Bonitz, One of the Pioneers of Steel Framing, Continues to Move Forward

By Michael J. Major

Jon Voight starred in the 1974 movie, Conrack, playing the role of a dedicated white teacher attempting to bring the joys of education to deprived black children on an isolated island off the coast of South Carolina. A drama of a different sort took place recently when the Beaufort County School System attempted to replace the Daufuskie Elementary School on the island of the same name, the one depicted in the movie, which had been there since the 1930s.

Two bids came back way over budget. Among the many problems were that the island is accessible only by barge, and there is neither on-site labor nor a supply house on the island. So the Beaufort administrators approached the Greenville, S.C.-based Bonitz Manufacturing Co., Inc., asking for a solution. Bonitz came through with a lightweight prefabricated steel panelization package, an entire 4,000-square-foot building, complete with floors, walls, acoustical ceilings, trusses, drywall, floor coverings, electrical, plumbing—the entire building. It was shipped 260 miles to Savannah, then put on the barge and taken to the island where it was assembled. “It was a turn-key package,” says Macon Clark, vice president of Bonitz’s manufacturing division. “And it demonstrated the full gamut of what we can do.”

Bonitz is a subcontractor that has so expanded beyond its traditional role that it now also has the capability to design, fabricate, install and even maintain a variety of different systems, or a complete project, like the schoolhouse. To see how the
company got from there to here, it's good to start at the beginning.

**Southern Exposure**

The business began as a roof deck firm in 1953, in Columbia, S.C., pumping lightweight concrete and gypsum roof decks. During the late 1950s, when plaster and stucco were the norm, Bonitz pioneered the metal stud and drywall business in South Carolina. Through the 1960s and early 1970s, the core of the business was acoustical ceiling and drywall work. In the 1970s the company added exterior insulation and finish systems, along with the initiation of specialty products such as modern fold-operable walls, computer access floors, demountable office partitions, floor coverings and single-ply roofing.

Up to the mid-1980s, the firm had been known under its original name, Bonitz Insulation Company, but, by this time, as Clark says, “we realized that was a misnomer.” The company then went through not only a name change but also a reorganization to reflect its increasing diversification. The umbrella company became known as Bonitz of South Carolina. The company was then broken down into three divisions. The contracting division handles acoustical ceilings and walls, carpeting, carpet maintenance, computer/access floors, demountable partitions, drywall partitions, operable walls, resilient flooring and surfacing. The insulation division is carrying on with single-ply roofing systems and insulating roof decks.

Various panelization work being done by the company as early as 1979 resulted in the opening of a manufacturing facility in 1987. This division makes prefabricated wall systems including pre-finished, curtain walls, screen walls, mansards, fascias, and interior and exterior loadbearing.

The company now provides complete coverage for both Carolinas, with a total of four branches in South Carolina and three in North Carolina. The manufacturing division in Greenville, S.C., services the entire southeast. Bonitz of South Carolina employs between 600 and 800 people, depending on market demand.

**Secrets of Success**

One of the keys to the company’s success is its range of products and services. “We’re always searching for new product lines,” Clark says. “Having a wide selection of products has enabled us to not put all our eggs in one basket, and to maintain our volume even when any particular segment slows.”

Other key factors in the company’s success, says Clark, has been its accounting practices and financial management, as well as an aggressive sales force that has developed good relationships with the architects and helps them specify their products.

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is not enough for a company that has always looked toward the future. Five years ago Bonitz embarked on a complete re-engineering of the company, from the president down to the most recently hired employee. “We were hit by the recession like everybody else, so we decided we needed to really streamline and improve quality,” Clark says.

But Bonitz went further than most. It initiated a quality control process that involves looking at all of its operations and processes, analyzing them and finding ways to implement them in a more efficient, cost-effective and quality-oriented manner. “We decided to invest time, money and energy, as well as put somebody in charge of the entire program,” Clark says. “We are now in the process of setting benchmarks, goals and measuring results.” It’s basically a five-year program, which began in 1992. It took the first year just to get everybody involved, then two years to design the program. Planning has just been completed and implementation will be complete in 1997.

All company personnel are affected by the change, including those at the top. “We’ve gone from a top-down management style to redefining processes and empowering decision making to the person who should be making the decisions,” Clark explains. “We’re set up now in more of a teamwork fashion—less adversarial, with less attention and blame on the individual, and more focus on improving the process. We’ve also spent a lot of time and money setting up in-house training programs, from administration to sales to production, especially in terms of safety and meeting OSHA requirements.” Clark adds that there is also considerable cross-training, especially among project and other management, sales, estimating and production.

The result, says Clark, “is that we’re earning more profit, with less work, and we are much more effi-

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cient. Internally, the experience has been very positive. People have been buying into it, becoming more committed, more communicative; and upper management is trying to become more responsive to criticism. So everything is working better, in all the different facets.”

Taking the Lead

The same efforts toward a more efficient, less adversarial mode of communication is also extending to the external world. Part of the in-house training is designed to help employees communicate better with architects, designers, electricians and workers of other trades.

“We’ve also done a lot of partnering,” Clark says. “We have a new division that sets up project teams between the owner, architect, contractor, subcontractors or will even bring someone else in so we can facilitate the process and resolve problems up front,” says Clark. “We don’t try to promote ourselves ahead of the general contractor, but if there’s an absence of solid communication, we will take the lead in getting everybody together and setting out goals and priorities.”

What the company has always

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done, says Clark, is “follow the market. We’ve always been big on promotion but then we began to grow into a conglomerate, with many of our efforts at cross-purposes with each other.” What other large companies tend to do in this situation is begin to divest themselves of various aspects of their business that don’t quite seem to fit so that they can get back to their core business. “We redefined our business, set new goals and found the common thread we could all relate to. Then we found ways to communicate so that all of it is now our core business.”

Steel Moving Forward

But as various and comprehensive as the company’s services are, they all relate to the central core of the growing steel framing and panel market. The light-gauge steel industry, Clark recalls, got its start in the late 1950s and 1960s, with prefabrication arriving in the mid 1970s.

“Now, because of its lightweight seismic requirements, and lower cost of design and labor, it’s actually becoming predominant,” he explains. “Steel is taking place of the cement block backwall. Because it’s lightweight, it’s easy to engineer, easy to construct and lends itself to panelization.” Clark adds that steel is fast, flexible and has a range from 2 1/2-inch to 12-inch studs from 25 to 12 gauge, with a variety of flange widths that give engineers a wide selection of studs to design for meeting specific project criteria.

And Bonitz’s steel projects are not limited to schoolhouses on isolated islands. The company does a variety of work for not only schools but also hospitals, commercial office buildings and major malls. A current project is in the retrofitting of a high-end, lo-story building in Atlanta, in a 1950’s style. This office complex is block and brick concrete with masonry infill to which is being added a steel frame.
By tearing out all the masonry curtainwalls and replacing them with steel frame, the building is being upgraded from a C to an A grade.

The first floor is Cold Springs Granite, but the remaining nine floors are clad with a Dryvit Ameri-stone finish that color matches the granite perfectly, but with far less weight—around six pounds per square foot as opposed to the 30 to 50 pounds per square foot of the granite. The lighter weight also has

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allowed for the prefabrication of 20-foot panels so that the demolition and retrofitting is going on while the building is occupied.

One very attractive byproduct of this process, Clark says, is that by using the steel frames to bypass the concrete column and grid, “we basically added 12 inches of floor space around each floor, which added up to the equivalent of adding another floor of leasable space.” CD

About the Author
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