

# HANDLING THE PRESSURE:

## HOOPER CONCRETE PIPE CO.

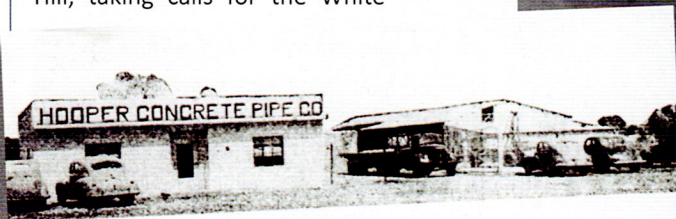
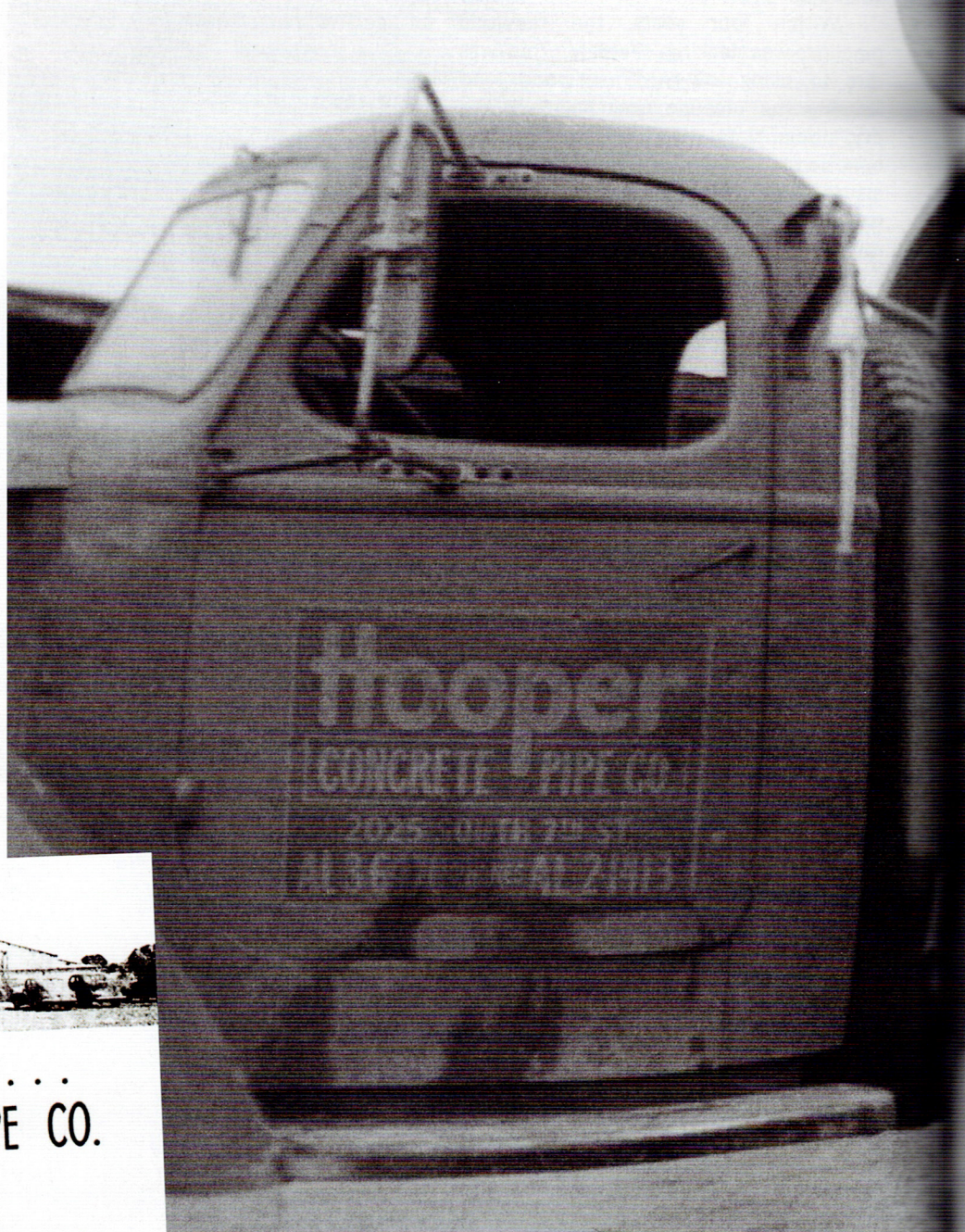
*Carly Hanson*

**T**here's an impressive construction legacy at a new industrial park near I-17 and South Seventh Street. At the site in 1946, Oliver "Chick" Hooper launched Hooper Concrete Pipe Co. which manufactured concrete pipe for irrigation, sewers, storm drains, culverts, and aqueducts.

The company would go on to create the strongest, highest-quality pipes that were used in vital aqueducts supplying water to much of the Southwest. How did Oliver Hooper go from a humble Midwest childhood to becoming the go-to guy for pipe in the region?

