

Oral History Interview

with

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By Michael R. Adamson

Adamson: Thanks for taking the time today to do the interview. To provide some context for my questions, tell me about your background and your career at Purdue and how you came to know Charlie Pankow.

McLaughlin: My career at Purdue began in 1950. I came here after graduating from Syracuse University. I came out here to work on an advanced degree, and I was a graduate assistant, and then after the first year I was put on as an instructor and continued on the faculty until retirement in 1995, in June of '95. I went through the ranks, assistant, associate and full professor, and subsequently in 1968 became head of the School of Civil Engineering, a position that I held until 1978, when I became assistant and then associate dean of engineering.

I spent the next many years as an all-purpose associate dean of engineering with no particular portfolio, doing just about everything, and there were two periods during which I was interim or acting dean when the then-dean or deans left for greener pastures. My last year was '94-'95. I was scheduled to retire in '94, but at that time Henry Yang

left. He was dean at that time. He left to become president or chancellor at [University of California] Santa Barbara, and so I spent an additional year as interim dean, retiring in June of '95. And that's my career at Purdue.

Adamson: Then at what point and in what capacity were you when you met Charlie Pankow for the first time?

McLaughlin: I met Charlie probably in—I think it was about 1968 or so. I was just newly minted as head of civil engineering and we met at a meeting of the American Concrete Institute. I can't tell you where it was. But I became acquainted with Charlie and our friendship developed from there.

Adamson: By both being in the American Concrete Institute, I infer that your research interested Charlie and overlapped what he was doing as a builder.

McLaughlin: Yes. Yes, I was doing research in concrete and, of course, he was building lots of concrete structures. We were on a couple of different committees together, ACI, I forget which ones they were, but we finally got involved in some of the sort of executive committees of the Institute. I guess we were both on something called the Technical Activities Committee together. One of our big jobs at one time was, ah, we were members of or chairmen of the Financial Advisory Committee of the Institute, and that brought to bear his knowledge and expertise in finance and management as well as the properties of concrete and concrete construction.

Adamson: So you were both professional and personal friends?

McLaughlin: Yes, we were.

Adamson: Did Charlie come out to Purdue frequently?

McLaughlin: He was here at least every other year. Well, first of all, we have something called the Distinguished Engineering Alumnus Award, and then, in 1970, I think it was, he was nominated for that award. It's for all of engineering, and there were about ten of these a year and he was given the Distinguished Engineering Alumnus Award in '70, and of course he was here for that. And then subsequent to that, he'd come and visit for a football game, or when he was a member of the Engineering Visiting Committee he and almost always Doris would be here for several days while he took part in the activities of the Visiting Committee, which was an advisory committee to the dean of engineering.

Adamson: I also understand that he, for a period of time until at least the mid-seventies, he would actually come out here and recruit people for his company, but that after that other people—

McLaughlin: Yes, he did that. Other people did it after that.

Adamson: Just some general questions. What traits do you think made Charlie a successful business person and builder?

McLaughlin: Well, he had a very keen knowledge of how to control costs and manage the construction process. His fort  was to bring things in on time and on budget, and he had the skill and the entrepreneurial ability to do that. So he was very successful.

Adamson: This is kind of a chicken-and-egg question, and I don't know if you can tease it out, but was he fascinated by concrete and saw concrete as a way to cut costs and achieve a design/build approach, or did he start with the approach and find that concrete was a way of executing it, or do they go together?

McLaughlin: I think they were indistinguishable; they went together. I don't know that he did much in steel construction, but he certainly was a pioneer in pre-stress concrete and prefabricated concrete structures. He seemed to know exactly how to assess the client's needs and bring the right design to meet those needs at the state-of-the-art of concrete construction.

Adamson: If you'd met him in 1968, his company would have been about five years old. From what I understand, it was successful from day one, but also that before the 1970s it wasn't a big operation; a few projects a year. So my question to you is, as the company grew, was the business itself a point of discussion between you and Charlie?

McLaughlin: Very little. Very little. He and I were more on a personal level than on a business level.

Adamson: So when did you first go out to visit him in California?

