
**“Every Contractor
Must Keep Customer
Needs in mind.”**

It's not really surprising that E.M. “Bus” Ratliff, president of the international association of Wall and Ceiling Contractors, has an enviable track record-in more ways than one.

In high school athletics he participated in most phases of athletic programs, especially track and football, and as a businessman, he has run his career span from proof boy in a small weekly newspaper to Vice President and General Manager of the prestigious C.F. Bolster Company in Los Angeles, California, a plastering firm whose annual gross runs to several million dollars.

In industry affairs, his contribution of time and talent to local and state affairs have garnered him a wall covered with plaques and plaudits. And on the national scene his presence has been just as indel-

ible and undoubtedly will continue after July 1 when he is succeeded in the iaWCC presidency by A. J. Ricca, of the Service Art Company, St. Clair Shores, Mich.

As fast-paced as his considerable accomplishments have been, though, the Ratliff career is one characterized by calculated risk, thoughtful pre-planning, and measured response to the realities of the situation.

A native of Kellogg, Idaho, and the son of a journeyman plasterer-contractor, Bus moved to Pasadena, Calif., as a small boy where he has lived ever since—and where he demonstrated early a capability to adjust his own ambitions to conditions.

Because many Southern California high school athletes were able to break the lo-second barrier, Bus as a dash man shifted successfully to the 660 and the 680-yard events and relays, while also playing in the backfield on the school football team.

And in work, he began as a newspaper proof boy, progressing to the copy desk and then to advertising sales. But these were the Depression years, and Bus soon found

himself selling advertising during the days, and plastering at nights and off hours.

In 1942, he joined the Asbestos Workers Union AF of L, CIO local #5 and became a Journeyman Asbestos worker in construction, rising to superintendent, overseeing work in the shipyards for the Marine Engineering and Supply Company, of San Pedro. Then in late 1947, Bus came to the wall and ceiling industry for good when he joined the C.F. Bolster Company as an estimator.

Three years later, C.F. Bolster retired and Bob Bolster, who served as president of the CPLIA in 1965-66, took over as president. Bus bought in as a member of the firm at that time, and the firm as it now exists was incorporated in 1960. And as demanding as C.F. Bolster affairs have been on his available time, Bus has consistently demonstrated an ability to serve the wall and ceiling industry at large.

He is past president of the Foothill Lathing and Plastering Contractors Association, past president of the Contracting Plastering Contractors Association of South-

BUS RATLIFF: Measured Response to the Situation

**iaWCC's President Can Move
Fast When Necessary, but
First Comes Study
and Pre-planning**



Ever on the look-out for improving operations, Bus discusses, with head mechanic Sal Salazar, a new type of manifold which can increase the productivity of the Bolster firm's 22 Tommy Guns in direct-to-steel applications.



Bus personally reviews all the job listings as reported daily in the Dodge Construction News.

ern California and past president of the California Lathing and Plastering Contractors Association.

He has served on the Southern California Plastering Trust as a Trustee for many years and has regularly attended meetings of the National Foundation of Health, Welfare and Pension Plans, to keep abreast of a trustees responsibilities.

As committee chairman for five years, he was instrumental in the development of the California Reference Specification working with Clyde Bell, then Managing director of the California associa-



the parents of two grown sons, Dick and Bob. They own and operate "The Christian Company," one of the largest wholesale roofing supply companies in Southern California.

"As a businessman you should walk away from a job with a profit—and as a craftsman . . . with a feeling that you've done the best work that your company is capable of."

tion. These specifications have been used nationwide as a model Lathing and Plastering Reference Spec.

Bus and his wife the former Helen C. Christian, who moved to Southern California from her native Wilksburg, Penna., are

An enthusiastic golfer, Bus tries to improve on his handicap at least once a week, usually at the California Country Club where he is a member. But he admits that the contracting business and iaWCC duties have been chipping away at his available golf time.

There are other things that are chipping away—or rather that Bus

"The sound businessman constantly analyses his company and what it needs in a reduced volume situation."

is chipping away at—and the 57 year-old contracting executive discussed these recently with DIMENSION.

DIMENSIONS: Virtually your entire career has been spent in the wall and ceiling business. Up to this time, what do you think was the single biggest development?

RATLIFF: Oh, it is hard to really point to any one development because there have been so many. But if I had to pick one I'd say the development of the plastering gun represented the biggest change.

In 1947 when I came into the industry, everything was done by hand with the exception of a plaster mixer, but the introduction of the plaster gun, shifted the industry into mechanical applications and techniques.

DIMENSIONS: Are there any other developments—drywall, for instance—that have produced a significant impact?

RATLIFF: Well, certainly drywall and acoustical ceiling systems have made a large penetration into the Lathing and Plastering business. I'm not nearly as familiar with drywall as I am with plastering since we're not big in drywall operations, but it apparently fills a customer need. Because of its economic competition drywall gives the designer options in achieving the designs he has in mind.

