





 INTERVIEW WITH

2017–2018 AIST President, Randy C. Skagen

Randy C. Skagen earned a degree in mechanical engineering technology from the Sault College of Applied Arts and Technology in Sault Ste. Marie, Ont., Canada, in 1980. He began his career in the steel industry with the Algoma Steel Corp. in 1980, where he held several positions in maintenance and operations. In 1991, he joined Nucor as a production supervisor during the construction of its second hot strip mill in Blytheville, Ark., USA. He was promoted to hot mill manager to construct Nucor's new hot strip mill in South Carolina in 1995. He then assisted in the design and construction of Nucor's new plate mill in North Carolina in a similar capacity beginning in 1998. In 2004, he was selected as the general manager of Nucor Steel Tuscaloosa Inc. and was elected vice president in September 2005. His current role is vice president and general manager of Nucor Steel Tuscaloosa Inc. Skagen serves on the board of directors of the Druid City Hospital Foundation, the Chamber of Commerce of West Alabama, West Alabama Works and the Black Warrior Council of the Boy Scouts of America. He also serves on the leadership advisory board for the dean of the College of Engineering at the University of Alabama. In recent years, he has served as chairman of the board for the West Alabama United Way, the Chamber of Commerce of West Alabama, the Black Warrior Council of the Boy Scouts of America, and is a past president of the AIST Foundation. *Iron & Steel Technology* spoke with Skagen about his career and his term as AIST president.

Tell us about your background. How did you get involved in the steel industry?

I was always a mechanically inclined kid growing up in Sault Ste. Marie, Ont., Canada. When I went to high school, I majored in machine shop. In Ontario, we had grade 13, which meant a five-year high school. There was an advanced track and a general track, and it was unusual to have someone doing a technical track as well as the advanced track, but I did both. Because of that, and taking machine shop and enjoying that mechanical aspect in high

school, I chose to go to Sault College of Applied Arts and Technology in Sault Ste. Marie and got my mechanical engineering technology degree. Partway through my first year, one of my professors saw something in me that he liked and suggested that I interview for a scholarship with Algoma Steel Corp. I interviewed for that scholarship and ended up spending that summer (1978) and the next, as a summer student at the steel plant working in maintenance, and then continued on to finish my degree in 1980. I started out in maintenance at Algoma Steel Corp. I had an



11-year career there, going up through the maintenance ranks to general foreman of the plate and strip mill when I left Algoma in 1991.

I then got an opportunity to go to Nucor. I started out for Nucor in Hickman, Ark., at the construction of our compact strip production (CSP) mill there. I was a rolling mill supervisor, and in 1995 I got promoted to rolling mill manager for the then-new Nucor facility in Berkeley, S.C., near Charleston. I met a fellow by the name of Joe Rutkowski, the general manager of Nucor Steel—South Carolina and a future AISE president. He knew that I had some plate experience, and he wanted to build a plate mill for Nucor, so we collaborated on that. While doing the start-up of Berkeley, we designed and built the first plate mill for Nucor at the Hertford County location. I left Berkeley in the summer of 1998 and spent six years as the rolling mill manager at Hertford County in the new plate mill. We then made the acquisition of Corus Tuscaloosa in 2004, and I came here to be general manager. In 2005, I was elected vice president and I'm still here at this job.

How did you first become involved with AIST?

I went to my first AISE conference in Pittsburgh — a rolling mill conference — in 1988. In fact, I can remember sitting at my desk at Algoma, probably in 1988 or so, reading Norm Samways' article about Tuscaloosa Steel in the AISE magazine. I had no idea where Tuscaloosa was, and absolutely no clue that one day I'd be living there. I've enjoyed it. I've been a full-time member since 1995, around the time I went to Berkeley.

Were you involved in any of AISE's Technical Committees?

As a matter of fact, that is how I evolved into a leadership role within the Association. I was chairman of the Hot Rolling Technical Committee, and from there I served on the board of directors for a few years. That was right around the time that we merged with ISS. Joe Rutkowski was president and they were looking for volunteers for the new AIST Foundation, and I volunteered. I spent a number of years on the Foundation before Bill Breedlove and Dale Heinz asked me to be president-elect. I agreed to do



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And it seems the Nucor Technical Academy is up and running and doing well.

Yes, we’re going to graduate our first class this May (2017). John Ferriola is going to come and present the diplomas. We’ve got 38 students in the class right now. We’re in our third year. We’ve had three years of Academy students working here in the mill at Tuscaloosa during the school year. They go back to their “home” Nucor divisions during spring break, Christmas break and the summer period. But the important thing for these students is they get the opportunity to work for a world-class company, they get paid for their school hours, they get paid for the time they’re working, their books and housing are paid for; and they leave here with absolutely no debt, with tremendous technical training and an associate’s degree of applied science in industrial electrical technology, and they also have 37 people that they’ve worked with for 1–3 years and they’ve instantly built a web of people they can rely on within the company. That is tremendous when you’re 23–24 years old, to have these people all across the country that you can call on for help. And Nucor is very good at responding. When there’s a call, people run. They’ll fly anywhere to help you with your problem. And it’s amazing that these kids can be debt-free, have a paying job and have this network across the company.

that and then spent my six years in that rotation — two as president-elect, two as president and two as past president. From there, I went on to the AIST board of directors and ended up where I am now.

