



FSMS Pioneers

A series that honors the legends of surveying in the state of Florida

By Dominic Levings

Oscar Pittman

After a career that began six decades ago, Pittman has cemented his legacy in Florida

The Early Years

The world was a lot different in 1961 than it was today. Fifty-seven years ago, the Compact Cassette tape had not yet been invented. John F. Kennedy was the President of the United States. Only 5 million people lived in Florida, and nobody had any clue what “Star Wars” was. One thing, however, is not different: and that is Florida License Survey Number 1748, which belongs to Oscar Pittman of Pensacola, Florida.

To say that Pittman had a distinguished career would be an understatement. His career in the profession spanned a remarkable 55 years. Over that period, he founded his own company, taught classes for 15 years, and served on the Florida Board of Professional Surveyors and Mappers, to name but a few of his accomplishments.

But what is surely most indicative of his success is the legacy he has left behind. His name has become synonymous with surveying great-

ness in Pensacola, and his surveying tree has so many branches, it is perhaps unrivaled anywhere else in Florida.

Pittman, 82, was born on November 2nd, 1935 in Marianna, Florida, the second youngest of six children, and the only boy. He grew up on an 80-acre farm with his sisters and his parents, Gussy and Daniel.

“You never run out of work on a farm,” Pittman said of his early years in Marianna. “You never catch up. That’s just not gonna happen. Especially when you have hogs, cows, and chickens, and have to raise crops, too. It’s a steady thing.”

After graduating high school in 1953 at the age of 17, Pittman moved to Pensacola seeking employment. He moved in with one of his sisters and her family while he searched for a job. He worked a few odd jobs here and there, including a stint at a local grocery

store, before he landed a job installing a sprinkler system at the nearby Naval Air Station.

It was the requirements of this job that eventually led Pittman into the surveying profession. He was able to decipher the complicated layout plans for the piping network of the sprinkler system. He was retained by the company and aided in interpreting layouts, charts, and instructions.

Soon after, he went to work for the county surveyor, and started as a crewman in the field. In 1961, he became a licensed surveyor after passing the official exam. He also obtained licenses in Alabama, Mississippi, and Georgia.

Pittman says his love for property, nature, and the outdoors is the primary reason he fell in love with surveying, a result of his youth spent on the family farm. He also cites the lack of monotony involved with the profession.



Oscar Pittman, Harley Gilmore, and Fred Duell at the 50th annual FSMS Conference in 2005.

“I’ve always been enamored by property. I just enjoy property and always have. I like to be out on the ground – you do something different every day. No two jobs in surveying are alike. Not to me, at least,” Pittman explained.

Running section lines has always been his favorite type of survey. While he admits it is not the most profitable work, he relishes the challenge in trying to prove corners and find original monument markers.

“It’s like being a detective, really,” Pittman said.

Pittman recalled one survey in which he found three out of four witness trees from a survey originally conducted in the 1800s. He was also able to locate the original corner post, marked by a stone monument, which was a ballast stone from a 19th-century ship.

Pittman & Associates

In 1975, Pittman founded Pittman & Associates in Pensacola. He ran the company for 25 years, forging it into the premiere surveying firm of the Panhandle area. In 2000, he sold the firm to longtime employee David Glaze, who still owns Pittman, Glaze & Associates today.

Glaze remembers the first time he met Pittman, during an interview for a job. In the interview, Pittman

asked Glaze how to calculate some coordinates by hand, but he didn’t know how. Then, right in the interview, Pittman took the time to teach him how to do it.

“How many people will do something like that?” Glaze said. “Even in the first job interview, I learned something from him.”

What Glaze admires most about his former boss, however, is his leadership style and personality.

“He was many things. He was a great teacher. He was a hard taskmaster. He expected you to do your job and do it well and not screw around,” Glaze said.

“But he was a very ethical man. Oscar was probably the most ethical man I’ve ever met in my life. And I learned a tremendous amount from just staying after work and discussing surveying with him.”

