In 1953, two weeks after he went to work for Harry Niehaus, a well respected plastering contractor in St. Louis, Missouri, Robert “Bob” Whittle was to learn something rich and memorable about his new employer.

At the first meeting of the two men—at a party—Bob was an up-and-coming estimator with journeyman plasterer’s credentials, working for Terry Blazier, whose own plastering contractor’s career had carried him to the presidency of CPLIA.

For his part, Harry Niehaus had been contracting successfully for many years. And since he had only recently added his own lathing operation, he more than ever wanted and needed someone to help him.

It was only natural that party talk turned to business talk with the result that Harry offered the likeable young East Side native a job in his firm as an estimator.

That was more than 20 years ago. Today, Harry Niehaus is happily retired. The business that he started—H. Niehaus Plastering—is now part of the diversified St. Louis firm of Niehaus Interiors, Inc., and the president and driving force keeping the company in the $3,000,000 a year category is Robert “Bob” Whittle.

Something Extra

It probably couldn’t have turned out any other way. The business relationship had something extra going for it from the beginning. Harry Niehaus had seen to that.

And Bob Whittle, seated in his office at the company’s attractive headquarters building in the heart of St. Louis, talked about his first two weeks with Niehaus Plastering. A soft-spoken man who moves with an easy, deliberate grace, Bob smiled as he recalled:

“It was a good match up, my going to work for Harry. He really was getting a bit tired of the daily grind and he had money. I had no money—but I was willing and anxious to work.”

Such willingness was apparently obvious to Harry Niehaus because two weeks after going to work Bob received a mysterious telephone call from his new boss.

“You know, I’ve never really told this publically before,” Bob recalled, “but it was a Monday morning and Harry wanted me to meet him at a certain street corner which was in the very poor section of the city. After I got there, he took me into a nearby parsonage where there were two ministers in attendance.

“I had known that Harry was a man of deep and sincere religious principles, but that morning I learned just how deep they were. Harry explained that he had been praying for someone to be sent to him to help him with the business and, consequently, he wanted the
ministers to give a blessing to our business union.”

New Business Associate

Following a short but very moving laying-on-hands ceremony, Harry then took his young protege around to his bankers and business friends, introducing him as his business associate. The friendship and the business were on their way.

Starting from a base of $400,000 a year, the two men tripled the business volume in three years and continued to grow, reaching the $2,000,000 mark by 1958.

In 1959, Bob demonstrated his knack for accurately measuring future trends in the industry. It was that year that he attended a special demonstration in Los Vegas by the U.S. Gypsum Company on gypsum board screw applied to steel studs.

“This eliminated the standard drywall problems of crooked walls and nail popping,” Bob explained, “and so I came home and urged Harry to get into drywall as the product of the future.”

For a variety of reasons Harry was reluctant to include such an operation into the existing company but he did encourage Bob to set up a separate corporation—Interior Construction Company—and this enabled them to go after a bigger portion of the commercial construction dollar.

H. Niehaus Plastering Co., concentrated on lath and plastering work while Interior Construction Co., went after drywall applications, including subcontracting for Niehaus on combination bids.

The two companies continued to operate separately until 1969. That’s when Harry decided to retire and Bob Whittle, taking a deep swallow, assumed all of his employer’s contracts.

“It was quite a step for me,” Bob admitted, “but I combined Niehaus Plastering and Interior Construction into Niehaus Interiors, Inc., and we finished up every contract satisfactorily and went right on from there.”

Diversification Continues

The move toward diversification continued and Niehaus Interiors now is in lath and plastering, drywall, movable partitions, fireproofing, and specialty exterior finishes.

“The volume of our business is still bidding to general contractors,” Bob explained, walking his visitor through the neatly arranged office areas. “Of course, we do a lot of development work with architects and interior designers—with the understanding that if the job is within the budget then it won’t be let out for bid.

“We can now do an entire interior, all of it . . . or any portion of it that an owner may want.”

Such readiness to take on a task—well-known to Bob Whittle’s customers—can produce an occasional odd job. Such as the local radio station who called him up and asked casually, “how about putting up our antenna?”

Rather than refer the request elsewhere, Bob looked around, found someone to do the job, and gave the station a price.

“We put up the antenna on a 35 story building,” Bob said, proudly, “and you can bet that that radio station is a very good customer.”

“You know,” he added, his face suddenly tightening, “I can put up with almost everything in this business—except customer complaints.

