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# Biography of BYRON LeROY GODBERSEN

Began modeling in 1976

January 19, 1925 to May 11, 2003

Compiled, Transcribed & Edited by SS (6/03)

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## **Career:**

- Founder and CEO of Midwest Industries, which produces farm and marine equipment
- Formed Byron Originals in 1979 to develop large-scale Radio Controlled model airplanes
- Started the Aviation Expo in his hometown of Ida Grove, Iowa, in 1981; the Expo was sold in 1991
- Donated much to his local community

## **Honors:**

- 1989 – AMA Distinguished Service Award

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*The following was written by AMA Assistant Historian Stacey Shannon for Model Aviation magazine in 2003 following Byron Godbersen's death.*

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Byron LeRoy Godbersen, owner of Byron Originals, died on May 11, at the age of 78 after battling numerous health problems during the last few years.

Godbersen was the founder and CEO of Midwest Industries of Ida Grove, Iowa. He started the company in 1954 to produce farm equipment. In 1959, Godbersen developed a boat hoist, which moved the company more into the marine area and started the Midwest ShoreStation equipment line.

Today Midwest Industries has more than 300 employees and 17 independently owned distributors throughout the United States.

In 1979 Godbersen's avocation of model flying became another company. Byron Originals was started to develop large-scale Radio Controlled (RC) model airplanes. The company produced its first kit in 1979 then started the Aviation Expo in 1981. The Expo became known as "The World's Most Unique Aviation Event" and drew over 50,000 modelers to Ida Grove. In 1991 the show was sold to a group based in Ankeny, Iowa.

Godbersen received the Kiwanis Citizenship Award in 1973, the Governor's Award, the first ever Albert Gallatin Award and was named the Iowa and National Small Businessman of the Year for 1973. In 1996 he was inducted into the Iowa Inventors' Hall of Fame. Godbersen, who holds patents on more than 50 inventions, was also named Inventor of the Year. He also contributed financially to Ida Grove including to the development of the Ida Grove Airport.

Godbersen is survived by his wife, LaJune, a son, Bruce (wife Beverley), four daughters, Beverly Corr, Susan Rusch (husband Don), Linda Harriman and Debra Brosius (husband Andy); 11 grandchildren; seven great-grandchildren; a sister, Berniece Pruehs and a sister-in-law, Leone Godbersen.

*The following obituary was submitted to the AMA History Program. Unfortunately no information was given as to where the article came from or who wrote it.*

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## **Ida Grove Bids Farewell to Industrialist Byron Godbersen (Byron Originals)**

May 12, 2003

Byron L. Godbersen passed away Sunday at his home in Ida Grove [Iowa]. Mr. Godbersen, who was 78, died as the result of the cumulative effects of numerous health problems that he had been battling for many years. Funeral services for Byron LeRoy Godbersen will be Thursday, May 15, at 10:30 a.m. at Saint Paul Lutheran Church in Ida Grove. Reverend John Schauer will officiate with burial in the Ida Grove Cemetery. McNamara-Moore Post 61 of the American Legion will conduct full military rites. The Christensen-Huffman Funeral Home in Ida Grove is in charge of arrangements where friends may call today, Wednesday, noon to 8 p.m. The family will be present from 6 to 8 p.m.

Godbersen, a self-made millionaire, was founder and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Midwest Industries of Ida Grove. He attained national and international recognition for his many innovations relating to farm and marine equipment. Godbersen's legacy includes a long list of awards and projects that led to the betterment of Ida Grove.

Godbersen was born January 19, 1925 on a farm near Mapleton. He was the son of Harry and Minnie (Scheer) Godbersen. He graduated from Mapleton High School in 1943. Godbersen joined the Air Force in August 1944 where he served as a paratrooper in the 11th Airborne Division.

Following his service in the military, Godbersen returned home to the family farm near Mapleton. He married LaJune Erickson on October 27, 1946. The couple lived for eight years on the farm where Byron grew up. Godbersen's desire to make farm work easier spawned his design of a hydraulic hoist to unload wagons. Godbersen perfected what would be called the Midwest Bolster Hoist with Godbersen POWR-LINK in Russell Coil's shop in Ida Grove. The hoist was the first product manufactured by Midwest Industries, which received its corporate charter March 10, 1954. Byron and his late brother Harold founded Midwest. Harold sold his share of Midwest to Byron in 1964.

Midwest's farm line continued to grow during the late 1950s into the 1960s. Over the years, the farm line included names such as Husky Hauler, Lift Harrow, Planter Harrow, Unbaler, Boom Fork, Coverall, Buster Bars and Freedom Hitch.

