What’s Right and What’s Wrong With The Industry

AWCI’S Technical Director, Gene Erwin Speaks Out On The Issues

It isn’t so much that Archie Eugene “Gene” Erwin turns his back on everything. But some of the best—and most frightening—things in his life have found him approaching back first.

In World War II’s famed U.S. Air Force bombing raid on the Poleski oil fields, Gene sat in his tailgunner’s slot and watched as plane after plane was literally blown out of the sky by the ground level explosions of the low altitude attack. He rode out the entire raid back side coming first.

Later, armed with a college degree in international business he turned his back on white-collar work and took up plastering—a move that ultimately put him into executive positions at national and local association levels.

As a plastering promotion man, he put his own feelings behind him and helped draft the ASTM specifications on gypsum wallboard—a step in authorship that accelerated industry acceptance of the newer technology.

Then, as National Technical Secretary for the old CPLIA, he turned his back on a national career to build the Southeast Lathing and Plastering Bureau and moved away from his self-built $20,000 home in Annapolis for a new home in Atlanta.

A month ago, when he began his new job as Director of Technical Services for AWCI, Gene had occasion to ride past his old home in Annapolis—now sporting a nifty $140,000 price tag. He turned his back on the tag.

Gene and his wife Gwen review construction specifications.

To Gene Erwin, whose house-building hobby has seen him build three homes, the money spread was testimony that his technical skills aren’t totally theoretical.

Born in Mayfield, Kentucky, son of Arch Erwin, now retired from the Goodyear Tire & Rubber Company, and Sally Palmer Erwin, both of whom now reside in Naples, Florida, Gene graduated from high school in Akron, Ohio. From there, he went straight into the 1942-45 stay with the U.S. Air Force as a tailgunner and ordinance crewmember on B-24 Liberator Bomber in the European theatre.

Among the 50 missions he flew was the fabled, and disastrous, Poleski oil field bombing raid where ground explosions from the up front waves of bombers blew oncoming planes out of the sky. As the crew-member also responsible for climbing into the bomb bays and activating the bombload, Gene knows the feeling of having your hair scared off.

He also knows the feeling of having it rubbed off. Following his discharge, his return to construction began with the job of carrying a #2 hod of Portland cement stucco up two stories on a hod carrier’s ladder.

That first day on the job produced a dent in his shoulder blade, a discovery of muscles whose acquaintanceship he’d not known previously, a familiarity with the arches of his feet that he would gladly have renounced, and a bald spot on the side of his head where the hod had literally worn the hair away. The return for the second installment was in serious doubt.

But the 5-foot 11-inch 140-pound ex-gunner persisted. He also took advantage of his GI bill, enrolling at Kent State University the following year where he earned only three years later a four-year bachelor degree in foreign trade and international business.

Enroute to his degree, he worked as a plasterer, a short order cook—and married a New England girl, Gwen Clough, whom he met in a library study period. Today, Gene and Gwen have three sons, John, a teacher in North Carolina; Jeffery, a senior at Georgia State; Michael, a freshman at Southern Tech, and a daughter, Cheryl, a housewife in San Francisco.

Upon graduation, Gene required only a quick trip to Boston for an import-export job interview to realize that plastering held greater possibilities for feeding families. He came back to Akron, went to work as a plasterer for Bridger Brothers as a journeyman plasterer, and then became increasingly active in local

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union affairs and in teaching the apprentice school.

Recognizing a knowledgeable promoter when they employed one, plastering contractors hired Gene by 1957 to head up the Ohio State Lathing and Plastering Contractors Association in Columbus.

Three years later he went to work as Technical Secretary and Assistant to Executive Secretary Joe Baker for the Contracting Plasterers’ Lathers’ International Association (CPLIA) in Washington, DC. After eight years of contacting government agencies and standards writing groups, he left to form the Southeast Lathing and Plastering Bureau.

An avid camper, Gene has played golf three times in his life but regards his hobbies as building houses and puttering in a workshop. A firm believer in the advance of technology, he saw the advance of drywall and moved to meet it, to learn about it, and find a place for it and the plastering technologies in the spectra of construction offerings to the final buyer.

DIMENSIONS: You’ve represented unions and management and you’ve combined theoretical skills with your own practical experience. So, Gene, what happened to the plastering industry?

ERWIN: The same thing that happened to a lot of other technologies. The future caught up with it.

The mechanic has been his own worst enemy since World War II as his costs went up while his productivity didn’t. Along came drywall which was faster, cleaner, and more economical—and the traditional plastering business did not recognize that it was now in competition and had to sell itself instead of being automatically specified. Some contractors and some labor folks have still not recognized this fact.

DIMENSIONS: As the new AWCI Director of Technical Services what do you see as the ultimate outcome of drywall and plastering?

ERWIN: I think we’ll eventually see some form of marriage between the drywall system and the veneer plaster system. Some of the drywall trades are pushing the economy of drywall up, and veneer is thus becoming increasingly more competitive. Plus, it’s a non-stop application.

DIMENSIONS: Let’s talk about job and product failures. You must certainly be aware that Project Alert—which was set up to monitor failures—hasn’t been an overwhelming success? What is it: ego, embarrassment, fear of libel or product boycott accusations?

