

Ed Thompson - architect

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

Let's visit the tallest building in the world. It's located in the city of Dubai in the United Arab Emirates. The building is named the Burj Khalifa – sometimes called the Dubai Tower. When this incredibly impressive structure was built, who do you suppose was one of the lead architects? Would you believe, a man from rural Kansas? This is today's Kansas Profile.

Ed Thompson is a long-time architect who played a leading role in managing the design team for this amazing building. He grew up halfway around the globe from Dubai, in the middle of rural Kansas.

Ed is from the south central Kansas community of Pratt, although his family moved around because his father worked in the oilfield. They also lived at the rural communities of Ellis, population 1,852, and Wilson, population 791 people. Now, that's rural.

From an early age, Ed knew he wanted to be an architect. While in the school of architecture at K-State, Ed visited several architectural firms. One of them caught his eye, a Chicago-based firm known as Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill which did international commercial work. After graduation from K-State, Ed had the opportunity to join that very firm and spent a 40-year career there.

Ed married Susan who also came from Pratt. In fact, the same doctor delivered them. Ed and Susan would follow his career with Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill around the world. The company developed a specialty in fast-tracking large projects so that construction could begin while design continued. Ed's career would take him around the globe.

"You go where the opportunities are, following the economy," Ed said. His first big assignment was in Wichita where he worked on the design and construction of the Fourth Financial Center. After that, he helped open the company's office in Tehran. "It was fascinating," Ed said. "We wanted to immerse ourselves in the local culture. Susan even learned Farsi from going to the marketplace."

His career next took them to Texas – which, after all, is also a whole other country.... Ed worked on large banks and other buildings in Houston and Dallas.

Then they moved to London where he worked on the Liverpool Train Station and Canary Wharf. The train station was fascinating because it had to be built over the existing railroad tracks. Canary Wharf was a part of the London docklands which had been heavily bombed during World War II.

The Thompsons moved back to Chicago where he worked on the Trump Tower there. Another fascinating project was the world's tallest building, the Burj Khalifa. "Dubai wisely saw that the oil economy would eventually run out, so they wanted to convert their economy from oil to finance and tourism," Ed said. Construction of the tower became a centerpiece of that transformation.

The technical challenges were immense. "We were literally going where no one had gone before," Ed said. For example, no one had done wind readings at the height which the company was to be building or had pumped concrete to that level. "We drew upon the world's intellectual resources to help accomplish the project," Ed said.

Each challenge was surmounted and the building was finished in 2009. Standing 2,722 feet tall, it is based on huge piers which were drilled deep in the sandstone, topped by a twelve foot thick layer of concrete. Wow. The exterior of the building is constructed in a spiral design to counter the wind.

“There were lots of firsts in designing this building,” Ed said. According to one website, the building set sixteen different world records. Ed’s role was in managing the process. “It’s like being the leader of a symphony,” Ed said.

After retirement, Ed continues to consult with the firm. Eventually he and Susan moved back to Manhattan, Kansas, where their daughter lives with her husband and five children. “I like Kansas,” Ed said. “I like the people.”

It’s time to leave Dubai where we’ve been visiting the world’s tallest building. We commend architect Ed Thompson who is making a difference by giving leadership to these remarkable projects around the world. He has definitely taken his architectural career to new heights.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.