

Bill Rogers

OPCMIA Vice President - Retired



LEGENDS

My biological parents abandoned me shortly after I was born, and I was raised by my Great-Grandparents until because of their advancing age and declining health they could no longer care for me, which is when I was placed into foster care. My Grandfather was born in 1898 and had served in both WWI and WWII. After the war, he found work as a carpenter in the motion picture industry. He worked building sets for movies such as Abbot and Costello Meets Frankenstein and The Ten Commandments.

He put a hammer in my hand about the time I started to walk. I lived for a while at McKinley's Boy's Home in San Dimas, CA, but was ultimately placed with a foster-

family in Riverside. My foster father was a semi-retired plastering contractor named Lynn Rogers. He had once been one of the larger contractors in the area back in the late 50's and early 60's. His company did the work on the original Riverside Plaza, the first large scale shopping mall in the Inland Empire. By the time I came along in 1970, he was mostly working alone, doing backyard additions, re-color coating, and patchwork. My marching orders were very clear; I would NOT miss any school (I had previously been prone to ditching), and when I wasn't attending school, I'd go to work with him. I was 14.

Talk about a fish out of water. I'd never given a thought to how plaster walls were made, let alone thought I'd ever be involved in the process. Like most of us starting out young and green, my job was relegated to loading and unloading the truck, pushing a wheelbarrow, and washing everything up at the end of the day. By the time that first summer was finished, I was never so glad to be back sitting in an air-conditioned classroom. The next summer, I wasn't satisfied just doing the grunt work. I wanted to learn how to plaster (how hard could it be I thought...). So, my Dad made me a deal.

He said, "If you get caught up tending me, you can try using the tools a bit." I worked my butt off to get ahead of the old man so I could grab a hawk and trowel. I dumped the mud all over myself. Stubborn, and bound to show him I could do this, I kept at it. But when my he saw me start taking the mud off the back of the hawk, he called a halt to my efforts. He told me the

proper method of taking the mud off the hawk was from the front and explained why. "You can better control the amount of material you load on your trowel, and it comes off clean and neat." I objected, saying, "But my way is faster!" He said, "Learn to do it the right way and speed will come later." Of course, he was right. Throughout the rest of my high school years, I kept working with him during the summers and the occasional weekend. I earned enough money to buy my own car by the time I turned 16, something none of my friends could say. By the third summer, we reversed places on the scaffold. I was up spreading mud, and he was tending (and coaching) me. A month or so after graduation, he marched me down to the Union Hall and told the Business Agent (B.A.), David Kidd, "Sign him up, he'll make someone a good apprentice."

My first union job was with Clint Caston on the Riverside Convention Center (formerly known as Raincross Square). I fretted the night before, wondering what my new employer might have me do. I'd heard about plaster machines (Tommy Guns), but I'd never seen one used, let alone worked behind one. Dad said, "All the big companies use them, so you'll probably be pulling hose for a while." Not likely. The B.A. had told Clint's foreman, Larry Heath (who would later become my main scaffold partner and an important mentor to me, on and off the job), that I could handle my tools. So, on my first day as a union apprentice Larry tested that statement and put me spreading interior finish, "white-coat" or "putty-coat" depending on who you talk to. I passed the test.

A while later, working alone on the balcony overlooking the main hall, a man in street clothes leaned over the railing and started asking me all kinds of questions. "What kind of material are you using?" "Why are you doing things that way?" He kept pestering me so much that I was afraid the Larry might fire me for slacking off. I told the guy, "I'm sorry, but I need to get my work done before I get into trouble." He then asked me, "You're Lynn Rogers' kid, right?" Surprised that this guy knew my Dad, as he didn't look much like a plasterer to me. I said, "Yea, why?" He replied, "I used to work for Lynn; he fired me."

Without missing a stroke, I said, "You probably talked too much." He then laughed so loud they could hear him down on the convention center floor. He then told me, "My name is Yodi, I'm Clint Caston's partner." I didn't know if I should wash-up my tools or what. At any rate, I still had a job the next day.

