This Colorado Contractor Started Young and Slow, But Is Now Coming On Fast—and Still Young

To the casual onlooker, James Lee Yocum might appear to be a young man in a hurry. The appearance is not altogether deceiving.

Dark complexioned and powerfully built, he walks with rapid, short steps like the championship calibre football player he once was. His speech is similarly swift and direct and his right hand intermittently slices through the air, Karate-style, to emphasize an important point.

Yet for all the impression he gives of accelerated activity, Jim Yocum as a businessman-contractor is the very model of careful planning, control, and caution.

In 14 years of contracting, the 41-year-old head of Yocum Plastering Company, Inc., of Longmont, Colo., has successfully guided his company from a two-man residential lathing and plastering firm into a fully diversified commercial-industrial operation doing some $1,600,000 in business annually.

End Not in Sight

Nor is the end yet in sight. At least to this point in his business life, Jim has refrained from committing himself to an ultimate goal.

“If you’re going to be successful at this business you have to plan, control, and have good people”

Having the managerial and financial resources to take advantage of an unexpected growth possibility is a luxury that wasn’t always available to Yocum Plastering Company. When Jim, who has worked as a plasterer since he was 15 years old, decided to go into the contracting business in 1960, about the only things he had to go along with his confidence and determination were a pair of stilts, a water hose, a wheelbarrow and some shovels, “all of which you could put in the back of the half-ton pickup truck I had.”

He bought a $600 mixer for $200 down and $100 a month and with a friend, Franz Ghesqiere, of Longmont, Colo., who mixed and helped plaster, the young firm completed its first contract for five houses.

“若有其事, 您必須計劃, 控制, 並擁有一個好的團隊”

“If we had a contract for $800 we regarded it as a pretty good job for us then,” Jim explained. “The biggest job we had that first year was for $1,500 to lath and plaster a house for a good friend.”

First Break Arrives

If the volume was low the reputation for quality work was high. And in 1963, the first of Jim Yocum’s breakthrough opportunities presented itself. An estimator friend who worked for a general contractor asked Jim to bid a seven-story highrise. He bid it successfully, finished the job, and the wing of a motel followed quickly.

“At the time,” Jim explained, “all the scaffolding and the rest would still go into the half-ton pickup. But that’s when the commercial business started picking up for us.”

At the same time, his other organizational efforts were also beginning to drop into place. Teaching sessions until the early-morning hours with his friend, Earl Hall, now the company’s chief estimator and office manager, were enabling Earl to take over more of the estimating and office duties.

This freed Jim to concentrate more on the field work, a considerable improvement over his existing schedule of three full working days on the job in addition to performing the business and administrative functions.

“I couldn’t afford to do it any other way,” he admitted. “As a matter of fact, in my first eight years in business the hod carriers often took home more pay than I did. And all my foremen did.”

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In 1966, an important milestone was reached. Setting the pattern for future things to come, Jim joint-ventured a half-million dollar classroom and administrative office job at the new United States Air Force Academy, near Colorado Springs.

"It showed me what could actually be done on what was then the biggest job I'd ever gone for. I ran it myself, and gained the kind of experience that only a big job can give you."

Once that particular challenge had been met, Yocum Plastering Company began going after the bigger jobs in earnest throughout a 500 mile radius that takes in Colorado, West Nebraska, and Southern Wyoming.

"If you’re going to be successful at this business," Jim cautioned, "you have to plan, control, and have good people. And when it comes to people, we have the best."

"In today’s market you just can’t bypass a careful look at new products. You should take the time to go look at them because some ideas really are a breakthrough."

Earl, who had been a local bowling alley employee when his print reading lessons began, is now fulltime in the office. In the field, Jim can call on an experienced veteran, Bill Lake, his field superintendent who brought his two sons, Don and Jim, into the company. They are both lathing foremen.

Del Werth and Mark Feighner are plastering foremen.

All have been with Yocum Plastering eight years or more.

"We have a constant job cost record control," he explained, "and it’s worked on daily. By payday of each week everything is entered into the system... materials, man-hours, overhead, invoices, and the like. That means that every Friday by 1 PM I can go to any job cost record and know precisely where we stand with regard to percentage of completion, percentage of cost expended—the whole works.

"For speed, as well as efficiency, we use Dodge/SCAN and Earl and I review the films daily for jobs we may want to bid. We get the job taken off and then the two of us go over the prints carefully, discussing the intricate details."

Because his firm is diversified, Jim seeks to bid everything "package." Except for unusual circumstances, he refuses to break out his bid despite the occasional loss of a job.

"We bid everything we can get our hands on," he explained, "and then we hold the package together. I think a contractor is cutting his own throat when he doesn’t bid package. With a package, you’re stronger, you have more versatility as well as better coordination and total control over your own work."

The move by Yocum Plastering toward diversifying began in the late 60s after Jim attended the Las Vegas convention of the inter-
national association of Wall and Ceiling Contractors.

**Proceeded Slowly**

Following sound advice he got into drywall slowly, watching for small jobs and making certain that he had sufficient coverage in his bids.

“We pieced the work out and kept a close, accurate finger on it. I picked up as much knowledge as I could on every one of those jobs and it still took us about five years before we could bid, equip, and handle the big jobs properly.”

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Finding enough time to look at a new product is a recent development for the Lafayette, Colo. native. While working his way through high school as a plasterer and hod carrier for his late brother, William, a residential plastering contractor, Jim still managed to earn state honorable mention as a guard on the school football team.