By Thomas G. Dolan

If you work hard, one day blends into the next, and it can seem as if nothing really changes. But, as it is often said, the one constant in life is change. And the one constant in the recollection of the nine wall and ceiling contractors interviewed for this article is how much the industry really has changed over the past 25 years.

The very nature of the work, the craft itself, has changed.

“Twenty-five years ago, the industry was all lath and plaster, and there was..."
no such thing as metal studs in drywall finishes as there is today,” says Ed Bruursma, vice president of The Bouma Corporation, Grand Rapids, Mich.

“The tradesmen have all changed,” continues Bruursma, who has been in the business for 29 years. “Before, there was a large use of latherers. But today that trade is virtually nonexistent. Carpenters do all of the metal stud framing and drywall hanging. Likewise, the plastering trade has also decreased substantially. Years ago, plasterers probably constituted 50 percent of the labor force. Today, it’s luck if they make up 10 percent.”

Bud Conrad has been active in the industry for more than 50 years; he is chief executive officer of the A.E. Conrad Company, Minneapolis, and he distinguishes the changes over the last 25 years between exterior and interior work.

“All the outside work used to be stucco, cement and sand, traditionally about 7/8-inch thick,” Conrad says. “Now a good share of the stucco is in a new system in which you install polystyrene board, then a glass fiber mesh embedded in a 1/8-inch mixture of cement and acrylic-based material, then a 1/16-inch pre-colored acrylic finish coat is added. This system is relatively crack-proof and also provides insulation.”

In terms of the inside, Conrad says, “Traditionally, up until the 1950s, almost all buildings were plastered on the inside. But now most of the walls are gypsum board, with the joints taped. The change from plaster to wallboard came about because of economics; wallboard is cheaper and faster to apply. Plaster, which was a half-inch to three-quarters of an inch thick, took considerable time to dry because much water was needed in the mix.”

Over the years, more and more wall and ceiling contractors have also introduced flooring into their offerings. “Twenty-five years ago, there was a small amount of asbestos tile, terrazzo and ceramic tile,” Bruursma says. “Today there are all kinds of new floor finishes out there. These resilient floorings and new carpets are the choice of the designers.”

“We’ve gotten a significant improvement in materials, and much more availability of different types of materials,” adds Chip Crane, executive vice president of the Fulton, Miss.-based EL Crane & Sons, Inc., founded 58 years ago. Crane, himself in the business for 18 years, adds, “This, along with high-tech tools and equipment such as lasers and man lifts, computer estimat-
“If my father could see what I’m accepting as finished work, he would flip over in his grave.”

ing systems, fax machines and cell phones, well, it’s hard to see how we ever got by without those things.”

Yearning for Labor

Yet, though those interviewed report the quality of material has improved over the years, they cannot say the same about labor.

“One of the biggest problems is that most of the really good craftsmen have a lot of age on them,” says Bruce Peacock, president of the Garner, N.C.-based Peacock Drywall, Co., Inc., in business for 27 years. “No one seems to want to learn the trade anymore. It is a reflection of society in general. The labor force is production oriented, graded by the amount of work they put out rather than by the hour. The flip side of that is there is less craftsmanship.”

Peacock, who got into the business 15 years ago, and is the son of the founder, says, “If my father could see what I’m accepting as finished work, he would flip over in his grave. We pride ourselves as doing better than most, but we also have to do what the market dictates.”

In agreement is Dan Sheehan, who took over his family business, the Savannah, Ga.-based Dan J. Sheehan Company, which has been around 75 years, 30 under his direction. “I think most mechanics have no concept of how much better
their counterparts were years ago. On a scale from one to 10, they might they were are a 10. But they are not. And 25 years ago, the best were at a 20. I can’t say that I was a good mechanic 30 years ago, but by today’s standard, I would be considered excellent,” Sheehan says.

But Sheehan doesn’t put all the blame for this lack of craftsmanship on the mechanics themselves. “Management abdicated its responsibility to train their employees to the unions,” he explains. “But, as the unions weakened, they became more interested in collecting dues than training. And management did not step in to provide proper training. So now we have people who think they are overqualified but who are really underqualified. I am not blaming employees. Employers are just as guilty. And I’m not saying our company is above it all, though we’re doing our best to correct the situation.”

Another dimension to the problem is related by Fritz Reitter, president of Reitter Stucco & Supply Company, Inc., a company in Columbus, Ohio, that’s been in business for 83 years. “Long-term clients call and make me aware of a job, ask for a budget and, basically, what I should plan for,” Reitter explains. “But because of competitiveness and the way owners are looking at the numbers, they want a quick return. They are looking at initial costs rather than life costs, so they are driving the general contractors’ bids down, which has caused them to cut out a lot of quality even when they do not want to.

