

Optimism in an unpredictable business—

Contractors have unlimited potential in industry

By CARL FILBRICH

In the construction business, there is always an element of uncertainty.

"A contractor is a gambler who never gets to cut, shuffle or deal." That instructive definition hangs on the wall at Jersen Industries Inc. in Waterford. John Jersen, president of the company, recently was elected president of the General Contractors Association of Eastern New York, a trade group that tries to take some of the risk out of a very risky business.

The association currently has about 30 members, all of whom operate businesses

within a 50-mile radius of Albany. They rely on the association for a variety of services, including training and safety programs, labor negotiations, and listings of projects coming up for bid. The association is part of the Eastern Contractors Association Inc., an umbrella organization that also includes other, more specialized contractor groups.

Jersen takes particular pride in the safety program offered by the group. When one of the member companies begins a construction project, James Bradt, safety director for the association, visits the site. He advises the site manager about any safety problems that he finds, and

also instructs workers on the excavation of trenches and earthworks, and the safe use of scaffolding and temporary electrical hookups.

"Safety is a very important issue in our business," Jersen said. "All our members want to run safe projects, and the association helps them do that."

The association also provides training programs for skilled workers who want to move up to the ranks of management.

Participants learn about project management and employee relations from members of the association and professional trainers. But currently, he said, there is a shortage of skilled workers who

are interested in becoming managers.

For high school students interested in a career in the building industries, the association runs an apprenticeship program in conjunction with the local Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES). Jersen thinks that this program will become increasingly important as the supply of skilled workers shrinks. He thinks that the current emphasis on math and science in high schools has come at the expense of courses in industrial arts, the starting point for students who want to become skilled workers.

"Not everyone wants to become a scientist," he said. "There are many young people who would be much happier in the building trades. And the opportunities are incredible."

Jersen thinks that the construction industry offers excellent chances for advancement, even without a college education. "It's easier for someone to move up in the construction business than in most other businesses I know," he said.

Jersen said that he can't remember a time when he didn't want to work in construction. He began his career as a civil engineer. After graduating from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, he went

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to work for General Electric Co.'s real estate and construction operation in Schenectady. From there he went to Sweet Associates Inc., a general contractor in Schenectady. He left six years ago to start Jersen Industries.

Jersen's thoughts on the opportunities available in the construction business were echoed by Anthony Caropreso, who manages the Eastern Contractors Association in Colonie.

"Two of the largest contractors in this area started out as bricklayers. If you have ambition and skill, you can go as far in this business as you want," Caropreso said.