Born in 1902, Oliver Hooper grew up with two sisters and two brothers playing tackle football without padding on frozen ground in Wisconsin and South Dakota. "Broken shoulder bones were quite common," said Bill Hooper, Oliver's son. "Coal dust on the white ice marked the field boundaries."

The three brothers went to college at Washington D.C., with the oldest, Lee, studying law. While attending George Washington University, Hooper earned money as a telephone operator on Capitol Hill, taking calls for the White



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House and Congressional offices. "My dad and brother, Al, then decided to go west to California," Bill said. "They had a tired Ford Model T and left in the dead of winter from Wisconsin." The two brothers navigated the primitive two-lane

highways using road signs and an atlas, and camped in a makeshift tent.

They arrived in Los Angeles in 1927, and got a boost by selling the patent for an invention Al had developed: a snap-on irrigation valve that's still used on golf courses. "The two were very accomplished surveyors and land-development engineers, as they had to make their way doing that while Lee was getting his law degree,"

Bill said. "They surveyed a great number of Los Angeles

**Right:** Oliver Hooper in 1955.

**Left:** Company advertisement, 1946.



Image courtesy of Chuck Runbeck

subdivisions and started doing golf courses as a specialty."

Oliver Hooper spent almost the next two decades in supervising and engineering positions. During World War II he constructed concrete runways for the U.S. Army Air Corps and expanded Fort Ord in California and Fort Huachuca in Arizona. From 1943-1944, Hooper worked as a general superintendent and estimating engineer for Vinson and Pringle Construction Company in Phoenix. After acquiring and

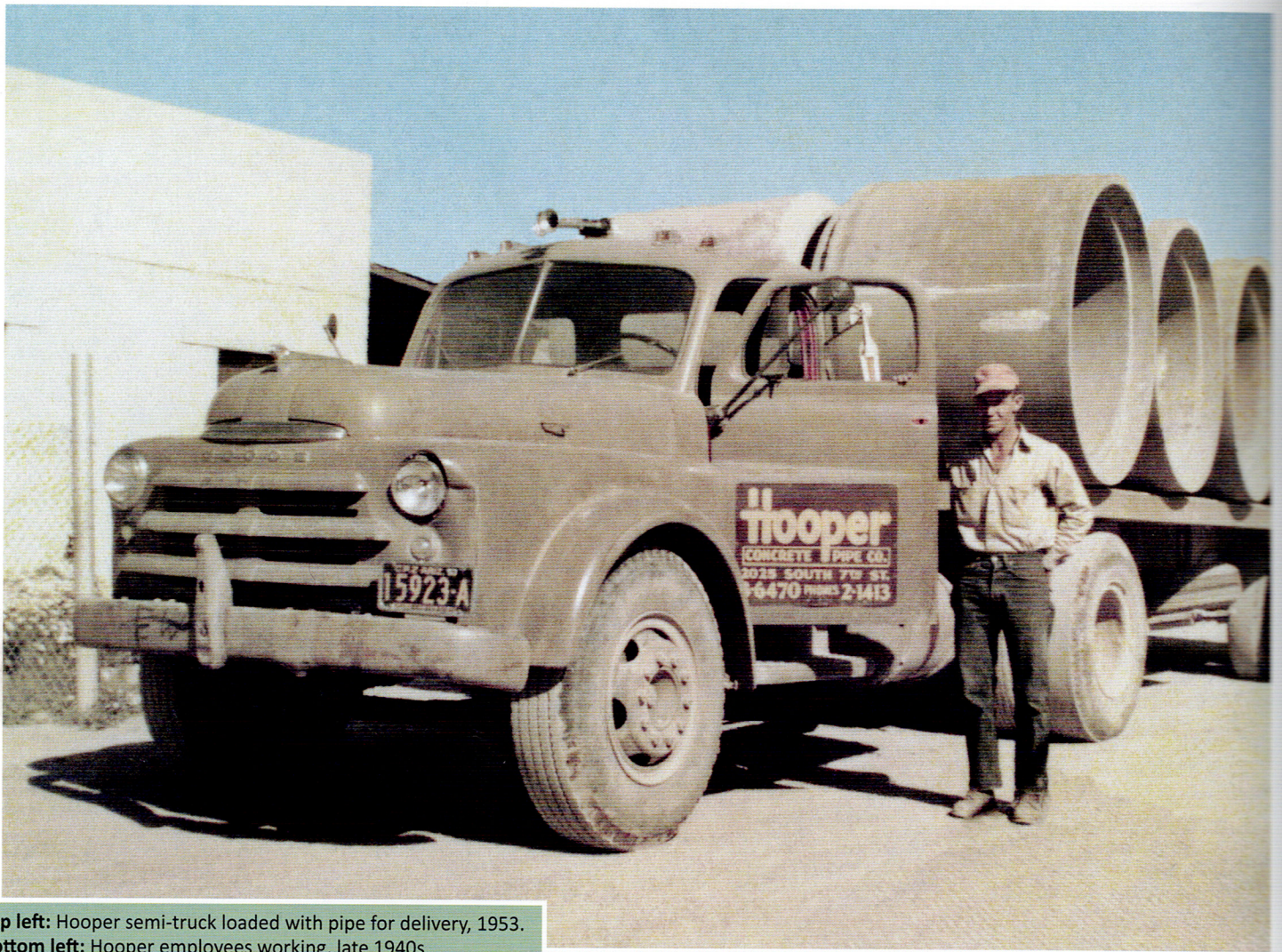
selling his interest in Arizona Concrete Pipe Co. in 1944, he launched Hooper Pipe.

