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ne of the most important tools in a surveyor's toolkit is the magnetic locator. Many of our readers can probably recall the days when

there were only a few companies that manufactured them. Due to changes in one of those companies ten years ago, the number of manufacturers has increased.

Ron Davenport was one of six founders and former President, CEO, COB, and now General Manager of SubSurface Instruments, one of the "new" companies. But success didn't come overnight, and if truth be told, it was a long shot that success even came at all. Many events along the way could have easily forged a bitter ending to Davenport's story. After meeting with him and getting to know him better, we believed it is a story worth telling, one that may inspire others who are facing tough challenges to hang in there. In Davenport's own words, "What doesn't kill us, makes us stronger."

### The Back Roads

Sometimes it just takes growing older to finally understand why things happened like they did. Today, as a grandfather of twelve with a great-grandchild on the way, Davenport talks honestly about the events that shaped his past and forged his future.

# Ron Davenport

## of SubSurface Instruments

His father married young. Not mature enough to handle the responsibilities of a child, his mother abandoned him. An aunt found him in a run down, abandoned house in Richmond, Virginia. The baby was wet, dirty, sick, and all alone. Married, with a child of her own, his aunt took him home and nursed him back to health. In

spite of her compassion, she had problems of her own. Her husband was a bootlegger at the time, and the expense of raising two children was simply too much. She took him to her mother, and there the baby

>> By Marc Cheves, LS



This old baking tray cart has been converted to a parts tray cart.

A cornshucker, used to separate the ear from the husk.



lived until he was three years old. Ron remembers his grandmother's funeral, and there are some vague recollections of the time spent with this aunt and uncle, but little else about those years. When Grandma Davenport became ill and was unable to care for him, another family member took him home to live on their farm in Elmont. This began a childhood of mental and physical abuse, memories that are painfully clear. For many years he cried himself to sleep at night, even through high school, with accusations of "You're nothing and

nobody, your father wasn't worth a damn, and neither are you..." echoing in his head. Thoughts of suicide visited him time and again. Many years later he learned that the patterns of abuse had been passed down from one generation to the next, a realization that finally helped him to let go of the anger that simmered for so long.

There were also interminably long hours of working the farm. Every year 150 acres of field corn had to be shucked

by hand, one ear at a time. Harvesters wore corn-shuckers to protect their hands, a device that slips over four fingers and interacts with the thumb when closed around the shucks on an ear of corn. Apart from harvest time young Ron developed a fascination with flying. Leaps off the barn were unsuccessful, resulting in inverted umbrellas that failed to catch the wind. He made his own model planes by nailing two boards together and imagined flying high above the clouds. Up there in the sky his imagination provided a place to escape his circumstances, if only for moments at a time.

Like a seed that germinates only after fire has scarified its outer coat, somewhere beneath the ravaged landscape of physical and emotional pain, resolve began to take root in the young Davenport's life. He realized that if he was going to amount to anything, it was up to him.

### Work, Work, Work

In 1965 he graduated from high school, then landed a job as a stealth employee for two weeks at a lumber company/mill. Afterwards he applied for the job. He admits that pretending to be an employee was not the best way to enter the work force, but believed at the time that it was only way he'd get his foot in the door. Six years later, he was second in command, second only to the boss's son.

In 1966 he began a 20-year process of going to night school, taking classes in business, business law, accounting, math, and computer sciences. He also served in the US Navy

during the Vietnam Conflict. Along the way, he took a Dale Carnegie course in which he won four awards, including the Highest Award for Achievement.

Life continued to get better. From his job with the lumber manufacturer, Davenport next went to work for a much larger building material supplier

and millwork company in Richmond, starting as a clerk. In time he became vice president. In the early 80s he moved on to a software design and development company in Northern Virginia. By this time he also had a wife and three children. Yet while it appeared that all was going well, working 60 to 90 hours a week and going to school eventually took a toll on his first marriage, which ended in divorce in 1982. A second marriage of ten years ended in divorce as well. Fortunately it is a chapter in his life that has a happy ending. Ron and his first wife remarried in 1997 bringing his family back together. According to Ron, "...and the marriage has been better than ever. We celebrated what would have been 40 years of marriage in June 2006."

