

Across the half century John Watson has devoted to engineering pursuits, the forward rush of science has amazed even the most levelheaded among us. Engineering grows exponentially more sophisticated and productive, the microchip supplying firm footing. Yet Watson believes it is people, finally, who build a profession. He has striven to become a generous investor in people, be they seasoned engineers, would-be students, or hourly employees.

A mechanical engineer who graduated from Auburn University in 1960, Watson is known statewide as a peerless mentor who delights in colleagues'—and future colleagues'—successes. Our engineering community today counts on Watson's multifaceted efforts to assist where assistance is requested. He is a long-standing supporter of engineering education, providing leadership and scholarships and recruiting meritorious high-school seniors; AU's John H. Watson Fieldhouse is an impressive indoor athletic facility erected by his design-build firm, Engineered Systems. He is chairman of Engineered Systems and of Smith's Inc., of Dothan, a company he became owner-president of in his 20s.

His role at Smith's began after his college co-op experiences at Redstone Arsenal and Fort Rucker and after completing service in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers as a second lieutenant in 1962. He interviewed for an advertised position at the Wiregrass's largest contract mechanical engineering firm. His ambition—expressed as desire to learn everything possible about the business—clearly engaged James M. Smith, company founder, who within four years groomed Watson to buy Smith's, even extending financing to support the 1970



JOHN HOLMAN WATSON

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final sale to Watson and two colleagues. Now enjoying freer rein, the Watson flair for engineering economics led to Smith's quick and marked diversification. Simple heating and air-conditioning contracts yielded to complex industrial ventures that, following the launch of Engineered Systems, were often completed in-house. Projects include the nation's largest latex glove manufactory; a cutting-edge baker's yeast plant representing one-seventh of the U.S. market; a camper manufactory;

a pelletized fuels plant; and a financial products company. The family of businesses has generated many jobs for Alabamians, often surpassing prevailing local wages. Watson's entrepreneurial engineering talents have thus changed lives, one reason the state's business hall of fame inducted him in 2004.

Watson is a foundation board member with the Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind, recently helping double its financial endowment. The institute's 2002 volunteer of the year, his most profound contribution there may be the newly constructed AIDB Wiregrass center for disabled infants, children, adults, and seniors. He now passionately supports the city of Dothan's campaign for a "Miracle Field," where disabled children will play baseball. A graduate of Leadership Alabama, Watson formerly chaired the Alabama Ethics Commission, served on the Alabama Industrial Relations Board, and was a board member of the Alabama Research Institute.

Watson and his wife, Gail Pearson Watson, are the parents of two and grandparents of six. They reside in Dothan, not far from the small communities they grew up in.