



DISTINGUISHED ALUMNI - 2021

TOM CONLAN

CLASS 1964

Thomas "Tom" Conlan (1946-2017) emerged from meager beginnings. Tom was raised in a two-car garage by his wonderful mother Eileen, a strong and determined woman who passed on those qualities to all of her sons including Tom. This drive and his own opinion of "I had nothing to lose, you couldn't get any poorer than me" eventually brought him from the coal docks to President of River Trading Company, a coal company he began and ran for 26 years.

He always attributed his success to his first and only wife of 43 years, Dorothy, whose love, belief in him and his capabilities were never unwavering. Even with great financial success, Tom always regarded his wealth to be his family and friends, wisely knowing how priceless they are. With grand influence he threw a large shadow while always making time for those who would seek advice, mentorship, or a helping hand. Tom's wit, comedic timing and ability to tell the stories and adventures of his life became mesmerizing.

His passion for speed began at a young age and continued throughout his life encompassing top fuel drag bikes, building and collecting hot rods and Ferraris, and racing at El Mirage and his personal pride and perseverance of racing the Bonneville Salt Flats year after year (when the weather allowed of course). Friends and family alike will remember Tom for his strength of character, generosity and humor.

Tom's story is a classic "rags to riches" story. After high school he worked at a moving company for a while. Then he signed up at Dunwoody and studied to be a Machinist. He got a job at the Bureau of Engraving but didn't like the prospect of losing his eyesight squinting over fine print.

Tom's cousin, John Conlan, was an operator for the Port of Minneapolis, which was a river terminal. John hired Tom as a laborer. His job consisted of unloading barges, unloading rail cars of coal, and dealing with all the products that the terminal handled (pipe, twine, steel, lightweight aggregate, etc.). Then Tom was asked to be a salesman, which turned out to be his true calling. From there Tom and three other people decided to start a coal company. At that time the terminal was operated by ConAgra, an agriculture company which wanted to get out of the coal business, so they started a company called Centran Corporation. The name stood for Coal Energy Transportation. During this time Tom had also traded grain for ConAgra. Their plan was to book barges from the loading areas for coal to Minneapolis, unload the coal, haul it to the customer in the country and backhaul grain which could be loaded into the barges and sent to the Gulf for shipment overseas. This was a great plan since it allowed the company to get reduced rates on both barges and trucks and make it more competitive in the market.

Tom left Centran after a few years and joined with several other people and started River Trading Company, which was based on the same methods as Centran. His new partners were based in the coalfields, which gave River Trading an advantage in purchasing coal. River Trading began to run the Port of Minneapolis for the city of Minneapolis and in addition they had a dock operation in Cincinnati, another on the Big Sandy River in West Virginia, and one in Muscatine, Iowa.

Tom had an uncanny ability to look into the future as evidenced by his planning the backhaul strategy for coal and grain. This allowed the option for better barge rates. Also, by owning or operating the terminals his company could do all kinds of things that were advantageous that competitors could not.

Tom never made any decisions that involved the company that didn't have thoughts for some sort of advantage in the future.