Another likeable aspect of Pittman, Glaze added, is that he is

an “extreme joke teller”. He recalled that one year at an FSMS conference, Pittman was under a gazebo outside the hotel, rattling off one joke after another to a small crowd. During the impromptu performance, one attendee, who didn’t know Pittman, said that he was glad that FSMS had hired someone to entertain at the conference.

Ronald Ruben worked for Pittman from 1986 through 1989. He interviewed for a job with Pittman when he was only 19 (while humorously wearing a three-piece suit). Today, Ruben owns Ruben Surveying & Mapping in Gulf Breeze, Florida, which he started in 1998.

“I love Oscar. He’s the reason why I am where I am today and I make the money that I make. I truly attribute it to him having selected me for the profession. I had no idea at 19 that it’d be the only job I’d ever have,” Ruben said.

Ruben worked with Glaze and Glaze’s younger brother, Jay, during the “golden years” of Pittman & Associates. They all worked on the same crew – David was the crew chief, and Jay and Ruben were the rodman and instrument man.

Like Glaze, Ruben admired Pittman’s style as a boss and attributes his own success as a business owner to the lessons he learned from him.

“He had the patience of Job. He was calm, he was kind. He was not



Surveying vans lined up in the lot behind Pittman & Associates, circa 1999.

an [expletive]. You know what I mean?” Ruben explained.

“He was all the things that I aspired to be [as a boss]. His personality allowed him to be a great boss. He was fair, he understood. His checks were always on time. He’s a good church-going, god-fearing, family man.”

On Changes in the Profession and Teaching

Consistent involvement in surveying over a 57-year period has allowed Pittman to observe and analyze changes in the profession. He laments how technology has replaced some of the meat-and-bones fundamentals of surveying, which were a staple in his heyday.

In his first job surveying with the county, the crew utilized transits and levels, which are antiquated today, and an individual had to start out at the bottom of the totem pole on the field crew. You would then move your way up on the crew as you gained experience.

“What’s got me concerned is that most firms now are running two-man crews. When I first started, you began as a tail chainman, then head chainman, then instrument man, then party chief. Now, when you’re hired, there’s no learning process. There’s no ladder,” Pittman said.

“A lot of guys now are data collectors, and they turn angles and distances and bring it to the office and someone with AutoCAD will plot it out and make the decision. People aren’t getting the experience to be licensed surveyors. How do you find people, how do you train people? How do you get people interested in surveying anymore?”

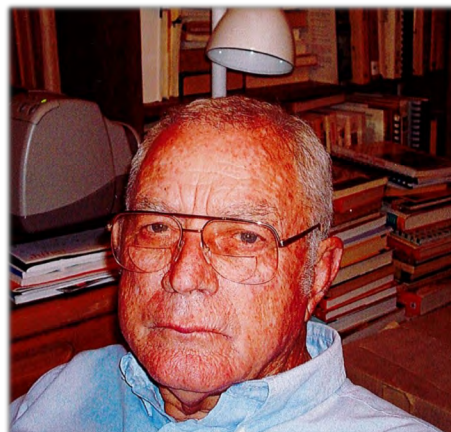
While he acknowledges that the increased use of technology in the profession is inevitable, Pittman believes that individuals should still be taught the *what* and *why* of the technology in order to fully grasp the role of a surveyor.



Oscar and his wife Lou (left) with Buddy and Sharon Bannerman at the Renaissance Hotel in Orlando in 2006. Bannerman was the FSMS President in 1983-1984.

After selling Pittman & Associates in 2000, Pittman was not quite done contributing to the profession. After a professor at Pensacola State College left in the middle of the semester, the administration contacted him and asked if he would finish teaching the “Construction Surveying” course as an adjunct professor. The rest is history, as Pittman taught for another 15 years; for two of those years, he also taught a class at the University of West Florida.

Like many teachers who truly enjoy their job, Pittman’s interaction with his students was what he valued most.



The gaze of a seasoned surveyor.

“If you’ve got students who want to learn, it makes all the difference in the world. You just enjoy teaching somebody who wants to learn. If you’ve got someone who could care less, it takes all the fun out of it,” Pittman said.

