

DENNIS WANLESS

A Passionate Life

By Mark and
Merrilee Ourada

Proud "Papa" with
the apples of his
eye – his two
granddaughters.



Nearly everyone who has the good fortune of meeting Dennis Wanless describes him similarly: He is the quintessential 'likeable guy'. My experience was no different; as I liked Dennis from the moment we first spoke on the phone to arrange the in-person interview for this newsletter "Reflections" article. We live about an hour apart, so we decided to meet near the mid-point. When he asked about the meeting time and I suggested 8:30am, he responded, "How about 9:00? Now that I am retired, I don't do meetings that early anymore!" I got a good laugh at that...a laugh that portended many more to follow when we met in person.

Dennis Wanless truly is an easy person to like with his warm, comfortable and self-deprecating demeanor. His first comment, and one he would return to repeatedly, was that "it was always about the people I worked with; that's really the essence of this whole [career] thing." Just that one statement immediately tells you a lot about his character.

Born in 1944, Dennis grew up on the Rosebud Reservation near Pierre, South Dakota. Most people didn't stick around the reservation after high school because there were few opportunities there to make a living. So, after graduation, he left too; he joined the army and is deservedly proud of the fact that he served our country in that capacity!

After his military service ended, Dennis travelled to Minnesota to visit his mother whom he hadn't seen in five years. And then, since his family's dairy farm was near Fargo, ND, he decided to go there to look for a car to buy. It was this decision that precipitated a chance encounter with an influential individual who opened the door for him to join Texaco's dealer-training program. Texaco, impressed with the job he was doing teaching mechanics, not only encouraged him to go to college, but also added their financial assistance to the funds he received from the GI Bill to make it possible for him to attend Moorhead State University and earn a Bachelors' degree in Business. Thus, it was that this single decision and a chance encounter launched Dennis Wanless into his multi-decade career, although it wasn't apparent to him at the time.

It was his job at Texaco that brought him to Minneapolis. There he became shop foreman for the upper Midwest – in charge of trucks, heavy equipment,



Dennis with Coal Scraper.

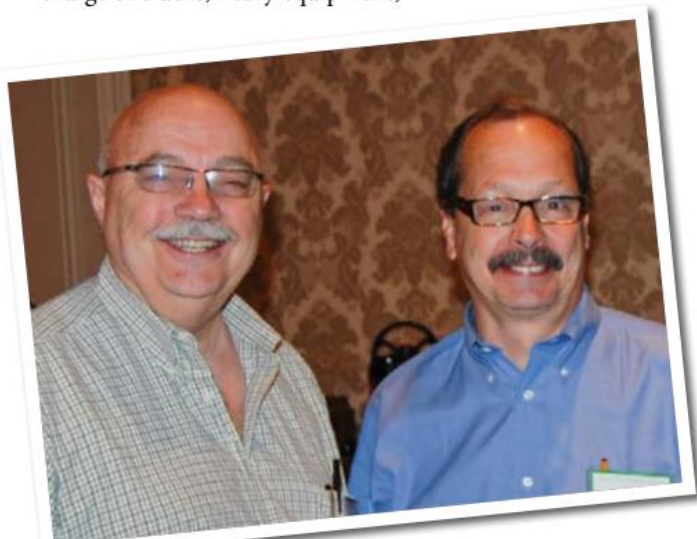
transports and aviation equipment – and then superintendent until Texaco left the Midwest market during the energy crisis of the 1970's. Dennis passed on a move to Chicago at this juncture because his wife had a good job as a nurse in Minnesota, and both of them wanted to raise their young son in a more rural community that was close to each other's parents.

This precipitated a change of career for Dennis and landed him at the State of Minnesota Department of Weights and Measures as an Inspector for five years. Feeling that work in state government was not 'his calling', to be polite, Dennis says that, when the opportunity to go to work for Northern States Power (NSP) opened up for him, he readily took it. At that time, NSP didn't have anyone calling on the power plants and mines to ensure that the quality and quantity of fuel required was delivered on time, and NSP (now known as Xcel Energy) had numerous power plants intended to burn coal, both currently in service and in the process of being built.

While attending an NCTA O&M Meeting in 1985, Dennis had already heard about air-pneumatic train cars when a senior vice-president reported significant safety concerns due to numerous accidents that occurred during unloading. Thus, when Dennis leased new, rapid-discharge cars, the 'show and tell' for the senior staff went very well!

