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Duro-Last Roofing
Celebrates Three Decades
of Distinction

and Counting

by Chris King

In the late 1970s, John Burt, a pool installer and the owner of Tri-City Vinyl, used a piece of thermoplastic material to patch a hole in the roof of his building, and the idea for his company was conceived. John Burt passed away in 2003, but his vision and philosophy continue to guide and inspire the employees at the company he found-

ed 30 years ago — Duro-Last Roofing, Inc., headquartered in Saginaw, Mich. Burt once said, “My philosophy is this: if I’m going to manufacture a product, that product better be the best of its kind and do what it’s supposed to do. That’s why today we have the highest quality roofing system in the industry and are well known for backing that system with

outstanding customer service and excellent warranties.”

Roofing Contractor spoke with some longtime veterans of the company on its 30th anniversary to take a look back at the company’s history and its foundation for the future: its contractor partners.

Kathy Allen and Sharon Sny are two of John Burt’s daughters who have served in

several positions since the company's inception and now sit on the board of directors. They remember their father's firm belief that if he could find the right formulation, the thermoplastic material that he used to line his pools could make an excellent roofing product. "Dad knew if it could keep water in, it could keep water out," Sny said. "He was a visionary and had such good ideas, and he kept at it until it worked."

"At one point early on I remember asking him, 'We have a good thing going in the pool business, are you sure about roofing?'" Allen said. "He said it would be the next big thing, the biggest part of our future, and he was absolutely right."

"We started out buying material from outside suppliers, but his philosophy was to bring all the manufacturing in house," Allen recalled. "We were driven by our desire to control our own destiny."

The System

The result of the company's vertical integration approach is Duro-Last's custom prefabricated roofing system. The reinforced single-ply membrane is a proprietary thermoplastic formulation and includes a weft-insertion knitted scrim that is laminated between two layers of film to give the membrane its strength. Duro-Last's sister companies manufacture the membrane, as well as screws, edge details, gutters, coping and other components.



Duro-Last completes 80 percent to 85 percent of roof deck membrane seaming in a controlled environment, which means that only 15 percent to 20 percent of the seaming is done in the field. Company President Thomas Hollingsworth pointed to three key elements of the company's continued success: "The close, valued relationships with our contractors, the custom prefabricated system, and the fact that we're a one-stop shop."

Hollingsworth has been with Duro-Last for 18 years, and has been president for the last eight. "Our work is all custom," he said. "That allows us to take most of the details out of the hands of the people in the field and enables us to offer the best warranty in the business."

Albert Janni, Manager of Engineering Services, has been with the company almost 29 years. "John's simple philoso-



phy was to deliver the highest quality and service, and we continue to strive for that," he said. "John's gift was to communicate with the customer. He found out what was and wasn't working, and then used that input to improve the system."

Burt would often take customers to his cottage in Oscoda, Mich., for a fishing trip, recalled Janni, where he would get their undivided attention to talk about roofing. "That's the beginning of the process that became our contractor advisory board," he said.

"Dad had a contractor background himself, and we'd visit jobsites to see what was going wrong and what was going right," said Allen.

"He insisted that we maintain direct relationships with contractors," said Sny. "They were encouraged to talk to us and recom-



mend changes. And because we did our own fabrication in house, we were free to adapt and implement changes."

"The first accessory was a round pipe flashing," Janni said. "We also realized corners were potential leak points, so we developed inside and outside corners. We also developed drains and PVC drip edge products. We added a metal line, which complements the system. The neat thing about metal is all the colors you can use to accessorize the building."

Contractor Support and Training

"Close relationships and continued support of the roofing contractor are the foundation of the business," said Steve Ruth, vice president of sales, who's been with the company 22 years.

"It's not just supplying a membrane, it's sales support, marketing support, technical support. As a small manufacturer in a large industry, that's how we built our business — one contractor at a time."

■ **Top Right:** Duro-Last Roofing's founder, John Burt, worked as a lumberjack, carpenter, tool and die maker, contractor and swimming pool installer before founding Duro-Last in 1978. He is shown here with his wife Mildred and daughter Carol. **Middle:** Close relationships with its contractor partners are an integral part of the company's success. Mid-Western Commercial Roofers Inc. completed this roof on a school building in Greenville, Miss. **Lower Left:** Duro-Last completes 80 percent to 85 percent of roof deck membrane seaming in the factory, which means that only 15 percent to 20 percent of the seaming is done in the field.

“We develop long-term relationships to help our contractors grow their businesses,” said Tim Hart, vice president of Western Operations, who has been with Duro-Last 26 years. Training is the first step. Contractors attend a two-day training course at the Duro-Last facility with classroom work and hands-on training. Forty hours of field training at the jobsite is available at no cost. In addition, the company offers ongoing training for its contractors after they are comfortable with the installation process to increase efficiency. “We know contractors wear 10 hats a day,” said Ruth. “We help them sell.”

“We also help with engineering — CAD designs, layouts — and prefabrication,” added Hart.

“Pre- and post-sales support and training is critical,” said Ruth. “The core philosophy of our founder is still in place today.”

Durable Relationships

George Bock is president and owner of Mid-Western Commercial Roofers Inc., with service locations in Mobile, Ala., Pine Bluff, Ark., Clinton, Miss., and Paducah, Ky. Mid-Western has worked with Duro-Last for the last decade, and Bock points to the product’s durability as one big reason for its popularity. “We do a lot of large roofing projects all over the Southeast and Midwest, and we were looking for a material that wouldn’t have problems,” he said. “It’s a dependable single-ply. Once we put it down, we don’t have to worry about it.”

