

Wire Rope News & Sling Technology

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Ropewalk: The evolution of rope
Ohio's Hooven & Allison Company preserves
its history in a documentary film

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Starting Over
Grays Harbor Equipment Co.
rises from the ashes

story on page 8

Photo credit: Timothy Hearsom

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The long-running ropewalk at Hooven & Allison—with spinners manufactured in nearby Miamisburg, Ohio.

Photo credit: Timothy Hearsom.

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Ropewalk: The evolution of rope Valentine to an unsung industry

By Duante Beddingfield

Thousands of years in the making, our manufacture and use of rope spans the ages from caveman to space travel. This is the story of one man's commitment to document and preserve this part of human history.

Bill Hagenbuch is preserving a legacy.

When Xenia, Ohio's Hooven & Allison Company closed in 2004 and was ravaged by fire the following year, a century-old local history nearly died. But Hagenbuch has put the company's story on film in *Ropewalk: A Cordage Engineer's Journey Through History*, a documentary that also traces rope from its prehistoric origins to modern time and its potential for the future.

"The story of rope stretches back through every culture to the dawn of civilization," Hagenbuch said. "I dug back through some ancient history and went into the whole evolution of the cordage industry. I found that the Cro-Magnons 30,000 years ago were the first makers of rope. And now they're talking about this space elevator, going



A proud Bill Hagenbuch shares the honors with daughter Kate Hagenbuch, executive producer of *Ropewalk*, at the film's premiere. Photo credit: Dick Palmer, Engineers

to places in space not using rockets, but traveling from Earth to satellites and even beyond, using advanced forms of rope."

Along with the company's story and the history of the industry itself, the third major element of *Ropewalk* is Hagenbuch's equally unique personal story.

Born in 1918 in Muncie, Indiana, his parents hailed from Beavercreek, Ohio, where the family had a background in milling and distillery. At six years old, he contracted osteomyelitis, a bone marrow infection, in his left hip.

"This was very serious," he said, "as antibiotics had not yet been invented. I had surgery and spent many months in the hospital. I missed a lot of school, and taught myself to play chess during that time. I think perhaps while I was hospitalized, I had more time to study and get interested in things mechanical. And my Uncle Ed was an inventor,

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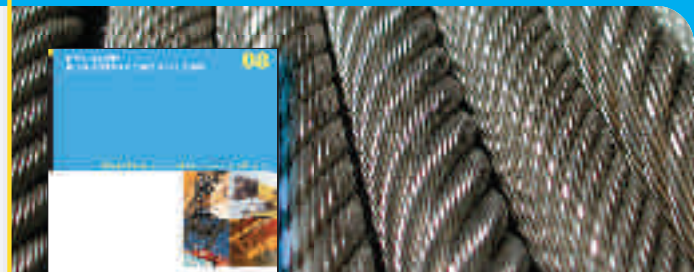
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“A surprisingly fascinating local history lesson and a valentine to an unsung industry.”

- Duante Beddingsfield, *Dayton City Paper*



Ropewalk: A Cordage Engineer's Journey Through History

A new 60-minute documentary on DVD

What ties together prehistoric tools, Ben Franklin, trust busting, railroads, drug laws, plastics, nanotubes and space travel? Discover the unexpected twists that join these threads in Ropewalk, a film about ropemaking's effects on agriculture and industry from the Civil War to the present. Ropewalk explores rope's ancient beginnings, world history and future possibilities.

Presented by the Engineers Club of Dayton Foundation, the Cordage Institute, and award-winning documentary filmmaker, Steve Fetsch.

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and he had all sorts of patents on strange things—nothing that really paid off handsomely, though—and I think he encouraged me to do all sorts of tinkering on my own, too.”

After graduating at 16, he attended Miami University in Oxford, Ohio (“Along with my sister, Louise, who had transferred from Mount Holyoke so she could watch over me.”) “I enjoyed my freshman year at Miami thoroughly—too thoroughly, according to my parents—so I was transferred to MIT,” he reflected, “where I immediately found myself on the Dean’s List.”

Active in student government, TCA, and ROTC, Hagenbuch met people who would become lifelong friends. “I got my bachelor’s and master’s in chemical engineering,” he said, “and then when World War II came around, I got radar electronics training and served in the Army Air Corps in England. We arrived in London just in time for the Blitz. The first assignment I had was to go out to Great Malvern, where the civilian laboratory was located, to pick up connectors for the jammers that we were installing in the planes. Someone introduced me to the American gal in the stockroom and said, ‘Grace, this is Lieutenant Hagenbuch—give him anything he wants!’