In 1959, Godbersen developed a boat hoist, which led to Midwest's ShoreStation equipment line. In addition to the boat hoist, the company's marine division eventually produced docks and dock equipment, marine hangers and ShoreShade (a large shade umbrella). The ShoreLand'r boat trailer line first appeared in 1971 and has expanded to include snowmobile, personal water

vehicle and utility trailers. Today, most of the manufacturing done by Midwest is marine-related. The firm employs more than 300 people and has 17 independently owned distributorships across the United States and Canada. ShoreLand'r ships to dealers in 32 countries throughout the world.

In 1976, Godbersen's enjoyment of flying led to Byron Originals. The firm's initial purpose was the development of large-scale remote controlled model air-planes. The first model kit was marketed in 1979. An offshoot of the remote airplane line was Aviation Expo, which was a model airplane show started in 1981. The Expo, dubbed "The World's Most Unique Aviation Event," drew over 50,000 model airplane enthusiasts to Ida Grove annually until 1991 when it was sold to a group based in Ankeny.

In 1987, Byron Originals was spun off as a separate company. Godbersen's son, Bruce, is the current president of the company, which has been transformed over the years and today is primarily an injection and rotational molding company. In addition, Byron Originals, Inc. is the world's largest producer of fuel for the modeling industry.

Godbersen's other enterprises include the Ida County Courier which he started in 1975 and sold to Roger Rector and Jim Jenkins in 1985.

Godbersen was also instrumental in bringing a radio frequency to Ida Grove. Under the ownership of Brothers Four Broadcasting, based in Roseville, Minnesota, KIDA went on the air in 1981.

In 1976, Courier Square, accommodating specialized retail shops, was built. Oak Grove Plaza was developed in 1983. The Plaza includes the Skate Palace, which opened in December 1982. Godbersen donated the Skate Palace complex to the Ida Grove American Legion in 1986.

Godbersen's efforts also led to the development of the Ida Grove Airport, Godbersen Athletic Field, the Ida Grove Country Club house, LaCasa Village and Lake LaJune Estate.

Godbersen's awards include being named Iowa and National Small Businessman of the Year for 1973, Kiwanis Citizenship Award (1973), Governors Award and the first ever Albert Gallatin Award (sponsored by the Zurich-American Insurance Companies).

In 1996, Godbersen was inducted into the Iowa Inventors Hall of Fame and named Inventor of the Year. He holds patents on more than 50 inventions, which is more than any other person in the state.

In 1999, the National Marine Manufacturer's Association awarded Godbersen the Alan J. Freedman Award for his lifelong contributions to the marine industry. Over the years, Midwest Industries has been recognized with a variety of awards. The company, which produced its one millionth boat trailer in May 1998, received the National Association of Manufacturers Award for Work Force Excellence; Existing Industry Economic Impact Award; Iowa Governor's Quality Recognition Award and was recognized by the Iowa/Illinois Safety Council in June of 1998 for having worked one million man hours without a lost workday due to an accident.

Midwest earned Class A status in manufacturing resource planning in September of 1992. Less than 1 percent of all manufacturers at the national level have earned Class A status.

According to Midwest President Andy Brosius, Godbersen's first love was the creation of new products.

"Byron has always been very active in new product development even during the last few years of failing health," said Brosius. "He had an uncanny ability to conceive unique, innovative and very detailed product designs in his head. It was not unusual for us to build prototypes from one of his drawings on a napkin or from a chalk sketch on the floor in the research and development shop.

"Byron was a true entrepreneur who will leave a huge void in both our business and personal lives. He will be greatly missed. However, to his credit, he had the foresight to do the planning and put the things in place necessary for the family to carry on the business without him."

In addition to son Bruce, several other family members are currently involved in Midwest Industries, including sons-in-law Andy Brosius, president of Midwest, and Don Rusch, Midwest marketing manager. Jon Devitt, engineering manager, is a third generation family member involved in the business. Godbersen treasured times spent with his family and friends and especially enjoyed the water, whether at Ten Mile Lake in northern Minnesota, on the beaches of Mexico or yachting in the Pacific Northwest. He will be remembered for his innovative and creative spirit, his generosity and for the passion and zeal with which he lived his life.

Survivors include his beloved wife LaJune; one son, Bruce and his wife Beverly; four daughters, Beverly Corr, Susan and her husband Don Rusch, Linda Harriman and Debra and her husband Andy Brosius; 11 grandchildren; seven great grandchildren and a sister, Berniece Pruehs; a sister-in-law, Leone Godbersen, all of Ida Grove; many extended family members and friends, as well as his favorite canine companion, Dana. His parents; a brother, Harold Godbersen and a son-in-law, Van Corr, preceded him in death.

