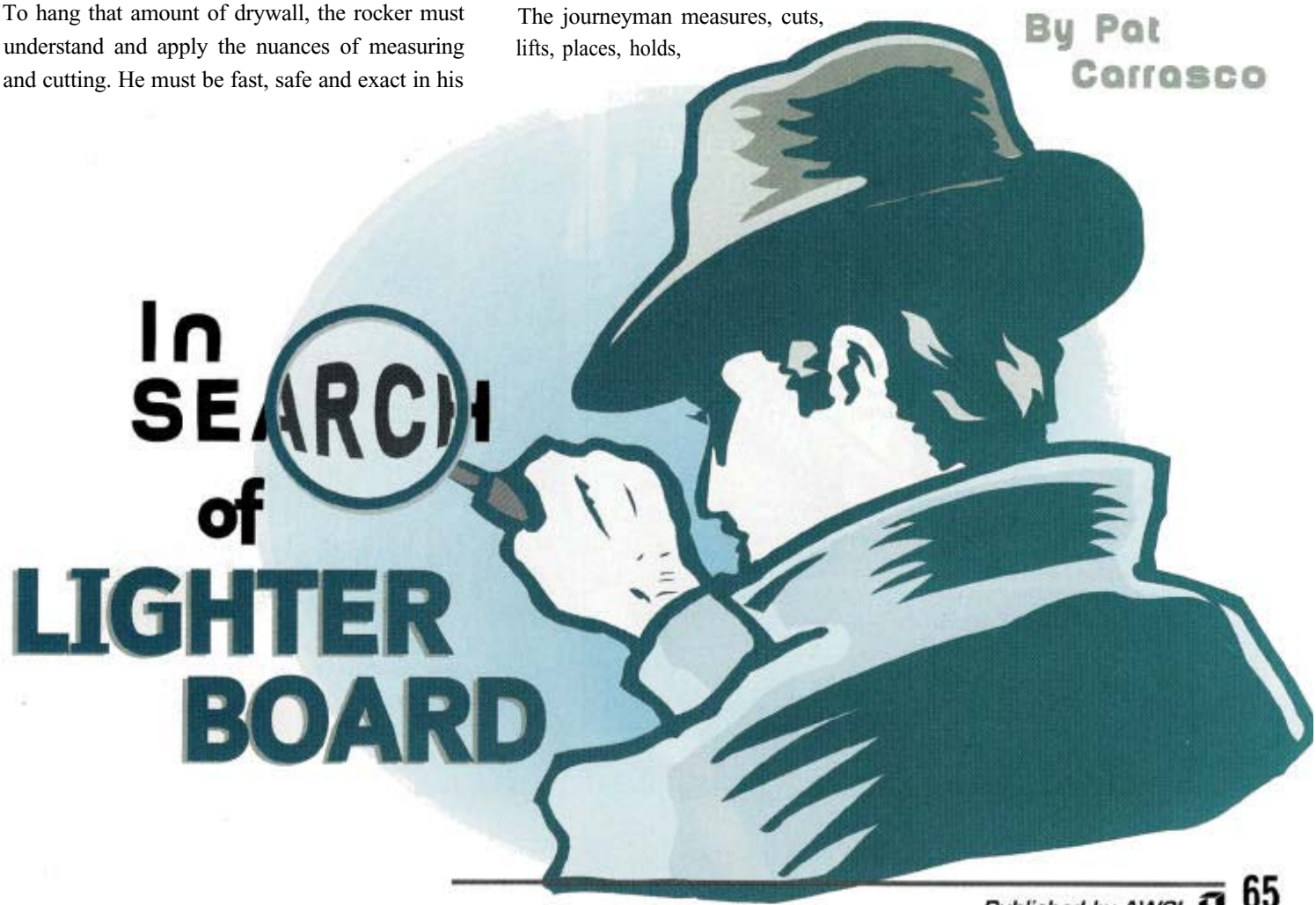
In SEARCH of LIGHTER BOARD

By Pat Carrasco



Most drywall hangers are too macho to grumble about the weight of drywall. I've not met a young rocker who doesn't feel a certain pride in the physical feats he accomplishes. But I'm 50 years old and way too wise to be swayed by mere testosterone. My body has started to warn me that 20 some years of doing the rocker hustle has taken its toll. There's a day in the not too distant future when I won't be physically able to hang drywall—this is a truth all rockers have to face, some sooner than others.

When I was a young hanger in California, an older craftsman told me that the union rule-of-thumb was that one man should be able to hang 2,000 square feet of drywall in one day on relatively easy construction (8-foot ceilings, square walls, no architectural frills).

My experience over the years confirms this. The average craftsman can do this type of production under optimum circumstances: professional framing, clean work area, good tools and good materials.

To hang that amount of drywall, the rocker must understand and apply the nuances of measuring and cutting. He must be fast, safe and exact in his manipulation of a pencil, knife, saw, hammer, foot lift, square and work bench. He must be able to safely use and maintain his screwgun and router and know enough about electricity to not electrocute himself. And last—but by no means least—the journeyman rocker must lift, transport and precisely place about 2 tons of gypsum board. Every day.

I arrived at the figure of 2 tons by multiplying the industry average weight for half-inch drywall (1.7 pounds per square foot) by 2,000 square feet. This gives us 3,400 pounds. And then some more weight needs to be added because every time a rocker cuts a sheet of drywall, he must lift it (at least partially) off the ground. I guesstimated this added lift during the day to be 600 pounds—it's a nice round figure that is probably a little on the low side.

Four thousand pounds a day is 2 tons, which is 500 pounds an hour in an eight-hour day—or 50 pounds every 6 minutes. This requires more stamina and strength than most athletic activities.

The journeyman measures, cuts, lifts, places, holds,

firmly, and then fastens 50 pounds of drywall every 6 minutes. But what if the drywall is 5/8-inch board? The industry average weight for 5/8-inch board is 2.2 pounds per square foot. Will that same journeyman be able to hang his 2,000 square feet of wallboard? Now he's got to measure, lift place, hold firmly, and fasten 65 pounds every 6 minutes.

And, there are heavier drywall panels out there. Some of them are marketed as "labor saving" creations!

A couple of years ago at an AWCI convention I spoke with a few executives of gypsum manufacturing corporations about board weight. Of the four representatives I spoke with, only one was concerned with producing a lighter drywall panel. He said that board weight was an issue to his company because their trucks could transport more drywall if it weighed less.

This weight issue has ramifications that affect at least four aspects of the drywall industry:

1. Emerging ergonomic standards—The state of Washington is working toward implementing ergonomic rules that will affect the drywall trade. It will be a long time before the entire industry feels this impact, but the writing is on the wall: The weight carried by one man needs to be lowered.

2. Work force longevity—Lighter board will bring about a longer productive life for those who hang drywall.

3. Production—We can hang more footage with lighter board.

4. And of course, let's not forget about the trucks.

The first drywall manufacturing company to seriously lighten the load will improve the industry—their product will be in great demand.

About the Author

Pat Carrasco is a drywall hanger, trainer and writer who lives in Montana.