Midwest Drywall Comes Up a Winner at Black Hawk Casino

To get the Black Hawk Casino by Hyatt™ built on time was a high stakes venture. The construction of what was intended to be the largest and the most visitor-friendly of Colorado's new wave of gaming establishments faced a number of obstacles. One was that the state legislature had limited gaming to only two areas in the state, one in the Southern part, and the other in the area around the city of Black Hawk. In fact, it was built directly up against the side of a mountain.

It Was Not a Gamble, Just Careful Planning and Creative Thinking That Made This Project a Success

By Thomas G. Dolan
across Highway 119 from a creek and the center of Black Hawk.

To accomplish this, more than 650,000 cubic yards of granite had to be blasted away from the 5.3-acres site, and hauled up over the top of a hill to the east. This demolition alone took almost seven months before the actual construction could begin in September 2000. And in just 14 months, the casino, with 132,500 square feet of floor space, on two levels, and the five-story 291,000-square-foot parking garage were completed.

The project was developed by Dallas-based Windsor Woodmont and managed by Hyatt Gaming. Its architect was Paul Steelman Company, Las Vegas, Nev., and the general contractor was PLC Construction in Denver.

And one of the primary subcontractors on the job was a member of the Association of the Wall and Ceiling Industries—Midwest Drywall Co., Inc. of Wichita, Kan. Midwest got involved in the competitive bidding in late 2000, won the contract, and was on the site in late January 2001. Midwest President Steven Nienke says one of the main challenges he faced was that Black Hawk had its beginnings as a mining camp, and had to have the original look of stone and wood. “It was hard to get workers out of Denver for the 45 or so minute drive, and we had to come up with a scheme to get the building done without employing 50 stone workers,” he says.

**Changes, Substitutions and Congestion**

Other constraints included the fact that the foundation was going in even before the design was complete. Because of the traffic congestion on Highway 119, no deliveries were allowed on the site after 1 p.m. on Fridays or on the weekend. Basically, as soon as anything was deliv-
ered, it had to go up. And because the site was so tightly wedged against the mountain, workers had to park two miles away and take a shuttle to the job.

“In addition to the very tight schedule, there was an immense amount of changes on the job,” Nienke says. The solution Nienke came up with was using faux or simulated material as a substitute for most of the required stone or wood. He faced stiff opposition at first, but gradually prevailed. As he demonstrated he could get results faster, in a cost-effective way and in a manner still aesthetically pleasing, he was given more responsibility. His original contract of about $7 million for the approximately $60 million project grew to about $9 million.

“Originally, the owner would not buy into the idea of faux stone, but a funny little situation occurred in October,” Nienke says. “Outside of four columns at the entry, there was no other real stone, only faux stone, but the owner came up to me and said, ‘I love the faux stone, why don’t we replace the real stone with the faux?’ I said, ‘Let’s get it opened first, and maybe do that in the spring.’”

“We basically did the structural steel

The interior features a large octagonal bar and entertainment area called the Wildfire Lounge, which leads to the food areas on all sides.
studs and framing, then finished the building with faux products,” Nienke says. “We used very little EIFS. Most of the exterior was FRP fiberglass made to simulate a lot of stone and wood siding. We would come to the site with the pre-manufactured pieces, put up the studs, grout the voids, then faux paint them so they came together.”

On the interior, Midwest used the GFRG gypsum products to meet fire codes, both prefinished and finished on the site, again to give a faux stone and wood look of an old mining lodge. The company also did the millwork (cabinets, bars and granite counter tops).

Guests entering the foyer step into a rotunda that is more than 60 feet high and a gaming area surrounded by large fireplaces. There are 1,350 slot machines, 17 gaming tables and a poker room on the second floor. Just beyond is a large octagonal bar and entertainment area called the Wildfire Lounge, which leads to the food areas on all sides: a large food court, an action-station buffet with seven unique kitchens, a specialty restaurant and a Starbucks.

The interior was designed with a “Rocky Mountain-style” architecture. Despite its mining camp patina, the casino really has an upscale lodge atmosphere with coffered ceilings, beautiful ceramic tiles, the faux stone and rock designs, and an enormous sky mural encircling the central gaming area.

