

# 25 YEARS THAT REVOLUTIONIZED AN INDUSTRY

*Editor's Note: The below was developed from an interview with RTA Executive Director Jim Gauntt in November 2019 by Nisus Corp.'s Jim Gorman and Ken Laughlin. Additional comments were collected from Crossties interviews.*

When Railway Tie Association (RTA) Executive Director James C. Gauntt announced his plans for retirement, railroad and manufacturing industry colleagues were saddened.

American Short Line and Regional Association President Chuck Baker tweeted an immediate reaction to learning that a search for Gauntt's replacement had begun. "The Railway Tie Association is looking for somebody great to replace the irreplaceable Jim Gauntt upon his retirement next year," he said. "Blessedly, he will hang around for some mentoring."

As executive director of the Railway Tie Association since 1995, Gauntt spent

more than 25 years working to ensure the industry remains safe, efficient and, in a word, the "best" it can be. With a career spanning more than 40 years, he amassed a remarkable record of success, including publishing RTA's *Crossties* magazine, conducting training sessions on tie grading, and hosting the RTA Annual Symposium and Technical Conference. Gauntt is also the published author of numerous articles, papers and publications on the subject of wood tie research and treated wood tie performance, and is a frequent speaker on wood preserving and tie industry subjects.

Retirement was something Gauntt only considered for a short period of time. He had begun to suspect his ability to shoulder the travel demands of the job might begin to ebb as time went on. Gauntt underwent multiple spine surgeries from 2015-2019. Yet, the decision to retire earlier than anticipated was made easier by the



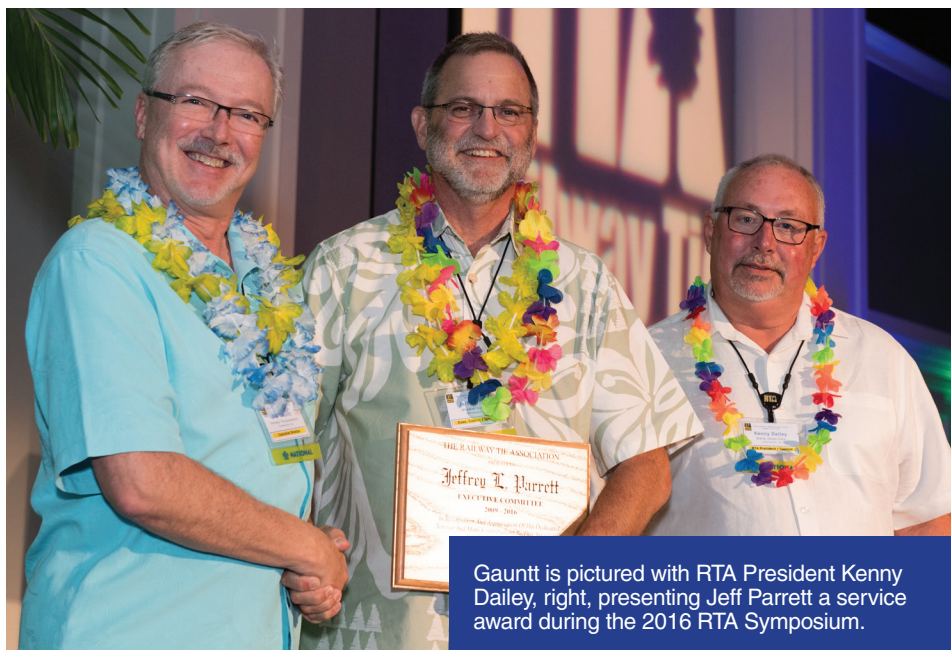
RTA Executive Director Jim Gauntt

consideration that it might be in the best interests of RTA and its members. Gauntt reflected on the difficult choice to step away from an organization and industry he loves. "When you find there are fewer years in front of you than behind, you ultimately realize you should give greatest consideration to your family and spend as much of that time with them as you can. The RTA Executive Committee helping me lay the groundwork for a successful transition was absolutely essential in my decision."

