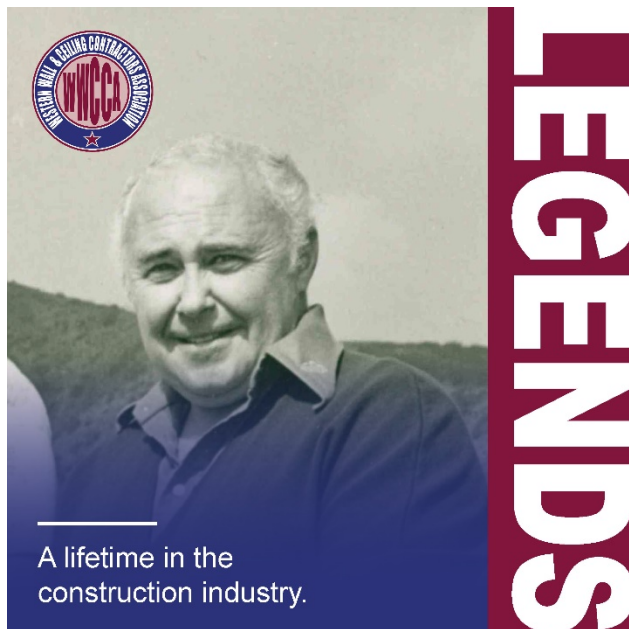


Walter F. Pruter



A compilation of articles, videos and (mostly) personal interviews with industry greats, re-lived in the personal stories section at the end of the article.

Walter Frederick Pruter Jr. was born on May 26, 1924. It was the year of the 1st radio broadcast, 48 states, the 1st Olympic games in France and the start of Babe Ruth's career as a Yankee. Joined by likes of Don Knotts, Benny Hill, Marlon Brando, Jimmie Carter and George H.W. Bush, it was an era of lawlessness, gangsters, and the Tommy machine gun.

Walt was the oldest of three children, 2 boys and a girl, and only 5 years old when the country fell into the 1929 financial collapse that eventually engulfed the entire world. Children of the depression learned the value of hard work as sometimes their fathers would be gone for months looking for a job. They experienced frugality while not knowing if there would be food the next day. And most importantly they learned the value of family.

He attended Morgan Park High School in Chicago and graduated just as we entered WWII. He served as an aviation cadette in the US Navy, flying the SBC Douglas Dauntless off carriers in the Atlantic. He spoke fondly and with humility about his time in the service. He told us stories about landing on the carriers at night in the rough seas with swells more than 10 feet. With 40's technology the skill and concentration required for such a landing is nothing short of phenomenal.

His famous toast at functions and private dinners alike invoked his days in the service. "Confusion to the Enemy" he would say as he raised his glass of Jameson Irish Whiskey.

Walt earned a Bachelor of Science degree in architecture at Illinois Institute for Technology. He was always proud to have been trained by Mies van der Rohe, a famous German architect exemplifying his elegant simplicity and structural honesty.

Walt was an open book and very much enjoyed visits from friends and family alike as he made everyone feel welcome. He was a great father to his 4 children: Lowell, Randall, Jane, and Andrew from his first marriage in 1948 to Lois Adams. They lived in Western Springs, Illinois, Virginia, and Chicago before moving to California.

In the late 1940's Walt served as an architectural representative for the USG Co. in Chicago, Washington, Philadelphia and Baltimore. In the early 50's he first met Dick Gorman while employed by Kaiser Gypsum.

As the industry grew so did the need for technical services. Walt established the Southern California Plastering Institute in the early 50's where he served as Technical Director before Dick took over. He founded the Information Bureau for Lath, Plaster and Drywall and also started the Furring and Lath Industry Bureau. Dick and Walt joined forces in the mid 60's and got their office on Los Feliz Blvd. in Glendale. They both had their own private consultation business and worked in the industry employed by California Wall & Ceiling Contractors Association doing union inspections. Dick would represent the plaster membership, Walt the lath, drywall, and framing, both highly respected in the industry.