As I began my second year, I heard that there was going to be a contest for apprentices up in San Francisco. The B.A. signed me up even before I could finish asking him questions. This contest has been held almost every year since, but this was the first time and no one really knew what to expect. It required applying a variety of finishes, which I knew I could handle, but it also included running a crown molding in place (in situ). I had helped my Dad patch a mold once, but I had never set one up, run it, and certainly never used a miter rod before. We didn't have an active apprenticeship school at that time in the Riverside area, so my foreman, Larry lent me a miter rod and copy of what he called the Dalton's Manual, a book originally published in the late 30's that had a chapter on making templates and running molds. Along with the book, Larry and my Dad talked me through the process. I built a

template and set up a bench in my backyard to practice, and after work every night I would run molds and block in miters over and over until the day I left for San Francisco. Well, I won the darn thing.

That night after the contest there was a big awards dinner, it seemed like a hundred people were packed in the room, dressed to the hilt. I was shaking hands with labor and management industry leaders from all over California, including, Rodger B. Wilt, Art DiGregorio, Everett Martin, Robert Scott, and John Moylan. Men who would play a big role in my later career. I even met some of the Union bigwigs from back in D.C. When I got home, Dad said, "Don't let it go to your head, you've got a long road to hoe." I was just 19, he was right, again.

I finished up my apprenticeship while working for C.F. Bolster. I was never out of work very long, it seemed about the time one company finished up a big project, someone else was starting one. I shuffled around and around between Caston, A. Lopez & Son's, Bolster, Berger Bros., and Orr Plastering. I was shooting fireproofing on a job in Ontario when word reached us that the Union B.A. had died of a heart attack. The funeral was held on a Saturday so that members could attend without missing work. As I walked back to my car from the gravesite, I heard this man with an Irish accent shout out, "Hey, laddie, wait a minute." The voice came from John Moylan, the plasterers B.A. from San Francisco who I remembered meeting at the contest awards banquet years ago. He asked, "Who is going to be your new B.A.?" I pointed at a couple of the older members who were also walking to their cars, "Probably one of them," I said. "No, that job needs a younger man, someone who cares about the future. You should run." I think I actually chuckled out loud at the idea. An hour later we parted, but not until he had planting a seed in my head.

The next day, I went down to the Union Hall and asked for a copy of the By-Laws, John had told me they would explain how the election of a union officer would work. The Secretary reluctantly gave me a little booklet and said that "someone else was going to run and that maybe I should wait until I was a bit older." I was 28. The night before nominations, that "someone" called me and asked if I was running. It was Don Smith, an excellent plasterer who I had worked with only once a few years earlier. I told him, "I am, are you?" Don said, "I would if I was 10 years younger, but I was wondering if you would let me nominate you?" That next night I got nominated, elected, sworn in, and began my career as a union representative. It was 1984.

So, what does a union representative do? I asked myself that a lot. Still do sometimes... A labor union's primary role is to represent and focus the voice of its members in negotiations with employers who are party to what's called a Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA). The CBA determines what the workers are paid, what types of fringe benefits they will receive (and how much all that stuff costs the employer). It also defines working conditions such as over-time, break periods, and safety rules.

My objective was to get the best deal for my members I could, but remembering what my Dad had said years before, "In order to pay union workers more money, union employers need to

make a profit.” One way a union helps preserve that opportunity is by organizing more workers to join the union and sign more employers to CBAs, leveling the playing field. The other way is to provide training to apprentices and advanced training to journeymen, especially as the industry shifts gears.

In the mid-80's, EIFS was only an emerging technology in Southern California, while today it's arguably the dominant exterior plaster system, at least on commercial construction, and I knew we needed to keep up with that shift in materials. I recalled stories about how the plasterer's union in the late 50s and early 60's turned down drywall taping. Labor and Management even joined forces and spent money on an advertising campaign to promote plaster and suppress the growth of drywall, “Knock on the Wall - Use Genuine Lath and Plaster” was the slogan. And even though some of our current crop of old-timers complained they didn't like the new acrylic materials; I wasn't going to repeat our mistakes of the past. Recognizing these responsibilities, I took an organizing course at L.A. Trade Tech and began teaching apprenticeship classes on Saturdays. I brought in representatives from Sto and Dryvit to help me not only teach but learn the materials better myself.

