

20 questions for Bill Cook

Interview by Angelo Pizzo Photography by Steve Raymer

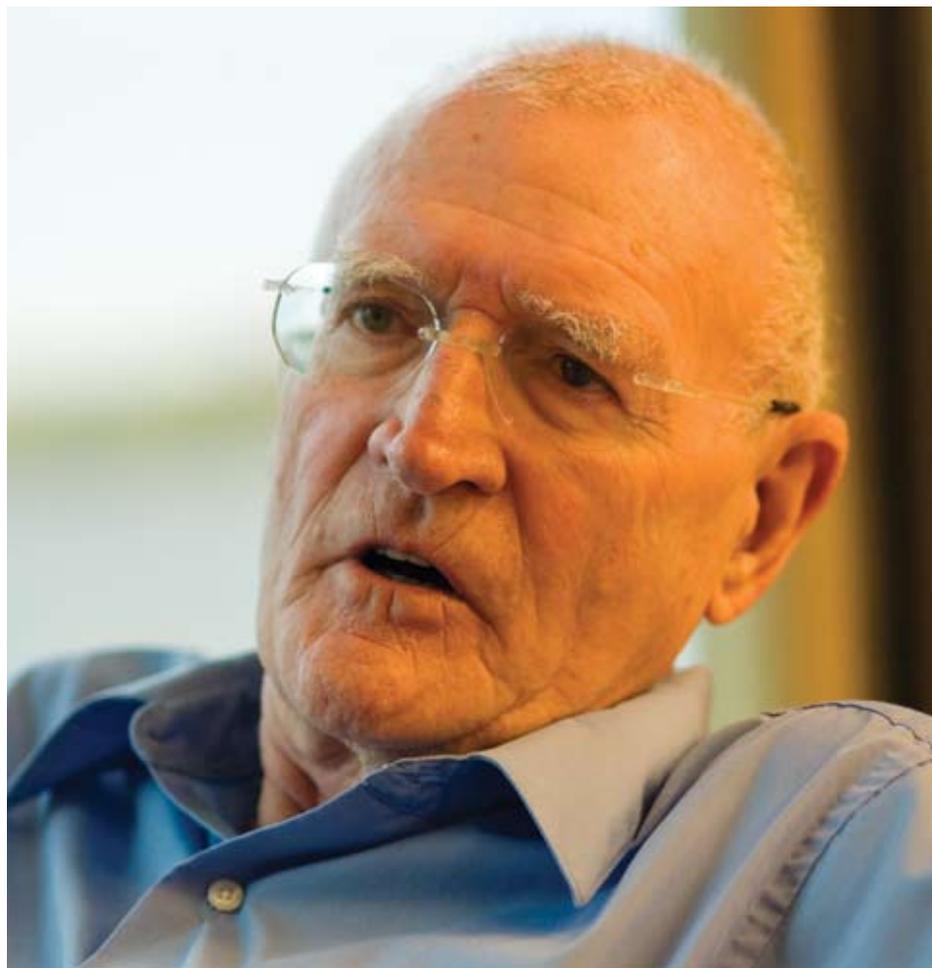
A Regular Guy Who Became a Magnate

If America were to pick its preeminent entrepreneur, the choice might well be Bloomington's Bill Cook. With an investment of just \$1,500, he and his wife Gayle—without a single employee—began a medical business that is now a worldwide empire. That was in 1963. Today, according to *Forbes Magazine*, Cook's net worth is approximately \$3.2 billion, making him one of America's 100 wealthiest individuals, number one in Indiana, and 170th in the world. But in Bloomington, the Cooks are perhaps better known for their philanthropy, having donated untold millions to charitable and educational institutions. Indiana University, from which Gayle graduated as a Phi Beta Kappa and which Cook once served as a trustee, has been a favorite beneficiary. A man who avoids the limelight, Cook, now 75, is rarely interviewed or photographed.

PIZZO People always wonder what spurs a person to become a huge success. How did your childhood affect your life?

COOK I had a very happy childhood, really only good memories. I had great parents. In high school I played sports and was in the choir; it was a good time. At Northwestern, I majored in biology, pre-med. I was going to be a doctor, but I learned eventually that choice wouldn't be for me. I would have had trouble because of feeling too much for my patients. I think a good doctor has to have some emotional separation.

PIZZO When you got out of college, did you have any idea what you wanted to do?



