Pearsall Biography

Duane Pearsall

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Pearsall biography

Duane Pearsall was born in Pontiac, Michigan in 1922. He entered the General Motors Technical Institute after graduating from high school in 1940. In Spring of 1942 he enrolled in a Civilian Pilot Training Program, and got his pilot's license. He enlisted in the Navy that summer and flew planes in the Navy Air Corps from 1942 to 1945, attaining the rank of lieutenant. He then enrolled at Denver University on the GI Bill, earning his bachelor's degree in general business in 1947.

He worked for the Honeywell Corp. for seven years, then founded the Pearsall Co., a manufacturer's representative for commercial climate control equipment.

In 1963, Mr. Pearsall started Statitrol Corporation, which among other things worked on controlling static. A working group discovered that the meter on the instrument they had designed would react every time anyone who was smoking came near it. This gave Mr. Pearsall the idea that this meter might work in smoke detectors. In 1966, Honeywell Corp, which made fire safety systems, gave Statitrol a contract to develop 15,000 smoke detectors for commercial use. In 1970, Mr. Pearsall and Lyman Blackwell, a local inventor, came up with an idea to make smoke detectors practical and affordable for homeowners. By 1977, when Mr. Pearsall sold Statitrol to Emerson Electric, 54 companies were making smoke detectors. Statitrol's invention is credited with saving many thousands of lives.

In 1976, President Gerald Ford presented Duane Pearsall with the National Small Business Person of the Year Award, and in 1980, the Society of Fire Protection Engineers recognized him as Fire Protection Man of the Year.

In 1980, Mr. Pearsall heard about WPI's new Fire Protection Engineering Program from FPE's director, David Lucht. He offered to match any gifts to the program, up to $10,000, for five years. This provided the impetus to get more financial support for the program in its early years. Mr. Pearsall was a charter member of the FPE Board of Advisors.

WPI honored Mr. Pearsall with an honorary doctorate and in 1987 named him the first recipient of the Center for Firesafety Studies Herrick Drake Commemorative Award. In 2004, WPI presented him with the WPI Presidential Medal.