

# STEVE FERGUSON

## Business Leader of the Year

“I think you need to be around positive people and you need to be a positive person yourself. If someone asks how I am, I always say ‘I couldn’t be better.’ I get up every day feeling like that,” shares 72-year-old Steve Ferguson.

This mindset and embracing life’s opportunities have guided Ferguson down a memorable professional path – one that continues marching along.

His plan had been to practice law and oversee the family farm in Monroe County. But meeting innovator Bill Cook in 1963 would add to his plate and ultimately alter his course in a most satisfying way. Later that same year, the Cook Group medical device company was born. Its hallmark would be the development of life-saving minimally invasive technology.

Ferguson was a Cook Group consultant for more than two decades before finally being persuaded to make the partnership official in the early 1990s. He was Bill Cook’s confidante and trusted advisor. (Bill passed away in 2011).

“I used to say my job description was whatever Bill Cook wanted that day. From the very beginning, we just found we had common interests and just related really well, and I guess to some extent I brought a sense of calmness to his sometimes always enthusiastic approach,” Ferguson offers.

Today, he is chairman of Cook Group (which also includes enterprises in the retail, real estate and travel/transportation industries). The company employs 11,000, has annual sales of approximately \$2 billion and generates more than a million medical device products each day.

The importance of what the core company does hits home daily, Ferguson says.

“To each of us, we see those stories. A child who is surviving, a parent who lives to see his grandchildren. I would think everybody in the company, whether they are on the floor manufacturing or in leadership, realizes that every device is going to affect somebody’s life.”

### Restore and revitalize

Another Cook legacy that Ferguson has been heavily involved with is restoration of historic buildings. Ferguson led the CFC, Inc. affiliate that was responsible for these projects, which began locally in Bloomington in the 1970s.

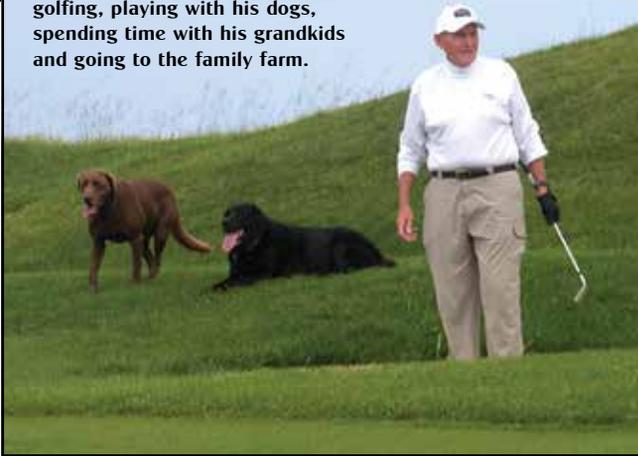


Steve Ferguson (left) said he and Bill Cook (right) never thought the business would reach the heights it has. “Now, we grow each year more than the size the company was in 2001. That’s like growing a whole new company every year.”

By Rebecca Patrick



In his spare time, Ferguson enjoys golfing, playing with his dogs, spending time with his grandkids and going to the family farm.



Ferguson notes that he and Bill were influenced in their decisions by what they would see in their travels – the company had expanded internationally early on.

“We would walk wherever we were in the world and just observe. We might observe how they finished something, what a sign looked like. Details of a particular community or a city stayed with us.”

Their first rehabilitation was Bloomington’s Graham Hotel. “We thought we would redo it, sell it and move on – and work our way around downtown restoring. The selling part never really happened much,” Ferguson laughs.

“We learned a lot about adaptive reuse, taking a building and making it look like it was restored but having it be modern on the insides (in terms of office light, air conditioning, etc.).

Bloomington businessman Lee Marchant has known Ferguson for more than 40 years. He can’t say enough about the lasting impact the downtown restoration has had on the community.

“Bill and Steve totally rebuilt one side of the square, which was an architectural disaster. They revamped everything on the south side of the square, revitalized part of the east and took a lot of the historical aspects of downtown and preserved the buildings.