After this demonstration NSP got into the car-building business (1988), expanding their fleet to serve their coal plants, starting with four-car sets then expanding out from there.

Executive Committee members Dennis Wanless and Tom Sedarski after the conclusion of the annual Round Table, 2013.





Dennis and his friends Dwight Porter and Gayle TenBrink.

Dennis became the go-to-guy for the building and purchasing of the new fleet, which previously had all been steel cars.

It was just during this time that Dennis became a member of the Board on O&M. He commented that it was a great resource to have O&M where ‘all of us’ could meet and have conference calls with contractors and vendors, and work on the issues all of us were facing. “Oh we had lots and lots of meetings!”, Dennis laughed.

With the new larger cars, which were now moving to aluminum construction, more issues arose. One example was that all the coal plants were constructed to receive the older, smaller cars hauling 263,000 lbs. gross weight on rail, not the new larger 286,000 lbs. cars. And, of course, the existing plants were not equipped for these new cars. Or, as Dennis commented, “the math didn’t work”; these were all the kinds of things that were coming on board, and all of us had to change and re-work the coal yards and re-work everything!”

He cited, as one of the many examples, that they currently conveyed coal at 1,500 tons an hour and that the higher-capacity cars now jumped the volume to 4,000 tons an hour. With lower 8000-BTU western coal, the hoppers designed to run for 24 hours now had to completely change. “As soon as we went west and started using low-Sulphur coal, it was a whole new ball game...totally different!”

“When we blew the crusher building up at Sherco everybody said, ‘What happened, how did that happen? We’ve burning coal since 1903 and never had an explosion?’ What’s going on?” So now the industry had another significant new issue to deal with. As a result, many new studies were undertaken to learn how to handle this new type of coal.

“Of course, I was all part of this. This was an absolutely fantastic career! We were growing and building and we couldn’t run hard enough, fast enough.”

It was clear to me at this point, and at many points during our conversation, how much Dennis enjoyed his career. And, even though very difficult at times, how much he reveled in the changes and challenges that he, and many others, were faced with day after day. I found it quite interesting to hear that, while dealing with car issues did take a great deal of Dennis’s time, it amounted to only about half his total work load! The other fifty-percent was taken up dealing with the coal mines and coal yards. Dennis was “right in the middle of all of it” when it came to dealing with the coal-dust issues of western coal – with all the new problems surrounding surfactants and dust treatments, etc.

Another first in Dennis’s career was dealing with the first contracts that used ‘mutual verification’, where the utility attended quarterly inspections of equipment, i.e., belt scales, coal samplers.

Dennis convinced management to bring in things such as new belts, etc. and test them at the Sherco plant in Minnesota. Ramsey Technology brought in people from all over the world to demonstrate this new equipment.

Dennis found this time to be so incredibly interesting. He referred to NSP as “a bunch of old farm boys who went to engineering school and happened to run a power company. It really was a great place to work from that point of view because they always wanted their company to be a leader.” These were interesting times for the industry and for Dennis. He clearly enjoyed working with the mines and railroads, figuring out the new cars and the new dumping facilities.

The coal yards had to be upgraded as well because, as the plants got larger, all their systems had to be upgraded to increase the speed of unloading cars. Dennis facilitated meetings each month, along with a call EVERY morning to go over their unloading process and “every operational issue there was, including safety, because we wanted those trains in and out the door in 4 ½ hours at Sherco. Prior to the upgrading of the coal yards, many of our plants took several days to unload a coal train.

Along with this push to increase speed, came concerns regarding safety. “My boss came to me and said that we needed to do something about safety. My response was to tell him, ‘well look at that crap you got running out there. It’s all junk. We’re 15 years behind in technology!’” Dennis believed that they were their own worst enemy because, no matter what, even with bad old equipment, they always got the job done – with the result that the procurement of new equipment was never prioritized. But, in the end once again, “safety drove the bus to get us better equipment”.

So now, again, Dennis was entrusted with a new directive and responsibility – that of buying new equipment for all the power plants. He tells how, “in just four years, we replaced every single piece of mobile equipment we had in the NSP coal yards and after the merger, across the entire Xcel system!”

