The wall and ceiling contractor from St. Clair Shores, Michigan, feels that uncertain times such as we are now experiencing presents a special challenge and represents opportunities that must be utilized to their utmost.

Al J. Ricca, who on July 1 will begin his term as the new president of the international association of Wall and Ceiling Contractors, flicked a piece of lint from his coat sleeve and strode to the window.

"The times are being tough on many subcontractors," he began, "and I suppose that the subcontractor is still looked on as a second class citizen in the construction community. But as the management concept grows we'll evolve from this rather poor situation into a prime contractor for the wall and ceiling system."

He stood silent for a moment, slightly grey, barrel-chested, with his weight held slightly forward, prize fighter style. Then slowly the new iaWCC present-elect began to talk again and a deep, resonant voice ebbed and flowed with a tide of subjects . . . construction systems . . . subcontractor image . . . union and non-union competition . . . diversification . . . technology and contractor know-how . . . jurisdictions . . . bid work vs. negotiated work . . . big vs. small contractors . . . energy and fuel problems . . .

The problems were all there in abundance but so were the possibilities for solution as the 45-year-old Detroit native fielded each of them with the same disciplined casualness that characterized his historic rise to iaWCC's top elective office while, at the same time, heading up the $10,000,000-a-year Service Art Company, Inc., in St. Clair Shores.

A highly successful practitioner of diversification, Al feels strongly about the need for an improved understanding and appreciation of the subcontractor specialist in the hierarchy of things.

Moving away from the window, he continued: "You know, over the years not 5 percent of the work has gone in exactly as the architect originally specified. My own firm is constantly making suggestions and saving customers' money."

"Today's architect can't possibly stay abreast of all the technology available to the modern building. He simply has to go to the people who are familiar — and that's where the subcontractor will come into his own because he can demonstrate his knowledge and expertise with the complex, sophisticated systems in modern construction."

If Al Ricca sounds patient about the conversion process it may be that patience had stood him in good stead throughout his own business career. After studying business administration at Wayne State University, Al served in the Army artillery with the 25th Infantry Division during the Korean conflict.

Returning home, he went to work in industrial relations with the Chrysler Corporation and then moved into labor and industrial relations with the Ford Motor Company. In the mid-50s he joined Service Art which had been founded by his wife Marleine's father, William J. Goodson, former president of iaWCC under whose tenure the bylaws were changed to accommodate the diversification trend, and by Albert Fici, now retired and an honorary member of iaWCC.

College man or not, Al started out as a laborer and progressed through carpentry and then estimating. In 1958, Al and Marleine moved their family to Long Island as Al went to work for Jeremiah Burns, Inc., of Rockville Centre, New York.

"Today's architect . . . simply has to go to the people who are familiar — and that's where the subcontractor will come into his own . . ."
sons: Alan, 23, a law school student; Dave, 22, who is in the business; Donald, 19, a freshman at Eastern Michigan University, and Jim, 17, a high school senior.

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In off business hours, Al hunts (he is a member of the Little North Hunting Club) and is active with the Kiwanis, the Detroit Builders and Traders Exchange and the American Arbitration Association. He is also the past president of the Lathing & Plastering Contractors Association of Greater Detroit, a chartered chapter of iaWCC.

For her part, Marleine is coordinator of prayer groups at Christ Episcopal Church and serves with the Junior Women's Association for the D.S.O. This year she will head the Women's Convention Advisory Committee of iaWCC which helps plan the social functions for the women at the convention.

Al and Marleine also have season tickets to the Nederlander Fisher Theatre and each month attend a broadway type musical.

Despite his business and personal accomplishments, though, Al will never be adjudged as the leading proponent of the perpendicular pronoun, and it was his vivacious wife, Marleine, who spelled out the historical breakthrough.

“In the history of iaWCC,” she explained, “there has never before been a father-son or a father-son-in-law succession to the presidency.

“Al,” she concluded, proudly, “is the first.”

Al is fortunate in that he has Harry Wettlaufer in the office who shares equally in the responsibilities of Service Art Company, and thereby frees Al to do that which needs to be done for the iaWCC membership.

“I hope that in the next year we can enhance our relationship and go forward together. As contractors, we must make a profit and the union leaders have the responsibility to their members to see that we can continue to employ their people.

