

Paul Heeks and part of his collection of Cranes, planes, trains and automobiles.



CRANES, PLANES, TRAINS AND AUTOMOBILES

For close to 45 years, Paul Heeks' name has been synonymous with the growth and advancement of the crane industry, and he is seen as the pioneer of the mini crawler crane market.

PAUL IS RECOGNIZED FOR HIS CONTINUED contribution to the crane industry. He makes a point of attending CICA's National Conference and Exhibition where he has been the Master of Ceremonies on many occasions, and he remains involved with CICA NSW co-hosting its successful fundraising auctions. But he nearly didn't have a career in cranes.

After an unimpressive school record, his first trade was Toolmaking, moving onto design draughtsman whilst studying, before moving into engineering sales.

In the early 1970s he started work at

Rheem as a Sales Engineer in the Engineered Products Division, where he had a career path that involved increasingly intensive management training courses.

Paul then ventured into the world of cranes and went to work with Favco Cranes, a division of Aquila Steel.

"Favco Cranes was the start of my love affair with cranes. I started as Sales Engineer, then Sales Manager, and then finally Marketing Manager. Primarily, we were working on tower cranes and construction work around Australia. Then the business developed as did the products

and we moved into offshore platform cranes and that's where the real fun started," he said.

"This was in the early 1980s and the oil industry was going berserk. Favco were making cranes in Liverpool, NSW at that time, and we were selling cranes for oil & gas platforms around the world including New Zealand for the Maui A platform, the Middle East and the North Sea. We had a Joint Venture operation in Newcastle in the UK, an office in London, one over in Vancouver, and another JV in Singapore for the vast SE Asian market. The job involved a lot of hard work and travel, but a lot of fun. It was terrific, until after a stint in India for three weeks looking for another JV partner, I had just arrived home and then suffered a heart attack in late 1982," said Paul.

I was told by my specialist I needed a job with less stress (travel) or I would be dead!

I was on "gardening leave" from Favco when I was offered the job of State Manager at Australian Crane and Excavator Co. which at the time was the distributor for Manitowoc and Grove Cranes. Australian



With the Maeda brand, unquestionably, Paul was responsible for developing the market for mini crawler cranes in Australia.

Crane and Excavator Co. was part of the Tutts Group which was a subsidiary of Bowater Scott

A couple of promotions later he became State Manger of the Tutts Group, NSW

“It was a good job, a good company full of challenges and I was enjoying it.

Paul recognized that working for a large multinational organisation had its benefits, but he really wanted to back himself and give his own business a go.

“And so, in 1987 I started PA Construction Equipment working from a desk in my rumpus room at home and that was about the size of it. I started buying and selling used cranes using the old network of contacts from my Favco & Tutts days and with a lot of help from my mechanic, friends Paul Flood and Patrick Mardaymootoo doing field service work and selling spare parts.

“In 1988, I found a little factory in Mortdale which we rented to refurbish older used cranes and carry out light repairs. I had a few overseas contacts from my travelling days, and I was in touch with guys like Stuart Anderson in the UK and many old friends

around Australia and Singapore,” he said.

“This was before the internet and if anybody in those days was in the market for a crane, they had to rely on their own contacts or maybe use a magazine called “Plant and Equipment” which was about the only way you could even check if there were any suitable cranes for sale.

“I always enjoyed the personal side of the business and dealing with industry friends like John Farrier. He would occasionally call and ask what we had in say a 25t RT, I would check our listings and quite often they were available in Japan, so off we’d go to Japan, we’d view the cranes and he’d pick the one he wanted. We would then bring it back, carry out a full inspection and service and ensure it conformed with Australian standards. I did that for quite a few years for many customers,” said Paul.

He was also traveling domestically, talking to crane owners to see which cranes might be coming up for sale and what they might be needing in the future, and then putting deals together.

As time went on, Paul decided he wanted

to represent crane OEMs with new cranes and then, out of the blue he was introduced to Maeda.

“Back then nobody had heard of mini crawler cranes, there was no such thing in Australia (or in fact anywhere else outside of Japan) The whole idea of a small mini crawler crane was a completely alien concept. Regardless, Maeda asked if I would like to visit the factory and have a look at the product, so I flew to Japan, and the rest as they say, is history,” he said.

This was in 1991 and Paul agreed to represent the brand. Initially, he bought a small model and was keen to see how the market responded. The initial response wasn’t promising.

“Nobody wanted it. I was told it was too small and just a toy, ‘who wants to own a crane that size?’ ‘They’re silly little things and there’s no use for them’. But I had bought one for stock and I was trying to promote the concept around the country, and nobody wanted it,” said Paul.

