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Structural Engineering & DESIGN

Constructing life while building bridges THE TRIALS AND EVOLUTION OF CRAIG FINLEY, JR.

By Susan Wallace

A little boy sits in a wooden sandbox surrounded by Tonka trucks and miniature mountains of sand. His small, sand-encrusted hand drives the yellow backhoe, moving dirt back and forth, making imaginary roads and bridges. What was child's play then has turned into a life calling for Craig Finley, Jr., P.E., founder of Finley Engineering Group.

Craig Finley was born in 1954 in Spring Valley, Ill., near Peoria. His mother, Geri, was a school teacher/college professor and his father, Bob, was in the agricultural grain business. Craig, the oldest of the four Finley children, relished spending time with his grandfather, Lyle White. A self-made man, his grandfather was a successful farmer and traded cattle. He not only taught Craig the ins and outs of business, but also taught him valuable life lessons. Those lessons and words of wisdom would build the foundation for the person and the professional Craig Finley would later become.



Craig Finley has a professional racing license and hopes to race in the 24 Hours of Daytona or Le Mans someday.

Young Finley loved sports. He played football, basketball, baseball, and golf for the Iola Mustangs at a small Kansas high school. His talents earned him a football scholarship to Baker University. His grades, however, were no match for his excellence in football.

“My freshman year could best be described as ‘Animal House,’” Craig Finley chuckled.

So, he took a detour from college and joined the Marines. During his military stint, one of his platoon commanders was an electrical engineer. This sparked Craig Finley's interest. Combined with having worked in construction during previous summers, he began to see the possibilities of an engineering career. After completing his military service, Craig Finley headed to the University of Kansas to pursue his degree in electrical engineering — this time taking school seriously. While on the road to being an electrical engineer, he discovered a strong dislike of getting shocked, which is not conducive to a successful career in electrical engineering. The aversion led him to make a switch to civil engineering.

During his college years, Craig Finley was hired as a part-time intern for a small engineering firm, Finney & Turnipseed, which proved to be providential. Robert (Bob) Thorne, a consulting bridge engineer, became a mentor as Craig Finley received hands-on training with surveys, staking bridges and, later, design work. This also gave him the opportunity to ask relevant questions in his college classes pertaining to actual jobs he was working on. He graduated with a Bachelor of Science in civil engineering from the University of Kansas in 1979.



Finley Engineering Group, Inc., partners: Cheryl R. Martin, CPA, principal and vice president, finance/administration; R. Craig Finley, Jr., P.E., managing principal; and Jerry M. Pfuntner, P.E., principal and assistant technical director.

Later in life, Craig Finley, then an established engineer, ran into one of his favorite professors at a party. He recounted the story. “The professor recognized me and asked if I was working for the caterer. I told him I was a consulting bridge engineer. Later, the professor explained to me how he viewed his students: “The A group was going to be professors someday. The ‘B’ students would likely work for the government. But he was always nice to the ‘C’ students because he knew they’d be consulting engineers and one day he might need for them to hire him.” As the years passed, Craig Finley said it was gratifying to run into this professor and have him introduce him as one of his best students.

The start-up

Growing up, Craig Finley had no fear of hard work. He worked for his father in high school unloading train cars, and held other jobs while going to school. He was even a lifeguard at the local country club, which Craig Finley said was the best job he ever had. With his varied work experience, his civil engineering degree, and the life lessons taught by his grandfather, Craig Finley launched his career with HNTB, an architecture and engineering consulting firm in Kansas City, Mo. His career path then took him to Tallahassee, Fla., and a position with Figg & Muller (F&M). Craig Finley’s bridge engineering career was on the fast track. He spent six months in Paris working with the esteemed Jean Muller, one of F&M’s owners. Then he moved to start the Denver offices of F&M. In 1987, Craig Finley was back in Tallahassee, working for Gene Figg, and loving his association with the firm. This made it very difficult when the owners, Eugene Figg and Jean Muller, settled their differences by deciding to split the company.

