



DAVID DAWDY RETIRES

A remarkable 40-year career and a story to learn from

By Vicki Jones, Editor

Editor's note

David Dawdy's 40-year quest for knowledge led to a long and impressive career in the door industry. Even though he is retired as of December 31, 2022, we can all continue to learn from his journey.

Joining the industry

David Dawdy graduated from Kansas State University in 1982 with a bachelor's degree in business. Not long out of college, he took a sales job with one of the leading operator suppliers of the time — John Green Corporation. The position paid straight commission, and he traveled a huge seven-state Midwestern territory with the task of selling commercial motor operators. Fortunately, he proved to be a natural.

He was responsible for all his expenses, including gas, hotels, and meals, but his ability to learn and sell the product allowed him to easily start earning much more money than his modest guarantee.

Four years later, Dawdy took another sales position with door manufacturer Wayne Dalton, where he had the opportunity to work with and learn from some of the legends of the industry, including Ben Yoder, Joey Earwood, Bob Zerull, Bill Gibson, Bob Hammersly, Dennis Schlabach, and John Zoller.

"John was our VP of sales and Dennis was my sales manager, and it was a dynamic atmosphere to work in and an all-star team to be proud of," Dawdy said. The connections he made early in his career would serve as the foundation for Dawdy's door industry network in the future.

Taking a leap

After gaining critical experience, Dawdy "got the brilliant idea" to manage a start-up garage door company in Duluth, Minnesota. The owner knew nothing about overhead doors, so he reached out to Dawdy — who couldn't resist the opportunity to try his hand at it.

That proved to be much more difficult than

he anticipated. The first of many challenges was the location. Duluth can be incredibly cold, and trying to build a business in a region with severe weather was difficult. "When it snowed, which was all the time, we had to dig our trucks out before we could even start our work days. We could only park one service truck inside our building."

Running a business

His product knowledge, years of selling experience, and business degree were not enough to prepare him for the dynamics of trying to manage and grow a new business.

"It was overwhelming. I was trying to master the mechanical aspect of all the products while simultaneously selling and training for installations and service work, plus addressing day-to-day business tasks. I didn't devote enough horsepower or time to successful business management."

I jumped off a ladder into a fire, and almost starved to death in the process. What an experience!"

Asking the right people the right questions

Recognizing when to ask questions, however, was critical to Dawdy's career development. "I had excellent mechanical aptitudes, and the many challenges we faced required me to learn on the fly. Many times, I needed help."

Having a knowledgeable network of advisors to call was key. Having the humility and awareness to ask for advice was equally important.

Dawdy said, "I learned how to ask questions and whom to ask. I learned that the quality of an answer depends on the quality of the person you ask."

One of the people Dawdy called on for advice was a fellow dealer and mentor, John Carl, owner of Crawford Door of East St. Paul, Minnesota.



Left to right: David Dawdy, Ben Yoder, Bob Zerull, Dennis Schlabach, John Zoller, and Joe Pedro.

"Just because you're good at selling a door or installing a door doesn't mean you're going to be good at running a business. You're expected to be many things, including a teacher, an installer, a bill collector, HR chief, and payroll manager. There was no manual for starting a door business.

"I had no idea what I was getting myself into.

"John introduced me to the world of standards and codes and taught me the basic NFPA guidelines for installing and servicing fire doors."

The fire door work sparked an interest in this sector and foreshadowed Dawdy's indelible mark on this part of the industry. "I put my foot on the gas and never looked back."

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Developing innovative products

After five years working as a dealer, Dawdy decided to move on when Ron Ryan of Overhead Door Company of Madison, Wisconsin invited him to run his commercial overhead door division, where his exposure to fire protectives grew even more.

Soon thereafter, Ryan and Dawdy were asked to serve as advisors for Trac-Rite Doors, a company developing a new line of rolling door steel door products. Dawdy was an ideal resource because he knew that many fire doors on the market were unnecessarily complex, hard to install, harder to reset, and prone to malfunction. "That's not a good recipe for a fire protective," said Dawdy. "We helped Trac-Rite



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Doors develop products that benefitted the installer and the owner. The new products were simpler and more efficient to install."

Implementing key features

Ryan and Dawdy used wiz nuts with serrated surfaces instead of nuts and lock washers like other manufacturers used at that time. They also used self-threading jamb bolts instead of machine bolts and implemented guide service cutouts, so installers didn't need to remove the entire guide set to replace slats.

