

SNIPPETS ON THE LEGACY OF DR. FRED EIDSNESS (1913-2003)

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Dr. Fred Eidsness was one of the three founders of the Florida-based consulting firm Black, Crow & Eidsness (BC&E), which was acquired by CH2M HILL in 1977. Many CHAA members recall “Dr. Fred” as an unforgettable man, known by his colorful personality and big, black patch over one eye.

Here are a few tidbits from the life and times of Dr. Fred, aka “Big Fred,” aka “Ole One-Eye.” His son, Eric Eidsness, and colleague, Dick Bedard, are primary sources of information, along with my memories of him from working in Florida in the 1980s and the stories I heard.

The Early Years

Fred’s potential appeared early in life when he became the nation’s youngest Eagle Scout at the time. Later, he entered medical school but had to drop out after his father, M. L. Eidsness, was laid off from the U.S. Postal Service. Incidentally, his father created the very popular “First Day Issue” stamp concept while employed at the USPS.

Fred entered William and Mary College, where he earned both BS and MS degrees in Biology. Not content to be just a scientist, Fred produced, directed, and starred in musicals while in college, where he also met and courted his one and only wife, Judy. After college he made use of his technical skills and effervescent personality to become a top salesman for Infilco-Degremont, Inc. (IDI), a global manufacturer of water and wastewater treatment equipment.

Creating a Powerhouse

In 1951 Fred, Bill Crow, and Dr. A.P. (Doc) Black co-founded BC&E, which became a powerhouse water engineering company in Florida and the Southeast. In the beginning, Doc Black was chief scientist of the company, Bill Crow managed engineering, administration, and finance, and Fred was the head of technology and marketing. Due in large part to Fred’s role as BC&E’s consummate salesman, the firm’s geographic reach expanded as far south as Cuba and as far north as Dayton, Ohio. In 1957, he earned a PhD in chemistry at the University of Florida and from then on became known as “Dr. Fred.”



Thanks to Dr. Fred’s international contacts from his days at IDI, BC&E did some work in Cuba prior to the fall of the Batista regime in 1959. Many talented Cuban engineers fled the country when Castro’s Communist party took over, and Dr. Fred recruited several of them to BC&E.

This photo, taken about 1957, shows Dr. Fred, two colleagues, and a Florida client starting a business trip to Cuba. The men, from left to right, are John R. Kelley (Gainesville, Florida Utilities Director), Dr. Fred, Charlie Black (BC&E head of public relations and son of Doc Black), and Doc Black. The train left the Waldo Station in Florida, bound for Miami. From there, the travelers flew on to Cuba.

As a young engineer in CH2M HILL’s Gainesville office in the 1980s, I received outstanding technical guidance from two of his Cuban recruits, Manuel Carreno, and Manuel Vilaret. Another one of his top Cuban recruits, Dr. Ignacio Garcia-Bengochea (who passed away in 2023),

developed the concept of deep-well injection of wastewater effluent to improve and preserve surface water quality in South Florida.

The Stuff of Legend

Many stories have been told about Dr. Fred. He was a flashy dresser with a brash and over-confident demeanor that could initially put off some clients. BC&E's first interview in South Carolina was in the late 1960s and would involve BC&E in the creation of the Grand Strand Water & Sewer Authority (WSA). Bob Ghiotto cautioned Dr. Fred about his language, as one member of the Authority was a Baptist minister who, coincidentally had also lost an eye. As members of the WSA deliberated among themselves after the presentation, Dr. Fred overheard the minister grumbling to his colleagues about "that loud-talking, Cadillac-driving, Florida salesman in his \$500 suit," to which Dr. Fred immediately retorted, "That just goes to show that you can't believe ANY one-eyed son-of-a-bitch!" The Baptist minister almost fell out of his chair laughing, BC&E won the job, and the Grand Strand WSA became a client of BC&E and CH2M HILL for years afterward.

An interview for another client started about an hour behind schedule one long evening, partially due to long and fancy presentations during preceding interviews by BC&E's competitors. Sensing that most folks in the room were ready to go home, Dr. Fred gave perhaps his shortest presentation ever, saying, "We don't have a movie; I didn't bring a brochure or pretty pictures; if you want to know how good we are, don't ask me because I'll lie. Ask our clients, and here is a list of their names and phone numbers. END OF PRESENTATION!" BC&E won the project in a unanimous vote.

