

## Conversation With A Legend

by  
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I always enjoy the "Blast from the Past" feature of Bill Spigner's monthly newsletter that Bill's wife, Barb, sends out via email at the beginning of each month. The latest feature article brought back memories of Bill's childhood, growing up at Hamden Lanes in Connecticut, a suburb of New Haven.

For some reason, I always associated Bill with Bloomfield, Connecticut, an area northwest of Hartford, where Mary Strong managed the Bloomfield Bowling Center, and would later be hired by AMF to oversee the midwest region with her office at the famous AMF Strike 'n Spare Lanes in Northbrook, Illinois.

Once Mary got settled in Chicago, one of her first priorities was to reach out to Bill, who had recently married Barb (nee Urbanek), the National Promotions Manager for Brunswick Recreation Centers in nearby Skokie. Mary was looking for someone to take over the duties of the pro shop at Strike 'n Spare and knew Bill from Connecticut.

"At the time I was still doing

well on the tour, but said I would like to do private lessons at Strike 'n Spare," remembered Spigner. Mary agreed, and took very good care of him, according to Bill. "When it came time to leave the tour, I reached out to her about operating the pro shop, and she said yes."

### Flashback to the 80s

AMF purchased Hamden Lanes (Bill's home house, according to the Blast from the Past article) and Cherry Hill Lanes in 1983, from proprietors Jack Cheesman and Bill Lanzoni. "Bill was the accountant and did the books for both centers, while Jack was in charge of the operations," said Spigner.

Hamden Lanes was located in Hamden Mart, a strip mall, while Cherry Hill was at the top of a hill, on a barren road with no street sign. Needless to say, Cherry Hill had great potential. Bruce Brailsford was brought in from Lang's Bowllarama, a powerhouse AMF center in Rhode Island, to manage Cherry Hill. Steve Radner was named general manager of Hamden.

Brailsford became one of the top managers in the chain in his first year at the helm. He and regional supervisor Ray Boufford were the two that would bring a summer free practice idea to my attention, and together we captured the awareness of the entire bowl-

ing industry the next year.

Under the precepts of the program, anyone joining and remaining a summer league bowler would receive unlimited free practice whenever lanes were available, for the entire summer. Within a couple of years the program had spread to almost every location at AMF Bowling Centers. Revenue and profit went through the roof.

Here's an interesting sidelight to the Lang's Bowllarama part of this story that I shared with Bill in our conversation. AMF Bowling Products wanted a showplace to unveil AMF AccuScore in 1984, and decided upon Lang's because it was so busy and triple shifted with leagues. Bruce Gobbi, my boss at AMF, was against the idea for the very reason that Lang's was so busy and AccuScore had not been fully tested.

The result? A disaster. The last shift of 9:00 pm leagues weren't getting on the lanes until 2:00 am! Bruce and I arranged for passage in one of AMF's private jets the first night to try and calm everyone. What a mess, but fun to look back on it now.

What's amazing is that no one cancelled their bowling league session! We finally got some of the 9:00 pm shift to bowl on Saturday and Sunday afternoons until most of the bugs were worked out. It's another example of how league bowlers will put up with just about anything...

### The Spigner's Open Hawthorn Lanes

Bill enjoyed the Lang's Bowllarama story and shared a similar example when Ten Pin Partners (there were originally 6 general partners) were in the process of opening Hawthorn Lanes in Vernon Hills, a suburb north of Chicago. The original plan was for Hawthorn to be AMF equipped, but when Spigner's father-in-law Jim Urbanek (Barb's father) invested in the project as a limited partner, the equipment was changed to Brunswick.

Jim had retired from Brunswick, where he was vice president in charge of the bowling division, and was actively involved in the purchase of the Schmid Company of Switzerland, makers of the Game Setter, or GS-10 pinsetter. "This machine, coupled with Bowler Vision, had the capability to set any pins the customer wanted for spare

shooting, as well as other bells and whistles," said Spigner.

"We went to Muskegon (Michigan) to look at the assembly, but I put the kibosh on it because, similar to Lang's Bowllarama, the new pinsetter wasn't field tested enough, in my opinion," Spigner recalled. "I also thought it would be difficult to train mechanics for the new machines."

"Bowler Vision failed and it took a long time before the GS-10 was successful," remembered Bill. "But the Brunswick A-2's that we eventually installed were hard to beat. I remember my father-in-law telling me that Brunswick put the A-2's on a life cycle test and after 50 years they stopped the testing. They are tanks. Maintained correctly, they will last forever."

### Where Are They Now?

Like so many AMF properties from the past, both AMF Hamden Lanes and AMF Cherry Hill Lanes are no longer with us. They are survived by AMF Circle Lanes, a 50 lane establishment in East Haven, and the 54 lane Lucky Strike Milford, a few miles southwest of New Haven.

Lang's Bowllarama is still in business, having returned to private, family ownership in 2012, after being leased by AMF for 30 years. The grandsons of founder Ed Lang, Dave and Rich Lang, took back control of the center and began a process of restoring the original 1960 vintage aesthetic.

Bill and Barb Spigner opened Hawthorn Lanes on November 25, 1989. They sold it about 20 years later to Brunswick, and it became known as Brunswick Zone Hawthorn. Like many of the former Brunswick Zone locations, the facility at 316 Center Drive was re-branded as Bowlero Vernon Hills following the purchase of the location by Bowlero Corporation.

INTERESTED IN BILL SPIGNER'S MONTHLY NEWSLETTER? - To get a copy of Bill's newsletter, simply go to [billspigner.com](http://billspigner.com) and enter your email address at the top right hand corner: "JOIN OUR E-MAIL LIST." Thanks to Barb and Bill for all the memories...

Dave's Corner artwork created by Lynn Matsubara of Cal USBC Newsletter

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Special shout out to Lou Tilman, Sarah Vieta, Beth Wade and Victoria Jacob, who were chosen as grand marshals of the USBC Women's Championships taking place at South Point in Las Vegas. This was their first time bowling in this tournament. Way to go and Bowl you four, representing Tucson!