The Voice of Experience

Old-timers have stories to tell, perspectives to give and technology to share that all too often are lost, leaving our industry the poorer.

AWCI’s Construction Dimensions is exploring the idea of giving these venerable and generally crusty gentlemen a forum so that their ideas can live on. We begin with Ian “Scatty” Paterson, who has been active in the construction industry since 1948, and who, at a senior age we will not specify, is still swinging his bat as a safety consultant for owners, developers, general contractors, builders, subs and suppliers in California. We warn you that what he says is not always politically correct, but it is Scatty Paterson. As he notes, “I’ve just about seen it all! I’ve spent 90 percent of my time in the field. If you want to know anything about construction, ask the people who are doing it, they’ll give you the straight skinny. The people back in the main offices don’t have their finger on what goes on in the field. They’re full of politics and BS.”

Before the folks back in the main offices get too ticked off, know that Scott sets his sights on the entire industry, not just your end of it, and it’s not all bad, either, so listen in.

SP: I’ve seen quite a few changes over the years in the field. We have certainly made big improvements in our equipment and materials. On the subject of GCs, some treat their subcontractors very well. Others often do not treat them even as second-class citizens. That is not right-when you work together and communicate together, you must treat each other as equals. Too many times, subs get the short end of the stick: They are not paid, they are cancelled-these are all different issues, but I don’t blame some subs for suing GCs. Another issue is that GCs should have a better selection process and not just take the lowest bidder every time.

I still think the weakest link we have in construction is at the superintendent level. They used to be in the field and stay on top of everything. Now they are stuck in their trailers answering all their email and working on their computers. They have so much paperwork now that they don’t have much opportunity to get out into the field.

CD: Who is generating this paperwork?

SP: Architects, engineers, main offices, outside people. See, in the old days, a general contractor would hire most of his own work force—carpenters, cement masons, laborers, operating engineers, teamsters, electrical, plumbing and everything else. He didn’t sub out much of his work. Now, everything is subbed out and on most jobs the GCs have only one person there, a superintendent. They won’t even send him a secretary! So, what I am telling you is that these GCs are understaffed. They’ve got one guy, and he has to answer phones all day, do all the paperwork, like he’s a secretary. So we don’t have superintendents providing oversight. They depend on all their subs to do everything for them. That is the trend.
CD: Why has the trend gone toward specialization?

SP: It’s a lot more economical for the general contractor. He doesn’t have to hire his own people or keep track of all the hours, the overtime and the pay. But what I have found is that when you sub out everything, you increase your liability as a general contractor. Because they don’t have enough time to go out and supervise and see what all those subs are doing, they lose control and so their liability increases. What they get is a lot more lawsuits—a hundred times more now than they were years ago.

CD: If they have to cover extra liability insurance and deal with the lawsuits themselves, are they saving money?

SP: No. They’re fooling themselves. Their liability premiums are more now than their workers’ comp premiums. In the old days, the workers’ comp premiums were always the highest because they had workers on the payroll, and that was what they wanted to control. I’ve worked for 23 different construction companies in my 55 years in construction, and their liability premiums are much more now than their workers’ comp premium used to be, because they end up being sued all the time.

CD: Are there any ramifications to this trend?

SP: Contractors usually select subcontractors by either bid or negotiation. Well, that sub might sub it out to somebody else, and that sub might sub it out to yet somebody else, so you can have first-, second- and third-tier subcontractors on the job. GCs really don’t know who the subcontractors are going to be until they show up to do the work!

CD: And it may be a sub they specifically did not want.

SP: Exactly. A lot of the time, subs are spread so
thin they’ll have to call in another sub-
contractor, some buddy of theirs. I had
a situation years ago at San Francisco
Airport. A sub was so busy that he called
one of his buddies and said, “Hey, bring
your crew out here to do the concrete
work.” Well, they overloaded the plat-
form with concrete and it collapsed.
With eight men on the platform, I had
to deal with personal injuries and a
structural collapse involving subs who
weren’t even meant to be on the job in
the first place.

CD: What was the outcome of that?

