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After a half century in business, N.B. West has the perfect formula for growth: They keep their promises and deliver personal service to their customers, regardless of the scope of the job

Last summer, when Millstone Bangert took on the project to repair approaches to the Poplar Street Bridge, they selected N.B. West to handle the asphalt work. If you've been in the St. Louis region for any time at all, you know that any project on the bridge would be one of the trickiest any paving contractor might face. It's a crucial point in the region's highway system, the most-traveled route across the Mississippi River in the area, densely packed with traffic even in off-hours. Any work on the bridge has to be done quickly and efficiently.

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N.W. West —Continued from page 67

That challenge was nothing new to West—the company has done work on thousands of miles of roadway in Missouri during its five decades—but its approach to the Poplar Street Bridge project may well stand as a microcosm of its business philosophy: to find out what its customers need and to get it done the right way, on-time and in-budget.

The entire job called for the repaving of four approaches to the bridge on the Missouri side of the river. The contractors would complete one approach each weekend for four weekends in the middle of summer. To make it even more crucial, that was also peak travel time for Midwesterners crossing the river to and from their vacations. As if the company needed any more pressure, the agreement was that each weekend, they had to finish work before Monday morning rush hour. If they didn't, area commuters would face a major headache.

Because of their role in the project, West became something akin to the anchor in a relay race: the last company on the job on the weekend. To meet the short schedule, West's crews rolled out of bed early on four Sunday mornings—many of them after already working a six-day week—opened the company's asphalt plant by five a.m., loaded up their trucks, and were on the jobsite by 6:30.



Norm West (founder), 1956

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N.B. West —*Continued from page 68*

On four Sundays, the company faced the challenge—and on four Sundays, the company was finished by 1 p.m., in plenty of time to allow the bridge to re-open for Monday morning rush hour.

"This is not really anything unusual for us," said West vice-president Jim Fitzgerald. "It's not an exciting story: every day, on every job, we come up with some solution for the customer that helps them expedite their schedule or solve a problem.

"Our customers have come to expect that from us; it's part of the reason they continue to use us."

As Fitzgerald said, "it's nothing flashy—but it's a way of doing business that has allowed N. B. West (which celebrates its fiftieth anniversary this spring) to grow from a small company paving residential driveways and patching small parking lots to



Three generations of West Contracting: (from left) Mary West, retired; Larry West, president;

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and Colleen West, project manager.

one of the leading paving contractors in the region."

The company was founded in March 1956 by Norman West, with his wife Mary (Woolsey) West. Norm West got his start in the paving industry working for his father-in-law's firm, Geitz-Woolsey, moving up through the ranks with the company—working on crews doing paving, driving a truck, working as an estimator. At one point, he hoped he would eventually be able to own the company. Then his brother-in-law went to work for Geitz-Woolsey. It then became clear to West that if he was ever going to run his own company, he'd have to strike out on his own. Taking three employees along with him from Geitz-Woolsey, that was exactly what he did.

The early days for N.B. West were fairly typical for a new,

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N.B. West—

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family-run business in the 1950s. The Wests set up an office in a finished room in the basement of their three-bedroom ranch home in Maplewood. During the days, Norm West and his crew would do asphalt paving for homes in the area. In the evening, he came home, showered, and changed into clean slacks and a dress shirt to call on prospective customers and write bids. His wife ran the office and handled the paperwork.

Because of the regional home construction boom in the 1950s—and because of West's growing reputation for delivering what he promised, when he promised it—business was good. Within a year or two, the company hired another estimator—Hock Rombauer, nephew of the woman who wrote the classic *Joy of Cooking*—and moved out of the Wests' basement.

Their first "office" was actual-



Asphalt plant manager Darren Morris reviews plant with Larry West.

ly in the body of a public service bus, located on property West's father-in-law owned and in which West installed desks over the wheel wells. After a year or so there, the company relocated to its first permanent office, in a building not far from the compa-



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the latest improvements to the Sullivan asphalt

ny's present location near Brentwood and Manchester in St. Louis County.

Over the company's initial five or six years, it focused specifically on residential projects but in the early to middle 1960s, made

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A large, high-contrast black and white photograph of a hand holding a pen, writing on a document. The hand is in the foreground, and the pen is positioned over the text. The background is dark and out of focus.

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N.B. West —*Continued from page 73*

a gradual shift into commercial work; by the next decade, it was doing projects for municipalities and counties, and eventually moved into the highway industry.

By the middle 1970s, the company was also successful enough that it began expanding, first by opening an office in Sullivan, Missouri.

"My mother and father were from that area," remembered Larry West, the company's current president. "They spent a lot of weekends going (to that part of Missouri) and saw a need there for the kind of work they did."

Once they were operating west of St. Louis, West also decided it would be prudent if the company opened an asphalt plant in the area, because it would be more efficient and economical than transporting asphalt from a plant nearly 70 miles

away in St. Louis. Using company resources to open the plant would be a bit of a risk but, Larry West remembered, his father understood that if a company were to grow and succeed, it had to take a certain number of intelligent risks.

"Dad had the knack of seeing where there was an opportunity and taking advantage of it," West said.

That capacity to recognize opportunity and to take advantage of it—first manifested by the senior West while he ran the company and then continued during Larry West's tenure since he took over the company in 1990—has stood the company well.

From the early days when it had a handful of employees, West now employs close to 150 people. In addition to its office and asphalt plant in Sullivan and its main office in St. Louis County, it also has facilities in Pacific,

which it opened in 1987, and House Springs, which it launched in 1988. Three years ago, seeking to be more of a full-service paving contractor for its customers, it added a concrete division.

