

Riding the Path to Success

Steve Chapel, *S.Chapel Associates*



WHETHER HELPING CLIENTS SOLVE T&D PLANNING ISSUES, CYCLING 40-PLUS MILES WITH HIS BIKE CLUB OR SPENDING TIME WITH FAMILY, Steve Chapel can be considered an asset to any team. Mathematician, statistician, economist and software developer all rolled into one, Chapel, director of S.Chapel Associates (Palo Alto, California, U.S.), says his choice of career was shaped largely by a childhood spent ranching, as well as by some influential high school science and math teachers.

“I grew up on a cattle ranch and dirt farm in Wyoming, where we didn’t have electricity until I was in the second grade,” Chapel says. “I did the usual cowboy stuff when I was young — moving cattle to the summer range, feeding them in the winter, branding them. Looking back, this is probably what led to my interest in statistics and economics.”

Like many young people entering college, Chapel found himself in search of a major. “I was pretty good in math, and I found I liked probability and statistics,” he says. “Then, I decided economics was a good field to apply the math and statistics tools.”

After graduating from the University of Wyoming with a Bachelor of Science degree in statistics and a master’s in economics, Chapel served in the U.S. Air Force for four years — at the Pentagon, no less. “I worked for the Department of Defense during the Vietnam War,” he remembers. “Being a lieutenant in the Pentagon was a novel experience, because junior officers were a rare commodity. No one knew what to do with us. Luckily, I was part of a small analytical group who had some smart senior officers for bosses, and I like to think we did some good.”

Once discharged from the military, Chapel spent an additional four years in Washington, D.C., where he served as a civilian economist for the Office for the Secretary of Defense for System Analysis and held the position of deputy director for the Office of Economic Impact at the newly formed Department of Energy.

In 1976, Chapel packed up his family (he had married and had two daughters while working in Washington) and headed for the West Coast after joining Santa Monica, California-based Rand Corp. as a senior economist. At Rand, he performed energy planning and policy research for energy industries and the Federal Department of Energy.

Four years later, the Electric Power Research Institute (EPRI; Palo Alto, California) came calling, and the rest, as they say, is history. “I worked as a project manager at EPRI from 1980 until I retired in 2003,” says Chapel. “While there, I focused on various generation and T&D planning issues

including utility fuel inventory modeling (producing UFIM), generation plant lead-times and costs, advanced light water reactor economics, utility capital budgeting, renewables and storage economics and T&D asset management. Still used throughout the industry, UFIM is a tool intended to help power companies develop reasonable, low-cost fuel inventory policies. One of the last remaining members of the team who originally developed the program, Chapel says he still provides software support for users.

Setting down roots in California not only allowed Chapel to pursue his career in utility asset management, it also let him indulge his passion for the sport of dirt bike racing.

“I rode a friend’s scooter when I was 11 years old and instantly fell in love with two-wheel machines,” Chapel says. “I got my first motorcycle — a Harley 165c — when I was 13. A few years later, I got a British machine — a 1953 AJS 500cc single. I rode it everywhere. Then, I went to college and forgot about it for a time.”

It didn’t take long, however, for the motorcycle bug to bite again. While working at the Pentagon, Chapel purchased a 1973 Penton 125cc dirt bike and started racing. During his 24-year motorcycle career, he competed in two well-known events — the first-ever Blackwater 100 and the Baja 500. “It was an adventure,” says Chapel. “My riding partner and I completed 500 miles in just over 13 hours, even though we ran out of gas twice. We ended up taking 10th place.”

Chapel continued to race dirt bikes until about 10 years ago. “As I got older, all of my older riding buddies quit and my younger riding friends got a lot faster,” he jokes. “So, I started riding bicycles for exercise. On Wednesdays, I ride with a club called the Western Wheelers. We typically bike anywhere from 40 to 70 miles. I love it.”

Upon retiring from EPRI, Chapel founded his own consulting firm, S.Chapel Associates, which specializes in providing analytic solutions to asset-management problems. He’s also putting the finishing touches on a C/C++ Pointers book he co-wrote with his colleague and friend Dr. Mukund Thapa.

When he isn’t working or riding, Chapel and his wife, Mary, enjoy traveling. “One daughter lives in Seattle and the other in Valencia, Spain,” he says. “Our daughter in Spain used to live in Mexico City, Mexico, and we visited her there quite often. Who knows — maybe someday Mary and I will drop everything and move to Spain for a while. But not yet.”