“Downtown was a shambles. Today, it’s active and vibrant. It changed the face of the community,” Marchant maintains.

“Bill gave that project to Steve and he carried out the reconstruction. It was a team effort but Steve headed that up. Bloomington is a far different place than I could ever imagine without the Cook influence and the fingerprint of Steve Ferguson.”

Still, the best was yet to come: The return to glory of the West Baden Hotel and creation of the French Lick Resort in 2007.

“Every project we had done and all the things we learned had an influence on this. We originally set out to just stabilize the West Baden Hotel. And Historic Landmarks was supposed to find a use for it. We ended up with \$35 million in it on a handshake to get it stabilized ... no written agreement. That grew into expanding the entire vision for it. Having someone else (come in and) own the casino, the hotel, etc., you would have just had different visions in mind,” Ferguson explains.

“It’s such an impact project. There’s a lot of involvement in the bricks and mortar, and I think we’ve done a very nice job there. Bill wanted the structure itself to be the decoration, and the structure itself is magnificent. But it’s much more than that.

He continues, “To bring the West Baden Hotel back to life and to have people visit there and enjoy it – which was always one of the things Bill wanted – was the real challenge. To have it lived in and be brought back to life. And that’s much more difficult than the bricks and mortar.”

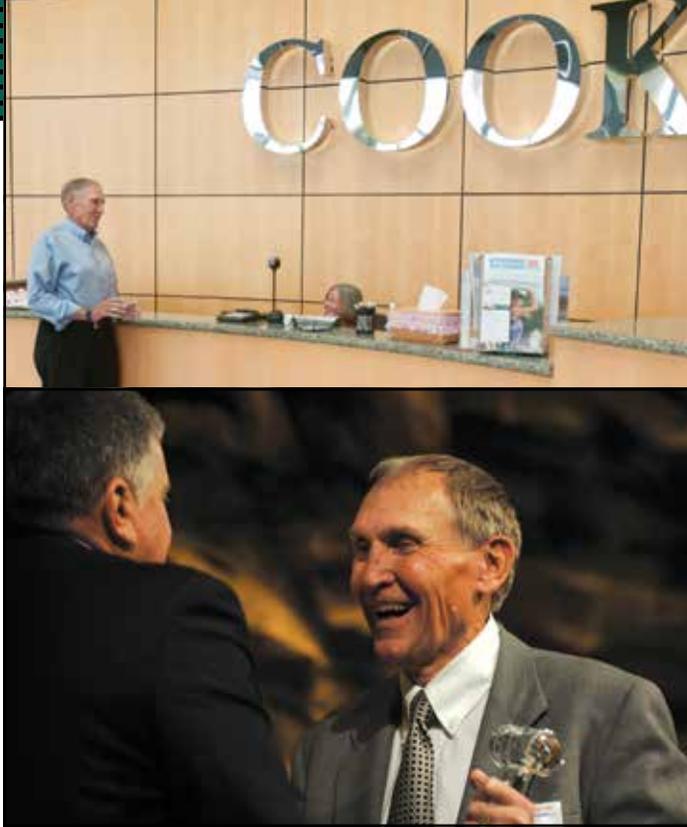
A specific and impressive lure at the French Lick Resort can be traced exclusively to Ferguson.

“The Pete Dye Golf Course is one project that wouldn’t have happened without him. He was the golf guy. He had the contacts to get (course designer) Pete Dye and the perseverance to get it moving,” asserts Carl Cook, Bill’s son and current CEO at Cook Group.

“I don’t think the rest of us would have gotten it moving if it weren’t for him.”



The West Baden Hotel restored to its glory days; Ferguson spends Tuesdays and Thursdays overseeing operations at the French Lick Resort facility.



This year, Cook Group celebrated its 50th anniversary, which has provided a trip down memory lane for Ferguson, who was chairman of the Indiana Chamber board of directors (bottom) in 2009-2010.

in what you have to say. To be a good communicator, you have to be a good listener.”

