“Every year I’d look at the new list of AWCI members, and I never saw anybody in Vermont, so I thought it might not be a bad idea if I was the only member in Vermont,” says Giles Turgeon, president of Green Mountain Drywall, Inc., Wallingford, Vt.

So Green Mountain Drywall became a member of The Association of the Wall and Ceiling Industries—International in 1997. But it wasn’t the first time AWCI came into play in the company Giles’ father, Herve Turgeon, who founded the business in 1970, “always got Construction Dimensions magazine,” his son recalls. “He felt it was very informative in terms of both the products advertised and what was in the articles. It got to the point where all the main employees were given copies, and they would come back with questions or ideas.”

The elder Turgeon did primarily residential work, along with a few condominiums, so he didn’t feel that great an impetus to join the association. However, with the new generation, the company turned to commercial work. Giles recalls, “AWCI seemed to become more and more relevant to what we were doing. I would read an article or an ad that recommended a laser or a plumb bob. Now I have seven or eight of them, and the guys won’t work without one.”

People move slowly but surely in this rugged New England state. It took a while for the company to join AWCI, and might take a while longer before it actively participates in many of the organization’s activities. “AWCI has some great seminars and I’d really love to get more involved some day,” Turgeon says. “But right now we’re just so busy building the business.”

**Residential or Commercial?**

A bit of history tells why Herve raised three sons into the business: Giles, 32, is president; Robert, 36, is vice president; and Daniel, 34, is secretary-treasurer. Giles tried college, but as he says, “it didn’t work out, and my dad told me he had something better for me to do.” Robert and Daniel went into the business right from high school, where all three had worked part-time and summers for their dad. Giles credits his dad for spotting his sons talents and pointing them in the right direction. Giles, with the management aptitudes, oversees the office and does much of the estimating and project management. Robert is a project supervisor and head of the drywall finishers, and Daniel is a project supervisor.

Herve turned over the business to his three sons in 1988. During the next couple of years, the economy went sour and the bottom fell out of the residential market. So the elder Turgeon decided to retire. Was there any big disappointment on either side?

“No,” Giles responds. “My dad had been through bad times himself. His advice was to go to work for a competitor if you have to, but just keep the doors open and sooner or later the business will come back.”

And that is what the younger generation did. Robert and Daniel went to work for a competitor in Burlington, while Giles did small jobs just to keep things going. Then a second competitor came into the area and hired all three brothers to work on a supermarket project. This was completed in 1992. “As I was working on this, I thought to myself why couldn’t we be doing this with our own company?”

The brothers went to the contractor, Engelbergh Construction, one of the largest in the state, and asked to do the rest of the plaza. Because they had done such a good job on the supermarket, they got the job. Giles gives a lot of credit to Robert Yelinski, who first hired the three brothers and who, he says, “is recognized as one of the top crew supervisors in the state.”

Yelinski, who lived in Southern Vermont and did not want to travel to the north to go to work, decided to work for Green Mountain. He was instrumental in hiring the first half dozen or so highly qualified craftsmen. This was the turning point for the company, and they now began to grow, not as a residential but as a commercial outfit.

For the first few jobs, Turgeon acknowledges, “We weren’t very good at estimat-
ing commercial projects. It was a little bit like throwing darts. We didn’t make much money, but we didn’t die. And we got much better as we went along.”

Excel at Quality

What the brothers were good at from the start was the quality of the work. They had a top supervisor in Yelinski, who brought on good men. And the three brothers had the expertise and values they gained from their father. “My dad always taught us that when you go back to a job to fix what you should have done right the first time, that’s where you lose money. So we do it perfect the first time, no matter what the effort. In terms of our drywall finishing we hang perfectly. That’s where it starts.”

They worked up to their first big job, a $600,000 contract for a K-12 school in Windsor. Other work includes a $480,000 effort for the three story headquarters for the Orvis company in Arlington, a five-story ski resort hotel in Stratton for $600,000 and a current $1.5 million project for Williams College.

Green Mountains rise was aided by the revitalization of a long stagnant economy in Vermont. Interestingly enough, there is not much conventional industry in this small state. But the state put aside big funds for all the schools and many, especially the colleges, started putting these dollars into building. Also, the ski industry, along with the accompanying hotels and resort facilities, are attempting to, as Turgeon says, “become another Colorado, and with the good snowy winters over the past couple of years, they seem to be succeeding.” He adds that over the past few years, malls, shopping centers and motels are booming.

Best of all, as far as Green Mountain is concerned, there’s virtually no competition. “There are a couple of bigger ball players in the north, in Burlington, but they’ve been busy, so we’ve not butted heads down here. Competition-wise, we’ve been lucky.” Turgeon says.

But there is competition in the residential market, which is, Turgeon says, “very cut-throat, with guys in a station wagon with ladders who say they’re in the drywall business and come in at half-price bids.” However, these people can’t get bonded and are not insured so are no threat in the commercial arena, where Green Mountain now does all its work.

But, if there’s not much competition at the moment, isn’t there the danger that it will come in the future? Turgeon doesn’t think so. The reason is because of the nature of the geography in Southern Vermont. Unlike the northern part of the state, which boasts a large city, all of the towns in the southern half are small. And there are no highways. Therefore, to get to the jobs scattered throughout many small towns, it takes an hour and a half to get there. This is not appealing to any competition that might want to move in. And this, in fact, is a hardship for the workers at Green Mountain. The 65-70 mile radius that the company encompasses crosses just over the border of three other states: New York, New Hampshire and Massachusetts.

Moreover, although business is very good for this company, with some 45-50 employees, there’s not the sort of over-abundance that might attract a big competitor.

In fact, Turgeon says he is “seriously considering” cutting back, for the company is growing a little too large for comfort. Once the brothers got their feet on the ground with their first commercial jobs, they set goals of $500,000, $750,000 and $1 million for 1992, 1993 and 1994 respectively. They met these goals, and this year are going to hit in the range of $3 million to $4 million.

But big is not necessarily beautiful in a state like Vermont, which would rather have scenic back roads than superhighways. “As we get larger, the profit margins get smaller and it’s harder and harder to get good workers to maintain our standards,” Turgeon says. “We’re thinking of dropping back to the $2 million level.”

Maintaining a quality work force is no small issue with Turgeon. From the start, he’s hired high quality workers and paid them well from the start, along with health insurance, a retirement plan and company trucks for the supervisors. “With the Vermont economy fairly good and only a 3-4 percent unemployment rate, we’re having a hard time finding qualified guys. Nobody is looking for work.”

Turgeon says that there are also no technical schools or training facilities in the area to bring along younger craftsmen into the business.

“I read in Construction Dimensions how other members throughout the country face this same problem and how they are addressing it and some of the seminars AWCI has in this area.”

Who knows? If Turgeon cuts back on some of his business, he might find he has the time to take in some of the AWCI seminars.

About the Author

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