How many times have you heard “if you ever want anything done right, do it yourself”? Because that’s exactly what Leonard Liddle of Nashville does. He does it all himself.

Ever since he bought out his father in 1973, Liddle has run the $600,000 a year operation practically single-handedly. Only with the help of his wife, Barbara whom Liddle calls “the boss” has he been able to get home at a semi-reasonable hour. His hard work and dedication are possibly the two most important factors in the current success of the firm.

Leonard Liddle is the President, Vice President, estimator and chief superintendent of Liddle Brothers Contractors. A growing southern firm that was originally founded by his father, David and his uncle Alex in 1939. Both of these men had immigrated from Scotland in the early 1900’s looking for new horizons in America.

But instead of a completely new career they decided to stick with what they knew best-lath and plaster. It was an easy choice because the plastering trade had long been a Liddle family tradition in Europe.

Leonard Liddle started in the firm as an apprentice after graduating from high school. However, his training was interrupted by the Korean War in which he served as a seargent in the Marine Corps for 4 years.

Upon returning to Nashville, Liddle completed his remaining years of apprenticeship training and became the jack-of-all trades in the family company.

Until 6 years ago, Liddle Brothers Contractors had always been a lath and plaster firm. At that time they added drywall and marble-lite finishes.

The company operates almost entirely within the commercial market and stays relatively close to the Nashville area.

Liddle, his wife Barbara and 3 children live on a 102-acre farm in the Mount Juliet area, minutes away from his office and the downtown area. Neighbors to several country western singers that have helped turn Nashville into a growth town, Liddle raises beef and quarter horses.

Nashville is also famous for its excellent fishing on the surrounding lakes and Leonard Liddle tries to take advantage of this opportunity whenever his schedule can afford it. Which is not very often. For, besides his business, farm and family, he is the President of the Southeast Lathing and Plastering Bureau, President of the Nashville Plastering Contractors’ Association, and last, but certainly not least, on the Board of Directors of iaWCC/GDC1 until 1980.

Fitting Construction Dimensions into a schedule of this type is not easy but Leonard Liddle did manage to give us several hours of his time to talk about the past, present and future of the industry.

DIMENSIONS: Does being a small wall and ceiling contractor offer any advantages over the larger firms?

LIDDLE: In a way, yes, my problems are only one quarter the size of a company that is 4 times larger. All kidding aside, basically the problems are the same only the scale is different.

There isn’t any difference between a firm that has a volume of ten million and one of ten thousand—only the numbers change. The procedures are the same and
the Job Right

... I must seem somewhat of a pessimist, but really I'm not. I feel that construction in this area is coming back and will continue to come back.

so are the departments. I just happen to run the departments myself.

DIMENSIONS: Does this tend to give you better control of the whole operation?
LIDDLE: This probably is the greatest advantage in being a small contractor. You do know all the phases of each operation. I never have to worry about what another man is doing. And there definitely is not a communication problem. Then again there is no one else to blame when something goes wrong. I do all the estimating myself and keep close tabs on all the jobs along with my superintendents.

DIMENSIONS: Do you always want to keep at the volume level you are now?
LIDDLE: First off, let me clear up one point. Even though we are a small firm by national standards, we are one of the largest in Nashville. Of course, the company strives for and anticipates growth in the future. Only first some changes must be made.

DIMENSIONS: What type of changes are you referring to?
LIDDLE: In Nashville, like other areas of the country, our main competition comes directly from non-union contractors. For years, they were mainly residential contractors but not any longer.

There are only 3 complete union wall and ceiling contractors left in this area and no general contractors that I know of. The competition has been that great. So when I talk of changes I mean either going to an open shop or a double-breasted operation. At this point in time, I don’t think I have a choice.

DIMENSIONS: Jumping off a sinking ship is one thing, plugging up the holes so she stays afloat another. Have you tried any alternatives to going open shop?
LIDDLE: Becoming open shop will, of course, be the last step. Until that time, I will attempt with every means available to develop new markets and ways to remain competitive. For my company to stay union will mean that the unions themselves learn to be competitive with the open shop mechanics.

Recently, the Southeast Lathing and Plastering Bureau held a promotional seminar on curtain wall, exterior and interior finishing and ways of insulating them, primarily for architects. It was’ very successful in that several jobs were switched over, but it was unsuccessful in that none of the people involved got any of the work after it was put out for bid.

However, we have a great deal of faith that this sort of thing will bring in jobs in the future.

DIMENSIONS: What percentage of your work is bid as opposed to negotiated?
LIDDLE: I would say that about 80% of our jobs are bid and the rest negotiated with the general. There are more negotiations now than ever before and its increasing all the time. It used to be that when you put a bid in and if it was the lowest you got the job, but not any longer. Sometimes we don’t hear about a bid for months. Part of the problem is because all the generals are non-union and tend to bid-shop a job whenever they can.

I feel the industry would be better off if every general were required to bid list every job.

DIMENSIONS: You spoke earlier of new market potentials. Do you have any particular market in mind?
LIDDLE: I believe insulation can be a fantastic opportunity for every wall and ceiling contractor. The market is there and it’s wide open for the taking. But to be honest with you, I recognize the potential, but I just don’t know enough about it. The iaWCC/GDCI seminar in December in Washington, D.C. will hopefully answer a lot of my questions.

Somebody — probably the government — is going to have to come up with a standard on insulation. Right now there is a tremendous void. It’s going to be up to wall and ceiling contractors to fill this void, but, first the contractors have to be educated.

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LIDDLE:

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DIMENSIONS: Leonard, you have been insulating buildings for years. Yet, you admit you actually know very little on the subject. Is this true of most contractors in our industry and why?

LIDDLE: All you have to do is pick up a current book on the subject to realize how little we actually know. There are new products constantly being introduced, and new, different ways of installing these products, and all in a language that is not easy to understand.

Test buildings and houses are being constructed around the world to provide new systems of design and good workmanship.

You can be certain of one thing, I'm not alone in my ignorance. Things are happening so fast in the field of insulation that just about everybody is in the same boat.

When we first went into drywall about 6 years ago, there was not the uncertainty that we feel with insulation. There was only one product to deal with. In insulation there are now about 20 different types and each installation is unique to the situation and the material used.

DIMENSIONS: For a company as old as yours, why did you wait so long to get into drywall?

LIDDLE: For one thing, up until 10 or 12 years ago all the work in this area was lath and plastering. The only drywall work at that time was in homes and the nonunion contractors were doing these.

As the drywall market continued to grow so did the non-union contractors until finally they had control of the drywall market. We could not be competitive with their pricing, which is extremely low in the southeast.

DIMENSIONS: How do you perceive the future of the industry in the southeast?

LIDDLE: I know by my comments, I must seem somewhat of a pessimist, but really I'm not. I feel that construction in this area is coming back and will continue to come back. Insulation, steel framing, and curtain walls will help provide a needed boost to every wall and ceiling contractor. And with a little help from Mr. Carter the future for the southeast could be very bright.