

**2023 Kansas Business Hall of Fame
Student Essay Contest Entry**

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Member:

Warren Bechtel

Historical Honoree

1997

The Hoover Dam, Scouting's Summit Bechtel Reserve, and mass transit in San Francisco—what do these three projects have in common? They all stemmed from the hard work of Warren Augustine Bechtel, the Kansas Business Hall of Fame Historical Honoree of 1997.

Bechtel came from humble beginnings and was born on a family farm in Illinois on September 12, 1872, to John Moyer and Elizabeth Bentz Bechtel. Bechtel moved with his family in 1884 to Peabody, Kansas, where they ran another farm and a grocery store.

After graduating high school, Bechtel briefly attempted a career as a traveling trombonist, joining an ensemble of performers called the Ladies Band. However, as the *New York Times* mentioned, "Either the music of the ladies' band was very bad or the Western audiences were lacking in appreciation." When this career path ended, Bechtel returned to the family farm.

At age 25, Bechtel's wife Clara was pregnant, and the family cattle ranch was nearing bankruptcy. Bechtel and his wife moved so he could work for the Chicago Rock Island and Peoria Railway Company, grading railbeds for frontier train lines. Bechtel continued working in various labor positions for the rail industry, leading to many projects just waiting to be started.

Through these projects, Bechtel accumulated a small fortune and formed the W.A. Bechtel Company with his three sons and brother. The young company began many new ventures, including constructing the Northern California Highway and the Nowman Dam, the world's second-largest rock-fill dam. By the time the company was incorporated in 1925, Bechtel Co. was the largest construction firm in the western U.S. It would later become the most prominent construction and engineering firm in the entire country while remaining family-controlled.

Bechtel became the president of a consortium called Six Companies, Inc. when the group received the \$49 million contract to construct the Hoover Dam. The dam was the largest engineering project of its kind in the world. The contract called for a dam 730 feet high and 660 feet thick at its base, forming an artificial lake 115 miles long, the largest in the world. Work on the enormous dam lasted from 1931 to 1936, but Bechtel did not live to see the project completed. He died unexpectedly due to an insulin overdose in Moscow in 1933.

While Warren Bechtel could not continue along his company's journey, he left it in great hands with his family members. His son, Stephen D. Bechtel, Sr., took over the

company after his death, and the company has remained under the control of the Bechtel family since then. It expanded under Stephen, president until 1960 and chairman until 1965. After World War II, Bechtel moved into nuclear power, mining, chemical and petrochemical plants, food and paper mills, and land management.

Warren Bechtel's incredible wealth continues to make an impact today, passed down through generations. Namely, his grandson, Stephen D. Bechtel, Jr., donated \$50 million to the Boy Scouts of America to purchase and develop the land for the new Summit Bechtel Family National Scout Reserve. The Reserve hosts the National Scout jamboree every four years and serves as a high adventure and training camp in non-jamboree years. This donation allows the generational wealth created initially by Warren Bechtel's efforts to impact tens of thousands of young adults annually.

In addition, Bechtel Corporation, as it is known today, still works on many construction projects worldwide. For example, they conducted a joint operation to create San Francisco's Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART). This operation involved the creation of a 3.6-mile underwater passage meticulously assembled in 57 sections that now serves as part of the country's seventh-largest heavy rail rapid transit system.

Through hard work and dedication, Warren Bechtel laid the foundation for a corporation that continues to amaze the world through innovation in construction. His efforts paved the way for a legacy of innovation from his family lineage that continues into the present day. Bechtel's incredible contributions to the economies of Kansas, the United States, and the world are why he inspires me more than any other Kansas Business Hall of Fame member.

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