Dennis was astounded learning, when he first went to work for NSP, that they had no fleet price for trucks and equipment. But then he realized that when you weren’t buying anything, you really didn’t need one. Caterpillar was the only manufacturer of coal scrapers in the world, so NSP had them custom-build coal scrapers to configure them specifically to handle the density and weight of coal.

It was around this time that Caterpillar did a survey of high school students and found that, as they rated jobs, Heavy Equipment Operator came in at the very bottom of the list. This precipitated a significant upgrade in heavy equipment design to help make the career more enticing to the young people just coming into the workforce. The first change was to move the cab forward and to use more glass, so the operator could see more clearly and be more comfortable. One of the other first things Dennis did was to put air conditioning, heaters, and radios in the cabs. After that, everything evolved to using a joystick-like operating mechanism to mimic the modern game technology this younger generation was already very familiar and comfortable with. This made it a whole new ball game because, now, the new dynamic made the job of being a Heavy Equipment Operator actually fun!

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Another interesting, though difficult challenge, Dennis had to navigate was the impact that the Japanese tsunami had when it hit in 2011. This impact was enormous because Japan was where all the tires for mining equipment were being made! He relates how, during this 'time-out', at the mines they were literally digging up tires from the pit, washing them, and then putting them back into service because they couldn't buy even a single tire!

Dennis says that, although many of the things he was involved with sound completely unbelievable, they are, in fact, true; this multitude of compounded challenges actually were part of his storied career and were just some of the things they had to deal with when it came to equipment. And he reiterated that, while all this time they were acquiring and/or upgrading their mobile heavy equipment, they were also continuing with the buying and upgrading of their train cars.

Dennis' goal was to move the O&M Group from a reactive maintenance program to a predictive program utilizing new technology

Dennis certainly had a wide variety of experiences, jobs and responsibilities during his tenure with Northern States Power/Xcel Energy, including work on the nuclear side of the business and managing ash landfills, among a variety of other things.

Dennis stated that, throughout his career, the industry was chasing technology, from steel coal cars at 45 mph to now having aluminum coal cars at 60 mph and everything that goes with it... and it's kinda cool!

As we continued our conversation, Dennis referred to NCTA, including his involvement in the O&M Committee as a member and ultimately as the Chairman. He evoked thoughts of the early, utility only, 'good old boys' O&M

meetings in a small conference room. Dennis recalled that when Tom Canter became the Executive Director they worked hard to take the group in a new direction. Vendors became integral to the conversation widening the scope of the group. During his tenure, Dennis' goal was to move the O&M Group from a reactive maintenance program to a predictive program utilizing new technology. He observed that, what was 'good old boy car knockers' transformed to a dynamic, diverse workforce of modern, technology based professional fleet car managers. Dennis beams with pride that he was able to bring this to fruition. He continued to explain that Tom Canter was instrumental in integrating the outstanding new forces and voices to include Gayle TenBrink and Carmen Sparks, just to name a few that contributed greatly to the NCTA O&M.

On the more personal side of his career...

Dennis's wife passed away in 2010 after 42 years of marriage, and, when he described that period as "a tough road", it was clear that it most definitely was...and still is. With his characteristic positive attitude though, he immediately followed with, "But I have a great family. They have always been very supportive of me." He also expresses much gratitude to the individuals in the fuel department for "riding with me during those tough times in my life." He is also thankful to his friends, not only from the O&M Committee, but also the vendors who frequently came up to take Dennis to dinner and to make sure he was okay. He talked about how much that meant to him, saying, "I still haven't forgotten them; they are, and always will be, in my prayers."

Since retirement, Dennis has made a very conscious and deliberate effort to stay busy. And busy he definitely has been!

