

barry swenson

# turning point



JAM MARCUS PHOTO

**NO EASY RIDE** Barry Swenson, flanked by his grandfather and father, has persevered to build Barry Swenson Builder into a robust contender in the valley's competitive market.

## bio

**Name:** Clifford Barron "Barry" Swenson  
**Title/org:** President, Barry Swenson Builder  
**Age:** 61  
**Education:** Bachelor's degree in business administration, San Jose State University, 1963  
**Family:** Wife Molly; adult children Case, Becky and Tamara  
**Hours of sleep per night:** 6.  
**A favorite book:** "The Good Earth" by Pearl S. Buck.  
**Newspapers or magazines you read regularly:** Wall Street Journal, San Jose Mercury News, San Jose Business Journal, Ag Alert, California Farm Journal and other farm magazines.  
**Favorite mode of travel:** Hiking and walking.  
**Mentors:** Dad and grandfather.  
**Favorite quote:** "In due season you shall reap if you faint not." (Galatians 6:9).  
**Best lesson Mom taught you:** Try everything, especially foods.  
**Family seniority:** Oldest of three boys.

## A strong foundation

**When Swenson was tossed out of the family firm, he redirected his energy, tested his business savvy and built a successful construction company**

By LYNN GRAEBNER

There's no hint of fear beneath Barry Swenson's quiet demeanor.

As he ambles across the office of his San Jose construction firm — Barry Swenson Builder — the tall, lanky developer appears calm and speaks slowly. It's easier to picture him in a cowboy hat tending to his almond orchards than hammering out a construction deal with high-powered tech executives.

But like his father and grandfather, Barry has peppered downtown San Jose and other parts of Silicon Valley with housing, offices and historical restorations.

But he didn't slip easily into the family construction business.

In fact he was tossed out of it. Although it was a painful blow in 1977 when company executives at Carl N. Swenson Construction Co. asked the 38-year-old builder to leave, that move allowed him to start his own firm.

"It was the most wonderful thing, because I would never have left without that," says the soft-spoken developer.

It gave him a chance to test

his own business savvy and perseverance. And he has proved himself a robust contender in the market, having outlived Carl N. Swenson Construction, which went under in 1982.

"He is an original, there is no one like him," says San Jose City Councilwoman Cindy Chavez. "He has a deep love for downtown and has really been one of its finest pioneers."

Barry wasn't the only pioneer in the family. Carl Swenson, his grandfather, arrived in the United States from Sweden when he was 17 and lost his shirt farming. He turned to carpentry, forming Carl N. Swenson Construction, and built markets, schools and bridges. The San Jose firm — which his son Clifford joined — built the Hotel De Anza, many of the Lockheed and IBM facilities, and San Jose City Hall.

Barry started sweeping floors for the company as a teenager. Living up to the accomplishments of his dad and granddad was an intimidating task. He didn't think he had the material to measure up.

"I thought I'd never be able to

build a building. I always thought if I could own 26 acres, I'd be really, really happy," he recalls.

Barry worked hard and took jobs no one else wanted, often on the weekends. He also took an interest in a landscaping and janitorial business, Green Valley Corp., which his father founded in 1955.

He eventually bought out his dad and ran it on his own while still working for his grandfather's company.

In the late 1970s his grandfather's firm hired some corporate reorganizers. But Barry was too busy to attend meetings, and didn't adopt new procedures. When he needed something, he went directly to the source.

"I never followed the chart. It drove everyone crazy," he says.

In 1977 when Barry was finally feeling confident about his work, the reorganizers, who were his seniors, asked him to leave his grandfather's company.

"It was the lowest point in my life," Barry says.

He turned to the landscaping business. And when the Carl N. Swenson Construction moved downtown, Barry leased two

rooms in the firm's old building.

Taking that space was key. Clients for his grandfather's firm would come in and Barry would tell them the company had moved, but if they were willing to risk working with a new contractor, he'd be more than happy to build for them. Companies such as Union Carbide and Control Data Systems Inc., who had worked with Barry at his grandfather's firm, took a chance.

Gradually he was able to buy land. He started with houses and worked his way into commercial real estate.

But there were many hard times in the industry. His grandfather used to say, "In this business, if you ever think you've got it made, watch out. The next year you'll go broke."

And his grandfather's firm did just that in 1982. The company had problems with three consecutive jobs, and even a sophisticated organizational chart couldn't save it.

These seemingly indestructible construction companies hang a lot on the line. Barry has 40 jobs under way. It's a risky business anyway you cut it. To get a building started, a builder must put out about 20 percent of the total cost in equity. It takes just a couple of bad deals to kill even an established firm.

But the risk hasn't made Barry shy away from costly and unpredictable projects such as the rehabilitation of the Hotel De Anza and the Letitia Building downtown.

"Barry has made a commitment to his hometown and he's following through on that commitment," says San Jose vice mayor Frank Fiscalini, who was Swenson's vice principal at James Lick High School.

Barry doesn't plan to retire any time soon. He says he owes too much to his employees for putting him where he is today. Although he could do with a little less adrenaline flowing through his veins.

"It would be so much fun not to be scared all the time," he says with one of his jovial smiles. "Development and construction are basically risk management. Every day is a new surprise and a new challenge. One of the things you have to learn is to take your lumps."

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