

# Automated Builder

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Innovative J L Schwieters Manufacturing utilizes two high-speed MiTek/PCS wall panel lines to feed 225 field carpenters. Also creates new components



California luxury home built with AK Steel framing coated with antimicrobial compound by AgION technologies



Triad/Merrick Machine Co. and Alpine Engineered Products combine displays as BCMC 2003 shows its wares in Phoenix



New soybean-based insulation foam sprays in place, wins Green Builders Conference product of the year award

## ALSO IN THIS ISSUE:

- Carlson's column on 'code plot thickens'
- Details on antimicrobial solutions
- Mick Pattinson discusses 'the murder Of California housing'
- Trammel Crow picks Tri-Chord steel framing For Portland project



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Unusual components by Schwieters Brothers include, left, tailor-made fireplace/entertainment cabinet systems, some with stair access to the second floor. Center, prefabricated stair systems which save hours of time at both homes and apartments. Right, storm shelters.

## What? No Trusses? How Minnesota’s Schwieters Brothers Converted a Stick Framing Company into Success with Innovation & Components

By Don O. Carlson  
Editor & Publisher

HUGO, MN—Find a need and fill it. Almost as soon as John and Joel Schwieters started their jobs as young contractors for conventional builders, they could see that the industry was almost drowning in an ocean of needs. The majority of the on-site building jobs were too slow and way too costly.

At separate times, the two brothers decided there had to be a better way to do it. John Schwieters grew his business by recruiting a cadre of no-nonsense carpenters and trained them in the tenets of both quality and urgency. Joel Schwieters saw the need

for finish carpenters to do millwork, cabinetry and, separately, the finishing of both products.

Taking an unusual turn, John Schwieters set up a separate operation called J L Schwieters Manufacturing and began building two products that often give stick builders the biggest headaches; namely, stairs and tailored fireplace/entertainment centers for both homes and apartments. Both components were wildly well received by big name site builders.

John Schwieters also saw that the work in the field would progress faster



John H. Schwieters, president/owner, J L Schwieters Manufacturing Inc.

and more economically if they had quality wall panels to work with - - not to mention the myriad of small items that always slowed job site carpenters to a crawl such as attic access doors, soffits enclosures over kitchen cabinets, headers, corners, tees and similar helpful items.

“At first,” says John Schwieters, “our 225 or so site carpenters didn’t like the idea of using factory-made wall panels. However, once they started working with them they soon found out that they got a lot more work done, the actual construction was easier, and the quality was infinitely better so they could take much more



The Schwieters complex includes three 45,000 sq. ft. buildings, soon to be joined by number four.



John Schwieters poses with one of their tailored unitized gas fireplace/entertainment cabinets.



Right, a completed unit ready to receive zero clearance fireplace, TV set and stereo.



CNC router machine by Thermwall can automatically route stringers for three staircases in a matter of seconds. Super strong stringers are made with LSL engineered lumber.



Virtek Visions' Laser MC automated system measures, marks and cuts wall panel parts in a single operation. Laser beams mark each part and maximize yield through optimization.

pride in their work. All we had to do is find more builder customers.”

For the Schwieters one thing led to another and the business grew to the point where they needed over 100 trucks, so John and Joel worked with another brother, Bob, and they bought a Chevrolet/Oldsobile dealership at Glenwood, MN. Before that, it was obvious that every major construction project needed fork lift trucks so John bought Builders Equipment Co., New Brighton, MN which handled Pettibone heavy duty fork lifts.

As the quality and productivity reputation of the Schwieters grew, they were beginning to be approached also by developers seeking commercial buildings and rental properties, so John and Joel Schwieters founded SB Commercial to act as a general contractor in that field. At present the wood products manufacturing and site installation business is grossing around \$20 million and the other divisions of the company gross about \$30 million annually.

Along the line of course they needed factory space for their growing manufacturing lines that were servicing major production builders such as Centex, Pulte, D. R. Horton and others in the Twin Cities metro area. Each year, according to John Schwieters, they had a goal of trying to grow the business by 20% annually, and they rarely missed their target.

The Schwieters brothers grew up on a Minnesota dairy

farm family with 12 children, including nine sons. “Very early,” says John, “we learned a lot about urgency from our father. For example, when he had to go away from the farm for a day or two, he seemed to be always able to make sure that we boys were left with enough work for about four days. We also learned with a lot of hands-on experience in construction when we built several new buildings for the farm.”

John Schwieters also states that literally he learned the need for education and public relations in the construction business, and the vast importance of a normal family life for employees. “When a worker is properly imbued with a sense of urgency regarding what he is doing,” says John, “he gets his work done by 5:00 P.M. so he can get home to the family. We strive to make sure that happens every day while still we stay on track to finish all of our buildings on schedule.”

Over the years the Schwieters conglomerate has framed over 35,000 buildings, and each year the number of builder clients goes up because of their reputation for quality and on-time completions. Whenever new materials or products are introduced, training sessions are conducted at the company headquarters for in-plant and in-field workers. At the present time, the company has about 35 employees in the wall panel/wood component plant and about 225 carpenters in the field.

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Two high speed MiTek/PCS wall panel machines each produce around 3,000 lineal feet of straight wall per day, about 2,000 with sheathing. A separate machine handles interior partitions. All walls are totally conveyORIZED, lifted and stacked at the ends of the line reducing injuries and fatigue. High-speed pneumatic tools by Stanley Bostitch each hold 2,500 fasteners in coils.



Load of wall panels is checked by John Schwieters, left, and Dale Meyer, lumber manager right. J.L. Schwieters Manufacturing builds wall panels for most major builders in the Twin Cities metro area.



Living up to its reputation of 'speeding site work for builders,' Schwieters also produces a plethora of small parts, such as attic access



doors, kitchen cabinet soffits and archways to greatly speed site fabrication.

Will the Schwieters operation ever expand into other areas? They state that they occasionally do jobs in other

regions of Minnesota and Wisconsin and occasionally as far away as the Dakotas. However, since they have a philosophy of using their own people to install their own factory-fabricated products, they feel this could become a quality problem down the road if their own people are unable to do the installations.

However, for some of the products which don't require highly skilled labor at the job site, such as pre-made stairs and perhaps some tailored entertainment centers, they may see the day when these are sold regionally or perhaps even nationally. At the present time, roughly half of the company's sales volume of prefabricated wood products are sold through lumberyards.

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### Keep the Crew, Get More Customers with Wall Panels

HUGO, MN—Part of the philosophy of J L Schwieters Manufacturing when they went into the fabrication of wall panels was that the move would enable them to hang on to their crew of 225 skilled carpenters while getting more work for them to do. The Schwieters' management believed that with wall panels, they would be able to serve more production builders at the site with greater speed and improved quality.

The machines they chose for manufacturing the wall panels were by MiTek/PCS, formerly known as Production Conveyor Systems. The theory behind the wall panel machines is that the wall panels move down the production line and the workers are stationary. By not chasing the work from one end of the line to another, they believe they would get greater production.

So far, the program has worked well. In order to get maximum speed they did have to specify high-speed pneumatic nailing tools by Stanley Bostitch. The framing tools work on sensors to quickly fasten plates to studs. A multi-tool bridge down the line applies sheathing on exterior walls.

"We found the man from MiTek/PCS, Jim Oakley," said John Schwieters, "to be extremely helpful in setting up our line for maximum production."



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