McLaughlin: I can't remember. Probably shortly after he moved into the house in Altadena. I forget the year that was.

Adamson: And the first time he hosted you in San Francisco at the 3800 Washington would have been approximately when?

McLaughlin: I can't remember.

Adamson: Did he always express a fascination with art collecting or is this something that he came onto later on?

McLaughlin: It was a surprise to me that he was so fascinated by the art, and I didn't know about this until I'd known him for several years. I never did find out what motivated him to get into the art collecting business, but he certainly went into it, as he did with almost everything, with both hands and feet. When he went after icons, he went after all the icons. When he went after scarabs, he went after all the scarabs. So I don't know how it came about, but I do know that he was very generous with his time and

effort, and had at least two exhibitions here on campus of his art, one on scarabs, an Egyptian collection, and one he brought back the icons.

Adamson: I knew about the first one. I was unaware of the second.

McLaughlin: About the icons?

Adamson: Yes, coming to Purdue with that. I saw the catalog for the Egyptian collection.

McLaughlin: Have you seen his collection of the icons that he had before?

Adamson: No, I haven't seen that. I've seen some pictures of his walls in San Francisco, but no, I haven't seen the whole collection.

McLaughlin: Well, the icon room in the Le Petit Trianon is something to see, if it's still there. I don't know.

Adamson: Well, unfortunately, well, or fortunately, he sold the—the Foundation was set up before his death, but to fund the Foundation, his collection was sold to establish the funding. So I think the family have some pieces, but the collection itself and the house on Washington have been sold.

McLaughlin: I lost track once he passed away.

Adamson: That's a part of this story I'm still piecing together, but in any case, let's just turn to the Civil Engineering Department at Purdue. Beyond recruiting engineers for his company, what contributions and what interest did Charlie take in the department?

McLaughlin: Well, he knew that we were doing some fundamental work in concrete properties, and after some years of association, he very generously contributed some money to the School of Civil Engineering to be used for education in concrete, with very little, if any, restriction on it. So over the years we developed a laboratory which subsequently became known as the Charles Pankow Laboratory, concrete laboratory, doing some fundamental research in concrete properties. He started off giving us something like \$20,000 a year and this went on for many years. I forget how much the endowment finally amounted to. It was well over \$100,000. Of course, this went on for many years.

Adamson: I understand there's also a professorship or chair.

McLaughlin: I don't know about that.

Adamson: A couple of the people I've interviewed were Purdue graduates and said that they have served on advisory councils that take an interest in the curricula or the

education. Did you know any of them or associated with, or had you retired by the time any of them—

McLaughlin: Well, I had not retired, but I had moved out of civil engineering into the dean's office, and so while I remember some of the names, I didn't know them personally.

Adamson: Did Charlie ever tell you why he went to Purdue?

McLaughlin: I don't remember that he did. How does that story go?

Adamson: I don't know. I ask the question because he took great pride in his father building Notre Dame Stadium and he was from the area, and I've never asked anyone until I came out on this trip as to why he picked Purdue other than it has a great engineering school.

McLaughlin: Well, Purdue is, of course, *the* engineering school in Indiana.

Adamson: Right.

McLaughlin: And Charlie was from South Bend. He always has had a great love for Notre Dame, but the family also apparently had a love for Purdue and he came to Purdue.

Adamson: You mentioned that Charlie came back for football games as well as—

McLaughlin: Yeah, he came back. He came back for some Notre Dame games, and some of the times we played Notre Dame and some of the times he saw a Notre Dame game and then came down here after the game and we'd spend the weekend together.

Adamson: You said before we turned on the recorder that you had been up to San Francisco and London. Can you elaborate on those occasions when you were hosted at those locations?

McLaughlin: Well, my wife and oldest child, a daughter, liked to travel, and one of the times that we were traveling, we were going to England. I think this was a trip that we were going to spend some time on a houseboat, actually. Charlie and I were talking about this impending trip. He said, "Go to London a few days early and spend some time in London and use the flat," and we did and had a wonderful time.

Adamson: He, I'm told, had a lot of art in that flat, as well as he—

McLaughlin: Oh, all sorts of stuff in that flat.