“It was just something I enjoyed doing. I enjoyed meeting the people. And it was interesting to see how some of the students think.”

Family

Pittman and his wife, Lou, have been married for 62 years.

“Best wife I ever had,” Pittman joked. “I’m surprised she hasn’t killed me. She hasn’t even attempted so far – that I know of.”

The events of their wedding day sound like something suited for a dark comedy. On the way to the wedding, Pittman got into a car wreck. The driver who slammed into him was drunk and was taken to jail, and Pittman’s car had to be towed. He had to hitch a ride to the wedding.

But the misfortune didn't stop there. Their preacher, who was to marry them, had had a heart attack earlier in the day and was in the hospital. Fortunately, another preacher of the church was a guest of their wedding and agreed to preside over the ceremony.

Some of Pittman's friends didn't think the marriage would last. They said that "Oscar was too wild" – something he doesn't disagree with. In fact, Pittman will be the first to tell you that he used to "run the streets".

"When you're young, you're running the streets. Only two things are important to you, a car and your clothes. You won't have anything else cause you're broke all the time. Dating and the car were expensive. You weren't making much money," Pittman said.

But of course, after 62 years of marriage, Pittman has proved his doubters wrong. He and Lou have one son, Craig Pittman, and two grandsons. Craig has been an environmental reporter for the Tampa Bay Times since 1998. He has also authored four books, all of which are nonfiction and revolve around events in Florida. His most recent book, *Oh, Florida!*, was published in 2016 and named a *New York Times* bestseller.

Retirement and Reflection

After retiring from teaching in 2015, Pittman found himself with no work-related obligations for the first time in over 60 years.

"Once I retired, I found out I got six Saturdays and one Sunday every week. I highly recommend it," he joked.

He is still a member of FSMS and has attended a phenomenal 57 straight FSMS conferences. He attended his first conference in 1961 – the year he became a licensed surveyor – and hasn't

missed one since.

"You meet a lot of people at the conference. You learn. Your local competitors won't help you out, because you're competitors. But if you're out of town at the conference, everyone figures hey, they're not my competition, so I don't care. You share a lot of things, how you do indexing, how you bill, what have you learned about this, etc.," he said.



Oscar now has a lot more time for fishing.

When asked what he remembers most fondly about his time in the profession, Pittman wasted no time in answering.

"You know, I just enjoyed doing what I did. I enjoyed the people. I had clients that were with me for quite a number of years. That always made me feel good, that you had people that were always your client and didn't go to anyone else," Pittman said.

It appears that his clients had good reason to stick with him. Glaze says that Pittman's reputation was the sole reason he didn't start his own company, and that his stature as a leader and teacher resonate throughout Pensacola.

"That was a no-brainer. That was the whole reason for buying his company instead of starting my own, was

the name recognition and the reputation he had," Glaze said. "I tried for two years to get on with him because he was the best and he had that reputation. I actually took a pay cut to go and work for him."

"He's trained a lot of the surveyors here locally. I'd say half the surveyors here locally have worked for him. The quality of surveyors around town...the ones that were trained by Oscar, have the best reputation."

Ruben also cited Pittman's reputation as evidence of his success. His prestige is so great, that employees of Ruben Surveying & Mapping have a nickname for Pittman's corner monuments.

"He's respected in the Panhandle and throughout the state. When we come across a Pittman 1748 at Ruben Surveying, we call it a 'godrod'. That sucker is gold, baby," Ruben exclaimed.

Recently, Pittman began taking a class at a local Methodist church. The class is about writing your life story – whether it be for your kids, your grandkids, and quite possibly, someone you'll never know.

The class has given Pittman reason to reflect back on his own life, and has also invoked in him a tinge of regret.

"There's a lot of questions now I wish I would've asked my mom before she passed. I would like to know how her and my dad got together, what their life was like when they were young, how they met, that sort of thing," he said.

Although Pittman may have questions about the lives of his parents that will never be answered, there is little question that future readers of his yet-finished life story will be reading the words of a surveyor who belongs among the ranks of Florida's greatest.