Insulation and Fireproofing: Double-Pronged Specialties

Wilkin Insulation Succeeds by Focusing on What It Does Best

By Thomas G. Dolan

"As wall and ceiling contractors become more proficient, they then to increase their scope, but we've stayed away from that," says Mike Wilkin, president, Wilkin Insulation Company, Mount Prospect, Ill. "We've resisted the temptation to branch out into other things, but have just stuck to what we're good at."

As it is, the company is good at two things, insulation and fireproofing, and has stuck with both. But, given its orientation of wanting to be master of one trade instead of jack of many, why hasn't it chosen either one or the other? That takes a little explaining, and probably the best place to start is the beginning.

Mike's dad, Randall K. Wilkin, started the company in 1940, left it for four years to serve in World War II, and then returned. As the company name implies, Wilkin was primarily an insulation contractor. Mike's older brother, Randy, followed in his dad's footsteps, and took over the insulation division, while Mike was starting the fireproofing division. In the mid-1980s, Randall stepped back and let his sons take more and more control.

The two sons took insulation and fireproofing in different directions. Although
occasionally, some laborers, especially in the more basic work, will shift from one side to the other, for the most part insulation and fireproofing are made up of two separate crews, both highly specialized in their areas.

And while it sometimes happens that both divisions will be on the same job, for the most part they go their separate ways. The reason is that most of the insulation is done on residential construction, and the fireproofing is on the big commercial jobs. Except for some large condominium jobs, the fireproofing side of the business doesn’t go into the residential market.

Whereas the fireproofing crews tend to be large, usually one man goes into a house to do the insulation, or, at most a two-man crew will blow insulation into an attic and get in and out as quickly as possible. What is true of both divisions is that the workers are specialized and trained to be as quick and efficient as possible. Though generally the insulators will work for the home builder or general contractor, often they will subcontract to drywall contractors who hire them for their specialty expertise.

Focus on Fireproofing

Since Randy retired last year and Mike is now full owner of the company, he says, “I’ve been forced to become a full-time manager as opposed to being an estimator and project manager in the fireproofing division.” Yet he adds that having a good management team in both divisions allows him to take a more executive-oriented and less hands-on role, though there’s no doubt that his heart has been in the challenging work of fireproofing. “As a fireproofing contractor, I’ve been pretty proud of what I do,” he says.

Wilkin, in fact, pioneered the growth of fireproofing in the company. “Through the 1950s to mid-1960s I got involved in the business as many kids in family businesses do, cleaning up the warehouse and loading trucks,” he recalls. “During high school I started insulating houses, and my summer jobs were blow-
ing attics and spraying insulation. I did a small amount of fireproofing. In college I became a part of the fireproofing crew.”

Though he attended college almost four years, he married and dropped out of school in 1974 to become a full time fireproofing applicator. “I did that the better part of three years, then moved into estimating and being a project manager for fireproofing jobs,” Wilkin says. “I hired an estimator to work with me, and we kept growing, getting bigger and bigger jobs. Again, in 1985, dad stepped back; Randy ran the insulation end and I did the fireproofing. There were a lot of high-rises going up in Chicago during the 1980s so the fireproofing business was good.”

Here Wilkins specialty focus stood him in good stead. “The specialty nature of the work makes it not that desirable to many workers,” Wilkin says. “It’s harder work, physically demanding and dirty. Usually when somebody working for a typical contractor gets assigned to a fireproofing crew, he thinks, ‘What did I do to get put into the penalty box?’ But our guys do it all year long. They say it takes a special breed to do fireproofing.”

Yet by doing it all year long, Wilkin’s crews become very specialized and proficient.

“They get to know what’s required,” he explains. “Each member of the crew gets in sync with the others. The material gets mixed properly, with just the right consistency, not too stiff or too wet, which makes it a lot easier on the sprayer. A good floor crew will have a pattern in front of the scaffold to keep it moving systematically, so the sprayer can spray above it without having to shut off his gun and move around. He’s also able to spray evenly, The material goes where it’s supposed to go, and that in turn reduces the waste when it comes to clean up. The result is a more efficient, lower cost operation. It’s what the general contractors we work with have come to expect. They know the job will be done quickly with the least amount of disruption to them.”

