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# Road to Success

How EC Babbert steered his central Ohio company from poverty to prosperity





**W**alking along the road, EC Babbert – with empty pockets and no job – headed for home. It was a short walk, just half a mile, but he had set upon a path that would lead him to a \$12 million-a-year business.

He had just told his boss the day before about a plan that had been buzzing around in his mind to start his own business, and that in six months he would give it a try. But EC never expected to be fired for it after working eight years for the man installing water pumps and water softeners in residential areas.

Things suddenly looked bleak, but his vision for the future never faded. After all, he had a loving family, a mountain full of determination and a life's savings of \$84 in the bank. He would pursue his dream of running his own water pump and water softener business, yet he couldn't have foreseen the day he would become a success as well as a beacon of light in the precast concrete industry.

#### **ROUGH ROAD AHEAD**

The year was 1960. EC's road to success, unpaved and bumpy as it was in those early days, started in Columbus,

**EC BABBERT AND  
FAMILY MADE  
THEIR WAY  
THROUGH LIFE  
WITH DRIVE AND  
DETERMINATION.**



# **ROAD TO SUCCESS**

By Ron Hyink

Photos by Brian Brosmer





EC BABBERT NOT ONLY BUILT HIS COMPANY FROM SCRATCH, HE BECAME A LEADER AMONG PRECASTERS AS NPCA CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD AND ALSO RECEIVED THE YOAKUM AWARD, NPCA'S HIGHEST HONOR.

EC Bobbert Inc. manufactures just about any product that is used below grade, except for pipe.

Ohio, in his garage, which he shared with a man who ran a printing business. EC turned to a cousin who ran a bank and borrowed \$1,000 for that little nudge he needed to get started. Asked what he had for collateral, EC put his home furniture on the line. "But he didn't know I owed on all my furniture then," said EC.

"I bought my first truck," EC said of his first investment with the loan, "and if you went over 40 miles an hour it would run off the road – the steering was no good." But the meager beginnings were but a minor distraction; he had a toehold on his own business, and he wasn't looking back.

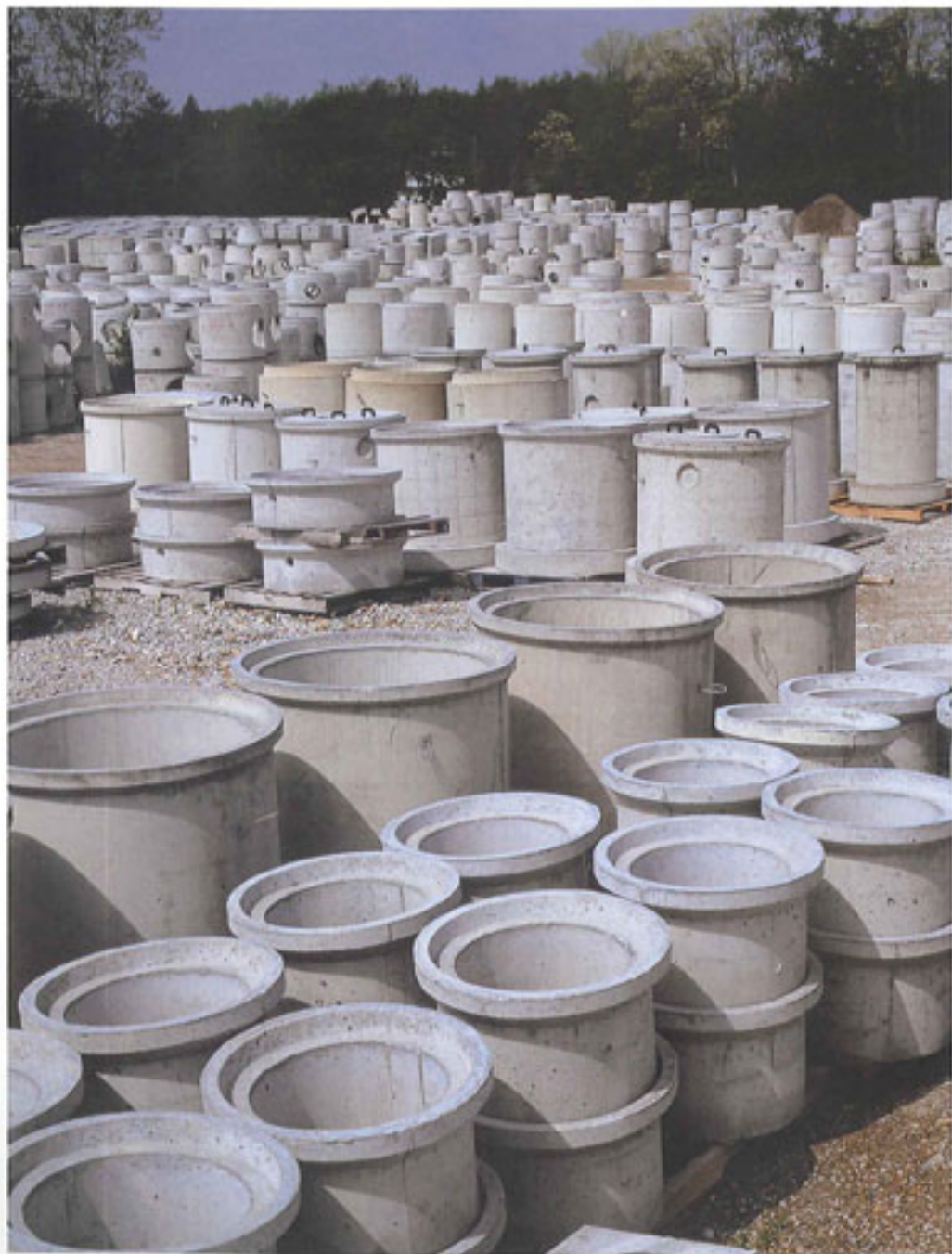
BJ, his wife (they recently celebrated their golden anniversary), helped run the business, and that was no easy chore. They were raising their two boys, Chuck and Ron, and she was doing some