He carries on that good practice at Cook headquarters in Bloomington, where he spends three of his workdays. Ferguson listens to those running the day-to-day operations and imparts his wisdom without telling them what to do: “I just listen and ask questions – or throw my opinion in. They need to be making the decisions.”

## Leadership and imprint

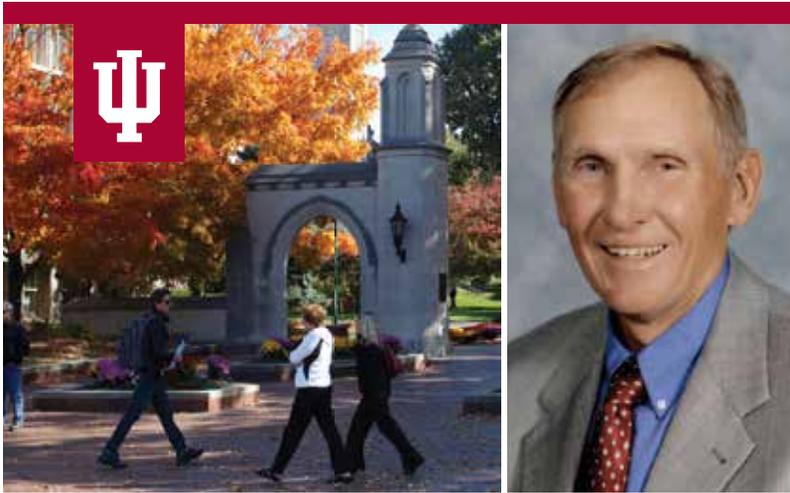
It’s this vision and determination that has aided Ferguson in so many of his projects over the years – both for Cook Group and the community.

Marchant worked with Ferguson in the 1960s on getting a convention center in Bloomington. “We only got it done because of Steve’s leadership abilities. He was absolutely brilliant at pulling together a large amount of different factors needed to make it work, synthesize it down to where it was a workable plan and then go like hell to get it done.

“Steve has a very unique and outstanding ability to take very complex situations and make them workable from a management standpoint. His ability to finish something they got started on was absolutely phenomenal.”

Carl Cook attests: “His biggest asset as a leader is his patience. And he’s the consummate attorney: listening, thinking, weighing. Analysis is constant with Steve. That’s something that can’t be shut off.”

Ferguson himself cites his ability to listen as his greatest quality. “I think to be a leader you have to be able to communicate. People need to understand and trust you, believe

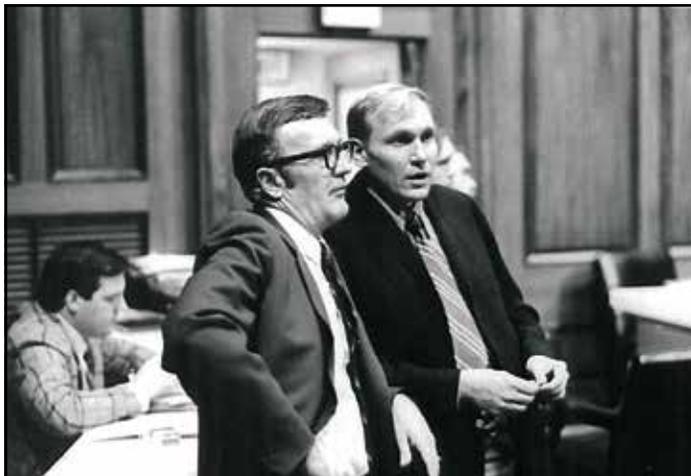


LEADERSHIP,  
EXEMPLIFIED.

**Indiana University congratulates Stephen L. “Steve” Ferguson, J.D. ’66**, on receiving the Indiana Chamber of Commerce “Business Leader of the Year” award for 2013. It is a well deserved recognition of his long history of commitment and leadership.

Steve has generously given many years of outstanding service to the university community as an IU Trustee, member of the Indiana General Assembly, member of the Board of Directors of the IU Foundation, and past chair of the State of Indiana Commission for Higher Education, and in numerous other capacities. His dedication to higher education has had and will continue to have a lasting impact on the future of Hoosiers and the state of Indiana.