Dr. Fred had lost his right eye in 1962 as an unplanned consequence of two operations to remove sinus cancer. The real story about his eye patch is the courage Dr. Fred showed in adapting his life to having just one eye. As son Eric recalls, "He continued to play golf, fish, and never complained about it that I ever heard. At least outwardly, he showed little sign that it handicapped him in any way. It did, of course, but he always covered his discomfort with humor."

Dr. Fred understood water science at the molecular level and held several patents. He also received highest awards from the Water Pollution Control Federation, the American Water Works Association, and the International Water Association. Less than a year after the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA's) founding in 1970, Dr. Fred wrote a newspaper article criticizing the Nixon Administration's choices for its political appointees to the EPA, arguing that EPA administrators should be experts with scientific and engineering backgrounds, rather than lawyers as most of them were. He was not afraid to express his controversial opinions, which endeared him to many BC&E clients.

I once managed an engineering study for the Village of Palm Springs (Florida) Water Treatment Plant. My role involved herding an assortment of CH2M HILL cats to evaluate the whole facility and report our recommendations. One "ole tomcat" who showed up to our site visit by surprise was Dr. Fred himself, a long-time friend of the client. They were having problems with the facility's chlorination system, a vendor package that they could not get to operate as intended. I watched as Dr. Fred took no more than a 5-second look at the control panel; then I heard him growl, "Shut the son-of-a-bitch down, it'll never work!" This saved the client several thousand dollars by deleting it from our evaluation. Instead, we covered it in one sentence: "The facility's disinfection system needs to be replaced in its entirety." Dr. Fred's snap judgments like this one were always on target and endeared him to so many clients. As a bonus in this case, we got to follow our report with the design of major renovations and improvements to the facility.

Dr. Fred was also proud of his son, Frederic Jr., who rose quickly through EPA's ranks. When Junior met with local officials he was often greeted with, "Dr. Eidsness, I thought you were a much older man with an eye patch!" Thus, Freddy dropped the Fred from his name and became Eric Eidsness to distinguish himself from his famous father. Eric learned and adopted Big Fred's view of the federal government, usually expressed as, "They have all the answers but don't know the questions."

Role in CH2M HILL Expansion

In the mid-1970s, Dr. Fred initiated the deal for CH2M HILL to acquire BC&E from Hercules Chemical Company. A few years earlier, Hercules had acquired BC&E to diversify its holdings but concluded after owning BC&E for several years that

it was not a good fit. As a result, they looked for opportunities to divest themselves of BC&E. Dr. Fred started negotiations by ringing up Holly Cornell out of the blue and asking him, “Hey, do you want to buy a great engineering company on the cheap?” Thus started the deal that closed in 1977 and completed CH2M HILL’s nationwide presence.

Dick Bedard joined CH2M HILL in 1981 to lead its Southeast Florida business, and his office in Boca Raton was next to Dr. Fred’s office. Dick soon realized being near Dr. Fred was akin to getting a PhD in Florida engineering and politics. Dr. Fred knew where the bodies were buried, partly because he had buried many of them! He was fully retired by then but still showed up most days to coach Dick and his colleagues as they navigated the Southeast Florida engineering market. One of his favorite sayings was “Bedard, they’re all IDIOTS.” If you haven’t surmised it by now, Dr. Fred could be a bit opinionated.



About the same time, I was working out of our Boca Raton office and heard Dr. Fred’s booming, uncensored voice as he was talking on the phone. A colleague quickly warned me, “What you overhear from Dr. Fred needs to stay right here.” Then there was The Sailfish. Dr. Fred had once caught a beautiful sailfish and proudly mounted it on his office wall. That fish had at least nine lives. Over the years, it was dropped, banged around, and bruised numerous times. And every time, it was fixed at CH2M HILL’s expense. So, here’s a belated thanks to you, members of the CHAA, for saving Dr. Fred’s Sailfish.

May The Sailfish and Dr. Fred continue to fight it out in the afterlife!

If you’d like to read more stories of Fred’s wild sense of humor, business savvy, antics, gruff charm, and overall politically incorrect approach to dealing with people, click on this link:

<https://ch2mhillalumni.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Fred-Eidsness-True-Stories.pdf>.

Notice: some of the stories include crude and potentially offensive language used by Fred.