

# Introduction



No Picture of R.J. Frisby -- R.J. Frisby Manufacturing Company

October 24, 2014

R.J. FRISBY

FRISBY MANUFACTURING COMPANY

Robert J. Frisby founded the R.J. Frisby Manufacturing Company in 1944. Over the next three decades he made it a leader in the American screw machine products industry. That industry was populated by a large number of entrepreneurs each running a small firm. In 1972, for example, there were 1,780 companies in the industry; the largest 20 firms accounted for only 15 percent of industry sales; and only 56 firms employed 100 or more people. In this hotbed of free enterprise, the R.J. Frisby Company stood out in size, financial performance and product quality. How Robert Frisby achieved this distinction is the subject of the biographical sketch which follows.

R.J. Frisby's Career Ladder

Robert Frisby was born in Chicago on Christmas day, 1915. he was raised on Chicago's northwest side. His was a strong Catholic upbringing and his religious faith was to be a significant factor in his later business success. But in the beginning R.J. got off to a less than promising start. He dropped out of high school after one year and looked for work only to find that he could not land a

steady job. Finally, with the aid of his father he was hired by an automobile dealer. But R.J. did not find the work entirely satisfying.

In 1934 a break came when a friend of his father suggested that R.J. apply for a job within the Chicago Electric Manufacturing Company. He applied and got a job in the polishing and buffing department. R.J. knew nothing about the work, but fortunately the foreman was sick that first week and R.J. had a short time to learn the job. A friendly co-worker showed him what to do and how to do it. When the foreman returned R.J. was performing well enough to keep the job.

Four months later R.J. was asked to run a chip spinning machine when the man running the machine quit. It was love at first sight. ♦Someday,♦ R.J. said to himself,♦ I am going to get a chance to run those machines. To prepare himself for that day, R.J. tried to finish his regular assignments early so that he could have one of the other men teach him how to run the screw machine. That strategy worked, thanks to the presence of an understanding supervisor who was willing to teach him. R.J.♦s supervisor eventually recommended him for an operator♦s job.

Curiosity helped R.J. impress his supervisor. While running the chip spinning machine he had spotted a complicated screw machine attachment lying on a storeroom shelf. He asked what the attachment was for but nobody could tell him. But he was still curious so he looked up the attachment in an instructions manual and found that it could be used to perform additional operations such as multiple cross drilling operations on the same part being produced on the automatic screw machine, without increasing the production cycle time. When R.J. later operated a screw machine he was given a job on which the mysterious attachment could be used to speed up production. His supervisor took notice.

Within four years R.J. was earning the top rate of pay in his department. His income was finally high enough for him to propose marriage to the woman who was to help him build his own company in later years. He had met Eleanor Mendriski on a blind date in late 1933. Within a short time they were going steady and on May 8, 1937 they were married.

R.J.♦s success caused him to raise his sights. After much looking around and

some night school training he found a job as a night shift foreman at the Garden City Plating and Manufacturing Company. There were 18 men under his supervision. The company was producing 20 millimeter fuses and 30 caliber armor piercing bullet cores for the U.S. military.

Two years passed and again R.J. found his personal goals changing. He decided that we wanted to run his own business. With two partners he formed the Aviation Screw Machine Products in 1942. The partnership arrangement failed to live up to his expectations and R.J. gradually came to the conclusion that if he was going to succeed in business he would have to be a sole proprietor.

### A New Company is Started

In 1944 R.J. Frisby started his own company. He was encouraged to do so by a very close friend, Walter J. Kelly. Kelly provided space for the new business as well as some start-up financing.

In the beginning it was a very small business. Capital funds consisted of \$800 from R.J.'s savings plus a loan of \$1,000 from his mother. The money was used to purchase R.J.'s first used Browne and Sharpe Automatic Screw Machine ( Manufactured in 1926). The labor force consisted of R.J. and one other man. Each of the men ran the machine 12 hours, 6 days a week.

The business grew slowly but surely. By the end of the first year R.J. had three employees and several used machines. In this small business R.J. did everything selling, estimating, handling layouts and set-ups, making repairs and operating machines.

During the next decade growth was sufficient for R.J.Frisby to begin to think about formulating a growth strategy. As so often happens, the strategy came to him somewhat by accident. The Mercury Marine Corporation sent R.J. a set of plans for a job requiring heat treating and grinding. R.J. wrote back turning down the job because he didn't have heat treating and grinding capabilities. A representative from Mercury called back by telephone and said, "Hey, Frisby, do you want future jobs with us? If so, send in a bid on this job."