Gauntt's transition will play out over the next 15 months. He said he firmly believes the succession process in place will serve the membership well and that the association will benefit with someone at the helm who will bring new energy and ideas to the association. Gauntt will continue to



Gauntt presents Representative Mac Collins (as Sen. Charles Grassley looks on) with a Broad Axe for his service to the railroad Industry during one of his many Railroad Day on the Hill visits.



Gauntt is pictured with RTA President Kenny Dailey, right, presenting Jeff Parrett a service award during the 2016 RTA Symposium.

serve as a resource to Mr. Ashley Goodin, who will take on the role of co-executive director on May 1. (See announcement on page 25).

### Important Issues For The Future Of RTA

RTA objectives include increasing the growth of its volunteer base participating in key areas and expanding upon the investment it takes to achieve more than 90 percent member engagement. Gauntt also said RTA should focus on increasing short line railroad membership and encouraging members to be transparent about processes and products. He said increased communication within the community of industry players will not only lead to better industry performance but will also foster greater tolerance and understanding when there are significant differing points of views.

Ken Laughlin, wood preservation vice president at Nisus Corp. and longtime friend of Gauntt, observed that when he first served on the RTA Executive Committee, there were no railroaders. Thanks to the work of Gauntt and the committee members, that changed.

Laughlin also noted that the procurement session of the RTA Annual Symposium is now one of the most popular sessions at the symposium; people love it, he said.

Gauntt said he sees the value of updating events, just like the RTA Executive Committee evolved, as essential to vibrancy within any organization and said he enjoys crafting engaging, must-attend sessions. For example, because of the procurement session's success, RTA went from having no sawmill industry leaders attending conferences to dozens attending today. Gauntt said the next evolution in events and leadership will be part of the fun and among the first of many challenges for the new association leader.

Another challenge for RTA's new executive director will be learning about the changes over the last 20 years in wood preservation technology and preparing members for the next wave of innovation. "It is a demanding hill to climb, but I know from my experience with Ashley to date that our selection for executive director is definitely up to the task," Gauntt said.

For the new executive director, continuing to prepare for the acceptance of new technologies will be a motivating force; there will always be something else coming, always some new technology "disrupting" the industry.

Even though the focus on the incredible value of RTA's face-to-face events where the merging of knowledge and networking will always occur, Gauntt said, "The industry also needs to embrace online learning in a greater way. Reaching the sawmiller with virtual learning will become increasingly important." He also said automation will play a role in the future. "The more members can automate, the more positions can become information technology-style jobs that will appeal to our industry's next generation of workers."

### A Look Back

Gauntt was born in Birmingham, Ala. His father, Paul Gauntt, born in Langdale, Ala., was an Auburn University engineering graduate who later found his calling by attending Candler School of Theology at Emory University on his path to ordination as a Methodist minister. His mother, Janet (Whetstone) Seaman, was from Alexander City, Ala., and graduated from the University of Montevallo en route to becoming an educator and business leader.

Gauntt developed a professional presence in the music world that began with his solo work at Indian Springs School in Birmingham. That led to performances throughout Europe and on the stage of the Lincoln Center before the age of 17. His work in theater also had depth, as he was a regular, with lead and supporting roles, in Birmingham's Children's Theatre, Actors Theater, and multiple shows for the city's Jewish Community Center.

In college, Gauntt collaborated in script and music writing to produce the winning musical of the 1976 Annual College Night competition at the University of Montevallo, where he also operated audio production services for the university's Music Department.

Just prior to his 20<sup>th</sup> birthday, Gauntt graduated, Cum Laude, with a bachelor of science degree in biology and chemistry. He and his wife, Susan, were married in 1985 and raised Marshall and Kristin Gauntt, who



Publicity photo for Gauntt's appearance in "South Pacific" in 1994.



Gauntt and his wife, Susan.

now reside in Jacksonville, Fla., and Dallas, Texas, respectively.

