

2006 Essay - A Cal Brown Story from Fred's Perspective

I worked for Cal Brown all through college at his company, Midwest Automatic Sprinkler. Calvin paid me a great wage, and in return, I tried to work my butt off for him so he would always hire me back. It didn't hurt that Cal knew my father, and there was no way I would ever allow a bad word from Calvin get to my Dad. I like to think of it as a win-win relationship: Cal wrote me nice paychecks, and I tried to make sure he got everything he paid for.

I've always said that Calvin Brown kept me in college. He paid for my college since about everything I earned went to college expenses. In addition, who would want to work that hard for all of their life if they could be an engineer? (I never met a sprinkler fitter who was older than 50. I always assumed they broke down before they got that old).

The day after high school graduation, I went to work at the old (was being built new at that time and I think it has been demolished since) JC Penny's store in downtown Des Moines. No partying for Fred after graduation. I went to bed early and went to work the next day. First day, Cal's sprinkler fitter brother, Jack Brown, put me to work unloading a truckload of pipe at the job site. Took me about all day and I went home with bloody shoulders. Like anything else physical, there is an easy way and a hard way to throw bundles of line pipe on your shoulder and carrying them into a building. Nobody showed me the easy way, so I bulled my way through doing it the hard way. I did more weight lifting in that one day than I had my entire life!

That evening, I got a phone call from my Father's brother, Al, offering me a job on the Alaskan pipeline. I could make four times what Cal was paying me if I was willing to live in a dorm out on the tundra with a hundred other men, work 12 hours a day, 7 days a week, and never see my girlfriend over the summer. It wasn't much of a choice to me. Stay in DM where I could smell my girlfriend, or smell pipeline workers all summer. I started a lifetime of making career choices that kept me close to my girlfriend (now wife of 30 years), Jeanne.

My favorite story about working for Cal is the time I partied really hard all night and came to work in his pipe-fab shop the next morning with too much alcohol in my system. It was the only time in my life I went to work when I was probably under the influence. I had actually went to my Father's house after 2:00am in the morning the night before because I knew Dad had a case of Old Granddad bourbon and I had run out of booze and all the bars were closed. I woke my father up as I stumbled around in his house, looking for a fifth. When the bell rang to start the day the next morning at work, out walks Calvin into the shop with a sludge hammer in his hands. He walked up to me, smiled, and said, "Freddy, I need you to bust up that 10 foot square of concrete floor so we can repour it".

All of a sudden, the fabrication of pipe was put aside, and instead of leaning against a pipe-threading machine all day (which was my recovery plan); Calvin wanted me to bust concrete by hand! The same Calvin who rarely ever gave me a job assignment all of a sudden wanted to personally make sure I was busting concrete all day.

I just knew I had been had. I just knew my Father had called up Calvin and suggested he have me "sweat it out". I sucked it up and sweated bourbon all day, puking every 15 minutes for the first four hours, busting concrete by hand. I was so sick by the end of the day I couldn't remember the drive home. My vision was much blurrier at the end of the day than at the beginning. My Father always denied that he sicked Calvin on me. But, the ol' Calvin was just too slick when he handed me the sludge hammer; his smile was just too happy; he took too much joy in watching me swing that damn hammer; he took too much delight in personally assigning me that job.

I learned a good business lesson that day. When two old dogs line up against you, you take your lumps and live to work another day.

Now, sprinkler installations are not an important part of Chemical plant processes. It is more like a necessary thing, like the lights that have to burn but don't really make you any production. I've spent a lot of time managing maintenance departments in chemical plants. In that role, I've always had to manage sprinkler maintenance and installation. I can honestly say I have used the things I learned working for Midwest Sprinkler my entire professional career. Can't seem to get away from ol' Calvin and thank the Lord I had a chance to know him. I just don't like him with a sludge hammer in his hand.