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*The following is a column written by Beth Wolterman that ran after Godbersen's death. Unfortunately, there was no record of where the column appeared.*

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*From this week's Windowsill Column Written by Beth Wolterman, Editor*

It's been a somber few weeks for friends and family of Ida Grove industrialist Byron Godbersen. We recently began to sort through our files, old issues and negatives in an effort to pull out highlights of his career and contributions to Ida Grove and the area.

Overwhelming.

Just for a moment, sit back, close your eyes and try to imagine Ida Grove without Midwest Industries, without Byron Originals, without Skate Palace and Veteran's Memorial Lake, without the high school sports complex, without this newspaper, without the country club house and

bridge, without the Ida Grove Airport, without the unique Ida Grove city marker and without the many other things Byron had a hand in starting or supporting over the years.

Overwhelming.

Byron was either loved and respected – or not – by the locals who knew him best. But most, like myself, were able to look through that tough shell and see the caring and compassionate man inside who really loved life, his family, his hobbies, his career and his community.

Overwhelming?

Yes, he was. But, that's how he helped, along with the rest of the Godbersen family, put this small community on the map like no other, and how he was successful in meeting his goals.

“We set goals, we don't set limits,” Byron told Buena Vista business students in 1987. “An aeronautical engineer will tell you that a bumblebee does not have enough wing area to fly. But, since the bee doesn't know that, he just keeps right on doing it. That's what drove me on – I just kept going. I didn't know what my limits were and I hope I never find out.”

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*The following article ran in the February 18, 1987 issue of the Ida County Courier and was written by Beth Wolterman, editor.*

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*Ida Grove industrialist Byron Godbersen shared the secrets to his success with business students at Buena Vista University in Storm Lake in a 1987 address. The following story appeared in the Feb. 18, 1987 issue of the Ida County Courier. Written by Beth Wolterman, Editor*

“If there are any students who think for one moment this world owes them a living; if they've found a substitute to dedication and hard work and think the world looks up to them because they have a college degree...they're in for one big rude awakening.”

That was just one piece of advice Ida Grove industrialist Byron Godbersen relayed in an address to students and the public last Tuesday at Buena Vista College in Storm Lake. Sponsored by the college's school of business, Godbersen's address, entitled “It's Up To You,” was one in a series at the college by entrepreneurs and businessmen.

Godbersen highlighted the birth of his career as an inventor and businessman for the large group, stressing there's no substitute for hard work and dedication during the rise of a career, as well as after reaching the “summit.” Godbersen's years as a boy and young man weren't much different than any other boy growing up on an Iowa farm during the [Great] Depression years.

“Things weren't so good in the 1930s,” he recalled. “We had nothing.”

There was often no crop and barely enough to eat on the farm where he grew up. They lived day to day on the produce raised on the farm, located on a mud road about five miles from Mapleton.

Getting to the one-room schoolhouse, where grades one through eight were taught, often meant walking or catching a ride when he could. After graduating from Mapleton High School in 1943 and after two years as a paratrooper in the military, he returned to Mapleton to get married and take over the family farm.

Godbersen remembered he returned from overseas with \$1,400 he had saved plus a \$2,000 GI loan. After several years as a struggling farmer, Godbersen began looking for other options.

“I guess when it gets down to the bottom line, I got tired of milking cows and my wife didn’t like taking care of chickens,” he told the students.

Godbersen confided in a neighbor that he wanted to quit farming and build a motel in Springfield, Missouri. He had studied survey results which showed there would be a lot of activity in that area and that’s where he wanted to be. But that neighbor gave him some of the most important advice he’d probably ever get.

Godbersen recalled the advice the neighbor told him: “Young, man, I’m going to give you a little advice. You don’t know anything about the motel business and there’s probably a lot of other things you don’t know anything about too. I’ve watched you tinker with farm machinery – you’re good at it. You act like you like it. Now why don’t you do something you like?”

Godbersen slept on that advice for several days and decided because no one had ever come out with a good one, he would build a hydraulic hoist for farm wagons. It took him six weeks to build the first one, and it worked. He went to work on the second one, which was even better.

“(The second hoist) was just about right,” he recalled, “but I thought I could do better. I didn’t give up.”

He showed the hoist to a machine shop owner in Ida Grove, Russell Coil, who helped him perfect the hoist. Weighing less than 200 pounds, the hoist was capable of dumping over five tons of grain. Godbersen continued to farm that year and also continued work on the hoist.

“There were weeks that I never saw the children,” he remembered. “It took a lot of work and a lot of effort, but I was determined to do this.”