After college, Gauntt was awarded a scholarship to the Cumberland School of Law at Samford University but declined to continue studies there after his first semester. "I learned what I did not want to pursue rather quickly, so even though I could have continued, I decided on another path."

That path led him to the wood treatment industry in 1979. That's when Osmose Wood Preserving Company of America (OWPCA), as it was known at the time, offered him a job. Over the next seven years, Gauntt rose to the position of director ►



of codes and product acceptance and made a name for himself in the industry. His work there laid the groundwork for future efforts in associations as he became OWPCA's primary liaison with several wood product and code groups.

Gauntt's primary tasks for Osmose involved fire-retardants that had been reengineered into the LHC brand—a low-hygroscopic formulation. Gauntt was given the task of marketing this new product to code bodies and architects and then selling the change to plants across the country. He had become an expert on the technical side of fire-retardant formulations, and, as the industry's fire-retardant liabilities mounted over the years, Gauntt's expertise was vital to the company.

In 1986, prior to joining RTA, Gauntt joined an Osmose licensee, which also had a distinct century-long heritage. Randall Brothers Inc. (RBI), a family business established in 1885, was also an architectural millwork and multi-channel building materials distribution business. Gauntt had known the company primarily as an Osmose customer since it also operated a treating plant at the upscale commercial and residential site now known as Atlantic Station in downtown Atlanta.

After spending a year learning aspects of the business, he was appointed vice president and worked there until 1995. Within two weeks of joining RBI, the treating plant burned, and Gauntt worked diligently alongside Osmose engineers to help get the plant back up and running, managing to do so within six weeks. "I remember having to turn valves and operate the plant manually by myself for a while," Gauntt said it was humbling and highly educational as he was able to learn first-hand the operations side of wood treating plants.

**Institutionalizing Knowledge**

According to Gauntt, many industry businesses are working with an older workforce—hard-working people with vast knowledge who have served their companies loyally for a long time. Now, the industry is charged with transferring this knowledge and hiring and training the next generation to manage these companies.



Steve Thomas, then host of the PBS show, *This Old House*, learns from Gauntt about Randall Brothers' special place in Atlanta's craftsmanship history.

Gauntt recalled one of the last big changes he played a role in at RBI. "RBI was almost invisible to the population boom occurring in Atlanta. Every native Atlantan knew about us, but we had missed connecting with the influx of new residents."

That's when Gauntt reached out to Steve Thomas of *This Old House* fame and invited him to join RBI at the Atlanta Home Show in spring 1985. "Steve and I got along very well. We recently reconnected and shared our memories of Randall Brothers' big foray into the retail marketplace," Gauntt said, adding this was a time of significant learning.

"As in the case of branding a new fire retardant and stepping into operations at the multi-channeled, 100-year-old, family-owned Atlanta building materials icon, I learned a great deal during the early years of my career. Without these experiences, I would not have been prepared to tackle RTA's work with the same insights and ideas."

**Joining RTA**

When Gauntt was first approached about RTA's executive director position, he turned down the offer, citing too much uncertainty in his personal life. Recently remarried and with custody of his two young children, the idea of also making a

change from such a secure position at RBI to a new employer seemed unfair to his family. He later confided to his wife that he wished the family situation had coalesced earlier so he had not felt compelled to turn down the original RTA offer. Later, Susan encouraged him to reach out to RTA to see if the position was still open. It was, and RTA offered the job again.

Once taking on the position, there were a few challenges, including opening a new office in Fayetteville, Ga., and hiring another person to support the mission. "I had never opened an office from scratch, and I remember the feeling of loneliness, standing in the office space by myself after having signed a three-year lease," Gauntt said. He soon hired RTA Administrator Debbie Corallo. "She was there for me and the association and made it so much easier to get to work for the members," he said.

Corallo and Gauntt have shared the same office space and been working together side-by-side since the headquarters in Fayetteville opened in January 1996.

