CHARLES A. BARNES:
Salesman-at-Large

This Journeyman Baltimore Plasterer Uses His Years of Selling Experience To Build a Dynamic Drywall Business

The credit goes to classified ads and Maryland winters.

That's the combination that drew Baltimore contractor Charles "Charlie" A. Barnes back into the construction industry—and then accelerated the penetration of drywall into Baltimore and Eastern Shore markets.

When he started reading the classifieds, he was an ex-journeyman plasterer who had left the trade early in the Great Depression to become a debit insurance agent. He remained one until 1947 when he noticed the ad that offered plasterers $20 a day—plus doable time on Saturdays.

With his brother, Bernard, and $1,000 borrowed from his insurance profit sharing plan, the two brothers went back to work with the tools as residential contractors, specializing in tract developments.

By their second winter in business, Charlie noticed that what few drywall people there were around enjoyed the happy capacity of working throughout the winter, a consistency that freezing temperatures did not always offer to plasterers. So, he went into the drywall business, and for the next few years showed the Baltimore construction community what trade know-how—backed up by solid selling experience—could achieve with a new product.

Today, the 66-year-old Baltimore native and head of Drywall Systems of Baltimore, Inc. presides over a company that does some $2,000,000 a year in such specialties as drywall, steel framing, acousticals, and lathing and plastering.

To get there, he needed to convince builders to change to drywall. As an insurance agent, he knew how to make sales call and extoll the virtues of his product. In 1950, he built a booth and exhibited at a Baltimore home show, promoting drywall to home owner and builder alike.

He backed these efforts by circulating a hard-hitting brochure to all the builders in the area. As for obtaining the brochure, this he accomplished by swapping a large drywall frame he had built for a Baltimore advertising man to use as a backdrop for a painting in a flower show. In return, the advertising man wrote the brochure copy.

As expected, some builders began switching to drywall. When the Joseph Meyerhoff Company, and H. J. Knott Company, two of Baltimore's biggest, made the switch the writing was dry on the wall. Drywall Systems of Baltimore and Charlie Barnes were on their way.

Born in Pikesville, Md., son of the late George O. Barnes and Mary Virginia Vance Barnes, Charlie was introduced to construction early. A year before his father died in 1926, Charlie went to work as a 15-year-old laborer.

The first day on the job he spent the morning with another laborer, Walter Medley, shoveling 10 tons of sand from a track into a basement 10 feet away without benefit of a chute. Convinced during his lunch break that the afternoon couldn't possibly be as severe as the morning, he nonetheless was (Continued on Page 38)
ready for his second task for the day: shoveling another 10 tons of sand from another truck into the same 10-feet-away basement.

That he would become a plasterer was almost inevitable. His father was a journeyman plasterer and was a leader in organizing the plasterers’ locals in Washington, D.C. and Baltimore, serving various jobs in the local union.

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Upon his father’s death, Charlie remained in Baltimore with his oldest sister. His mother, with 5 sons and 5 daughters to raise, moved to Philadelphia with another of Charlie’s brothers and remained there for a number of years.

Charlie’s operations are now based in an attractive 7,500 square foot concrete building on Baltimore’s Amos Avenue. A two-story addition houses the office areas. There is also a branch operation on Maryland’s Eastern Shore.

Charlie and his wife, the former Ruth Emily Soilers, also a Baltimore native, are the parents of a daughter, Sharon, and a son, David, and have five grandchildren.

When he is not out promoting his business or negotiating a deal with one of his many customers, Charlie spends his time at the Towson Golf and Country Club, where he swims regularly and plays golf in the 80s. A member of the Gypsum Drywall Contractors International since 1958, he served the association’s Board of Directors in 1960, 1968-69, and also in the early 70s.

With the consolidation, he took out membership in the new iaWCC/GDCI. A founder and past president of the Maryland Council of Drywall Contractors, Charlie now serves that organization as treasurer. He is a member of the Masonic order.

When CONSTRUCTION DIMENSIONS stopped by to talk, Charlie was busy talking to a supplier salesman, negotiating prices on a new, upcoming project. There may be recession in some companies, but things appeared busy and normal. And he talked about these things and others.

DIMENSIONS: Charlie, there doesn’t seem to be any scarcity of work in this company. How do you see the immediate period ahead?

BARNES: Oh, there’s a tremendous amount of work coming out for us. We know we’ll do at least $250,000 in the next three months, and then there’s another $500,000 coming up in about four months. A lot of our work is with builders with whom we’ve always worked and they’ll be starting up again.

DIMENSIONS: Are these residential builders? There is a great deal of controversy about the cost of homes today?

BARNES: Yes, I do a great deal of residential work . . . and I do single houses, too. To me, single houses, if they’ll pay the price, is good good business. For instance, one of my general contractor customers in 10 years has built 700-800 apartments, but he’s also done about 100 single houses that meant about $150,000 in drywall.

DIMENSIONS: Then, despite the present pessimism, you see housing coming back strong?

BARNES: Certainly it’s coming back. People need houses, it’s as simple as that. I think the trend will continue to be toward the smaller house and the more efficient apartment, though. I do apartments, and even here you no longer see the 3-bedroom, separate kitchen, and extras like that. It’s all on the economy and efficiency idea.