“It was like a divorce,” Craig Finley said. “I really liked them both, but I made the decision to stay with Gene Figg.”

After a year at the new firm, Craig Finley decided it was time to go out on his own. He and Scott McNary formed Finley McNary Engineers.

At first, the new venture was a little daunting, Craig Finley explained. “I didn’t know what I was going to do, but I did know what I *wasn’t* going to do.” Finley McNary took off and quickly gained a sterling reputation as bridge engineering consultants internationally recognized for their innovative solutions in the design, management, construction engineering, and inspection of complex concrete and steel bridge structures. Some of their most notable projects include: Natchez Trace in Tennessee, Woodrow Wilson Bridge in Washington, D.C., Presumpscot Falls in Maine, and Seabreeze in Daytona Beach, Fla.

Finley McNary was doing so well the renowned Parsons Corporation, a world leader in the engineering and construction business, purchased the company and named Craig Finley senior vice president and head of their bridge and tunnel division. Craig Finley promised them he'd stay on for at least three years.

The sale went smoothly, but the way to Parsons' New York office for his first day was one of the most harrowing times in Craig Finley's life. Thirty minutes prior to his scheduled landing in New York City, his plane was diverted to Atlanta. It was the tragic morning of 9/11. Craig Finley rented a car and drove home to Tallahassee and was very thankful to be there safely with his family.

A brand new firm

Jim Shappell, president of Parsons' Transportation Group, encouraged him to reinvent their bridge capabilities. He was fantastic to work with as was Jim McNulty, Parsons' chairman, Craig Finley said. They gave him leeway and respected his work, he said. Three years and one week after the acquisition, Craig Finley decided to retire with dreams of lazy days and fun times. In his jovial manner, Craig Finley quipped that it didn't take long to get tired of "doing nothing." He missed the excitement. At first, he took on a consulting job here and there, but it wasn't long before he realized he might as well get back into the bridge consulting business full time. In 2005, Finley Engineering Group, Inc., (FINLEY) was up and running, full steam ahead.

Today, FINLEY has 36 employees, with production offices in Tallahassee and Orlando, Fla., a marketing office in Phoenix, and a satellite office in Boston. Six years after Craig Finley abandoned his retirement plans, FINLEY is recognized, nationally and internationally, as a leading engineering and construction consulting firm specializing in complex bridge projects of all kinds. A leader in his profession, Craig Finley has been honored for his service to the industry as one of *ENR's* Top Newsmakers in 1995 and two Leadership Awards from the American Segmental Bridge Institute — the only two-time recipient. "This was a huge, huge honor," he said. "I always go back to — I'd be nowhere if it weren't for Eugene Figg."

Craig Finley and his firm celebrated an award-winning year in 2010. The company was named to *Rebuilding America's Infrastructure's* 2010 Power List and *Structural Engineering & Design's* "Top Structural Engineering and Architectural Firms 2010."

"These awards came about due to an accumulation of years of good work. I've always said 'the harder we work the luckier we get,'" Craig Finley said.

Overall, Craig Finley likes his industry, although he wishes there was a little less regulation in some areas. His favorite part of the business is working on putting a deal together and winning the project. "I like using innovative, cost-effective ideas and winning," he said. "I just really like building bridges."

It's not surprising that Craig Finley has held numerous leadership roles in several professional organizations. "It's very important [to be involved with your peers]," he said. "Every person's success is due to someone helping along the way. Professional organizations also give you a say in what and where the profession goes."

The accolades also come from FINLEY's clients. "For me the two top qualities of Craig Finley are honesty and reliability," said Enrique (Rick) Espino, president of Condotte America and long-time client. "His understanding and belief of the professional responsibilities guide his design behavior."

Craig Finley started working with Espino about 15 years ago, providing advice and construction engineering work for Espino's company in very complex projects. He always delivered and they continue to use him today on their projects.