"It is so hard to believe my journey started with Jim and RTA almost 25 years ago," Corallo said. "I can't express how wonderful it has been working for this terrific association and getting to know the fabulous people in the industry. I am genuinely grateful for the many friends I have made because of it, and I am



also very thankful to Jim for giving me this opportunity. It has been extremely educational in so many ways working with Jim, and he has always challenged me to keep up with his vision for RTA. I am confident the new director will be good for the association—just as Jim has been—and will take it to the next level and beyond.”

The next challenge came in working with members who fought intensely among themselves. So, during his first Executive Committee meeting in January 1996, Gauntt advised the group that while he didn't know what they had done in the past, they would operate by consensus.

The association was stable yet was in need of a growth plan.

Once on board and as improvements began to galvanize, the tenacity of the members to support the organization impressed him. “It was either that or they were letting the new guy have just enough rope to...,” he laughed. “Well, with that extra length of rope, we were able to pull together and avoid the association drifting from its purpose. We charted and steered a steady course for the future.”

Tom Loadman, who retired as senior vice president, Railroad Products and Services, for Koppers Inc., said he remembers Jim replacing Randy Wingard as executive director. He said Gauntt had big shoes to fill. “Coinciding with the timing of Jim taking the reins, Class I Railroads were reworking the Class I landscape through a series of acquisitions and mergers. Jim couldn't have inherited a more challenging landscape, which was unlike anything the industry had ever seen. Leadership was more important than ever, and Jim proved to be a key catalyst in helping RTA and its members navigate through a very challenging time. This defined Jim's career and gave him the confidence to lead the organization. The association saw in Jim a leader they could trust and depend on. The RTA recently celebrated its 100-year anniversary. What a testimony to the fact that Jim has been at the helm for a quarter century helping shape the RTA for the next 100 years. The entire time Jim was executive director, I was running the Railroad Products Division for Koppers. Over Jim's career, we spent many hours discussing strategy, challenges and key

decisions. And through it all, I developed great respect for Jim as the head of RTA but, more importantly, as a teammate and friend. Jim combined intelligence with integrity and dedication and gave the industry everything he had. I wish Jim nothing but the best in retirement and offer sincere thanks for a job well done.”

Gauntt was offered the position of executive director when Randy Wingard retired. Wingard, a fellow Alabamian, had 40 years of involvement in strategic and financial management in *Fortune* 500 companies, primarily Koppers Company of Pittsburgh. Wingard knew Gauntt from previous industry connections and knew he was respected in his field.

Wingard suggested the first thing Gauntt do would be to lead a strategic planning process. In response, Gauntt and Bill Gadd, who was RTA president at the time, along with past president Tony Chambers, created a strategic planning committee that included both railroaders and suppliers. He continued to push meetings throughout that first year and in the process developed a mission statement and plan that is still in place today. It was during those meetings that the ▶



Gauntt, far right, presents Rep. John Lewis (D-GA) with an RTA “Wood Tie” at Railroad Day on the Hill.

plan emerged. RTA does not just serve treaters; it serves all suppliers and customers and user groups—treaters, railroads and manufacturers. RTA was and remains in the center, connecting, facilitating and serving all facets of the industry.

Gary Hunter, retired from Union Pacific Railroad, recalls Gauntt joining the RTA team. “He came to RTA during a critical period in the history of the wood tie,” Hunter said. “His expertise in organizing and leading RTA in becoming the leading trade organization in this critical area was his mission, and he accomplished that and so much more. He was able to coordinate the best efforts of the railroad, suppliers, researchers and others to maximize the impact of the association.”

Gauntt helped RTA focus on five key areas: member education, product development, research and development, communication and administration. He facilitated changes in the by-laws so the nine-member board could include sawmillers and at least two railroaders. The maximum number of direct producers was limited to five. Gauntt said he believes the addition of sawmillers and railroaders to the Executive Committee was the most important development in RTA history to this day.



