

FRANK J. KRAFFT: Making The Time Count

**iaWCC's Past President Operates a Successful Contracting Business,
But still Finds Time to Devote to Industry, Social Improvement**

On his way to becoming a Senior Oarsman with the Old Dominion Boat Club of Alexandria, Va., Frank J. Krafft demonstrated some thing to himself.

Even when you're bone tired—you must and can keep rowing.

You do that because you have a commitment to the other men in the boat to pull your share, and because it's the only way to win.

Winning through persistence and ability has become a habit for the 50-year-old Past President of the international association of Wall and Ceiling Contractors and head of Krafft-Murphy Company, a diversified contracting firm with headquarters on West Braddock Road, Alexandria.

There, he manages his \$2,000,000-a-year business in acoustical tile, drywall, lathing and plastering and fireproofing. At the same time, he also finds the wherewithal to devote a considerable portion of his time to the iaWCC, to the virtually full-time task of raising funds for an orphanage in Mexico, as well as to the other organizations and groups to whom he has made commitments.

His company, Krafft-Murphy, was started in 1918 by his father, the late Jacob Martin Krafft, and by the late Frank Murphy, both of whom were charter members of the Contracting Plasterers' International Association, the forerunner of iaWCC. Following a progression from apprentice plasterer, to estimator, to field superintendent for the company, Frank took over as head in 1953, and attended his first iaWCC convention in 1955 in Pittsburgh.

By 1973 he was President of the iaWCC.

Seven years ago while visiting Mexico, he came upon Our Little Brothers and Sisters Orphanage in Cuernavaca, operated by a Roman Catholic priest, Rev. William

Wasson, originally from Phoenix, Ariz. There was a pressing need for funds. Frank volunteered — and for the past seven years has conducted in the evenings and on weekends a successful national direct mail fund-raising program for the orphanage.

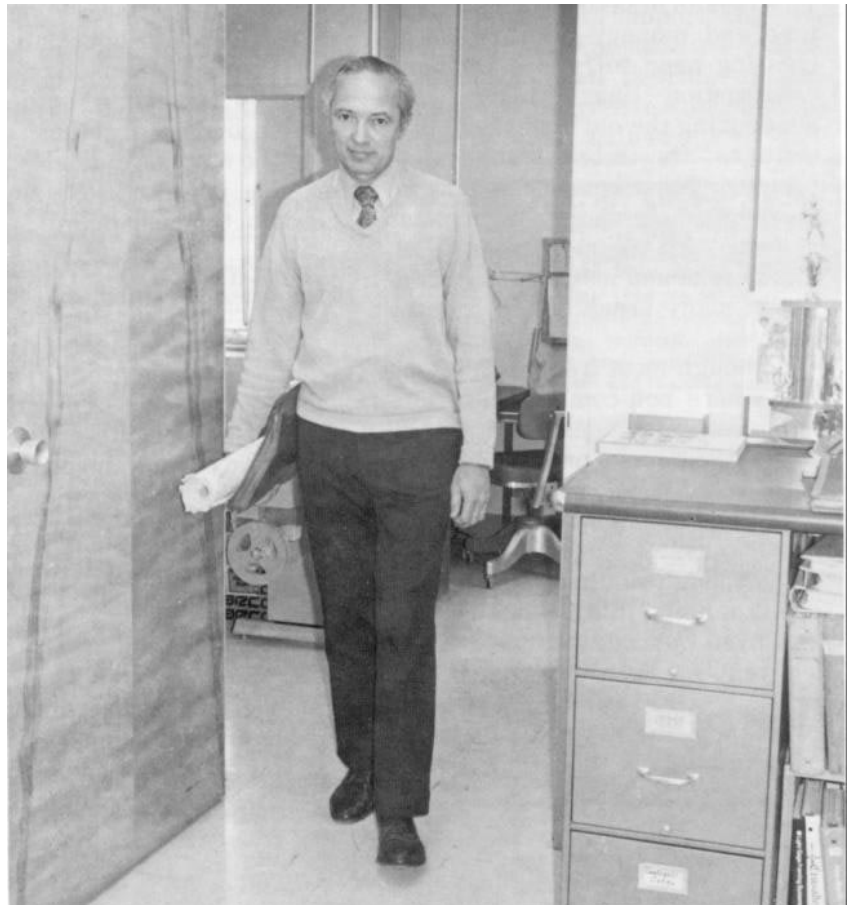
“In a slow period you must keep overhead to a minimum and stick to the lines of work that you know best and are the most profitable.”