Adamson: Sort of a staging area.

McLaughlin: Yes.

Adamson: Did you ever see a piece there that showed up?

McLaughlin: No, no, I didn't.

Adamson: So you mentioned that you were on the ACI committees together.

McLaughlin: Yeah.

Adamson: Were there other technical aspects of building and construction that you discussed with Charlie?

McLaughlin: Well, nothing specific. We were on something called the Technical Activities Committee of the American Concrete Institute together, and there we were involved with all sorts of specifications. This committee oversaw the specification and construction practice documents of the Institute, and so we'd have discussions of those, but nothing that was specific to me at all.

Adamson: You mentioned the laboratory to which he contributed money. Since his death, there's the Charles Pankow Foundation that funds research. People have told me that before the idea of the foundation sort of developed, Charlie had the idea that there would be a full-blown institute of some sort at a university, perhaps Purdue.

McLaughlin: Yes.

Adamson: I wonder if, say, in the nineties or eighties he talked about that.

McLaughlin: No. No, I think Vince [Drnevich]—let's see. Who else is on your list from Purdue besides Vince and me?

Adamson: Possibly Henry Yang.

McLaughlin: No one else?

Adamson: Not on the list they gave me.

McLaughlin: All right. All right. Henry wouldn't know anything about that. Vince is the source for that.

Adamson: Well, my understanding about the idea for the foundation came late in the day and it wasn't necessarily even Charlie's idea, it was suggested to him, so that's why I was wondering if he—

McLaughlin: No, I had no part in that.

Adamson: —if he had any ideas about what to do before that.

McLaughlin: No.

Adamson: Okay, fair enough. About a year before Charlie's death, the company made a training video that had Charlie and other people in the company talk about the Pankow Company, and they show this to the incoming engineers as part of their acculturation process. One of the quotes that Charlie had in this video was, when talking about his company, was that "Innovation has been our main theme." I'm wondering if you can just comment on the technical aspects of the sort of innovations that Charlie applied to the construction industry.

McLaughlin: Well, he did a lot of onsite preparation and casting of concrete components that went into the building itself that others had no real feel for. He was an imaginative, forward-thinking engineer and developed some construction practices that were followed by others, but never as successfully as he did. So I can't be more specific than that.

Adamson: Sure. In that same video, another Pankow employee, Tom Verti, talked about the culture of respect that Charlie instilled within the firm.

McLaughlin: Yeah.

Adamson: So on a personal level, can you talk about how this sort of respect for others and integrity and trust and loyalty that he had in personal relationships carried not only between friends, but to his company and how they conducted themselves.

McLaughlin: Well, his company had an excellent reputation in the industry. He was generous with his time in such things as the American Society of Civil Engineers and the American Concrete Institute and other contractor organizations, and was always highly regarded in the industry as one who was trustworthy and, you know, all the buzzwords. He also brought people along in the company and gave them responsibility and brought out the best of their talents and rewarded performance and brought people up. I think Tom Verti is an excellent example of that.

Adamson: Bob Law, one of the Purdue graduates who served subsequently on one of these advisory councils, mentioned that there's a construction management component of training—I'm not sure if it's within civil engineering or it's the sort of training that civil engineers and other engineers get into—but can you talk about that program at Purdue?

McLaughlin: Well, we are an old-line Civil Engineering Department at Purdue and have been granting degrees in civil engineering for a long time. But it became obvious that the management component of engineering was becoming more and more important and the kinds of work that some of our engineers were getting into, and so during the time when I was head of civil engineering, we also developed a second curriculum called construction engineering and management, in cooperation with the Krannert School [of Management].

We have a separate degree program in that that's been extremely successful with respect to attracting high-quality students and placing them in positions of responsibility in the construction and construction management areas. Charlie was not singularly responsible for it, but without his support, we would never have managed to institute that program and get it recognized.

Adamson: This question is kind of jumping back to the beginning. You mentioned knowing Charlie since 1968, so it prompts the question, did he ever discuss with you his reasons for starting his company in the early days of the company prior to your—

McLaughlin: No.

Adamson: Did you ever visit a Pankow job site or tour a completed building?

