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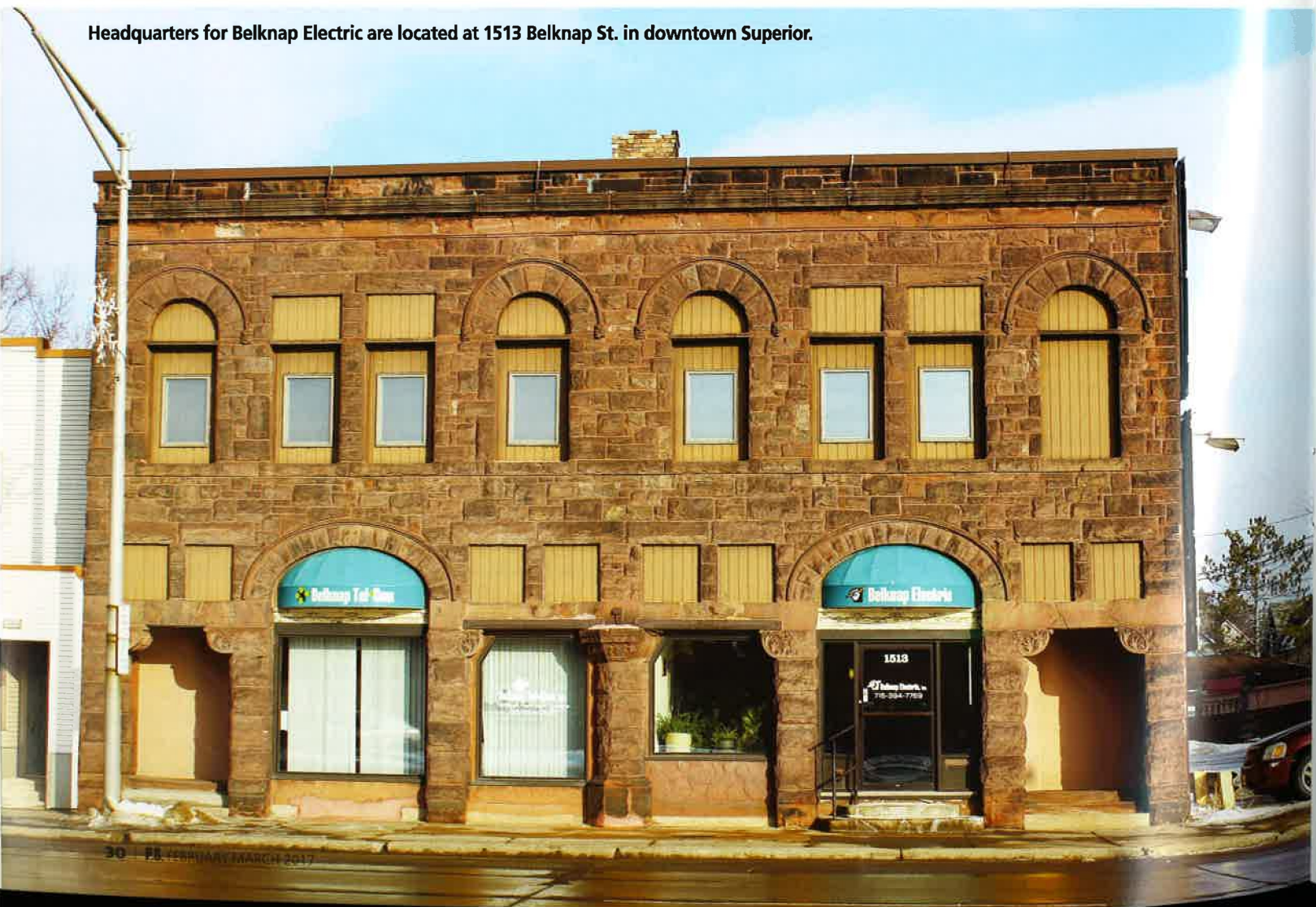
The Right Connections

Belknap Electric Has Served Industrial, Commercial and Residential Customers Since 1933, Thanks to a Focus on Expert Service and Safety

By Thomas Vaughn

Connectivity, interoperability, flexibility and compatibility – business developers today know the synergistic momentum these key essentials release to support ongoing success. Perhaps the founders of Belknap Electric held a prescient sense of the future when they organized their company over 70 years ago on the bedrock of those core attributes. By keeping close to these basic practices over the years, Belknap Electric has remained a thriving firm sought out by residential, commercial and industrial clients in the Twin Ports and surrounding area.

