



# singers & screamers

Character counts on the construction site

by Bruce Giffin

Like fishermen and cowboys, construction workers tend to be colorful characters. In my days of swinging a hammer, I've sweated side by side with all kinds: those with advanced degrees in philosophy and physics to those with missing teeth and criminal records. You find out real quickly who's got genuine integrity, who carries their weight and knows their stuff and who's blowing smoke up your skirt.

In the early '70s, baby boomers were entering the job market in force. A lot of kids like me, who might have gone to college in a different era, got more interested in construction. Something about the physical nature of it: of being in shape and being outside in the elements; of having a different challenge each day and working around all kinds of people; of being able to stand back at the end of the day and see what you accomplished; the satisfaction of creating a product from stone, wood, plaster and metal. The freedom of being independent, of not wearing a suit, of not being bound up and enclosed in an office pulled us in. We loved it.

The guys who taught us how to build are mostly gone now. They were old school; veterans, not only of the industry, but World War II and Korea. Some drank too much, some were cantankerous, some were singers

and some were screamers. Yet, the guys who taught us were remarkable for what they knew. If you could put up with them, then you could learn some amazing things. The two guys I learned the most about building from were two characters named Dom Poncia and Bill Adkins.

In the late '70s, Dom taught me how to frame custom homes. "Put your eye on it!" he'd say. He taught me how to stand back and sight walls, beams and structure to see if they looked right—straight, plumb and level. We only used a level to confirm what "our eye" told us was right. We framed custom homes in and around Boston, in the nicer suburbs of Wayland, Lexington and Concord.

In those days in New England once we had framed the shell of the house we would shingle the roof. My all-time classic memory of Dom is on the day before Thanksgiving in 1979, a light snow is falling, most of the crew is inside the newly framed home doing pickup framing and Dom is up on the roof on his hands and knees, shingling and singing away. (He wore the same attire in mid-February as he did in late October: two sweatshirts over two t-shirts with a pair of flannel lined jeans, low street shoes and socks with worn out elastic.) Snow flakes are falling around his neck, down his pants where his sweatshirts have ridden up, and down his ankles where

his socks have fallen down. In front of him, bundled up, a semi-frozen kid sweeps the falling snow off the roof in front of him so that Dom can keep shingling. All day long, in the snow, the two of them worked along: Dom, singing, happy as a clam and this kid turning blue, not saying a word, just sweeping the roof.

Dom loved life. He loved working hard and he loved to party and joke around with his wife and family. In his lifetime, he probably framed 1,500 houses and he knew a ton of tricks for bending nails and wood into place. "It's only a stupid piece of wood," he'd say. "We'll just outsmart it." He was a master builder. The homes he built had an inner integrity that reflected Dom's character and strength.

Bill Adkins is the other master builder who heavily influenced the values of my life and career. Bill was a tough guy to work for. He was an artist, a perfectionist, an irascible contrarian, a demanding task master who not only wanted it done perfectly, he wanted it done fast, too, damn it.

I worked for a lot of different builders as a young man, but Bill was the only guy who ever fired me.

I really wanted to work for Bill. He was doing the kind of interesting, high quality work I wanted to be associated with. It was the winter of '77-'78. Although I was an apprentice, the only work he had available was working as a laborer building a three-story office building in the heart of Santa Barbara. Most of the work was just hard, blunt, brutal labor.

There had been a drought for the previous 3 years when we began construction. On the site, the adobe soil was literally rock hard, baked solid—so hard that Bill's ancient backhoe bucket could not break it up for digging footings and trenches. Being an enterprising guy, he looked around and saw me, young and stupid. He put me on a 90-pound jack hammer to break up the adobe in front of him on the backhoe and as fast as I did, he would scoop it away, yelling at me to go faster. I sweated my ass off. That lasted for about two weeks and then our crew started tying re-bar in the footings for the foundation. Just as we started our first major concrete pour,

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