“Fired” to Contracting Success

California’s Amos Starr Was Fired From His First Plastering Job But Recovered to Run His Own Company

By his own admission he “Wasn’t much of a plasterer” on his first job, which is why he lasted one week.

Truth is, Amos Starr — the new president of the California Lathing & Plastering Contractors’ Association— turned out to be a better plasterer than his initial employer, or a Los Angeles union business agent, thought likely. By 1958, he’d not only developed into a true journeyman, but was good enough with the trowel and business principles that he opened up his own business.

It’s been uphill ever since for the Orangevale, CA, contractor. Born in La Mesa, Texas, son of the late Lemuel S. and Mamie A. Stokes Starr, Amos together with eight brothers and two sisters grew up in central California. As a teenager he worked in the fruit fields there until 1949 when he moved to the Los Angeles area to enter construction with his older brothers, who were plasterers.

He got a job brown coating but his own lack of experience got him bounced by the business agent a week later. The next job was as a hod carrier leading ultimately to an apprentice plastering job.

At this juncture, the U.S. Army interrupted and he served in the medical corps in the Seattle, WA, area. Following his discharge in 1954, he married Susan Johnson, of Richmond Beach, WA. With the high school diploma he earned in the Army, Amos attended Fullerton Junior College and also night school, working daytime hours as a plasterer.

In 1957, he obtained his own contractor license. The following year, he launched his own business, Starr Plastering, in Orange County. A big tract job the following year took him to Sacramento and Amos and his family have been in Northern California ever since.

With expansion and growth, the company was finally incorporated in 1977 as North Starr Plastering, Inc. Under Amos’ direction, the company
moved out of tract work into the commercial market, and then ventured in to its own realty development.

His brothers still play an active role in the business, and Amos himself appears poised for the next growth round. When CONSTRUCTION DIMENSIONS caught up to him, he was preparing to take over the reins of the California plastering organization.

DIMENSIONS: In an age when market attractiveness appears down for the plastering trades, you have made no strong effort to diversify. Have you deliberately chosen to cast your company’s future with pure plastering?

STARR: I prefer to specialize and why change when you can find work and make an acceptable profit? As long as the market holds up-and I don’t see any appreciable dip coming along-why look for trouble? We’re doing a good amount of work, although I must admit that the high interest rates in 1980 hit our business hard, too.

DIMENSIONS: Is that the reason you moved into real estate and rental properties?

STARR: Not really. When we made that move, it was done because it made good business sense. A large amount of value is in our real estate. Star Enterprises is the management part of these properties, and North Starr Plastering is the construction end of the business.

When we started building in 1974, the original plan was to build our own headquarters and yard and to perhaps rent some space. That worked so well, we continued to develop. It’s been an evolving thing.

DIMENSIONS: You mentioned, I believe, that your company is also active in Dryvit. Do you see this
technology as a comeback for the plastering trades inasmuch as troweling is an essential task in its installation?

STARR: Yes, I believe you could say that. Certainly, this new type of exterior has been catching on rapidly.

In 1976-77, we tried a scratch coat with a textured, colored second coat. It worked for a little while because of the labor saving, but there simply wasn’t enough work to salvage the traditional plastering trades. These new exterior insulated wall systems, I think, will produce the necessary amount of work.

DIMENSIONS: Some suppliers are also stepping up their promotional efforts in behalf of regular stucco or plaster type systems?

STARR: We installed quite a bit of Nu-Wall in the 70s and it was more than equal to regular stucco—

DIMENSIONS: — and currently? Are you still using it?

STARR: We still do a substantial amount of work because of its R-19 insulation factor. With the new energy code, house developers go for it.

DIMENSIONS: Do you see the market for these kinds of walls continuing? Or do you feel the emphasis is temporary?

STARR: As long as there is an energy code the interest will be in these kinds of systems that not only give an attractive, acceptable exterior finish, but contribute to energy conservation as well.

It’s really more energy savings than anything else. Such a wall is highly durable and it provides other benefits such as less cracking. Remember, in a one-coat system you get cracks, and while you do indeed get some cracking with these new systems its considerably less.

DIMENSIONS: I take it you’re still familiar with the house tract market? Isn’t sidings and other options pretty much penetrating what had been a strong stucco-type market?

STARR: Plastering and stucco aren’t anywhere near the volume that they enjoyed a few years back. And, yes, it’s true that much of the replacement can be attributed to siding—

DIMENSIONS: — plastering is quite labor intensive. Isn’t siding a
much more efficient system—from the standpoint of manhours it takes to install it?

STARR: It actually may cost a bit more to install a siding job even though there are wage efficiencies. I find that general contractors will pay more for siding because of the speed in having a finished exterior.

It’s quicker and cleaner to install a 5/8” siding job because there are no necessary delays such as between lathing and plastering and curing. With siding, a housebuilder can frame one day, put in windows and door bucks the second day, and do the siding on the third day. You just can’t do that with a stucco job where it takes 30 days for the lathing, scratch, brown and finish coat.

With money costing what it does these days, a builder can’t afford that kind of delay. Stucco is a luxury that more and more developers are doing without.

DIMENSIONS: Can’t foam board accommodate a lot of the shifting caused by green lumber?

STARR: Yes, but any competent contractor knows that time is the key. Time is money. So it stands to reason that Nu-Wall is a variation from traditional stucco and plastering the same as Dryvit is a variation of Nu-Wall.

DIMENSIONS: As a specialty contractor how do you approach the bidding on such a job . . . especially when there are these options available and one is apparently preferable to the other.

STARR: When we get a call, we bid the job—but we ask a lot of questions in the process. I often submit an alternative bid, showing my customers the options they can have. Generally, though, the design and specification work on a tract is completely finished and it’s very difficult to get a change.

DIMENSIONS: Much of your business, I assume, comes from old customers. But you still need a good supply of new business, right?

STARR: If I’ve learned anything, I’ve learned to ask questions. We take new customers, of course, but we ask around a lot and we follow good credit procedures.

We have very strict lien laws in California and you can lose out if you don’t follow proper procedure. I notify the owner and the general contractor on the pre-lien notice so they know we have liens available.

DIMENSIONS: Do you actively promote your business, or pretty much rely on incoming calls?

STARR: Recently, we’ve gone to the Yellow Pages to support our efforts on the local construction newsletter. We haven’t pushed lath and plaster as much as we might have for the last couple of years but that’s only because the rental business has been going so well.

Business has been a bit slower than usual so it’s now a matter of waiting things out. I see signs that activity is starting to pick up and I hope we can get some good projects going.

One thing’s for certain, the next year or so will be interesting.

DIMENSIONS: In your opinion, Amos, what’s been the biggest change in the past 10 years—and the biggest challenge in the next 10?

STARR: The energy crunch brought on the biggest changes because this involved the high cost of money, inflation, a sudden move to optional building systems . . . it all revolved around money.

From a plastering contractor’s viewpoint, I’d say that the new foam plastic one-coat systems represent the wave of the future. A contractor will need this type of product in order to survive.

The key to success and profits in construction these days is speed . . . more speed . . . and then some more speed on top of that. The interest rate thing isn’t over yet: we haven’t heard the last of expensive money even though it seems to be leveling out now.

The formula isn’t difficult to understand. Just do better and faster what you’re doing.