In an age when women are becoming more and more liberated, construction remains one industry with still relatively few women in management and field positions.

Even without the mud, the blisters, and the calluses, construction, as any male purist will inform you, is strictly MAN’s work.

Proving Herself an Exception

San Francisco’s Barbara Meiswinkel Proves Every Day She Can Handle a Construction Company — Successfully

Not so proves Barbara Meiswinkel, of San Francisco. She proves it every day, too, as the president of Frederick Meiswinkel, Inc. With her late husband, Frederick, she helped build the primarily lathing and plastering firm into one of the largest in the San Francisco area.

They founded the company in 1945 shortly after World War II. Fred had been a plasterer prior in the war years for his uncles and during the war gained valuable management experience by running a 300-man shipyard operation on the west coast.

With that kind of leadership and trade experience, the new company grew quickly. Then, unexpectedly, Frederick Meiswinkel, died of a heart attack on October 25, 1956.

On that date, Barbara Meiswinkel discarded her role as the silent and efficient treasurer and bookkeeper. Later in the week she called all the firm’s key employees into her office.

One of her three sons, Fred, goes over the final figures on a bid. They could run the firm but Barbara has no intention of retiring.

If you want to continue working for the Meiswinkel company, she told them, you’ll have to work with me and help the company through this transition.

They all agreed.

One week later, the new head of the company strode out of a general contractor’s office with a pair of $75,000 contract handshakes still warming her palm. Six months later the company was incorporated, and with the help she received from friends, her sons, other contractors, employees, and the association the growth line held steady.

Why did others feel so strongly about the survival of Frederick Meiswinkel, Inc.? “Because,” answers Barbara, “we were always an honest firm, one that people felt they could trust.”

This reputation for integrity and honesty has been the key for the $2½ million a year operation. In the intervening 20 years since her abrupt take-over, Barbara has had the luxury of three sons to help share the burden.

Rudy, the oldest, is vice president of the company and along with his brothers, Fred and Joe, does most of the estimating, contracts, and leg work.

Barbara maintains her offices on the first floor of her home in downtown San Francisco. The home is a townhouse designed and built by her late husband. There, Barbara still handles all of the accounting and receives incoming calls.

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Besides her construction commitment, Barbara has been extremely active in community affairs and numerous charities. These activities, along with 21 grandchildren, understandably occupy a great deal of her time.

She still had time, though, to talk to CONSTRUCTION DIMENSIONS about Barbara Meiswinkel, about her industry and where it is headed—between a ringing telephone and a stream of demands competing for her immediate attention.

DIMENSIONS: Many still feel a woman’s place is in the home, and yet you are the president of a construction company. Has your sex aided or hurt you in the industry?

MEISWINKEL: First off, I never really left the home. I just put an office on the first floor.

Basically, the construction industry is not a woman’s field. But I was kind of born with it. My mother’s family were contractors from Germany, and even before my husband started this company, I wrote up bids for his uncles.

I like it. I’ve never been the domestic type—one that could sit on the edge of a chair and talk about making a pie. Although I do it—it’s just not the most important aspect of my life. I’ve always worked with men and I enjoy it.

DIMENSIONS: Do you consider these lengthy and complicated contracts as an indication of a breakdown in the old general-sub relationship?

MEISWINKEL: Everyone is afraid of what the other side is doing or what he might do. So, sure enough, in come the lawyers.

Before you know it you’re dealing with a third party. Trust and integrity are no longer part of the picture. It does not have to be this way, but many times it can come to this. Recently, we signed a contract that was 23 pages long. Can you believe it?

DIMENSIONS: Years ago contracts were much more simplified, but aren’t the lengthy contracts written to protect all parties?

MEISWINKEL: Maybe I’m sentimental, but this company was (Continued on Page 29)
founded on honest principles and has remained that way through the years.

Most of the general contractors we work for have come to realize this and respect us for it.

A contract only states that you will do this work for this much money in this amount of time. It does not say anything about doing a good job. The contractors we work for know and trust us not to skimp or cut corners. They know we are honest and will give them a good job for their money. Don’t forget a 23 page contract is only as good as the contractor that signs it.

**DIMENSIONS:** Being honest and trustworthy is fine, but does it put jobs and money in your pocket?

**MEISWINKEL:** In the long run, it helps a great deal. It gives you that repeat business that is so necessary to any contractor. It helps the entire working relationship. Not only with the general, but with your employees as well.

Another added benefit is the time and material work we receive. Here we can’t lose. But I guarantee you, we wouldn’t get this work if we weren’t trusted, and had earned this trust.

**DIMENSIONS:** You mentioned your relationship with your employees. Is it difficult to get them to accept your authority?

**MEISWINKEL:** I never was a domineering, dictator type of boss. I have been very fortunate to have reliable people working for me.

I never really have spent much time in the field checking on job sites, because I know that the superintendents and foremen could do the job. After all that’s what they were hired for. They do, though update and keep me informed on their progress and any problems.

**DIMENSIONS:** Have you or other bay area contractors felt a recession or down-market in recent years?

**MEISWINKEL:** Not really. Construction on the west coast, generally, has been very healthy. Of course the climate doesn’t affect us like other areas, and therefore, the energy crisis lost some of its crunch and impact here. I think the main difference is that building has been steady out here over the last ten years. We did not go from a boom situation to bust. A gradual increase or steady level is what we hope for and what so far we’ve gotten.

**DIMENSIONS:** Collections and receivables can be a subcontractor’s biggest nemesis. What can be done about them?

**MEISWINKEL:** Communication is definitely the key to getting your money and as soon as possible. First off, many offices have an accountant who is responsible for keeping all the books and records. Sometimes the contractor or owner might not find out about a past due account until months after the original payment was due. By this time the damage is done. The accountant or bookeeper should notify whoever is responsible for receivables, which many times is the owner, as soon as they become late. Secondly, the accountant should not be the one to call. Most of the time it should be done owner to owner.

Our biggest problem right now is that generals are holding out payment because they have not been completely paid by the building owner for a completed project. The problem might not even concern you . . . the owner might be complaining about the plumbing. But in the meantime, we don’t get paid. This is wrong, but you hate to take legal recourse.

**DIMENSIONS:** With all these complications and three competent sons in the company, have you ever considered fading out of the picture?

**MEISWINKEL:** I guess you can say I’ve been on the fade for 20 years now. The boys are more than capable of handling the operation. And all things considered they pretty much do now. But I enjoy the business and I enjoy the work I do and probably always will. It’s too much a part of me now to give it up completely. And after all it’s only downstairs.