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Properties

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Roadmap to Construction Excellence

The Ruhlin Company celebrates
100 years of success with
eyes on the path ahead

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100TH
ruhlin

Great People.
Proven Results.
100 Years.



FAMILY-FOCUSED FOUNDATION Based out of its headquarters (top left) in Sharon Center, Ohio, The Ruhlin Company prides itself on operating as a family-oriented business – literally and figuratively. The team (bottom) is made up of 100 salaried employees, including President & CEO Jim Ruhlin Sr. (top right, at right) and his son Jim Ruhlin Jr. (top right, at left), a superintendent with the company's Civil Division. During the busy seasons, as many as 450 people may be on the payroll.

By Doug Bardwell | Photos courtesy of The Ruhlin Company

The youngest of 11 children, John Ruhlin probably never dreamed of creating a centenarian legacy when he started his company on August 4, 1915 and bid his first project – Creston School. Would a dollar per square foot get them the job? Just to be safe, he cut his bid slightly and was rewarded with Ruhlin Brothers Construction Company's first project – a 30,000-square-foot school for \$29,000.

Located just 15 miles away from The Ruhlin Company's present headquarters in Sharon Center, Ohio; Creston School served the community well. With masonry expertise brought from Germany and Switzerland, John Ruhlin and his brothers built a school that would last well into the 21st century.

Early memories

"My grandfather was a bricklayer by trade," recalls President and CEO Jim Ruhlin, Sr., third-generation leader of the employee-owned and operated construction company. "A big, barrel-chested man, he relied heavily on

those he worked with, and in turn, made sure they were treated very well. It was he that gave this company its origin of being a family-oriented company. He always wanted to share the wealth of the company with those who helped create it.

"I don't have a lot of memories of my grandfather, since he passed away when I was only eight years old," says Ruhlin. But one memory of his first ride-along in his grandfather's Buick, checking job sites, still lingers today. "He was a cigar smoker and always had his trusty black dog in the car. That day it rained like crazy. I was all wet,

the dog was all wet, the cigar smoke was wet, and sealed up in that car I thought I might not make it."

Branching out

In the beginning, the company was operated from John's home, right where the University of Akron's athletic fields exist today. In 1948, the company incorporated as the John G. Ruhlin Construction Company and moved into its first "official" offices at 1024 Home Avenue in Akron.

The year 1955 saw the beginning of its Heavy Civil Division and highway projects followed as the U.S. Interstate

COMMUNITY BUILDING The company's diverse project portfolio includes a range of institutional buildings throughout Ohio, including (top to bottom) Barberton Industrial Arts High School (1940) in Barberton, the John S. Knight Center (1994) in Akron, and Vern Riffe Center for Government and the Arts (1988) in Columbus.

System was being created. Having experience in forming and pouring concrete, the firm at first teamed up and bid projects with dirt-moving companies. That proved a winning combination, and their first civil contracts were for sections of I-77 and Ohio 224.

In 1960, William R. Ruhlin took the reins as the company's second president. Two years later, the firm purchased 75 acres in Sharon Center, which would eventually become company headquarters. Its first warehouse was built on the grounds in 1964. While the remainder of the ground was still undeveloped, Ruhlin would use the grassy fields as an F.A.A. approved runway for his brother Jack's biplane.

Bill Ruhlin also started one of the country's first profit-sharing plans with his employees during the early 1960s. "Share the rewards with those who create the profits, was his philosophy," explains Ruhlin. "It's been a long-term value of this company, and has served us well."

The first out-of-state projects came in the '60s in Pennsylvania where Ruhlin began doing concrete and earthen dams. About the same time, the company began doing industrial work in central Pennsylvania.

"Also in the '60s, we built Cascade II and Cascade III as well as the parking deck," recalls Russ Gregory, vice president and treasurer. "We moved our office into III Cascade, taking two floors in 1969, where we stayed until 1983."

In 1977, the firm established an ESOP (employee stock ownership plan), giving employees a share in the company's success, and in 1980 changed the corporate name to The Ruhlin Company. In a corporate newsletter, Bill Ruhlin stated that the new name "reflects the company's expanding scope of operations as a major





WORK LOAD The Ruhlin Company's diverse workload is roughly 40% civil and 40% commercial building, with a mix of industrial and structural comprising the remaining 20%.

general contractor and construction management firm.”

In the early '80s, The Ruhlin Company began to expand into international work, completing a \$10 million desalination plant in Cape Verde, an island in the Atlantic Ocean off the African coast.

In 1984, the company was to install 23 miles of water line in Sri Lanka, all hand dug, since there was no equipment available in the area. Within three days of arriving on site, Ruhlin's superintendent and his wife were kidnapped by the Tamil Tigers, an independent military organization opposed to the government, and held for a million dollars ransom. Through intervention by the government and others, they were released within days without payment of the ransom, but civil war broke out shortly thereafter.