You’ve had many years of leadership within the Association — what do you hope to accomplish as president? What will be your main area(s) of focus?

My passion is safety, and how we can interact better with OSHA to allow our people to come home at night. In my opinion, safety is a value. We talk about safety being a priority, but everyone knows that your priorities change within the first 30 minutes that you’re at your desk. A value is something that we believe to be true, and if safety is a value, that the most important thing we do is come to work and go home safely to our families. That’s what it’s all about.

The second thing I want to focus on, which is near and dear to my heart, is technical education for our young people, which doesn’t necessarily mean a four-year track in college.

To be debt-free with a solid job, in this day and age, is really quite an accomplishment.

There are so many kids whose parents want them to go to a four-year school, and they go and they graduate with a mountain of debt — sometimes approaching US\$100,000 in debt — and they can’t get a job that pays more than US\$45,000 a year. They’ve basically got a mortgage payment hanging over their head before they start life. The Technical Academy is a way to get people who might not necessarily want to follow the college track, but they’re very bright individuals with a technical background who are more hands-on.

When Nucor looks for people, we look for people with a strong work ethic, who can get along with people, who are incredible problem-solvers, and those are exactly the kind of kids who come up in this company and move forward.

So this is not only a benefit for the students, but for Nucor as well?

As any corporation evolves, we have a lot of people facing retirement over the next couple of years, and this is a great way to have people who are trained in our culture, who are trained technically and can fill jobs right away. And really, it's a benefit for our teammates because they've got people coming in and it reduces the amount of overtime they have to work, and they can rest easy knowing that they've got good people coming in and that they're leaving the company in good hands.

What challenges do you foresee facing the industry and/or AIST over the next several years?

We have two problems, in my opinion. One is overcapacity in the world, particularly China, who has approximately 400 million tons of overcapacity. It's a Chinese problem that they have to solve. They can't export their problems. They're exporting a lot of material to other countries, and in turn those countries are exporting material here to the United States. Although we're not totally self-sufficient here in the United States, as far as steel we produce vs. steel we consume, we've certainly had an abundance of steel across all product lines, and it's something that government and industry together as a group needs to converge on. And we have a pretty good track record of launching trade cases when necessary, and we've been successful in many.

I think the other issue we face as an industry is competitive materials. Steel has always been the material of choice in the automotive industry, but perhaps steel is a little bit late to the game with developing high-strength, lightweight steels, when you look at the aluminum and composite content in some vehicles. Steel is catching up though, providing materials now that are stronger, lighter and more economical than aluminum, and I think that's going to change the makeup of vehicles going forward. And as an industry, we need to make sure that steel is the product of choice versus other materials like concrete and aluminum, carbon fiber, etc.

Producer engagement is vital to AIST's success and global reach. What can AIST do to enhance and encourage producer participation?

I think one of the issues AIST has is that we have a technical bent on the glass that we see through, and that doesn't necessarily reach all the leadership of the steel mills. So I think the more we can do to partner with the SMA, MSCI, AISI, etc., to get AIST in front of non-technical people and share our story, I think it's very important. Through the Road Shows, we've been very successful, but I think at some of the Road Shows, some of the companies



were hesitant to have their people sign up. I think that's something that needs to be embraced by the leadership, because AIST is the perfect forum for sharing information that we're allowed to share. We don't share proprietary or commercial information, but we certainly share technical information that will make the industry stronger. I've had many advantages afforded me by the membership, by going to conferences and attending papers, asking questions, and building relationships. Over the years, I know a lot of people in the steel industry, and that is because of my time in AIST and the leadership I've had in it.

Another vital component to AIST's success is the involvement of young professionals. What would you say to young engineers and students to get them involved in AIST?

I would tell them to join as early as possible and step up to a leadership position on a Technology Committee, and not be afraid to speak up and voice your opinion and your ideas, because that will be rewarded over and over again by the contacts that you make.

There's so much to be learned and so many people to know in this industry. I still remember being a young engineer back in my late 20s, early 30s, going to my first conference, and I looked at all these guys and I didn't know anyone.

You have to take the step and not be afraid to get involved and speak up. If you go to these meetings and you get on a Technology Committee, you start talking to people and getting your ideas out there, you'll be offered a leadership position, and from there you can go anywhere you want.

Thank you for your time. Would you like to add any final thoughts?

It's an honor that I'm getting the opportunity to be the president of the Association. I've been in the steel business a long time, and it's something that doesn't happen very often. It's an honor and I'm proud to serve. ◆