Taken aback, R.J. realized that one alternative would be to job out the heat treating and grinding. And so he submitted a bid. It was accepted ; R.J.

completed the job on time and to the customer's satisfaction; and Mercury Marine Corporation became one of R.J.'s largest and long-lasting accounts.

That experience caused R.J. to envision a new strategy, that of taking on difficult jobs. Most of his competitors were, as he had been, unwilling to take on jobs which they could not handle in-house. Consequently, reasoned R.J., there should be good profit margins for anyone willing to take on the tough jobs and making a go of it.

Using this new strategy R.J. Frisby quickly built a reputation as a quality house that was willing to take on the more complex jobs. The company's reputation became its best sales tool. Sales grew and in 1960 employment passed the 40 person mark.

In later years R.J. would frequently cite the high quality, high markup strategy as the key to success in his industry. In his words, "If you need to be low bidder to keep customers you'll never grow in this business."

### Double Shift

During the same period R.J. adopted a permanent policy that distinguished him from the average screw machine company owner-manager. That policy was to run two shifts per day. To R.J. doing so made economic sense. Two shifts made it possible to spread the overhead and improve lead time. Yet most screw machine companies avoided double shifts because of quality control problems that might arise if the owner-managers were not present to keep an eye on the work. To a degree they were right, for R.J. encountered quality problems on his company's night shift. But he was able to solve the problem by tightening nighttime controls. The new controls were then applied to the day shift.

### Move to the Chicago Suburbs

As the growth of the R.J. Frisby Company continued, R.J. began to have difficulty hiring competent help. After much study of the problem he concluded that his location in a deteriorating section of Chicago was the source of the problem. And so he began to look for a better location in the suburbs.

In 1962 he moved to the Chicago suburb of Elk Grove Village. In order to

finance the construction of his new facility there, he had to sell his summer home and take out a second mortgage on his family home. Friends in the business counseled him against the move. They told him it was too risky. But R.J. believed that it was just such a risk-averting attitude that kept most of the nearly 2,000 firms in the industry so small. His belief was, ❖If you intend to grow, you have to take risks.❖

In the new location increased sales required additional qualified help. R.J. solved this problem by adopting a policy of paying wages above the going rate. He believed that doing so would enable him to attract the more skilled workers. With better workers would come a higher level of quality and productivity. This belief proved to be correct in the R.J. Frisby case.

### Growth in the 1960s

A period of rapid growth began in 1964. Work space was expanded from 16,000 square feet to 60,000 square feet in 1972. The need for even more manufacturing capacity caused the company to construct a 100,000 square feet facility at a new location. R.J. purchased an additional twelve acres of land at that location in order to prepare for future expansion.

The growth of the R.J. Frisby Company was fueled in part by a steady increase in the kinds of work which the company❖s in-house capabilities. In large measure this was accomplished with a two-step process. First sales demand was developing using subcontracting operations. Then, once a sufficient volume of regular business had been developed, the company would acquire the machinery to be able to do the work in-house.

Multi-spindle automatic work is an example. Prior to 1964 R.J. would get orders for jobs requiring that some work be done on multi-spindle automatics. That work would be subcontracted to several other companies. After many years of this profitable and repeat business, R.J. took the next step in the strategy. Two New Britain multi-spindle automatics were acquired in 1964 and that function was brought in house.

The strategy illustrated in the case of the multi-spindle automatics proved highly successful in other areas of manufacturing such as centerless grinding,

thread rolling, broaching and gear hobbing. In each case the service was initially provided by outside subcontractors and later brought in house. As the service were brought in house, the R.J. Frisby Company acquired the ability to handle new product lines such as roller shafts for photocopiers, armature shafts for sub-fractional motors, and poppets, spools and components for hydraulic valves.

Much of the company's expansion of capabilities was the result of R.J.'s careful planning. But there were a few lucky developments, too. In 1968, for example, a customer placed a large order for a variety of screw machine parts including armature shafts. The customer offered not only to pay for the products but also to provide R.J. with the equipment necessary to produce them. That equipment opened a new era for the R.J. Frisby Company as a qualified source for precision sub-fractional horsepower motor shafts.

The growth of the company was also fueled by R.J.'s careful husbanding of the limited capital at his disposal. Much of the equipment which was added in the 1960's was purchased used. Often it was purchased at auctions. This purchasing strategy provided substantial cost savings, stretching the purchasing power of the company's capital budget. The practice continued through the middle 1970's.

