WHO SAYS PLASTER IS DYING?

In Arizona, Don Boehmer Maintains an Excellent Business Specializing in Lath and Plaster Work

Donald G. Boehmer didn’t just happen to slip into contracting as a profession. You might say he had a calling.

In addition to that the 57-year-old head of Don G. Boehmer, Inc., of 4195 W. Clarendon Ave., Phoenix, AZ, came to realize something about all his years of pursuing a doctorate degree in economics. They had left him somewhat disenchanted about economic theory and with less business knowledge than could be gotten in a short afternoon chat with St. Louis contractors Bob Whittle or the late Harry Neihaus.

For all the dazzle of Keynesian economics, it still didn’t match up to the practical knowledge of the gruff, capable, rigidly honest Niehaus or the equally capable, Bob Whittle, a graduate chemical engineer, who succeeded Niehaus.

For that reason, Boehmer found himself in the contracting business as a fulltime career. Born in St. Louis, son of Nora Whittle and the late Malcolm Boehmer, Sr., Don graduated from East St. Louis High School and then went on for degrees at Southern Illinois University. At Indiana University, working for his doctorate in economics, he married fellow student Barbara Moser. They are now parents of three children.

Don got a first taste of wall and ceiling work following his U.S. Army discharge where he’d been a medical aid man in Korea. Working as a carpenter’s apprentice for AWCI member Huntley-Blazier, he was among the first to install 2x4 exposed grid ceilings.

Two years later, though, he used his GI bill to return to college. When economics lost its attraction, Don went to work for the Niehaus Company. By his own admission, Harry taught him about business and Bob showed him the wizardry of estimating.

At the same time, plasterer-to-the-bitter-end Harry threw the drywall business at Whittle with a caution, “It ain’t gonna work, but try it anyway,” and Don followed Bob Whittle into the fray of introducing drywall to the St. Louis market.

Bob made it work. “Bob taught me estimating and drywall,” Don says, “and Harry—an extremely wise man who was unencumbered by the so-called rules of learning—taught me about business concepts.”

With Bob leading the way, the company nailed down the St. Louis Post Office job by introducing Donn nailable studs and USG screws. “This, of course, preceded the USG screw stud and we were frankly a bit worried about using ratchet nails with all the attendant popping problems.”

In 1965, Don moved to Indiana for personal reasons, and then in 1970 went to work part time in Phoenix for Dennis Hopper while he toyed again with a doctorate in economics. Quickly tiring of the campus scene, he quit for good and remained with Hopper until
starting his own business in 1978. From a column patch job and a severe cash flow situation, he has proceeded to build a $2-million-a-year business in lath and plaster, fireproofing and exterior insulated systems.

Today, Don has a company which allows him the quality of life he wants for himself and his family, time to teach economics part time at Grand Canyon College, and the wherewithal to devote time and effort as a devout Christian to the Bethany Bible Church.

From his small, extremely efficient headquarters facility in Phoenix, Don keeps a close tab on his jobs in progress and coordinates with his superintendent, Ron Bishop, and his top mechanic, Al Moreno, to assure quality work at competitive prices. It’s a tested formula—one that Harry Niehaus taught—and it keeps the company growing . . . and under control.

DIMENSIONS: For a $2-million company you have modest, yet attractive, facilities in your headquarters. I take it, the company is you, your secretary-bookkeeper Alice Gossett, and then Ron and Al. Is that correct?

BOEHMER: That’s right. When you say the word “lean” you would be referring to my overhead. There’s everything in these offices that we need—and no more.

Each of us has our function. I run the company and do the estimating. Alice keeps the books and runs the office. Ron runs the jobs, and Al mixes men and materials for a good job. We make a respectable profit . . . and our customers know and trust us with their jobs.

What else is contracting all about?

DIMENSIONS: Yet you quickly established a reputation here for efficiency in fireproofing work, moving productivity far beyond what had been the level. How did you do that?

BOEHMER: When I started here the setup for fireproofing in Phoenix just wasn’t set up efficiently. The best pumping rate was only 200 bags a day: I believe the record was 201 bags. Ron, Al and I, working with Zonalite’s Paul Korenberg, set up our own system and the first day we ran 256 bags. We were up to 300 the following day.

DIMENSIONS: The key? What was the key?

BOEHMER: The key was 3-inch pipes run as far as we could before going to the 2-inch hose. Then make sure you have long sweeps with long radii.

