

J Martin Benchoff 1927 - 2007



J Martin Benchoff, one of the last surviving pioneers of Grove Manufacturing Company, died peacefully at his home in Rouzerville, Pennsylvania on Thursday July 12th from complications resulting from Parkinson's disease. He had recently celebrated his 80th birthday.

He was born in Hagerstown, Maryland and grew up between the villages of Blue Ridge Summit and Rouzerville and in spite of a great deal of international travel, never left the area he loved. Benchoff attended St Andrew School in Waynesboro, followed by the Friends Academy in Philadelphia. One of his first jobs was a school bus driver, but he soon graduated to selling heaters for the local gas company until in 1954 he was 'spotted' by the Grove brothers and Wayne Nicarry. They offered Benchoff a job as sales manager for their farm wagon manufacturing business, on a commission-only basis. Spotting the potential he took the risk and the rest is history. Grove had revenues at the time of around \$700,000 but it did not take Benchoff too long before he became the highest paid employee. At one time the Groves complained that he only worked three days a week, but he would respond that

that's all it took to sell all they could possibly build. The company had already built its first cranes, initially for its own use and then increasingly to satisfy customer demand. In the late 1950's Grove introduced its first telescopic boom and the focus shifted from farm equipment to cranes.

By 1967 revenues had climbed to \$30 million and Grove began a major push overseas, a factor that Benchoff recognised more than anyone as critical to the company's future growth. That year Benchoff met Fred Sullivan, chairman of Kidde, an industrial conglomerate. He convinced Sullivan of the growth potential of the hydraulic crane market and of Grove's potential, given the financial support. On November 17th, Grove's shareholders approved the sale of the business to Kidde. John Grove opposed the sale and resigned from the company.

In 1969 Benchoff took over as president and Dwight Grove retired. Benchoff pushed product development and overseas expansion to new levels and in 1970 Grove surprised the crane world with the introduction of the 72-tonne capacity TM 800 truck crane with its trapezoidal boom.

Between 1967 and 1979 Grove grew at an annual rate of over 20 percent as it rapidly expanded and updated its product line. It added a number of record breaking machines, including the RT980 and TM 1275 truck crane with a 52 metre boom, the longest telescopic boom in the industry. With Benchoff at the helm, Grove became the most profitable equipment manufacturer in the world.

By 1981 Grove revenues topped \$600 million with over 50 percent coming from exports.

With further expansion in mind and an eye on the lattice crane market Benchoff tried unsuccessfully to persuade Kidde to buy Manitowoc. Instead he purchased the rights to Lima and Grove designed its lattice cranes from scratch but it never had the impact that the acquisition might have had.

That same year Benchoff built the Grove Training Centre on a 300 acre property near Camp David. The facility known as the 'Grove Lodge'



J Martin Benchoff in 1966 with three of the managers that would stay with him for much of his career, (L-R) Ken Kilheffner, Bob Maynard and Charlie Warner.

featured accommodation, dining, training and hunting facilities aimed at the training and entertaining customers and distributors. Over the next decade more than 10,000 visitors passed through the doors of the Lodge. A personal project of Benchoff's - he approved every detail of the construction, decoration and landscaping - he could be found there on most evenings, greeting customers

or telling a favourite story in a quiet corner with a glass of Cutty Sark and a Cuban cigar in his hand.

In the early 1980's recession knocked the bottom out of the crane and access markets. Benchoff and his team brought Grove through the period relatively intact by making early cutbacks and persuading the workforce to take pay cuts. Spotting the opportunities that the recession offered he put a plan together to acquire five key crane competitors from the UK, Germany, France, Italy and the USA and terms were negotiated to purchase each and every one of them. The first came in late 1984 when Coles Cranes was acquired, Europe's largest manufacturer at the time. P&H followed in 1986 but the deal was blocked by the US Anti-Trust authorities. The following year Kidde was acquired by Hanson and Benchoff's master plan was dropped. Hanson quickly decided that it wanted a change at the top of Grove and Benchoff was moved aside, becoming chairman emeritus, a purely symbolic title.

Benchoff in his heyday was a brilliant leader and manager. He would never accept No for an answer and had a skill for picking talented managers and letting them get on with the job... as long as they succeeded. He set a standard for the company that left no employee in any doubt of "the Grove Way" of doing things. You did it right and if you made a mistake "you put her right". If there was a problem "you took care of it".

Benchoff had a great respect for Winston Churchill, and clearly liked to model himself on the great man. His other great passion was for hunting, particularly in the Yukon where he went after big rams.

A celebration of his life was held at the Grove lodge (now a restaurant) on Sunday August 12th (for photographs of that event see www.vertikal.net).

A large number of past and present employees of Grove attended the memorial.



A Grove TMS900E held a flag at half mast outside Benchoffs beloved Lodge during the memorial to his life in August