Godbersen told about the day he went on his first sales call, driving past a number of farm dealerships before he had the nerve to stop at one in Missouri Valley. He had installed one hoist on the bed of his small truck and put five others in the back. He got some farmers in the shop interested in the hoists and told them he’d made a few. Then, one farmer noticed that one hoist had the number one for a serial number. Byron had to confess he was a farmer who had just built a couple of the hoists in his spare time.

“Everything I’ve got is right here, they don’t dare fail,” he recalled telling the farmers. “If they fail, I fail, and I’ve got everything I’ve ever worked for on the line here.”

He sold two hoists to one of the farmers that day, but Godbersen said he learned a little lesson he's ever forgotten.

"Of all the items we build at Midwest Industries, I can assure you of one thing," he told the group. "You will never buy anything as long as I'm around that starts with a serial number less than 1,000."

Things went better after that, Godbersen said. Later he came up with an idea for a better boat hoist while vacationing in Minnesota. He noticed how inefficient the hoists were around the lake where he was staying.

"I thought there's an opportunity and in life when you see an opportunity like that, you've got to grab it," he said. "I didn't know anything about boating or boat hoists...but I recognized the problems right away."

He went home and designed a hoist he later showed at the Minneapolis Trade Show.

"This is the way it's gone," Godbersen said. "It really helps to have a great bunch of employees. I'm a firm believer in giving people a chance to help you."

Buena Vista students and faculty learned last week that setting goals has been a key to Godbersen's success as an entrepreneur.

"We set goals, we don't set limits," he said. Not understanding a project does not hold him back. Godbersen set an example: "An aeronautical engineer will tell you that a bumblebee does not have enough wing area to fly. But since the bee doesn't know that, he just keeps right on doing it.

"That's what drove me on – I just kept going. I didn't know what my limits were, and I hope I never find out."

In under five years, the sales volume at Midwest increased over 1,000 percent.

"Thank God I was in the marine business, though," Godbersen said. "The farm equipment business has disappeared before our very eyes."

Godbersen pointed out that resting at the top can prove to be a fatal mistake, however.

"Lots of people think once you've got a place like that, you've got it made, it's a breeze from here on in and you only have to put forth effort one time. But that's not quite the way it is," he told the group.

Currently two Fortune 500 boat companies are in a duel to see who will control the marine business and are buying up all the big boat companies.

“I’ve told my, people, so that happens – but when it’s all said and done, there’s going to be one boat trailer company left and they’re going to know who it is.

“This is our attitude...if we have to, we’ll develop another product. We’ll do what we have to to survive,” Godbersen said.

Godbersen looks to his hardships during the early years of his life as a major reason why he’s learned to survive and become successful.

“It helps to have had to endure hardships – there’s something about that. It brings out the good in people; it brings out of them what they don’t even realize they had.

“People that haven’t had to endure hardship, it’s a little tougher for them. Things have been easy up to now, and I think it’s only fair to warn them that it won’t be as easy because there’s obstacles out there.”

The Ida Grove industrialist told the group that putting forth a good honest effort is important.

“No one is a born winner or born loser. What really determines it is how the game is played and how you play it,” he said. “What it will be is the sweat and the effort that you give – that’s what is going to run up the score.”

Godbersen added that making mistakes is a part of the game, as well.

“Everybody has a fear of making mistakes – I’ve sure made my share of mistakes. But, I’ve also learned that a blundering mistake can be turned into an accomplishment. I acquire knowledge from it and do not make it a second time.

“I don’t advocate that you throw caution to the wind, but if you prepare yourself for a task, then are afraid to try for fear you might fail, then you’ve already failed.”

Before closing his address Tuesday, Godbersen touched on the rewards of a successful career.

“Money is probably one of the strongest influences in this world. It probably shouldn’t be that way, but it is. But at the same time, a man’s attitude toward money contributes so much to his happiness,” he commented. “People living beyond their means causes more hardships than anything else I can think of. If you can’t manage your financial affairs so you can live within your means, you’re headed down a one way street.”

Godbersen told the students to remember that peace comes from enjoying what you have – and by losing the desire for things you can’t have. He said a pet peeve of his is installment buying. He pointed out if one can’t afford something – except student loans, a home and other necessities – why pay the full price plus interest?

“If you save your money, it gives you a lot of time to think about whether or not you really need it.

“If riches ever come your way, you better prepare yourself to be big enough to handle it or you’d be better off if you’d never seen it,” Godbersen warned the group. “Money seems to have a destructive and diverse effect on people who can’t handle it. It will swell their head and shrink their heart. Some will be very rich, yet very poor. They may have a lot of money, but it won’t buy what they really need.”

