

THE ACADEMY OF ELECTRICAL CONTRACTING

Paper presented by

Jerome A. Valenti

From Tool Box to Attache' Case
One Man's Prescription for the Climb Up:
equal parts of ambition, training, courage
and principles mixed vigorously with
hard work.

April, 1977

During these precious moments which have been afforded me this day, I would like to share with you a story...a true story.

It's a story of a young boy -- his dreams, his struggles, his growth and his maturity. It all began during the great depression of the '30s. The times were harsher than this youngster could really understand. Banks had closed and life savings were lost. Unimaginable unemployment spread across the country. Businesses and plants closed and money just wasn't coming into the house. They were desperate times when men did desperate things; and the very courage of our people was tested to the extreme.

And yet I suppose it is part of the innocence of being a young boy to dream of his future life. And it is from the nature of the American dream of accomplishment that this lad should firmly believe that he could succeed...even with all that bleakness around him.

His dream was electrical contracting and it became an all-consuming drive for him. From first playing with a toy erector set and its electric motor, he went on to earn Boy Scout merit badges in electricity and took formal electrical training at the Vocational High School. And his dream and his drive took on sharper focus: by now, as they say, he was so hooked on becoming an electrical contractor that he could almost taste it.

As if the trials and pressures of the depression were not enough for the boy, now a young man, a world war gripped people everywhere in many ways. He went into the service, although he could not see at the time where his training as a soldier would

further his ambitions. But he was wrong. To be sure, the skills of a soldier do not lend themselves to being a successful electrical contractor; but he did learn lessons of discipline, handling people and judgment which were to stand him in good stead later on.

The war was over and, as with every service man, he had tasted the fruits of being on the winning side. But there were millions returning from military duty and looking for their place in civilian life. The competition for jobs was very rough. It seemed that there were ten conquering heroes for every one opening.

That is the way things were for our young man. Back home he went to work as a helper for local contractors. And again he was taking orders, this time trying to build a base for his own security rather than to help win a war. He did everything he was asked. He was glad for the opportunity to be working and to have some pay coming in. Extras didn't bother him, if it helped his security. Shoveling the snow off the Boss' sidewalk on a Sunday morning wasn't too much.

But what about that dream: to become an electrical contractor? He had learned his craft; and, what with time out for war, he was now 30 years old. Would he strike out on his own? And if so, when? Riding home from work on the bus one evening, he decided that he must make the try. But for him this was a family decision. With their three-year-old son looking, our young man and his wife took stock of what they had and where they wanted to go. This togetherness carried through all that came after.

But our young man's decision was more than just making up the mind. First a Master's License was needed; and he would require two signatures on the application. But he knew nobody. It was his first experience of the value of establishing credibility in his industry. By stretching his meager funds and planning his budget very closely he purchased his own truck and began working 18 hours a day. Re-stocking was handled nights and on weekends. With full confidence in himself and his work, he made sure his name was on that truck big enough and clear enough so that no one could miss it.

Thus began our young man's first introduction to those "other things" he would have to do as a contractor. Yes, as the boss he had to do everything: estimator, manager, workman, material man, tool man, driver and salesman. And his faithful and loving wife took care of the bookkeeping and the taxes. He even typed his own business card. The long hours and the hard work began to really mean something when he completed his first significant job at a profit. This modest beginning gave him a first glimmer of what it might be one day to do a million-dollar job. The work was hard but rewarding.

The learning and the experience continued through the realities he had to face in his new role. He grew with his successes and failures; but good fortune was to be his. Then came the next testing period, with his business growth came an entirely new set of challenges that never occurred to that young boy of his dreams. The weight of responsibility for this expanding business became very real in many ways: developing a staff, meeting a weekly payroll, close monitoring of his cash flow and signing of his name on agreements and contracts. These and other

things were the stark realities of business he was now facing.

At this point his recently-obtained membership in the National Electrical Contractors Association began to play an important and on-going role. Through its seminars, papers, and other resources it provided him with information about his craft. Information which was crucial to his growth. Information which he could have obtained from no other source. And he felt an inner warmth as he rubbed elbows with the giants of the industry, men he had respected. Then he made another important decision: to try to repay this debt to his Association. As he grew in competence and business stature, he also served the Association in many capacities and in many areas. And his contributions were rewarded by the ultimate honor of selection as a Fellow of the Academy.

Our boy of the dream was now growing and maturing and succeeding as a business man...running his own business. He was an electrical contractor, the boss. And he became aware of the advantages and pleasures of social awareness and his involvement. Participation in local associations, service clubs, fraternal organizations, building programs, youth activities and other community endeavors assumed great importance.

Yes, our young lad had now arrived. He could take on any job anytime, even when good advice said "no". It was another testing period. It happens to us all and, it's very humbling. After building up his belief in his all-conquering talent, there followed that heartbreak of going home with bad news and the hot breath of possible bankruptcy on his neck.

From the experiences of those sleepless nights, the hat-in-hand search for new financing and the shock from being too cock-sure came new dimensions in our man. He gained a new

awareness that, though the owner of a business, he must serve the customer and he is the associate of his employees.

But our man learned and his business swung back to being prosperous. His name and business attained credibility His company technical and managerial skills developed to a fine degree and a reasonable number of "blue chip" jobs came to him. And that fellow, who had worked those long hours doing everything in the trade, now had gained community respect and the phone rang and rang and rang.

Self-confidence comes from having made the big time, but every new bid brings back those almost-forgotten memories when every job was not a success. While it had become reasonably comfortable to tackle another million dollar job, that old nervousness came back when he took his first shot at a multi-million dollar job. Much like the lad getting his first chance in the Yankee training camp, he wondered if all he had learned would play there. But he had learned well. He was disciplined to the challenge. He made the big leagues.

Gone are the days of that one truck and the typed business cards. Our man can now be seen meeting with the significant people of the business community and participating in major planning. He experiences a sense of involvement in the decisions which will affect much of the future. Outwardly, this new role can be seen in his office, on the wall crowded with awards, plaques, trophies and photos with VIP's. It could be for him the climax to all that learning and work and associations. It is a time to look around, he feels, and take an estimate of all that has happened. Not only has he been able to realize the challenges and hopes of that youthful dream: but he has been able to provide well for his family. Indeed, he has been fortunate enough to have his sons and

some valued, long-time employees involved with the continuation of his business.

At the outset I told you that this would be a true story. It may not be an original story for others in many businesses have done it. But to this one man...your writer...it is a singular story because they are his trials and conquests. But it is not the end of his story, for I assure you, he will continue to serve those principles by which he has worked. And he will strive to encourage younger men to be principle-motivated.

Though he didn't realize it, that youngster's dreaming was what is the American dream: not that you will get what you want, like an apple falling off a tree; but that you have the opportunity to grow, to learn, to accomplish limited only by how great or small is your drive. And no where else on this earth, in this universe, does an individual have such a great chance to succeed. But I humbly suggest that for our business, there are some guiding principles all should hear and abide by:

- believe in what you do.
- give respect and demand respect.
- be a quality man and run a quality organization.
- learn from your mistakes.
- never be proud to ask for advice.
- establish and maintain high personal and corporate creditability.
- there are high spots and low spots in every life; do not become discouraged.
- big results often begin with little dreams; so do not be afraid to dream.
- beyond your concern for your own business; do not hesitate to give loyalty and integrity to your industry; and also to your Church, your family and your Country.

-- never forget that we're in a people business and that the workman's tool box is just as important as the manager's attache case.

No matter what you think you've attained in your life time; your greatest accomplishment can be the heritage you leave to other young lads who are only now just beginning to dream.