Walt and Dick's office was a stand-alone building with multiple rooms including a conference room. Walt was a packrat, he had stacks of old magazines, books and papers 3 feet high all around his entire office. If you asked him if he had seen a detail on an assembly from years ago, he would walk over, thumb through a stack and give it to you within minutes. He had no file cabinets or system but kept things organized in his brain. It was amazing to see.

Walt and Dick realized they needed a central point of a well-recognized book and built the first much needed manual in 1970 which was a big conglomeration of some old ICBO information, a data guide, some details, and technical information. It was the best the industry had at the time. They put out a few revisions during the next few years and Walt began to build a very close community working with the architects. He would write specifications, draw details, and educate them about the value of using union contractors and trained apprentices.

He must have produced over 1000 letters yet never sat and typed one out himself. He hand-wrote them all and Carol who was Walt and Dick's receptionist, typed them out. Over time Walt and Carol grew sweet on each other and in 1985, they were married. Walt loved Carol dearly and glowed when she was around. Carol had a daughter named Tara, and Walt treated her as his own child. Tara trained hard and became a firefighter, then went on to work for Disney in their internal fire department.

Walt loved to draw; he was really an artist. His cartoons were reminiscent of the 30's and 40's and reminded some of the original McDonald's logo. He was a character with a great sense of humor and spirit larger than life. A big-hearted mentor with a hard-outer shell and soft middle just like M&M candy.

Walt truly enjoyed good food and shared that love with everyone around him. His adventures for local flavor and knowledge of a good meal anywhere in the nation were legendary. It never had to be extravagant or expensive, but it was always fun.

There are many stories circulating about Tadich grill, the oldest seafood restaurant with the best cioppino in San Francisco, or Tam O'Shanter, his favorite Scottish pub to talk business

down the street from his office, his great friend Leon Goldberg and his Steakhouse LG's. He always wore his glasses on a tether around his neck and enjoyed making jokes about his vision getting blurry when he discovered a good cleaning of fallen food particles was called for.

He was affectionately called "the Professor" by some for his passionate ferocious reading, sharing of knowledge and love of learning. His most outstanding feature was how he promoted everyone around him to always be open minded and carry it forward. He could have a conversation about history, politics, architecture, culture and lived by believing one should learn something new every day as well as his words "don't ever think you know everything."

It is believed one of his biggest contribution to the industry was the way he carried himself and lead by the example he set for others. The bar he raised representing our industry earned him the utmost recognition of his peers. It was way beyond a job or even a career, it was his life. Walt performed inspections, wrote specification, counseled builders, and architects. He was an extremely hard worker, even taking phone calls into the evening.

He had a lot of credibility because of how he spoke. He was an old school guy, very humble and never tried to be in the spotlight. He did not see the need to make a big show of anything. Walt was a part of the greatest generation, a trustworthy guy that was easy to respect. Being from the Midwest he proud himself on doing things the right way and did not believe in cutting corners and taking shortcuts. He promoted quality craftsmanship and took his reputation very seriously. Walt was a conservative honest gentleman, whom people trusted.

He mentored a lot of people personally and professionally in the industry. He would always say we are not selling a product we are selling ourselves. He made it very clear the only thing we have is our integrity and it needed to be maintained no matter who we were dealing with. He would always take the high road and do what benefited the industry. As he saw mistakes made calling out the responsible was done privately. Walt was always there to represent the contractor with helpful ideas but never let them slide.

On the National level he would go to many CSI meetings which were not directly beneficial for his region because he already had good representation but there was nobody else. He believed it was his duty to help the entire industry. There were sometimes Federal or State agencies or architecture firms from many different parts of the county with questions. His involvement in these national meetings helped tremendously at ASTM code hearings.

