

FROM THE FIELD

Industry Legend

BY DAN FOLEY CONTRIBUTING WRITER

I first met Bill Melvin about 15 years ago. At the time, he was a product engineer and I was still at Arlington Heating. I would cross paths with Bill at various industry events. He was based out of Leesburg, Va., and we were often on the same flights as we traveled to conferences or trade shows. One evening, our flight out of BWI was delayed by weather and we had a chance to chat for a couple of hours.

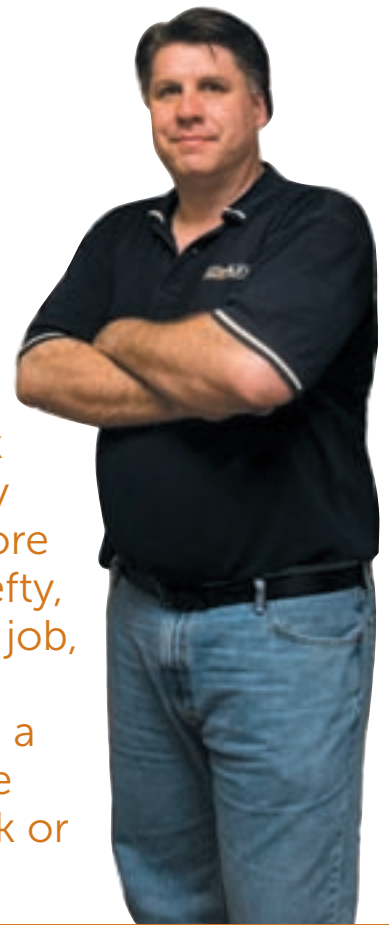
Bill and I became good friends. He would help with our designs and even made a jobsite visit when we had an issue with one of his products. Of course, Bill quickly diagnosed the problem and recommended a solution.

About five or six years ago, Bill called me to let me know he was making a change. He said that he was moving to Michigan to take a position with Legend Valve. I was a little surprised because Bill's expertise was with radiant floor heating systems, and I only knew Legend as a manufacturer of ball valves and radiator valves. I did not know at the time that Bill had big plans for his future at Legend Valve.

Fast forward to the AHR show in Dallas, Texas last January. I saw Bill there and we had a chance to catch up in his booth. He had a full display of radiant heating gear in his booth: radiant tubing, manifolds, floor track systems, air separators, hydro-separators, and geo manifolds, among other hydronic specialties. It turns out that Legend Valve



Bill Melvin, manager of Technical and Engineering Services at Legend Hydronics in front of a display case featuring some of their valves and hydronic specialties.



I am a "hands-on" kind of person. I need to pick up, test, feel, and put my hands on a product before I use it. I want a solid, hefty, heavy-duty valve on my job, not a cheap pot metal imitation that will leak in a year or two. I cannot see this quality on an ad slick or cut sheet.

was a whole lot more than just ball valves. I mentioned to Bill that I should make a trip up to Legend and see what they were all about.

I am a "hands-on" kind of person. I need to pick up, test, feel, and put my hands on a product before I use it. I want a solid, hefty, heavy-duty valve on my job, not a cheap pot metal imitation that will leak in a year or two. I cannot see this quality on an ad slick or cut sheet. I cannot see this in an online catalog page. I need to pick up a valve, feel the heft, operate the lever, see the casting or forging, touch the threads. Only then can I tell if this is a component I want to install in my clients' homes.

Bill and I are both very busy so it was not until October that we scheduled my visit. On a cold November morning, I caught a 6:00 am flight out of Dulles and headed to Detroit International. It was a brisk 21°F when we landed and I noticed a dusting of snow on the ground on the 30-minute ride to Legend headquarters, located in Auburn Hills.

Bill met me at the front door and escorted me into the conference room. There, I met David Hickman, president and CEO, Tom Huck, vice president of Business Development, and Walter Jann, executive vice president. We chatted over a cup of coffee. We discussed my company, our business philosophy and the various products we use.

Then, David discussed the history of Legend Valve. The business was founded 25 years ago with a core value of customer service. He emphasized that customer service is the foundation of their corporate culture and is ingrained in every employee. The focus is on the customer. I noted that is easy to say, but hard to do. David readily agreed.

We discussed their product support, shipping procedures with quick turnaround, no minimum order size, and warranty policy. One thing that was evident was the passion David displayed when talking about his company and his commitment to customer service. In summary, Legend Valve makes it easy to do business with them. It seems so simple but I can tell you that it is hard to execute.

Then, Tom and Bill outlined their recent foray into the radiant heating business. Tom explained their conservative business philosophy and how they thoroughly research a

➔ Turn to FOLEY on p 50

| FROM THE FIELD | CONTINUED FROM PAGE 48



A Legend Hydronics geothermal manifold installed in a Foley Mechanical jobsite in Bethesda, Md.

product line before they take action. They examine their weaknesses versus their strengths to make sure a product line fits their strategic plan. With Bill Melvin at the helm, they felt like the time was right to launch Legend Hydronics.

