

Living History

Bob Ruhstorfer and the WQA History Project

By Nate F. Searing

If you've ever been to a trade show or an industry meeting, you've probably heard the stories. They're the colorful ones, about family-run dealerships and companies large and small, how they began and how they've grown over the years.

Since the first Water Quality Association meetings nearly 50 years ago, the history of the industry has been available only in these little snippets. Yet on the larger scale, the history of the water treatment industry has been largely unrecorded.

Former WQA President Bob Ruhstorfer, president of Aquion Partners, wants that to change... and he wants your help.

"What we're doing here is telling the story of who we are and why we do what we do," Ruhstorfer says. "We have an opportunity to create an asset for our industry, for every company and every person who has had an impact on our industry. But the time is running out and we need to start documenting our history before it's too late."

The project was born of a conversation at last year's Aquatech Amsterdam show between Ruhstorfer and Kinetico founder Bill Prior. The two men were discussing the many changes in the industry over the years and lamenting the fact that many of the key founders had died, Ruhstorfer said.

"Many of those original companies had been passed on to the second generation, who are now nearing retirement as well," He said. "It's apparent that if we don't begin documenting this history now, it will be lost forever."

The conversation got Ruhstorfer thinking and spurred a series of discussions with WQA administration and board members. Eventually, a small group of interested individuals developed a task force document for the project and held their first public meeting in Quebec City, Canada, at the 2005 Mid-year Meeting.

The goal, Ruhstorfer says, is to create more than just a history book about the industry and the WQA, but rather to set the framework for a living history that can be explored in any number of ways by members, potential investors and the general public.

While the Association is still seeking new ideas on how to present the history, the goal is to create a searchable, easily accessible online database an-



chored around key people, companies and events that shaped the water treatment industry; one that can be added to and customized by any WQA member (upon fact vetting by the Association). Eventually, members will be able to customize and combine portions of their story and produce

their own unique history book to memorialize an individual, create a company profile, or for any other use.

The WQA History Task Force has also suggested creating audio and video histories to accompany the written text on-line.

"The most exciting thing about the whole project is that we can use any number of technologies, transfer it all to the Web and let people process it as they wish. It can really take on a life of its own."

The information could also become a draw for investors, showcasing industry sectors and companies on the WQA site that could enhance future investment at all levels, Ruhstorfer believes.

While the project is still in its infancy, Ruhstorfer says the task force hopes to begin conducting interviews with key industry figures at WQA Aquatech 2006. The goal is to have a core history available to the public on-line by the end of next year.

The project, which will be funded solely by contributions from members, is seeking your input and donations to proceed. Those interested in participating should contact WQA Director of Membership and Marketing Margit Fotre at (630) 505-1060.

"The core history should be relatively easy to compile and provide to our membership," Ruhstorfer says. "It's the remaining information, the individual stories and family histories that are going to bring this thing to life." G