Adding railroaders to RTA's Executive Committee is an accomplishment Gauntt said he is particularly proud of. Here, Gauntt is pictured with Kristine Storm of Genesee & Wyoming who is also a member of the Executive Committee.

During Gauntt’s tenure, solid funding and market data were shared by competitors through the association. Gauntt hails the data collected through the “Two-Cent-Per-Tie” program as critical for members. For RTA to expand the value of that data, he sought professional advice and insight from a colleague, Fred Norrell, who had been a top economist at Alabama Power Co. As the go-to person for forecasting at Alabama Power’s parent company, Southern Company, Norrell’s skills were employed for econometric modeling for electricity and predictive use, which helped determine how much generating capacity Alabama would need for five- to 20-year plans. Gauntt collaborated with Norrell to determine RTA member needs.

Gauntt and Norrell developed an econometric model based on historical data to successfully implement annual demand forecasting at RTA. “RTA has been able to build an extremely reliable system that ensures that the best correlation is achieved with actual market demand for ties,” Gauntt said. The data of production and inventory that members provide along with annual data from railroads expands and improves the modeling’s accuracy. The model continues to evolve over time and has been used to help the shortline industry document the positive effects of the 45G tax credit.

Gauntt’s tenure spanned 25 years that revolutionized an industry. George W. Caric, vice president of marketing for Stella-Jones Corp., commented on the many changes that occurred during that time. “Kenny Dailey (also of Stella-Jones) and I were talking the other day in amazement that Jim’s been in charge of our association for 25 years. There have been many changes over those years with lots of ups and downs, including a Great Recession and 9/11. And, through it all, Jim’s leadership was solid in making sure RTA stayed focused on the promotion of our industry and keeping the treated wood crosstie as the premier product used in railroad track maintenance and construction.”

Despite all the hurdles over the past two-and-a-half decades, Gauntt said he is grateful for making lifelong friends, keeping crossties vibrant, and for dual-treatment acceptance in railroad environments; at

least 10 million ties are now dual treated annually.

RTA Past President Bill Gadd, retired, Appalachian Timber Services, offered the following words of congratulations. “Just wanted to take the time to congratulate you on your very successful tenure as executive director of the Railway Tie Association. It is one you can be proud of. I remember well the challenges that confronted us both as you took control of the future guidance of a very anxious group of tie producers and other supporting companies. I say ‘anxious,’ which was a result of Randy (Wingard) stepping down while the larger tie producers struggled to determine who would dictate RTA’s future. But, after many, sometimes confrontational, meetings the ‘anxious’ feelings subsided, and you were able to convince all involved that working together was in everyone’s best interest. This enabled RTA to grow in size and strength and become an excellent industry advocate for the wooden railway tie. You can retire with pride for a job well done, my friend. You were the ‘tie plate’ that held the industry together. Be well, stay safe, and relax with those you love around you.”

Today, as the country battles COVID-19—possibly the biggest world order disruptor since WWII—Gauntt said the industry and RTA will rise to the challenge. In fact, RTA has already had a major success in having sawmills and wood treaters recognized as essential businesses when the state of Pennsylvania issued its initial stay-at-home order. “Members asked us for help, and RTA responded within 24 hours. Over the next 48 hours, Gov. Tom Wolf issued revisions to include our members in the essential business exemption,” he said.

For the next 25 years, RTA should continue to focus on increasing membership, growing awareness and engagement, and continuing the new wave of innovation in the wood preservation technology. This may seem like boilerplate wish-list items, but it is nothing more than the truth.

Gauntt said, “We have a never-ending job. Like the church on the hill, we have the same message and mission every week.” Is this trite? “Never. The message and the purpose never change. The only thing that changes is the person on the lead horse.”



