THE DEPRESSION YEARS:

HOW THE INDUSTRY SURVIVED

by Kathy B. Sedgwick

In this third article in our historic series celebrating AWCI’s 75th anniversary, we explore how the hardships of the 1930s affected our industry and its association, the CPIA.

By 1932, some 12 million people were unemployed. In 1933, Roosevelt closed the banks and launched the New Deal. The WPA (Works Progress Administration) put unemployed architects to work designing schools, bridges, post offices, fire stations, bringing “citified” architectural styles rural areas.

By 1936, the CPIA was well into the various government programs, including the PWA, WPA and others. (At the time, lathers and plasterers were getting as little as $1 per hour in Oklahoma City and Louisville, $1.50 in New York and Chicago.) Following the war, CPIA participated as the official agency in cooperation with the government in the National Recovery Act (NRA).

Despite financial hardships, a number of important construction landmarks were completed during the 1930s. The Empire State Building opened in 1931, the Boulder Dam was completed in 1935, the Golden Gate Bridge in 1937, and three of Frank Lloyd Wright’s important works were finished: Falling Water, in Bear Run, PA; the Johnson Wax Co administration building was built in Racine, WI; and Taliesin West, in Phoenix, AZ.

New products and technology were developed and tested. Glass block was used in load-bearing applications. Greater strength of materials yielded lighter construction, thin-tile with heavy load-bearing capacity, for example. Steel leaped forward in the Depression years, being used for framing, window sashes, doors and ornamental work.

Minneapolis contractors promoted the first steel-framed, lath and plaster houses. This was followed by the Lurie Steel House,
named for and designed by Erwin M. Lurie, managing director of the Metal Lath Manufacturers Association (later the Metal Lath/Steel Framing Association).

Taking a cue from wartime production efforts, building construction was simplified, and processes were streamlined. Key concepts were prefabrication, standardization, and mass production.

MEANWHILE, THE REST OF THE WORLD....

1930 - Pluto was located as the ninth planet in our solar system.
1931 - Al Capone was sentenced for tax evasion.
1932 - FDR was elected. The Lindbergh baby was kidnapped.
1933 - Prohibition ended. “King Kong” opened.
1934 - John Dillinger was killed.
1935 - Huey Long was assassinated. The Social Security Act passed.
1936 - Windsor abdicated the British crown for divorcee Wallis Simpson, the Spanish Civil War began, and “Wrong Way” Corrigan made his famous Brooklyn to Dublin flight.
1937 - The Hindenburg exploded over Lakehurst, NJ, Amelia Earhart disappeared somewhere in the Pacific.
1938 - The national minimum wage was enacted. Orson Welles terrified the nation with “War of the Worlds.”
1939 - The New York World’s Fair opened.

Next Month: The Forties.