### **A Fortuitous Meeting**

In spite of his personal struggles, the survivor in him kept pushing. Apart from his day jobs, over the years Davenport also revisited his boyhood love of flying and logged enough hours to obtain a pilot's license in 1979. He became proficient with hang-gliders and ultralights. He opened and managed the flight park in Manquin, Virginia, and is a member of the US Ultralight Association Ultralight Instructors.

Using his business and software skills, Davenport continued to develop lumber sales and inventory software that increased efficiency, information, and profitability. But, this now was his first exposure to customer support dealing with angry customers who were sold something that had little chance of working. In the 70s and 80s it was customary, he says, to sell a product and customize it later, since few if any knew much about computers, software, and business. In time, Davenport grew disenchanted with fixing others' problems that should never have happened in the first place.

One of those customers was Schonstedt.

Davenport had been working with Schonstedt and was redesigning their software when he came to the decision he wanted to return to the "business" sector. In one of his meetings with Norm Langford, accountant and VP for Administration for Schonstedt, he mentioned his desires and informed Langford that he was leaving, though he didn't know where he would go. Unbeknownst to Davenport, Langford was planning his retirement and had bought a place in Illinois



**Davenport in his Houston office, holding a 100-year-old pine knot property corner given to him by a satisfied East Texas customer.**

to which to retire, but had not told Erick Schonstedt because he had not found his replacement – that is, until that moment. Langford arranged an interview with Mr. Schonstedt and introduced Davenport. Their personalities clicked and the two of them hit it off. Schonstedt, who had worked his way through college doing numerous odd jobs, including time as a door-to-door Fuller Brush salesman, shared a background of hard work. He was impressed with Davenport's one-page resume, which showed that from 1965 to 1985 he had only held three jobs in 20 years – the two lumber companies and the computer software company. He hired Davenport in 1985.

When Erick Schonstedt died on March 15, 1993, the company was donated to a college. Many changes followed. At the end of that year Charlie Upton – Mr. Schonstedt's VP for Engineering and Number Two employee – retired, and Davenport was asked to take charge, eventually becoming President and CEO. A couple of other long-time engineers left, and one became an independent consulting engineer, while the other worked for another engineering firm and started his own locator company.

Davenport sees significance in three dates: on March 15, 1953, Erick Schonstedt began Schonstedt Instrument Company; on March 15, 1993, he died



Locators ready for final tuning and finishing touches before shipment.

suddenly of a heart attack; and on March 15, 1998, Davenport and five others started SubSurface Instrument Company. “Beware the Ides of March,” he says.

Starting over in 1998 with nothing, and capitalizing on all the business principles he had learned, plus his life experiences, Davenport hit the road with a prototype locator. He was driving a car with nearly 200,000 miles on it. In a 7,000-mile road trip around the country he secured prepaid orders for 1,400 locators, based on promise. “If you will give me an order for  $x$  locators, I promise you we will build and deliver them.” They did ...and they still do.

Davenport believes that reputation is everything. He has built the business around several key ideas, including extreme customer service. He told of one customer in East Texas, who, although not dissatisfied, was not completely satisfied. Following his rule of “Don’t ask questions, just fix it,” Davenport over-nighted him a replacement unit. The customer rewarded Davenport with a 100-year-old pine knot (see photo). He firmly believes in the statements, “He who makes no mistakes, does no work,” and “It’s what you do next that counts.” Davenport doesn’t feel the need for his company to have a trendy mission statement: “If your employees don’t know why they are there, you’re the problem.” Davenport believes in surrounding himself with good people and helping them succeed. He understands an employee’s desire for recognition. He also rewards loyalty.

Today, SubSurface has a couple hundred dealers and leans more toward supporting main “distributors” and their own dealer networks. While having only a few “main distributors,” he still remembers all those dealers by name and the people who have supported him and the companies over the last 20 to 30 years.

### Leaving Virginia

Davenport and the other owners sold SubSurface to MDU/WBI, an energy conglomerate based in North Dakota, and were brought in under Innovatum Inc., an offshore pipeline/ utility/ communications locating firm located in Houston, Texas. The acquisition of Innovatum brought a need to secure the company that made and serviced their underwater magnetometers, and brought an entirely new experience to SubSurface. The company moved from Virginia to Houston to become more closely involved in Innovatum and the underwater locating sector, including an Innovatum branch in the UK.