Walt was recognized as an authority on building codes and standards. He was an affiliate member of the American Institute of Architects, Construction Specifications Institute, International Conference of Building Officials, American Society for Testing and Materials, and the American Concrete Institute. His knowledge was far reaching and if anyone had a problem, they always knew who to call.

He was so well respected at high levels for his honesty and distinguished stature, ICBO evaluation service would specifically request Walt to be present and give testimony for code

changes and products. If he did not think something was going to work, he would say it even if it was not politically incorrect.

There were many times he would stand at the mic debating with a 1000 people listening in the audience. "Asking what Walt thinks", was common practice because of his unbiased professional opinions.

He was very well published and wrote papers and articles in magazines. One example would be the 1992 November issue of Walls and Ceilings Magazine where he discussed how to plaster over cement block. His writing style was eloquent with creative terms and adjectives, but it was packed full of references. He was always able to back himself up, cite his sources and was careful to keep objective.

Because of his background in architecture and knowledge of products; he had the ability and the experience to know how to talk to architects. He would help them sketch things out and it looked like a beautiful drawing you would want to put in a frame. It could be a window opening, a parapet or even just a section of the wall. He was a firm believer that to get a chance to see how things fit together, how lath overlaps, how flashing goes around an opening, you had to go through the process by hand.

So much was undefined in the industry, it was mostly an art not a science. There needed to be a spokesperson and Walt had a voice. He became the ambassador, a pioneer. He was the only one for the job. There were some others out there with a lot of opinions and narrow focus. Walt was able to separate out his personal side and comment on what worked, why it worked and what was the best way to go about it. The bureaus really developed into something relevant, and everyone started turning to them. They helped standardize things, promote cohesion, and educate on issues with expertise.

Walt, Carol and their two floppy eared Kings Charles whom he also adored, lived in Glendale until they retired to Palm Desert. He was always very proud and happy to correct anyone who mistakenly referred to it as Palm Springs. He enjoyed his Ironwood Country Club membership playing golf, tennis and happily visiting with any friend, colleague or the WWCCA family.

After retirement Walt continued to consult for the TSIB (Technical Services Information Bureau) and WWCCA (Western Wall & Ceiling Contractors Association).

Although his brain and passion never slowed him down, those who knew him saw his health as his biggest limitation. In September of 2008, Walt received an unfavorable diagnosis. While at the Eisenhower Medical Center he was excited when he realized one of the contractors, he knew was doing work on a wing expansion of the hospital. The project job was visible from his hospital bed where he watched in earnest and was even able to review a set of plans, from the same bed.

Being a man of strong faith, a devout Christian and practicing Episcopalian, Walt attended church every Sunday and even taught Sunday School. After his diagnosis one could sense a calm in his presence and peacefulness in his voice as he realized eternal salvation awaited his soul. It was his focused faith that helped him near his end.

Walter Frederick Pruter Jr., with his many marked pages in a tiny book titled "Safe in the Shepherds Arms", died on November 10, 2008

Personal stories

Ian Hendry, retired CEO - WWCCA

I first met Walt in 1985 when I started at the association. I was blessed to have so many great memories with him and Carol. I had gone on some jobsite visits with him where he asked me to get up in the roof and take some pictures. We loved playing golf together and were involved in many tournaments. He would always make me feel great by commenting "Man you really killed that one." We also shared lunch, dinner and drinks from one end of the coast to the other. In our younger years we were at an ASTM function in Newport, Virginia and somehow, we missed the cab back to the hotel. We ended up walking back in the 40-degree rain without jackets.

It is no secret that both Walt and I love to eat. We were at an ICBO conference in Denver and ended up at the Buckhorn Exchange where stuffed game gaze at you while you eat strange dishes. My wife Pam decided the Rocky Mountain oysters sounded interesting and still to this day does not believe what she consumed.