This fall, the story behind this unique orphanage will be featured in a special two-hour movie entitled “Who'll See to the Children” over the national CBS-TV network.

A native of Alexandria, the six-foot one-inch contractor is married to the former Pauline [Polly] Biberstein, of Washington, D.C. They are the parents of nine children: Barbara, Sue, Jeanne, Donald, Marie, Martin, William, Stephen, and Nancy. Polly, just as active as her husband in association and philanthropic affairs, last year went to the orphanage in Mexico with five Krafft children and all worked there for the entire summer.

Frank's working career began as a customer engineer for IBM after graduating from high school. In 1943-46, he served with the U.S. Navy at an ammunition depot in Indiana and then returned to IBM for a short time before enrolling at Catholic University as an architectural engineering major.

His next stop was as an apprentice plasterer for Krafft-





Murphy where he experienced first-hand the difficulty of a six-foot one-inch frame adjusting to scaffolds built six feet down from the ceilings.

Still a small boat sailor, Frank's interest in competitive rowing began in high school and continued until shortly after World War II. His racing career took him all over the East Coast and his trophy case attests to his winning ways.

With the new slate of iaWCC officers taking over this month, Frank is no longer an official member of the association's executive committee, but he will continue to be active. He is also President both of the National Association of Philanthropic Organizations and of Our Little Brothers and Sisters, and a member of the Washington Building Congress.

Like most busy people who get things done, Frank still had the time to sit down and talk to CONSTRUCTION DIMENSIONS about the construction industry, his company, and the advantages of staying competitive.

DIMENSIONS: These are rather hard economic times for the construction industry, so where do you see the wall and ceiling industry going, say, in the next five years?

KRAFFT: I don't think there's much doubt that our industry will continue to grow . . . and it will con-

tinue to change. Naturally, there will be some slowing down in the period just ahead. It happens every so often in recession periods and some contractors fall by the wayside. But others will come in when things get good again.

DIMENSIONS: You spoke of a continuation of change?

KRAFFT: Yes. Our contractors have the current technology in walls and ceilings under control, but I'm certain that substitutes for the way we're doing things will develop. Architects, for better or worse, want change . . . they look for and design for it . . . and our contractors are smart enough to pick it up.

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DIMENSIONS: Since you came into the business what have been the major changes that you experienced?

KRAFFT: Well, in my own company's case it has been the relative decline in the amount of plastering work and the increase in drywall. Also, there's the shift to applying a finished product. Before, you built just about everything on the job. But the trend now is away from job manufactured products to factory manufactured products . . . and you'll see more and more of it.

And, of course, there's the continuing trend to pre-fabrication.

DIMENSIONS: Do you view the increase in pre-fabrication as a part of the systems approach or is it merely economics?

KRAFFT: Oh, I think pre-fabrication is more economics than anything else. A lot of people have mistaken systems for pre-fabrication, but systems is performance oriented. The architect is looking for a system on the basis of how it will perform and does not necessarily specify how it is to be built. It's up to the wall and ceiling contractor to develop the most economical design.

DIMENSIONS: In the area of systems, many so-called experts feel that the wall and ceiling contractor's future is in systems, that he should take responsibility for an entire system as a prime contractor. How do you view this?

KRAFFT: There is a tendency toward this. And it is up to the wall and ceiling contractor to equip himself for the responsibility. Even though some of your work must be sublet, such as mechanical or electrical, you should develop a basic knowledge of these sublet items so the entire system can be coordinated. After all, you are responsible for the performance of the entire system.

DIMENSIONS: Krafft-Murphy is oriented primarily toward the bid market, isn't it?

KRAFFT: Yes, we're mainly in bid work. Construction management and some of the other approaches to construction have changed for the general contractor, but for the subcontractor he still has to bid competitively to get the work—and this is not all bad.

DIMENSIONS: It sounds as though you are a firm supporter of the bid system?