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**Ferguson first became active in public policy when he was elected a state representative in his twenties.**

On Tuesdays and Thursdays, he's at the French Lick Resort. Dealing with that expansive property and government affairs are Ferguson's major roles, according to Carl Cook.

"On the government side, he's been around a long time. He knows so much history, sometimes more than the agencies themselves. When he goes to the Legislature – he was there (as a state representative from 1967-74) – that means something. He is full of history."

### **The best of times**

Spend a moment talking to Ferguson about his career and he will refer to the relationship he had with Bill Cook. The two men were not only close working colleagues but also friends who frequently vacationed together and, in general, enjoyed each other's company.

"We shared a lot of memorable occasions. Bill was such a great individual. Had all the right concerns about people and the right ethics, the right morals. Plus, he had such a great vision. He was a rare individual who could see out into the future. The vision he had and the willingness he had to step forward to make things successful.

"It was such a wonderful ride, because you were always on the cutting-edge of everything; you were action-oriented and moving forward," Ferguson reminisces.

"Whether that was restoring a resort or a church in Indianapolis, establishing a clinic on-site or whatever – there were always fun places to be. The organization was there. Bill was there. Fun times."

The duo was also fixtures at various sporting events, from high school basketball games to IU athletics to the Super Bowl.

All the camaraderie didn't mean they couldn't engage in competition or push each other's

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buttons from time to time.

On the land front, Ferguson gradually expanded his family farm to 2,500 contiguous acres. "I was always out in front of Bill on that; then he caught up with me ... but I finally passed him again and won that," he remarks.

Carl Cook recalls the early years before Ferguson accepted a full-time position and was still practicing law.

"We might be on vacation somewhere in Montana, riding along on a lonely highway and Steve would say, 'I need to make a phone call (related to a legal case).' Well, this is the middle of nowhere. There's not a telephone pole – not a blade of grass visible all the way to the horizon.

"So we'd be driving along and come upon an abandoned gas station and outside is a phone booth. He'd get out and we might sit there for 20 minutes while he was on the phone. It's one of those things that kind of drove my Dad crazy. We'd get back on the road an hour and Steve's saying: 'I need to make another phone call.'"

The pair was also known to be big on practical jokes.

"We were constantly going back and forth with each other, always pulling little pranks. I've done less of it in recent years than when I was younger and feistier," Ferguson

laughingly admits.

One frequent trick Bill played involved Ferguson's vehicle.

"Steve used to always leave his keys in the car and if Dad spied one of his cars – and it didn't matter where it was, at the mall, downtown, wherever – Dad would jump in it and move it, sometimes with a note. Sometimes he might move it just one row over," Carl Cook remembers.

"(But) one time Steve was coming out of his office as his Jeep was driving away. He thought his car was being stolen – which it was, I guess – and he chased after it."

### 'God's work'

Something Ferguson gets very serious about is volunteering and community involvement, which he believes is something everyone should embrace.



**A respected presence at the Indiana Statehouse, Ferguson (back row, center) has championed various pieces of legislation that became law over the years.**

And he walks the talk.

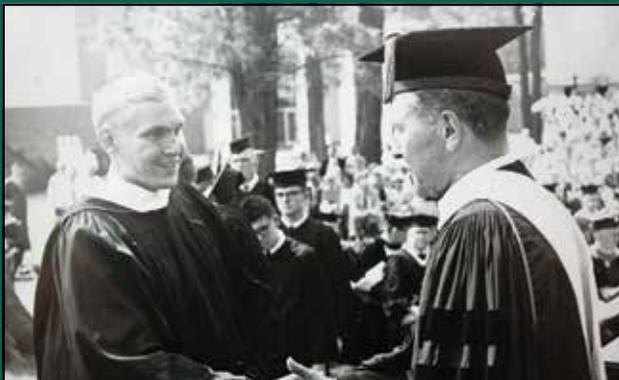
Among his many associations, he served 12 years on the Indiana University Board of Trustees and was a member of the state's Higher Education Commission and Indiana's Education Roundtable.