Midwest succeeded in translating the typical gaudy gaming atmosphere into a more sophisticated mountain lodge environment.

“People will not believe the level of finishes on this project,” says PLC Project Manager Dale Kain. “It doesn’t look like anything else in town. The theming is more like the sophisticated interiors you see in the big Las Vegas casinos. Midwest did a fantastic job putting the architect’s vision in place.”

**Vegas Roots**

Midwest did, in fact, do a theme job for the Venetian® Las Vegas about five years
ago, which is how the company really got started in this market. Nienke recalls he got that job by default, for there were only about four or five companies in the country able to offer large theming packages, and they all were busy. But Midwest, which had done some small theming projects, came to the bid with recommendations, and also had the size and skill to pull it off.

Since then the company has completed the Beau Rivage Hotel Resort & Casino in Biloxi, Miss., a number of mall and retail theme projects, and will do a large expansion for the Argosy Casino in Kansas City, MO., starting this spring.

One reason Midwest got the Black Hawk bid was that it offered a full one-stop package including not only theming, but a number of other things as well.

“There were two drywall companies, one from Denver and one out of state, that were bidding just for that,” Nienke says. “One theming company bid on the interior, and another on the exterior. Several millwork companies were bidding for millwork alone. The owner, architect and general contractor would have had to deal with five to six contractors that we put together in just one.”

Midwest, instead of just doing a subcontracted job it was paid to do, entered into the creative design process.

“We had the overall concept on getting the job done on time, but there were no specifications on how you did the theming package,” Nienke says. “We came up with the fiberglass idea and showed them how to do it, how to attach the products to it, and how it was going to look.”

Nienke’s intent, he explains, is to get himself involved in a big project at the start—even as early as being a part of the architectural team. He likes becoming part of the design, helping to put things together, showing how particular products work, how they are compatible with others, offering specifics to meet building codes, and helping with finishes, colors and textures—putting it all together in one package. As a result, he says, he is able to do more negotiated work than ever before, about 25 percent. Even on the bid work, he says, “We’ll often be given a second look.”

The Growth Continues

For the last several years Midwest has averaged more than $100 million a year in revenues, and is always operating with more than 1,000 employees. The company has eight offices throughout the United States. The main one is Wichita, with branches in Dallas, Denver, Las Vegas, Nev.; Glenwood Springs, Colo.; Oklahoma City; Omaha, Neb.; and Shawnee Mission, Kan.

The main reason for the expansions, he explains, is that Wichita is a smaller metropolitan area, so when that market
started to reach saturation, it was time to move to another. At this point, with the Denver and Glenwood Springs offices just three years old and a lot of capacity still to be filled in several other markets, he has no plans to expand. Instead he plans to solidify and grow out of what he has.

Another key reason for growing, Nienke says, “is that we make a commitment to our people. Most have been with us for 30 years. Each of our offices acts and operates independently, and we do a lot of training, so people can start at the bottom but have an opportunity to move upward. We don’t have nearly the problem many others do with attracting and keeping good employees. We have a very good wage package, along with medical benefits, bonuses and profit sharing that we can put up against just about anybody in the industry. It’s very gratifying to hear about some of the offers our lead guys get, and they just say they are not interested, they have no plans to leave this company they’ve been here so many years, and they plan to retire here.”

For a wall and ceiling contractor to have so many different locations and have them all work productively together is a difficult feat. The fact that Midwest is able to do it is a key to its success.

“All the offices share resources when needed,” Nienke says. “We drew from several locations to get the Black Hawk job done on schedule, and capped out at about 80 to 85 people just on that project.”

Midwest also has an extensive equipment base, including scissor lifts, fork-lifts and a dozen motorized platform scaffolds. The company owns about 75 percent of all its equipment, and all of its facilities.

“We’ve grown with our own money,” Nienke says.

In other words, Nienke may build casinos, but he hasn’t gambled his way to success.

About the Author
Thomas G. Dolan is a free-lance writer for the construction industry.