

## Contractor Ralph Korte recalls college days

When Ralph Korte was attending Saturday morning classes back in 1968 at what is now the campus of the Southern Illinois University School of Dental Medicine, little did he dream that one day one of the most advanced dental clinics in the state would rise on the empty lot next door, and that he would be its principal contractor.

The recently completed clinic, dedicated June 5, contains 33,798 square feet of space, including 72 general dental operatories, three oral surgery operatories, six oral diagnosis and emergency operatories, three demonstration operatories, and a waiting room with seating capacity for 71 patients.

The president of Ralph Korte Construction in Highland, a company which grossed well over \$80 million last year and promises to approach the \$90 million mark in 1987, remembers his years as a student at SIUE as if they were yesterday.

"I took two classes at the Alton campus. One was a physics laboratory on Saturday morning. The class met in the stone building next door to the new clinic," he said.

Did he ever believe that a building built by his company would be situated next door? "No! I had no idea when I graduated that our company would be as big as it is. Not in my wildest dreams."

To say that Ralph Korte is a self-made man is putting it mildly. Unlike many successful business executives who choose to discount their modest beginnings, Korte is tremendously respectful of his years on the farm and is quick to emphasize their influence on his life.

In early summer, he learned that Southern Illinois University, which only had a campus in Carbondale, was opening a branch at the Rock Junior High School in East St. Louis.

In order to take advantage of the educational benefits, he took a course that summer at Belleville Junior College and entered the University in the fall.

For the next nine years, he plodded along, running his construction business during the day and taking University classes at night, first in East St. Louis, and later at the Alton campus and the new campus in Edwardsville. "That's how I became a college



Ralph Korte

The Pocahontas youngster never went to high school. The Catholic elementary school in his neighborhood only went to the eighth grade, and the nearest high school was 10-12 miles away. "In those days, there were no truant officers to check up on you," he said.

Korte spent two years in the army. At his basic training camp, Korte learned about the General Education Development (G.E.D.) program. He decided to take the tests. While he doesn't remember his exact grade, Korte believes it was somewhere between 84 and 86 composite percentile.

Sixteen months of Korte's army stint were spent in Korea. Assigned to a post near the 38th Parallel, the young recruit had a lot of time on his hands.

graduate," he said.

Of the nine years he spent in getting his degree at SIUE, Korte said, "There are a lot of fond memories, particularly at the Alton campus. It was a more happy time because I saw the light at the end of the tunnel."

Korte is very proud of his college education, and rightfully so. "Learning how to delegate and manage has made the difference," he said.

What advice does the construction executive have for other young people just starting out? "Get a college degree! Today a college degree is as basic as a high school diploma was 30 years ago," he said. "Get a goal and

Most of his free time was spent at the post library, located in a squad tent.

It was here Korte met an enterprising young soldier who had been a civilian lawyer in Chicago who decided to teach a class in business law. "He knew that if he could get six persons to go to class, he would get paid for teaching them," Korte said. Korte signed up for it. "That's how I got hooked on education."

His Korean buddies convinced him that college was not out of his reach. It was the encouragement of these men, many of whom already had academic degrees, which influenced the direction of Korte's life in the years that followed.

The family plan was for Korte to take over the family farm when he returned home. However, his father had decided to delay his retirement several years.

"That changed the whole game plan," Korte said. His army experience in construction had advanced him far beyond dairy barns. He decided to pursue a career in the construction industry.

With the \$1,600 he had saved while in the army, Korte and a cousin went into business. "We bought a brand new Black and Decker eight-inch saw for \$79.95 and a used '46 International one-ton flat bed truck for \$100. We were in business," he said.

Four years later, the cousin decided to go back to farming, and Korte became sole owner of the small company.

Ralph Korte put off going to college until it was almost too late. The deadline for taking advantage of the Korean GI bill was in late summer, 1959.

stick to it," he said, adding that one has to have self-confidence as well.

Over the intervening years, the Highland construction company has racked up quite a number of impressive construction projects, including numerous professional office and commercial buildings, and dozens of financial, industrial/manufacturing, health care, churches, schools, condominiums, and other types of multi-family housing projects.

However, its president has a special place in his heart for the recently completed dental facility. "There is a sense of pride in doing something for my alma mater," he said, smiling.