“Then one day, I was having a conversation with Bob Smith at Brambles,



crane and then a 3t, and it stayed at these sizes for some time. Maeda then launched a 5t and 6 t followed by an 8t model, which is the largest they made. I could see the potential for much larger capacity telescopic crawlers and in those days, there weren't many brands represented locally," said Paul. (There were a few very, very old Kato NK160's)

Paul started looking at the larger telescopic crawler manufacturers around the world and eventually discovered Sennebogen, another unknown brand in Australia.

At this time, Paul's son Anthony was becoming more and more active in the business. He was initially more interested in the servicing and maintenance of the equipment and although he completed management studies, he preferred being on the workshop floor rather than selling. In fact, Anthony became the first Cranesafe Assessor for CICA in NSW.

He was deeply involved in the decision to take on Sennebogen and he basically took the 'business reins' at that stage.

"We contracted a succession consultant to enable a successful transition and he provided sound advice over a 12-month period as I backed out and Anthony took over. He now runs the business, probably better than I ever did," said Paul.

Anthony is closely associated with CICA as Chair of CICA NSW. A position Paul held many years ago.

He was involved with the National Crane Association right at the start, attending the very first national meeting of the Crane Association at the Broadbeach Hotel in 1979. Since then, he has been to every national convention, and every CICA "Bauma" European bus tour. He has had various roles within the Crane Industry and was the President of the Crane Industry Association (CIA, NSW), and has also served on the CICA board,

In 2015 he was awarded the CICA "Con Popov Memorial Award in recognition of outstanding contribution to the Australian Crane Industry".

He has been the MC for the national convention many times, and is still active with the NSW division, although in minor activities.

and they had a job out at Penrith. He said, 'I think I can use that little crane of yours.' I took it to site for a demonstration and it worked very well. The job involved lifting air conditioning ducts down and out of the ceiling. Instead of using two access platforms with two blocks and tackles which would take about two hours to lift one duct down, we put this little crane in and we had them down in about 20 minutes. Everyone was impressed," said Paul.

"I said, 'Okay Bob, do you want to buy one?' he said, 'No, but can you leave it here for a while?' I then said, 'Do you want to hire it?' because at that stage I was thinking to myself if I can't sell these cranes, maybe I can hire them and sell the concept. Maybe even make a small return on the investment.

"And that's exactly what we did. I bought a few more which I offered for sale, but

hire was the way people were going because nobody wanted to own these tiny cranes as they couldn't see a market for them.

"We were hiring them for a couple of years and then customers finally started seeing continuous applications for the Maedas and they were getting ongoing work, and that's when they started to buy them. This would have been around 1993 and that's when we really kicked off with the Maeda brand," he said.

The Maeda product went well for Pace Cranes for the next 10 years. The mini crawler concept became popular, and a lot of small builders, glaziers and crane hire businesses wanted at least one in the fleet.

They are very suited for small scale work including window installation, commercial glazing, air conditioning installation etc.

"We started by bringing in a 2.5t capacity

He recently enjoyed the Canberra Regional meeting where he stood in for Anthony and welcomed Sarah Brookes and her father Jon, the recipients for the fundraising auction conducted by Jeff Wilson from Finlease. The auction generated \$48,000 for Sarah's Charity for the fight against children's cancer, with all funds going to the Sydney Children's Hospital.

"Our industry is so generous towards this type of cause, and I like to be involved wherever I can," Paul said.

On a personal note, Paul was made a "Life Member" of Lions International service Clubs in 2007 after many years' service and chairing the "Lions Children's Hospital Eye Clinic Appeal", raising over \$1,000,000 over six years from Lions clubs in the Sydney District.

He also received a much cherished "Cook Community Award" from Scott Morrison in 2017.

Paul very much enjoys staying involved with the family business, so much so he has a permanent base in the Pace Cranes yard. He bought a demountable building from Terry Whyte from Whyte Cranes while they were building a new office and workshop in Peakhurst.

"I now use this "shed" to house my collection of crane models that I have collected for over 40 years. I've never been able to display them previously. So, I bought a few cabinets and now have the models on display with separate rooms for my crane models, a small display of planes, another one for trains and a large collection of classic Jaguar car models as well as trucks. (Craig Membrey's vehicles feature here as well as a beautiful 1933 Bentley Blower donated by John "Shades" Shevlin)

"I enjoy cars and motoring and have participated in a couple of Variety Club Bashes around Australia, including one

from "Bondi to Broome" What a great fun drive in the bush!"

"The shed is popular with old mates, and we frequently entertain local & overseas visitors from the industry to just sit and have a coffee and a chat – All are welcome," he said.

Paul's wife Faye was also involved in the business from scratch and is also well known in the industry' attending many of the functions, home and away. They have been married now for 58 years and still enjoy travelling together around the world.

Iceland and Norway are next on the agenda later this year, followed by the long-awaited trip to Antarctica. Paul's career has been long and distinguished. Like so many industry stalwarts he has repaid his good fortune with time and generosity. Without the contribution of the likes of Paul, the crane sector wouldn't be the powerhouse industry it is today. ●