“I have heard complaints of generals who have to keep certain
costs within parameters, and have to use subs they would not choose otherwise,” Reitter continues. “This causes headaches, because you have new players on the job who do not have a clue as to how the others work. Years ago, when the same groups of subs worked together, they knew what to expect from the general and each other. The work was done more smoothly, quickly and with better quality."

The problem is then compounded, Reitter adds, “since the emphasis is on lower initial costs, the costs that should go into maintenance features are not invested, and that, along with the poorer workmanship to begin with, inevitably results in more repairs-by mechanics less qualified to do them.”

Moreover, even as the skills of the craftsmen deteriorate, changes in the business demand a different type of management than that provided by the hands-on owner of the past. George Simpson, president of Simpson Commercial Contracting, Inc., Birmingham, Ala., says, “It takes a more sophisticated person to run the business today. The trend has been from craftsman down to the more college educated-type person who can take on the increasing amounts of paperwork, especially that involving regulations and litigation.”

Who’s in Charge?

“The litigation aspect sure has changed things,” Reitter adds. “If you don’t cover yourself every which way, you’re opening yourself to much higher risks. It is almost as if the lawyers are making your decisions as to whether or not you do a job. If you don’t cover yourself, you might be taken to court by the general contractor, and that was something you never worried about before.”

“Your lawyer and accountant are now the most important people in your company,” Peacock says. “It used to be that everything was done with a handshake. A man’s word was his bond. No longer. The personal connection is gone. I think it’s a generational change.”

“The bureaucratic requirements have become excessive,” says Sherman Simmons, who has been in the business for 19 years and is president of the 50-plus year old company, the Las Vegas, Nev.-based company, M.J. DiBiase/Simmons Contracting. “Workers’ compensation has gotten much more technical. I think safety has swung to a degree that I personally consider unreasonable. Nobody wants an employee to be unsafe, but if somebody does not want any of the risks that are inherent in construction, he should do something else. And, if you criticize excessive safety reg-
Simmons also cites the problems of slower pay plus the problems resulting from increased competition. “Everybody is fighting for the same dollar,” he says. “And our market, especially, attracts a lot of out-of-state companies. People are sent here from their home office. They think they will like it here. A lot of contractors come and go.”

Ed Robertson has been in the business for 22 years. He is the secretary for the East Rochester, N.Y.-based R.W. Dake & Company, which has been operating since about 1960.

Robertson adds, “For us, the biggest change is the evolution of the delivery system, from the old general contractor to the construction manager, and now design-build. These new contractual relationships come with positive and negative changes: They provide a fairer shot to the subcontractor in terms of reduced bid shopping, but GCs and CMs are changing the subcontract to one that shifts the risk and responsibility away from themselves and on to the subcontractor. Another big change is the reduced quality of plans and specs provided to bidders.”

Another change, says Crane, “is we’ve seen the benefits of diversification in terms of both location and product. We’re trying to do more than one thing and pick up more and more new product lines.”

Another positive change, says Bruursma, is that “previously all work was gained through the hard bid, but a big share of the business now comes from developing relationships with owners, and doing their work on a cost-plus basis. So now, 50 percent of out work is negotiated, which is, of course, a big plus.”

Define “Growth”

Growth has certainly been a factor over the past 25 years. But growth does not necessarily mean the same thing to everybody. Simpson is probably typical in that he simply relates a growth of about three to four times to his current $8 million annually.

Bruursma says that Bouma has increased probably 10 times, to its current annual $80 million, but he adds, “The work force has doubled, and the office staff has quadrupled, with a huge amount of paperwork”.

“If we made the same amount of profit today that we did in our first year, we’d be better off today,” Sheehan says.

Generally, there’s more work today, but, as says Reitter, “We could do 30 percent more work if we had the available labor force.”

If you can get the labor, rapid growth is more possible today. “If we did a quarter of a million dollars a year in the first 10 years of our business, we were doing a lot of business,” says Peacock. “But
In 1974 ...

... “Streaking” became a fad among college students.

... The maximum national speed limit in the United States was reduced to 55 mph (for states receiving federal highway funds) and would stay that way for 22 years.

... Hungarian professor Erno Rubik designed the Rubik’s Cube. Sales peak at 100 million in 1980.

now we do about $5 million and have grown tremendously.”

Sometimes you grow not because you want to, but because you have to. “We haven’t wanted volume, and we wanted to stay about the same, but because of inflation, we need to do a higher volume. We hire the same number of men, about 60, as we did 50 years ago, to reach our $6 million a year volume.”

“Our growth has been slow and steady,” Robertson says. “I think, in our business, you can grow only so large if you’re in a medium-size market like we are. We’ve grown about 20 percent per year over the last five years, and we like our size.”

Yet sometimes growth is desired, and growth is good.

“We were doing between $13 million and $15 million in the 1970s, as far as the late 1980s,” Crane says. “But the 1990s, as far as the construction industry goes, have never been as good. This is as good as it gets. These are the good old days.”

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