Bock finds the warranty is a major selling point with customers. The standard, comprehensive 15-year full warranty is transferable, has no exclusions for ponding water, and provides coverage against consequential damages that result from defects in the Duro-Last material. “We chose Duro-Last because of the quality of the material and the hassle-free relationship,” Bock said. “We don’t want to spend time and effort getting the product to the jobsite — we want to spend our time and effort selling and installing more product.”

Dave Damschroder owns Damschroder Construction in Fremont, Ohio. The company has installed Duro-Last systems since 1985, when a customer requested that



■ Duro-Last custom designs each roof based on the layout and penetrations. (Photo courtesy of Mid-Western Commercial Roofers Inc.)

Damschroder install a Duro-Last roof on his building. “The more work I did, the more I began to realize what was causing flat roofs to fail, and the more I realized the benefits of the Duro-Last system,” he said. “It’s flexible, and can absorb the stress of a moving building and remain watertight.”

One particularly challenging project was the Rexam Beverage Can Co. factory in Fremont. “The roof had 356 penetrations in a very small area,” he recalled. “Because of the prefabricated deck membrane and flashings, we were able to reroof through that area without shutting down the plant, and we provided an amazing, weather-tight roof that is still performing today.”

Robert Luukko and Sean Kidd, co-owners of Kidd-Luukko Corp. in Worcester, Mass., have high praise for Duro-Last, their local sales rep, Scott Bieber, and their technical rep, Dennis Davies. Luukko credits Bieber with convincing him to give the product a try. “We started using Duro-Last in 2003,” Luukko said. “They worked closely with us to secure and execute our first contract. The scope of work was a basic flat roof overlay, about as easy as it gets. Our tech rep worked with us to properly complete the installation. After that project, we became very comfortable with the system. It worked out very well.”

“The Duro-Last product has been great for us and our clients. The warranty, prefabrication process and marketing help are all valuable assets,” continued Luukko. “The greatest benefit to using Duro-Last has been the sales and technical support. Scott Bieber is an excellent salesman and has extensive product knowledge. As difficult prospects or situations arise, he has always come through, offering his help and expertise.”

Curtis Nicholson is co-owner and vice president of Western Roofing, Golden, Colo. He owns the company with his partner, Sandy Sanderson. “Getting to know the product and the people over the years has given me confidence in the system, and it’s become the No. 1 product that we use,” said Nicholson. “The relationship, the product, and the way they stand behind it were the key. And it just grew from there.”

What sold Nicholson are the same things he uses to sell the product to building owners. “It’s a complete roof system,” he said. “Duro-Last will warranty all aspects of the system from the edge metal to the walls to the membrane to the screws.”

“Educating the building owner is the key to the sale,” said Nicholson. “This manufacturer has been around for 30 years and takes care of its customers.

Once you put on a Duro-Last roof, the best benefit is peace of mind. You don't have to worry about it. Here in Colorado, Mother Nature is brutal on roofs — snow, wind, sun — and we'll inspect it and make sure it's holding up, winter, summer, spring and fall."

Energy Efficiency to Boot

Another selling point for Nicholson is energy efficiency, an increasingly important issue for building owners, but one Duro-Last contractors have been stressing since the late 1970s. "We've always been at the forefront," said Nicholson. "We've been talking green, reflective, and energy efficiency for 30 years. Duro-Last has been a pioneer in all of these areas — white membranes, reflectivity, cutting cooling costs."

"We were selling energy efficiency 30 years ago," Ruth pointed out. "Now it's a



■ The Mid-Western Commercial Roofers Inc. team includes Mack McEntire, George Bock, Richard Noel and Chuck Smith.

core business strategy. The industry is still trying to catch up to us."

Duro-Last founder John Burt cited high-quality products, solid relationships, and excellent customer service as the keys to success, Duro-Last's employees continue to follow his example, and as they talk about the company, one word keeps cropping up: family.

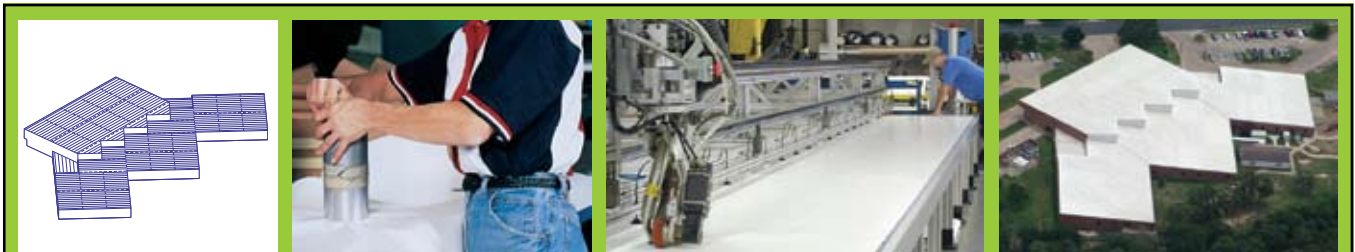
"It's kind of an extended family for us," said Sny. "Many of our employees have been with us since the beginning and have been instrumental in our growth."

"If you could see us at one of our national sales seminars, you'd see it's like a big family," said Janni. "I see a lot of our customers there that started small, built their businesses, and became millionaires. They attribute their success to the unique relationship they have with Duro-Last."

"It's all about good people," concluded Hollingsworth. "We have a lot of great employees, great contractors and a great team effort — an excellent team."

For more information about Duro-Last, visit www.duro-last.com.

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