SP: Well, the lawsuits never quit on that
one! It went back to the shoring system
that was used for the concrete, and it
went back to the engineers and the
architects. The plaintiff claimed the sys-
tem wasn’t designed to hold the weight.
But most of these lawsuits in construc-
tion—I have been involved in so many
of them [as a forensic expert in con-
struction site safety]—are settled before
they ever go to trial.

We used to have a law in California that
says if an event involves a personal
injury, it has to be reported within one
year. Now they’ve extended the time
frame to two years, so people have more
time to think about and report any of
these personal injuries and then sue. The
courts in California are so backed up
with all of these personal injury cases,
that it gives the attorneys more time to
study and hire experts and find out what
really happened on these cases.

So, that is another thing that has hap-
pened as a result of this trend—the law-
suits have really increased and continue
to do so.

CD: What else has changed over the
years?

SP: What has really changed is the
equipment, materials and tools. There
have been huge improvements with
these. I have to praise all the suppliers for
the different types of equipment—lift-
ing equipment, cranes, etc. that they
have given us. What has not improved
is the people! I don’t see any big improvements in the people!

CD: What would you like to see in the way of improvements in people?

SP: We obviously need more trainees. I have to praise the unions, because they have actual training programs. Union people have to go through apprenticing and training before they can come out in the field. Some of them have three, five, six years of training. The unions have very comprehensive, excellent training programs so when you call the Hall and they send out somebody, you know you’re going to get a qualified person.

But the unions have lost a lot of control with many non-union contractors moving in. These don’t have the same kind of comprehensive training programs and so we generally find less-qualified people in non-union contractors. In fact, I looked at statistics on safety one time and found non-union people usually have about three times as many accidents as union people.

CD: Which, again, means more lawsuits?

SP: Yes, and many non-union people don’t speak English. We have large Hispanic and Asian populations here in California, many of whom don’t speak English. We don’t see very many Asian people on the job sites, but there are many Hispanics. It presents all kinds of problems when they don’t understand the English language or how to read and write it.

CD: Understandably so. Any other issues relating to personnel?

SP: Contractors usually have mandatory retirement. They throw out employees when they hit 60 to 65, and that’s not right. You get thrown out if you can’t do your work, that’s different. But there are a lot of elderly people who can still do their work, who are actually more dependable. They have volumes of experience, they can still perform well, so I am all for seniors in construction!

Another pet peeve is that construction workers should never accept the premise that death is part of the job. All construction accidents can be prevented. I’ve always stressed this with all construction workers that they didn’t come to the job to die, but to live and make a living! Unfortunately some of them have the mindset that ‘construction is dangerous work, we love dangerous work and that’s why we’re here.’ But construction can be done safely.

CD: Quite right! Do you have any words of wisdom for those coming into the industry?

SP: I tell all the young people who have just graduated with master’s degrees in construction management that their best career move, and I say this quite candidly, is to stay away from family-owned companies and joint ventures. These are problem areas.

CD: Tell us more.

SP: Well first of all, unless they’re part of the family, they will not be promoted, they will not share in the profits. They will be ignored and neglected. Now, some people will work for family-owned businesses just for the experience, which is okay. But your chances for advancement and promotion in family-owned companies are very, very slim. If the
grandfather founded the company, then the next generation will be brought in, and the next generation. So you find a lot of kids running these construction companies, but they don’t have the commitment of their elders. So stay out of family-owned companies.

As for joint ventures, the reason they exist is because the original contractor doesn’t have enough money for the insurance to cover the project. Most joint ventures involve two or three companies, but I’ve been in joint ventures with as many as six different contractors. The problem with these projects is the contractors all have different and often conflicting policies and procedures, and the result is a lot of internal bickering. They really end up being a mess to work in.

I’ve never seen anybody print the above two points, but this is what I have found to be true in my experience.

CD: If these are the folks not to work for, whom do you recommend one should work for?

SP: The people I enjoy working for the most are owners. They are smarter (most of them) and they have the resources. My second choice is construction managers, they’re smarter, too! And my third choice is general contractors. My last choice is subcontractors. They’re at the bottom of the barrel because they generally either have terrible policies and procedures or no policies or procedures at all!