I remember we were at an architectural group meeting in Spokane for a few days. It is only about 1 hour from Coeur d'Alene, Idaho with the famous million-dollar floating golf green. It can be raised, moved, and it is tethered with some steel cables. Once you hit the ball, they would take you out on a boat to the green. None of us have ever seen it or played it and it was time to go. Of course, Idaho is famous for potatoes and we were determined to get some french fries at one of the corner stands which they were sure to have. We never found the course; we were told it was a hoax and never found any potatoes either even though we spent the better part of the day looking. We had to be content with a fountain drink place that served ice cream.

Michael Logue, Project Executive Preconstruction - Nevell Group, Inc.

Walt was so much more than a mentor he was a friend to me and my family. He was every bit an adopted grandfather. He gave me advice on all types of subjects and made sure I knew to get my drinks on the rocks and let ice melt before I ordered a second. He was a true gentleman.

Walt and Dick took me to plaster city when I started in 2000, on a hosted USG plant tour. They loved all the information and always learned so much, it was an inspiration

When I first started, I had no idea what to do so I spent the first months reading all the letters Walt wrote to various contractors. Seeing his work and writing I realized right away he was a wordsmith who really liked to express himself and would probably take many hours on his correspondence.

Walt was a kind of a lath, plaster and drywall hoarder. 70% of his garage was full of things that ordinary people would throw out. Brochures, documents, and papers. Of course, there was no computer storage back then and he saved everything.

Walt willed his library and collection to Darin and me. After his passing, we filled up a 20-foot-long trailer, 3 feet high of contents from his garage and office. Digging through that was a form of archaeology. We came across some gems and a good portion of the TSIB library came from that.

He had a lot of charisma and did not need a whole lot to be able to draw you in. When TSIB would do architectural presentations we really went all out. We brought mockups, visual aids, very elaborate power point presentations and handouts. Walt would literally walk into the architect's office with a couple of pepperoni pizzas and an 8.5x11 yellow pad of paper and everyone would be captivated. He would just talk for hours.

One visual aid he did have that he stopped using by the time I met him was a jar of marbles, rocks and different types of gravel and sand. It illustrated how properly graded sand would fit together to create a much denser plaster mix. As we moved from an era where contractors were hand applying to gun applied production the quality of sand changed.

Darin Coats, Chief Technical Officer - TSIB

I would call Walt at least twice a week and he would always ask what he could do to help. He would give me suggestions and made sure I knew not to say anything if I did not know the answer. Walt would say "go research it and get back to them". There were many times I did not want to hang up the phone with him because of the information I was learning or the stories he was telling. There were many times Michael and I would say "WOW" he was such a great wealth of information and a great guy.

Bryan Stanley, Architectural Specialist, TSIB

My first impression of Walt was intimidation. I knew of him and heard people around me talk about the smartest guy. To me he was much bigger that way than the actual person. When I finally met him, I realized he could not have been further from it. He was the nicest person and I instantly felt like I was part of his family. He was very unassuming and much more human than the perception I had built up on my head.

Bob Heimerl - Mowery Thomason Inc

I was just a kid, 23 when I met Walt. Through all the years he has always been honest, a great

asset to the industry. If you messed up, he would let you know. He was an encyclopedia of lath, plaster, and drywall.

Jason Fell, Former Technical Director for DITF, Northern California

Every time you meet someone you develop a bond with them. Walt and I were both in the war. Mine was Vietnam but we both flew so that is what we talked about.

I was at my 1st or 2nd ASTM meeting; I was young and new. I had to give a report and the “rocket scientist” of the industry handed me my shorts. Walt was sitting across the table from me said “Wow that was so bad. That’s ok, ask any of them if they could do a night landing.” He always made you feel good no matter where you were. His reputation reached all the way up to the Bay area and probably all around the country, he was an icon in the industry.

Frank Nunes, CEO - WACA

When I think of Walt, his personal handwritten notes quoting “Illegitimi non carborundum” often translated as "Don't let the bastards grind you down" are the first to come to mind.

I met him in 1988 and will never forget how much he seemed to enjoy making sure I knew that he started the bureau the year I was born.

