

**WE
REALLY
LIKE
PLASTER**



**CONTRACTOR
OF THE MONTH**

Indy Walls & Ceilings Is a Full Service, One-Stop Contractor, But Its Specialty Is Plaster

“Drywall is a necessity, but we prefer plaster,” says William R. Pruitt, a partner with William McAuley, of the Indianapolis-based Indy Walls & Ceilings.

On one hand, Pruitt’s statement might seem a bit unusual, in view of the fact that he also says, “We found our niche by starting and finishing a job almost every day. We found we could do the job quicker, get in and get out, and that way make our money. Others found out we could do it, and that’s how we built our reputation, by finishing jobs ahead of schedule.”

Since drywall is relatively quick and easy to apply, and plastering a slower and more painstaking process, it would be easy to assume that a contractor who prided himself on speed would prefer the quicker application. But this apparent contradiction is resolved when you realize that Pruitt, 69, comes from a different era—before drywall came into being. “We really like plaster,” Pruitt says. “I grew up with it.”

JACK OF ALL TRADES

Pruitt started out as a lather’s apprentice in 1956, and moved up in the trade from there. “When I was a young man, all the hospitals, and most of the other buildings, elevators, hallways, everything was done in

plaster,” he recalls. But drywall hit the market in the late 1960s and early 1970s, so in 1973, when Pruitt and McAuley, who both worked for another contractor, went off on their own to form their own company, even then their basic business was drywall, with plaster being a strong specialty for those who wanted it.

As the business grew and times changed, the partners realized it was necessary to become a master of all trades. Demountable partitions came first, followed by fire-proofing, acoustic ceilings, EIFS, and doors and hardware. “Everything you see inside a building, we can do,” Pruitt says.

Drywall soon eclipsed plastering, which has become “a dying trade,” Pruitt says. Yet plastering today is staging a comeback, especially in renovation. Pruitt has no trouble understanding why. Although plaster is more expensive and takes longer to apply, it also, he says, “is much more durable, and probably has a greater insulation value.” He adds that aesthetics plays an important part as well, since many of the older buildings being renovated want the ornamentation that was accomplished through the original plastering.

Recent major plaster jobs Indy Walls & Ceilings have done include the Circle Center Mall in

downtown Indianapolis, the Murat Hotel and the Cary Quad dormitories at Purdue University. Pruitt says plaster is often chosen for varying reasons. For instance, the Murat chose it for its durability, since kids who stayed at the hotel often damage the drywall. Purdue, however, chose plaster for aesthetic reasons, to restore the columns and cornices to the way they once were. However, since expense was a factor, the plaster was applied in the more visible, aesthetic areas, with drywall put into the areas less likely to be noticed. On the other hand, new fireproofing materials were put into this renovation that were not there initially.

One problem with the renewed interest in plastering, Pruitt says, is having workers trained in this artisan arena, which requires greater skills than drywalling. “Most of the guys who can do it are in their 60s,” Pruitt says. “And we still have some of them with us.” He adds, however, that the training for the application of exterior insulation and finish systems, also a wet material, also lends itself to

plastering, so there is the possibility for a whole new generation.

Pruitt was himself a latherer, or the person who constructed the foundation for the plasterer. The latherer trade has been absorbed into the carpenter’s arena as a part of that union, while plasterers have their own union. Pruitt sits on the joint apprentice council for that union, as well as the Indiana council for the plasterers’ and cement masons’ pension funds.

HOW TIMES HAVE CHANGED

The decline in the status of plastering was only one of many changes Pruitt has seen over the years. The company started off doing offices and warehouses, and has since grown into a wide venue of other buildings.

“There was not as much work as there was back then,” Pruitt recalls. “But the population has grown, and with it more schools, hospitals, commercial, indus-

trial and office buildings. We’ve been very fortunate here in the Midwest. We don’t have the highs and lows of some different parts of the country. We just have steady work, going from offices to warehouses then back to hospitals and schools. It’s just kept growing.”

Pruitt adds, “In the old days, we would work seven to eight months and then be done for the year, but now we maintain crews all year round.”

