

## The Williamson Herald

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### Almost a century of service: Rock City Construction now state's oldest licensed contractor

By Joe April for the Williamson Herald

In 1913, two Balkan Wars were fought, the Paris premiere of Igor Stravinsky's ballet score "The Rite of Spring" caused riots and the Ford Motor Company introduced the first moving assembly line. All of these events 95 years ago would have widespread influence upon the world, but an event far closer to home in the Williamson County area occurred that same year.



Frank Neal (Left) presenting congratulatory award to John N. Lee, President (Middle) and Fred Reynolds, Vice President (Right) at 95th Anniversary Open House held October 17, 2008.

Rock City Construction Co. in Franklin celebrated its 95th anniversary in 2008. Back in 1913, three businessmen founded the company, and five years later the company would begin its long legacy of leadership with the Lee family when J.W.N. Lee II became the sole owner of the company. When J.W.N. Lee II retired in 1962, his son, J.W.N. Lee III, took over as president, until 1985 when his own son, John N. Lee, became president of the company.

"It's a great honor and privilege," said John N. Lee about being the third generation of the Lee family to lead the company, though he admits he never thought he would become president. "It just worked out that way, by working a long time and getting to the top."

"I began working for Rock City when I was 16, then a few years later I went to engineering school and even worked for another company before returning to Rock City," said Lee. "I just liked working here. I liked working for my boss."

Rock City retains its No. 2 state contractors' license, which Lee explained the company received because his grandfather was sitting on the State License Board in 1931. The No.1 license was given to W.A. & J.E. Gervin, but with them no longer in business it makes Rock City the oldest licensed contractor in Tennessee. Many people who have called asking for the company's license number think they're being joked with when they hear it's two, but Lee said he tells them it's the truth.

Lee said that part of Rock City's success is that the company is small enough to be flexible with the marketplace, such as being capable of taking on private and public construction projects. Another part of their success has been the quality of their employees.

"Everyone here wants to work," said Lee who pointed out how many employees enjoy the business so much that they feel they belong to a family rather than just a company. "Our employees strive to do high quality work and we all treat our customers well"

Rock City's long history is filled with projects like the State Library and Archives Building, the old and new Brentwood Libraries, Centennial High School, along with many religious buildings, banks and industrial plants.

The full nature of one of the most historically important construction projects taken on by Rock City was unknown to Lee until recently. "I had been asked about some records from our work during World War II and I discovered that we had been part of 10 contractors involved with the construction of the Manhattan Project in Oak Ridge," said Lee. The Manhattan Project was the United States' secret research project during World War II that created the first nuclear weapon.

J.W.N. Lee II, who served as the company's president through World War II as well as the great Depression of the 1930s and the boom of the 1950s, died when John W. Lee was only 12, but Lee still has memories of him.

"My grandfather lived right next door from the house I grew up in," said Lee. "I'd see him go to the office to make a few calls then he would actually sleep on a bed there and he would be done and back home by 3 p.m. Seeing that I thought working here would be real easy."

While the Lee family's legacy with Rock City is almost a century old, the family has an even older history with construction in Tennessee.

"My great-great-grandfather's uncle received a Revolutionary War grant in Kentucky and my great-great-grandfather after growing up there moved down to Tennessee around 1816," said Lee. "The house I grew up in was built by him almost 173 years ago."

Rock City Construction Co. is going strong with current construction projects such as the Tennessee Towers, the Bone and Joint Clinic in Franklin, and new elementary and middle schools in Nolensville.