Hooper's plant started in a 125-by-40-foot building, manufacturing concrete pipe from a few to 60 inches in diameter. Bill worked for his father at the plant during summer breaks from 1949 to 1951, and then for a few years full-time. Bill's favorite memory is Hooper giving each employee a free turkey for Thanksgiving and Christmas. "I remember this mostly because when I was employed there, the task of getting

about 125 turkeys from the local supplier into a truck and transporting them to the office usually fell to me," Bill said.

Hooper's nephew and Bill's cousin, Chuck Runbeck, also started at Hooper Pipe in 1949. "I used to stand out there in the back with hoses because all the pipe needed to be watered down. It was a long and messy job," he chuckled.

Runbeck was impressed by Hooper. "He was a very respected person because he was straight with everybody," he says.



**Top left:** Hooper semi-truck loaded with pipe for delivery, 1953.

**Bottom left:** Hooper employees working, late 1940s.

**Bottom right:** Hooper Pipe installing 48-inch discharge storm pipe at the Naval Air Station Litchfield Park, 1953.

Runbeck recalled a time in 1953 when he and his wife had just started their own business, and money was tight. Hooper had lunch with him and noticed Runbeck's car was missing a door on its passenger side. After lunch, Hooper took him to a nearby used-car lot and bought him another vehicle. "It was in a lot better shape than the piece of junk I had," Runbeck said. "It was just the type of man he was."

Hooper expanded the plant in 1952 and introduced a new high-pressure pipe that he called the strongest in the country. The new

pipe replaced the method of cementing sections of pipe together by instead using a rubber gasket that would withstand the same high pressures as the pipe itself. Testing proved the pipe could handle a

700-foot head of force, while ordinary cast pipe like that used for irrigation, would only withstand a 25 or 30-foot head.

Hooper wrote a letter to his employees in 1956, detailing his merger with American Pipe and Construction Company (aka



Images courtesy of Bill Hooper

Ameron), which had plants in Los Angeles, San Diego, San Francisco, Portland, Dallas, and several South American countries. "They expect everyone, including myself, to continue in their present capacity," he wrote. "I feel that the Hooper Concrete Pipe Co., under the new ownership, will be able to expand and progress much faster and give us all a greater opportunity for advancement in the future."

Ameron requested that Hooper move to California as vice president and manager of the Hooper Concrete Pipe subsidiary to oversee the Metropolitan Water District Siphon Project. The objective was a \$200 million expansion program that would bring additional water into Southern California through the Colorado River Aqueduct. The general manager and chief engineer of the Metropolitan Water District declared it "one of the largest engineering, pipe fabrication and installation projects ever to be undertaken in Southern California," in an article in *Colorado River Aqueduct News* in 1957.

Hooper was responsible for transporting and installing 63,000 feet of the largest pipe sections ever manufactured: 16-foot long pipe segments weighing 68 tons each (for more details, see BTOP, page 42). "The board of directors was skeptical concerning the 'handling' of these gigantic pipe joints and remarked that nothing this massive had ever been routinely manufactured and delivered to the job site for installation," Bill said. "Even one joint on a semi-trailer would exceed the weight limit for the highways along the proposed route."

The initial question was how would the joints be tipped horizontally for transportation and installation. When called to a board meeting, Hooper requested a water glass, string, and scissors. He demonstrated how the project would be carried out by tying the string around the center of the water glass, with two pieces hanging at each side. "Picking up most of the weight of the glass, he then pulled it slowly over using the side strings and lowered it gently to the table," Bill said. Hooper's point: A Cat D8 Sideboom with the boom straight up could safely lift and walk with 120,000 pounds; a Cat on each side could lift and tip the joint.

The board then wondered how the pipes could be laid in trenches with enough accuracy to connect the gaskets between each joint. Hooper described a vehicle that would crawl through the horizontal pipe joints, then raise each one off the ground and into position. Then, precision hydraulics would make final adjustments to align

the pipe gaskets. Thus, the "Pipemobile" was born. "He got this idea from lifting heavy furniture at home by crawling under a dining room table, for example, and then proceeding to move the load to a new location by raising up his back to lift the table," Bill said. By the end of Hooper's demonstration, the board knew he was the right person for the job.

Hooper later managed pipeline projects in Trinidad, Mexico, Japan, Australia, and South America before retiring.

In 2002, Bill sent a letter to the White House, requesting a note for his father's

100th birthday. A delayed, but much appreciated greeting was received:

"Happy Birthday! Laura joins me in sending best wishes for your 100th birthday. You have led a remarkable life that is great in accomplishments and great in years! We join your family and friends in wishing you a wonderful celebration. May you be surrounded by the warmth of happy memories and secure in the knowledge that you have made this world a better place."

George W. Bush. ☐



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