An Industry Comes of age

From volcanic ash to polystyrene, we’ve come a long way as an industry and as an association.

Studies of man’s early attempts to house himself conclude that prehistoric man built, as we tend to today, with materials readily available. Undoubtedly mankind’s first residence was the shelter afforded by the spreading branches of trees, by caves or overhanging cliffs, by skins spread over a network of interwoven tree limbs or by roofed pits.

Presumably by watching the hornet and the swallow build their nests, and the beaver plaster his den, man was led to use common mud or dung to chink, to cover and to embed. The lath was often a system of self-supporting interlaced wattles, withes, brush or reed shoots as is still found in some primitive constructions today. The use of wood, rock and brick were gradually adapted and they, too, supported or became the bases for plaster.

The Egyptians used burned gypsum and lime to face and decorate the interior surfaces of rooms in their pyramids. The Greeks perfected a weather-proof lime stucco. By the time Pompeii was constructed, ornately embellished stucco was in common usage incorporating sgraffito, scagliola, cornices, composition, impressed and relieved work. The cement used was often the volcanic ash burned in the fiery furnace of some volcano such as Vesuvius.

The choicest plaster sand in Rome was tunnelled from below ground. The pozzolana sand was found in striations between layers of tufa stone. The 500 miles of catacombs under the city of Rome were created by the extraction of aggregate for both plaster and concrete. Most of the corridors were large enough to permit passage of a horse and cart and were 50-75 feet below the surface. Similar catacombs exist at Naples, Syracuse, Alexandria and elsewhere. In Rome, niches carved into the walls of the catacombs became cemeteries or burial places which were often ornamented, artistically sculpted and artfully painted over plaster.

In ancient Greece, before the time of Christ, each craft and art had its own organization. They did not function as unions or employers’ associations such as we know them now, but were rather entities of men who shared trade secrets, who understood one another and were drawn closely together by the same daily-effort and the practice of the same art. The Greek banding of workers was more on the basis of social and religious commonality than an economic form of grouping.

At their professional meetings they honored their god or hero-founder and then talked shop. Knowledge and skill were religiously confined to the craft and handed down from generation to generation. The craftsman was highly respected not only because of the beautiful creations of his hands, but more importantly, as the member of a “school” which might emphasize some arcane or private technique in its output or as the guardian of an ancestral tradition.

From this type of association the rigid craft and arts guilds had evolved in the Roman Empire by the time of Christ. When the guilds became politically active Caesar had to suppress them and permitted them to re-form only with the issuance of state-controlled charters. Guilds were permitted

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to build great halls, train apprentices, oversee the quality of craftsmanship, establish death benefits and provide for burials. Guilds flourished throughout Western Europe during the Dark and Middle Ages and even until the last century. Part of their function was to define and maintain lines of jurisdiction.

In 1501, King Henry VII of England chartered the plasterers’ guild to maintain quality standards for craftsmanship and materials. The charter gave guild officials the right to inspect all plaster jobs and to levy fines for sloppy work or the use of improper components!

The craftsmanship of European artisans was brought to the new world by immigrant plasterers starting in the 1500’s. As craftsmen with similar skills increased in numbers here, plasterers began to organize into local groups similar to the guilds of Europe. At first these groups were organized by nationality. In New York, as an example, there may have been one local union or guild off-shoot for English plasterers, one for Irish or German or Italian.

The system was not the result of intended discrimination or snobbishness but rather a way of associating with others who understood and did things the same way they had been done in the “old country.”

As unions were organized, counter-part employer associations came into being, primarily on the local level where labor agreements were hammered out. For instance, within a couple of years of the issuance of a charter to Operative Plasterers’ Local #2 in Los Angeles, Contracting Plasterers Association of Southern California was organized as the responsive multiple employers bargaining group.

Since history is generally the record of organized groups, it is to the development of the union movement that we look first for the tracings and dropings of the plastering trade. In the New World, organizations of journeyman mechanics existed as early as 1791 when house carpenters in Philadelphia struck for a lo-hour day in lieu of the then prevalent dawn to dark workday. By the 1830’s combined masons and
plasterers or separate plasterers’ local unions were located in several of the major U.S. cities. Recurrent economic cycles saw unions successively organized, dissolved and reorganized. In 1844, plasterers were earning $1.50 per day. Twenty years later had raised their pay scale to $1.75 to $2.25 per day.