babysitting as well. "I used to go pick up parts," she said, explaining that she would load all the kids in the car and head to the supplier. She also did the books and helped out around the office. EC sold and installed the parts, mostly without any hired help, and worked busily into the night. "If we wanted to see him, we'd go with him in the evenings," BJ said.

"We struggled," EC said of those difficult times. To help make ends meet, he moonlighted in the entertainment industry. "I called square dances on weekends so we could make some money to feed the kids," he said. BJ was there, too, tending the door. As an active member of the Aladdin Shrine Clown Unit, EC also performed as a clown during circuses and other such events in town, but that would come years later when he had more time on his hands.

It wasn't long before a local contractor wanted him to install septic tanks as well as the pumps and softeners, so EC hooked up with two precast companies to pour them for him. The family's road through life was taking its first turn toward the precast concrete industry, but dark clouds were forming on the horizon.

In 1966, the city of Columbus annexed his neighborhood, and zoning laws would not allow him to operate the business there. To make matters worse, the quality







**BJ BABBERT HELPED EC RUN THE BUSINESS BY PICKING UP PARTS, BOOKKEEPING AND DOING VARIOUS CHORES AROUND THE OFFICE – WHILE RAISING TWO BOYS AND WORKING AS A BABYSITTER.**

EC Babbert first got into manufacturing precast concrete when he couldn't get a quality product and decided to do it himself.



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of the septic tanks provided by the precaster had been deteriorating. EC approached one of the manufacturers to complain. "The guy said, 'If you're so smart, why don't you build your own tanks?' So that's when we bought this ground here," said EC, referring to his Canal Winchester plant. "It was a little farm when we bought it. We rezoned it and built our own building."

With the new plant up and running, EC bought some used forms and hired a ready-mix company to deliver the concrete. The Babberts had officially arrived on the precast concrete scene. But the dark clouds were forming once again: The mixes being delivered had become grossly inconsistent. "In one load, they forgot to put cement in it," said EC. "It was all sand and gravel." So as before, to get things done right he would have to do it himself, and he bought his first batch plant.

Things were looking sunny for a while, but business took an unexpected turn for the worse. "I almost went bankrupt in 1972," EC reflected, a potential dead-end that was almost repeated in 1982. Even though business was bad, EC was reluctant to let people go, and he kept paying wages. "But we've been very fortunate – we've had no layoffs that I remember."

But if there was a defining moment that made the difference between poverty and prosperity, it had to be because of motor sports. The city of Columbus had played host to some prominent





**CHUCK BABBERT, PRESIDENT OF SALES, WORKED THE FAMILY BUSINESS FROM THE GROUND FLOOR UP AND ALSO IMPARTED LEADERSHIP BY SERVING ON NPCA'S PLANT CERTIFICATION COMMITTEE.**

Membership in NPCA has enabled the Babberts to network with other precasters and exchange information on production and handling methods.

500-mile races, and for the inaugural race in 1985, officials were in dire need of concrete barriers – a lot of them. “I was the high bidder but ended up with the job,” said EC, referring to a twist of fate that would ultimately keep the other bidders at bay for different reasons.

The company had never made these products before, so to meet the quota of 2,400 barriers within an ambitious timeline, EC bought some used forms and a used boiler – all sight unseen – and went

into overdrive to complete the job on time. “We were pouring three times a day and using steam to step up the hydration so they could get (the barriers) out of the forms and pour another batch,” he said.

Meeting the quota by the deadline made a statement for the company, and the word got around. “We started getting requests for larger items, so that’s when business really started expanding,” said BJ.

#### **DETOUR**

EC joined the National Precast Concrete Association in 1970, and after years of giving of himself to the association’s activities

and committees, he served as chairman of the board. That was 1976-77 – the same years he won a Gimmicks & Gadgets Award and earned the Yoakum Award, NPCA’s highest honor that can be bestowed upon its members for leadership and inspiration in the precast industry.