COOK No, not really. I became an army medic and taught physics of anesthesia to resident anesthesiologists. After I got out of the army I went to work at Martin Aircraft as an engineering recruiter. My next job was with American Hospital Supply, editing their products catalog. During that time I started coming up with ideas for possible products. One was to make disposable hypodermic needles.

PIZZO Around this time your wife, Gayle, came into your life. How did you meet?

COOK I went to work in Chicago for the Nelson Instrument Company, a small company I had heard about. The company's owner, Lloyd Nelson, was Gayle's cousin, and

through him I met Gayle. We played bridge one night at the Nelsons' home. I had a date and Lloyd didn't play bridge, so the foursome was Gayle, my date, me, and Lloyd's wife, Editha. A few months passed and I asked Gayle out. Four and a half months later, we got married. She lived at 7600 on the south side of Chicago, and I was at 7200 north. I'd just get on Lake Shore Drive and go all the way south. One night, my old '46 Packard broke down. I thought it was best to get married. She had the money. I thought, "Boy, it's about time. I don't want to be making that drive through the winter and I don't know how I'm going to get down there." And during this time I was developing ideas for going into business for myself.



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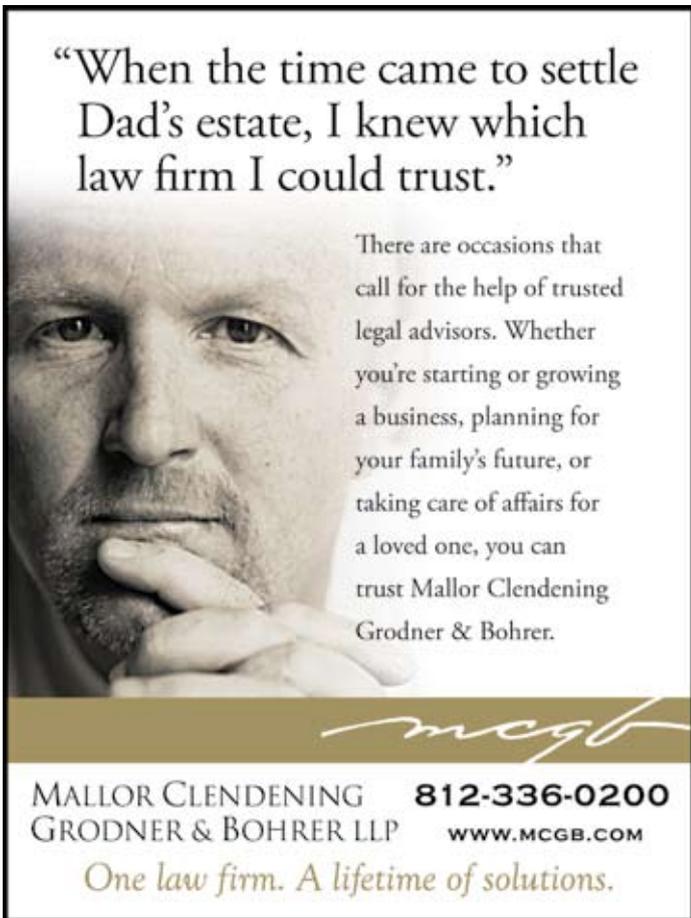
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PIZZO You co-started your first company in Chicago, MPL, which manufactured disposable hypodermic needles. How did you end up in Bloomington?

COOK Gayle and I had been talking about starting a company, and we had been studying several possible towns in which to live. We wanted a small town, out of the snowbelt, but fairly close to our hometowns—I was from Canton in west-central Illinois and she was from Evansville. One day, I was in Cadillac, Michigan, picking up some needles that had been defective. The snow was coming down hard and I couldn’t get out of town. I spent three days in a Cadillac motel. When I finally got out, I started driving south, back toward Chicago. When I saw the Fort Wayne turnoff to Chicago, I thought maybe I should go to Bloomington. Gayle went to school there and really liked it. I thought, “If it’s not snowing there, I won’t go back to Chicago.” So instead of making the right-hand turn to Chicago I kept on going south to Bloomington. When I got there, there was no snow on the ground. I called Gayle that night and said, “How would you like to move to Bloomington?” She said, “Would you first tell me why?” I said, “It’s snowing up in Chicago.” She said, “Okay, I’m ready to move.” In a few weeks we got our plans together and moved.

There’s always so much that is going on in Bloomington. If you can’t get active in this town, you really have a personality problem.