Throughout our conversation he included stories that illustrated how, his whole life, he has worked and played outside. He clearly has a love of the outdoors and values being able to spend so much of his time there, both at work and during his free time, as evidenced by his membership in Pheasants Forever, Minnesota Deer Hunters, Isanti Sportsman's Club and a local



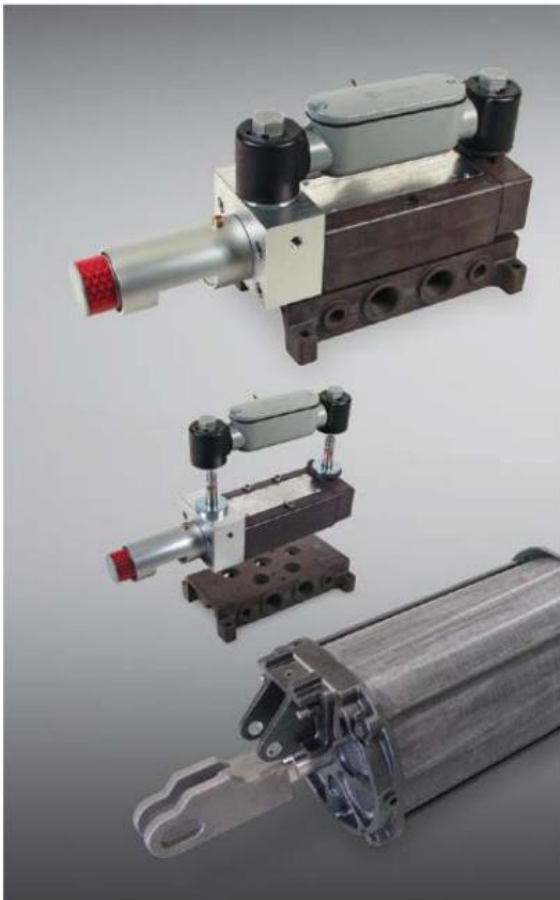
snowmobile club. He spends a great deal of time supporting and enjoying these organizations, and shoots on the trap league himself. When I asked him if he cared to divulge scores, he laughed and said, "BETTER THAN HARRY!" And, as we all know who Harry is, we both got a good chuckle out of that! He specifically loves to hunt elk and antelope and went on an elk hunt last fall in Utah, which, of course, included a stop in South Dakota, his birthplace, for pheasants!

Through these various clubs, Dennis is very involved in teaching gun safety and safety classes for four-wheelers, and snowmobiles. Through the hunting club connections, those three groups supply all the ammunition and trap range time for the high school shooting team. He was clearly proud of that fact when he spoke about kids from Isanti being in the top ten during this year's state tournament where 4,000 shooters participated, saying, "it was exciting as hell!"

Dennis revealed that he is now traveling quite a bit and divulged that he has been dating and has a lady friend, both of whom lost their spouses suddenly. He talks about how that was a whole new challenge at this point in his life. He went on to say, "it's a bigger club than you think, and not a good club to belong to. So, if you have a spouse, take good care of them. That's always my motto."



Dennis was always good at shooting the "bull!"



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His recent travels have taken him to Alaska (Denali specifically), a Viking river cruise all the way from Budapest to Amsterdam that he called ‘unbelievable’, along with trips to England and Ireland.

Last year took Dennis to Scotland. When I commented about him getting around, his response was, “I’m running as hard as I can, just like I did all the rest of my life.” Not slowing down one bit, he tells how he’ll be headed to Norway before this article gets published!

