Changes in Retrospect

Harrisburg’s Jim Novinger Keeps Active Following a Notable Career

It’s not easy finding a man nowadays who started out in a log cabin.
And it’s even less easy finding a man who was knocking in holes-in-one at age 73—and at age 83 is still striving to get another one.

But then James D. Novinger, the lather-turned-contractor isn’t your run-of-the-mill type man either.

True enough, he was born in a log cabin near Harrisburg, Pa., where the company he formed, Novinger’s, Inc., is today located. That was for starters. Before he retired more than 20 years ago, Jim had done, among other jobs, the plastering in the White House, helped build the National Institute of Health in Bethesda, Md., and laid the foundation for a company that would continue in the multi-million dollar a year category.

Novinger’s, Inc., today is in the $7 million a year class and from its sprawling suburban headquarters in Linglestown, Pa., specializes in such diversified services as exterior walls panels, fireproofing, insulation, demountable partitions, integrated ceiling systems, steel framing, curtain wall, drywall, and lath and plaster.

The business today is operated by Jim’s son-in-law Bob Gulden. Even though retired, Jim still comes into the office regularly. The technical skills accumulated over a lifetime come in handy such as when the company wanted a new full size logo similar to the famous St. Louis arch. Jim did the entire layout and the construction went smoothly.

A school dropout at age 16, Jim Novinger went through a succession of jobs before locking in on construction. He worked in a broom factory, as an elevator boy, a machine operator, and then as a wood lather.

In World War I, he worked for the Remington Arms Company making rifles and ultimately went to France where he served with the 108th Field Artillery. After the war he returned to the trade. He was elected business agent for the Harrisburg lathers’ local, and in 1924 finally made the transition to employer when Jim and Herman Wagner formed a partnership.
By 1933, the partnership had moved into plastering and they remained in business together until 1947 when the arrangement was dissolved amicably and Jim set up shop as Novinger’s, Inc.

When World War II broke out, Novinger tried to enter the Seabees. But at five-foot-four, he missed out. The minimum was five-foot-six.

It was after World War II that Novinger really began to move in the contracting business. Because of a lack of business during the war, Jim had worked at a tool maker in Harrisburg while Wagner ran the company.

Always a traveler, Novinger began landing big jobs in Washington, including the lathing and plastering of the White House restoration during Truman days. This led to a partnership with the James Kane Company in a Washington operation which lasted in one form or another until Jim decided to retire.

Married to the former Susan Ebersole, Jim Novinger is the father of three children: James D., deceased; David, a lather, and Evelyn, wife of Bob Gulden. An old member of the Contracting Plasterers International Association, Jim helped write the original bylaws and code of ethics for the association.

He is a charter member and past president of the Harrisburg Rotary and Harrisburg Builders Exchange. Four state governors have appointed him to the board of directors for the Harrisburg State Hospital, and he served 19 years on the Susquehanna School Board.

When CONSTRUCTION DIMENSIONS caught up to Jim Novinger he had just come in from a round of golf and his desk was a contractor’s delight, full of papers. He pushed the piles aside and began talking about wall and ceiling work, today, tomorrow, and a bit of yesterday.

**DIMENSIONS:** From a knockabout career to contracting: where did the actual transition take place?

**NOVINGER:** I’d worked all over on lathing jobs and I was recommended to a general contractor in Lancaster for a high school job. I gave him a price on corner bead and ceiling square footage. He took care of materials, payrolls, etc., and I took care of the work.

It was a marvelous time for me to go into business for myself. I had no money, no car, a mortgage on the house, and some odd bills.

**DIMENSIONS:** What did you do about your union job as business agent?

**NOVINGER:** Oh, I had to resign as BA. Also, to get around any union rules about being an employer, the business was owned by my wife, Susan, and Herman’s wife. Herman and I worked for our wives and this allowed us to hire from the local unions. Everyone was happy about the arrangement.

**DIMENSIONS:** Even when the Great Depression of the 30s hit?

**NOVINGER:** Especially so, then. I didn’t know there was a depression because I worked straight through. Herman and I worked during the week and did the estimating on weekends.

**DIMENSIONS:** When and how did you add the plastering?

**NOVINGER:** That came in 1933 and it was the YMCA in Harrisburg. The plastering contractor was a fine fellow who went broke after taking the job at another man’s figure. That’s bad, bad business and he blew a fine company.

**DIMENSIONS:** Your company, even before you retired, was well on the road to diversification. Did Continued on page 28
you have any hang-ups about moving into, say, drywall?

NOVINGER: None whatsoever. Why should I? It was a legitimate business opportunity, and I didn’t hesitate one second. When they specify it, I’ll put it in.

