



JOHN MEEKS: BRACING ACTIVIST

by Molly E. Butz

"If I have seen farther than others,
it is because I was standing
on the shoulders of giants."

—Isaac Newton

John E. Meeks, P.E., has been called every name in the book—teacher, promoter, contributor, crusader, leader—and he's also one of the pioneers of the structural building components industry that has shaped the way we do business today. But don't be misguided because, even if you have read through his extensive résumé, what you'll find out about this classic southern gentleman is that, first and foremost, he's humble. And for John, humility and greatness have defined his career.

John's career path began after he completed his senior year of high school in Savannah, GA, in 1943. Like so many young men during that time, John joined the Navy and spent three quiet years doing radio/radar work. After attending Tulane University in New Orleans on the G.I. Bill, John graduated with a B.S. in Civil Engineering and married Beatrice, his lovely wife and a native of the city. Just a few years later, John and Beatrice started a family, and John left his post-graduate work in structural engineering to land his first job designing concrete, steel and wood framed commercial and industrial buildings for Albert M. Alexander in New Orleans.

Continued involvement in the concrete industry, which included working with pre-stressed concrete products (a fairly new concept at the time), eventually led John to his first entrepreneurial endeavor, W.R. Jones and John E. Meeks, Inc. in Baton Rouge, LA, a "design and build" company that opened in 1959. A bit ahead of his time, John's new business was responsible for the design and construction of numerous commercial and industrial buildings in the area. (Think "component manufacturer with an internal engineering staff.")

A move in the early 1960s prompted by family medical issues brought John to Florida. Here, once again, he worked in the concrete industry and, after a brief stint doing land surveying and subdivision engineering, John met Cal Jureit of Gang-Nail fame and owner of Automated Building Components, Inc. (See *SBC Magazine*, Sept/Oct 2005.) Initially, as Engineering Manager of the Multi-Structures Division at ABC, John was in charge of the design and construction of franchise chains that were popping up all around the country. "It was places like Bonanza and McDonald's," John said, "but we didn't do that for very long. We knew we

Continued on page 46

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at a glance

- ❑ John Meeks began his post-military career in the commercial concrete industry.
- ❑ Meeks met Gang-Nail's Cal Jureit in Florida, and joined Automated Building Components, Inc. as the Engineering Manager in charge of building franchise chains.
- ❑ He became involved in truss design engineering at ABC, and also took an interest in bracing and installation while inspecting a truss collapse.
- ❑ Throughout his career and still today, Meeks has made his mark on the wood truss industry as a respected forensic engineer.

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John Meeks: Bracing Activist

Continued from page 44

weren't experts and we wanted to focus on other things."

This change in focus found John working as the Chief Structural Engineer at ABC, which made him responsible for providing wood truss engineering designs for roughly 200 truss fabricators throughout the U.S. Always passionate about engineering, John jumped into the structural building components industry with both feet. Over the next 13 years, John participated in and was Chairman of the Truss Plate Institute's Technical Advisory Committee (TPI TAC) and later served as the organization's president.

John was intimately involved in the evolution of the Metal Plate Connected Wood Truss design standard into what it is today and continues to actively participate in the project committee work as the industry develops its 2007 version of the standard. He was also very involved in working with TPI's former technical director Buddy Showalter, P.E., on two bracing-related documents: Design of Structural Bracing, DSB-89 and its summary sheet, HIB-91.

"I saw [John] in action with the Truss Plate Institute's TAC committee," says Steve Cabler, P.E. and Senior Vice President of Engineering and Technology Services for MiTek, Inc. "He brought to the table the best combination of technical abilities and practical experiences using realistic approaches. John contributed significantly in the area of permanent bracing issues and his work is the basis of much of the work the committee has been doing and will continue to do in the future."

John also wrote WTCA's "Commentary for Permanent Bracing of Metal Plate Connected Wood Trusses" publication. In addition, he was a member of numerous other industry organizations including WTCA, the Forest Products Society and APA – The Engineered Wood Association.

In 1979, Cal Jureit and the other stockholders, which included John, sold ABC. Shortly thereafter, he left ABC and opened his one-man consulting company, John E. Meeks, P.A. Consulting Engineer, in Fort Lauderdale, FL, where he is still doing consulting work today.

"Yes, I'm still working," John will tell you. "But I'm limiting it to forensic work, and only with the wood truss industry." With nearly 60 years of his career behind him, John is keenly aware that there is still a need in the structural building components industry for an ally. "When there is a problem," John says matter-of-factly, "I can help them solve it." And the rest of the industry is in total agreement.

"John is a fabulous expert witness," recalls Bob Becht, President of Chambers Truss Inc., who describes John as the most respected forensic engineer in South Florida. "I've seen cases dissolve because John was involved as an expert witness," Bob continued. "I've known John for at least 20 years, and what I remember most about John is his untiring defense of the truss industry."

Carlos Rionda, a fellow P.E., agrees. "John was the first industry engineer to concentrate on forensic truss analysis in collapses," Carlos recollects. "And he also developed many industry firsts in truss bracing during erection. Always a solid engineer and a good, ethical person, John has been a real contributor to the truss industry."

But having your career, even your life, described as a "truss bracing crusade" is no small feat. Even John (mostly seriously) refers to himself as the "grandfather of bracing." So what does it take to turn a Louisiana concrete buff into a truss bracing activist? Just one truss failure.