DIMENSIONS: On the subject of Phoenix, why does it have a reputation as a “subcontractor’s graveyard?” It seems that any traveling contractor gets bitten hard here.

BOEHMER: Many contractors feel that it’s less expensive here than elsewhere. It’s not and if a contractor comes in here expecting a gravy train he’s headed for trouble.

DIMENSIONS: Yet business activity in Phoenix seems high?

BOEHMER: It’s been good the past two years, with a slight slowdown this past winter. The new tax bill may have delayed some building projects but they’ll pick up again. This region has a steady growth element so any vacancy or overbuilt condition will be corrected and we’ll get on with new projects. We have about 100,000 people a year moving into Phoenix.

DIMENSIONS: How do you manage to hold out on lath and plaster when its level of use is deteriorating so rapidly everywhere else?

BOEHMER: This is plaster and stucco country: it’s the Spanish influence and the majority of buildings
here are Portland cement. We have no worry about the freeze-thaw syndrome, and there is even more lath and stucco in Tucson.

Keep in mind, now, that I’m talking exteriors—not interiors.

DIMENSIONS: You mentioned that you installed Dryvit. Is there much activity in this area for exterior insulated walls?

BOEHMER: It’s doing very well here as the acceptability grows. Dennis Hopper is the Dryvit distributor and he’s done a great deal to introduce this new technology.

DIMENSIONS: For sales imagination, Hopper is unbeatable, isn’t he?

BOEHMER: The guy is tremendous. Portland cement does crack and you can sight down a long wall and see any irregularity.

To get people’s attention about Dryvit, Dennis came up with a picture of traditionally cracked stucco and added the line: “It’s all it’s cracked up to be.”

DIMENSIONS: How do you handle the cost comparison problem?

BOEHMER: The synthetic is more expensive, no doubt about that. Except for exotic reliefs on a wall, you can install Portland Cement less expensively.

But the benefits of the synthetics are greater. It goes on as flat as anything on the market. Cracking isn’t an issue, and discoloration is something you don’t need to worry about anymore.

It’s only drawback is the softness problem where people can come in contact with it. Of course, you can make it stronger, use heavier meshes . . . that sort of thing but these add to the costs.

DIMENSIONS: Then you see a continuing market for stucco?

BOEHMER: Oh, sure. It’s less expensive. It’ll remain in any market
where you don’t have quick temperature shifts. When you run into a city like St. Louis where it’s 5 degrees one day and 65 degrees the next, you’ll find the usual freeze-thaw cycle that makes it a less attractive exterior material.

**DIMENSIONS:** Are you strictly a bid-type contractor, Don? And do you have your usual favorite list of customers?

**BOEHMER:** I answer “yes” to both questions. I’m selective in my bidding because I’ll bid only to the GC who has the contract either on a construction management basis or through negotiations.

This way, I bid to one contractor because once he’s got the contract he’ll be more selective in his subs. When you bid in competition with a dozen GC, you could be going against 20 lath and plaster contractors, and another 10 fire proofing bids. Who needs that nonsense?

Besides, by bidding to one GC I find we are more likely to work with other good, qualified subs, a situation that usually represents a profitable job.

**DIMENSIONS:** That also limits the number of jobs you must bid to land one. It keeps the wasted effort content down, too, right?

**BOEHMER:** Absolutely. And who needs wasted effort? I don’t which is why I don’t even bother subscribing to Dodge or our own Blue Streak. As a matter of fact, when the job is ready for bid the GCs will call me.

**DIMENSIONS:** Your company is small and your lines of management are short. Do you personally—as most contractors insist you must—visit your jobs regularly?

**BOEHMER:** I really don’t both visiting jobs that much. Ron and Al run the jobs and I simply refuse to interfere. They know all the numbers on the job, what must be done and when, so what more can I contribute.

I occasionally go out and visit the job . . . let people know I’m interested. But I wouldn’t think of issuing orders and tell anyone—including Ron and Al—what to do on the job.

Let’s face it: I could countermand something that Ron or Al are doing and gum up the works. If I see anything, I might ask about it later—away from the job.

**DIMENSIONS:** Well, then where and how does your job control function?

**BOEHMER:** Through constant communication with Ron and Al and through our record system.

I watch those labor records closely.
and I know what’s been spent because I go over each job with Ron. We don’t keep secrets from each other and we both know when the other perhaps has made an error—and we work to correct that error not assign blame.