He was so far ahead in his thinking and I admired how much he enjoyed the industry and loved the people in it. He treated us all like his flock and herding was not easy but always done with love and the best of intentions. He always was a big-hearted mentor with a hard-outer shell and soft middle like M&M candy. He let us all fall sometimes so we can learn but always watched out for us.

He loved traveling and eating. He would snicker when we came across some odd food that we never heard of or would come close to trying. He took me everywhere and encouraged me to do things in a very progressive way. He promoted me to learn things and put me in charge before I even knew what was going on. He was very good at leading us down a path and make us question things. Walt many times had the answers figured out but would let everyone around him work it out which would sometimes help him arrive at new solutions as well. He eventually had me take over on some things as he faded out. He needed to pass the torch and it made his value even stronger.

I can remember being at code meetings or ASTM evaluations, running out to make a phone call to Walt across the country. I would let him know what was going on and asked him what he thought. He would quickly tell me questions to ask and advice to come back with to fill in the blank. He was so savvy to the process he did not even have to be present.

You could never get off the phone without him acknowledging his love of family and asking about yours.

When I first met him, and Dick I could not figure out if they liked each other or hated each other. It was a game like the odd couple. One minute they would get along like brothers, the other complete opposite. It would make you dizzy. They were masterfully orchestrating it and it was fun to watch.

To this day I hear him in my mind all the time. He sat us up for years describing, working, and guiding us through different situations. How to deal with them and maintain the balance on what we had to do for our contractors and the industry to carry it forward. There was true art in what he did.

Dick Gorman

Walt and I went back 45 years and seemed to get along, so he called me up one day and asked if I wanted to take over the Bureau. I said sure, I will try it, half a lifetime later I am still here.

We shared good times we shared bad times and at a lunch meeting decided to share an office as well. Some of you may remember every time you came to the office, we had a different secretary. I do not even remember the first one. The second one was matronly and kept telling Walt to buy gold which in hindsight was a great tip. There was another one after that, a blonde. The final one turned out pretty good. Carol and Walt got married a few years later.

We traveled to Washington to a CSI meeting a while back and spent 2 weeks doing presentations to the military.

We did a lot of architectural lunch presentations on lath and plaster throughout the years. Walt would always start off with the lath, when he sat down then I had the rest of the time. I never had more than 5 minutes I could not shut him up. They would always keep us there for an extra hour or so.

Ron Wollard - Certain Teed Gypsum

I started working with Walt when he was 75 in 1992. Some thought he was going to retire soon. Little did they know he was never going to stop working. I left USG to work with him and he used to work there as well. We had a few things in common we were both from Chicago. I learned as much as I could, I was being mentored by him, a sidekick and appreciated the opportunity. He was very easy to be around, and I learned a lot. He was soft spoken and very patient with me although I know I frustrated him. I learned not just about lath and plaster but life as well. He was an avid reader, he liked history, politics, we would talk all the time.

I loved taking trips with him to ASTM and ICBO meetings and meet all the players in the industry. A few times I would go out on a jobsite as he was unsteady on his feet, I would go up on a scaffold take some pictures and be his eyes.

I remember we were going to renovate the office and add a conference room and a library. He was fine with the old gold shag carpeting, but the walls were falling apart it was a wreck. We pretty much had to move out and I rented 2 trailers. One to store things and the other to set up

a temporary office in. I was in my mid 30'ies back then and I was going to change the world. Walt had a bunch of magazines and so much stuff in his office that he had a path to walk through the door. He had all these old UBC code books from 1963. I could not understand why he would be holding onto them, so I just threw them away to save space. When Walt saw what I did he was so angry, but he contained himself. Of course, I found out he had those so he can go back to old codes to reference buildings designed in the past. Quite a few of them were in lawsuits and he would get hired by forensic attorneys to clear up details. We just had to bite the bullet; they were gone. That was a boneheaded mistake and I never threw anything out after that.

We all loved, admired and respected Walt and miss him to this day!