KRAFFT: The competitive bid

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system does just that . . . it keeps you competitive, sharp . . . and brings about many new ideas and innovations that ordinarily wouldn't be developed.

There is no question that time and material work is nice. It reduces risk and I don't oppose it. I'd like to run my business on time and material, but for the good of the industry the bid system is best. If you were always handed jobs you might tend to become lax; it's human nature.

DIMENSIONS: There are some contractors who feel that negotiated or sold work is preferable to bid work and that they can do more for the customer when not locked in by the low bid?

KRAFFT: Low price isn't necessarily the low offer. You must consider service, quality, and workmanship as factors. When this is taken into consideration your bid price does not affect your ability to properly service the customer.

DIMENSIONS: Whether bid or sold, the current economic situation is testing many contractors. How is Krafft-Murphy adjusting to inflation?

KRAFFT: We've been bidding only those jobs that will be ready within a year. We're avoiding

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work too far off so as to minimize the necessity of crystal balling too far into the future.

DIMENSIONS: What about the use of escalators?

KRAFFT: So far as the use of escalator clauses is concerned, I feel it's a very difficult concept to sell to general contractors. This

isn't the first time that the industry has encountered runaway prices: and escalators have been tried before. But like the past, the chances of obtaining acceptance of escalator clauses are slim.

DIMENSIONS: Are there any alternatives that a contractor can use to protect himself?

KRAFFT: Certainly, no one has found a magic formula for going through recession periods without being effected in some way. In a slow period you must keep overhead to a minimum, and stick to the lines of work that you know best and are the most profitable.

DIMENSIONS: Going into fields now served by regulars is part and parcel of a move to diversify. Are you sounding a note of caution?

KRAFFT: Only a temporary one. When business activity is slow, profit margins are lowered. If you are able to secure a job in a new line of work in this atmosphere the extra start-up costs and inexperience can cause the job to go sour.

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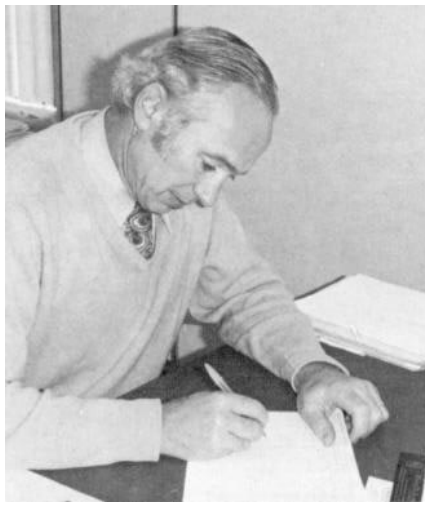
They are the types of jobs that none of us needs.

DIMENSIONS: What were the factors that led you into diversifying?

KRAFFT: With the slowdown in lath and plaster work and the increase in drywall and acoustic tile work, it became evident that diversification would be necessary for survival. In 1953, we were strictly lathing and plastering contractors. In 1958, we diversified into the drywall and acoustical tile business.

DIMENSIONS: As one who has experienced diversification, how do you feel a contractor should approach it?

KRAFFT: I think a contractor should go into it gradually and feel his way along. You certainly don't take the biggest job in town as your first job. You must first acquire experience on small jobs and thus minimize any possible losses while learning. This also



develops a following of men whose productivity is a known factor.

DIMENSIONS: Getting the experiences of other contractors is also one of the advantages of being in an organization such as iaWCC. As past president, why do you feel contractors should join a national association?

KRAFFT: Besides the technical and management educational benefits, an association opens up the experience of the entire country to contractors with basically the same problems. A contractor from another area is

often more free with information than a local competitor would be. Maybe that's not the way it should be; but it is human nature.

From your fellow contractors you can learn of new techniques and materials that are being used successfully in other parts of the country, thus giving you a competitive edge in your local bidding.

DIMENSIONS: Was it this kind of thinking that led to the recent merger effort with which you were so closely involved?

KRAFFT: Well, there are currently three associations serving the same group of wall and ceiling contractors. One organization, combining the resources and talents of all three, could successfully provide a much more effective program for the wall and ceiling contractor and without additional cost. Many more contractors, we feel, would join if there were one organization.

And that's what it's all about — to be successful at what you're doing.