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Merryn C. Gill: A Pioneer's Hommage

2013

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We often judge a man's life by the mark he leaves behind. Merwyn C. Gill died on May 30, 2013 at the age of 102 and left a mark of such breadth, depth and diversity, it would probably be visible from space.





Maude and

Merwyn Gill

The family drug store.

M.C. with his monkey, Satan. Merwyn Carlyle Gill (M.C.) was born on July 30, 1910 in the small Midwestern town of Terril, Iowa. He was the only surviving child of Carl and Maude Gill. The Gills owned and operated the town drugstore, serving the 420 souls who called Terril home. M.C. attended elementary school in Terril and spent many afternoons at the soda fountain swapping stories, listening to baseball games on the radio or helping his father run the store. Citizens of Terril remember Carl and Maude as solid citizens who instilled good values and respect for others in their son.

Even as a boy, M.C. was always up for a challenge. M.C. and his friends got into their share of boyish mischief, but M.C. always did things a little differently. While the other kids had dogs for pets, M.C. had a monkey, who rode on his shoulder while they roamed around town and who later traveled with M.C. when he began commuting on the train to college.



M.C. with 3rd Grade classmates; front row, 3rd from right.

M.C. reached adulthood during the Depression, but he wouldn't let difficult times deter his desire to further his education. He began his college career at Estherville Junior College in Estherville, Iowa. The flaccid economy dictated that M.C. help out at the family store while attending school and one semester lapsed into another. After three years, M.C. transferred to the University of Minnesota to study engineering. In 1933, he moved to California to attend the University of Southern California (USC). Upon arrival, M.C. roomed with a group of young men in a house on 36th Street in Los Angeles. It wasn't long before M.C. met the love of his life when Ellen Wildy and her sister moved into an apartment next door. M.C. and Ellen became inseparable, enjoying college life, attending games and cramming for finals. In 1936, M.C. earned his degree in chemistry, but stayed on long enough to earn another degree in chemical engineering in 1937. In 1939, Ellen graduated with a degree in business, and a year later they were married.



M.C. attending the University of Minnesota.

1939, M.C. and his wife, Ellen.



M.C. at Estherville Junior College, circa 1928.

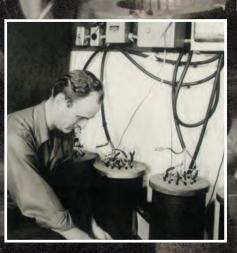
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M.C.'s USC employment certificate for U.S. Rubber Co.

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA Richmond 4111 Bureau of Employment Mar. 5 19.37 1 U. J. Rubber 5725 July ge Introducing Morrogen Empl-M-P-M-DI

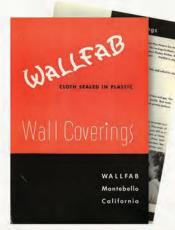
M.C. secured a job with U.S. Rubber in East Los Angeles as a quality control engineer. When the United States entered World War II, M.C. went to work in research and development for AO Smith Corporation and later at Swedlow Plastics, but dreamed of running his own business. World War II had fueled demand for military aircraft, but when the war ended many people assumed the aviation industry would fade away and the company M.C. was working for closed its doors.



M.C. working at AO Smith Corp.

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By then, M.C. had a wife and three children to feed so he took a job at Aerojet General and a part-time job at a liquor store to make ends meet. Unfazed by the obvious challenges before him, M.C. opened Peerless Plastics Products, Inc. in a rented garage on September 11, 1945. The product line was consumer oriented, including plastic-coated cork baseballs and balsa bats, wall coverings, lampshades and placemats. M.C.'s first "sure thing" was a decorative wall covering he named "Wallfab." He was crushed when the product didn't sell well but he continued working nights and weekends searching for the break that would set him on the road to success.



Early Wallfab brochure. Clockwise: M.C., Phil, Stephen, Ellen, Debaney.



Early products included lampshades, placemats and table top overlays.





In 1951, a glass cloth supplier told M.C. that Douglas Aircraft was interested in purchasing very wide reinforced polyester laminates and that no one could produce the material. M.C. found a solution and secured a \$60,000 order from Douglas Aircraft Company for baggage compartment wall liner laminates. Rather than pocket the cash, M.C. reinvested his profits into the purchase of more equipment, moved the company from the garage to a Quonset hut and renamed his company M.C. Gill Corporation.

