End of an Era

Bill Garff announces retirement, ending three generations of a Utah-based, family-owned general contractor that dates back to early 20th Century.

By Brad Fullmer

Bill Garff’s office at Salt Lake-based Garff Construction hasn’t changed much the past four decades, as evidenced by two photos on the wall from a 1975 project groundbreaking that helped resurrect the company that bears his name, and a mustard-yellow Sharp Compet ‘electronic printing calculator’ from the same era, which Garff figures has helped him estimate and win untold projects over four decades.

“I bought two of them for $400 each,” Garff recalls. “It still works for me. When I would do estimating, I spent two weeks doing take offs on four-column sheets and spent almost an entire day running calculations off the calculator. What used to take a day is now done in seconds, but you still have to have the art of the take off.”

Looking back at the past is something Garff has been doing in recent weeks as he has made the decision to both retire and close the company, the last incarnation of three generations of contractors dating back to the 1910’s.

“It’s been a good hundred years for us,” quipped Garff, ever cognizant of his family’s rich heritage and history working in Utah’s construction industry. Garff has three sons, but each pursued different career paths, which he has no problem with.

“I’ve spent my whole life looking for work, and I’ve got to stop doing that. Got to make that transition,” he says.

Looking Back

Garff’s construction roots date back to maternal grandfather Eric W. Ryberg, who along with brother William started Ryberg Brothers Construction in 1911. They eventually founded Utah Sand and Gravel, which operated into the 50’s.

In the late 40’s, Mark B. Garff – Bill’s father – helped start Garff, Ryberg and Garff, a firm that Bill says was “a main player in their heyday” in Utah’s construction industry through the 60’s before shutting down, in part because Mark Garff had left in 1966 to run the LDS Church’s Building Department at the request of then-President David O. McKay.

The younger Garff, who was at the University of Utah earning a Business Management degree, was considering construction or working in a restaurant. The summer before his final year he gave a ride from Montana to Utah to Ted C. Jacobsen of Jacobsen Construction, the uncle of his brother-in-law, Ted M. Jacobsen, which proved fortuitous.

“He said, ‘when you finish school, come talk to us’, which I thought was interesting because it wasn’t coming from my brother-in-law,” Garff recalls. “When I graduated, I knew I had this open interview. I wasn’t sure I was ready to work, but they hired me that day.”

From 1972 to 1975 Garff learned the ropes of the construction industry at Jacobsen, working as a timekeeper, an assistant project superintendent, a laborer, and ultimately an estimator. Life was good, as Garff had himself a secure, well-paying job at one of Utah’s largest GC’s. He was also learning quickly.

“Kent Carter (a Jacobsen Project Manager) once said to an owner, ‘if we can be friends at the end of this project, then this is going to be a great project.’ That was a very prophetic comment for me. It was good learning that experience on how to maintain a client’s business with good rapport, and still get your dirty, noisy, construction work done. It was good to learn right out of the chute.”

Opportunity Knocks

In 1975 Mark B. Garff had the opportunity to resurrect the family business via the Sports Mall project in Murray, a $2.5 million project. Bill, of course, had a chance
to work for his father but was unsure about leaving the security of Jacobsen.

Eventually, he took advice from his brother-in-law, who essentially told him to go for it.

“He said, ‘you can’t come back here once you go out that door. Don’t look back.’ That was great advice. We didn’t have a pickup truck, didn’t have a shovel. We had dad’s reputation and a little bit of capital and figured out how to get a bond. We got the project and off we went.”

Bill Garff was 28 when Mark B. Garff Construction started in 1975, with a modest sized-office at 28th West and 5th South in Salt Lake. Bill’s brother Mark R. Garff also worked part-time. Mark B. was 68, a fact not lost on Garff, who turned 68 himself in May.

“To his credit...this was a man in his late 60’s, still recovering from a stroke, and he was willing to go back to work to give his son an opportunity; that was the quality of man he was,” says Garff.

Over the years the company has built many commercial/retail and institutional projects. Long-time clients include Salt Lake Int’l Airport Authority, State of Utah DFCM, Stephen Wade Auto, and many others.

Service to Industry
Garff has been an active participant in the community, and especially with the Associated General Contractors of Utah. The chapter’s highest honor just so happens to be named the Eric W. Ryberg Award, a sort of lifetime of service to the industry award, but Garff didn’t get involved with the prominent association until the early 80’s. Once he did, he realized the value of not only associating with his peers and competitors, but the AGC’s...
collective political clout and wealth of services.

Garff has served on various committees, the board of directors, was President (now Chairman) in ’94, and is also an AGC National Life Director. He even received the award named for his grandfather in ’97.

“The AGC has been very good for me,” he says. “It’s enjoyable to rub shoulders with the big boys and different people within the industry.”

“Bill is not just a great contractor but a man of impeccable character,” said Rich Thorn, AGC of Utah President/CEO. “He has served our chapter in many capacities and has been who has not been afraid to roll up his sleeves and get things done. He’s left a mark that has been positive for generations.”

“I always tell him that he gave me my start in the industry in Utah,” said Karyn Salerno of Traveler’s in Salt Lake, who worked at Garff Construction from ’94-’02. “He’s a great man. He got me involved with the AGC immediately and I received an award for ‘Rookie of the Year’ and I attributed it to Bill.”

Calling it a Day

Garff has worked with Phil Henriksen, 65, and Dennis Doman, 64, since the late 70’s. Both men have been loyal to Garff for longer than any of them can remember. Both would have considered taking over the company had they been younger. It just wasn’t meant to be.

“Construction companies typically don’t get sold – they get transferred to family, or employees,” says Garff. “I worked for a couple of years trying to bring in an heir apparent and it just didn’t work out. Even Jacobsen (Construction) became an ESOP (Employee Stock Ownership Plan).”

The prospects of retirement are both eagerly anticipated, but with some obvious hesitations.

“I’m not going to know what to do,” admits Henriksen. “I’m excited to not work so much, but I’ve enjoyed what I’ve done. I enjoy building things for people. We had a lot of good clients, made a lot of good friends. That’s about to change.”

“The plan is to finish all construction opportunities this year, have everything built, billed and paid for,” says Garff. “Next year we’ll go about closing accounts and selling tools and equipment and getting those types of things done. You collect a lot of junk over the years.”

He says he has no regrets and is ready for the next chapter, which will include a lot of skiing, traveling, church and community service, and days of doing nothing.

“It’s a wintry morning, I get up and look at the window and it’s snowing, and it’s cold. I’m not going to say, ‘did we get that concrete covered? Did we get asphalt? Can guys work today?’ It’s ‘which ski resort am I going to today?’

“Construction has been good to me. Look at what we’ve done! We made it to the end. I’ve got to figure out how to close it down. It’s not easy. You’re worried about your people.”