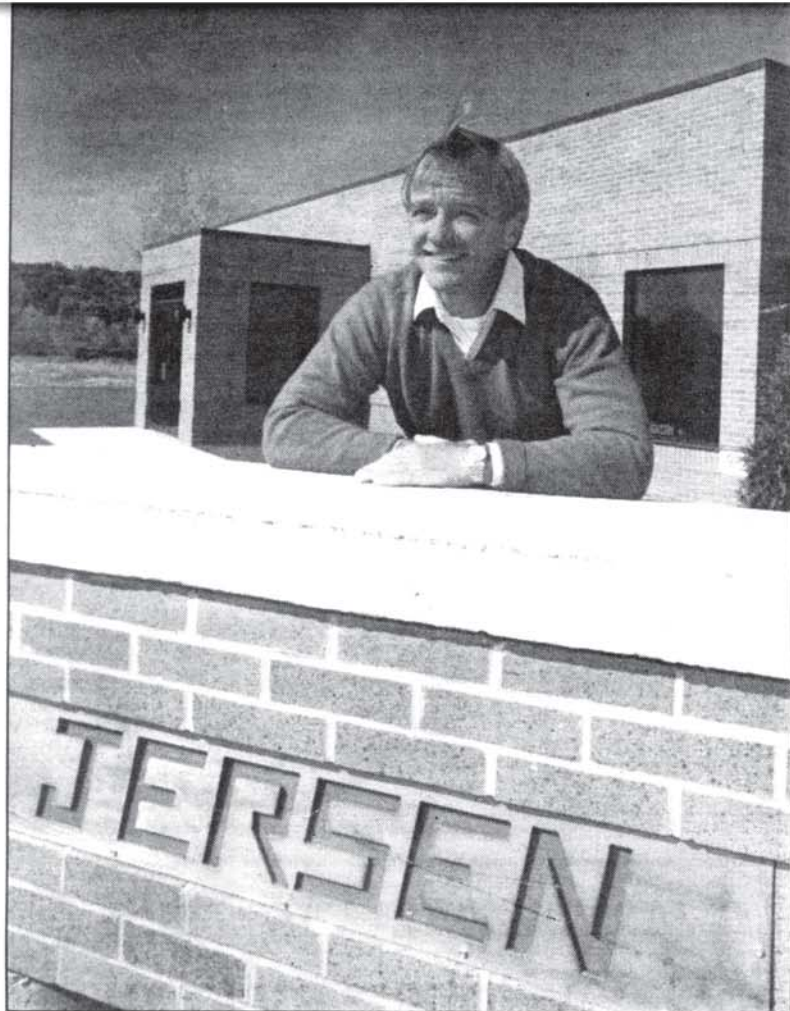
He also pointed out that there is plenty of room in the construction industry for small and medium-sized contractors. "The industry isn't dominated by one or two large companies," Caropreso said. "It's the last industry that I'm aware of that is as close to pure competition as you can get."

But the rewards of working in the building industry are not just financial. "You can drive around 10 or 20 years from now and show your children the buildings you worked on," Jersen said.

"There's a great feeling of accomplishment for everyone who works on a project," he said. "And you never have a chance to get bored, because there is a great deal of variety in the work. You work indoors and out. You get to use both your hands and your head. It's a satisfying way to make a living."

But there is also a great deal of uncertainty.

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DONNA ABBOTT

John Jersen, president of Jersen Industries Inc. of Waterford, is president of the General Contractors Association of Eastern New York, a trade group that is part of the Eastern Contractors Association Inc.

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tainty in the construction business.

"You have to learn to take the bad with the good," Caropreso said. "Skilled craftsmen make very good money. A journeyman bricklayer makes over \$21 an hour. But if he doesn't work, he doesn't get paid. There's no provision for sick time or vacations."

The same is true for contractors. Most never know how much work they will have six months or a year down the road. Their businesses move in cycles that often defy explanation. The contractors association helps its members cope with some of this uncertainty.

At the headquarters in Colonie for the General Building Contractors and the Eastern Contractors Association, there is a plan room that contains detailed information about construction projects in the area that currently are up for bid. Members receive a weekly newsletter that updates the status of these projects.

The ECA also manages negotiations with the six trade unions that represent most employees in the building industries; the carpenters, laborers, masons, ironworkers, teamsters, and operating engineers. In recent years, negotiations between contractors and the unions have gone smoothly, for the most part.

"We all have a common stake in the

business," Caropreso said. "I think that both the contractors and the unions recognize that."

The association also offers an arbitration panel to help settle disputes between employers and employees, and a grievance committee to address employees' complaints.

Although the association does not lobby the state Legislature on particular bills, it does try to inform the public about issues that it considers important. Jersen cites workers' compensation insurance as one of these issues.

"Everyone in our business wants to operate a safe shop," he said, "but the state offers no reward for a good safety record. Premiums for workers' comp are based on wages, not a company's safety history."

Despite these problems, Jersen thinks that there are great opportunities available to contractors in the state, particularly in the Capital District. He predicts that Colonie and southern Saratoga County will set the pace for growth in the area. His own development, Hudson Shores Industrial Park in Waterford, currently has two tenants, and he expects to add two more in the near future. In the next five to 10 years, he expects to construct 20 buildings on the site.

Like most contractors, Jersen is an optimist. In his business, it just doesn't pay to be anything else. □