SubSurface products are used today in many different markets, not only surveying, civil engineering, utility locating, and undersea/ocean floor work, but also with unexploded ordnance detection around the world. Considerable effort was needed in the work going on in the Gulf of Mexico after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Innovatum’s underwater gear has recently expanded worldwide, and Davenport has been spending part of his time in Europe. He has exhibited at hundreds of trade shows because he

believes that if he can demonstrate his equipment directly to surveyors and other potential customers, they’ll buy it. The “ML” locator units are 100 percent made in the USA.

### The Show Must Go On

At the 2006 ACSM conference in Orlando, Davenport exhibited some of the reasons for his success. All was quiet in the exhibit hall when a commotion arose around the SubSurface booth. Davenport and Rusty Hartland from SECO were singing and dancing around with a couple of ML locators. Davenport went into his routine demonstrating how tough his ML-1 and ML-1M locators are. Heads swivelled up and down the aisle. I’m sure several were wondering if they should call 911. Not content on merely throwing his locators up the aisle on the floor repeatedly, as is usual for him at trade shows, he turned the two ML locators upside down and began walking on them with feet on the electronics box, using them as stilts. Still not satisfied, he began using one locator as a pogo stick, jumping up and down on it until finally, the locking pins in the electronic box snapped and the box slid up into the handle. In Barnum & Bailey fashion, after falling on the floor from the mishap, he jumped up, turned the locator on, and it still worked – finding steel targets in the floor. The only difference was the electronics box was now resting about two inches from the end of the handle... not even visibly broken,

just looking like it had a 2” handle on it! Comments like “Man! I’ve got to have one of those!” rippled through the spectators.

To this day, Davenport is constantly trying to prove something. He’s old school; a man who believes that quality, hard work, high standards, treating employees well and letting them know their importance, and unparalleled dedication of service and support to the customers, will win in the end.

### **Another New Beginning**

In the latter months of 2006, the large parent company (MDU/WBI/Innovatum), decided it did not want to keep the underwater locating portion of its portfolio: Innovatum US. This was due to several factors including the mandatory retirement of the CEO of MDU, and a board decision to divest itself of Innovatum US, under which SubSurface Instruments was purchased in July 2001.

In what may have been an unprecedented act by other huge companies, the owners of Innovatum/SubSurface came

to the former owners working there and offered to sell their company back to them. “All of you have worked so hard and done so well, you deserve a new opportunity. Here’s the opportunity, see what you can do...”

Davenport didn’t have to be asked twice. Calling a long-time surveyor friend in Green Bay, Davenport began to put together a plan with his former founding partner, Bob Miller. Miller and Davenport were quickly off to Green Bay to meet with their surveyor friend and the representative from the MDU/WBI group, who gave a presentation of the reasons for the willingness to return the company to its original founders.

With a desire to regain ownership the successful and growing company, help from the then parent company, and economic reasons to relocate to the Green Bay (De Pere) area, the purchase/sale was struck on October 20, 2006. The sale of the Innovatum US stock, which included SubSurface Instruments, to the newly formed “old” company, SubSurface Instruments Inc., was culminated.

SubSurface has invented new, “quieter” sensors for the underwater search & locate industries now in connection with Innovatum UK as they “revamp” the older Innovatum systems. These have smaller, “user-friendly” locating systems for deployment on ROVs and the new smaller AUVs.

With Ron Davenport as President and Owner, and Bob Miller as Vice President and Owner, and strong financial backing from their professional friends, a final relocation to De Pere was executed. In Davenport’s words, they have finally, truly, “found a home.”

Some former employees relocated with them and other new employees have been hired and trained. They have been pleased to discover a loyal and dedicated workforce to draw from in Wisconsin. With an ever-increasing customer base and a passion for “personal customer service,” all is set for “the rest of the story.” Oh, and by the way, Davenport keeps that corn-shucker in plain sight on his desk – a poignant reminder of a long road traveled and proof that one’s past need not determine one’s future. 