The partners started with about six employees, now they have between 80 and 140, depending on the season. For the past three to four years, annual volume has been about \$10 million.

Competition also has grown. There were four or five competitors when the firm started, now there are eight or nine, about half the same size as Indy. Though the competition has increased, so has the market, so things are generally much better.

And Pruitt is not nostalgic about the

way things were done in the past. When asked about business being conducted “by a handshake,” Pruitt says, “There was that, but there was also a lot done under the table. Business is conducted with more honesty now.”

Equipment is much better now than in the early days, as is material, Pruitt says. “Scaffolding and skylifts are more mobile. Before, we would build the scaffolds for each job.”

“Working conditions are much better now too,” he continues. “Before, if it was winter, laborers would work in the cold. Now the building is heated.”

Certainly a big change has come in terms of safety. “When we worked with tools, it was kind of crazy,” Pruitt recalls. “You’d walk on high on one or two boards, and never get fined for it. The attitude was different then. It was a macho attitude. If you were asked to do something, you would say, ‘I can do that.’ You didn’t think about safety.”

But, thanks to OSHA and workers’ compensation insurance, all that has changed. “We’re big on safety now,” Pruitt says. “We have a safety director, and monthly meetings with recognition and awards for every job that hasn’t had an accident. Now everybody is much more acclimated to safety than they were in the past.”

LESSONS LEARNED

When asked the worst business decision he has made in his long career, Pruitt responds, “That’s easy. In the early 1980s we tried going out of state, to Baltimore. We barely got out with our shirts. We were young, foolish and thought we could do everything. I still

keep my financial statement from that venture in my drawer. I look at it now and then just to humble myself. What I learned is that big is not always better. Now we stay close to home. We’ve done a lot of work in Cincinnati, but that’s about as far away as we’ll go.”

When asked his best business decision, Pruitt is quick to answer, “Going into business with ‘my partner. Bill and I worked in the field together since 1958, before we went into business together, so we’ve gone back a long way. I think we complement each other. He does all the buying, and I do all the pricing.”

The partners are both, however, hands-on owners, who come from the field rather than the office. To take care of the latter, they’ve hired good accountants, insurance representatives, lawyers and others. “They’re all like partners,” Pruitt says. “We’ve been very fortunate that way”

The partners basically micromanage the jobs through their foremen and superintendents, but like to be out on the job. “In construction, you don’t know what you’re going to make until the job is done, and I don’t see how people can do it if they spend all their time in the office,” Pruitt says. But, along with an on-the-job presence, Pruitt says the paperwork, prepared by the office staff is of vital importance: “We’ve gradually improved the quality of the paperwork over the years, so now we know where we are all the time. We have project management meetings each week and each day, and this helps us with better scheduling so we can get in and out as quickly as possible.” He adds that employees are, when possible, sent to the same types of jobs, such as hospitals, so that specialized skills can be honed.

Another important lesson learned over the years, Pruitt says, is the importance of getting a job that pays on time, rather than simply the job itself, even if that means closing certain doors.

Indy is a union shop, and Pruitt credits much of the company’s success and small turnover to the training provided by the unions, plus the loyal, knowledgeable work force.

KEEP IT GOING

Pruitt, a self-described workaholic, shows no sign of retiring. His previous 10 to 12 hours a day, six days a week, have dropped to a more conventional eight-hour, five day week, but he says that, “like the Pope, I’ll work until I drop.” Being an owner can require long hours, but it also allows for flexibility. After winning the state championship in high school wrestling, he coached wrestling for 27 years, eight in high school, and the rest for CYO and other organizations.

Currently his hobbies are golf and getting away to a vacation home in Florida: Pruitt and his wife, Joan, have been married for 42 years, and have three children, David who is a doctor, Sharon who is a physical therapist with her own business, and Steve, who works for the company as project manager. McAuley, who is 64, has a daughter, Becky Hunderwood, who also works in the company as safety director.

So, even though the two owners may not yet be thinking about retirement, when the time comes, there’s a younger generation waiting in the wings to keep the business moving forward. 