M.C. GILL CORP.

REINFORCED PLASTICS

SHIPPING

The first location for the newly renamed M.C. Gill Corporation, 1951. The early years for M.C. Gill Corporation were lean and challenging, but M.C. never looked back. When a fiberglass cloth distributor was interviewed by a local paper and asked who among the early plastics pioneers would succeed, he said, "M.C. Gill. He makes the same dumb mistakes everyone does, but he learns from them and doesn't make them twice."

> Early factory worker at resin mixing station.

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A 1950s Douglas DC6-C; contained the laminate panels of M.C. Gill Corporation.

> A mechanical "walking man" for testing wear and tear.



In 1952, Ellen joined the company as an accountant. M.C., Ellen and a handful of loyal employees worked side by side producing the laminates by hand. In the beginning, the company could produce 19 sheets a day. The sheets were cut, painted and loaded into a station wagon that delivered the finished goods to Douglas Aircraft for installation in the DC6-Cs. As each year drew to a close, M.C. presented each of his staff with the gift of a Christmas ham and a bottle of whiskey. The tradition was soon nicknamed "The Hamming" and, although the whiskey has been replaced with candy, the event is still in practice today.

By 1955, M.C. Gill Corporation had moved into a 5,000 sq. ft. building to accommodate a new piece of equipment – an 84 sq. ft., 1,250 ton, steam-heated press. The staff was now producing 25 sheets a day and the company was now 10 years old, so M.C. and Ellen organized the first of many "Anniversary" parties to be held every five years.



1955 came with a move into a larger location in Montebello to accommodate new equipment like the press on the right.







Top: Phil's cub scout troop. Left: Debaney's homing pigeons.

While the company was expanding and becoming more influential in the blossoming plastics industry, the Gill children were growing up as well. M.C. encouraged his daughter Debaney's fascination with homing pigeons. His sons joined the Boy Scouts and played sports and, when they were old enough, Stephen and Phil worked part-time for their father during their summer breaks. Once in college, they continued to work part-time with M.C. while Stephen was pursuing a degree in business and Phil was studying chemical engineering.

During the next decade, M.C. acquired additional manufacturing space, increased his workforce and eventually moved into the present location in El Monte, California.



SPI Western Persons of the Year, 1984.

Stephen and crew.

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While M.C. was growing his business and mentoring his sons,

he found time to cultivate some personal interests that were special to him. M.C. had always been a die-hard fan of USC. Trojans are loyal to their alma mater and M.C. was no exception. He became a Trojan football season-ticket holder and cheered when his son Stephen graduated from the School of Business. In the '70s, M.C. realized he was in the unique position to make a difference for future plastics scientists. He envisioned a formal program for composite materials that would be an integral part of the School of Engineering at USC. In 1987, M.C. pledged a \$250,000 endowment to the School of Engineering to fund an academic chair for the study of thermoset polymeric materials (composites). M.C. explained:

"Reinforced plastics should be given the same emphasis as steel, aluminum, wood, and other structural materials. College students should be acquainted fully with these important new materials. At the minimum, students should be familiar with the basic electrical, physical and mechanical properties of reinforced plastics. We anticipate that as more students see and appreciate the technology and challenges of the reinforced plastics industry, more will enter it as a career. And, they will come better prepared. It is something they MUST know in order to keep up in the materials field." True to his nature and infectious hands-on approach, M.C. devoted countless hours working with students and faculty at USC. He served on the school's Board of Councilors and received the Outstanding USC Engineering Alumnus Award in 1980.

In 1988, M.C. began another series of large financial gifts earmarked for the Center for Composite Materials at USC. His dogged efforts finally paid off when USC announced they had appointed Dr. Steven A. Nutt as the first permanent M.C. Gill Chair holder for the Composite Materials Program. Dr. Nutt acknowledged M.C.'s impact on the field, saying:



"M.C. Gill has taken more than a passing interest in furthering a formal program for composites materials and a center to promote same. He is one of an all but vanished breed – a true pioneer in the reinforced plastics industry – and the company he founded in 1945 has outlived all the others and is now the world's oldest continuously operating company solely dedicated to composites."