McLaughlin: We visited a job site in San Francisco during one of my visits to that area, but my relationship with Charles was more personal than being involved in his construction activity.

Adamson: Well, I'll just take off on that point. You want to just elaborate and characterize that relationship and the times that you saw him, how you interacted on the personal level rather than the professional?

McLaughlin: Well, we were good friends and we talked about construction and we talked about education and we talked about football and lots of other things, but it was kind of a family relationship between Charlie and Doris and Eleanor and me.

Adamson: So you went on vacations?

McLaughlin: No, we didn't go on vacations together, but we were very active in this American Concrete business, the American Concrete Institute business, and he and I did all the committee work that people get into in these technical societies. I became vice president and then subsequently president of ACI, and he followed not exactly in my footsteps, but he was president of the Institute the following year from my year as president of the Institute. This Institute had annual and semi-annual meetings all over the country and these would last anywhere from three to five days, and we were always able to be present at the—frequently able to be present at the meetings and we had lots of social times together on these occasions. So I can remember being together with him in Washington and New York and Atlanta and Philadelphia, Los Angeles, San Juan, Puerto Rico, lots of places.

Adamson: So during your time as head of the ACI, and Charlie's, can you talk a little bit about the increase or any use of concrete in construction or the different uses to what it was put in the seventies and eighties, I presume?

McLaughlin: No, it was evolutionary. That was a period of mostly prosperity in the building industry, and Charlie was into it with both hands and feet. So the company grew subsequently during those years.

Adamson: I'm told that Charlie liked to see a collaborative relationship between industry and universities, and when he'd come to Purdue that he liked to talk to the students and faculty and he saw this as a key link between what was going on at the university and how it was applied. I'm just wondering, taking your cue from ACI activities, did you get the sense that a lot of what Charlie did at the job site was applications of research or did he find out things on the job site and then tell the people at the ACI and universities about what he had developed?

McLaughlin: Well, the latter, for the most part. He was on a lot of technical committees and he gave a lot of his personal knowledge to the activities of these committees.

Adamson: I'm trying not to be redundant here. Looking back then, what would you say how we should understand Charlie's contributions to the building industry?

McLaughlin: He was a pioneer in the design/build concept and was very successful in developing client relations that depended upon their trust in his integrity and capability, far more than any other company that I have ever heard about or had any personal knowledge of.

Adamson: His contributions to Purdue, his giving and activities were directed to the Civil Engineering Department or was it also campus-wide?

McLaughlin: To the civil engineering. A faculty member in civil engineering who was head of our instruction management program for a long time named Dan Halpin, H-a-l-p-i-n. You don't have his name?

Adamson: No, but I can make contact.

McLaughlin: Talk to [Vince] Drnevich about that. He and Charlie interacted a lot in this construction management area.

Adamson: It's interesting, because as a practice, I talked to Pankow people about design/build and they make the point that construction management was something they didn't want to do because design/build, you were self-perform, got involved in the process, whereas construction managers, as it was practiced, were just basically advocates of the owner and didn't take the risk. So it's interesting, the same word is used in the construction management program that seems to mean something completely different.

McLaughlin: Yeah, it was completely different. I know the construction manager is more frequently seen as the representative of the owner, the watchdog of the owner, the

facilitator, but that's not the way Charlie did it. He and the owner were partners in this venture.

Adamson: Right. So the program here [at Purdue], construction engineering and management attempts to do what exactly? Clarify a little bit for me.

McLaughlin: To develop someone who is able to step into a construction firm and act as an interface between the client and the builder. You really ought to talk to this fellow Halpin. I'm surprised that he's not on your list.

Adamson: Okay.

McLaughlin: Well, as I say, I had a tenet of behavior that I developed over the years and that is when you're finished, quit, and in 1995 I walked out the door and I resisted all attempts to influence anything that went on in civil engineering from that point on.

Adamson: Fair enough.

McLaughlin: It would have been easy to do, but I decided not to.

Mother [wife], upstairs in that bookcase over by the light of the stairs there is that icon book that we got from Charlie. Bring that down. I'll bet you that Michael would be interested in looking at that.