DIMENSIONS: You mentioned "customer need." Just how important do you feel this concept is, say, to a contractor, who bids to a given set of specifications?

RATLIFF: I think every contractor, whether he's selling or bidding work, must keep his custo-

Continued on page 46

mer needs constantly in mind. You're a businessman first. If the type of sub-contract work you're doing won't sustain your desired yearly volume then more than likely you'll need to shift into other related markets. That's why so many contractors have gone into the dry-wall and other related business. The market dictates the products we produce. On the other hand through our trade promotion programs we try to influence and create a market for those products we are familiar with.

DIMENSIONS: The C.F. Bolster Company is strictly plastering, isn't it?

RATLIFF: That's right. Bolster keeps its volume in plaster work—about \$4-\$5 million a year. We do what we feel we know best. As a matter of fact, we still sub out the lath work.

DIMENSIONS: Then there's still a viable market for the specialty contractor offering a single application?

RATLIFF: There certainly is. But the danger, the real danger, I think, is in taking a rigid position. It seems to me that you can no longer define yourself as being strictly in one line of business and then closing your eyes to the market or changed conditions. You must be ready to sell what people want to buy, providing you want to keep your volume up. When your volume drops then you'd better start some hard thinking and planning about other business possibilities.

DIMENSIONS: Since the market is constantly shifting, do you see a continued trend toward contractor diversification?

RATLIFF: Oh, I think the diversification movement is here to stay, no question about it. But I think it should be a planned and intelligent diversification—not a quick jump into something you know nothing about.

DIMENSIONS: It sounds as though you were sounding the note of caution?

RATLIFF: I certainly am. I think that whatever new applica-

Continued on page 48

tion a contractor wants to get into—drywall, painting, acoustics, vinyl, floors—he must study it carefully. There's not enough of this kind of careful pre-planning and business analysis being done, and market conditions and timing are also of utmost importance.

As a result, millions of dollars have been needlessly lost by going

into things that looked promising but about which some contractors don't have enough knowledge and preparation.

DIMENSIONS: Where can a contractor go to get this kind of information?

RATLIFF: There's no shortage in the information area. The suppliers & manufacturers, such as the gypsum companies all have people and technical information to educate a contractor in a new product or application study. It's there

for the asking.

At the iaWCC, we're more and more getting into the educational areas, helping contractors to become better businessmen. We're certainly above the elementary stages in the various iaWCC seminars and symposia that have proved to be so beneficial for those attending.

Let me cite an example: A lot of people have in the back of their mind that they'd like to have a plush restaurant business. It's glamorous, looks easy and appears profitable—which it is, I guess, but there have been many many failures. Why? The people going in simply didn't know the business.

DIMENSIONS: Let's move back to the wall and ceiling industry. There are many experienced journeymen who, without experience or specialized education, have begun what today are very successful contracting businesses?

RATLIFF: That's true. And there are a lot more who failed. One of the fallacies in the construction industry is, that when a person becomes a journeyman he feels he is automatically qualified to be a contractor.

You need to know the principles of business and be able to apply them before you can call yourself a contractor-businessman. Despite the exceptions, the plasterer to foreman to contractor progression is not automatic.

DIMENSIONS: Certainly the current economic crunch will test the business capabilities of many contractors, won't it?

RATLIFF: Yes, and the good ones will survive. Economic problems will force out the marginal operators because the sound businessman constantly analyses his company and what it needs in a reduced volume situation. He's already done it or has a plan for restructuring to weather out the storm.

DIMENSIONS: Has the crunch effected C.F. Bolster's volume?

RATLIFF: No. As I said before, we're holding our volume. But unfortunately, I now find myself spending at least 3-4 full working days a month just on collections, making calls for payment from cus-

tomers who have never been slow in paying before.

I think we're like most other contractors. The past year has been particularly tough.

DIMENSIONS: It's surprising how many contractors throughout the nation report that their business volume is being maintained, even with the construction industry so depressed. How do you explain this?

RATLIFF: These are the contractors who have worked to establish a good reputation in the quality and performance of their work. And they work to maintain that reputation because they're reliable businessmen.

Someone can take a lot of work for a few years doing what I call "slop work" but eventually he'll be out of business. As a businessman you should walk away from a job with a profit-and as a craftsman you walk away from the same job with a feeling that you've done the best quality of work that your company is capable of. That's true in any endeavor.

DIMENSIONS: Speaking now as the president of the iaWCC, where is the value of this association for the wall and ceiling contractor?

RATLIFF: Oh, I think every contractor should belong to the local, state and national organizations- just to keep abreast of what is going on in the industry. Association membership can be helpful by highlighting the things he should be doing, by keeping him informed and alerted to industry developments, new government regulations and requirements. Also our associations play a very important role in our labor relations, particularly in training new workmen through our apprenticeship programs.

At a convention, a contractor is missing a bet if he doesn't attend every workshop and seminar that he can possibly fit into his busy schedule.

In addition you expand and strengthen your own abilities by your association with other successful contractors, and the experts and specialists that the association can make available to you.