

# Thomas C. Graham Jr.

## 2004 AIST President



Thomas C. Graham Jr. with his father at the elder Graham's home in Naples, Fla.

**T**homas C. Graham Jr. is vice president — engineering for AK Steel Corp., Middletown, Ohio. “I entered into the steel industry because my father was in the business his entire life,” said Graham, namesake of the well-known executive who was former CEO of J&L Steel, LTV Steel, Washington Steel and Armco Steel LP/AK Steel and vice chairman of U. S. Steel Corp.

After earning a bachelor's degree in economics from Allegheny College, Meadville, Pa., the second-generation Graham began his professional career with National Steel Corp. as a management trainee at the Midwest Division, Portage, Ind., in 1976. His early years were spent in operations as a turn foreman and general foreman in galvanizing and tinsplate. While in Indiana, Graham also earned a master's degree in business administration from Indiana University.

In 1984, he went to the National Great Lakes Division as superintendent of the electrolytic

galvanize line, an opportunity for Graham to participate in the design and construction of a new facility. During his 20 years with National Steel, Graham spent time in product and process technology at the Pittsburgh headquarters, where he was responsible for capital planning, research planning and product development. He was named director of engineering in 1992, and in 1994 he became National's general manager of marketing and sales for the construction market.

Graham was recruited to AK Steel Corp. in 1996 to design and start up Rockport (Ind.) Works, a \$1.2 billion steel finishing plant. Those who worked closely on the innovative project with Tom Graham concur without a doubt that the start-up was the most difficult and demanding of its kind.

“Tom delivered on all fronts. He built a great team of engineers and chose outstanding equipment, suppliers and construction contractors who, together, completed the massive project safely, on time and within budget,” said Jim Walsh, former AISE president and vice president of manufacturing for AK Steel in 1998. “Rockport Works embodies much of what AIST is all about: sophisticated engineering, state-of-the-art process controls, sound metallurgy applied in creative ways and innovative technology. It is only fitting that the man who led the start-up of Rockport Works is now AIST president.”

The 2004 AIST president has 27 years of combined membership in AISE and ISS.

Tom and his wife, Joan, live in Mason, Ohio, and have two children. Their daughter, Amy, is in her first year at Ohio State University College of Veterinary Medicine, and their son, Eric, is a junior at Bucknell University, majoring in computer science.

# An Interview With Thomas C. Graham Jr.

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by Joann Cantrell, Editor,  
*Iron & Steel Technology*

players in the business, large integrated companies, that have re-emerged as different entities that are competing again. It's a remarkable amount of change.

*Iron & Steel Technology:* What can you point to as a major highlight of your experience in the industry?

**GRAHAM:** Clearly, the design, construction and start-up of AK Steel's Rockport (Ind.) Works. There aren't many opportunities to build a billion-dollar manufacturing plant. It was an opportunity that I will always remember and treasure. When I was at National Steel prior to that, I was involved with an over-300-million-dollar project to rebuild a coke battery and byproducts facility, and at the time, I thought that was the biggest project I'd ever see in my

life. A few years later, to have the chance to lead the Rockport project was a tremendous opportunity.

*Iron & Steel Technology:* You have been in the steel industry for nearly 30 years. How has the industry changed since you began your career?

**GRAHAM:** The industry has changed so much that it's mind-boggling. In 1976, when I started in the industry, if someone said that Bethlehem Steel, National Steel, J&L and Republic Steel were all going to be gone by 2004, and to say then that some of the major flat roll producers would be companies called Nucor and Steel Dynamics, I would not have believed it. There has been a huge change in the industry, now approaching 30 years that I've been involved in it. It is interesting that the steel industry always finds a way to renew and start over. We have minimills today that didn't exist when I started. There are major

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*Iron & Steel Technology:* Do you recall your first exposure to or involvement with AISE or ISS?

**GRAHAM:** Actually, I was a member of both organizations. I was a member of ISS for the last four or five years, and I became a member



Key Rockport Works project managers at the conclusion of the start-up project.

of AISE right out of school in 1976. My father, Tom Graham Sr., was my first contact with the organization. He thought it was a great networking opportunity and recommended that I get involved in the organization just as he had been involved at various times through his career. He saw it as a great way to be exposed to what was going on in the industry, and I took his advice.