They also eliminated tension release and manual push-up fire doors entirely by adopting the Grifco chain hoist governor, imported from Australia at that time, as their standard fire door. "Adjustable headplates enabled technicians (who knew the secret) to achieve a perfectly level barrel — small things like that add up," added Dawdy.

Having vision

After two years as an advisor, the owner of Trac-Rite asked Dawdy to come work for them. A few years later, when the owner told him he was ready to sell the business, Dawdy said, "Let me go find a buyer!"

Dawdy knew that adding a rolling steel door line would round out C.H.I. Overhead Doors' residential and developing commercial product offerings, making them one of only three other manufacturers offering all three lines at that time. So, he went to Arthur, Illinois and met with Willis Miller and Jim Overholt; the owner and the general manager (respectively) of C.H.I. at the time. He said, "We want to sell you a turnkey business — lock, stock and barrel." With some convincing from Miller, Overholt agreed, an offer was made, and C.H.I.'s commercial rolling steel door division was born.

"Unfortunately, I had just sold myself out of my own job." But shortly after the agreement was penned, Willis told Dawdy, "You're coming to work with us!" By Jan. 2001, Dawdy had joined the C.H.I. team, and had his hands in



David Dawdy and Bob Hammersly at the IDA Shootout in Vandalia, Ill.

everything, including sales, dealer training, R&D, engineering, production, and even advertising and marketing.

"I wrote all the copy for our literature and price books because I was the only person at the company (at the time) who knew anything about rolling steel doors, how to price them, or how to write a specification." The one exception was Pat Hunter, head of engineering, who had done a stint at McKee Door and worked hard to get the engineering standards developed to work with the C.H.I. program. "Pat and I developed a long-standing respect and friendship that I value greatly to this day."

Proving himself

Initially, Willis questioned many of Dawdy's proposals for the rolling door line. Dawdy told him, "Look, we have to build fire doors; we can't just build service doors." Willis would listen to Dawdy's suggestions and then survey his dealer network to see if they agreed.

Time and time again, the dealers would agree, and Willis eventually learned to trust Dawdy's expertise. His field experience gave him the knowledge to design products with the installer and end user in mind.

"I would explain to engineers that 'lab

perfect' has little to do with practical field conditions. The good ones got it."

Within a year of acquiring the equipment, C.H.I. started selling rolling products, such as service doors, counter fire doors, and fire doors. "We knew we had a great basic product line that dealers and installers would appreciate, so I proposed putting one of our new fire doors in a trailer. This allowed me to do two things at once: train our salesmen and demonstrate to dealers just how good this door really was."

Discovering the key to sales

Similar to C.J. Johnson's 1922 Model T overhead door truck, Dawdy created what would be coined as "The Rolling Steel Road Show." He began traveling with salesmen to different regions in a pickup truck pulling a 12-foot

enclosed trailer and one chain hoist fire door.

It eventually transformed into a large, air-conditioned, walk-in goose-necked trailer with about a dozen working models of coiling

products. Dawdy took the road show all over the Midwestern, Eastern, and Southern states. The strategy proved to be a great sales and training tool.

"We would put pins in a U.S. map and invariably, wherever we took the road show, we would start selling rolling products. A savvy dealer could see that if their installers liked the features and gave their approval, there was power in a 'team' decision," said Dawdy.

Miller and Overholt's decision to take on rolling doors was successful for C.H.I. — today, they have grown to be a major player on the rolling steel door market.

Following his passion

After a few years helping Janus International develop a rolling steel door division, in March 2013, Dawdy took a position at CornellCookson as a segment director. That soon led to his position as the director of fire and life safety and new product development.

"I knew I wanted to focus on fire and life safety, so the position was ideal. I also became active with NFPA and joined several technical committees." Dawdy served on the DASMA Rolling Door, NFPA 80, NFPA 85, NFPA 105, and UL standards technical committees; he is

regarded as a fire protection product, code, and standards specialist.

He also participates in International Code Council and International Fire Code hearings as an advocate for our industry and is a past director for the IDA Board of Directors, chairing its technical and education committee. He is the former chair of the DASMA Joint Technical Committee.

Sharing his knowledge

Dawdy has created numerous factory training programs and regularly conducts seminars for IDEA and IDA. He has authored many articles aimed at elevating the level of fire and life safety knowledge within the overhead door, architectural, contractor, and owner communities.

