

## **Art & Mary Avril: They Created an Industry**

By Lynn Wasnak

Many entrepreneurs have built businesses, but very few have created an industry from the ground up. A fascinating and exceptional couple who did just that are Art and Mary Avril of Cincinnati.

The Avrils originated SAKRETE, which is the name of the company that produced the first prepackaged concrete products in a bag. Art developed the three SAKRETE formulas in 1936: a mortar mix, resurfacing/finishing mix, and a standard concrete mix. To date, more than 4-1/2 billion bags of SAKRETE products have been sold from the Cincinnati plant and the 80 manufacturing companies that license the trademark, manufacturing process, and marketing techniques around the world.

At 86, the energetic Art Avril has scarcely slowed down from the days when he and Mary named their new concept SAKRETE from lists of names they compiled at the dining room table. In those early days, Art would package mix in the morning, then go out and sell. Mary dried the sand and gravel, monitored deliveries, and kept the books. Together, they bagged 36,000 bags of SAKRETE the first year.

“She swung 90 pound sacks around when she only weighed 100,” says Art with a laugh.

Though they don’t swing SAKRETE bags anymore, he’s still an active CEO who gets a kick out of fast cars and world travel. The Avrils were the first U.S. couple recognized for traveling over a million air miles together by a major airline. That was a few years back, Art explains. “We’ve gone about 3.5 million miles by now, including seven trips around the world.”

Their next trip abroad will be to Germany, where the SAKRETE licensee is planning an elaborate celebration for the product’s 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Nearly all the Avrils’ traveling is business-related.

“I’ve always established a friendship first, when planning international business,” Art explains. “Too many people rush in and try to push a business deal through. Friendships make doing business abroad so much easier.”

Art Avril’s parents started the well-known Cincinnati meat business, Avril & Sons. By the age of six, Art was standing on a box, linking sausage.

But after quitting school briefly to help out while his brothers were in the service, Art knew he didn’t want to be a butcher. When the war was over, his family wanted him

to attend the University of Cincinnati, but Art wanted to go away to school. “If I had stayed in Cincinnati, I’d have had to come home and work in the shop,” he says.

So he sent away for college catalogs, and found out that Ohio State University had a mining engineering course that University of Cincinnati didn’t offer. “I decided right then to be a mining engineer!” says Art, with a twinkle in his eye.

Avril’s first foray into the concrete business began in the 1920s, after a stint at a stone company in Toledo. When he came back to Cincinnati, he opened one of the first ready-mix concrete plants in the country.

“Most people in the concrete business had no technical background,” says Avril. His training as an engineer gave him an extra edge among competitors. During this period, Avril designed the first ready-mix trucks to use a rotary drum. He also supplied quality concrete for many major projects, including the 500,000 cubic yards of concrete used to build Cincinnati’s Union Terminal.

“The Union Terminal was the first project in the U.S. to specify concrete on the basis of its strength, rather than proportion of materials,” he says. That concept, which Avril proposed, was subsequently adopted for all concrete specifications in the U.S.

The Depression put that first company out of business, but not before Art had married a girl he’d first met in high school, Mary Joyce. She had moved to California, but on a trip to the western states, Art found her again. Together, they weathered the hard times and, instead of being discouraged, Art put his natural creative thinking to work.

“I had seen many people come into the ready-mix plant, looking for a bucket or shovelful of ‘drippings,’” Avril explains. “These folks had a small job to do around the house and just didn’t need a cubic yard of concrete.”

That observation spawned the SAKRETE concept: packaging dry concrete and mortar homeowners could mix and use as needed. It’s a product that truly revolutionized an industry.

The SAKRETE business also gave the Avrils a very satisfying life.

In addition to doing business in many cultures and climates, Art has been able to indulge his taste for fast cars.

He claims 83-year-old Mary has a heavier foot on the gas pedal than he does, but that’s doubtful. His favorite is a 1955 gull-wing Mercedes that he’s clocked at 140 mph. “I wouldn’t give it up if hell froze over,” he says.