

# Grizzled Veterans Practice Skills Learned During Lifetimes At Firm

**HICKORY** — If the Walker Construction Company of Hickory were a baseball team, then it would be the kind they always show in the movies. The team with the grizzled veterans who know their way around every ballpark in the league and the rookies waiting in the dugout, looking for their chance to move up the batting order.

That impression probably comes from the fact that Walker Construction has no less than three employees who have been awarded Outstanding Master Craftsmen honors by the North Carolina Department of Labor, more than any other company in the State. This rare concentration of craftsman-level talent gives the company's training program a tremendous boost as junior employees get a chance to learn valuable, advanced construction skills along side highly qualified craftsmen.

"We specialize in most any type of building work," company president Glen Walker says with the same grin he uses to inform newcomers of the company's not-so-distant founding in 1978. Indeed, the company employs a wide range of construction workers, carpenters, and other craft workers to complete its varied projects across western North Carolina. While Walker presently employs a total of about 60 people, skilled workers well versed in the intricacies of modern construction work are one commodity that Walker says is almost impossible to find in the needed amount.

"When you start a company," he says, "you just about have to grow your own employees." As a strong supporter of the North Carolina Department of Labor's voluntary apprenticeship program, Walker and the already expert workers that he has do what they can to pass on their knowledge to a new generation of craftsmen.

The three Walker Construction craftsmen who have won Department of Labor awards for their outstanding abilities are carpenter Melvin Eckard, cabinetmaker Harold Noe, and project superintendent Bill Williams. Together, they form a core of construction expertise that Walker hopes to expand upon in the next several years.

The on-the-job training and apprenticeship efforts offer rewards to all concerned. Better trained workers enhance a company's reputation and avoid making costly mistakes. Beginning workers learn good work habits and skills from experts. True master craftsmen also usually make substantially better wages than those with less training, for example, Walker construction pays its most highly skilled workers \$8.50-\$12 an hour, not counting overtime pay.

**Harold Noe**  
Harold Noe, 44, says that in his case, becoming a heavy hitter in the cabinet making craft was a combination of his love for working with wood and the shortage of jobs in his native Kentucky. "There was no work in the coal mining area," he says, recounting how he and his family moved to North Carolina in 1962. The move became a very auspicious one for Noe as he soon found work in the furniture manufacturing industry around Hickory.

He absorbed the secrets of the wood worker's art as he helped other more experienced craftsmen, and learned to use the various saws and tools of the trade. Eventually, Noe even took classes to learn how to read blueprints so that he could transform designs into real pieces of cabinetry, furniture, and finely milled woodwork without assistance.

Today, he is the premier craftsman of Walker Construction's cabinetry shop, which is located along with the company's other office, appropriately enough, in one of Hickory's oldest industrial buildings, a former saw mill. There under the big wooden beams and hand-made metal fittings, Noe practices his craft in much the same way cabinetmakers traditionally have made their works, except that his saws and tools are more likely to be electric powered.

Otherwise the same personal care is given to the work as always, he says. Noe sometimes even keeps the work of past artisans alive by restoring and re-building aging woodwork. When Walker Construction recently remodeled and restored the historic "Old Rock School" in Valdese into a community center, Noe repaired or replaced many of the structure's deteriorating mid-1900s era windows and frames. After inspecting the more healthy, original woodwork slated to remain, he deduced how to replace and repair others so that when finished and in place, they were virtually identical to their 80 year old neighbors.

Other projects in which Noe has taken particular pride include building the replacement cabinets for the Lenoir Rhyne College student center and the distinctive diamond-shaped windows of Hickory's St. Albans Episcopal Church. But no matter what the project, it is Noe's craftsmanship which is of primary importance to the company's customers in this age of prefabricated cabinets, windows, and wood trim. "We don't try to mass produce anything," Noe says.

He feels that part of the pleasure in being a cabinetmaker, instead of just one member of a commercial carpentry crew, is that he works on smaller, more specialized projects. This means that he can build something from start to finish with his own hands. "I enjoy seeing something made nicely and coming out a finished product," he says.

So, what does a cabinetmaker do for relaxation after a day of sawing, shaping, and drilling wood? Noe likes to get into his wood shop at home and make something, of course. His main project for a long time has been to create a set of black walnut furniture, one of his favorite woods. With a china cabinet and desk already made, these days Noe is at work on a kitchen table and chairs. "I like working with wood," he says smiling.

