

# Tom Thorson

by Suzanne B. Bopp  
Alumnews Editor

Tom Thorson loves to organize people, and he started with a baseball team. As a boy, Thorson's passion was baseball, but where he lived in Osage, Wyo., there was no team for him to play with. "My dad promised to buy us uniforms if I put together a team," he recalls. So Thorson got a dozen other kids, from 8 to 16 years old, to join his new team. Most of the time, Thorson was the manager, making sure everyone got out to practices at the cow pasture that was their home field. They drove themselves to games against teams in surrounding towns. They got their uniforms, as promised.

Thorson's father had come to Casper in 1922 to work in the oil industry. After marrying and starting a family, he moved with his family to the oilfield near Osage, then, when Thorson was three years old, they moved into the town - "maybe not much of a town, but still better than an oilfield." He and his friends explored the pine forests surrounding the town and swam in the reservoir. "You made your own fun," Thorson says. "We had a pretty free rein."

For high school, he traveled to Upton. In the summers, he worked for his father, who had gotten involved in bentonite mining in the 1940s and later started Black Hills Bentonite. When graduation neared, there was little question about what came next for Thorson. "My dad said, 'You need to be a geologist.' I said, 'It sounds good to me.'" Thorson was glad for the direction. "I didn't spend a lot of time romancing a lot of different ideas," he says. Instead, he tailored his education to what he knew he'd be doing in his career, taking minors in chemistry and accounting.

He had never traveled as far as Laramie until he came to register for school. "It was a pretty new experience for me," he says. "I was totally enthused about it. I had some friends who also came down; we went through rush week together." Thorson ended up pledging Sigma Nu, which he still remembers fondly. "It was great being thrown in with new people from all over the place," he says. "We wore a tie every night for dinner and a suit on Sundays. Of course we got to meet a lot of girls with the sorority functions. I wouldn't have enjoyed the university as much as I did without the fraternity."

Nor would he have enjoyed it as much without the teachers he had.



Tom Thorson BS '60

Among them was Sam Knight, still teaching when Thorson began in 1956. "He was a classical geologist and a wonderful man," he says. As a geology student, Thorson participated in science camp with Knight, going to stay in the camp above Centennial, built by Knight himself, to study geological questions.

Thorson also enjoyed watching UW sports teams. "Coming from a small town, that was pretty hot stuff," he says.

Thorson took the then-mandatory ROTC and joined the National Guard, then went right to work for Black Hills Bentonite, at first doing mostly fieldwork. But his father's business partner was away often, and he said Thorson was going to have to help run things in his absence. Thorson was 22 years old.

There were 20 employees at the time, and the offices were in Moorcroft, but in 1964, after buying some bentonite property north of Casper in 1964, they moved to Casper. Then the company started growing, going into partnership with Bethlehem Steel, a major consumer of bentonite, giving Thorsen a chance to be involved with the corporate part of America. Then another plant was built in Worland, and later still, the company purchased a competitor in Casper.

Their bentonite went primarily to the steel-making business and then to the oil drilling industry, and so the company had ups and downs along with those customers. Though Black Hills Bentonite still owns 51 percent of the operation, they have now sold part of their interest to Japan and part to Clorox, which uses bentonite in cat litter.

Today there are five plants and 100 employees, and Thorson has been president since 1978.

He's gotten to indulge his love of organizing groups of people in his off-

work hours too. In 1991, when he became president of Rotary, he wanted to organize a relationship with another city, and he wanted to do it with a place he could visit and see firsthand what its needs were. "Many times these organizations send money to places they never see," he says. "I found a city in northern Mexico we could go to, I got in touch with a club there. We knew we could make a contribution." With another Rotary member, he flew to El Paso and drove down to Delicias, toured the town, met with the mayor, and was feted. "We had to dance a bunch," he says. "These Mexican gals just about killed us. It was such a warm reception."

Thorson and Rotary club members returned with fire trucks, clothing and hospital equipment. "When we arrived in the town of Delicias, there were bands playing, they paraded us through the streets." He's now made 13 trips there, taking the mayor of Casper one year, a group of exchange students another. A couple of Delicias students have come to Casper to go to school. To date, Thorson has donated 36 vehicles to the town and made some of his closest friends. This relationship is one of his proudest accomplishments - second to his three children, of course.

Thorson's been active both inside and outside of the mining industry. To mention just a few endeavors, he's been president of the Casper Chamber of Commerce and of the Wyoming Mining Association; he was involved in the formation of Leadership Wyoming. And whenever he can, he likes to organize his friends for snowmobiling, rafting and hiking trips.

He travels often - to Mexico each year with his wife, Kathleen, and this fall to Japan to attend the wedding of a business associate's daughter. When a Japanese company purchased an interest in Black Hills Bentonite, the trade relationship soon became a friendship with the company's president. The Thorsons have traveled to Japan many times to stay with him and his family; they have in turn visited Casper as well. One of the man's daughters went to school in Wyoming for a year and lived with the Thorsons. Thorson was soon organizing trips that included her. "We traveled so many places with her, including New York and Boston, as well as snowmobiling and whitewater trips on the Salmon River," he says.

It's another example of the words that seem to describe Thorson's approach to life: "Anything I do, I make fun out of it." ❄

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