ERWIN: Failure—and reporting failures—is admittedly a very touchy field to get into. A manufacturer can spend a lot of R & D money and then along comes an unfortunate incident and the investment can be exploded . . . and perhaps it’s not even the fault of the manufacturer or the product.

DIMENSIONS: It could be the application then?

ERWIN: Yes, but it is too simplistic to use the term “application” without further defining what could be included. Often it is not the actual application of a product, but rather
the “job conditions” under which the product is applied.

Traditionally, the contractor has looked to others for R & D and pretty much accepted what the manufacturers have offered in the way of immediate performance as opposed to long term performance. Occasionally, a manufacturer will develop an idea into a product, and then develop his own specification tailored to that specific product—a spec he is sure the product can meet. The product may or may not do the intended job, but it does meet the spec.

**DIMENSIONS:** But there is a reservoir of knowledge and experience among contractors that is worth tapping, isn’t there?

**ERWIN:** There’s an enormous reservoir. If we can tap that, condense it, communicate it, we can write superior sets of guidelines or job specifications that are better than anything now existing in the industry.

**DIMENSIONS:** Then what is holding up Project Alert?

**ERWIN:** I think perhaps that most contractors are reluctant to put to paper his failures for a number of reasons. Some are obvious, such as reputation, effect on future business, etc. But often it is because he is not quite certain just what did occur and is hesitant to make a lot of noise about it.

Having done a considerable amount of job problem consulting, I can tell you there are as many reasons as there are contractors for being reluctant to talk publicly about failures. I can also tell you that we find trends or patterns in the failures we have investigated over the past 15 years and while it would take the entire magazine to explore the subject, it does indicate to me that a program similar to Project Alert, if conducted dispassionately, could be invaluable to the membership.

**DIMENSIONS:** You earlier mentioned something to the effect that the designers and those handing out contracts aren’t above some blame in this area?

**ERWIN:** There are others. Architects and engineers are not exempt from insisting, on something in the wrong location or installed under improper conditions.

Furthermore, any contractor can describe situations where the general contractor or owner has sometimes insisted that work be performed under conditions where a wall or ceiling contractor knows it should not be performed.

Contractors will have to resist this kind of thing—or take the lumps of failure.

**DIMENSIONS:** Where will manufacturer support come in? For ob-
vious reasons, they are reluctant to contribute to their own hanging.

ERWIN: It boils down to the fact that no one person or product can do everything . . . that a product can perform brilliantly in one application and fail miserably in another.

For example, we know that magnesium oxychloride based cement is good only where you can guarantee that water will never get into that system. No contractor in his right mind can guarantee such a thing on an exterior. Yet we can’t get a single manufacturer to concede this fact.

Instead, they cite successful jobs, that is, jobs where the water hasn’t yet reached the material or where modifications are made to shield the cement itself.

DIMENSIONS: Where would you say the average wall and ceiling contractor needs technical assistance right now?

ERWIN: I’d say the foremost need is fire rated and sound rated assemblies. There is a strong need for a place to obtain information on one or more assemblies that a contractor wants to build.

It’s important for a contractor to be able to compare a job spec he’s about to build with industry specs. And it’s doubly important for him to do this while there remains a possibility to get to the designer on what changes will improve, save costs, be acceptable . . . that sort of thing.

DIMENSIONS: What do you see as your immediate objectives as the Director of Technical Services for the entire wall and ceiling industry?

ERWIN: I’d like to see us develop an up-to-date file on all manufacturers’ literature which is as complete as possible. This involves getting every bulletin and every new change of product bulletin and then we can perhaps put out a monthly advisory or changes in product communications piece.

This is an important service to keep contractors updated—and also to guard against a designer using an old, obsolete bulletin and not knowing it.

The next big objective would be to establish a complete reference series of ASTM test methods. This would allow us to check product literature against the most accepted ASTM tests, and make us conversant with changes in test methods, materials, specs and applied standards.

DIMENSIONS: Gene, where do you see the biggest challenge and
changes for contractors, say, in the next five years? 
ERWIN: A decade ago, the need to survive emphasized diversification. Now, I think there’s this continuing acceleration into systems. Many contractors are ahead of this trend right now, but more and more it’s the contractor who can bid and build an entire system who is the one coming out on top.

Concomitantly, there should be a new structure for trained manpower. And this will have to come. The skill capabilities must conform to the market need.

DIMENSIONS: You’re speaking about an enormous shift in approach and attitude in the training area, aren’t you? 
ERWIN: Yes, I suppose I am. But it’s increasingly important to adjust manpower training to accommodate what’s actually being built—and the way it must be built. Training today must be better geared to the way things are, now what you want them to be.

DIMENSIONS: How about the unions? Can they make this kind of shift? 
ERWIN: I believe the national unions recognize this. Look at the Dryvit experience. There currently aren’t enough mechanics on this single approach so the company has to conduct training programs.

The union situation is one of national versus local. The national office can see the big picture and they know clearly and accurately what’s needed. But locals hold the power and if they don’t want a certain number or kind of apprentice, that is reality. The local decides—and sometimes these locals can’t see beyond a pile of wallboard.

DIMENSIONS: All that we’ve been talking about here today; it all boils down in the final analysis to quality, doesn’t it? 
ERWIN: Maybe, because even here you have to define quality first.

Is it the best performing system for what you can afford? I think that’s the industry definition. If money is no object, you can build a great monument and that’s not unheard of.