Since then, Ruhlin has remained stateside and has created a stunning

portfolio of projects across a vast range of industries in the surrounding states of Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, New York and Kentucky.

John B. Ruhlin Jr. took over as president in 1988, and became CEO in

an art gallery and the Capitol Theatre for performing artists.

That same year, Ruhlin moved to its 75-acre property in Sharon Center, setting up its present office building. “I think we had three months to transform a warehouse into an office,” recalls Ruhlin.

“In 1993, we developed the balance of the 75 acres into the Sharon Center Industrial Park,” explains Gregory, “dividing up much of the property for a very diverse group of seven tenants.”

In 1996, Jim Ruhlin Sr. was elected as president and CEO (the sixth in the company's history) and within two years chartered an Employee Advisory Team (EAT). The EAT works with management by overseeing training, conveying information, setting meetings and ultimately selecting two people from the 100 employee-owners to serve on the board of directors. When new directors are interviewed from outside

“Ruhlin is a company of great people. We don't need to prod our people to perform, because they all like what they are doing and they like working together.”

Jim Ruhlin Sr.
The Ruhlin Company

1990, ushering the company into the third generation.

1989 saw the completion of the \$138 million, 34-story Vern Riffe Center for Government and the Arts in Columbus, Ohio. Housing 2,000 state employees, the building also includes

DRIVING GROWTH The company launched its Heavy Civil Division in 1955 as the U.S. Interstate System was being created. A half-century later, The Ruhlin Company continues to complete road work in Ohio and beyond. Recent civil projects include work as part of a joint venture on the George V. Voinovich bridge carrying Interstate 90 Eastbound across the Cuyahoga River in Cleveland (top) and International Gateway, an interchange project linking Port Columbus Airport to Interstate 670 (middle), as well as repair work along Interstate 77 through Cuyahoga County (bottom).

the company, the EAT are also involved in the interview process. “It really keeps the employee investors involved in how the company is set up and how it’s run,” says Ruhlin.

2003 saw the creation of a formal Industrial Division and in 2006 began its Structural Erection Division.

With a growing list of projects completed in all four divisions: civil, industrial, building and structural, Ruhlin had become very well known and respected. In regard to the company’s focus on civil construction, “We like to say that our expertise is in holding things up or holding things back,” quips Don Rife, AIA, NCARB, LEED AP, director of business development for Ruhlin.

Awards recognize achievements

Awards began to follow with the Build America Award from the Associated General Contractors (AGC) of America in 2002 and the Build Ohio Award in 2009 for the company’s work on the IR-90 Innerbelt bridge repairs.

Supports for the bridge on the west bank had begun sliding toward the Cuyahoga River and 525 lineal feet of the bridge crept east, closing up an expansion joint. With 90,000 pounds of temporary steel for support and 26 sets of hydraulic jacks, the 10-million pound bridge was lifted, placed on silicone skid plates and moved back westward four inches before being lowered and attached to new anchor bolts.

“We don’t just do the simple projects,” explains Rife. “This is the kind of work our structural group thrives on.”

Looking at the company’s historical workloads, roughly 40% is civil, 40% is commercial building and the other 20% is split between industrial and structural. The Ruhlin Company presently is made up of 100 salaried employees,





TEAM EFFORT In 2010, The Ruhlin Company was part of a joint venture that transformed Akron's former Inventure Place museum into an innovative STEM middle school.



and as many as 450 people may be on the payroll during the busy seasons.

"When LEED became important to many of the state entities we work with, we developed a definite strategy to get our team accredited as LEED professionals," explains Rife. "We have professionals now that can contribute to both pre-construction as well as during construction. We like to be able to provide guidance to our customers during the design phase and then make sure that all the performance benefits are maintained during the actual construction. So far, we've done one LEED Gold project, eight LEED Silver projects and have several other projects awaiting certification."

The Hollywood connection

It wouldn't be discovered until years later, but Ruhlin made a cameo appearance in a Hollywood blockbuster in 1991. Well actually, it was a Ruhlin coffee mug that made the appearance.

"*Silence of the Lambs* with Anthony Hopkins and Jodie Foster was filmed in Pittsburgh in the late '80s and early '90s, shortly after we had completed the North Shore Expressway there," explains Gregory. "In the scene where Hannibal Lecter is about to escape, the camera cuts to the guard sitting there drinking coffee and reading the newspaper. It was then that I realized that was one of our coffee mugs in the film. We heard later that one of our former employees had a bit part in the production and must have taken the cup to work with him."

Recent projects

The year 2011 marked the start of the Willow Island Hydroelectric Powerhouse project for American Municipal Power in St. Marys, West Virginia. This \$140 million project is scheduled to complete in 2015 and will generate 239 million kilowatt-hours (kWh) of electricity. Over 82,000 cubic yards of concrete and 9.5 million pounds of reinforc-



CONSTRUCTION POWERHOUSE The Ruhlin Company is currently working on the Willow Island Hydroelectric Powerhouse project for American Municipal Power in St. Marys, West Virginia. This \$140 million project is scheduled to complete this year and will generate 239 million kilowatt-hours of electricity.

ing steel will come together for this engineering marvel.