So what went on in civil engineering or engineering in general at Purdue subsequently to June 30, '95 is ancient history.

Adamson: Fair enough. Do you have an anecdote that covers something about Charlie that doesn't pertain to his art collection or his business that sort of illustrates the sort of person he was?

McLaughlin: None that I would put on tape.

Adamson: That's fair enough, too.

McLaughlin: One thing that I can remember was one of Charlie's great delights was at their fiftieth wedding anniversary surprising Doris with a gift of a Jaguar. He kept that pretty well a secret and sprung it on her during that weekend, and she was very happy to get a Jaguar. He was kind of pleased as punch that he kept it quiet and that she didn't know that she had it.

Adamson: One other aspects of his career that was brought to light—

McLaughlin: My voice is going.

Adamson: —is that in talking to Tim Murphy, who was the CFO, he talked about the several and many or many non-construction business activities of Charlie. He got

involved with wireless communications, got involved in some other aspects, and he was more or less was successful in all of them. Did you ever talk about any of these ventures or these other interests?

McLaughlin: Not with Charlie.

Adamson: It wouldn't surprise you that he was successful in them, though?

McLaughlin: Oh, he's the kind that he was a success in whatever he did.

Adamson: Well, that's all the questions. I've kind of run through—I'm sure I haven't touched on many aspects that you interfaced with him, but if I haven't probed an area that you know about and might want to elaborate on, please—

McLaughlin: I think a lot of people wondered why Charlie didn't get active in work outside the United States, but he felt that there was all the business that the firm could possibly want within the United States and that it was much too risky to go in places like China, which was emerging at the time, and that one stood to gain a lot but lose a lot in that kind of a venture. So his limits of activity were, I guess, as far to the far west as Kauai, as far east as New York and Boston and that was it. He maintained that as a tenet of his activity.

Adamson: Of course, if you made a map of where he traveled to find art for his art collection, I think he—

McLaughlin: Oh, I mean, personally he went all over the world.

Adamson: All over the world.

McLaughlin: Yes, but he didn't do business in Egypt either.

Adamson: Right.

McLaughlin: Except to collect art.

Adamson: So I was told that when business in the mid-eighties got really slow in Hawaii that he and George Hutton—I'm not sure if you're familiar with George—went to Shanghai late eighties, I guess, and for a while were thinking about a project in Shanghai, but that the business environment wasn't satisfactory enough, and basically he wouldn't be able to get his money out. So that fell by the wayside pretty quickly.

McLaughlin: But he kept his firm together during that period. That was also different from what a lot of people did. He kept the firm together and kept all his people employed when things were tough going there. I remember being over in Hawaii, I guess it was in 1980, I think it was 1980, the bottom had just fallen out of everything over there, but still

he had enough business to keep his key people on the payroll and when things started to pick up again he was ready to go.

Adamson: So you knew George Hutton?

McLaughlin: No, I didn't know him personally. But another time one of my sons, the young one, was graduating and we were going to take him on a trip to Hawaii to show him where Daddy was stationed during the war or after the war, and Charlie heard about it and said, "Here's the keys to my apartment." I forget where it was, but we stayed in his apartment in a high-rise building that he had built over there.

Then we also stayed in another place in Princeville, I think it was it, Princeville in Kauai that he owned. So our graduation present to our son was enhanced by living in a luxury suite in Honolulu and in Princeville, Kauai, which was very nice. At that time we met and had dinner a couple of times with George.

Adamson: One of the reasons that Charlie wanted to start his own company was that Peter Kiewit built dams and roads and those sorts of civil engineering projects, and even though he got his start in building within Kiewit, they didn't want to go in that direction as Charlie proposed. Was your interest in civil engineering particular to building or was it more general than that?

McLaughlin: No, it was just in general and with respect to uses and properties of concrete.

Adamson: So a much broader swath than just building.

McLaughlin: More general.

Adamson: General.

McLaughlin: Yes. Yes, it didn't matter to me whether the cubic yard of concrete went into a dam or a road. The properties of concrete were the important part.

Adamson: Thank you. Why don't we stop here?

McLaughlin: All right.

[End of interview]