There were also changes in the marketing part of the business. In 1964 R.J. started to build a sales organization, using commissioned sales representatives. He hired two to cover Chicago and northern Illinois and one for Minneapolis. The new sales reps were successful in adding many good customers. Some them which accounted for a substantial part of R.J. Frisby's sales were: Thermo-King, Gresen, Washington-Scientific, Rosemont, Fluid Power and Char Lynn.

In 1966 Don Kronforst joined the company as a salaried salesman. He had many years of experience as a purchasing agent for a large original equipment manufacturing company which was a customer of Frisby. As a Frisby sales representative Kronforst concentrated on the Milwaukee and southern Wisconsin area with great success. Some of his greatest achievements were the signing of contracts with Husco, Hamilton-Beach, Dremel, and R.T. and E Corporation.

In 1969 R.J. initiated a direct mail sales effort on a selective basis. The first mailing was targeted at electrical appliance manufacturers which were using small electric motors. The objective was to obtain orders for armature shafts that required multi diameter centerless grinding, spline and worm rolling. R.J. Frisby had developed some unique capabilities in the high volume production of these products, a fact that was brought out in the mailings. The mailings resulted in Eureka Williams and Rival Manufacturing Company becoming new customers of R.J. Frisby.

## Employee Relations

As the company expanded R.J. began to spend more time on personnel policies. From the very beginning he had involved his people in decision-making, treated them as personal friends, and rewarded them with sincere demonstrations of respect and recognition for their contributions to the company's success. In 1960 he added a high wage policy to the employee compensation package. In 1965 he introduced an employee profit sharing plan. R.J. made sure he was paying top wages and benefits by participating in his industry's wage and salary surveys.

In 1971 R.J. introduced the four day week. The four day week ran Monday through Thursday, with some workers on 10 hour shifts and others on 11 or 12 hour shifts with overtime pay. Fridays were left free for overtime work, if needed, and for preventive maintenance and special clean-up crews. Employees were thus guaranteed a two day weekend and could usually expect a three day break. The program worked well during the next decade.

Other benefits provided by R.J. Frisby included health and life insurance and generous vacations. By 1979 each employee had an option of three hospital plans, one conventional and the other two health maintenance organizations. By then each family had a full dental program paid by the company. By then each employee had a minimum \$15,000 life insurance policy provided by the company. And by then each employee received ten paid holidays in addition to paid vacations.

## Successor Management

Perhaps R.J.'s biggest concern in the 1970s was the development of a plan that would provide continuing good management after his retirement. Adherence to R.J.'s basic business philosophy was his basic goal. To R.J. that meant that successor management would pursue sound corporate growth and security for the employees.

Three of R.J.'s sons were participants in the management of the company and had contributed substantially to the company's growth. During the last half of the 1970s operating management decisions were shared equally among the three sons and R.J. continued as chief executive officer. For several years the three-man concept of management worked successfully, achieving exceptional growth and profits.

In 1979 a fourth son joined the company as controller and was later elevated to the position of vice president of finance.

Beginning in 1980 two of the sons began to lose interest in the business. They were disappointed because R.J. refused to relinquish control of the company to the sons. In 1981 the two oldest left the company. One of the remaining sons served as vice president and general manager at the time and was a viable candidate for the position of president. That son offered the opinion that R.J. gave his sons the freedom to act, compensated them on the basis of their performance, and never backed away from a decision. The son added that R.J. did what he thought was right for the success of the company and its employees, sometimes with adverse effects on the relationship with his sons.

R.J. retired from active management in 1982. The company was soon thereafter sold to a larger corporation.

## Conclusion

Close to the time R.J. retired his firm ranked in the top five percent of its industry in terms of size with 180 employees. It also ranked first in the industry in terms of gross product, value added, return on stockholders' equity and sales per employee (National Screw Machine Products Association. Management Ratio Report for 1979. Cleveland, 1980.)

Looking back on the many tough and risky decisions he had to make, R.J.



offered this explanation of his risk-taking ability, "I have a tremendous faith in God's unfailing direction. I ask that he guide me in everything I do, so that my decisions will always be fair and honorable." Such was the faith upon which R.J. Frisby built his highly successful business. Two appendixes to this article provide additional insight regarding his faith and wisdom.

This biographical sketch was prepared by Dr. Richard Hattwick, professor of economics at Western Illinois University at the time. The story is based primarily on interviews with R.J. Frisby in 1981-82 and several other company employees including one of R.J.'s sons. R.J. reviewed the manuscript and approved it for publication prior to it being published by the Illinois Business Hall of Fame in 1983..