In construction, we face change all of our working lives. Why let a new product or change throw us? Just go do it—and do a good job.

DIMENSIONS: Doing a job like the White House must provide some great satisfaction. What are some of the details about that job?

NOVINGER: Well, I did the estimating and we got the job for $270,000. We beat McNulty, of Chicago, by $38,000. The job today would run at least a million. John McShain was the general contractor and the job was so well done that he insisted that his superintendent, J. Paul Hauck, get his name on the plaque. He deserved it, too, the man could really run a job.

DIMENSIONS: Yet from your comments your initial meeting with John McShain wasn’t all that pleasant, was it?

NOVINGER: Well, he made me mad is what he did. He had this big Mount Alto Hospital job and I went to see him about the lath and plaster. He asked me about some of my jobs and I told him. Then he said, ‘oh, well, you’re just a little old house plasterer.’

I told him, ‘Then I won’t waste any more of your valuable time,’ and I got up to leave. John kinda laughed and said, ‘well, don’t get too upset. I’ll give you the nurse’s home and if you do well as you say you can, we’ll look at the other buildings.’ We did the whole job.

DIMENSIONS: Was it a profit job? That’s what a good job is, isn’t it?

NOVINGER: That definition never changes. It was good all the way around. I wanted to do a float finish on cement plaster over lath, but the architect insisted on a flat finish. I warned them it would crack but they insisted. The only way I’d take it was cost plus and I brought the job way in under the minimum which McShain and I shared. We did a lot of jobs together after that — and the finish cracked just as I said it would.

DIMENSIONS: Where have the major changes been that you’ve noticed in the industry?

NOVINGER: Well, we’ve gone from woodlath, to rocklath, and then to drywall. Plastering has gone and I think it’s too expensive to comeback.

Only in rare instances where cost isn’t a major factor will you get a good plastering job anymore. This is a reflection of the changes in construction techniques and in the buildings themselves.

DIMENSIONS: Is that a matter of economics?

NOVINGER: Exactly. Change is so rapid now that buildings quickly become obsolete. As a result we build many of them so they can be torn down and something else built in its place. I can still remember when we built a building so that it would last practically forever.

DIMENSIONS: Where do you see change taking us in the next five years?

NOVINGER: I see techniques shifting to meet the increasing cost of construction. The unions will continue to demand more, just as they always have in the past.

DIMENSIONS: For organized labor to want more is no change, though?
NOVINGER: That’s true. But the complaint that union craftsmen are not as productive as years ago is a legitimate criticism. Once you could say that they were more productive than non-union help but that simply is no longer true.

It’s not an individual productivity thing; it’s group productivity. In a union situation, you must have all journeymen carpenters, for example. In non-union, you can have one good carpenter and two good helpers.

DIMENSIONS: You hear a lot of talk these days, about “no growth,” “energy and resource shortages.” Do you see these developments affecting construction significantly?

NOVINGER: As far as growth is concerned, I think we’ll continue to expand and grow. I don’t see us going back. It’s been that way for 83 years of my life.

We’ll overcome this temporary energy problem, too. With the technology this country possesses, we can handle the challenge.

DIMENSIONS: Jim, has the construction industry changed all that much in, say, the last 50 years?

NOVINGER: Most of the change, really, has been in materials and techniques. It’s still debatable whether you can no longer take a person’s word as you could in the past.

Most contractors today still want to do the best job they can. If it’s wrong it should be fixed. It usually doesn’t cost that much if you do fix it, and it costs more if you don’t.

DIMENSIONS: That sounds like you’re talking about the infamous punch list problem?

NOVINGER: Sure I am. The owner is paying for a first class job and he should get it. Punch lists are necessary because they pinpoint responsibility. When you’re responsible, do it—and your so-called punch list problems will disappear.

DIMENSIONS: The punch list might disappear, but isn’t it also used to avoid final payments and hold onto retentions?

NOVINGER: I suppose it has been. But I never experienced anyone holding back on a final payment. Nor did I have to sue to get paid either. I only had to get tough once and I told the people to pay me now or I’ll shut the job down. They paid.

DIMENSIONS: In two hours of talking you’ve indicated only two times that you, well, got a bit testy? Are there any other occasions when a bit of temper were evident?

NOVINGER: Well, I’ve always been slow to anger. But, yes, there was one other time. That was the big Dauphin County Court House and I found out that the New York City general contractor was shopping my bid.

I went right to New York and told him I would take the job at the price I bid and the time of award was right NOW. Then I walked out. I got the job at my price.

The only time I get mad now is when I count up my golf score. It just isn’t what it used to be.