Headquarters for Belknap Electric are located at 1513 Belknap St. in downtown Superior.





“We take it personally. We’ve got some skin in it. If there’s an issue ... we step up and take care of it.”

– OWNER KEN LARSON

Owner, President and Project Manager Ken Larson

For current owner Ken Larson, who started working in his family’s business in 1980, connectivity means more than having speedy Internet service. It also means keeping the history of Belknap Electric connected to the present – a professional and personal commitment for him.

“We’ve been around forever; I think we’re the oldest electric company around town now,” reflected Larson, who offered further details about the building’s origins and the decorative brick arches and carvings on the storefront’s façade. “The building itself is an old funeral home and crematorium. In the back door, there’s a square opening and then a square window to our current work counter. That’s where they used to wheel the coffins in and out,” he explained.

Ken works alongside his brother, Mike Larson, another connection that links the past to the present. They’re the sons of the previous owner, Roland “Rolle” Larson, a well-known and respected Superior businessman who also “had more electrical knowledge than most seasoned electricians,” Ken said.

“It’s always a challenge to take a set of blueprints and then try and figure out how you’re going to build. It’s fun that way.”

– MIKE LARSON

The company initially took root in 1938 when a group of electricians simply began practicing the trade out of the building at 1513 Belknap St. Then, in 1954, four stockholders incorporated the enterprise into Belknap Electric – a minor shareholder being the young Rolle Larson, who would continue to buy out the other shareholders on his path to eventual full ownership. Rolle began his career at Belknap Electric in 1955 as an 18-year-old. He swept floors and stocked shelves while building his knowledge of the electrical side of the business. Rolle became the sole owner in 1986 and retired in 2000, when Ken and Mike took over the business.

With desks side-by-side in an open-area environment with other coworkers, the brothers communicate quickly and easily about anything and everything that comes through the office during the business day.

“We actually get along,”

joked Mike. “We [sometimes] disagree, but it’s never in anger – usually just about different ways of doing something on a project or whether we should extend more business to a particular employee.”

“We both look at things differently – completely different,” concurred Ken, who served as an apprentice instructor for 14 years at Lake Superior College. In fact, Mike was in his first class of students in 1988. “We argue about things in the business, but then we go fishing together on the weekend.”

As brothers in business, they work diligently to bring the best ideas and solutions to customers. Their close proximity in the office makes it easy to solve problems, brainstorm automation ideas, and evaluate potential project bids. Ken manages the office. Mike stays focused on projects.

“It’s just a different kind of thinking,” said Mike about working with new project blueprints. He started in the electrical contracting business in 1984 and served



Vice President and Project Manager Mike Larson



as the foreman for the Swenson Hall project at the University of Wisconsin-Superior, among many other projects. “I like the mechanical part of it – thinking it through, from walking up to a big pile of dirt in the ground and envisioning a brand-new school at UMD,” he said, referencing the Labovitz School of Business and Economics. “It’s always a challenge to take a set of blueprints and then try and figure out how you’re going to build. It’s fun that way.”

Other projects Belknap Electric has completed include the Douglas County Metro Center, where Ken was the foreman, the University of Wisconsin-Superior Yellowjacket Union and several regional Kwik Trip locations. The company has worked on projects ranging from the AMSOIL Arena in Duluth to the ALDI Food Market in Superior, as well as for Superior Glass Inc. and for area hotels and hospitals. They also support major industrial clients (including Calumet, Northern Pipeline and Enbridge) and perform a majority of the automation work bid out by Johnson Controls, which allows them to leave their mark on many, many school buildings throughout the region.

Interoperability is the norm at Belknap Electric. When a truck pulls up with pipes for delivery, everyone in the office grabs a pair of gloves and heads outside. And in hiring, Ken and Mike look for the kind of employee who understands the need to support coworkers and project goals.

“Everything that happens after the engineer lays out the placement of the light fixture is up to the electrician as to how it gets set up,” said Ken. “So attitude is the number-one thing. The employees that have good attitudes don’t care whether they’re digging in the trench or installing light fixtures in a nice, clean office building.”

Flexibility is another essential characteristic for both employees and managers. The company serves the needs of residential, commercial and industrial clients. Varying levels of skill are needed at all worksites, with few exceptions. Service requests are frequent, diverse and challenging.

In residential situations, the most common request is for updating old fusers into breaker models. Wireless products for residential homes that offer



continuing developments in hand-held remote technology (where wall switches can be swapped out to a hand-held remote control switch instead) need installation and attention. Fixing light fixtures remains a long-standing source of calls as well.