## APPENDIX 1 " QUOTATIONS FROM R.J. FRISBY

(Statements made during interviews in 1982)

"You can get everything in life you want, if you help enough other people get what they want."

"The young people you expect to grow in your company should have a chance to make their own decisions."

"Loyalty takes time to develop. You can't pay for it. You have to earn it."

"You can lose good employees by promoting them beyond their capabilities."

"I learned the hard way that you can only expand through other people."

"Many businesses remain small to avoid the risks involved in growth."

"I'm a great believer in asking for help."

"I've got a lot of things going on in this business that I don't understand but that's part of the secret behind our growth. Most screw machine entrepreneurs don't want anything on the premises they don't understand."

"I know my limitations."

"Good personal relations with people that could help me were a key to my success."

- ◆ If you need to be a low bidder to keep the business, you will never grow. ◆
- ◆ Economic uncertainties are not all bad. On the contrary, they are essential to the correct allocation of profits according to effort, wealth and intelligence which are not equal in all people. Those willing to think, work hard and take risks deserve the higher profits. ◆
- ◆ Progress and change only come from challenges and insecurities and lack of satisfaction with one's present situation. ◆
- ◆ Teach your children how to do things for themselves. The Chinese say it well. If you give a man a fish you feed him for the day. But if you teach him how to fish you feed him for life. ◆

## APPENDIX 2 ◆ QUOTATIONS R.J. USED TO GUIDE HIS THOUGHTS AND ACTIONS

(During interviews conducted in 1982 R.J. Frisby cited the following quotations as important words of wisdom that he used to guide his own thoughts and actions)

1. ◆ Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent. ◆ ◆ ◆  
Source: Calvin Coolidge
2. ◆ I expect to pass through this world but once. Any good therefore that I can do or any kindness that I can show to my fellow creatures, let me not defer nor neglect it, for I shall not pass this way again. ◆ ◆ - Source: CREDO Art.
3. 8 Ways to Bring DOWN a Son
  - a. Provide him with plenty of spending money.
  - b. Permit him to choose his companions.
  - c. Give him the house key and allow him to return home at any hour.
  - d. Make no inquiry about who he's been with or where he spends his time.
  - e. Tell him that manners are more important than morals.
  - f. Allow him to spend most of his time on the street and don't ever mention church. ◆

g. Let him expect pay for all acts of helpfulness around the house.

h. Never let him see or hear you pray.

#### 4. 8 Ways to Bring Up a Son

Let him know that you love him.

Give him responsibilities.

Show him how whenever necessary.

Allow him to have some freedom.

Appreciate his success rather than dwell on his failures.

Show no partiality.

Always be firm when your answer is No or Yes.

Set an example with your actions and continually remind him to seek God's help, first, in everything.

5. I don't have the problem that my children have because I was born broke. Kirk Douglas.

6. The seven most important 2-letter words: It, If, To, Up, Me, Is and Be. IF IT IS TO BE IT IS UP TO ME. Source unknown.

7. I never feel sorry for poor boys. It is the children of wealth that deserve sympathy; too often they are starved for incentives to create success for themselves. Source unknown.

8. You can't shear a dead sheep but once. Source unknown

9. Men occasionally stumble on the truth, but most of them pick themselves up and hurry off as if nothing happened. Winston Churchill

10. One quality that an individual cannot learn or acquire, but must bring with him is not genius, but his character, the aggregate of distinctive qualities belonging to him. Source unknown.

11. On Leadership from Louis Lundberg People will follow the person who they feel:

Knows where he is going;

Knows how to get there;

Has courage and persistence ♦ will not run away or back down from danger, opposition or discouragement.

Can be believed;

Can be trusted not to sell their cause out for his personal advantage;

Makes the mission seem important; exciting; and possible to accomplish;

Makes their role in the mission seem important;

Makes them feel capable of performing their role.

## 12. HOW TO RETIRE AT 35

It ♦s easy. Thousands of men and women do it every year. In all walks of life. And it sets our economy, our country and the world back thousands of years in terms of wasted human resources. But worst of all is the personal tragedy that almost always results from ♦early retirement. ♦

It usually begins with a tinge of boredom. Gradually a man ♦s work begins to seem endlessly repetitious. The rat race hardly seems worth it any more. It ♦s at this point that many a 35-year-old boy wonder retires. There are no testimonial dinners or gold watches. He still goes to work every day, puts in his forty hours, and even draws a paycheck. He ♦s retired, but nobody knows it. Not at first, anyhow.

