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Cassidy: A real Silicon Valley power broker steps down

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Jim Ryley's professional journey wasn't exactly your conventional Silicon Valley career path.

In fact, you could say that Ryley, who's retiring as CEO of Cupertino Electric, is a throwback. Remember when you did what your dad did? When you went to work for a company as a kid and that's where you stayed? That's Ryley, who started as an electrician apprentice at the electrical design and construction company in 1959. Apparently, he worked out.

"To be around the group that we've assembled of bright, young people, it's stimulating. It's exciting," Ryley, 71, says to explain his longevity. "I look forward to it every day."

Ryley spent more time at Cupertino Electric than most valley companies have spent in existence. He was at Cupertino Electric for more years than some of the valley's hottest hotshots have been alive.

But here's the funny thing: Ryley's career runs like a high-gauge wire through the evolution of Silicon Valley. Like the guys who sold picks and shovels to the 49ers looking for gold, Cupertino Electric supplied those in the digital gold rush with something they can't live without: power. Massive electrical systems to run their fabs, research complexes and data centers.

Like many successful executives, Ryley was encouraged by his parents. After graduating from Campbell High School, he left Oregon State University when his football career was cut short by two concussions. He returned home to find himself.

"At one point my parents said, 'Jim, it's time to find a job,' " Ryley says. His father, an electrician, suggested he look into an apprenticeship, which is how he caught on with Cupertino Electric. And from there he began rising quickly from a field electrician to the executive suite.

"He was sharp," says Gene Ravizza, 81, the company's founder, "so we made him a foreman and eventually we took him into the office."

It was clear to many early on that Ryley had what it took to lead a company. Robert Tragni, business manager for the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers local in Santa Clara County, worked as a summer apprentice at Cupertino Electric a few years after Ryley arrived. He still remembers his boss pointing out Ryley to him.

—%o'That guy is moving up,' he said."

Now that Ryley is retiring (he'll stay on as board chairman), he says he might go climb Mount Everest. Really. Or spend more time riding his Ducati motorcycles or manning speedy yachts, like the one he sailed to victory in the 1995 Transpacific California-to-Hawaii race. Or maybe he'll stick with cars, like the Porsches he used to race.

"After we made him foreman I used to worry, 'I wonder if he's going to be here Monday,' " says Ravizza, who's retired but still on the company board. "He was a little bit of a daredevil."

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When Ryley started, company headquarters was a 2,500-square-foot house in Cupertino. (Now, and despite the name, it's in an airy building on eight acres in North San Jose.) In those days, the firm was helping build the stores, homes and schools needed to support the valley's postwar boom.

In the early 1960s, a new kind of customer came along. "Here's what we're going to do," Ryley says these new outfits told his company's designers. "We're going to take silicon and we're doing these chips and we need you to do the power."

It was virgin territory. The semiconductor industry's power needs were immense and complex: high-temperature ovens to bake the silicon; clean rooms with compressors and fans; and the critical need for a fail-safe electricity supply.

"No one knew how to do it," Ryley says. But the company figured it out and went to work for Fairchild, National and Intel, for Hewlett-Packard and Stanford University.

Ryley pushed sales to a record \$746 million in 2000, largely by working on the server farms that were key to the dot-com boom and made up about 85 percent of Cupertino Electric's work. When the boom went bust, the reckoning was swift and severe. Over 18 months, Ryley laid off about 2,000 of the operation's 3,000 employees, in what was his toughest stretch as CEO.

"That's probably the hardest thing, management thing, to do," he says.

Of course, those who were laid off were upset, the IBEW's Tragni says. But, he added, Ryley worked well with labor and was open to new ideas.

"He will be missed," he says.

Today Cupertino Electric is a company of about 1,000 employees with annual revenues of about \$400 million. It's time, Ryley says, to let a younger management team take over. And so he's stepping aside after 50 years at the same company.

As Ryley leaves, you might want to watch him go. Fifty years. One company. It's just not the way we do business in the valley anymore. And on some level there's something a little sad about that.

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Jim Ryley

Age: 72

Education: Campbell High School; Oregon State University

Family: wife, Pat; one son and one daughter

Career: Cupertino Electric apprentice electrician, foreman electrician, project manager, vice president of sales, executive vice president, president, CEO and chairman of the board