



F.L. Crane & Sons

SAFETY

The Company's Safety Program Safety Awareness and Reduces

By Michael J. Major

“Basically, back in 1990, we were just like most people when it came to safety; we'd say, 'You all be careful,' and hope for the best," recalls Travis Holiman, safety coordinator of the Fulton, Miss.-based F. L. Crane & Sons, Inc.

But the company knew something had to be done. A rising accident rate had taken a toll on insurance rates. Moreover, at that time, many insurance companies were pulling out of Mississippi workers' compensation coverage, and it was difficult to simply get insurance. And safety was becoming a major consideration for owners and general contractors when awarding work to sub-contractors.

But instead of just tackling the problem, the company decided to put

itself among the "leaders of safety management," to be "in the forefront



From left to right: Chip Crane, Jimmie Crane, Johnnie Crane, Travis Holiman and Mike Heering

Knows That PAYS!

Dramatically Increases Workers' Compensation Costs

of safety nationwide,” Holiman explains.

The results have been impressive. One good way of measuring safety improvement is to use the experience modification rating for workers' compensation insurance. In 1990 the company's EMR was 1.3; today it is 0.6. If, for example, the base rating requires the payment of \$10 in insurance premiums for every \$100 worth of labor, this means the cost to the company went from \$13 to \$6, for a savings of \$7 for every \$100 worth of labor.

“With our large payroll, this represents a significant savings,” Holiman says. “And this doesn't include the work time saved from the drop in the number of accidents and the severity of accidents.” Moreover, Holiman explains, since 1990 the company has grown from

185 employees to more than 700, but the dollar amount paid for insurance is less now than what it was in 1990.

Successful Safety Program

How did F. L. Crane & Sons achieve this success?

“First we called all 185 employees together, explained our situation and asked for their assistance and cooperation in improving our safety program,” Holiman says. “The response was impressive, and employee interest and support has been consistent since then.”

The first steps included initiating a pre-employment and post-injury drug-screening program, a pre-employment safety orientation and an education program covering a multitude of safety

issues relating to the construction industry. Safety compliance officers were added to the staff to inspect job-site safety conditions and implement

The educational process is ongoing, with meetings, newsletters and updates on new OSHA regulations, such as the new one on scaffolding.

necessary corrections. Foremen assumed responsibility for ensuring

that their crews worked in compliance with OSHA standards.

“The first year we saw a dramatic drop in the number of accidents, near-misses and injuries, as well as a decrease in the severity of injuries received. That trend continues today,” Holiman says. “Not that we don’t have our problems; we will never be perfect. But now we all work together to continually improve our safety program and working conditions for all of us. Our goal is to have all employees go home at night with all their pieces and parts in the same working order as when they reported to work.”

In terms of the drug-testing program, senior vice president Michael Heering

Incentives play an important role in safety, but they have to change periodically so that they adapt to changing employees and new job situations.

says that the company benefited through good timing, by being a step ahead of other construction companies that have since moved in the same direction. “Our pre-employment drug screening turned up 40 percent when we started, or four out of every 10 people tested were drug positive,” he explains. “But after three months, the rate dropped to 7 percent.”

Heering attributes this dramatic drop to the fact that word got around quickly, and drug-inclined workers saw they had much better chances of getting employment with a more lenient outfit. “We were getting the better workers while other construction companies were getting the dregs,” Heering says. “I recently talked to a construction business owner who was getting a 75 percent pre-employment drug positive rate.”

There are now three safety compliance officers, whose main job is to drive around to various work sites to make sure all the required safety procedures are in place. When asked whether there is enough to do to justify these three full-time employees, Holiman laughs. She explains that each officer has to check out some 65 to 70 jobs that are going at any one time, in anywhere from seven to nine states. “Three men on a three-day job is just as important as a several-week, 150-man job, because a worker could fall and break his back from either job,” she says. “The company has now grown from home base in Fulton to three other Mississippi offices, in Boyle, Florence and Southaven, as well as offices in Austin, Texas; Angie, La.; and Tuscaloosa, Ala.

