

CHAPTER 1: THE FOUNDATION YEARS: GEORGE THOMPSON'S JOURNEY

The story of Thompson Pump began long before the company's official founding in 1970. Its roots reach back to the Depression-era childhood of George A. Thompson, a man who would come to shape an entire industry.

Born in Oklahoma in 1921, George arrived during a time of great economic uncertainty. His family had moved to Oklahoma before the Depression struck. When hardship deepened, they relocated back to rural Southwest Illinois. In this farming community, young George spent his formative years with his older brother Raymond, under the care of his mother, Carrie, and father Robert Thompson.

Life on the farm was not easy. The Thompson family lived humbly, and George divided his time between working on their small farm and taking odd jobs at neighboring farms to help the family survive. While George was not one to talk about his early life, his mantra was “Get up early and work hard!” and the lessons he learned on the farm proved invaluable. Farm life inherently taught self-reliance and ingenuity; when equipment broke down miles from town, farmers had to fix things themselves. This self-sufficiency became second nature to

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George and would later influence his approach to business and innovation.

As was common for many young people at that time, George faced a pivotal choice early in life: continue his education or go to work to help support the family. For George, the decision was clear. With the family's pressing needs, he chose work over schooling, taking various jobs on farms throughout the region. Then, acting on a desire to get off the farm, George applied for and was hired by a company based in Chicago, Illinois, the Eugene Dietzgen Company. During his tenure, George learned about surveying as well as the manufacture and utilization of engineering, surveying, and drafting supplies and equipment.

The real story of George Thompson's life began when he joined the military around age twenty. In 1942, as World War II raged across Europe and the Pacific, George entered basic training for the Navy at the Great Lakes Naval Training Center located near Chicago. His mechanical aptitude then qualified him for specialized training at other military installations as a machinist's mate.

After completing his training, George was assigned to duty on transport and supply ships, where he would serve during the most dangerous days of the war from 1942 to 1945. These vessels transported vital materials and troops across the perilous waters of the North Atlantic to support the Allied war effort in Europe and North Africa.

Over the course of the war, George completed 23 roundtrips across the North Atlantic—an extraordinary achievement given the ever-present danger of attacks by Axis submarines. Transport ships would gather at Halifax, Nova Scotia, before

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traveling in protective convoys to minimize losses to German U-boats. As the Allies pushed into North Africa and deeper into Europe, the routes extended farther south and into the Mediterranean Sea to supply the advancing troops.

As a machinist's mate aboard the transport ships, George's responsibilities were vast, varied, and vital. His duties involved keeping all the ship's mechanical systems running, including the engines, ventilation systems, fire suppression systems, generators, compressors, pumps, and various other items requiring maintenance. The military provided excellent training in these technical areas, creating a strong foundation of knowledge that would serve George well throughout his career.

When the conflict finally ended in 1945, George mustered out of the Navy in New York City, ready to apply his hard-earned skills to civilian life. George began working for Complete Machinery and Equipment Company, a family-owned pump business based in Long Island, New York. He started as a mechanic, using the mechanical skills he had acquired during his Navy service. The company would send him out to customer jobsites to install equipment and fix mechanical problems.

During these early post-war years, George experienced personal tragedy. His first wife, Helen Dickey, passed away from cancer approximately three years after the birth of their daughter, Kathleen. George found himself a single father with no other relatives in the New York area.

While working at Complete Machinery, George met Gloria Griggs, who worked as a secretary at the same company. Gloria, a divorced mother with an infant son, Bill, was involved with all the office functions typical of the pre-computer era: reception,

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accounts payable, accounts receivable, dictation, typing, and correspondence. Their professional relationship evolved into marriage, forming a partnership that would later prove crucial to their business ventures.

George's naturally personable demeanor served him well as a mechanic. While out fixing equipment and installing systems for customers, he did more than just perform the technical work—he built relationships. Management at Complete Machinery noticed how George was solidifying relations between the company and customers through his friendly, capable approach.

Around 1949, when he was about 28 years old, George's talents earned him a promotion from mechanic to a sales position. His new territory covered New England: Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine. For about three years, George thrived in this role, establishing his reputation as not just a skilled technician but an effective salesperson.

This was a time of tremendous growth and change in America. Veterans were returning home, eager to build careers, start families, and establish homes. Mass housing developments were springing up to accommodate the booming population. And significantly, many Americans were migrating south, drawn by new opportunities and a warmer climate.

Complete Machinery recognized this demographic shift and saw potential in the southern market. His bosses asked George to travel south to explore business opportunities in North and South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida. When George completed a long-term rental or made a sale, Complete had to ship the

pumps and equipment from New York to the jobsites in the South.

This presented problems. There was a dearth of roads connecting the two regions of the country. Trucking firms capable of hauling cargo were few, and delivery times were long. Often, because of their bulk, the equipment was loaded onto railroad cars and shipped to a city near the destination, where it was offloaded and delivered to the customer by a local trucking firm. When the rental project was completed, the process was implemented in reverse fashion. This certainly was inconvenient, inefficient, and it was definitely expensive.

Regardless, it wasn't long before his sales in the southern territory outpaced those in the company's northern markets. The pump business was booming in the South, particularly due to the region's coastal plain geography and the demand for the building of all types of infrastructure—roads, bridges, schools, hospitals, electrical power plants, sub-stations and power lines, water plants, sewage treatment facilities, water & sewer pipelines, airports, police & fire stations, and, of course, housing developments. Each of these projects created constant and long-term needs for dewatering equipment during construction.

Recognizing the potential, George recommended Florida as an ideal location for a new branch, driven by four factors: population growth, coastal plain geography that required dewatering, the increasing need for infrastructure, and limited competition in the area. The company agreed, and in 1951, George traveled to Florida on what was supposed to be a temporary basis to evaluate the territory for a suitable site.