“We were married soon after the war,” he laughed, “so you see how seriously we took our assignments!”

He recalled, “When Gracie accepted my proposal, it seemed the best thing to do would be to go into the family business. In 1869, my great-uncle, Jacob Harbine, was involved with the formation of the Hooven and Allison Company. My father was now the H&A’s vice president; he and the president, Charles Darlington, didn’t twist my arm or make any special promises, but they made it clear that I’d be welcome. Gracie also agreed that she’d like to live in Ohio. These decisions, as it turned out, were not just temporary moves; they set the stage for the rest of our lives.”

The newly-married Hagenbuch became acquainted with



When wife Grace accompanied Bill on a trip to an African ropemaker, he got a much warmer reception.

ropemaking operations, from start to finish, including grueling hands-on training in the early manual procedures.

“I started with the bales of fiber,” he said. “Most sisal came from East Africa, and manila came from the Philippines. I helped unload the rail cars and spot-check the indicated weights—275 to 600 pounds. We would stack the bales 12 feet high in the warehouse, then haul them on a hand truck to the breaker room. The manila had to be cut into lengths less than six feet. The knife was a scythe blade, fixed about shoulder height to point right at your nose. Fortunately, sisal did not have to be cut, but cutting manila was the most

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retired in 1986 as CEO and Chairman of the Board. In fact, 20 years later, at age 88, I'm still the Chairman of the H&A Retirement Board, as I was surprised to discover a few years ago! In 2002, when MetLife de-mutualized, they were required to contact employers of the retirees to whom they were sending monthly pension checks. I wound up with the notification and a distribution check, which I divided among the 25 retirees who were still living. In May 2006, I received MetLife's latest annual report on payments to H&A

retirees—18 are still around."

That wasn't Bill's only involvement with the plant after his retirement, though. Hooven & Allison closed in 2004, and the following year, a fire destroyed most of the facility.

"Overall, the factory site is devastated," Bill stated. "The landmark smoke-stack is still intact, as are a few of the oldest buildings, but it's tragic: a large and historic landmark has been mostly destroyed."

He noted, though, "Aside from the ruined buildings, the site is a lovely property with expanses of green lawns, and

we hope some good use can be made of it in the future."

At the time of the fire, Bill had spent the last few years giving slideshow presentations on the evolution of the H&A and cordage itself.

"I was surprised when a request for a little presentation on the history of the H&A came along," he confided. "And it really didn't seem that fascinating. But it was fun as I dug back in the ancient history. I was also surprised to see all the speculation on what could be done with really super ropes in the future. That was fun. I enjoyed going back and going into the future since my retirement."

"Dad started the community presentation using his own slide collection, his own books on the cordage industry, and research from the H&A archives at the Greene County Public Library," said Kate, also Ropewalk's executive producer. "After about eight years of community presentations, I transformed the lecture to PowerPoint using the same slides, then we added a video clip [of a brick dangling from a rope, as a strength demonstration] so he wouldn't have to set up it up every time."

"When H&A closed and burned down," she continued, "I thought, 'This history's really lost, and Dad's one of the only people who can relate it. How can we preserve this and share it with more people?' I tried taping one of his lectures, but it was, well, a taped lec-



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Oral Historian Lyric Rillera (middle) and filmmaker Steve Fetsch (right) transform Hagenbuch's home office into a film set.

ture...not the most compelling. Then I saw an Engineers Club screening of *A Forest Returns*...

Athens, Ohio-based filmmaker Steve Fetsch said, "In 2005, I finished a 30-minute movie with producer Jean Andrews, *A Forest Returns*, which featured Ora Anderson describing his experience as a journalist during the Depression, when New Deal interventions converted failing farms to forest. Later, Jean told me she'd been contacted by a family in Dayton who were interested in discussing the possibility

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of a similar project.”

“Dad & I presented our idea to Jean and Steve,” Kate said. “We wanted a film with the look and feel of theirs—oral history, narrated by an older storyteller, with lots of images and music to integrate it all. Steve was the right person to create such a film. He accepted the project after meeting Dad and reviewing the videotape I’d made, and he directed, filmed, and edited Ropewalk.”