Commercial customers have other distinct needs. Cirrus Aircraft wanted a project completed inside a precast building that was part of its recent expansion – an electrical grounding of a prime and paint booth surface that would allow trucks to bring airplanes into the building for painting. Belknap Electric employees



Belknap Electric was one of the contractors involved with the Lake Superior College Health and Science Building.



Office Manager Tammy Fielding “takes care of the entire company,” said President Ken Larson. “Most companies have a number of staff doing her job.”

worked out how to fit the 30-foot-high-ceilinged building with new lighting, electric panels and dust collector equipment to reduce dust particles from the sanding and prepping of the planes. They also installed the grounding system inside the floor slab. This system removes incendiary dangers to both the airplane

and to Cirrus employees – no sparks, explosions or fires from a piece of painting equipment that gets dropped and ignites nearby flammable gas or fumes, because the plane itself is grounded.

Industrial projects sometimes involve teams that travel. For example, Belknap Electric manages a pipeline for

Cirrus Aircraft wanted a project completed inside a precast building that was part of its recent expansion.



Chris Krook

“On bid day, we hit it hard. That’s the great thing about being the size of the company that we are.”

– CHRIS KROOK, CHIEF ESTIMATOR/PROJECT MANAGER

Northern Natural Gas Co. A major task involves supporting an industrial fire prevention system that inhibits gas leaks along the line. Belknap Electric also runs the pipeline power and control systems for the large natural gas compressors and oversees instrumentation, valve automation and compressor station automation. The pipeline starts in Texas and runs throughout areas of Minnesota. “We’ve worked all over Minnesota on that line and traveled to Kansas, Nebraska and Oklahoma, too,” said Ken.

“It’s interesting,” he added when discussing commercial and industrial work. “We’re there shoveling the ground at the beginning of the job and we’re the last to leave, even behind the painters; we’re running around doing touch-up. Electricians are the first ones there, because when the other worker pulls up in his construction trailer, he wants temporary power for his lights and other needs. We also turn the lights off. We’re the last to leave on every single job.”

“People don’t realize that falling just six feet – when you hit the ground, the worker is going 14 miles an hour.”

– BRUCE JERSETT, SAFETY COORDINATOR

Team flexibility makes things happen – safely and quickly. Chris Krook has worked at Belknap Electric for 13 years as the chief estimator and project manager. “The Cirrus project was a really nice project to work on,” said Krook. “Not one job is the same; that’s what I get out of it the most. We [also] do the smallest of projects. There are a lot of people that call about residential and ask if we send people out to fix light switches. We do the smallest of electrical work – we do everything like that.”

Krook noted the sense of connectivity that working together in a small business setting draws out. To him, this close sense of shared purpose also allows the company to submit bids that impress clients. Because they talk and work so well together, the Belknap Electric team is better prepared to engage and interact with stakeholders in a potential project.

“Comfort level of estimating,” nodded Krook as he described how the team talks through a given project. Their discussions will cover how everything will

fit together – from the blueprints to pricing out pipe, wire, connectors and labor according to the particular installation process.

“Then we start talking out loud,” Krook said. “We ask questions: How well do you know the plans – the specs, install needs? How well do you understand the block, the precast, how it’s put together in the end? There’s always one person that is going to ask a question that the other two didn’t think about through the prior process. That’s what allows us to be aggressive about pursuing jobs and working with customers. The more comfort we have, the more aggressive we can be about a job. On bid day, we hit it hard. That’s the great thing about being the size of the company that we are. It’s all open-door here – communication.”

Team interoperability has also been enhanced since the company was founded due to app integration into the electri-

cal contracting business. PlanGrid helps team members get into the nitty-gritty of their work instantaneously. “I – or any one of our employees – can pull project blueprint plans up on their phone – to the finest little detail. Then we can work together. It’s instant for us all,” said Ken, adding that there’s something new coming out every week which is app-related, including wireless, cloud-based and Internet products, even within the industrial scope of work. “We just put in six light poles at the Port Authority for the ships coming in,” he said. “The controls are on an app phone, so the guy can pull up his phone and turn on the lights down there for unloading the ships. It’s kind of mind-boggling, really.”



Bruce Jersett

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As the company's work methods keep evolving along with technology, compatibility with ongoing safety standards remains a major priority.

