McNulty Bros.
Company: 115 Years Old
and Still Going Strong

In the late 1880s, three McNulty brothers arrived in this country. One was a carpenter, another a bricklayer, and the third was a plasterer. They each started a business. The one who was successful was the plasterer. In 1888, Thomas J. McNulty started the McNulty Bros. Company in Chicago.

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By Thomas G. Dolan
In the early days the founder would transport labor and material to the job site on his horse and wagon each morning. If it was a small job, he would return home in the evening with his horse and wagon. If it was a multi-day job, he would leave the wagon and ride home on his horse.

His son, Joseph D. McNulty, became the company’s second president and was one of the original founders of the Contracting Plasterers International Association, which, after various mergers, became what’s known today as the Association of the Wall and Ceiling Industries-International. The third generation, Joseph Monroe McNulty, took over the McNulty Bros. Company in the mid-1960s.

He was the final generation for the McNulty family. But another family, which had grown up through the company, seamlessly took over. Peter J. Feldner started with the company as a plasterer and stayed with the company more than 50 years, retiring as its superintendent. His son, Joseph A. Feldner, started as a plaster apprentice in 1947, and it is the only company he’s ever worked for. Feldner acquired the company in 1985. Today he is still active as president/CEO and has no intention of retiring. Joseph’s son, Duane, represents the third generation of the Feldner family to help run the company. He also grew up in the business and today is an executive vice president. Since Joseph D. McNulty was one of the founding fathers of the AWCI forerunner in 1918 and the company is a lifelong member, it’s not surprising that both Feldners are enthusiastic about the organization.

Duane, who participates on AWCI’s Education Committee, says, “What I value is that I can’t go to a competitor across town to discuss problems, but through AWCI, I can participate on a committee with someone across the country, and I can share my concerns and learn something new.”

Joseph, who has won AWCI’s Pinnacle Award and various other awards, says, “Since 1967 I’ve served on every AWCI committee that’s existed and been on the board of directors the longest of anyone.
There’s so much love and dedication in that organization, and I’m so proud that it’s been so much of my life.”

McNulty Brothers Company has grown from his humble horse and wagon beginning. It now has about 250 employees, which includes management and a dedicated multi-generation field staff. It has expanded from just plastering to encompass complete interior systems, acoustics, ceilings, standard and custom drywall, ceramic and marble setting, ornamental and veneer plaster systems, frames, doors, hardware, millwork, finish taping, exterior insulation and Portland cement finish systems, decorative interior finishes, and construction management, as well as demolition, material sales and heavy gauge steel stud curtain wall framing.

**Leaving Their Mark on America**

The company history is studded with important projects in Chicago. These include Orchestra Hall and Marshal Field’s State Street Store in 1904 and the Palmer House circa 1925.


But that’s the past. The company has continued nonstop into the present. A random selection of recent projects includes the Ada Rice Wing of The Art Institute of Chicago, the Wrigley Build-

ing since 1924, One prudential Plaza since 1954 and Two Prudential Plaza and the United States Gypsum Company headquarters building. A few of the company’s extensive list of tenant development projects include Sears Tower, Smurfit-Stone Container, Bosch Tools, the Quaker Oats expansion, the Juno Lighting showroom and the NBC Tower.

McNulty Brothers also specializes in religious affiliation buildings. Examples include Old Saint Patrick’s Church and School, St. Raymond’s Cathedral in Joliet, Ill., and The Church in Chicago. To
zero in with a little more detail on one important project. McNulty was responsible for the plastering and dry-walling of Chicago’s Harold Washington Public Library Center, which opened Oct. 7, 1991. This is the world’s largest open-stack public library and holds the world’s largest children’s library within it. It takes up an entire Chicago block.

When the library was first conceived it was billed as the “100 Year Structure,” so it was appropriate that the McNulty firm started working on it. At that time, McNulty Bros. was nearing its own 100th anniversary in business. The intent was to make everything about the design, construction and use of materials a reflection of the best of an earlier
age’s high style and architectural durability

This was one of those rare modern projects in which the emphasis was not on the cheapest materials but the best material—and don’t worry about the cost. Plaster was a natural for this classic project. But, in terms of the best, Duane Feldner says, “We’re not talking only about plaster. All the trades were represented with their best materials. It was fun for me to take different people through the project and receive their impression of the high quality of materials—all material—that were brought in.”

