

Built to last

Gundlach-Champion celebrates 100 years

By Cyndi Perkins

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HOUGHTON - Way back in 1898, Herman Gundlach Sr. started a construction business. In 1945, his son, Herman "Winks" Gundlach Jr., took the reins of the thriving company. One of the 100 oldest construction companies in the United States, Gundlach is still going strong. In fact, the fruit of its labors can be seen practically everywhere you look in the Copper Country - and throughout the U.P.

Schools. Stores. Office buildings. Industrial facilities. Banks. Apartments. Housing complexes. Recreational areas. Hospitals. Mining structures. From Crystal Falls to Ontonagon, downstate Flint to downtown Houghton, Gundlach-made buildings are an enduring, distinctive part of the regional landscape. The scope of the third oldest general building contractor in Michigan also extends to projects in northern Wisconsin, Minnesota and even Ohio. In 1985, the company joined with Champion Inc., formally becoming a division. It now operates as Gundlach Champion Inc.

The merger may have led some local folks to believe Gundlach had moved south. But the company is still based in Houghton, where it all began. The pleasant downtown waterfront offices harbor some very major undertakings that ensure the Gundlach influence will continue to be a key player in the construction trade for generations to come.

"We're probably the best-kept secret in the area," says Gundlach-Champion President Dan LeVeque, noting the business is the largest construction company in the U.P., with a \$5-million annual payroll.

Although he holds no financial interests now, Herman Gundlach Jr. maintains an active interest in the company, serving on its board of directors. An Emeritus of Counsel, the hale and hearty 85-year-old has not abandoned strong opinions about the kind of work that should be accomplished under the Gundlach banner. Proud of the family heritage yet modest about his own role in it, "Winks" Gundlach carries the torch for a high standard of excellence. While proud of what his family has accomplished, he's not one to rest on laurels. His eyes shine as he enthusiastically discusses projects under way or on the horizon. His idea of retirement is a far cry from sitting back in an easy chair. Instead, you'll find him at the office, in the thick of things. "I love it," he says.

The Gundlach family found a formula for success early on: think big, work hard, hire the best people available and do a good job on time. That philosophy is every bit as effective today as it was a century ago. Current projects include a \$12-million contract for the Michigan Tech Performing Arts Center, which will bring world-class entertainment to Copper Country audiences in a state-of-the-art facility and a tribally operated casino in Hannahville with an \$18-20 million price tag. The \$40-million Dow Environmental Sciences and Engineering Building represents the company's continued relationship with Michigan Tech, where practically every significant building on campus is a Gundlach product. The science and engineering building, situated on a campus

hillside (actually built into it) adjacent to the waterfront, is a civil engineering feat featuring outstanding innovations in structural steel and foundation work.

Suomi College, across the canal in Hancock, is another outstanding example of the mark Gundlach has made on the U.P. and the construction field in general - the majority of the buildings on America's only Finnish-Lutheran private college were erected by the general contractor.

Union labor is a vital cornerstone of company philosophy. "We have a very pleasant relationship with all of the trades," says Gundlach. "We have always been a union-oriented construction company. We find the quality and workmanship is easier to come by."

LeVeque adds that unions offer the company "the ability to get lots of qualified people quickly," which is an essential part of Gundlach's commitment to bringing projects in on schedule.

The company is also dedicated to the concept of construction work year-round, which definitely presents a challenge for Yoopers contending with snowfall. Years ago, it was considered a novel concept. Gundlach notes keeping workers on during winter months has proven to be wise both ethically and economically.

"That helped us hold good quality people. We didn't tell them 'come back in April,' " he says.

Instead of layoffs during harsh winter months, the company figured out how to frame in structures to keep workers working - and out of the worst of the cold. Pouring concrete was an exceptional challenge. Through its persistence in the belief that building doesn't have to be seasonal in northern climates, Gundlach established itself as a widely recognized authority on winter building. It was a pioneer in reinforced concrete construction.

"Winks" Gundlach has a tough time deciding on a favorite building. No wonder. He has literally hundreds upon hundreds to choose from. He recalls that Kay Hall, at Northern Michigan University, was a particular favorite of his father's. The vintage sandstone structure, erected in the early 1900s, was tabbed for replacement in the 1990s, despite a community group's efforts to preserve it. The D&N Bank building in Hancock, a mirrored high-rise that is a striking and indelible part of the Copper Country skyline, is also a stand-out.

But some of the most notable projects are not buildings. "We've done a lot of interesting projects in mining and mills," Gundlach notes.

"We do a varied kind of work. We don't limit ourselves to building buildings," explains LeVeque.

Boilers, precipitators, water-treatment plants and underground mining structures are among the wide array of projects Gundlach has tackled throughout its history. Current projects in this category include a pellet load-out facility at Empire Mine in Tilden. The company also regularly works with Louisiana-Pacific in Sagola. In addition, the company competed for and secured a three-year contract with the State of Michigan for Upper Peninsula projects that are being fast-tracked in lieu of the slower conventional bidding process. Essentially, this involves taking on work the state wants done as soon as possible but doesn't have time or resources to carry out itself in a timely fashion.

Another current project perfectly illustrates the company's longevity. Gundlach built Crystal Falls Elementary in 1912 and the high school in 1913. Now it's building the new educational facility. Due to its staying power, Gundlach has been a witness to the evolution of countless other endeavors. For example, the company built the original worker's camps at White Pine copper mine, as well as some of its processing facilities. Who knows? Someday it could very well be putting up new buildings or renovating current ones to suit new tenants as a new industrial park site grows on the site of the now-closed copper mine.

Adaptability isn't a new concept to the venerable construction company. These days, new kinds of partnerships are being formed in every facet of the business, including architecture, engineering and construction. "Our industry has changed drastically," explains LeVeque. "You look at the owner's needs and how you can fill those needs. It's not just building." Customers look for a total package, including overall supervision and coordination of all the elements that take a project from the drawing board to reality. In these instances, the contractor often takes the lead. Those involved in the group efforts agree that partnering creates an atmosphere of trust and cooperation that makes jobs run smoothly.

Both Gundlach and LeVeque warmly credit Champion's Bill Verrette, who heads up this construction division, for the foresight, cooperation and can-do attitude that is keeping Gundlach-Champion at the top of its field. "He's great to work with," says LeVeque.

In June, the company hosted a celebratory dinner for current and past Gundlach employees and their families. It was a time to share memories, take stock of accomplishments and look forward to a new century of building.

"This is an important year for us," says LeVeque. Asked what direction the company will take in the future, he says no whole-scale changes are planned. "Why would you want to mess with success? I see us doing a lot of the same things, while continuing to improve service and quality."

For more information on Gundlach-Champion Inc., contact the company at PO Box 278, 58 N. Huron Street, Houghton, MI 49931 or call 1-906-482-2480.