Bill Marek

Bill Marek has spent a great part of his 57 years being an exception to the rule. From the moment he and his two brothers started Marek Bros., in Houston, Texas, in 1946, the three have done things differently.

Originally and still primarily a drywall operation, the Marek Bros’ John, Bill and Ralph Marek started by hanging residential drywall just after the war. It was months before they could add a fourth man to make two teams of hangers. From that point on they added two at a time and today employ more than 200 men.

“Speed was the most important factor in the early days of drywall,” Bill explains, “Drywall was so cheap that unless you did it fast, you didn’t make a penny.”

Marek attributes the company’s tremendous success to several factors. First, Houston is a city of fantastic opportunity for the energetic contractor willing to work. Second, and probably more important is the cooperation and mutual respect between the principals and the employees.

Bill boasts that in 30 years he and his two brothers have never had an argument or a major disagreement. “That’s the advantage in having three of us; never a tie vote,” he explains.

Long interested in bettering the industry, Bill Marek is a Past President of iaWCC/GDCI. At present, he chairs three committees; the Awards Committee, the Building Study Committee and the Council of Past Presidents.

He is also an active member of AGC, the Greater Houston Builders’ Association and the Houston Drywall Contractors Association.

Between his business and association work, Marek still finds time for hunting and fishing. On the weekends he and his lovely wife, the former Bessie May Silva, can be found enjoying themselves at their second home in Freeport, where the Marek boat comes into dock long enough to fuel up.

Despite a customary time press, Bill still found time to talk to DIMENSIONS and what makes the industry—and Bill Marek—go.
Cooperation and respect in Marek Brothers in a city well-suited for an energetic contractor is the key to this successful Houston contractor.

Dimensions: How did you originally get started in the drywall business?
Marek: I guess we just grew up in it. I started hanging drywall back in its infancy—when you nailed up the wallboard and the carpenters came in behind you and put lather strips over the joints.

After that we started to use metal tape and this went fairly well until lightning would strike and then it would burn and pop right through the paint.

I can’t tell you how many man hours we spent just trying different tape and joint compound until we found one that would work. Houston has always been a great city for the drywall contractors. I guess mainly because it is relatively a new city—at least as far as growth is concerned.

Dimensions: Why has Houston continued to be such a boom town?
Marek: The climate is one reason: the seasons don’t affect us like they do other areas of the country. It’s a port city. And finally we are graced with plenty of oil and natural gas, which translates into Money. And believe me, these oil companies are investing heavily now—and it should continue because of the energy crunch.

Besides the oil companies, which are in Texas for obvious reasons, other large companies, I believe, originally moved here because it was cheaper.

Dimensions: Do you see it all coming to an end?
Marek: Not any time in the near future.

Of course we’ve been overbuilt before. In 1953 and 1972 we had down markets in an overbuilt condition. Construction will always go up and down like a yoyo. The trick is being able to foresee the trends and being prepared when they come.

Dimensions: Because of Houston’s “construction success” in the last five years, have local contractors had problems with contractors from other areas of the country invading with branch offices?
Marek: Not really as much as you might expect. Sure, there are two or three but even these seem to do one or two jobs and then they leave.

I think basically they are unsuccessful because we operate in Houston so much differently then they do in other areas of the country. For example, most drywall contractors in this area do very little other than the drywall. Some might do the insulation and the ceilings but that’s about all.

I have talked with other contractors around the country and most say they wouldn’t take a job unless they could do the fireproofing, insulation, acoustics, plastering, painting, and the drywall. This just isn’t true here.

Houston is a very hard market to break into.

Dimensions: Breaking into any new market is difficult. Are there any other reasons in particular?
Marek: Take the generals, especially in residential work. We’ve hung the drywall for some generals in every house they’ve ever built in the last 30 years.

I think most of the drywall contractors in this area are basically just good businessmen in that they know how to keep their customers satisfied.

Dimensions: Does this open the avenue for more negotiated work as compared to just bid work?
Marek: I would say that if I had to completely depend on bidding in my residential work that my work load would be drastically reduced. Let’s remember that the general might get four bids on a particular job, but that doesn’t mean that he goes in with the lowest one. He might choose the second to the lowest, because he doesn’t want to get hurt by going in too low only to have the sub back out of the job. So the low bidder is not always the one that gets the job.

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Dimensions: Do you offer your open shop employees anything besides a paycheck?

Marek: We have a pension profit sharing plan, hospitalization, retirement plan, and life insurance. We’ve already had three men retire on their pension and their share of the profits. The first employee we ever hired 31 years ago is still working for us now. More than once, we have used our line of credit with the bank to establish a loan for one of our employees. All-in-all, we try and help our employees as much as we possibly can. Because, don’t forget, a happy employee is also a damn good worker.

Dimensions: During the last several years, your company has been very successful in the demountable partition field. How do you promote this industry and what advantage do demountable partitions offer the building owner?

Marek: Demountable partitions are becoming a very big part of our business because of a very simple formula. Drywall is getting more and more expensive and demountable partitions are getting cheaper. And when demountable partitions become financially competitive with drywall, most people will choose demountables because of the tax advantage they offer.

Demountable partitions, according to the IRS, are tax deductible, whereas permanent drywall partitions are not. Besides, they have tremendous flexibility and in most cases are very attractive.

Promoting this type of system is the easiest thing in the world. We have a ‘man who goes directly to the building owner and describes what we can do and what is possible.

The builder owner in turn shows these samples to the leasee and usually if he likes them we have a job to bid.

Dimensions: All right, it’s easy to sell, but how easy is it to install correctly?

Marek: With demountable partitions you better have someone who knows what he’s doing. They are expensive and any breakage, damage, and replacements can take your profits down.

But with good men you can come out way ahead of the game.

Dimensions: Bill, do you have any thoughts of retiring any time soon?

Marek: Well, John was the oldest and he’s already retired. I’m in the middle so I guess I’m next. Ralph will probably stay on the longest. We’ve worked hard at this business for a long time now, and I do look forward to taking it easy. Not that I don’t take it easy now.

But believe me, between my brothers and I, we have plenty of sons, and nephews to keep the Marek’s in business for a long, long time.