**DIMENSIONS:** And when a job goes sour? What’s your management strategy then?

**BOEHMER:** Precisely what Harry Niehaus taught me—

**DIMENSIONS:** —and that is?

**BOEHMER:** If you have two jobs and one goes sour while the other is a winner, spend your time with the winner. You’ll lose more on the winner trying to cut your losses on the loser.

Get out of the loser as best you can, but maximize profits on the winner.

When you’re in that situation make sure you don’t let your workers in the field know what you’re facing. If you let them know you have a bad job, they’ll do their best to salvage it, causing added problems . . . namely loss of quality. They will also, of course, expect something in return for their additional efforts.

**DIMENSIONS:** It’s easy, being human, to make mistakes. Do you do your company’s estimating?

**BOEHMER:** All of it: I estimate everything because I frankly don’t have the courage to allow someone else to do it. Even from today’s perspective, I still can’t understand how Bob Whittle ever let me do my own estimating for his company. I don’t know how a contractor gets to that point where he can delegate something so sensitive.

**DIMENSIONS:** To you, where’s the challenge . . . the bid price or the take-off?

**BOEHMER:** The take-off is the critical area. In any bid, you must be certain you take off everything pertaining to that job and price it.

Prices may not be absolutely correct but that’s usually a case of too much on one and not enough on another. I believe any contractor will agree: the take-off is more important than pricing.

**DIMENSIONS:** How about computer estimating? I would assume you have your reservations about that approach?

**BOEHMER:** Computers are fine. But they don’t estimate: people do. A person must still sit down and measure a job and make subjective evaluations.

The computer is great for putting on prices and extending them—the clerk work. That’s often where an estimator errors, not on the estimating but on the arithmetic of pricing.

A man and his brains must do the take-off, I’m convinced of that. He must find the work, reason out how the architect or designer wants it done—or how to innovate. My mistakes come from overlooking or misinterpreting something on the plans and a computer just won’t help me on that.

**DIMENSIONS:** But many contractors insist you can spend less time and
“As for abatement work, I was asked to bid a school removal job. I turned that one down and did the same with the next after I saw my competition consisted of people who knew absolutely nothing about asbestos removal.”

submit more bids with a computer?

BOEHMER: If that’s the direction a contractor wants to go, fine. I just don’t intend to work that way... spraying bids all over the place.

DIMENSIONS: Despite your best estimating and good management, Don, a job can go bad for any number of reasons—poor GC management, acts of God, poor coordination—

BOEHMER: On that coordination theme, many subcontractors create their own problem. You know, a sub will work hard to get a job, then once he does get it he puts it into a tub and forgets about it. Then the GC says, “see you on the job next week,” and that sub is in deep trouble.

You have to stay close to the job from the time you decide to bid it until it’s finished and paid for. Anything less than that is to court disaster.

DIMENSIONS: One last item: asbestos. As a fire proofing contractor you have some working knowledge of these materials. Have you considered abatement work?

BOEHMER: Well, for one thing, I started in business after the ban on asbestos started so my company never installed any controversial materials.

As for abatement work, I was asked to bid a school removal job. I turned that one down and did the same with the next after I saw my competition consisted of people who knew absolutely nothing about asbestos removal. The bid documents said something about “practices of the trade.” I asked what that meant and no one, absolutely no one, had the slightest idea although they did feel that the phrase was a nifty one that assured quality work.

On another job, I watched people in street clothes taking down asbestos. That’s my competition? No, thanks.

DIMENSIONS: The situation has improved.

BOEHMER: Yes, but by that time the insurance problem has arisen.

To be perfectly honest about it, I didn’t want to jeopardize my company with this kind of work so I’m still not involved. At this point, I’m happy to advise and I won’t shut the door.

But it’s a strange market: the material is difficult to remove, you have to fund dump sites, and your insurance coverage must be done carefully with a reputable company. “Long tailed liability”—where you get sued 25 years from now—is no simple issue.

DIMENSIONS: Where to from here, Don?

BOEHMER: I have no massive plans for this company. I run it: it doesn’t run me. It gives me the quality of life that I want with plenty of time to spend with my wife and family.

It’s a good, profitable business and it’s done for me what I wanted it to do. I’d like to continue with that kind of success—and I don’t see anything on the horizon that would alter my thinking.