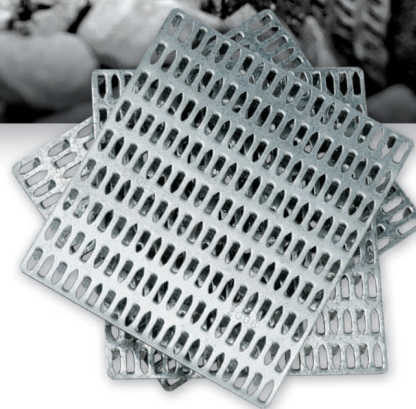
Over the years, so many people have championed RTA, and Gauntt said it would be impossible to thank all of them. But his industry associates' thoughts could be summed up by AREMA's Beth Caruso. "The industry simply won't be the same without Jim Gauntt. Through my years of knowing Jim, he is one of the nicest and most professional individuals I know. Jim encompasses what it means to be a true professional, and it's been a pleasure knowing and working with him. I wish him the best, always."

Gauntt embraced the expressions "consensus" and "a rising tide lifts all ships" to ensure all members stick together, retain focus and avoid distraction. He said he hopes this perspective will serve RTA and its new executive director well in the future. ■



Gauntt receives the 2019 AREMA Award for Service to the Industry.

# The Fountain of Youth



**For millions of cross-ties across North America, the end-of-the-line is now further down the line.**



Eagle Anti-Split Plates are extending the life of millions of Class 1 cross-ties across North America. Eagle Anti-Split Plates meet and/or exceed Class 1 Railroad specifications with superior splitting resistance that yields added value and profitability for our customers.

Call today and discover how to maximize cross-tie life and your bottom line. **Drink deep.**

[eaglemetal.com](http://eaglemetal.com) • 1-800-521-3245



# An RTA Career Without Guardrails



This photo captures the spectacular view that Gauntt and Broadfoot were treated to after their hike to the Grand Canyon together in 1997.

Jeff Broadfoot, two-time RTA president and friend of Jim Gauntt shared a story he thought poignant in reflecting on Gauntt's career with RTA. Broadfoot is president of Natural Wood Solutions, and he offered the following comments:

Jim is a great friend whom I have known for more than 30 years. I first met Jim in 1990 but really got to know him when I joined the RTA Executive Committee in 1995 while working for Kerr-McGee.

Jim has always been a great uniter, and, over the years, he and the Executive Committee led RTA through an unprecedented transformational period in education and collaboration for the association. One of my favorite memories with Jim is the trip we made to Las Vegas in 1997 looking for a venue to hold the 1999 RTA Convention for my first term as president.

Over three days we checked out many potential sites in and around Vegas, and on the last day decided to take the afternoon off to catch some of the local sites.

I had never been to the Hoover Dam or the Grand Canyon, so, on the last day of

our trip, Jim suggested we take a side trip and do just that. At the time, Hoover Dam was still giving tours so we learned all about why and how the dam was built, including all the equipment and manpower needed, which was fascinating to me. After visiting the dam, we got our map, talked to some locals and found we could visit the less traveled south rim of the Grand Canyon just north of the Hualapai Indian Reservation.

What they didn't tell us was that in order to get there we would have to take some very narrow and harrowing winding roads to get there, which took quite a bit longer than we thought. When we arrived, we were met by two members of the tribe who were just having lunch. We gave them our \$5, and then looked at each other and said, 'OK, what now?' They pointed to a trail and without any more instructions, simply said take the trail this way and the canyon will be there and, oh by the way, be careful because we have no guard rails!

So, we did just that and were treated to one of the most spectacular views I have ever seen. No guard rails, no people, and,



Jim Gauntt, left, and Jeff Broadfoot award TTCI's Carmen Trevizo with RTA's Award of Merit during the Annual Conference in Lake Tahoe, Nev., in 2011.

for once, neither Jim nor I had anything to say. We simply looked out, took in the beauty, and then later marveled at what God had created! I am so happy I got to spend time with Jim taking life's less traveled roads.

We took many other enjoyable trips over the years, but this one for me stands out the most. So, to my friend, Jim Gauntt, I say this, may God bless you and Susan in the next phase of your life, and I pray you continue to explore and take all of those less traveled roads, my friend.

Thank you for the opportunity to help commemorate my good friend. ■