“I know the statement has been overworked,” he continued, “but we really do have mutual goals. The unions must provide secure job opportunities for their members and if we contractors can’t get those jobs moving then we’re all in trouble.”

At his headquarters building, standing at the long tables covered with drawings and prints, Al provided some hint as to his own personal business development principles.

“There are two basic markets as I see it,” he offered, “the traditional bid market and the negotiated market.

“In the latter case there is involved the relationship that a contractor can develop with the builder-owner and he does this on the basis of his ability to meet completion dates and provide quality work at a competitive price.”

In the case of Service Art, the company’s ratio of bid work to negotiated work had been holding about 50-50 over the years, but is currently running 70 per cent for negotiated work. It is this developing trend that the iaWCC president feels will have significant impact on the construction market, particularly in view of current economic pressures.

“Basically,” he began, “the industry is probably evolving from the bidding situation into one where quality is becoming the competition. Quality always has been important even though bidding is still king. But it’s changing and even the government

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is moving away from the low bid concept. Some private owners are now putting into their bid documents that they may not accept the lowest bid.

“Our customers—and I mean the wall and ceiling industry’s customers—are getting more interested in a firm’s capability, its past performance, and its ability to perform.

“Consequently, as interior and exterior systems contractors we are becoming primes rather than subs. In the bid situation you answer direct to the general contractor. With such new concepts as the Construction Manager you have a contract direct with the owner at least 90 percent of the time.

“The 70 percent of Service Art Company’s work that is negotiated was achieved because we established and maintain a good reputation for doing quality work and remaining competitive. Of course, we stay in the bid market to keep abreast of market conditions—and to keep our people on their toes.

“But negotiated work is more profitable . . . more secure. If you have good customers who build constantly then you know you’ll do their work and that makes for a stable company. We never, never overprice so the relationship continues.

“The obvious advantages to Service Art is that the company isn’t affected so much by the rise and fall of the normal construction market. So, we can build good crews from journeymen who know that we can provide 52 weeks of work . . . and good crews keep you competitive.

“Later, at lunch in one of the more plush Grosse Pointe restaurants, Al was flanked by Marleine on his right and to his left by son, Dave, and Dave’s fiance, Teri. Briefly, the conversation turned to his college days and Al mentioned that as a college boxer his most notable encounter was with the Michigan flash, Chuck Davies, who was later to contend Kid Gavilan for the world’s welterweight championship.

“But the talk turned back to business as Al noted: “Our industry is getting into performance specifications now where no products are mentioned.”

“This demands greater sophistication on the part of the contractor because he must become more knowledgeable, develop more expertise in the field he’s involved in. The guy coming off the scaffold today trying to bid a performance specification is a fish out of water.

“And this is where iaWCC can be so important . . . to assist the wall and ceiling contractor to move with the trend . . . to upgrade his personnel . . . to develop and then demonstrate the technological and business capabilities of his firm within its jurisdiction of work.

“That’s why I hope to work for a better, closer relationship between union labor and union contractors. I feel we must work together and develop techniques and systems to upgrade our industry. We each have our oar in the water, so we’ll need to pull together.

“The traditional petty squabbling of one trade vs. another must be minimized and with it a reduction in the possibilities and number of shut-downs. We’ll have to work more on dividing lines as to who does what. We’ve already started on this—but so much more needs to be done.”

To accomplish these objectives, Al fully expects to be an activeContinued on page 26
figure in association matters and both he and Marleine are prepared to devote whatever time that it takes.

With Harry Wettlauffer able to handle business functions, the family situation also lends itself admirably to their plans. In the reading room at home, Marleine eagerly joined the conversation:

"The association has always been a part of our lives, and this is a business that I, too, am completely familiar with. The dinner talk between my own home here and that of my parents has always been the same.

"I used to envy my mother and father when they went to all the iaWCC conventions and meetings. Now, I am able to go. With the children all grown, Al and I have no worries about traveling so we're looking forward to the coming year and its demands on us."

As to the leaving of some of Detroit's refinements for the obligations of heading a national association, Al's comment was brief and to the point, like a quick right jab:

"I'm ready to try to put back into the industry and the association what Service Art as a company has derived from it."

Marleine explained it somewhat differently: "I'm very proud of Al," she said, intently, "and I know he'll be good for iaWCC. As far as moving about the country is concerned, both Al and I have always said, "Have suitcase, will travel."

The incoming president of iaWCC smiled.