PIZZO I know you have a great appreciation for Bloomington. It has to be more than just because it wasn’t snowing that day. What else about this place drew you here?

COOK Bloomington is a special town because of its natural beauty, and I think it’s attractive to me for the same reason it’s attractive to you. There’s always so much that is going on in Bloomington. If you can’t get active in this town, you really have a personality problem. Everybody here speaks to you whether they know you or not. The first thing they’ll ask is, “Where are you from? What are you doing in Bloomington? Do you like the town?”

PIZZO How did you launch your business here in Bloomington?

COOK I sold my interest in MPL to my partner and used \$1,500 of that money to start up our new business with just the two of us as employees, Gayle and I, in a small apartment. I was the manufacturer and the sales department, and Gayle was in charge of billing and quality control. We had our son, Carl, by then. We kept a strict regimen. I put on a shirt, tie, and coat everyday. It was hot in there so I sometimes took the coat off when I was manufacturing our product. But I always dressed like that as a self-discipline, to stay with the regimen.

During the day, Gayle would take care of Carl and I would work until 4 pm or 5 pm. After supper, I would take care of Carl and she would do her jobs. Then Carl and I would go to bed and she would work until 1 or 2 in the morning. That’s how it was for the first year. We added our first employee, Tom Osborne, a high school kid who turned out to be a genius in product design—he’s still with us. We expanded the manufacturing operation into another building that is a violin shop now. And we just grew from there.

PIZZO As your successes in the medical devices field kept growing, you had to multiply your companies — up to 42 now. How do you manage to oversee such a huge organization?

COOK I make sure people I hire do what I want them to do and adhere to the principles I set out. Once you get a feeling that these people are doing the right thing, you leave them alone. But in the early stages—I call it the “learning period”—you’re very much involved, looking to see whether you need to take corrective actions. If you do, you have a little chitchat. I do as much as I can with a handshake. Being good to the people you work with, your employees, is important. In our company today we are integrated with very strong managers in Ireland, Denmark, San Diego, Winston-Salem. We have key people in these organizations who show up here once every two or three months. That’s not to talk to me but to Kem Hawkins, the company president now. I am comfortable with Kem because he knows the way I want things done. It’s the same thing with Steve Ferguson, who has been with us almost from the start.

PIZZO I know you have other passions besides business. How did you get involved with your drum and bugle corps, Star of Indiana?

COOK I’ve always loved music. I have a background in piano, and I was in the choir in high school, then I sang in choir all four years I was at Northwestern. But the drum corps came because my son, Carl, who was in the band in high school, played with a drum corps in Iowa one summer. In 1979, we went to the drum corps world championships and I just fell in love. I told Carl I wanted to start a corps in Bloomington and he said I was nuts. But in 1991, Star of Indiana of Bloomington won the world championship. I had a lot of fun being involved, and I’m still passionate about it. We had a lot of good years, but now I’m not involved and Star of Indiana has morphed into something else.

PIZZO Which leads me to *Blast*, the musical, which won both a Tony and an Emmy award. How did *Blast* emerge from the Star of Indiana drum and bugle corps?

COOK We had so many good musicians in the corps but because there is an age limitation, we knew these kids were going to go off and become school teachers and take on other jobs. Then we were at a reception for the Canadian Brass after they appeared at the IU Auditorium,



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and they asked us to do a short tour with them. But the national headquarters told us that if we did so we would lose our amateur status.

We decided to go ahead and do it for the kids, so the Star of Indiana became a title only of the organization that presided over what we call the Brass Theatre. We ended up traveling for three years with the Canadian Brass. They would do about an hour and we would do an hour and 15 minutes. It was a wonderful experience for these kids to be around this group of musicians, but they were getting tired, too. Jim Mason, the musical director, said to me, "You've got to do something about getting off the road so we can rehearse more." So we did and then went on our own with a new program.

We started going into the big venues and selling out. For example, we had 18,900 people at the Hollywood Bowl. The week before they had something like 2,000 for the Boston Pops. We were playing to sell-out crowds all over the place. We went to Branson for two years and did well. We went to the Hammersmith Theater in London and we were dying on the vine there for the first month until the BBC put us on the air for two broadcasts. Then, we started to do very well, and fortunately some people from New York saw us.



A tape recorder between them, Cook discusses his life and passions with interviewer Pizzo.