In the late 1850’s, the first short-lived National Plastering Union was organized but the Civil War caused it to cease operations. In 1864 it was revitalized for a period of time, disappearing from the scene during the terrible depression of the 1870’s. In 1880 census does not refer to a national plasterers’ union but does cite 17 local unions then operating.

There are, and have been most of the time since 1864, two national unions representing plasterers. The one, Operative Plasterers’ and Cement Masons’ International Association initially organized in 1864, represents both plasterers and cement masons.

The other, soon to become the National Union of Bricklayers of the U.S., was organized in 1865 and included subordinate locals which had bricklayer/plasterer members. Now known as the Brickmason and Allied Crafts, the BM has expanded its membership to include stonemasons, terrazzo men, and tile setters among others.

For over a century, despite short lived truces, jurisdictional and membership disagreements have caused intermittent hostilities between locals and between the national unions. Attempts to merge the plasterers of each have proven fruitless. Reportedly, the O.P. currently represents the greater number of U.S. plasterers. Largely because of the loss of the housing sector to open-shop contractors and their refusal to recognize the realities of the marketplace, the construction unions have generally suffered severe reverses in recent years. However, as a result of the high volume of construction in mid-1985 the Operative Plasterers’ and Cement Masons’ International Association reports an upswing in the number of new apprentices and in journeyman reinstatements.

Meanwhile, technological improvements in materials were going through the gestation periods readying the breakthrough which would challenge
the age-old art of plastering for-evermore.

In the middle 1890’s Augustine Sackett had invented a wallboard composed of three stria of gypsum plaster sandwiched between 4 plies of wood felt paper. Open edges were rough so the only suitable use was as a plaster base. In 1909 United States Gypsum Company bought the Sackett Plaster Board Company, quickly developed paper-lapping edging for the board and a practical drywall component was born.

Speedy construction of military training camps in 1917 launched the wide-spread usage of wallboard into post-war U.S. construction. The real penetration by drywall occurred following World War II when the pent-up demand for housing ignited the wallboard market. Today, 90-95% of interior residential walls and ceilings are clad with wallboard sheets. Except for a small percentage of residential and commercial construction, the plastering trade today is largely occupied with fireproofing steel framing, applying portland cement plaster to ex- teriors, installing exterior insulation systems etc.

Diversification into drywall, painting, acoustical, and other sub-trades has become the game plan for former plastering contractor purists. The Association of Wall and Ceiling Industries-International (AWCI), had kept step, under the prodding of its forward-looking Executive Vice President, Joe Baker, Jr., in serving the varied needs of its contractor, manufacturer and other service-oriented members.

The ontogeny appears to be recapit-ulating the phylogeny, plastering con-tractor specialists reverting to becom- ing diversified generalists.

Modem wars have served to pro-mote post bellum economic expansions and the development and application of new methods, new systems, new equipment and new materials. So it was at the end of the first Great War when the Contracting Plasterers’ International Association was born in 1918 with Oscar Reum of Chicago as its first president holding office for 26 years. For much of the time between wars the association was dormant and was ac- tivated again in 1945 largely due to the efforts of Baltimore contractor John Hampshire and Philadelphia contrac- tor Ed Venzie, who held the top reins for 7 years. Ed ran the association from his company offices and is reported to have invested $200,000 in nursing the group back to life.

In 1976 AWCI consolidated with the Gypsum Drywall Contractors Association which itself had been organized in 1957. National umbrella agreements have existed for only a few years, since Joe Baker has moved the Association of Wall and Ceiling Industries-International into the arena of in- dustrial relations, by signing national labor contracts with the plasterers, painters, laborers and carpenters covering lathing, plastering drywall and related work.

The stage is set for continuing growth and improvement in construc- tion technology and the adaptation of new systems to solve the increasingly hostile aspects of our abused environ- ment. As plastering contractors realize they are in the shelter business, they learn to assimilate and accommodate to what is new.