What Larry Martin, chairman and chief executive officer of G. Earl Martin, Inc., Terre Hill, Pa., likes to do for pleasure on Sunday afternoons is go out riding in his horse-drawn buggy.

Unusual? Not in Lancaster County in south central Pennsylvania. Martin’s Amish and Mennonite neighbors do it all the time. Martin feels quite at home in this very conservative part of the country. Not that he’s a part of these particular religious traditions. He couldn’t quite live as if he was in a previous century and still keep abreast of all the modern products he needs for his wall and ceiling business. But Martin certainly does believe in traditional values, in terms of both his business and family. In fact, it’s really impossible to separate the two.

G. Earl Martin got into the business by plastering silos. But this was basically summer work, so he moved into plastering buildings. When he got laid off because of a lack of business, he decided to go after his own business and started his company in May 1954. His wife, Arlene, had worked as an office manager and bookkeeper, so she handled the financial end while he did the jobs.

It was a mom-and-pop business in more ways than one. The couple had six children over a span of 18 and one-half years: Larry, Linda, Lonnie, Lisa, Loren and Ladd, most of them ending up working in the business.

Larry, 50, recalls starting to go off to work with his dad, at age 6, in a 1949 Dodge truck. This began a pattern followed by all four of the boys, working in the business from an early age, after school and on weekends and vacations. The boys earned their own way to college, and, when it came time for the fall semester, Larry says, “I would think that maybe I didn’t want to go to school, but I knew that’s what I had been working for. My dad kept us going to school or working for school. It was the old-fashioned work ethic.”

After graduating from Elizabethtown College, Larry worked for two years in children’s services and then joined the business in 1972. He began taking over the field management and estimating from his dad, who gradually move into semi-retirement (at age 74, though, he still comes in to help). A year later, Lonnie arrived with an associate’s degree in accounting, to take over the
financial end, so his mother could retire to be a full time homemaker.

Jonathan Frank, who married Larry’s sister, Lisa, had a background in commercial framing and drywall, and he wanted to be a part of the Martin family business. Today he heads up the framing and drywall division.

Brother Loren, after graduating with honors from Elizabethtown College, came to work full time in 1985. He spent 10 years developing the plaster division, which he now heads.

Ladd came to work shortly after graduating from high school in 1984 and is the top field foreman.

Lonnie, in 1994, decided to sell his part of the business. He now teaches business and finance at the Lancaster Bible College.

**In the Beginning . . .**

In the 1950s and 1960s the business was primarily residential lath and plaster. When the new generation came on board in the early 1970s, plastering was losing out to drywall, so the company began training people to install drywall.

“We got back to our plastering beginnings with the arrival of EIFS,” says Larry Martin. “One of the main distributors for Dryvit in this area was the Manning Company, which got us started with that specialty.”

As the company progressed into the 1980s, it started doing light-gauge metal framing for small commercial jobs. The company is now primarily exterior plastering (mostly EIFS and stucco) and residential drywall. By the mid-1980s, the company had settled into its present structure of three divisions: commercial metal framing, drywall and acoustical ceilings; residential drywall; and both residential and commercial plastering, primarily the latter, the majority of which is EIFS.

The first division will bring in about $5.5 million this year, and the latter
two about $2 million each. Employees number about 125.

“One of the nice things about EIFS is that it helps you provide a total system,” Martin says. “We’ve done several retirement homes in which we’ve done just about all of the walls, drywall on the inside and EIFS on the outside, with ceilings and the metal framing. EIFS was once just considered an insu-

G. Earl
Martin started by plastering silos. But this was only summer work, so he began plastering buildings.

lation cladding. Now it offers multiple design possibilities in various shapes and colors and gives a building real character.”

Martin adds that one niche he has carved out for himself is custom or upscale home where quality and good service matter, and EIFS helps out in this regard.

For both residential and commercial work, Martin says, “The directives I’ve always given to my superintendents is, ‘Say what you can do, then do what you say.’ We try to give value in the sense of managing the job, adhering to the schedule, getting the job done within good time and within the budget,
giving honor to both the commitment and the quality”

Good Examples

“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” is, of course, a truism. But it’s one that struck true for Martin, who saw his father exemplify it in practice.

“He always told me not to ask anybody to do something I wouldn’t do myself. He told me how various employers had treated him, and I saw how he treated the people who worked for him. It made an impression on me,” Martin says.

One result is that in an industry plagued by the problem of attracting qualified employees, Martin has been successful in attracting and retaining qualified help. The business is 44 years old, and several employees have been with the company for more than 30 years.

One of the payment methods incorporates a bonus into it. Management shares with the employees the savings made from the labor and the job. On the other hand, people are not paid at a piece rate, which might encourage a narrow focus and cutting corners.

“We use the bonus system to get away from the piece-work mentality, Martin says. “People are paid by the hour, along with the bonuses for efficiency, benefits and profit sharing. We want everybody to be concerned not with just their particular job but rather the finished product as a whole.”

As a help to the employees, the company has about 70 trucks to get them to their jobsites, so they don’t have to drive their personal vehicles.

Management with Style

In terms of management style, Martin says he is a “participating, consultative manager. I like to have good people around me. I don’t like to make all the decisions myself or to simply dictate them. I prefer to talk about challenges, possibilities and options, and then give a lot of freedom. I believe that the more
people make their own decisions, the more they buy into them. After all, the people here are compensated by earning a percentage of the bottom line. If they make the right decisions, they do well financially. I like to give people as much autonomy as possible.”

He adds that though the three separate divisions are each very dependent on the company for financial management, they go after their own jobs and run their affairs according to their own management style.

In this regard, Martin says, “I credit our parents with the ability to give responsibility, then step back and get out of the way, without trying to maintain control or micromanage.”

Along these same lines, Martin says that his stable, conservative approach to money management also stemmed from the way his parents had run the business.

“My mother always made sure the check books balanced, the financial statements were made on a regular basis and we never spent more than we had,” Martin says.

The same attitude continued to the next generation. The company works with stable businesses and has good credit procedures in place.

“We haven’t done much creative financing, but have pretty much paid our way,” says Martin. “We’ve never gone out on a limb financially. For instance, when we started buying trucks, we bought used vehicles. Even now we do our best to maintain them, so we keep them for about 10 years and get the most out of them.”

The company has a good long-term relationship with the same bank the first generation did business with.

The company has also been involved with the Association of the Wall and Ceiling Industries-International since the early 1980s. Martin found the programs targeted toward young executives very valuable when he was younger, and he believes the association is an ongoing source of education and ways to better serve both the industry and its customers.

Meanwhile, both the family and business continue to evolve together. Martin has recently promoted his brother, Loren, to president and chief operating officer.

“One of my continuing primary responsibilities is to oversee contract administration,” Martin says. “And the plans for me are to be involved in more strategic long-range planning.”

As part of his role in taking the long-range view, Martin’s activities with AWCI and Associated Builders and Contractors is to put the brakes on increasing government regulations and to find ways to attract young talent to the industry.

Family Matters

The six the Martin children are married and each have children of their own. All of them, numbering about 30, meet on a monthly basis.

Larry has been married for 28 years to Lena Mae. And Larry is doing his part to bring his son, Lament, 16, into the business, as his father did for him.

He says, “Lamont spends his summers and vacations driving delivery trucks, and, after school (except during wrestling season) works in the warehouse.”

Which means that, before too long, Lamont’s dad will have more leisure time to tool around in his horse and buggy.

About the Author

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