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*This article originally ran in the May 12, 2003 issue of the Sioux City Journal and was written by Julie Weeder, a staff writer.*

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## **Ida Grove Inventor Godbersen Dies**

By Julie Reeder, Staff Writer

Byron Godbersen, the business entrepreneur and inventor who influenced Ida Grove, Iowa's, castle architecture, died Sunday at his home. He was 78.

Godbersen, who was born in a small farmhouse outside Mapleton, Iowa, became CEO of two companies and philanthropist to the Ida Grove community, the town where he built his businesses.

“He was an incredible man,” Godbersen’s son-in-law, Andy Brosius, said Sunday. “He probably did more in his lifetime than any 10 people if you look at all the things he created. He was an incredibly creative man and he used his talents in an amazing way. He will be missed tremendously.”

Godbersen returned to the family farm after serving as a paratrooper in World War II. While farming, Godbersen came up with his first of many inventions – a hydraulic hoist for farm wagons.

“His genius was innovations – that’s what he enjoyed doing. If he saw a need for something, like a wagon hoist, he developed a wagon hoist. If he saw a need for a boat hoist, he developed a boat hoist,” said Roger Harrington, vice president and secretary/treasurer of Midwest Industries Inc., and employee for 34 years.

Midwest Industries is the business Godbersen founded in 1954. The company expanded to include a variety of tillage equipment and other farm products. By the early 1970s, the business had ventured into Godbersen’s interests in boating. He soon debuted his latest invention, ShoreLand’r Boat Trailers, which accompanied his already-successful ShoreStation Boat Hoist. Today, the business focuses primarily in marine products.

“He had a very talented eye on engineering – probably as good as anyone I’ve ever seen at that,” said Carl Ulshafer, who worked for Godbersen for 32 years. “He had more of a gut feeling than a

brain feeling at doing things. He had a sense for business that was remarkable. And he was fun and enjoyable to be around.”

In 1976, Godbersen adopted another interest – Remote Controlled (RC) model airplanes. That interest developed into his second business, Byron Originals Inc., which manufactured Godbersen’s own line of RC planes.

Today, Byron Originals does fuel blending and injection molding for model airplanes. To promote the airplanes, he held demonstrations and shows for modelers. In 1982, Godbersen introduced the five-day Byron’s Aviation Expo. The annual air show eventually outgrew Ida Grove and was purchased and moved to Ankeny, Iowa, in 1992.

Over the years, Godbersen donated land for the Ida Grove School’s track and football facility, donated money for the development of the Ida Grove Country Club and gave the Skate Palace to the American Legion. Godbersen built the Ida Grove Airport, which he later sold to the city for a modest sum.

“He was very generous to this community. His mark will be here forever,” Harrington said. “He liked this area and was committed to it. His roots were here.”

It’s difficult to turn a corner in the Ida Grove kingdom without seeing Godbersen’s influence – from the stone towered suspension bridge that spans Odebolt Creek to the castle-themed buildings of the Ida County Courier, American Legion/Skate Palace, Ida Grove Country Club and city markers welcoming visitors.

“I know the community will miss him,” Ida Grove Mayor Dennis Ernst said Sunday. “He was definitely a generous man. People used to say, ‘Orlando has Disney World and we have Byron.’”

Godbersen could have moved his successful companies to larger venues, but instead he chose to stay in Ida Grove, Ernst said.

“Midwest Industries and Byron Originals employ a lot of people and are great companies to work at,” he said. “He took pride in his people. He stayed in the area, promoted the town, kept the people here and gave a lot of people a lot of chances. (His death) is a loss to the community. He will be missed.”

Godbersen’s awards include being named the Iowa Small Businessman of the Year and the National Small Businessman of the Year, both in 1973. In 1974, he became the first recipient of the Albert Gallatin award, named after the late Secretary of the Treasurer under Presidents Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. Gallatin was also a small businessman. In 1996, Godbersen was inducted into the Iowa Investors Hall of Fame, which honors Iowans for innovations that have enhanced the lives of others.

Godbersen had patented some 50 inventions, including 25 patents from 1990 to 1996. At that time, Godbersen held more patents than any other individual in Iowa. The National Marine

Manufacturers Association, in 1999, awarded Godbersen the prestigious Alan J. Freeman Award for his lifelong contributions to the marine industry.

Godbersen is survived by his wife, LaJune, and five children, all of whom live and are raising their families in the Ida Grove area.

“He was a very driven man. He set goals and he went hard after them,” Brosius said. “That’s part of his success. It was a great adventure and experience working with him and knowing him. I feel pretty fortunate to have had that opportunity.”

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