

2015 – Clinton Gronau



Clinton “Clint” Gronau founded Vortron Smokehouses, Incorporated, and his stainless steel one-truck smokehouse changed how small meat processors from across the United States processed smoked meats.

Clint was born in 1915 and grew up in Chicago, Illinois. In order to help his family financially, Clint dropped out of high school and took a job as a spray painter for a manufacturer of metal lockers and cabinets. Having no experience as a painter, Clint made quite a mess in his first days on the job!

In 1939, Clint married Frances Sherry. During World War II he served in the U. S. Coast Guard. After the war, Clint first worked for a Chicago-area steel mill. His next employer, a sheet metal and air conditioning company, apparently glimpsed his potential and gave him management training.

His career in the meat industry began when Clint took a plant management position with the Atmos Company, a smokehouse manufacturer. In 1964 Atmos was sold to United Industries. After a few months of weekly commuting, Clint and Frances moved with their sons Roger and Craig, to Beloit, Wisconsin. While working for United, Clint was instrumental in designing the first U.S. closed-system smokehouse, which reduced pollutants emitted into the atmosphere and was more energy-efficient.

Alkar hired Clint as a sales engineer in 1966. Clint tried to convince Alkar that they should build and sell a stainless steel smokehouse for small processors with performance characteristics comparable to the large units they were manufacturing. Failing to persuade Alkar of the market, Clint did at least gain approval for himself and son Roger to begin manufacturing smokehouse trucks in the family garage. In 1970, they moved into a larger building in Beloit and expanded their product line to include smoke sticks and screens. Soon thereafter Clint resigned from Alkar with the intent of fulfilling his dream by developing and selling smokehouses. After his 1971 discharge from the Navy, Craig joined his father and brother in their growing business.

In 1972, the Gronaus displayed their first production smokehouse at the Wisconsin Association of Meat Processors (WAMP) convention. "We stayed up all night putting the finishing touches on the unit, and drove to Madison at 7:00 a.m.," Craig recalls. "We erected the unit in time for the opening of exhibits. Clint worked the booth after not sleeping for 32 hours." All their hard work paid off, with a Wisconsin firm buying that first unit at the convention.

Clint obtained U.S.D.A. approval for their product in 1975. Vortron's was the first federally-approved one-truck smokehouse. The succeeding years brought many improvements and enhancements to the line of Vortron smokehouses, ranging from hand-load to six-truck capability.

Although Clint had turned over control of Vortron to his two sons, Craig and Roger, he remained involved in the business, particularly on technical issues and convention marketing. Vortron kept moving forward until the business was sold in 1985.

Knowing that someday his sons would run the company, Clint had the "wisdom to let us learn by doing" Craig says. "There were mistakes made, but he did step in if he felt it was a major error." With obvious admiration for his father, Craig says that the success of Vortron all stemmed from Clint having a dream and being willing to take a chance on it. Clint was a man of integrity and always wanted to give Vortron's customers more than they expected. "When we were developing the production smokehouse at the start, we sold one of the prototypes to an individual in Kansas. Clint insisted the man come and look at it to be sure it was what he expected. Clint did not want any misunderstanding as to what he was buying", Craig relates. Clint retired in 1987.

Beyond product development and business success, Clint Gronau made many other contributions to the industry. He was a member of the Wisconsin Association of Meat Processors (WAMP) and The American Association of Meat Processors (AAMP). He served as a board member of both organizations and was responsible for starting the prayer breakfast at the WAMP annual conventions.

Clint was a member and officer of the People's Church in Beloit and a member of the Gideon organization. Clint was a pilot and started a flying club. He enjoyed woodcarving and building model airplanes. He also built several full-sized boats which were used for family recreation. At his death in 1999 Clint, was survived by Frances; their children Roger, Craig and Linda; grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Clinton Gronau made a big impact, both professionally and personally. His climate controlled smokehouse changed forever the ability of small processors to control cooking/smoking processes and produce safer products.