

Constructing a Legacy: The Weitz Company and the Family Who Built It

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of profiles covers three prominent figures associated with entertainment and communications: Harrison Gray Otis, publisher of the *Los Angeles Times*, early filmmaker Carl Laemmle, and the ultimate entertainer, William F. Cody.

It is easy to see that Anschutz admires his subjects; although he notes foibles and mistakes, their accomplishments are his focus. He praises John Evans, appointed Colorado Territory's governor in 1862, for his efforts in developing Denver and the region, but he sidesteps the governor's complicity in the Sand Creek Massacre.

This book is easy to criticize: Anschutz's view of history can be as simplistic as it is insightful; his choices can be questioned (why Samuel Colt and not Oliver Winchester?); his sources need updating; there is some sloppy editing in the bibliographies; and he is prone to overstatement. But it is a handsome book with sturdy pages and colorful art, and it contains more than one gem in his list of favorites. For readers interested in American entrepreneurs, Anschutz provides a starting point; despite its drawbacks, the book is worth having on the shelf.

Constructing a Legacy: The Weitz Company and the Family Who Built It, by William B. Friedrichs. Des Moines: Business Publications Corp., 2015. xviii, 311 pp. Illustrations, note on sources, notes, index. \$20.00 paperback.

Reviewer Bill Silag, a former editor of the *Palimpsest*, is working on a biography of Iowa author Ruth Suckow.

Charles Weitz was 30 years old in 1855 when he and his wife arrived in Des Moines, the newly designated state capital. Charles found work as a carpenter and soon opened his own shop. Business was spotty at first — rail service to Des Moines was still years away — but Weitz believed in Des Moines's metropolitan future, so he kept up with his modest trade, started a family, and got to know the local landscape. The arrival of the railroads in the late 1860s sparked a long-awaited economic boom that continued mostly without interruption until the 1890s. Charles Weitz was in the middle of much of that urban development, as were his grown sons, including Frederick Wilhelm, born in 1867, who would succeed his father as CEO of the family's construction business in 1903.

Author William Friedrichs explains the firm's longevity in terms of family character: "The Weitz family itself was a key reason for the company's success," he contends. "Beginning with Charles, the [Weitz] clan created a strong familial stake in the company, and then, over the generations, identified and developed family members with a passion and talent for running the firm" (xi-xii).

Much of the book's text focuses on the Weitz Company's ongoing efforts to develop new markets and new relationships with various government agencies. But especially interesting are the author's discussions regarding succession at the executive level. As a child in Germany in the 1830s, Charles Weitz apparently understood from an early age that his birth family's weaving business was not large enough to ensure employment for every family member—several of Charles's siblings were already at work in the family business—and likely he would be on his own when the time came to earn a living. Decades later, as a successful business owner in Des Moines, Charles decided to do better by his own heirs. He had come to see each family member as a stakeholder in the primary mission of the family—the economic survival of the Weitz family itself. The building company would be his legacy to future Weitz generations, secured by the continuing financial success of the family enterprise.

Charles's son, Frederick Wilhelm, began to take charge of the day-to-day administration of the company in the 1880s, adhering to a long-term business plan devised under his father's direction. The plan emphasized construction of large commercial structures, such as grain storage bins and office buildings, along with the local post-office construction projects Weitz had been doing for years within and increasingly beyond Iowa's borders. By the turn of the twentieth century, government contracts had become a major source of Weitz company income.

Each of the Weitz men who served as CEO of the company had his own goals, but presumably a major element of the succession process had to do with achieving a family consensus regarding the aspiring CEO's goals moving forward. For Frederick Wilhelm Weitz (CEO 1906–1935), the emphasis was on winning contracts for government buildings; Rudolph (Rudy) Weitz (CEO 1935–1974) was associated with FHA-financed apartment complexes. But Rudy's son, Frederick William (Fred) Weitz (CEO 1974–1995), who found his niche in the construction and management of retirement communities, had other changes in mind as well; he proposed selling shares in the Weitz Company to company employees in a process that would eventually lead to complete employee ownership. The Weitz family accepted Fred's proposal, the work of restructuring the company commenced, and beginning in 1995 the Weitz Company was employee-owned and operated.

The new firm had two divisions, one for the construction and management of continuing-care retirement communities, the other for general construction. In the new firm's first decade, both divisions did well, but in its second decade the general construction division—the core of

the original Weitz Company – began to have trouble, “dragged down by the deep recession that began in 2007” (xviii). Finally, in 2012, the general construction division of the Weitz Company was sold to a multinational corporation based in Egypt. The retirement community division of the company continues to thrive.

Friedricks writes in a style that is informative and reader-friendly. His sources include interviews with Weitz officials and family members, company documents, and construction industry publications. Dozens of black-and-white photos document some of the Weitz company’s project outcomes and their impact on Des Moines’s built environment, as well as the range of its domestic and international activity. Overall, *Constructing a Legacy* is an excellent company history, focusing on a fascinating family story that will appeal to specialists and general readers alike.

Still Turning: A History of Aeromotor Windmills, by Christopher C. Gillis. Tarleton State University Southwestern Studies in the Humanities Series. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2015. xviii, 274 pp. Illustrations, appendix, notes, glossary, bibliography, index. \$35.00 hardcover.

Reviewer Derek Oden is associate professor of history at Del Mar College in Corpus Christi, Texas. He is the author of “Perils of Production: Farm Hazards, Family Farming, and the Mechanization of the Corn Belt, 1940–1980” (*Annals of Iowa*, 2014).

Christopher Gillis’s interest in windmills reaches back decades, and his vast knowledge is clearly evident throughout his outstanding book, *Still Turning*, which tells the story of Aeromotor, one of the industry’s best-known names. Those looking for an expansive treatment of the many dimensions of windmill technology might find the book unsatisfying. However, readers will discover that *Still Turning* is meticulously researched and an exceedingly worthwhile company history.

Gillis begins by discussing the inventive ways people employed windmills to drain wetlands, obtain salt, and pump ground water. Such efforts eventually led to developing “water-pumping windmills” that were “relatively easy to erect, durable, and able to run with minimal maintenance” (16). He then examines the company’s origins in the late 1880s and its rise as a major windmill manufacturer. He also chronicles the many challenges company leaders overcame throughout the corporation’s history. Today, Aeromotor is the only surviving U.S.-based company that manufactures a “mechanical water-pumping windmill” (196). In 1919, however, there were 31 such companies (101). Gillis’s work fully explains the many factors that led to the industry’s present state.