Wilkin says he’s been told many times, especially by a contractor, he hasn’t worked with before, “that when we get a job done in a week, he said he expected it would take two week. The other compliment I get is that we make half the mess. When you’re spraying all the metal and steel deck, overspray has to be cleaned up immediately. But we have less overspray, and our cleanup crews get their work done faster. I’ve often used the analogy of golf. The guy who plays five times a week is going to play better than the one who golfs only on Sundays.” Wilkin adds, however, “I don’t play that much golf”

A Booming Business

The company is a 100 percent union contractor, the union being the Operative Plasterers’ and Cement Masons’ International Association, which Wilkin
himself was a member of for three years. 

Yet, because of the specialty nature of fireproofing, Wilkin says, “It’s not really taught at apprentice schools, so we rely on ourselves to provide the training.” This is basically on-the-job training, but there are also semi-annual meetings with classroom training, with the study of new equipment and application techniques, as well as reinforcing the standards already in place.

Despite the hard, messy aspects of the work, and the general high turnover in the industry, Wilkin says, “We have a very low turnover rate. There are numerous people who have been with us for more than 25 years. We’re a good company, we treat people well and pay them well. If they want to, they can work 52 weeks a year.” There are about 20 people working in the office doing clerical work, accounting and estimating, and there are about 75 people in the field, about half in each division.

“We’ve been around more than 60 years, have a good reputation, and work with the same contractors year in and year out,” Wilkin says. “All the contractors know us.” Wilkin has several fireproofing contractor competitors in the Chicago area, but he feels that “because they do other things, our specialized focus gives us a bit of the edge.”

Another advantage to his approach, Wilkin says, “is that instead of branching into other specialties, we’ve increased our business by expanding geographically. Generally we go into areas where there are not fireproofing specialists present.” As a result, Wilkin has gotten large jobs throughout Illinois, but also Indiana, Wisconsin, Iowa, Nebraska and, occasionally, Michigan.

The company’s credits include McCormick Place, the large exposition center in Chicago, as well as several of the 40-plus story office buildings along the Chicago River. The company has also fireproofed the American United Life building in Indianapolis, the University of Wisconsin Medical Center, and the Blue Cross/Blue Shield building in Milwaukee. Currently the company is
involved in the complete renovation of the Green Bay Packers’ Lambeau Field, doing all of the structural steel that’s supporting the skyboxes and the ramps that the fans enter and exit on, as well as Title Town, which incorporates a large retail area. “This is the most treasured facility in the state,” Wilkin says.

On the Personal Side

Wilkin, 50, recently celebrated his 27th anniversary with his wife, Susan. They have five children: Laura, 26, who works in the accounting department; Beth, 24; Emily, 21; Clair, 19, who works in the business during the summer; and Michael Jr., 17, who Wilkin says, “is doing residential insulation and might be following in his father’s footsteps.”

Wilkin plays hockey, both snow and water skis, is an avid fisherman both open water and ice, and an occasional golfer.

‘I’m not a workaholic,’” he says. “I work five days, eight to 10 hours a day. I used to work more, but, with five kids, I had to make a choice. So I delegate a lot of responsibility. I have a good management team, and they keep the company moving.” Annual volume ranges from $15 million to $18 million.

“As a specialty contractor, I find it’s good to be a member of the Association of the Wall and Ceiling Industries-International,” Wilkin says. “You get to see how your colleagues across the country are running their businesses, so you can learn a lot. And AWCI is a good educational and resource source, especially now, with the International Building Code, which is attempting to combine other codes, but relying more on sprinklers to protect a building and requiring less fireproofing. That would be a mistake, because sprinkling systems have been known to fail, and fireproofing is a fairly low cost but very effective application. AWCI has a task force in place and is actively educating building code officials on the importance of fireproofing, and not reducing the protection they require in their buildings.”

So let’s hope AWCI’s task group is able to accomplish its goal; then maybe Wilkin will have more time for golf.