Beyond its investment in facilities, West also continues to invest resources in state of the art technology and materials. A few years ago, Missouri Department of Transportation decided to try a new type of asphalt pavement called Nova Chip. It is more porous than conventional asphalt, which means that it reduces standing water on highways and also decreases the spray from passing trucks, meaning that highways become safer during a rain.

"The highway department was looking for a contractor who would be willing to supply the material and Larry (West) was willing to take the risk to invest in it," Fitzgerald said. "Over the last five years, we've done over

ask listen solve

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80 percent of the work in the east-central part of Missouri (for Nova Chip) and it's going to be a significant part of our future highway business."

As its operation has expanded, West has become increasingly involved in important paving projects that have significantly enhanced the region's infrastructure. It has done work on major road projects on nearly every major highway in the region, and most recently—thanks to that new concrete division—completed projects at the intersection of Lindbergh and Lemay Ferry roads as well as a stretch of Olive Street Road west of I-270. It has also handled paving during the renovation of St. Louis's landmark Union Station, as well as the massive project to pave parking lots for Harrah's Casino.

At the same time, West has been much in demand to provide key asphalt work for many of the tennis courts in the region. Paving tennis courts may seem trivial in the context of the company's paving a major highway, however it gives us an insight into why the company has thrived while so many of its competitors during West's early years are now out of business: paving a tennis court requires extreme care and a kind of finesse that demands patience and accuracy.

"The tolerances are so tight," said Larry West. "They basically need to be flat but also must drain water and if there's even the hint of a seam, they'll call you back (to fix it)."

Larry West handles a key part of those projects himself, said Fitzgerald.

"He goes out (to the site) with a survey instrument and physically drives nails (into the ground) marking the height of the court, ties a string around the nail heads and says (to the crews), 'Okay, pave to the level of the string.'"

That sort of personal involvement on projects seemingly as small as a tennis court is symbolic of the kind of attention West gives to all of its customers.

"One of the things that sets us apart is that people don't see us so much as a corporation but as a family business," said Colleen West, Larry West's daughter, who joined the firm earlier this year as a project manager, following a degree in construction man-

agement from Purdue University and a two-year stint working for a heavy highway contractor in Indiana.

"You could think of it as 'family values,'" Larry West added. "Our customers give us a lot of trust; we have a tremendous number of people who call and say, 'You did my job 10 or 15 years ago and we want you to come back.' That always impresses me and that we have a lot of people who call and say, 'I was

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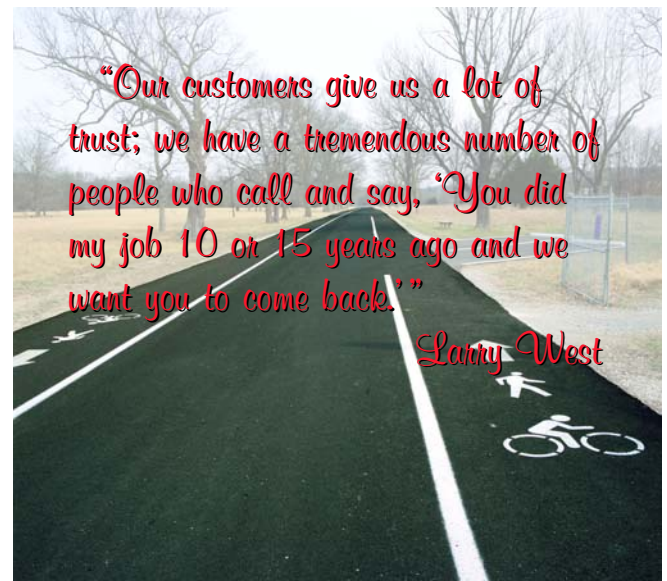
N.B. West —Continued from page 75

told you're the only one I should call for this job.' That kind of tradition is rare."

In the final analysis, the reason the company has grown over its five decades was not entirely due to the risks it has accepted but because of the way it has chosen to work with its clients.

"People choose us a lot even though we're not the lowest bid," Larry West said.

Added Fitzgerald, "We've seen steady growth ever since (the company's founding) but especially in the last ten years. We bring quality work at a fair price, but also a willingness to work with the general contractor or owner to solve problems. We show up on a project wanting to work hand-in-hand with a customer. We're not just one of those hit-and-run guys who are just there to collect a check."



West's customers are quick to praise the company for those very qualities.

"They have always been a contractor who has worked out well for us," said Ed Hassinger, district engineer for MoDOT. "That's been especially true in the last few years since Amendment Three (the "Smooth Roads Initiative") passed and we all of the sudden really needed contractors to step up and deliver and increase their productivity. Sometimes when you ask a contractor to do that, they sort of fall apart, unravel at the seams, unable to produce. But West has just continued to do an outstanding job."

"A lot of that comes from their good management. They've always been straightforward; they've always been willing and able to sit down with us and talk about issues that come up and figure out ways to solve them."

Added Pat McLain of J.P. McClain, "They've been doing work with us for just about 15 years and the reason we keep working with them is accountability as much as anything else. It sounds simple, but they show up when they say they're going to show up; they do what they say they're going to do; they don't cut corners. They're just extremely professional."

"They're pretty much the perfect sub-contractor," said Mark Kamp of Wachter Construction, a company that has worked with West for the last quarter century. "They are not always the least expensive bidder but they are timely in their submittals; they respond to our field superintendents when they call them with questions or concerns; they show up on time; they complete their work on time. They're just very dependable."



Now that the company has passed the half-century mark, it has some clear ambitions for the next half century.


"We'll continue moving forward as we have," Larry West said. "We must grab onto whatever new niche comes along and stay ahead of it, just as we have been doing. We'll continue to invest in equipment, employees and technology. We've seen other people in our industry fall by the wayside and we have no intentions of doing that. We can't just sit back and reap the rewards of our success." **CNR**



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