"Craig and his top management have a tremendous power of concentrating and paying attention to the real task at hand with consideration to all details needed to be able to construct the unit as designed," Espino said. "The quality of FINLEY's work is well above industry standards. [Craig] is always looking for innovative ideas to make the project easier to construct and of improved quality."



Craig Finley with his wife Teresa and children Tyler, Trey, and William.

Family life

In the mid-'80s, Linda Figg (Eugene Figg's daughter) introduced Craig Finley to her childhood best friend. Craig and Teresa fell in love and have now been married for more than 25 years. They are the proud parents of three boys, who may not follow in their dad's professional footsteps, but all of them are or have been involved in sports and are chasing their own dreams. The oldest, Tyler, 25, currently is pursuing graduate studies at Florida A&M and is a high school baseball coach and instructor for Southern Baseball Academy. Trey, 21, is a junior at Florida State University (FSU), studying business with a major in accounting. He plans to continue his education next year in FSU's joint law/MBA program. William, 17, will attend Wake Forest on a baseball scholarship next fall with dreams of pitching for the Yankees some day. Craig Finley credits Teresa with making sure the boys were "well-fed and well-scrubbed." Though supportive, she's hands-off when it comes to his business. "Teresa has a career of her own as a paralegal specializing in insurance defense. I was very fortunate and lucky to marry her," he said.

There's more to Craig Finley than engineering and bridges. Besides a deep love for his family, he has an interesting passion for racing cars — Porsches, in particular. This hobby began in high school with racing stock cars. He holds a professional racing license and hopes to race in the 24 hours of Daytona or Le Mans someday. "I'm an old, overweight guy, but I'm fast," he said with a laugh. Another love of Craig Finley goes back to his grandfather's influence. He owns a cattle ranch in northeast Oklahoma with his brother and raises registered Angus cows.

A large man, Craig Finley has an equally big heart. Steven Givens, a long-time friend, described his generosity: "When I first met Craig, I expected him to be a little stiff, but he is quite the opposite. He's gregarious, outgoing, fun loving, and loves to joke and tease. Craig also is a *real* philanthropist. He constantly looks for ways to help those less fortunate and always insists his giving be anonymous." Givens went on to tell about the years Craig Finley and he coached a traveling youth baseball team. "We traveled all over — from Key West to Omaha to Boston. The parents incurred some of the expense, but there were always some less privileged kids whose parents couldn't afford to pay. Craig would quietly and anonymously cover the kids' costs, making sure everyone who wanted could participate." Givens also said Craig Finley was interested in the trips being more than just baseball. Wherever they went, he would pick out areas of interest or historical sites that would give the kids a more complete experience. On one particular trip to Boston, Craig Finley arranged for the kids to have lunch with a team from an impoverished area of South Boston. They brought the Boston kids gifts and had a great bonding time.

Reflecting on his 57 years, Craig Finley said he now has a better understanding of what Eugene Figg used to say: "You spend your whole life building your reputation and your career, but you can lose it in a minute."

Craig Finley appreciates every moment of his life, his career, and time spent with family. “My life has been full of things I stumbled into,” Craig Finley said humbly. But it’s obvious from his personal and professional success that Craig Finley has worked hard to get to where he is today. And as Craig Finley races ahead his professionalism, his gregarious nature, his selfless generosity, and his love of life and family will long be an inspiration to those who follow.

Q & A with Craig Finley

1. What would you consider your *shining* moment so far in your life?
My three kids.
2. What do you like to do in your off time?
Hang out with my family, race Porsches, and sell registered Angus cattle.
3. What is your favorite bridge?
Florida’s Sunshine Skyway or the striking Millau Viaduct in France.
4. What’s the biggest challenge in your business?
As Bob Thorne used to say, “It’s a great business if it weren’t for the people. But the people are also the biggest reward.”
5. What would you like to do before you die?
The 24 Hours of Daytona, or the 24 Hours of Le Mans, win the National Western Stock Show in Denver, and ... build the next “Big One.”

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