

Don Erwin Biography

I was born in Alabama and lived in Germany as a kid. Then my father retired from the U.S. Army and we moved to Enterprise, a small town in South Alabama. The local library, AM radio, and three television channels were my connections to the outside world. My parents were from Missouri and Kentucky, and I spent many summers in Louisville, Kentucky.

Enterprise was progressive and a good place to grow up. The smell of roasted peanuts often drifted over the town from the peanut butter processing plant.

Enterprise High School had a record of excellence. My senior year, my partner and I won the state high school cross-examination debate tournament. I won top speaker and was awarded a debate scholarship to the University of Alabama.

I planned to major in physics but was attracted to the social aspect of economics. My German language courses were difficult because I hated to memorize. I had outstanding teachers in European History, Shakespeare, the impact of technology on society, and creative writing. I wanted to write a novel but didn't have the life experience to pull it off. My first taste of Alabama politics occurred while serving twice as a student government senator. I joined two polar-opposite organizations: the Mallet Honor Society, a dormitory of wickedly smart, progressive people, and a social fraternity. For a season, I did a Point-Counterpoint segment on Alabama Public Television, debating environmental issues with Ed Passerini, a UA professor.

As a senior, I hung with some law school people and realized what I didn't want to do. I graduated with an economics major, an English minor, and a concentration in German language and started work at Alabama Power Company, an electric utility.

The first couple of years I wrote training manuals. Then I joined, and eventually headed, an IT support group for the company's purchasing and logistics operations, where I received a thorough grounding in computer system design, programming, and working with data.

Then something wonderful happened. Alabama Power's economic development department heard I vacationed in Europe to work on languages, and they needed someone to recruit European companies to Alabama. I can still remember thinking during the interview: So they'll actually pay me to travel around Europe! I felt I had gone to heaven.

This was 1990. I quickly learned that Alabama was terra incognita to most of the world. People in other countries typically had no idea whether Alabama was like the American Southwest or a Brazilian rain forest.

I helped organize the first International Baccalaureate school in Alabama to make it more welcoming to international companies. Today, Alabama has 30 IB programs at 23 different schools.

In 1993, Alabama surprised the world by landing Mercedes-Benz' first U.S. production plant. No one had given us a chance, but we won it, and I was lucky to be part of the team.

Years of success followed with auto suppliers and other companies locating in the state. Alabama's median household income rose to 35th among the U.S. states. Effectively, it was higher, since Alabama's taxes and cost-of-living were well below the national average.

I traveled to great places, met interesting people, and came to love visiting overseas corporate headquarters, touring production plant floors, and learning production processes.

It sounds like a wonderful life, and it was, but some perspective: The first piece of chocolate cake is wonderful; the sixth piece is less wonderful.

Economic development allowed me to earn a good living while also doing good. Few thrills are greater than passing a manufacturing plant with hundreds of cars outside and knowing you helped people get good jobs to raise their families.

After more than ten years of doing economic development for Alabama Power, I accepted a position with the Economic Development Partnership of Alabama, a statewide nonprofit, where I ended up heading the recruiting group. That lasted about two years until the organization changed course.

Several years previously, I had helped Mr. George Barber, a local businessman and philanthropist, find a site and negotiate with local and state governments to build the Barber Motorsports Park in eastern Birmingham. He asked me to come work for him.

Today, the 880-acre Barber Motorsports Park houses the Barber Vintage Motorsports Museum, the world's largest motorcycle museum. The Park's two largest customers are Porsche and Mercedes-Benz. Porsche has their largest driving school in the world at Barber, and the Honda Indy Grand Prix of Alabama has been held at Barber for eleven consecutive years. For many consecutive years, TripAdvisor has ranked the Barber Museum as Birmingham's #1 attraction.

Working for Barber's commercial real estate operation, I learned a lot I wish I had known as an economic developer. In 2007, we did a deal that resulted in the Innovation Depot, a 140,000 sq. ft. international award-winning incubator that currently houses more than a hundred companies and 1,300 employees in downtown Birmingham.

I spent about sixty percent of my time on real estate matters and forty percent supporting the non-profit museum and park. I was no longer a professional economic developer, but I constantly worked with economic developers on projects which made an economic impact on the city and state.

Barber's management team is top-notch, and I was just glad to be a part of it. Alabama Power, EDPA, and Barber Companies have all provided a great life to raise a family.

I still hadn't published a novel, though I had been working on one for several years during evenings and weekends. I retired from Barber on July 1, 2020, and after several months of 8-10 hour days of writing and editing, Buffalo Hunting in Alabama is the result.