Continued on page 48



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John Meeks: Bracing Activist

Continued from page 46

"We were in the process of constructing a new building for ABC," John told **SBC** staff. "We designed the trusses for the building, but we had an independent contractor working on the project. It was actually being erected right near the main offices for ABC headquarters. The trusses went up, and just as quickly it seemed, they came right back down."

As V.P. of Engineering at ABC, John was sent out to examine the jobsite and analyze the truss collapse. "I could see that I didn't know enough at the time to know why the trusses fell down," John says. And that was the beginning of the end. "It just hit me, and I thought 'Hey, this is awful. All they were trying to do is put trusses up. This is a major problem.'" Calls started trickling in from all over the country. "I realized this was happening all over. We were getting more and more sophisticated with the engineering and analysis of the trusses, but then we just turned them over to the builders and framers with no instructions!"

"How would you like to go to work every day and risk your life?" John asks. "Every time those guys moved around on the jobsite they were potentially risking their lives. That's not how it should be."

Since that day back at ABC, John has spent a lot of his time and energy improving safety and solving problems associated with truss installation. "I helped write the first bracing article in 1976," John recalls. "It was so important because it was the first time anyone tried to give any kind of guidance." That same document evolved into the "Green Sheet," which eventually became what we know as the BCSI B1 Summary Sheet.

Once bracing and installation issues were on the front burn-

er, John's career took off. On the jobsite, he always had a knack for which measurements, photos and information needed to be analyzed after an incident occurred. He's also known for building small scale models of the structure and trusses in question to use as an example. This was often his method for making the rather sophisticated topic of truss bracing and collapse a little easier to understand. "John is able to relate to the lay person," Steve Cabler adds. "He is proficient at making complex engineering theories understandable to anyone."

Dave Brakeman, P.E., S.E., and Vice President of Engineering at Alpine Engineered Products, Inc., recalls the impact that John's truss models often had on the jury. "John did a lot of forensic work," Dave says. "I remember a time that he needed to make the jury really understand how

important it was to use proper bracing. He built a model that looked a little like a hangman's gallows and he used rubber bands to squeeze the end of the model, which was in essence like applying a load. Then he took what appeared to be a paperclip he'd straightened out and he would use it to 'release' the bracing and the entire structure would collapse. It really made it clear how necessary it was to properly brace and how strong a structure could be, even under heavy loads, if the bracing was in place and installed correctly."

John is often asked to write a report or make his files available for review. And when push comes to shove, he gives expert testimony in court. "The plaintiff's attorney wants to talk to me," John explains, "and then the component manufacturer's attorney wants to talk to me and sometimes I even have meetings right here in my office. And then I have to explain what I do, and how I analyzed the situation."

Bob Becht notes that one of the best things about John is that he is "definitely not for sale." No matter which side of the case John is representing, "he always tells the truth." John has never been afraid to tell the builder, framer or component manufacturer that they are at fault. "Occasionally, I do have to tell the component manufacturer that he's wrong," John laments. "But it doesn't happen very often and it's getting rarer and rarer. And I won't help an architect or engineer that's only in it for the lawsuit; I only want to help people that are honestly having problems."

Hurricane Season

Over the years, John's work has branched out beyond working with specific component manufacturers. He has participated in a multitude of seminars and written countless articles, reports and papers concerning issues that affect almost

everyone in the structural building components industry.

"Immediately after Hurricane Andrew came through the southeast in 1992, I called TPI," John remembers. "I could see that we were looking at a tremendous amount of damage and we needed written documentation. Every day, Mike Triche, a professor of wood engineering at the University of Alabama, and Ramon Riba, a professional engineer from TPI, would meet me at the grocery store and fill my truck with everything we could think of and head down to South Florida to our 'hurricane headquarters' located at the University of Miami." Each day was spent reviewing the hurricane damage and handing out supplies to the families in the area. "When we got to the university the next morning we compared notes and talked about what we saw," John continued.

"On one of our trips, we took big garbage bags loaded with toys that my neighborhood had collected," John relates. "That day I stopped at a multi-story complex for damage assessment. There were a lot of small children around and no power. Everyone was just hanging around and the mothers were keeping a small fire going so that they could cook to feed the children. I gave them a bag of toys and one woman was completely overcome with emotion. She said, 'They are bringing us all kinds of stuff down here, everything under the sun, but no one ever thought to bring us toys! Thank you so much!' That made my day," John recollects.

John, Mike and Ramon eventually pooled all of their information and co-authored a paper for TPI called "Performance of Metal Plate Connected Wood Truss Structures During Hurricane Andrew." This became just one in a library of articles and reports John has authored throughout the years.

Today, John continues to write about hurricanes and any other topic he deems necessary, and he's still protecting the men and women in our industry. Hesitant to rehash old forensic work and unlikely to bring up topics he hasn't thoroughly researched, John has set an example that anyone should be pleased to follow. "His roots go right back to the beginning of the industry," Steve Cabler says. As a matter of fact, even though he'll be celebrating his 80th birthday this month, there isn't anything holding John back and, oddly

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enough, he's not the only one. "I've made a lot of friends over the years," John concludes, "and I know a lot of people that could have gotten out of the industry years ago; they could have retired...but they didn't. I don't know what it is, there's just something about this industry."

John E. Meeks, P.E., has been called every name in the book, but we've got just a little more name-calling to do. Even though we're guessing the name John likes the best is Grandpa, today we add to his list innovator, guardian and friend. Yes, there is just something about this industry and, John, we're glad you've been a part of it. Happy Birthday! **SBC**

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