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Robert E. McDonnell Named Historic Civil Engineer
Prestigious Recognition Shines Light on Passionate Advocate for Engineering Profession and its Contributions to Public Health and Safety

KANSAS CITY, Missouri — The American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) has named [Robert E. McDonnell](#), one of the co-founders of [Burns & McDonnell](#), a Historic Civil Engineer. McDonnell is one of only 45 engineers who have been selected for this recognition since the ASCE's founding in 1852. Representing more than 150,000 members in more than 177 countries, ASCE bestows the designation upon engineers who “led the way in innovative civil engineering design, serving as an inspiration for today’s practitioners.”

“We are thrilled Mr. McDonnell is being honored as one of the Historic Civil Engineers,” says Ray Kowalik, CEO and chairman of Burns & McDonnell. “The values he instilled in our firm when it was founded are still the values we stand by today. Mr. McDonnell was a strong believer that engineering helped improve the quality of people’s lives and he wrote hundreds of articles and spoke to many audiences throughout his life about this topic. That is why our core mission today remains to ‘improve the quality of life,’ through all the different types of projects we perform.”

Robert E. McDonnell led [the firm he founded](#) with longtime business partner and Stanford University classmate, Clinton S. Burns, for 53 years, from 1898 to 1951.

McDonnell was born in 1872 on a ranch in Gallatin County, Montana, one of four children of John and Harriet McDonnell. As a young man, he worked on his father’s ranch, served as an apprentice surveyor and taught public school. By 1892, he had saved enough money, \$150, to enroll in Leland Stanford Junior University, now Stanford University. A classmate of future U.S. President Herbert Hoover, McDonnell was active in many student organizations at Stanford and served as president of his graduating class.

After graduation and following a short tenure working as a staff engineer for the Southern Pacific Railroad, McDonnell reconnected with Burns in early 1898, fulfilling a promise they made as classmates to start their own engineering firm specializing in water and sewer infrastructure. After investigating

several potential locations throughout the country, the partners chose to start their firm in Kansas City, Missouri, after their research showed the cities, towns and villages within a 200-mile radius had the fewest number of water systems serving their populations. It was a period in which typhoid and other waterborne diseases were commonplace and several state and federal public health agencies were setting water purification standards.

With McDonnell leading civil and construction work and business development, and Burns working behind the scenes as chief engineer, the duo slowly began building their business designing water and public power systems for dozens of small towns and cities throughout Kansas, Missouri, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Iowa and Illinois. Within a few years their firm was becoming well-known nationally as an authority on engineering, construction and financing of public infrastructure. They began designing larger and larger waterworks and public power systems from coast to coast and by 1923, the 25th anniversary of their firm, Burns & McDonnell had completed 548 projects for 313 communities in 33 states.

A vocal proponent of public sector ownership of water and electric utilities, McDonnell became a prominent member of the American Water Works Association (AWWA) where he advocated for continued municipal investment in clean water systems as a crucial step to counter many public health issues.

A prolific author, McDonnell wrote more than 160 articles and technical papers intended to grow the body of knowledge for the engineering profession. He was proud of his contributions as a civil engineer and in one article stated: "The romance lies in the doing of many unusual and difficult tasks that to the engineer are all in a day's work. The chief reward is in the joy of seeing useful structures rise and making life more pleasant by mastering one round after another of worth-while achievements."

Following the untimely death of Clinton Burns in 1924, McDonnell kept the firm on a path of steady growth throughout the 1920s and the Great Depression of the 1930s, including a significant number of projects for rural electric cooperatives that brought power for the first time to many underserved regions of the country. In the years leading up to America's entry into World War II, Burns & McDonnell became a large U.S. defense contractor, designing and constructing Army airfields and training bases throughout the country. Burns & McDonnell remains one of the nation's top military engineering contractors today with projects underway in 14 districts of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

By the firm's 50th anniversary in 1948, Burns & McDonnell had completed more than a thousand projects in 854 communities in 45 states, the territory of Alaska and Canada and Mexico. By this time, McDonnell had gained even more stature as a vocal champion of public ownership of water and electric utilities and was a prominent leader of the American Public Power Association (APPA) in addition to the AWWA. In a book penned by McDonnell celebrating the anniversary, he proudly noted his firm's contributions to "the supreme satisfaction pure water, good sanitation and dependable, useful power and light can have on the standard of living throughout this mighty nation."

In 1951, McDonnell retired from the firm he founded, though he retained a role as "consultant in retirement" from then until his death on Jan. 2, 1960.

About Burns & McDonnell

Burns & McDonnell is a family of companies made up of 7,000 engineers, architects, construction professionals, scientists, consultants and entrepreneurs with offices across the country and throughout the world. We strive to create amazing success for our clients and amazing careers for our employee-owners. Burns & McDonnell is 100% employee-owned and is proud to be on *Fortune's* 2019 list of 100 Best Companies to Work For. For more information, visit burnsmcd.com.