Another of Ruhlin's most recently completed signature projects was the three-story Education and Wellness Center for Northeast Ohio Medical University (NEOMED) in Rootstown, Ohio. This \$85 million, 177,000-square-foot facility is the new "face" of the campus as you enter from the east.

Started in December of 2012 and completed in 17 months, the project required extensive infrastructure relocations to prepare the campus not only for this project, but for the next 25 years as well.

Built as a Construction Manager at Risk project, certain components like the soaring roof trusses needed to be ordered even before design was completed to meet the aggressive schedule. The result was an impressive 52-foot-

high atrium, which directs students, business executives, instructors and the community's senior citizens to educational and conference areas as well as providing a location for the first STEM+M school in the State of Ohio. The building now brings the entire community onto the campus for everything from corporate and community meetings to weddings.

Ruhlin is also currently acting as program manager for Kent State University's comprehensive Foundations of Excellence building campaign, providing oversight as several CMs at Risk construct five new facilities at the school's main campus in Kent.

Building on safety

An emphasis on safety started back in 1971 with Ruhlin's first safety director and formal safety manual, but under

Jim Ruhlin's watch, safety has been elevated to a passion throughout the company. After a couple of serious accidents, Ruhlin decided that things needed to change.

"Despite having all the practices in place, we weren't breeding the culture," says Ruhlin. "It probably took us five years, but eventually everyone embraced the program."

Safety awards from the AGC recognized the company's efforts and achievements in 2007 and Ruhlin went on to win the national award in 2009. Sitting in a place of honor in the company's conference room is a gorgeous alabaster eagle that was awarded to Ruhlin in 1995 for Safety and Excellence by Anheuser Busch.

"We've actually elevated safety to an entirely different level, with behavioral training for foremen and superintendents, even involving the



MODERN MARVEL In 2012, The Ruhlin Company completed construction of Bridgestone Americas Technical Center in Akron, a \$100 million, 260,000-square-foot facility. Featuring a vegetative roof and other sustainable features, the building earned a LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) Gold rating from the U.S. Green Building Council.

hourly personnel's families in our safety philosophy," explains Ruhlin. "Employees' children draw safety posters and those are turned into calendars for employees."

The formula for success

Though a century of successful projects have built Ruhlin's legacy of construction excellence, the company's key to success is really the people who perform the work.

"First and foremost, Ruhlin is a company of great people. We don't need to prod our people to perform, because they all like what they are doing and they like working together," says Ruhlin. "It's a family atmosphere of us as employees, but also of the employees' families. A lot of people do things together. And that is our moral base.

"It extends out to our customers. It extends out when we build something. We don't cut corners, we do things right. Because of our great people, we've enjoyed longevity."

"Coming up on our 100th anniversary, we went out to survey our customers," adds Rife. "What came back was that our customers liked our work and liked our people – their attitudes and their responsiveness. It was from [those results] that we developed our tag line – Great People. Proven Results. 100 Years."

"I'm surrounded by a great team of company officers, lead managers and

staff that do a great job for me and the company," reflects Ruhlin. "We couldn't be what we are today without them."

Looking to the future

Considering that the average lifespan of today's leading businesses is only 15 years, it becomes even more remarkable that Ruhlin is celebrating its 100th anniversary. With 15 Fortune 500 clients, a client retention rate of 90% and a client satisfaction rating of 98%, the future looks bright for Ruhlin.

When asked about future plans to grow the business, Ruhlin says, "I don't

think we are thinking about any new lines, but rather expanding in the lines we already know. We are looking at the oil shale business in southeastern Ohio and surrounding areas, and may make some moves in that direction."

Coming full circle

Jim Ruhlin recently had the opportunity to revisit his grandfather's original project. "In 2010, we were selected by the Ohio School Facilities Commission to build new schools for Norwayne. As the final part of that project, we were to tear down the original building [Creston School] my grandfather first built in 1915," recalls Ruhlin. "From that demolition, we saved the original '1915' keystone as well as numerous pallets of bricks."

"You could tell the founders loved their craft, as the original bricks and mortar were still solid on the building's exterior," adds Gregory.

The bricks have been brought back, used to create a patio outside the company's offices in Sharon Center, and will hopefully see another century of service for Ruhlin's family and his extended family of employees. **P**



CORNERSTONE OF SUCCESS Founded by John G. Ruhlin, a bricklayer, with brothers Charles and Edward, Ruhlin Brothers Construction Company won its first project bid in 1915, building Creston School (now part of Norwayne Local Schools) in Medina County at a total value of \$29,000.

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