One of his more notable projects is the Fire Marshal's Training program, codeveloped with Ed Hermans, David Mount, and Mike Whitacre. The dealer-focused training launched three years ago. "It's basically rolling fire doors 101," Dawdy said. "Fire inspectors are desperately in need of the information and readily embrace the comprehensive training.

"The train-the-trainer program is vital because it can be used for fire inspectors in any region

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across the country. Despite being a grassroots approach, it will compound over time."

Changing the industry for the better

The fire marshal training presentation also features a key analysis of the well-known Charleston Sofa Superstore Fire. The case study serves as a perfect example of how a lack of periodic inspections and maintenance can lead to tragedy. It also helps punctuate the need for enforceable standards and proof of technician training.

Dawdy said, "Technicians who annually inspect and test fire doors need specific knowledge. Manufacturers and dealers have never had any control over who completes annual inspections, and that's a liability to everyone.

"The original NFPA 80 standard verbiage essentially stated that anyone who 'says' they're qualified can inspect and test fire doors; well, that could be my niece," Dawdy noted. He advocated that the person or company testing a fire door should be required to have clear proof of training and adhere to NFPA 80 standards.

In 2022, the NFPA 80 language was finally revised to specify this. "It took six years to develop. I submitted the proposal to the IDA committee, the DASMA rolling

technical committee, and then to the NFPA 80 committee to approve the new defining verbiage." A further joint effort by IDA and DASMA in the fall of 2021 ensured that the 2024 edition of the International Fire Code will make this verbiage legally enforceable as code.

Creating a trail

Dawdy has left an undeniable mark on the industry, particularly the fire and life safety sector. He has also acquired several patents in the process (with a couple more on the way).

When in Duluth and witnessing a broken winding cone, he resolved the problem of safely back-winding sectional spring assemblies for cable or section replacement by inventing a simple service tool. "I told Dennis Schlabach about it in 1992, and he insisted that he add it to his product lines. We called it the torsion tool. The Denco 'back-winding hub' is still sold today."

"This is a fascinating industry, and it has treated me very well despite setbacks. The only reason I made progress was because I asked a ton of questions of the right people and ignored a lot of egos. People from all over the country became dear and cherished friends in the process. My advice is to not be afraid to ask questions, pick your mentors wisely, disseminate information accurately, and be humble because there's still a lot to learn. Success is often punctuated with failure."

Retired Dawdy will work part-time as a consultant/advisor for Clopay Corporation — that is, when he's not busy hunting, fishing, working on a new idea, or riding Indian



motorcycles. He will also continue to train and stay involved with IDEA, IDA, and NFPA 80. So, fortunately for us, we will still be able to learn from his knowledge and experience.

"I've witnessed an unbelievable growth of our industry, incredible product innovation, and tremendous leadership," said Dawdy. "It's a lot different than 1982, and it's the right time for me to step aside. I am truly excited and optimistic for the future of our industry."

Honoring Dawdy

Dawdy was recognized by the industry at the 2022 Expo by receiving two awards: the Daniel R. Apple Commitment to Professionalism Award for his many years of service to IDEA and the Jerry R. Reynolds Volunteer Leadership Award in recognition for his years of distinguished service with the International Door Association. ■



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Reflections from professionals in the industry



"David's commitment to industry education is unmatched. Throughout his career, he has been consistently dedicated to advancing standards, safety, professionalism, and training focused on coiling and fire doors. His influence has shaped national building and fire codes through, and his positive impact will be appreciated for years to come."

- Flossie Miller, Miller Edge



"When I first met David 20 years ago, he immediately took me under his wing, and over the course of many years working together, became a true mentor of mine. I am grateful that I had the opportunity to learn and work with one of the industry's greats. I am immensely appreciative of his generosity, sharing of perspective, experience, and knowledge. Although David's retirement will leave a sizeable void, his contributions to the industry over a long career have and will continue to have a lasting impact."

- Curtis Schroeder, Janus International



"I've known of David for over 30 years, and he is not only a colleague, but a friend. Rarely do you meet a person with the passion and sincere interest in not only knowing and understanding issues, but who can identify areas for improvement coupled with the determination to champion change. David has had an influence on those who know him and on our industry for decades and his legacy will live long after his retirement."

- Milt Prosperi, Clopay Corporation



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