CD: Were subs better to work for before?

SP: I don’t think we see the same kind of competence among subs as we used to when I was working for general contractors. And like I said earlier, when you get a sub, they sub out and then they sub out, so you don’t really know what you’re getting. But that’s equally true for the general contractors—they aren’t nearly as good as they were 50 years ago.

CD: So it’s about 50 years ago that things started going downhill?
SP: I noticed the change in the 1960s. I would say that’s when everything started to go downhill. We had all these hippies show up on the job. The best construction workers are those who have been in the military because they are used to organization, structure and discipline. You have fewer problems with veterans than with these other types, I found that out. In the old days, that’s what we had. When I went into construction, it was the WW2 vets and then the Korean War vets who were used to the organization, the structure, discipline, and ways of doing things—regulations.

And then in the 1960s it all changed as we had drugs flooding the construction sites and it was a mess. All these guys started wearing dark glasses and you couldn’t tell whether or not they were on drugs.

CD: After all these years, how is business for you these days?

SP: I’m still hanging tough. I have about five different projects I am working on right now. I usually have about six but it is a little slow this year. But it’ll pick up: Residential construction is still booming here in California, despite the economy, but commercial/industrial construction is down.

I went into business for myself 16 years ago after working for contractors for almost 40 years! Finally, at age 56, I went into business for myself I should have done it at 36 or at 46! But, I was one of these guys who was loyal to the contractor, seeing projects through, waiting until they had finished the jobs. Finally, I said, “Enough is enough!” and went into business for myself, using all these contacts I had built over the years. That was the smartest move I ever made. I am making more money now than I did then, I turn down what I want to turn down, I take what I want to take—it’s just a whole world of difference.

So, my big message to all these young people going into construction is, “Yeah, you need about 10 or 20 years of experience working for somebody else to
find out what is going on, but after that, go into business for yourself.” I’m really big on private entrepreneurship. When you feel comfortable that you can do it on your own, then go into business for yourself.

CD: Any other new perspectives to pass on?

SP: We should have “lessons learned,” but the problem in construction is that we have “lessons unlearned.” Accidents that I am involved in—I do a lot of forensic work, too—are exactly the same as those that happened 50 years ago, exactly! People falling through undisguised floor and roof openings, trenches caving in and burying people—these are exactly the same kinds of things that happened 50 years ago, but the lessons learned were never passed down to the next generation. So, we still have people falling through roof openings, falling through floor openings and wall openings, falling down elevator shafts. We still have a lot of cave-ins because they don’t shore the trenches and people are being buried in trenches or excavations.

So, my point is that all these lessons we learned half a century ago are almost never passed down to the next group of people that come in. We have a terrible communications problem in the construction industry. We have thousands of publications, but the problem with all of them, with hazard alerts, etc., is they never make it past the main office. Sometimes they find their way into the field and sometimes they don’t. But even if they are mailed to the field, they are ignored or thrown into the wastebasket. So, it never really gets to the men who have to do the work, and that is my point. There are too many levels of administration.

For instance, many of these men I talk to have never seen their company’s safety program. You know, there are laws: You have to have a company safety program, and so many a company has one. But many of the employees have never
even seen it! And I’ve run across contractors who don’t know they’re supposed to have a safety program in this day and age! I had a big case I was involved in last year, for example, where both the general contractor and the subcontractor didn’t know they had to have written safety programs.

I’ve seen it all, done it all. I’ve been on every type of project you can think of, and I will continue to do so. I’m going to keep going strong until I drop dead! I love construction, it gets in your blood, and you can’t get it out, you know. I just love anything to do with construction and it’s been my whole life. I was fortunate to be able to earn an engineering degree on the GI Bill and that certainly helped. So I’m a big, old, grizzled, Korean War veteran-type, 6’11”, 240 pounds, and I just love construction. It’s my life and hobby.

About the Author
Steven Ferry is a freelance writer based in Clearwater, Fla.