The workmanship by the crews began right up front. Instead of the job being priced on square footages, the estimators counted each piece of blue board, each corner bead and each piece of GRG to calculate their bid. The quantities of materials and manpower to put it in place would make one’s head swim. More than 1.5 million square feet of plaster reinforced gypsum shapes were applied to the total job.

The talents of the foremen, crews and superintendent were tested for their performance under tight deadlines and small material staging areas on the site. These handicaps required their crews to bench the plaster ornamentation off-site. But the toughest part of the whole job was really the coordination necessary between the various trades. And, natu-
rally, the building’s completion schedule was always being revised.

Hail to the Unions

There was six month’s worth of planning before the McNulty crews even set foot on the job site. Much of that intensive planning by McNulty Brothers was focused in the area of training their young crew to work the old-fashioned way with plaster in large quantities. “The average job today uses drywall or veneer plaster (a 1/4” plastering method known as ‘skinny plaster,’” Duane says. “But we applied three-coat plaster, which consists of a metal stud frame, a layer of lath and a topping of conventional plaster.” At any one time McNulty had 40 to 45 plasterers on the library job, or up to 170 people during the peak periods.

“You can’t beat the tradition of a tradesperson who appreciates what he or she creates with his or her hands,” he says. For this reason Duane emphasizes that the 100-plus year success of McNulty Bros. Company is due as much to the workers in the field as the managers and officers in the office.

It’s also for this reason that the company has always been a strong supporter of unions. “I’ve carried my plasterer’s card for 57 years,” says Joseph. “We enjoy a rapport with unions that is second to none. I’ve been personally involved in apprentice training, labor management, labor contract negotiations and arbitration committees. We have the respect of the union and go in and discuss anything with them. I thoroughly enjoy a welcome walk into the District Councils of all the Chicago unions and wouldn’t trade that welcome for anything.”

Too many contractors, Joe says, look at unions from an adversarial point of view, and “expend a lot of energy figuring out how to beat the system. We’ve flipped that coin over. We’ve made the system a part of our business. We look to the union to provide well-trained mechanics so that we are able to send them to any of our jobs to perform all of our work scopes.” Because of this, he says his company is not plagued by the labor shortages that affect much of the country. “I sit on the committee overseeing the education of 4,000 carpenter apprentices and 4,000 carpenters’ upgrading their skills programs’ from 10 Northern Illinois counties each year. Each fall, I proudly attend the graduation of 800 carpenter apprentices’ step to full-fledged carpenter journeymen,” he says. And Duane is one of two judges for the State
Managed Construction

Do things get easier the older you get? “It’s three times as hard to make a prof-
it today than it was three years ago,” Joe responds. So he has expanded to deal with the current situation—“construction management.”

Feldner explains: “Typically, once we have the drawings and are awarded the work, we start layout of the walls and perform the metal stud framing. The electricians, plumbers and sheet-metal works, etc., follow with their work. The general contractors look to us to close up the walls as quickly as possible and push the job’s completion.

“So many fast scopes of work need careful coordination. It is not unusual to receive a phone call today asking us to stock and start a job tomorrow morning. If the job or other trades are not ready for us, we all spin our wheels. . . . Some of our long-time customers have asked us to join them in the construction management of their sites.”

In short, construction management means that McNulty, with the owner, will coordinate the different trades so that they all get in and out of the job as quickly and as efficiently as possible, while saving the partnered owner valuable time and money.

Is he taking over the role of the general contractor? “No,” Joseph replies. “We are careful not to bite the general contractor’s hand that feeds us. With our coordinating role, we work with the owner to complete the job performed in a workman way while cutting out lost costs.”

Some of the company’s construction management customers include five Lord & Taylor retail stores, the Chicago and Northeast Illinois District Council of Carpenter’s offices and meeting hall, Chicago Archdiocese schools and churches and corporate offices that anyone who has ever been to Chicago would recognize.

With such diverse offerings of products, talent services, and continuing multi-generation-dedicated work crews, there’s no doubt that McNulty Bros. Company will be shaping America’s skylines for the next 100 years and beyond.