**Melvin Eckard**  
It seems natural for someone with a great deal of skill, talent, and fascination for one subject to specialize in mastering it. Melvin Eckard breaks the rule. For Eckard, 48, the challenge is not how to specialize his skills as a carpenter, it is how to expand them. He likes to "start at the footings and finish at the roof," Eckard says, when he goes to work on a new construction site.

Eckard moves through most projects accepting responsibility to finish a bewildering number of construction tasks using a vast array of tools and hardware, and yet still meeting what Walker describes admiringly as a "best in the business" standard for each assignment. By combining his 25 years of construction carpentry experience with an obviously natural flair for comprehending how things should go together, Eckard has become something of an in-house legend at Walker Construction.

For example, many supervisors would normally cringe at the thought of letting the same worker who formed a solid concrete wall in their project's initial phase, come back to install the final delicate trim and hardware

at its completion. Yet, Walker Construction supervisors vie among themselves trying to get Eckard assigned to their projects from the ground breaking to the ribbon cutting.

The carpenter from Conover takes such things in casual stride, tackling whatever unlikely series of assignments come his way. He credits virtually all his skill as a heavy construction carpenter to what he calls his "on the job" education. However, Eckard's deft sense of movement among the girders and machinery perhaps more accurately reflect skills gained as a long-time dedicated hunting and fishing enthusiast.

Eckard's philosophy of creating new structures is simple: build good foundations. While the public usually judges construction projects by how impressively its steel and wood skeleton rises into the air, Eckard worries most about the part down in the pit. The base, anchoring points, and footings, he believes are the heart of a project. After all, no one wants to build a fine structure on a poor foundation, and in any case, nobody can continue building until "you get the footings poured," he says.

He also takes a true craftsman's stance toward the influx of new, high-tech machinery that has arrived on the construction scene in recent years. The motorized back hoes, cranes, concrete pouring machines and other powerful tools of today simply perform tasks that laborers once did through sheer strength, he says; they do not replace skill and training. However, this new machine age has created the greatest changes to take place during his career, Eckard says. Whenever new machines arrive, he says the carpenters and workers go through a period of trial and error, learning what new capabilities are at their fingertips. "You got to try it," he says, to learn how a machine can help.

**Bill Williams**  
The third member of the master craftsmen group at Walker Construction, Bill Williams, is easily the delegation's senior member. At a very unnoticeable 61 years of age, Williams brings over 40 years of construction and carpentry experience to his work as a project superintendent.

His lean, heavily suntanned face and arms give testimony to the months and years that he has prowled through muddy western North Carolina construction sites. Williams still spends his average day out in the sun, watching every detail of the construction placed in his care. "I've always enjoyed outdoors work," he says during a recent interview on the Catawba Valley Technical College campus where his crew is completing a new health care teaching facility for the school.

As a project superintendent, Williams is the final hurdle that a mistake or bad idea must dodge before it can become a permanent gremlin in some newly constructed building. Whatever the designers, drafters, architects, carpenters, laborers, subcontractors, and building materials suppliers let get by them, must face his regimen of last minute inspections, gut hunches, and



Noe puts skills to work on cabinet

quality control checks. There are very few gremlins in Williams' buildings.

"Nobody is taking pride in their work these days," Williams says while taking a long look across the site. "That's something I don't believe in — skimping on anything," he says. Williams points toward the uppermost steel girders his men are bolting in place. Just the day before he says, he had realized that the project's existing blueprints called for a girder configuration that would cause problems when the roof was laid. Williams' crew was working from the freshly altered plans the next day.

Two things critical for his success as a superintendent are his many years of experience and what Walker terms as Williams' ability "to see" oncoming problems. Williams is the first to admit that his real job is basically to walk among the freshly poured concrete slabs, newly joined steel girders, and recently hammered wooden studs looking for anything that seems wrong. He credits his love of being outdoors and his interest in watching how complicated things get put together as the two main reasons that he chose to spend a lifetime in construction work. This enthusiasm has even

bridged the generations in the Williams' family as his son also works for Walker Construction as a carpenter.

One thing which does not have Williams feeling very enthusiastic these days is what he perceives as a decline in the number of people interested in really mastering the carpenter's craft. "There don't seem to be any young fellows taking it up at all," he says. What makes this situation even worse, Williams says, is that the designs for commercial buildings and custom homes are getting more complicated, thereby placing a greater demand for skill on those who build them. "A real shortage of craftsman workers is becoming apparent," he says.