They invited us to open on Broadway, which we did, selling out for three months before 9/11 happened. After that, we gave a few free concerts to the people in the fire and police departments. Then Jim decided we'd better just come on home. Three months later we went out again on tour and were again a big hit. At one time we had three groups going at once. Then we developed another show, *Cyberjam*, and more recently *Blast 2*, which is now called *MIX*.

PIZZO You find something you enjoy and feel passionate about, and at the same time you figure out a way to make it profitable. How does that process work for you?

COOK A lot of it has to do with the money not being a prerequisite. The biggest charge I get is from manipulating an idea to produce a result. I love to take an idea and massage it to see whether or not there's anything in it. The trick is, if it doesn't work, to get the hell out.

PIZZO What was the first major indulgence you allowed yourself?

COOK The first thing that I ever owned over and above what was the normal thing in doing business was an airplane. I loved to fly. But even then, we were using planes for the business and eventually flying turned into a business of its own. I recently indulged in a boat, *Star 7*, a catamaran built for me in Australia. I bought the boat because I always wanted to see the rivers of the United States. That came from my early years living in Peoria, on the Illinois River. I saw all those barges going by, and I always wanted to know where they were going. The first summer we had the boat, Gayle and I saw all the major rivers in the eastern part of the country. This year we saw all of the Great Lakes. We would have seen more rivers on the way home had we not blown an engine between Quebec and Nova Scotia.

PIZZO How did you get involved in historic preservation?

COOK Gayle and I decided we would like to do this in the 1970's. The first thing we did was the Colonel Jones house down in Spencer



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County, in the area where Abraham Lincoln lived as a boy; he had some connection with that particular house. Then we did the Conklin House in Bloomington and then the downtown Square. Now, of course, we've done West Baden and French Lick.

PIZZO: How did you get involved with West Baden?

COOK: Historic Landmarks of Indiana (HLOI) asked if we would help to stabilize the building. We thought it would take \$10 million. It took \$35 million. Then we thought we'd go ahead and sell this to somebody and found out we couldn't sell it, nobody was interested. It was really a white elephant. Some people wanted me to donate it as a religious retreat area, and there were a lot of other crazy ideas. I wasn't interested in any of them. I was giving a talk one day to the Historic Landmark of Indiana people and I'd already given the speech and sat down and then it hit me what we could do. So I asked Lee Williamson, who was the head of HLOI, if I could say one or two more words.

What I said was, "You know, folks, the only way that I can ever see that we can save this hotel is if we got casino gambling down here — bring French Lick back to where it was before." I had carried the idea around for a while but it sort of just gelled that night because everybody was so downcast that they couldn't sell West Baden. Steve Ferguson got caught up in it and said, "Yeah, let's do it. Let's just do this." Steve took it to the legislature and worked his cookies off for many years, seven or eight, to make this all happen. Finally, it did.

PIZZO You've done a lot to revitalize the downtown area at a time when downtowns are dying in many cities of Bloomington's size.

COOK Conceptually it works very well. I wish it could have a little more retail, but it is growing. We do have some problems in this town though, things we have to guard against. You and I live in a very nice community. It used to be trim and pretty and all the houses used to look the same when we bought in the 1960's. People were very proud of their homes.

Then along came aluminum siding. Then we began to see people who believed they should keep their yard natural and so you got weeds. Then all of a sudden you see students moving in and then, worse, the preservationists or quasi-preservationists, people that probably do not have their best interests in preservation at

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all, start messing things up. They have restricted the construction of new buildings and they have put restrictions on entire communities and neighborhoods and called them historic and significant when in actuality they could be talking about a 4x4-shotgun house that has no historical significance whatsoever.

For an area or place to be historically significant, a historical event must have taken place there, or it should have some special architectural value. If it can be replicated in reasonable form at reasonable cost, then that's not historically significant. The requirements are very clear. West Baden and the French Lick Hotel could never be replicated again, for instance, because it would be too expensive. The downtown Square you would not replicate because it would be too expensive to build brand new.

Our community has created its own little slums and I live in one today, the Elm Heights neighborhood. You ride down First Street and there are one or two blocks which are very nice, and then it just falls into rooming houses and houses in various states of disrepair. And it's mainly because these so-called preservationists have designated these buildings, homes, and neighborhoods as historic structures. And unfortunately too, these same "preservationists" are actually purchasing these properties and making a profit out of them, fixing them up and turning a profit renting them to students. That's okay, but the rest of the community suffers as a result.