“NPCA has taught me a lot,” said EC. “After I joined I could call people and get information – I’d had to pay a lot of money to get it from an engineer.” His involvement with NPCA provided him the opportunity to get involved with the committees and exchange ideas. It also gave him the license to thumb through the membership directory to find out who was making similar products, call them up and talk to them. “They were open with you to discuss anything.” Likewise, EC has been happy to help other NPCA







RON BABBERT, WHO WORKED HIS WAY UP TO BECOME PRESIDENT OF PRODUCTION, IS INSTRUMENTAL IN PROVIDING THE TOP-QUALITY PRODUCTS FOR WHICH EC BABBERT INC. IS SO WELL KNOWN.

members in need of a little guidance.

The '70s also saw Chuck and Ron enter the business after completing high school. "They graduated and came right to work here," said BJ. "They were working in the evening, cleaning floors and all, but they've never had another job."

EC added, "If they were going to get into the business, they were going to learn from the bottom up – and that's what they've done."

Even during their school years, Chuck and Ron would work in the plant when they could. "On weekends and evenings and during the summer, we would work on small products – teardown, buildup, coring – so we've had to work it from the ground floor up," said Chuck.

"We used to pour patio stones back then," said Ron. "We'd strip them at night and oil the forms for the guys to pour the next day." Then when summer came around, they would swing into a full-time mode.

After graduation – 1971 for Chuck and 1973 for Ron – they entered the work force full-time. "I drove truck deliveries for

## HULK VS. BULK

### SUPERHUMANS GIVE CONCRETE THE HEAVE-HO.

strongmen and 10 professional strongwomen from around the world for two days of grueling competition in May.

The norm for these competitions includes such events as the 700-pound tire flip, the 400-pound stone carry and the car deadlift. But this contest promised to be more intense. This time, in addition to all the standard fare, each athlete would back up to a 5-foot section of

the concrete manhole and roll it – slightly uphill – a total of 50 feet. "The pieces each weigh 15,000 pounds," said Babbert.

And it wasn't just some unused product lying around in the precaster's yard. "We had to make these special because we had to cast in some inserts so they could get a full 360-degree roll without any restrictions," said Babbert. "So we went with cast-in lifting anchors. That way we've got a means of handling it and they've got a means of rolling it."

The day of the event finally arrived. Solid masses of steel, stone and concrete put up a fierce resistance against solid masses of bulging muscle. Mass against mass, dead weight against iron will and determination, the humans overcame – not by a lot, but by enough to determine who would claim the title.

Ironically – or perhaps understandably – the man and woman who scored highest in the pipe roll event also won the overall competition. Both were from Poland.







THE BABBERT FAMILY HAS MAINTAINED A VIGILANCE FOR QUALITY PRODUCTS AND QUALITY SERVICE OVER THE YEARS – AN ATTITUDE THAT HAS HELPED THEM ALONG THEIR ROAD TO SUCCESS.



EC Babbert Inc. delivers its products where its reputation leads – and that often means out-of-state sales.

about nine years then moved into sales," said Chuck.

Ron, on the other hand, worked his way up through the production side of the business. "I was the batch man for several years, then I started setting up catch

basins and then moved to manholes," he said.

And now, with a 50/50 split in running the company, Chuck is president of sales and Ron is president of production.

## OPEN ROAD

EC Babbert Inc. has grown steadily over the years, and now manufactures just about any concrete product that is used below grade, except for pipe. "They're either stormwater or sanitary conveyance structures," said Chuck.

In addition to typical configurations of manholes and catch basins, the company has tackled other items as well. "We've done five-sided boxes, and we've done a tremendous amount of specialty items," said Ron. "Sometimes if it's something nobody else wants to mess with, we'll stick our heads in there and go for it."

Chuck agrees. "If you want to expand, if you want to have year-round production and sales, you really have to be diverse," he said. "You have to be willing to do some things out of the norm."

Orders for larger items go to the Babberts' Lancaster plant, which they built themselves in 1996. These products primarily include manhole sections measuring 60 inches up to 126 inches in diameter.

Most products are sold in Ohio, but they do make their way beyond state borders. "This year we've already had probably a dozen out-of-state runs, mainly with interceptors," said Chuck. "Those items are becoming more popular in some states that didn't have them before." Not only that, but some of the engineering firms the company has dealt with opened up offices in other states, and they continue to request Babbert products. Products are frequently shipped to the states surrounding Ohio and, on occasion, even farther. "We've shipped as far as El Paso, Texas," Chuck said, "and we've been up in Syracuse."

Both Babbert plants are certified annually through NPCA's plant certification process. "We have to be certified to produce Ohio DOT products," explained Ron. "They adopted NPCA's way of doing things about a year ago."

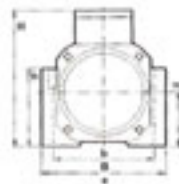
And plant certification is something the Babberts strongly

believe in. In fact, Chuck had served on NPCA's plant certification committee for six years. Customer service is key, too. "The primary thing with us has always been that our customers know they're going to get service – not only service after the sale as far as getting the product to them when promised, but also if they have problems with the product," said Chuck. "We go out of our way to help our customers, and they know that."

It's an attitude that has helped the family along its road to success – that drive to provide the best possible products accompanied by the best possible service. ■

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