But it is hard to keep Williams' attention away from the project at hand, the health care building, for too long. To Williams, who continually roams through the parked trucks and stacked materials looking at things, it's all business as usual: everything must be perfect.

Eckard is also at work on the site, forming a key, reinforced concrete wall which will serve as a major support in the structure. There's even always the chance that Noe may be called to the site during its later stages.

## Dean's List

The following students were named to the Dean's List at Craven Community College for the summer quarter:

Bruce L. Watt, Bridgeton; Nancy G. Strickland, Cove City; Sheryl L. Ogle, Ernul; Amy W. Woolard, Ernul; Charles L. Bryan, Allen L. Campbell, Barbara M. Harris, Jeffrey R. Midgett and Cassie S. Oates, Vanceboro.

In order to be named to the Dean's List, students must average 3.5 or better grade-point average out of a possible 4.0 on at least 12 quarter hours of coursework.

## School Volunteers To Meet Sept. 21

The Vanceboro Farm Life Elementary School will hold registration for volunteers from 8:30 a.m. until 3:30 p.m. Sept. 21 in the volunteers' room at the school or at the front office.

An orientation for volunteers will be held at the school Sept. 28. Assignments and scheduling will be completed at the meeting.



A third grade teacher asked her class, "Why did the Puritans come to America?"

"To worship in their own way," said a boy, "and to make others do the same."

But God doesn't make you worship Him, if you don't want to.

You were created by God, and you live in a world made by God. You are what you are because He made you that way.

What you do, matters to God. Where you go after you die, matters to God.

He wants to save you from sin and its consequences, and to enjoy the happiness of heaven forever. But the choice is up to you.

The Bible says, "Whoever wants to, let Him come." Come to Him, won't you?



but Confusion came instead.

At last Help came, and Help knew what to do. In times of emergency, are you Help? If not, learn Red Cross First Aid where you work or call your local chapter.



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<p><b>19.8 OZ. BOX DUNCAN HINES CHEWY RECIPES BROWNIE MIX</b> <b>1.19</b></p> <p><b>32 OZ. BOTTLE 7 FARMS CATSUP</b> <b>.79</b></p> <p><b>12 OZ. CAN PET EVAPORATED MILK</b> <b>.49</b></p> <p><b>18 OZ. JAR KRAFT ORAPE JELLY</b> <b>.89</b></p>	<p><b>303 CAN APRIL SHOWER GARDEN PEAS</b> ..... <b>2/.89</b></p> <p><b>5.5 OZ. CAN STAR KIST TUNA</b> ..... <b>.69</b></p> <p><b>15 OZ. CAN LUCKS CANNED VEGETABLES/BEANS</b> ..... <b>3/1</b></p> <p><b>303 CAN JACK-N-BEAN STALK CUT GREEN BEANS</b> ..... <b>2/.89</b></p> <p><b>5 OZ. PKG. CRUNCH MUNCH POPCORN</b> ..... <b>.69</b></p> <p><b>12 OZ. CAN HERFORD CORNED BEEF</b> ..... <b>.99</b></p> <p><b>40 LB. BAG CHATHAM CHUNK DOG FOOD</b> ..... <b>4.99</b></p> <p><b>48 OZ. CAN DEL MONTE PINEAPPLE JUICE</b> ..... <b>1.19</b></p>	<p><b>15 OZ. CAN PAM COOKING SPRAY</b> ..... <b>1.99</b></p> <p><b>15 OZ. CAN CHEF BOY-AR-DEE SPAGHETTI &amp; MEATBALLS</b> <b>.79</b></p> <p><b>1 GAL. PUREX BLEACH</b> ..... <b>.79</b></p> <p><b>4 LBS. PKG. ANGEL SOFT BATHROOM TISSUE</b> ..... <b>.99</b></p> <p><b>64 OZ. BOTTLE WISK LIQUID DETERGENT</b> ..... <b>3.19</b></p> <p><b>32 OZ. JAR DUKE'S SALAD DRESSING</b> ..... <b>1.29</b></p> <p><small>LIMIT 1 WITH \$10.00 FOOD ORDER</small></p>	<p><b>48 OZ. BOTTLE CRISCO OIL</b> <b>2.49</b></p> <p><b>8 OZ. JAR FOLGERS INSTANT COFFEE</b> <b>3.19</b></p> <p><b>18 OZ. BOX KELLOGG'S CORN FLAKES</b> <b>1.45</b></p> <p><b>303 CAN WHITE HOUSE APPLE SAUCE</b> <b>2/.79</b></p>