"We're always working around electricity all the time, and there's a safe way to do it," said Safety Coordinator Bruce Jersett. Jersett started his electrical apprenticeship at age 19 and is now nearing retirement. He is also a connection to the firm's past, following in the footsteps of Rolle Larson. Rolle had developed a forward-thinking safety program for employees. This training initially covered



Belknap Electric was one of the contractors involved with the University of Minnesota Duluth Labovitz School of Business and Economics.

respiration-fit and high-voltage safety protocols for Belknap Electric employees as they began working for Murphy Oil in the early 1990s – a period when most electrical contractors looked to their insurance providers for safety training rather than implementing their own in-house training practices.

"I started in 1998 working with Rolle, then," recalled Jersett. "I really liked Rolle and thought a lot of him. He was a great guy to work for. In 1996 I moved to Missouri and worked electrical down there. In 1999, I came back and Rolle put in a call for an electrician because he

wanted me back. So that was really nice, too." Over time, Jersett has become very knowledgeable about electrical contracting. He earned his OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration) certification as a safety instructor in 2002.

Jersett focuses on fall protection for employees working in height situations, OSHA adherence and industrial site safety. He notes that OSHA statistics show that falls are the major cause of fatalities on electrical contracting job sites. For construction sites, safety awareness begins at six feet off the ground. Jersett offered an example of an employee weighing about 200 pounds.

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“People don’t realize that falling just six feet – when you hit the ground, the worker is going 14 miles an hour. I mean, that can do some damage, so that’s where we want to start thinking about it: at six feet.” Jersett added that employees think about height safety when they climb toward higher elevations of 30 and 50 feet and usually take proper precautions. But at lower levels, where they feel more comfortable, people tend to neglect safety protocol, and that’s when injury happens.

Consider the opposite scenario. Jersett points out that excavation situations also present potential hazards that team members must know how to avoid. “When you look at excavations deeper than five feet, you can have earth coming in on top of you,” he said. “The amount of weight that lands on the body per yards of soil is tremendous. If you get buried up to your neck in soil, you’ve got enough weight to keep your lungs from expanding and contracting; the

chest won’t move because there’s something like 800 and some pounds of force on you, and you suffocate. That’s called a ‘caught-in-between’ situation.”

He points out to co-workers and new hires that small (but important) things, like proper storage and handling of materials, reduce the potential for material stockpiles to fall over on a worker. And watching for stray nails that need to be pounded out averts potentially infectious skin punctures and wounds.

Jersett also monitors safety training and practices for new hires and young people who seek an electrical contracting apprenticeship. Apprentices are placed in regional electrical contracting businesses by the International Brotherhood

As brothers in business, they work diligently to bring the best ideas and solutions to customers.



Belknap Electric installs a generator at the University of Minnesota Duluth’s Kirby Student Center.

of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 242 apprenticeship committee. Prior to that, the committee vets applicants for suitability in the trade. As new hires come to Belknap Electric, they receive on-the-job education by going to work at various job sites and getting the safety awareness training they need.

“All of our new hires here come through the hiring hall, which means they’re journeymen or apprentices,” Jersett explained. “So they’ve gone through an apprenticeship program and come up

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– or are coming up – through that training that meets the ‘qualified’ standard set by OSHA for this trade and industry. When we hire an apprentice, we know they’re coming through the steps of the OSHA-approved training.”

Jersett conducts quarterly safety reviews for longtime Belknap Electric employees as well, offering a blend of refresher material and new training on topics such as personal fall arrest, guardrail system awareness and safety-net use understanding. There is also time for thorough discussion of safety issues pertinent to particular job sites, so employees can bring up their concerns and things they’ve seen.


“I’ve always enjoyed trying to build something of quality that’s substantial and knowing that it’s going to last,” Jersett reflected about his years in the business, noting that “building something of quality” is more about developing a sense of connectivity and confidence in younger employees than it is about his own contracting projects these days. “If the young folks learn as I learned, they will do well. And that will benefit everybody: making a

good installation that is sound,” he said.”

During the summer of 2016, Belknap Electric had so many bids approved that it was kept very busy, managing a total of 60 employees for projects.

“We take it personally,” said Ken. “We’ve got some skin in it. If there’s an issue or a problem, we step up and take care of it. It’s our business, our company,

our livelihood. I grew up here; Mike grew up here. At a lot of the bigger companies, everybody’s just an employee. They’ll take care of the issues, too, but they don’t have skin in the game.”

“Like they say – from flashlights to lightening, we do it all,” added Mike. 

Thomas Vaughn is a Twin Ports-based freelance writer.



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