“There’s nothing that will make an old man out of you quicker than dissatisfied customers. When I hear of a complaint, someone gets moving on it immediately.

“This is especially true with time and material jobs. No complaint must go unanswered, and you must be brutally honest in your billing. When we bill on any T&M job, we send copies of actual payrolls, paid invoices, and credits for any material not used.

“Furthermore, we tell our customers what trucking, hauling costs, and the like will be and the like will be and we show that these bills have been paid. Big corporations like this method of doing business—and so do I. With an average of $500,000 a year in time and material work, I never lost money on a T&M job.”

To keep his company happily in the profit colored ink—especially during the current economic situation—the books are balanced

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BOB WHITTLE
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Each month to determine current status, and job meetings are conducted each week between Bob, his three superintendents, Joseph Fawcett-lathing, Melvin Lewis-drywall, Charles Ferber-plastering; his chief estimator, Malcolm Boehmer; his son, Jack, a graduate engineer who has already programmed the company's computerized estimating operation, and George Green, who handles sales and promotion for Niehaus.

In typical Whittle fashion, Bob introduced each of his key people and then, as he returned toward his office, remarked: “You’ll notice that I’m quite immodest about the quality of the people in my organization. I am proud of every one of them.

“You met them and talked to them. You can tell easily. They’re all excellent people. When you have good, dedicated employees all the way from the girls in front to the fellows in the shop then your organization is in good shape.”

Launches New Business

Because of his penchant for measuring and responding appropriately to developing trends, coupled with a careful definition of his own role in the construction process, Bob just recently launched an ambitious new enterprise called Progressive Interiors, Inc.

Its mission will consist of performing direct sales to architects, engineers, interior designers and building owners and managers, heralding the virtues of less-than-ceiling-high partitioning.

The rationale behind the formation of this new company is inspiringly simple. “I kept watching the price of mechanical work escalating, getting in some cases to 50 percent of the total cost of the structure.

“I just figured that the designers would need to begin economizing these costs, particularly getting away from the idea of separate rooms which involve individual controls, wiring and ducting for air conditioning.”

“To me, the logical tactic would be to stop ceiling high partitioning where the cost of changing office layouts was growing prohibitive.”

Because the remodeling market is extensive and was being served by small general contractors who subbed out much of the work, Bob elected to set up an organization that could handle 95 percent of any interior job, thus giving customers what they want most—single responsibility.

“I’ve made arrangements with two other contractors,” he explained. “My firm will do the movable partitions; a second contractor will bid the acoustical work, wiring, lighting and the air conditioning, while a third will do the decorating. They will bid directly to P.I.”

“Progressive Interiors will function as the direct sales operation and we three contractors can handle just about any job, or any portion of a job, that a customer may want.”

Not all of Bob Whittle’s time is devoted to business. An amateur gardener specializing in plants raised from hybridized seed, he has his own greenhouse at home and can boast of plants in bloom twelve months out of the year.

And, taking a page from the book of professional football star Rosie Grier, Bob also finds the geometric demands of needle point very relaxing.

“I enjoy doing needle point and especially giving my finished work away as gifts. They mean so much more than a purchased gift because they represent something of your own effort.”

Bob and his wife, Elenora (Nonie), who is the daughter of Terry Blazier, met while he was serving tables at her college sorority house. He was an organic chemistry major at the University of Illinois.

They are now the parents of five children: Terry, a commercial artist who designed Niehaus’ unique logotype; Jack, who works for Niehaus Interiors; Jane, a married daughter; Andy, a high school student, and an 11-year-old daughter Lisa.

If Bob Whittle tends to think precisely and straight to the objective, it may be because his own career has followed such a pattern.

“'I've just newer been satisfied with what I am supposed to get. If the owner wants something built, then I'll build it . . . the answer, at least for me, is flexibility.”

Straight off the college campus, he went into the U.S. Navy. Upon his discharge in 1946, he gave up the beckonings of a chemist’s career (“I never worked at organic chemistry a day.”) to serve a four-year plastering apprenticeship with the Blazier firm.

In 1950, Blazier made him a field superintendent and two years later he came into the office as an estimator. Then in 1953, he and Nonie went to a party—and Harry Niehaus was there.

“I've just never been satisfied with what I am supposed to be doing,” Bob concluded. “If the owner wants something built, then I'll build it.”

“Yes, I'm a plasterer. But I'm something more than that—I'm a builder. The answer, at least for me, is flexibility.”