"That was one of the nice things about being associated with Bill; we both agreed it's our obligation to give back to the community. And that doesn't mean just money; it's your mind,

## Biggest Impacts

### His parents

"Working on the family farm, the people there were an enormous influence. Your parents have a tremendous influence. After Dad passed away, I was planning on going to live there and go to college at IU. But mother said there's more to college than that; you can't live here. For her being a widow, that was a big decision. It resulted in me going to Wabash College (below), which was a tremendous experience."



### His brother

"I practiced law; my brother was an attorney. That was a big influence. I knew I wanted to stay in the area ... all it offered: the family farm and Bloomington. Practicing law let me do that. ... I never wanted to get involved in politics; it wasn't the plan. My brother did influence that. I ran (for the Indiana General Assembly) while I was still in law school." Ferguson would serve from 1967-1974; the sessions then were 60 days every two years.

### Fellow legislators

"In the Legislature, all the people that I met there. The influence of people like (future Gov.) Otis Bowen, (the EPA's first administrator) Bill Ruckelshaus, (builder) John Hart, just to name a few. I learned a lot from them at that age: I was in my twenties."

### Bill Cook

"Since meeting him in 1963, he's been more than just a little influence. We became good friends. His association, friendship and business relationship; he was a special guy, and I was fortunate to have that."



**State Rep. Ferguson attends the opening festivities for State Road 37 in Bloomington.**

your abilities and your leadership – your participation. I think that’s what gives strength to our communities.

“Bill would always say that was God’s work. Off to do God’s work today. That was his way of saying that it’s a calling we all ought to have and we all ought to participate. Bill and I were in total agreement on that. It was an important part of our culture here,” Ferguson affirms.

Adds Marchant, “Bill and Steve have been involved in numerous projects that nobody even knows about, in the background, that made a difference in Bloomington. Where they quietly went about making sure the leadership and funds and so forth were in place to make it work. It just changed the whole culture in Bloomington. And they were the most active people in town.”

Ferguson says it’s easy to get caught up in running a company, but urges business leaders to continue to rise to the occasion.

“For the state to be successful, the leadership of the business community has to continually step out and provide leadership for the state and for the public policy of the future.

“People in leadership positions that can see the future and have vision need to be the ones stepping up,” he declares.

### **Crowning achievements**

There are many things that Ferguson is proud of, starting with his children: “They’ve grown up and done well.

“I’m obviously proud at what we did at the French Lick Resort. The most important part of

*Continued on page 59*



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And with that, Duke Energy congratulates Steve Ferguson on being honored as Indiana Chamber of Commerce Business Leader of the Year.

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## Ferguson

*Continued from page 32*

that is the impact on people. Giving people job opportunities, which gives them ability to take care of their families and homes – and have a life in their community,” he surmises.

Ferguson is also pleased with his role in getting the primary road system completed in Bloomington, citing specifically the ribbon-cutting on State Road 37.

But what touched him emotionally and he spent the most time on during our interview was a particular volunteer effort. And it says a lot about Ferguson the man.

He coached about 800 basketball games involving “little kids up until high school” and was able to impact their young lives – and be enriched himself along the way.

“The thing that stands out more than the games you won or lost is the kids you were associated with. I remember there

was one little kid who was so small and frail. He could hardly get the basketball to the basket ... but he had one spot where he could shoot from. He had a tough family situation. I’d pick him up and take him to practice, and then take him home and spend some time with him. I didn’t think there was going to be much opportunity in life for him.

“Years later, one day I was walking into the HPER Building (at IU) to watch some of the kids play and I was walking past the young guy who was checking them in and he said, ‘Mr. Ferguson.’ I said, ‘Yes.’ I went back and said, ‘I don’t know who you are.’ He said, ‘Remember that little kid...’ Ferguson trails off.

“He was now in college. That’s a life you changed. You can’t get much more memorable than that.”