Initially, I just received the magazine and attended the annual conventions — my first one was probably in Chicago. That was my first real exposure to most of the technical content other than the magazine. I was also involved in the committee work during my time in Pittsburgh. I was on the Pittsburgh district executive committee, and I also spent time on the project management committee.

**Iron & Steel Technology:** What were your first impressions with being active in a technical association?

**GRAHAM:** Initially, I did not have a lot of exposure. Travel wasn't authorized, and I was unable to attend conferences and so forth. At various points in my career, I was able to get more exposure and found it to be very valuable. During the time when I was involved with an electrolytic galvanized line project, there were a lot of them being built around the country, and that was a topic for AISE sessions. For me, it was valuable to see what was going on with competitors and network with

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equipment suppliers, as well as the people involved with projects like the one I was working on.

**Iron & Steel Technology:** What do you find to be the most valuable benefit of AIST membership?

**GRAHAM:** I find that, especially in today's business environment, most companies tend to be internally focused. There is a real benefit in having the ability to get out and see what is going on elsewhere around the world — to be exposed to the suppliers and competitors in the steel industry and to hear about other people's successes and mistakes. If you just stay at your home facility, you miss a tremendous learning opportunity. I view that as the largest benefit of our organization. It is the ability to see outside of your own organization and view what is going on in your field around the world.

**Iron & Steel Technology:** Does membership in the organization have any personal benefits?

**GRAHAM:** On a personal level, obviously networking develops friendships and provides an opportunity to get to know people. Any industry occasion where you can get together with those you've worked with and have known through the years is always a great opportunity.

**Iron & Steel Technology:** How do you view your role as president with this being the inaugural year of AIST as an organization?

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industry it serves.”

**GRAHAM:** The challenge for AIST is to get the participation and input from all members who participated in the predecessor organizations, without trying to live within the procedures and traditions of either ISS or AISE. As president, I see a challenge with the history of the two organizations. Many members are familiar with the ways the previous organizations operated, and we now have to craft a new association.

Ideally, AIST would begin as blank sheet of paper — a clean slate — without having to justify a new plan versus the way it was done in the past. As an organization, we definitely need to get membership excited about AIST being a member-driven organization. Without participation of the membership, we will not flourish. Somehow we must solicit members and gain better participation. We must find the best way going forward and to some degree leave traditions behind. Our industry has gone through incredible change with mergers and consolidations, and that amount of change is difficult. It is no different for this association. We need to create a new business model and make it successful.

**Iron & Steel Technology:** What effect has the steel industry’s recent instability had on AIST as a new, consolidated association?

**GRAHAM:** Clearly the industry has been contracting over a number of years, not only in the pure size of the industry in terms of numbers of companies, but also in the number of industry employees. The numbers are shrinking dramatically with the primary steel producers and suppliers. As a result, the population of the potential contributors to a technical association has been shrinking.

The steel industry was at a point where it could no longer sustain two independent technical organizations. That is why the merger of ISS and AISE made such great sense. We had to “rightsized” the technical organization to the industry that it serves, and I think we’ve done that with this merger.

**Iron & Steel Technology:** What is the outlook for the future of the steel industry and AIST?

**GRAHAM:** Currently there are a lot of challenges for the industry. As we’ve shown through the years, the industry always finds a way to be competitive and to survive. The biggest challenge in the near term is that we need our customers to be successful so that there is someone to consume the steel. The plight of American manufacturing has the potential to affect the steel industry just like other industries. As we continue to change and serve the customers, our competitive position changes. In the mid-1980s, the Japanese steel business was king, and we were viewed largely as noncompetitive. Here it is, 10 or 15 years later — with the significant change in the exchange rate — and it’s a completely different world. Now, China seems to be booming. The potential exists for that kind of change to happen all the time. There’s no predicting where it’s going to go. No one would have predicted where we are today.

AIST’s focus has to be on establishing a new business model to serve a changing industry. Clearly, as in any merger, it won’t be completely perfect from day one. We need the encouragement and involvement of all members in order to make this a successful business. And how are we going to go about doing that? One step at a time! ♦