“When I went to Bill’s place and met him there,” said Fetsch, “he was amazingly warm and welcoming. He makes you feel like an old friend, happily reunited. This quality carried over into the interviews: his storytelling is a gift shared with an open heart.”

“It must have been over two years from initial contact to completed movie,” Fetsch continued. “The public reception has been quite warm, and very meaningful to me.”

The period spent making Ropewalk was a special time in Kate’s life, and not just because of her involvement with the film. In the weeks leading up to the premiere, she married Mark Martel, one of the movie’s collaborators and the force behind the marketing, fundraising, and most of the graphic



The H&A’s long-running ropewalk—with spinners manufactured in nearby Miamisburg, Ohio. Photo credit: Timothy Hearsum design.

“Mark and I met in the fifth grade in Beavercreek schools,” Kate recalled. “We were friends in high school and dated briefly. I moved away to Wisconsin and Colorado for 26 years; we maintained mutual friends back here, and we got together when I moved back here in 2002. We were in our mid-forties.”

“Mark started his own graphic design business last year, and I’ve helped with the business aspects. We have different, but complementary skills. We found we were compatible not only in our personal lives, but could work together too. We recognized how unusual and lucky that is, so we eloped and tied the knot while on vacation in Hawaii. We kept it very low-key. The Ropewalk

premiere was such a huge event, we couldn’t handle another one around the same time, so we got married on the beach and told our families when we got back.”

About the funding that made the film possible, Kate said, “It was not difficult. Donations came from Engineers Club Members, Cordage Institute members, many community organizations, and individuals. The Foundation received a grant from the Greene County Community Foundation (Greene Giving), and we raised additional funds from pre-release DVD orders. Volunteer work, donated images, and Dad’s prepared presentation kept the budget reasonable. And the film is nonprofit—all proceeds benefit the Engineers Club of Dayton Foundation for historic preservation and education in science and technology.”

Bill said, “I wrote the original script that I used for my community presentation, ‘The Story of Rope,’ which was also published by the Cordage Institute in Ropewalk News in 2006. [Co-writer and interviewer] Lyric Rillera helped reorganize the script for the film, and provided interview questions as well as oral preparation and practice for the interviews. The filmmakers—Steve,

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Kate, and Mark—added a few details suggested by their own research.”

An enormous wealth of information was compiled for the film, most of which was already archived in just three places. “The Greene County Public Library houses an extensive Hooven & Allison archive,” Bill said, “including photographs, advertisements, and film clips. The Greene County Historical Society has a display of artifacts from the H&A. And I used my own collection of photographs and books on ropemaking. Much of the vintage footage used in the film came from forgotten industry reels that we found in my basement.”

Among the vintage film reels seen in Ropewalk are “Fiber for Rope & Twine” from the Cordage Institute; another is “Hearts and Stars,” a short industry film produced in the 1940s by the H&A and a long-lost segment from the Peabody Award-winning 1950s series Industry on Parade.

“We weren’t looking for old footage,” Kate said. “We found some of it in a box in Dad’s basement on 16mm film. He didn’t even know they were there. Those reels are now archived at the Greene County Public Library and are available in their entirety at the StoryOfRope.org website and in the Ropewalk DVD extras.”

The Smithsonian houses the Industry on Parade series, but for some reason they didn’t have that rope vignette. Our digital version was donated by the Boston National Historical Park, which had the only known copy.

The film includes a wonderfully sensitive score by Athens, Ohio musician Bruce Dalzell.

“Bruce had created the award-winning soundtrack for A Forest Returns,” Kate said. “He and Steve worked well together. Initially, we weren’t sure acoustic guitar was right for this film, and we solicited demos from both Bruce and from another talented musician. Bruce’s demo fit perfectly - “Ropewaltz” is a major key/minor key waltz near the end of the film that accompanies the visual recap of the life and death of the Hooven & Allison factory.”

About his process, Dalzell explained, “I have a small project studio in my home, so I’d spent many late night hours struggling with my muse and instrumental skills. There were many takes, and much was discarded. I made my own rough mixes and drove around with them to judge them from differing perspectives, then handed them to Steve to see what he could do with them, and re-edited.”