Education Continues

The educational process is ongoing, with meetings, newsletters and updates on new OSHA regulations, such as the new one on scaffolding. In fact, one of the company’s major exposure to serious injury came from falls, so fall protection and the proper erection of scaffolding and guard rails were among the company’s first priorities. The foreman is free to substitute his own safety topic for any

particular meeting, if he finds it more pressing. But, overall, a variety of subjects is covered. These include personal protective equipment, tools and equipment safety, ladder safety, scaffolding and lift safety, fall protection, assured grounding, housekeeping, electrical and laser, lifting, respiratory protection, hazard communication, drug and alcohol, vehicle safety and fire safety.

Heering reports that incentives play an important role in safety, but that they have to change periodically so that they adapt to changing employees and new job situations. Heering reports that the newest program, which is very successful, groups crews of four workmen and a foreman together. Drawings for prizes are made on a quarterly basis for those crews that have had no accidents requiring medical treatments, no vehicle accidents, the maintaining of assured electrical grounding practices, no OSHA citations, and the foreman turning in his reports of his weekly safety meetings.

“The program is designed to create peer pressure and encourage people to work together,” Heering says. “If any one person gets careless, our hope is that his fellow workers and foreman will correct that behavior before it gets too far out of line.” The names of eligible crew members go into the pot, and the winning worker receives a monetary award of not less than \$1,000. If anyone from a particular crew wins, then the foreman also gets \$1,000.

Company History

The company was started in 1947 by F. L. Crane, who later passed the business on to his sons, Jimmie, who is now chief executive officer, and Johnnie,

who is president. The third generation also is actively involved, for Johnnie's son, Chip, executive vice president, joined the company in 1982 and became one of the owners in 1992.

When the company began, it was basically a plastering company but then evolved into drywall, acoustical, exterior insulation systems, fireproofing, ceramic tile, floor covering, computer access floors, moveable partitions and industrial noise control. As says Chip Crane, "We try to pick up something new all the time."

"We can offer so many phases to the general contractor-from closing the building to laying down the floor cov-

ering-that we can stay competitive," Crane says. "So the general contractor has to deal with only one rather than several subcontractors."

Just as the company offers a variety of services, so too it serves a variety of customers. "These things seem to go in cycles," Crane says. "Right now we are doing more hospitals and wellness centers, whereas that market had dried up a few years ago. And, a few years ago, we were getting into casinos, which were very hot, though that market is settling down now."

But it was the new casino market, which the F. L. Crane & Sons managed to get into before many others, that was

responsible for fueling much of the company's rapid growth. The company hired local employees to do that work,

It was the new casino market that was responsible for fueling much of the company's rapid growth.

then, when the casinos were finished, they searched out other sorts of work to keep their jobs. "If we had simply sent

our own employees, the housing costs would have added 25 percent to the payroll costs," Crane says. "The casinos helped us get our foot into markets where we had never been before, and we just decided to stay there."

Keeping Everyone Happy

One of the key reasons the company has been able to move into new markets, such as casinos, Crane says, "is because we load up with manpower for fast-track jobs. For some people, money is not the main consideration but the time frame is. One project might require 30 men, another might take 100. We try to keep everybody happy. I don't know of any schedule we

Three safety compliance officers drive around to various work sites to make sure all the required safety procedures are in place.


haven't met, but some of them have been tough-such as the building of a casino in 16 days."

Crane reports that the company's dramatic growth has seen the number of estimators grow from six to 20. He says his new estimating system "allows us to do cutting-edge estimating faster and more accurately, for we're able to digitize the drawings instead of hand measuring them. Once we get that we can get a good material list and break the job out any way we want." The com-

pany uses the system to help architects and general contractors with their budgets, often getting negotiated work out of the process.

The Cranes are 25-year members of The Association of the Wall and Ceiling Industries—International; Jimmie Crane is a past AWCI president. Also, in 1994, Jimmie Crane was presented the Pinnacle Award, AWCI's highest honor, for his contributions to the industry and the association.

“We’ve always been a great supporter of AWCI, and always get a lot back from it, especially in terms of education,” Chip Crane says.

“Since we began concentrating on safety in 1990, our annual sales have multiplied fivefold,” Crane says. In other words, he continues, “Good safety is good business.” 

About the Author

Michael J. Major of Anacortes, Wash., is a free-lance writer for the construction industry.