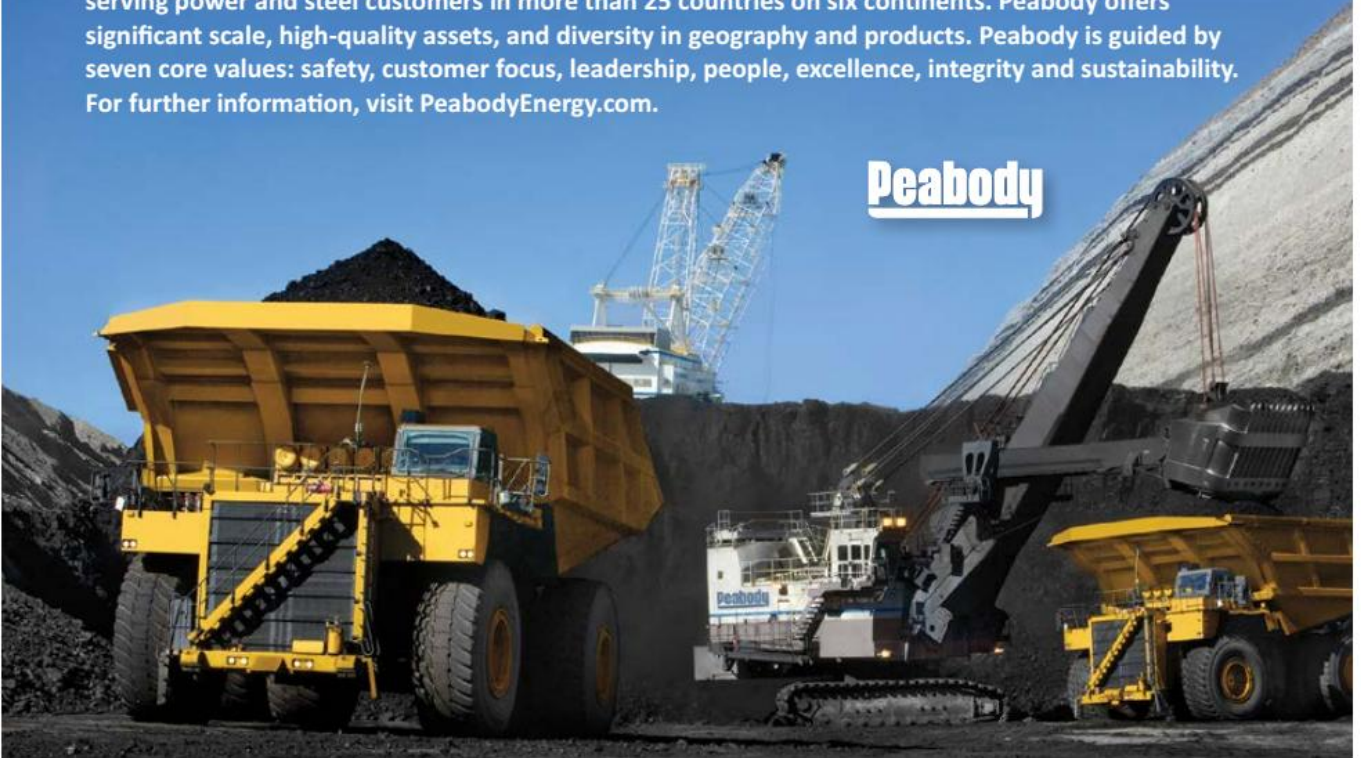
Coming off the reservation, Dennis has what he describes as a ‘real reservation family’ with brothers, half-brothers and step-siblings. His one nephew said, “Dennis, we need to find out what we are,” so he gave him a membership to Ancestry.com for Christmas. It was through this site that his son traced the family name back to Scotland. So, Dennis used that as an excuse to plan a trip to Scotland. He says that it was a special moment to stand on the family farm of eight generations, and that he found it to be both an awesome and emotional experience!

He kept a travel journal and had a book made recounting his adventures on the trip and gave a copy to each family member. “The only mistake I made,” he says, “was not including a piece of rock, a piece of the homeland to include in the book.”

Dennis and buddy make a great team.

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This is something his brother will likely remedy on his upcoming trip to Scotland.

His only child, a son, has two daughters, and Dennis is clearly proud to be 'Papa' to his granddaughters. His son holds engineering and biochemistry degrees and an MBA. Dennis is very proud of his son who works at the senior level for Medtronic and his daughter-in-law that works in senior leadership at Polaris Industries. Their family lives in the Twin Cities. Dennis is clearly pleased that they come out to the country a lot to visit.

Through all the family years, Dennis got a lot of experience building, expanding, and remodeling homes – he's done at least four properties! This included tearing apart a house on Long Lake in Isanti County that was only four years old, and later, completely re-building a cabin adjacent to his existing property. Dennis Wanless is clearly a handy guy to have around!

As we closed our conversation Dennis had some parting thoughts:

"If there is anything I would like to end this whole thing with, it's to say that I am eternally grateful to have had a fantastic career working at a very exciting time burning and transporting low Sulphur coal and being able to participate at this level. It's been an exciting wonderful career!

Lastly, Dennis wanted to sincerely thank all those on the O&M Executive Committee during his tenure for all their efforts and support! Carmen Sparks, Gayle TenBrink,



Dinner for the winter.

Harry Mullins, Robin Andersen, Tom Sedarski, Troy Smith, Kurt Stroer, Kevin Johnson and Scott Marino.

It couldn't have been a more enjoyable afternoon! My only regret is that I hadn't met Dennis sooner in life. He's that kind of guy! ▲

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