Over the next few years, we saw union market share in the Inland Empire grow and the number of apprentices increase dramatically. This success came to the notice of the union leaders in Los Angeles, and soon a merger of the two jurisdictions was agreed to. By 1990, I was teaching apprenticeship classes for the Southern California Plastering Institute (SCPI), back then the school was located at Heritage Square Museum, located along the old Arroyo Seco Fwy. Heritage Square is a museum of old Victorian era homes that were brought to the site for preservation and so that people interested in restoring such a home would have a resource where they can go and tour up close historically accurate restorations. We not only taught the trade at this site, but also had the pleasure of plastering the interior of a few of these beautiful old homes. My wife says I was never happier than when I was teaching at Heritage Square. She is right.

In 1992 I was elected as the head of Local No. 2, and in 1995, the Operative Plasterers' and Cement Masons' International Association (OPCMIA), the parent organization of our local union, decided to merge all of the plasterer local unions in southern California into one, creating Local No. 200, which still exists today. I was also elected as the head of that organization and challenged with bringing outlying areas such as San Diego and Bakersfield into the fold. In this broader role, I led the negotiating team for the Union with WWCCA and became the co-chairman for the various SCPI trust funds, pension, health & welfare, and training.

I sat across the table from many of the management leaders of that time. Peter Berger, Bob Heimerl, Jim Rutherford, Bill Martin, Gary Jaacks, Rob Bolster, Joe Krader, Mike Zellner, and of course, Ian Hendry representing WWCCA. I always found training to be the area of most agreement between labor and management. Better trained workers benefit everyone, including the construction end-user. Byron Dalton, in his book, Practical Plastering, Cement Finishing and Related Subjects (yes, that same book that helped me years ago) wrote:

“ Plastering and Cement Finishing never will become a lost art unless it be through the indifference or abuse of those engaged in the various branches of the industry – As the manufacture of the materials is more easily managed and less influenced by the vagaries of human nature, the greater responsibility rests upon the mechanic using the materials.”

Back in 1966, the OPCMIA, in partnership with the Association of Walls and Ceiling Contractors – International (AWCI), created the National Plastering Industry’s Joint Apprenticeship Trust Fund (NPI), an organization that operates over 50 pre-apprenticeship schools all across America, funded by the U.S. Department of Labor’s Job Corps program. In 2001, I was selected by the Labor and Management Trustees to become the Executive Director of that organization. The job clearly called to me.

I’m sure because of my experience as a foster kid who started learning the trade in his teens. Most of the Job Corps students come from broken homes, poverty-stricken areas, and many have spent time in foster care and all are between 16 – 24 years old. I went into the job with one goal: When a student graduated the program, they would make someone a good apprentice. The same words my Dad had used with the B.A. all those years ago when he took me down to sign up with the Union.

The General President of the OPCMIA, John Dougherty, and the other Trustees of NPI, including my old management friend from the SCPI Trust Funds, Bob Heimerl (followed by his son, Todd a few years later) offered me great latitude in the hiring and training of the program instructors. We established standardized curriculum and developed academic partnerships to train our instructors how to teach, which is very different than just demonstrating the work. Over time we went from being the lowest performing Job Corps contractor to the number one performer nationwide.

Somewhere along the way I was appointed as Vice President of the OPCMIA, and in 2016, became the Special Assistant to the General President. My role was to oversee and advise on all national training operations, including mentoring my replacement on the administering the Job Corps contract, chairing the committee to start up the brand-new OPCMIA International Training Fund, and to work with many of our smaller apprenticeship training programs across the country to evaluate their capabilities, and to offer recommendations on improving their outcomes. Once I felt these assignments had been sufficiently accomplished to hand them off, I set my sights on retirement. I’ve always loved spending time in the wilderness, especially the Rocky Mountains and the Pacific Northwest, and SW Idaho is centrally located to some of the most beautiful and remote parts of our country, so that is where I and my wife settled. Today I spend much of my time exploring trails in my Jeep, working in my Chesapeake Bay Retriever and tinkering in my woodshop. I’ve become an officer with a Freemason Lodge, a volunteer position that feels a lot like my old role as a union representative. It keeps me busy, useful, and out of trouble.

I’d like to thank my Grandfather for teaching me to enjoy working with my hands; my Dad for introducing me to the plastering trade; the Union for providing me with the opportunity to

learn, lead, and to teach; and the unionized plastering industry for providing this foster-kid an opportunity to earn a decent living while giving something back.

P.S. If you were wondering about my last name and my foster-father's being the same, that's no coincidence. He wasn't related to me by blood, and never adopted me. But out of respect and gratitude, I changed my last name to match his shortly after I turned 18. He would have been 100 years old this year.