

## A Short History of Sound-Craft Systems

The company was started near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1946 and was principally engaged in industrial sound and intercommunications systems for the steel, mining, and energy industries in western Pennsylvania. Business was brisk in the post WWII era with the country rebuilding and expanding its infrastructure. To some degree, Mr. Shaw was able to start his electronic business through knowledge acquired installing battle sound on LST landing craft during the war.

As with any custom business, every job had to be designed, installed, and maintained as a separate job, requiring large blocks of time. To overcome this impediment, he began investigating the manufacture of standardized products and eventually created a line of portable loudspeakers, lecterns, and wireless microphones. Because the customer base included schools, churches, businesses, and all branches of government, the business eventually became international in reach.

Now, about Arkansas. As best I can replicate, dad spent a good part of his younger years moving around and at some point, during the late 20's or early 30's found himself on a farm / timber company in Marked Tree, Arkansas. He signed on as a sharecropper, a life he always respected and was proud to tell folks so. When one spends a good part of the day picking the fiber that clothes others, or in a swamp up to their armpits in all manner of vermin, respect for and from others struggling alongside comes kind a natural. Malaria eventually drove him back home where he discovered a depression was in progress. Folks in east Arkansas considered the depression a nonevent since things had been depressed there for as long as any of the locals could remember.

Anyway, Mr. Shaw must have always wanted to return to Arkansas. By now the business was viable and as best I remember, my sister, Sandy, and I were being fed on a fairly regular basis. On a summer day in 1958, dad returned from a business trip and pronounced, "We're going on vacation". "Where?". "Arkansas!" "Where is Arkansas?" He had located 90 acres for sale on Petit Jean with a WPA schoolhouse owned by a local businessman, John Thines. But this was not to be a vacation, it was the mother of all con jobs. How he convinced my mother Elsa to leave everything that was familiar to her, including her entire family should have been preserved in a textbook. The kids didn't compute. The upshot is that in January 1959 several lives were loaded into moving vans, and we headed out to what might just as well have been Peru. You should be aware of what life was like on this hill 55 years ago. Petit Jean Mountain had just received a dial telephone system. Highway 154 to Centerville was unpaved. When the roads iced over, you might just as well have been on the moon. How could this ever work? Was this man nuts? Or maybe just remarkable. To a teenage schoolboy that loved the outdoors it was sure enough heaven. Still is.

The company did succeed. The product line served an important need. Recent government funding for public education provided school districts the needed funds for educational equipment. Government contracts were procured, and a network of professional dealers was assembled that needed quality products to serve their markets. Just as important was the need for quality employees. During my 30 years of traveling for Sound-Craft, I often suffered thoughtless comments about rural Arkansas. My personal conviction is that for time immortal Arkansans had worked so hard, for so long, for so little, they didn't know there was any other way. The old man knew he would need good help, and I believe those days in Marked Tree told him just where to find it.

## A Short History of Sound-Craft Systems

But like anyone who's been in business knows, if things are going a little too peachy, it's time to keep one eye over your shoulder. On December 28, 1973, the place burned to the ground. Little was saved. At this point, I feel it appropriate to inject a personal thought. Although my father was a demanding employer, I have never known a more honest or fair-minded person. He just always seemed to know the right thing to do. Customers, suppliers, and employees did not forget the little company on a hill with a funny name. With help from many quarters, Sound-Craft was soon on its feet again. Today, that story of recovery is more than remarkable. I still find it nearly unbelievable.

In 1977, Mr. Shaw was diagnosed with cancer. Although initially treated successfully he decided that it was time to move aside. The business was sold to a local businessman, Earle Love, and three existing employees, Katherine Foust of Morrilton, Hugh Donnell of Petit Jean and me. Earle was an excellent businessman and manager, and one peach of a fellow. The fact that the business tripled during the fifteen years we worked together testifies to the fact that partnerships can succeed, given the right personalities and a compromising attitude. During that time, we absorbed companies, developed new technologies, expanded our markets, and work our chops off.

Dad died in 1979.

Then, disaster again. On June 1, 1991, Earle, his wife, Jan, and her parents died in a private plane crash at Gaston's Resort in Mountain Home, Arkansas. The reason is still a mystery. Earle was an excellent pilot, logging well over a thousand hours with multiple licenses and qualifications. The company had invested in its own airplane and for years Earle and I flew together on business to nearly every major city east of the Rockies. Even in weather or congested air space I never felt unsafe.

For a time after Katherine, Hugh, and I operated the business and eventually acquired Earle's interest from his estate. Earle's children, Ed and Elizabeth, while talented and certainly capable, had developed paths of their own. While unsettling at the time, it was probably the right thing to do.

In 1998, I decided 30 plus years was enough. A couple years later, Katherine and Hugh concluded likewise. The company was sold to a group of investors within the industry. I can't comment on specifics of the company now, as my few visits since leaving the firm have only been social. Sound-Craft has been here longer than most of us, and it has been a good neighbor. My every hope is that they are doing well.

In wrapping up my personal reflections of a man, a company, and a mountain, I'd like to share a little-known occurrence of this place we call home. During the time of creation, I believe the fifteenth day, God took a deep breath and with extra care carved out a place we now call "Petit Jean". When finished he looked to his recording angel and said, "This will be one of my special places." The recording angel smiled and replied, "I was just thinking the same thing." Remarkable.

Henry W. (Hank) Shaw, Jr.  
January 6, 2014