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Mark/Trèce Celebrates 50th Anniversary

by Len Prazych

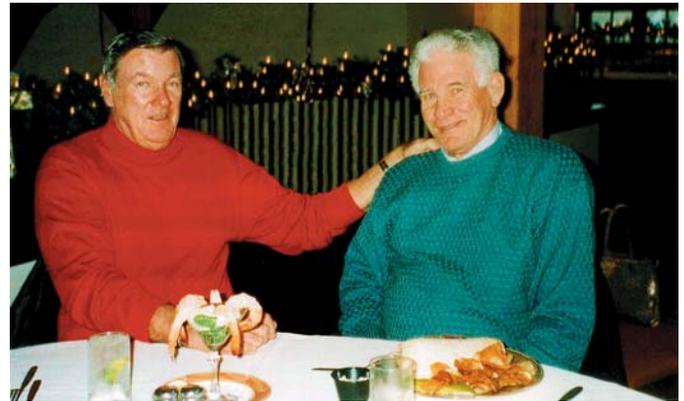
It is rare enough that a company survives 50 years in any business any more, much less have founders who are alive, well and still maintain a respect and an affinity for each other as they prepare to pass their successful company on to the next generation of stewards.

Yet such is the case with Mark/Trèce Inc., originally incorporated in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1962 to service the platemaking needs of a young corrugated, converting and graphics industry. Founded by partners Richard Godfrey, Don McCaughey and Joe Smith, the three chose the company name Mark/Trèce, the word “mark” being a powerful word in the print industry and the word “trèce,” meaning three. They set up their “plant” in a storefront at 119 Hopkins Place in Baltimore. It had all of three rooms: a small office, a layout engraving room and typesetting/vulcanizing room in the back. Long ago razed, a government building stands on the spot.

Within nine months of forming the company, however, Joe Smith left and it was now up to Godfrey and McCaughey to carry the torch: Godfrey was responsible for sales and McCaughey, production. The two had known each other a mere six months or so prior to forming the company and in fact, worked for local competitors. They met for the first time when McCaughey was replacing a salesman at his then-employer, Chesapeake Reprographics. The two had a conversation and realized they shared an entrepreneurial spirit. With McCaughey’s technical knowledge - he was an artist and hand-engraver with a degree from the Rochester Institute of Technology - and Godfrey’s sales expertise, they thought they could make a go of it. So with partner Joe Smith gone and a mere \$200 left in the company coffers, Mark/Trèce began in earnest.

Godfrey remembers vividly how he felt after he and his partner began the journey that would last more

than half a century. “Scared as hell!” he said of making the leap from the security of a sales position at J.H. Matthews to starting the fledgling Mark/Trèce. “It was a terrific challenge, but we felt we could make the market better and help our customers because there would now be a local platemaker in Baltimore.”



Partners Richard Godfrey, left, and Don McCaughey, share a meal and some memories of their 50 years as owners of Mark/Trèce.

The company’s early customers felt the same. Weyerhaeuser, York Container and Oxford Container were among the first and after fifty years, both York Container and Oxford Container remain loyal customers. “They’re still great customers and I like to think we are still their main suppliers after all these years,” said Godfrey.

Business grew quickly and the pair opened a plant in a converted milk barn Godfrey bought in Elmira, New York, to be close to one of McCaughey’s old customers, Corning Glass Company. Soon after, there was a plant in Whippany, New Jersey, which gave the company a presence in the competitive New York City metropolitan market.

“The competition was just as strong back then as it is today, probably even more so,” said McCaughey. “There were considerably more plate makers in those

days but they were smaller. And you had to be physically close to your customers, unlike today where technology allows you to be anywhere. Both Dick and I took advantage of opportunities that presented themselves to us to be of service to our customers. Fifty years later, the goal of Mark/Trèce remains the same: service.”

By the 1970s, the company had evolved into a full-service business. In addition to platemaking, it provided designs with Mark Color Studios, and inks for converters with Mark Color Inks. “Mark/Trèce could do the photography and creative design, do the plates and if necessary, bring the ink,” said McCaughey.

When the oil crisis of the 1970s made the ink business untenable, the partners sold Mark Color Inks. And with the emergence of Mac computers in the mid 1980s, no one had to draw anymore. Mark Color Studios went the way of markers and Exacto knives and Mark/Trèce went back to its core business: printing plates. It’s a business that the company has continued to grow, having since added manufacturing sites in Fallston, Maryland; Murfreesboro, Tennessee; and Atlanta, Georgia, and satellite sales offices in Mansfield, Massachusetts; Greensboro, North Carolina; Richmond, Virginia; San Antonio, Texas; and Toa Alta, Puerto Rico.

The company, to its credit, has stayed on top of advancements in technology, explained McCaughey. “Since I had a technology background, even in the early days of the company, we were always on top of what was the latest technology and I like to think we still are. It’s been amazing for me to watch the evolution from hand engraving to laser engraving technology.” McCaughey and Mark/Trèce, in fact, hold the first patent for the laser used to engrave photo-polymer, which replaced rubber.

Godfrey agrees. “One of our trademarks has always been technology, which is why companies looking to develop their own technologies for the corrugated industry came to us. We’ve been a beta site for numerous developments including DuPont Cyrel, McDermid’s liquid technology and EskoArtwork’s screening technology. And within the last four years we’ve been instrumental in helping DuPont developing digital plates for corrugated.”

Mark/Trèce is, of course, fully automated and remains on the leading edge of digital technology. It recently purchased its second digital printer, a wide-format flatbed for its Tennessee manufacturing plant and con-

tinues to seek growth opportunities, primarily by way of satellite offices.

While the partners are no longer active in the day-to-day operation of the business, both remain active in its management; Godfrey continues to oversee the company’s “financials” and deals with its suppliers and equipment purchases from company headquarters in “the barn” in Joppa (Bel Air), Maryland, and McCaughey oversees operations of the company’s Fallston, Maryland, plant. The partners also had the foresight to create a succession plan to ensure the company they founded 50 years ago continues to be a major force in the corrugated and converting industry well into the future.

Lee Grantham is now the company’s Vice President and General Manager and handles most of what McCaughey did

on a day-to-day basis. Grantham has been with Mark/Trèce for a mere 34 years, breaking into the company’s ink business in the 1970s. Along with 30+ year employees Kenneth Ricks, General Manager of the Tennessee plant, and Sandra Godfrey, Corporate Financial Officer, the three comprise the management team that will sustain the vision of its founders.

In this, the year of its 50th anniversary, Mark/Trèce will have grown from a three-person platemaking company operating from a storefront with \$200 in the bank to a company with 187 employees working in 12 plants across eight states (and one U.S. territory) with more than \$22 million in annual revenue. No small task for a couple of guys trying to “do something” for the industry. Mission accomplished!

“There aren’t many 50 year partnerships any more and I certainly treasure this one,” said McCaughey. “I attribute our success to Dick and I hope he attributes it to me. He had his responsibilities and I had mine. It worked because we saw eye to eye on the big things.”

Godfrey indeed attributes McCaughey with the company’s success. He also points to the fact that the majority of Mark/Trèce employees have been with the company for thirty, forty and some nearly the entire fifty years of its existence. “My philosophy is that I wouldn’t ask anyone to do anything that I wouldn’t do first. I’ve always wanted our employees to succeed as much as Don and I were succeeding. They all know we’re behind them a hundred percent every day, because without them, we wouldn’t have succeeded at all, much less last fifty years in an industry as competitive as ours.”



Godfrey and McCaughey at the groundbreaking of their Fallston, Maryland, manufacturing plant, Mark/Trèce’s largest.