can be reached at jerryk@omnisaw.com.

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