Holding Out for Plaster

Robert L. Maidt returned to Oklahoma City in 1945 from service in World War II as a bomber pilot and attended the University of Oklahoma while completing an accelerated but full apprenticeship as a plasterer during the summer months. He then took over the family plastering business in 1947. His father, R.G. Maidt, and uncle, Albert, had started the Maidt Plastering Company around 1903—that being the date of the earliest written record available. As Bob Maidt only retired in 1998, liquidating the business five years shy of its centenary anniversary, he would qualify as the kind of crusty old timer whose 50-plus years of experience might yield insights for folks who had been in the industry a short time—say a decade or two.

By Steven Ferry
Replacing Sweat with Technology, Quality with Speed

In those days, of course, plastering was basically lime and sand-gypsum was a long way off. In terms of quality from a plasterer’s point of view, this was good news; but in terms of convenience, it was probably bad news: They had to let the lime carbonate in the air for a few months before they could return to finish it. Imagine that in today’s concertina’d production time frames!

The same hand tools were still in use, but the plaster pump, introduced in around 1955, certainly gave plasterers a leg up on large projects. “Appreciably faster” is how Bob Maidt describes the improvement. Being a man of few words, that says more than one might think.

It took chatting with Bob Maidt Jr.—who has himself been in the industry for more than three decades, most of it in the family business before he quit eight years ago because “I was tired of chasing money all over the country because GCs wouldn’t pay up, and tired of OSHA regulations”—to fill in the blanks.

“Dad knew what a plaster pump could do, he saw it work and made a lot of money with it, so he could see the potential of concrete pumps. He therefore pioneered concrete pumping in Oklahoma City, bringing in the big boom trucks around 1977 and eventually running half a dozen of them.

“My father was very innovative, too. He knew there had to be a better way to do some things, and he’d find it. Around 1960, for instance, he had a job that required a lot of cutting of #40 expansion joints. The problem with using existing tools to cut where the four pieces intersected was they left an ugly intersection, with one solid piece running horizontally and two broken, diagonal pieces. They also took 15 minutes to cut. So he invented a one-of-a-kind machine specifically to cut these joints in less than 30 seconds.
and leave four clean openings at the intersection. We sold the machine five years ago with the rest of the company, so presumably someone is still using it in Oklahoma City someplace (and nowhere else in the world).”

One significant change that Maidt Sr. witnessed in the building industry was the transition from reinforced concrete to the lighter steel, which meant that plasterers like him, as the first finishing trade in the construction cycle, could move into the job quicker. It also meant less plastering being done, however. And the other reason for that, according to Maidt, was an increasing lack of skilled manpower as a result of apprenticeship programs falling away,

“The way you got into the trade when I first began work, was through an apprenticeship,” Maidt recalls.

Why did apprenticeships fall away? “The unions didn’t seem to have as much interest in apprenticeships as they should have had,” Maidt says.

How come? “Well, if you were a plasterer, about 60 years old, you wouldn’t want to train a young man to take your place prematurely, would you? That’s what would happen. You would train a younger man and then you’d be out of a job.”

Not a good internal strategy overall, if the plastering profession is already under assault on two flanks: less demand and cheaper/swiftly applied materials.

**Then and Now**

Echoing his son’s words, Maidt reports, “In the early days, GCs and owners were more inclined to respect me, to pay their bills on time. These days, they are not timely in their payments. We have wondered why over the years but never found a satisfactory explanation that made sense or that we could put in the bank!

“Contractors have not changed that much over the years except certain areas are having trouble obtaining insurance for their work. Even though we did have to have insurance back then, getting it was never an issue.”

For the employees, wages have sunk “In the 1940s, a journeyman’s wages were
around $4 to $5 an hour—at the higher end of the construction trades. I think it’s now $20 and up.” Considering that a good car used to cost about $1,500 back then, working the same number of hours at today’s wages wouldn’t buy much of a car for $6,000 or $7,000.

Added to this drop in value of money is the malaise concerning sweat equity. “I heard my father say many times,” explains Maidt Jr., “that people used to work for their money, now they want it given to them. They were willing to break a sweat at work; now they want to stop for a break when they start sweating. That aggravated him no end, because he knew how the work ethic used to be. Dad always instilled in me, “Don’t be afraid to work. You’ve got to earn the respect of the people on the job, you can’t be afraid of hard work.” And that’s why we succeeded as we did. I blame the change on the unions in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when they tried to run the contractors’ business. It wasn’t successful, although dad knew the top officials in all the industry unions and how to handle them.”

**Strength Through Association**

If these is one message Maidt Sr. wants to get across today, it is to “support your trade association. I was very active in our contractor’s association. I learned a lot, made a lot of friends around the coun-
try, and it was just a great experience. Promotion of the trade, building up our contractor membership and involvement, and anything we could do to better the industry was what we focused on.”

Once again, Maidt Jr. comes to the rescue with a few more specifics. His father was actually president of the Contracting Plasterers’ and Lathers’ International Association, the predecessor of the Association of the Wall and Ceiling Industries—International, for the 1963-1964 fiscal year. “We did a lot of traveling all over the country. His main concern has always been the survival of the plastering industry itself. Back in the early 1960s, a bad school fire occurred in Chicago and so he served as an officer for three years in the National Lathe and Plaster Bureau to promote plaster in schools. That was the time frame when sheetrock was coming into play and competing against plaster, so dad became heavily involved at the national level in trying to sell plaster to architects and building owners. The success
of this program helped grow the industry until probably the late seventies. He was also responsible for starting the CPLIA conference program.”

As for growing the association, Jr. gives an example in “Nate Kimmel, who had a small company out in Los Angeles, Calif., in the early 1960s. He attended one of the association meetings in California, and dad persuaded him to join the association and take his product national.

“Our company was a charter member of the CPLIA, which itself was founded in 1918. My father started at AWCI in the late 1950s. He would always collect both the *Walls & Ceiling* and [AWCI's] *Construction Dimensions* magazine—he had stacks of them dating back to 1950, which he donated to the AWCI library.

“In later years, it was disheartening for him to see the plaster industry slowly pinning away. He would not let us do any of the synthetic-stucco work for many years. It was a battle, but he finally agreed that it was being spec’ed and bought, and we might as well do it. Cutting costs was the bottom line, no doubt about it. He knew how the hard plasters and cement plasters had performed over thousands of years and all of a sudden, there was this new, softcoat material. It did not impress him one bit! But the fate of plaster was being sealed slowly with the passing away of each old plasterer and nobody rising to take his place. Right now, there are a few people in the industry who almost know how to plaster.

“But while the family business was in business, we did very well. My father and grandfather built half of the downtown metro area, and I remodeled it. I loved it and dad always liked the ornamental plasterwork: it was challenging and we knew how to do it.

In the elder Maidt’s words, “We helped build Oklahoma City and environs. It was quality work.”

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