DIMENSIONS: Many observers feel that construction and therefore the nation’s business situation won’t improve until housing gets a stronger push?

BARNES: We’re fond of saying
that the country won’t do anything until construction is healthy. I believe that. Until this industry really gets back on its feet, there’ll be people out of work. Construction—and the automobile industry—are the backbone of the economy.

DIMENSIONS: Yet you seem to be doing all right? How have you managed? By bidding more or by selling more?

BARNES: There’s more selling for me than bidding although we do a lot of bidding. But while we do bid jobs, I much prefer to work with general contractors and negotiate the prices.

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DIMENSIONS: Every contractor would like to be in a position to do more negotiated work. Where is the key to developing a good customer list, that is, what is it that you feel distinguishes a subcontractor from being able to be successful in this area from one who isn’t?

BARNES: Reputation is the key. You have to be known for the type and quality of work that can be expected. I know it’s been said before but it still bears repeating: be willing to do a little bit more than expected. If you have 10 men on the job and the general wants 5 more, if at all possible get the extra 5 men. Don’t give the general a hard time. Get along with the other trades and solve your own problems without constantly running to the general or builder.

They have to show a profit, too, and when they recognize that you’re being cooperative—sometimes at your own expense—it’s just got to pay off in the future.

DIMENSIONS: How about the handshake with a customer where any prudent person would count his fingers afterwards?

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BARNES: I don't bid or negotiate much with people I don't know. And some—such as the kind you mentioned—we won't bid at all.

I deal with honest, decent people. Even with my suppliers, if the delivery ticket says 200 pieces of board, we don't have to check the count—we know they don't cheat.

Maybe we're not saints here, but we try to act like saints.

DIMENSIONS: Not every contractor, though, has the luxury of dealing only with such commendable individuals?

BARNES: You have to work at it. It's all in your reputation. Look, John Hampshire does work around this town that I'd love to do, but Hampshire has the reputation and no one can take the work from him. Well, we have our reputation, too, and we work at it hard.

DIMENSIONS: How do you approach suppliers with this philosophy?

BARNES: There is loyalty among suppliers and subcontractors. We've been accused sometimes of being tough buyers—but they can't censure you for that. As for our customers, certainly they check our prices, but you can't censure them for that either. It's just good business.

And if I've made a profit and if my customers have made money off our work why should they change?

DIMENSIONS: What do you do, Charlie, when a job goes bad?

BARNES: I check our jobs every two weeks. Then I come back in here to the office and check the progress with the estimate. But the one thing I won't do is cut a job to make a profit.

DIMENSIONS: Cutting overhead seems to be the order of the day in the industry now. What do you do to keep overhead under control?

BARNES: We don't have many paid-every-week employees in this company. The people who supervise our jobs drive pick-up trucks to deliver materials also. I was doing it myself until the last few years.

Our office force is small. We don't even have a fulltime estimator. The woman you saw in the outer office is it. And me. If you keep constant control on your overhead, you don't have to trim back when things get tight. We run lean all the time. The idea that you have to add a lot of overhead to take care of extra volume is a fiction.

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You just work hard and run lean. If we think we maybe need 10 men on a job we'll put on 9 and try it. We have a '74 pick-up for the Eastern Shore and it already has 120,000 miles on it. That means one thing: we keep on the move.

DIMENSIONS: Charlie, how do you handle your philosophy of 'something extra' with such a sensitive area as, say, collections?

BARNES: I get very, very indignant when I don't get my money. We're particular about paying our bills, so I'm not the least hesitant about going right there and demanding my money. I expect my bills to be paid the same as I pay.

You know, this matter of collecting I learned in the insurance business. I stopped by a customer one day to collect the weekly premium and the lady's little girl told me they wouldn't be paying me because they didn't have enough money.

Fortunately, I heard through the door when the lady told her daughter that she had only enough to pay the other insurance man. Well, I called the lady to the door and I asked her, 'Why do you have money to pay the other man and not me?'

You know what she said? 'Because the other man gets mad when I don't pay him.'

So I learned something. Now, I have a reputation for being very, very indignant when I don't get paid—and I work at this very hard, too.

DIMENSIONS: Do you collect yourself?

BARNES: Absolutely. I collect myself. I think every contractor should, just so he'll keep in touch with his customers. Too many contractors get out of touch and things start falling apart.

DIMENSIONS: Where do you see some of the future markets—or opportunities—developing?

BARNES: Well, for one thing, one-story commercial buildings have all gone to steel framing now. I think steel will eventually take over completely from wood in housing.

With load bearing studs, they're going even higher now. In our own case, we've talked a number of builders into using light gage furring channels because there's less loss—and I think this will take over. We've also just figured a big townhouse project for steel.

DIMENSIONS: How about changes in other areas of the wall and ceiling industry?

BARNES: The rising cost of materials alone will force change. I wouldn't be surprised in the near future to see a material cheaper than gypsum. I thought it might be plastic, but there's still some work remaining there.

Anyway, you can bet that somebody, somewhere is working on it. Drywall is a replacement for plaster which has lost much of its need in today's situation. But other substitutes will be coming, you can be certain of that.

DIMENSIONS: With all the changes, problems, challenges, and uncertainties when do you plan to 'pack it in'?

BARNES: I'm not going to retire. The only thing that'll get me out of here is health or when I die. I wouldn't know what to do.