The lucky ones get fired in time to make a fresh start. Those less fortunate hand on for awhile ♦ even decades ♦ waiting and wondering. Waiting for a raise or promotion that never comes, and wondering why. There are ways to fight back, though, and most men do. They counteract the urge to coast by running as they ♦ve never run before. They run until they get the second wind that is now known as ♦self-renewal. ♦

Self-renewal is nothing more or less than doing for yourself what your parents, teachers, coaches and bosses did for you when you seemed young enough to need it. It ♦s the highest form of self-discipline. And it can be one of the most

satisfying experiences a man can enjoy.

Self-renewal is the adult's ability to motivate himself; to reawaken his self pride in the face of spiritual fatigue.

Self-renewal is the device by which the boy-wonders become men. Leaders. Creators. Thinkers.

Self-renewal is probably the greatest test a businessman must face. It's worth the effort, though. With all the talk about banning compulsory retirement and with the life expectancy approaching the century mark, 65 or 70 years is a long time to spend in a rocking chair.

◆ Source: Marsteller, Inc.

13. The Voice of Christ My child, I am the Lord who gives strength in the day of trouble. Come to me when all is not well with you. Your tardiness in turning to prayer is the greatest obstacle to heavenly consolation, for before you pray earnestly to Me, you first seek many comforts and take pleasure in outward things. Thus, all things are of little profit to you until you realize that I am the one Who saves those who trust in Me, and that outside of Me, there is no worthwhile help, or any useful counsel or lasting remedy. But now, after the tempest, take courage, grow strong once more in the light of My mercies; for I am near, says the Lord, to restore all things, not only the full, but with abundance and above measure. Is anything difficult for Me? Or shall I be as one who promises and does not act? Where is your faith? Stand firm and persevere. Be a man of endurance and courage and consolation will come to you in due time. Wait for Me; wait ◆ and I will come to heal you.

It is only temptation that troubles you, a vain fear that terrifies you. Of what use is anxiety about the future? Does it bring you anything but trouble upon trouble? Sufficient for the day is the evil thereof. It is foolish and useless to be either grieved or happy about future things, which perhaps may never happen. But it is human to be deluded by such imaginations, and the sign of a weak soul to be led on by suggestions of the enemy. For he does not care whether he overcomes you by love of the present or fear of the future.

Let not your heart be troubled, therefore, nor let it be afraid. Believe in Me and

trust My mercy. When you think you are far from Me, then often I am very near you. When you judge that almost all is lost, then very often, you are in the way of gaining great merit.

All is not lost when things go contrary to your wishes. You ought not judge according to present feelings, nor give in to any trouble whenever it comes, or take it s though all hope of escape were lost. And do not consider yourself forsaken if I send some temporary hardship or withdraw the consolation you desire. For this is the way of the kingdom of heaven, and without doubt it is better for you and the rest of My servants to be tried in adversities than to have all things you wish. I know your secret thoughts, and I know that it is profitable for your salvation to be left sometimes in despondency lest perhaps you be puffed up by success and fancy yourself to be what you are not. What I have given, I can take away and restore when it pleases Me. What I give remains Mine, and thus when I take it away, I take nothing that is yours, for every good gift and every perfect gift is Mine.

If I send you trouble and adversity, do not fret or let your heart be downcast. I can raise you quickly up again and turn your sorrows into joy. I am no less just and worthy of praise when I deal with you in this way.

If you think aright and view things in their true light, you should never be so dejected and saddened by adversity, but rather rejoice and give thanks, considering it a matter of special joy that I afflict you with sorrow and do not spare you. ❖As the Father hath loved Me,so also I love you.❖, I said to my disciples, and I certainly did not send them out to temporal joys, but rather to great struggles; not to honors but to contempt; not to idleness but to labors; not to rest but to bring forth much fruit in patience. Do you, my child, remember these words.

❖ Source: The Imitation of Christ

This article was written by Dr. Richard Hattwick.

[Slides related to R.J. FRISBY](#)

[Slide show of all IBHF Laureates!!!!](#)

## IBHF Laureates

Our laureates and fellows exemplify the Illinois tradition of business leadership. The IBHF has published the biographies of more than 40 of our laureates and fellows.

Some are currently available online and more are added each month.

[Back to Top](#)

## Illinois Business Hall of Fame - Contact

c/o Western Illinois University Libraries

Macomb, IL 61455

(309)298-2705