

Building a Century

A history of Bechtel and projects galore (Book Review/Case Study)

Introduction

This is the story of a nearly bankrupt young man who makes good and founds a family dynasty. It is recounted in an online book that chronicles the people and projects that have combined to make the Bechtel company a global leader in engineering and construction. The occasion of online publication, 2008, celebrates the company's 110th anniversary and starts out as follows.

"Like many great American entrepreneurs, Warren A. Bechtel would take a few frightening steps toward failure before he found the path to success. In 1898 cattle farming had fallen on hard times because of collapsing beef and corn prices. So, the nearly bankrupt 25-year-old Bechtel and his pregnant wife, Clara, left their farm and headed 100 miles south to the dusty expanses of Oklahoma Territory in search of construction work and new opportunity. Thus began an epic journey that would span a century of building, four generations of his family, and eventually much of the globe."¹

This online version includes profiles of four generations of family leadership, links to project profiles, and more than 200 photos in easy-to-view galleries.² You can read each chapter by clicking on the links that follow.

- Chapter 1 - The Formative Years, 1898 – 1940 [<http://www.bechtel.com/BAC-Chapter-1.html>]
- Chapter 2 - Bechtel Goes to War, 1940 – 1945 [<http://www.bechtel.com/BAC-Chapter-2.html>]
- Chapter 3 - Bringing Energy to the World, 1945 – 1959 [<http://www.bechtel.com/BAC-Chapter-3.html>]
- Chapter 4 - Structuring for a New Era, 1960 – 1969 [<http://www.bechtel.com/BAC-Chapter-4.html>]
- Chapter 5 - A Decade of Megaprojects, 1970 – 1979 [<http://www.bechtel.com/BAC-Chapter-5.html>]
- Chapter 6 - Surviving a Global Downturn, 1980 – 1989 [<http://www.bechtel.com/BAC-Chapter-6.html>]
- Chapter 7 - Leading the Way to Change, 1990 – 1998 [<http://www.bechtel.com/BAC-Chapter-7.html>]
- Chapter 8 - Building a New Century, 1999 – 2008 [<http://www.bechtel.com/BAC-Chapter-8.html>]

Commentary

Yes, the chapters in this book *Building a Century* are self-congratulatory, as might be expected of a proud company like Bechtel. However, the descriptions and many pictures of very large and challenging projects show what can be done in projects involving major civil engineering works. What this book does is to trace great works of building and civil engineering often with innovative and high-risk technological approaches. And it does so over a time span of more than 100 years.

Suggested issues for discussion

1. Is it still possible to build such a company "dynasty" today?
2. If so, why or why not?
3. Should we be building "Big Projects" today, given the current economic crisis?
4. If no, then why not, or if yes, then what "Big Projects" would you suggest?
5. And who should pay for them, or where will the money come from?
6. What is the difference between projects like these and social projects?
7. Which types of project have the most lasting effect?
8. And does it mean that those projects provide the most long-lasting value?
9. How do projects such as those portrayed compare to, say, large IT projects?
10. Which would you prefer to work on and why?

¹ See Chapter 1 [<http://www.bechtel.com/BAC-Chapter-1.html>] accessed 4/4/09

² See Building-a-Century [<http://www.bechtel.com/Building-a-Century.html>] accessed 4/4/09