They did not want to release the line until they had a complete array of radiant and hydronic components, as well as, the support system of design engineers and product specialists. We then discussed the various products and components and I shared my thoughts from a contractor's perspective.

I emphasized that I cannot install what I cannot get from my local supplier. Parts and materials on the shelf in Michigan do me no good in Washington, D.C. I also discussed warranty issues and how I expect manufacturers I do business with to stand behind their product. Tom reiterated Legend's quick-ship policies; no minimum size orders and commitment to stand behind their products with strong warranties. This was music to my ears.

As a business owner, I want to do business with companies who make it easy to do business with them. I want to do business with a company that makes solid products, has quality support, has the parts when I need them, and stands behind any warranty issues. Legend makes it easy to do business with them.

We then left the conference room for a tour of the facility. They are located in a 180,000 square-foot refurbished warehouse, to give you an idea of the size. They practice what they preach as the offices have radiant floor heating and a snow/ice melt system is installed under the front entry walkway. We toured the product support center, met the design and engineering staff, and toured their training room. This caught my attention as they had all of their products on display. I suggested they take inventory after I left as some of the components might be "missing." Bill gave me a sample of one of their manifold pressure test gauges. I like that it connects directly to the manifold without the need to make up an adapter bushing. Since I did not check any bags for the trip, I later had to explain to the TSA agent exactly what this device was. He let me through only after a long, hard look at the gauge and a second trip through the X-ray machine.

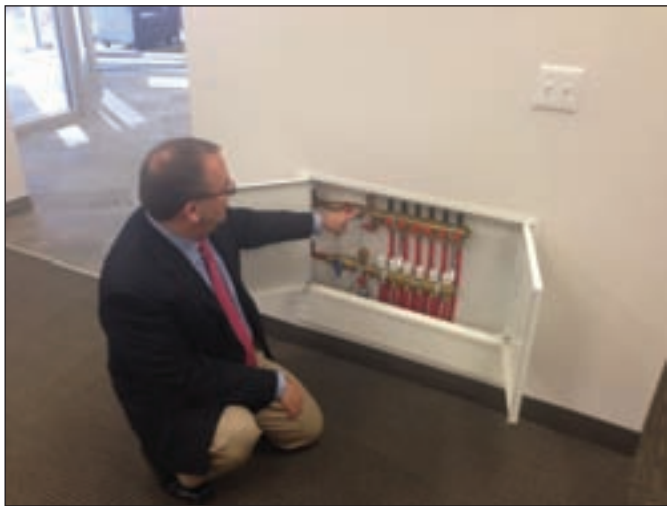
We then toured the warehouse with valves, fittings, tubing and other hydronic goodies stacked floor to ceiling. The materials are loaded and retrieved by an automated system of unmanned forklifts guided by wires embedded in the concrete slab. This high tech system is very impressive. The next stop was the R&D facility with a broad array of

test gear, spectrometers, flow meters and other devices with rows of buttons, dials and computer screens. This is where all of the products and components are tested to make sure they will be reliable in the field. They also test returned products here to determine cause of failure.

One such product was a threaded ball valve that was returned as "defective." Upon closer inspection of the threaded ball valve, solder was detected in the threads. Someone had actually attempted to fix a leaking threaded joint by soldering it! Nonetheless, the warranty was honored even though the valve had not been properly installed.

We had a look at the training center where classes are held for both in-house staff as well as contractor training. They have a hands-on section where students actually install the Legend products. This impressed me because that is how I learn. Books and lectures are important, but I have to actually install a product before I really feel comfortable. There were sections for tubing installed in a slab, staple-up with plates, and the over-slab product as well as various manifolds, geo products and solar pump stations.

We wrapped up the visit with lunch while discussing trade associations, conferences and industry trends and issues, such as the no-lead mandate that goes into effect early next year. As my company does not do any potable plumbing work, this change really does not affect me. But, I learned how this affects a manufacturer and how this change really creates a challenge from a manufacturer's



Walter Jann, Legend Valve's executive vice president demonstrates one of their brass manifolds in their technical support office.

perspective.

I left the facility with a three-ring binder of all the products available from Legend Valve, which I leafed through on the plane ride home. More important than the various components were the words of David Hickman and my realization that it is the people behind the products that create the value. It gave me an appreciation of this company and their customer-driven philosophy. It also gave me an insight into what Bill Melvin was thinking when he made his decision to come to Legend Valve six years ago. It all makes sense to me now, my friend.

Dan Foley is president and owner of Foley Mechanical, Inc., based in Lorton, Va. FMI specializes in radiant, hydronic and steam systems as well as mechanical systems for large custom homes. He can be reached at 703-339-8030; dfoley50@verizon.net; or www.foleymechanical.com. ●