I never owned a garage in my life, because I live in a neighborhood that has no driveways. I would love to have a garage, but that would mean that I'd have to buy the lot next door and take down the house to put up a garage. And of course, I'm not allowed to do that. People in our neighborhood are prohibited from increasing the value of their homes because of these preservationists. It's not worth putting up a porch because of all the hell and abuse we would get from the city planners and the city council "preservationists." So no one puts a dime into improving their homes, and they lose value. It ultimately hurts the city because it decreases the tax base.

PIZZO You could live anywhere, build an extraordinary structure on a vast estate, without cost being a factor, yet you choose to live in the same modest, three-bedroom home you purchased in 1967. And on top of that you're not happy about what is happening in your neighborhood. Why are you still there?

COOK I like where I live. It's a great neighborhood. I like people living on either side of me. They're my friends. This is my home. I want to protect my neighborhood, too. But the people who have most to say about this place don't live here.

PIZZO Changing the subject, who are the three most impressive people you've ever met?

COOK My mother, my dad, and my uncle. There are many people I have respect for, but these three people influenced me the most. My dad taught me to always shake hands when you had a deal or an agreement. My mother taught me how to be a decent person. I had an uncle who was a paraplegic for most of his life. He made and repaired furniture for a living. His door was always open and there were always people around him because he was such a happy guy.

PIZZO What about outside of your family, who are the public figures you respect?

COOK I admire Dick Lugar and Evan Bayh very much. These two people seem to be able to do a job with a minimum of effort, or at least the appearance of effort. When Evan Bayh was governor he was totally Teflon, totally seamless. He just did his thing and didn't really worry who was around or what people were saying; he just did it. Both men are in there, day in and day out, doing their jobs. Then there's Herman Wells. He lived by example. He would take any amount of time to listen to you. He's probably the best person I've ever met. He never really had a whole lot to say about himself. He wanted to know about you. Herman Wells was a special person, and if he asked you to do something, you didn't turn him down.

PIZZO Does it bother you that people are always soliciting money from you for business ventures, worthy causes, or individual needs?

COOK No, not really. I have long understood their reasons and there are so many causes that I really enjoy. Giving is usually based on need, and I try to concentrate as heavily as I can on that. Kem has authorization to give money for medical research through our companies. Educational purposes are another good cause. We built a science building at Northwestern. Here at IU, Charles Webb of the music school asked me and Gayle to help with the music library. We put up the lights at Memorial Stadium and we've endowed ten Herman Wells scholars.

There is a predisposition toward giving to higher education and to forget our high schools. We are going to do better in that area, and, of course, support the YMCA, and I'm always looking at other opportunities to help the community. Rarely have we gone outside the Bloomington area. I've always felt that you should give enough so it makes a difference. We never give to United Way or charitable organizations like that, because we have no control over the money. We give money locally because we have control over it—I can specify things like the lights at IU or the music library. We got into the Wells scholarships because Herman asked me to. He wanted us to create them any way we saw fit.

PIZZO When I was reading a short bio of you, one detail really caught my eye. You were a driver of John Mellencamp's tour bus?

COOK I was also a driver for Star of Indiana for nine years. I enjoy driving buses. John called me up one time and said, "Hey Cook, would you like to drive the bus for me? I need a bus and you've got one." I said, "Well, I'm not doing anything, so that's fine with me." So I drove him up to Lansing, Michigan, one time and Columbia, Missouri, another time. The whole band would pile in the bus and there would be a lot of shouting and laughing on the way there, but then after the concert they would climb back in and go right to sleep. I'd drive all the way back home and the whole busload was asleep on me. I didn't mind. I'm a long-range driver.

PIZZO Reportedly you've retired, but when I spent a day with you in French Lick recently you seemed totally engaged—aware of every detail of every project and on a first-name basis with every worker. What is your official status as far as retirement?

COOK I have a great deal of fun with all of that down there. But I've been in some state of retirement since my first bypass in 1974. At that point, I didn't think I was going to be able to work again. I had another bypass in 1983, then I retired officially in 1989. Then I got more active again in the company and I went overseas in 1997, had a hell of a heart attack, and came back here. So I've been in various forms of retirement ever since 1974, and it just goes on and on. But I feel good now. In the business I'm in, I can do what I like. Money is not what I work for. I work to make an idea work. And, yes, I stay pretty active. I really enjoy what I'm doing. ✨