“To hold it all together,” Kate added,

“I recorded Mikki Hearsom’s voice to dub in the voice of the interviewer asking questions; this helped put the various interview segments in context.”

Mikki, 91, a retired speech teacher, was a voice actress in the golden age of radio. Her son, photographer Timothy Hearsom, toured the H&A plant in 1973 and took many of the photographs that form the foundation of Ropewalk, as well as the picture used in the cover art.

“Lyric Rillera inspired the Engineers Club of Dayton Foundation to sponsor the project,” Kate said. “She is a development/fundraising professional, and I asked her about grantwriting for this project. She had just left her full-time job and was taking a year off to write oral history! She delved more into Dad’s personal history. Dad was interviewed in his office, in front of Steve Fetsch’s camera for seven hours over two days. Steve created a storyline from the seven hours of interview.”

Rillera’s influence brought a personal touch to the film, weaving the history of cordage and the H&A with Bill Hagenbuch’s own life story. Bill’s humor and warmth set the tone for the entire film and gently guide it along, and when the hourlong documentary is over, Bill feels like an old friend.

Kate said, “The most difficult process was integrating the personal stories with the history of ropemaking, and keeping it all in context. The Foundation’s goal, as well as my father’s, was to educate. We had to be careful not to present a personality piece—the goal was always educational. Done right, the combination of personality, illustrations, and music makes learning effortless.”

Nearing his 90th birthday, Bill still lives on the family farmstead, with two of his daughters nearby—Kate in Oakwood, another Dayton suburb, and Chris, who lives in the gate house on the grounds.

“All four daughters were home for our annual Fourth of July party,” he said proudly, “including Susie from California and Bonnie from Oregon. That party started in 1947, so this was our 61st!”

Bill enjoys relaxing with his family, and spends his days puttering around the house and keeping his mind sharp.

“My day usually begins late,” he confessed, “because I usually stay up late to see Charlie Rose’s midnight interview program, then after that, I check out the repeat programs on PBS. I’m usually asleep at 6:00 a.m. when Chris comes by to feed Baxter, my dog, and

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she leaves me a glass of orange juice to start the day when I wake up. I get three papers: the *Xenia Gazette*, the *Dayton Daily News*, and the *Wall Street Journal*. But for the most interesting news, I rely upon the on-line edition of the International Herald Tribune. Because I don't like to read the monitor,

I print many of the long articles (and then pass along the printed copy to Chris so I don't feel guilty about wasting so much paper!). Also, I get some news via radio and TV, but my favorite TV programs are the PBS specials and regulars such as *Nova* and *Antiques Roadshow*. Unfortunately, my hearing is deteriorating so that I can't understand most of the purely entertainment programs. I guess I'm lucky that my sight is still okay," he said with a laugh, "and that I'm still passing my semi-annual driving test! I also do my therapeutic exercises, which takes about 30 minutes. I enjoy them, except when I'm tired out from something like travels."

An avid traveler, Bill and Grace loved trotting the globe when they found the time, especially to Africa, making eight safari trips there.

"I'm not up to that any more," he said, "but Chris, Susan, and I have scheduled a "Maine Coast and Harbors Cruise for September. That should be less tiring than Africa, but not quite so much fun as chasing and photographing the giraffes, hippos, and zebras. Incidentally, I've lost much of my interest in photography. I really enjoyed the dark room work, but I haven't really mastered the digital process. Maybe that should be

my next assignment!"

Bill is experiencing a bit of celebrity since *Ropewalk* premiered.

Typically modest, Bill said, "The completed *Ropewalk* was a real surprise to me. I'd never imagined that my 'Story of Rope' could be so glamorized with music and related stories. The complimentary response even embarrasses me a bit. Much of the credit should certainly go to the half-dozen who really put things together."

"It's so well-received by ropemaking enthusiasts, hobbyists and professionals, history buffs and museum curators...even a tall ship is using it to teach about ropes," said Kate. "Internet connections have brought the news of this film to many different audiences. We thought it would be of just local interest, but we've had orders and kudos from all over the world. Now the film seems to have taken on a life of its own."

Ropewalk is a surprisingly fascinating local history lesson and a valentine to an unsung industry, and really shines due to Hagenbuch's earnest, colorful, and charming narration.

Ropewalk is available for purchase at Filmbaby.com, and for rental via Netflix. Visit the film's website at StoryOfRope.org. WRN

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