> Merwyn C. Gill Foundation

COMPOSITE

CENTER

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Amidst all his success, M.C. was devastated when his wife Ellen suddenly became ill and died in 1989. Fortunately, he had the support and expertise of his sons Stephen (operations) and Phil (R&D) and a staff of more than 100 employees as the corporation entered a new decade.



Stephen, Phil and M.C. Gill.

In 1991, oldest son Stephen stepped into the role of CEO and began a series of acquisitions as part of their strategic growth plan. Royal Plastics Manufacturing in Nebraska, Castle Industries in California, Alcore Brigantine in France, Alcore in Maryland and M.C. Gill Europe in Northern Ireland became part of the M.C. Gill Corporation. An Advisory Board was established to make sure the corporation would have quarterly access to a group of highly skilled independent business professionals.



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Scoutmaster M.C. Gill.



Top: Mr. Van Johns

Bottom Left: boy scout applying a wet lay-up process.

Bottom Right: M.C. presents a Composites Learning Certificate. M.C. now turned his energies towards another project that was dear to his heart. When his sons were young, they joined the Boy Scouts and M.C. participated as a Scoutmaster. His fond memories of those times prompted him to reach out to the local Boy Scout leadership with the idea and funding to establish a Composites Merit Badge.



The San Gabriel Valley Council, Boy Scouts of America worked closely with M.C. designing the guidelines, instruction and requirements for how to earn the new badge. Through his efforts, M.C. had found yet another way to influence and educate young minds about the composites industry.









In 2004, the American Composites Manufacturers Association (ACMA) recognized M.C. with their Lifetime Achievement Award. Over 2,000 people attended the ceremony and paid tribute to a man who had given so much to the field he loved.

M.C. served as Chairman Emeritus until the time of his death with his son Stephen Gill serving as Chairman and CEO of the company. When USC learned of his passing USC President Max Nikias requested a special tribute be posted on the university website. Nikias added his personal thoughts to the tribute saying,



"USC alumnus and trustee Merwyn C. 'M.C.' Gill 37, founder and chairman emeritus of M.C. Gill Corporation, one of the world's largest manufacturers of reinforced plastics, died on May 30, just two months shy of his 103rd birthday. Dedicated to making USC a leader in composites research and education – the field he helped define - he endowed the M.C. Gill Chair in Composites Materials in 1986. In 2001, he made a gift to endow the Merwyn C. Gill Foundation Composites Center at the USC Viterbi School of Engineering. M.C. was a true pioneer of the composites industry, and his legacy will live on at USC through the endowed chair and the center he created. But he also holds a special place in our collective heart for his leadership, friendship, wit and stalwart dedication to the Trojan Family."

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THE M.C. GILL GROUP OF COMPANIES



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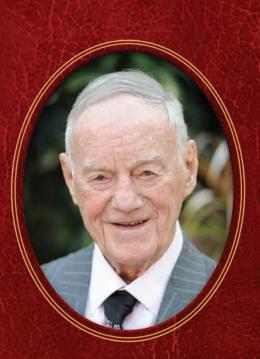


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Castle Industries, Inc. of California 601 South Dupont Avenue Ontario, CA 91761-1502 USA phone: 909 390-0899 fax: 909 390-0898 email: info@castleindustries.net



M.C. was a visionary businessman who dedicated his life to the field that made him a success. But it was his tireless efforts as a husband, father, mentor, friend and role model that defined his remarkable life and legacy.

Merwyn C. Gill is survived by his second wife Hester; sons Stephen and Phillip Gill; daughter Debaney Gill Lefort; grandchildren: Stephanie Gill Frederick, Jennifer Gill, Denise Gill Wilkinson, Darren Gill, Courtney Gill-Timmons, Matt Gill, Christopher Lefort, James Lefort, Michael Lefort; and step-children Carine Bester, Annelize Bester and Dirk Bester.

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Karl Hubenthal and the Gill Toons

Karl Hubenthal, known as "Hubie," was an illustrator for the *Los Angeles Herald Examiner* for years. He became M.C.'s friend and drew many cartoons for *The Doorway*.







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