

A Minnesota
precaster
rises to the top
with the right
products and pride
in its work.

GOOD TIMES

Story and photos by Sara Geer



CREST PRECAST INC.

A company that enjoys the challenge of creating quality precast products, on time and free of error, is one to trust.

Crest Precast Inc. has forged that reputation of trust as an NPCA certified plant with a loyal customer base across the United States. Celebrating 50 years in 2014, the company, located in La Crescent, Minn., ranks high in Google searches for storm shelters and specialty products in the Midwest and management favors its position at the top.

A BACKLOG OF PROMISE

Steve Mader, president and co-owner, said Crest Precast has seen ups and downs over the years. Yet, he is glad to say 2015 looks bright. For starters, he's never seen such a large backlog going into January.

"You go back to 2000, to 2008, at the end of the year we were done and we would look for new business," he said. "Now, it seems like business never goes away."

Competition still remains for bidding on jobs, but the recent business pie is large enough for the company to find new work all the time. "We play offensive football, not defensive" is his favorite saying when describing the company's approach for bidding. This aggressive approach has rewarded Crest Precast with a renewed excitement for the future.

Today the company is chasing after three different product divisions – sound wall, prestress, and underground and wastewater products – that continuously add challenges as the company wishes to manufacture larger products at a higher capacity.

But, it still embraces manufacturing those off-the-wall specialty precast products that people contact it for from prior positive customer referrals or random online searches.

"We have a diverse enough product line, we don't know if we want to add any more," Mader jokingly said. "We just have our niche markets where our customers keep coming back."



Crest Precast had 20 to 30 active projects in September 2014. There is no lack of work for the company even in the winter.

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— Steve Mader, Crest Precast president and co-owner

Crest Precast traces its roots to ice, brick and block manufacturing prior to precast concrete. Pictured is Steve Mader and his son, Deke, standing next to Mader's great uncle's 100-year-old ice truck.



ICE BLOCKS TO CONCRETE BLOCKS

Crest Precast traces its roots back to 1914 when Mader's great uncle delivered ice blocks door-to-door during hot, summer days. The Maders purchased their first ice truck even before the local fire department purchased its own vehicle. The truck, now 100 years old, is still in storage at the plant.

Ice blocks turned to concrete blocks in the early '50s when Mader's father took a job for a block company in town. A partnership blossomed between him and his brother-in law, Al Wieser, who worked at the same location. The two created Wie-Mar Concrete Products and later split up to found individual companies – Al's Concrete and Crest Precast – in 1964. Both still exist in La Crescent. Steve Mader and his brother, Gary, now co-own the family business. Mader's son, Deke and nephew, Lee, also have careers in the business, investing their time in the future growth of the company. Crest Precast now has a second manufacturing facility located in Barneveld, Wis., called Crest Concrete Products Inc.

“That original company from 1957 evolved into manufacturing full-fledged precast products and started making septic tanks and steps,” he said. “After that, it was moderate growth until the '70s when people started to diversify product lines with NPCA's help by going to classes and plant tours.”

He believes it was in the company's best interest to join NPCA. The certification program has helped to acquire more



business and to attain a comfort level knowing product quality issues are covered under regular plant inspections.

A BIG BOOST

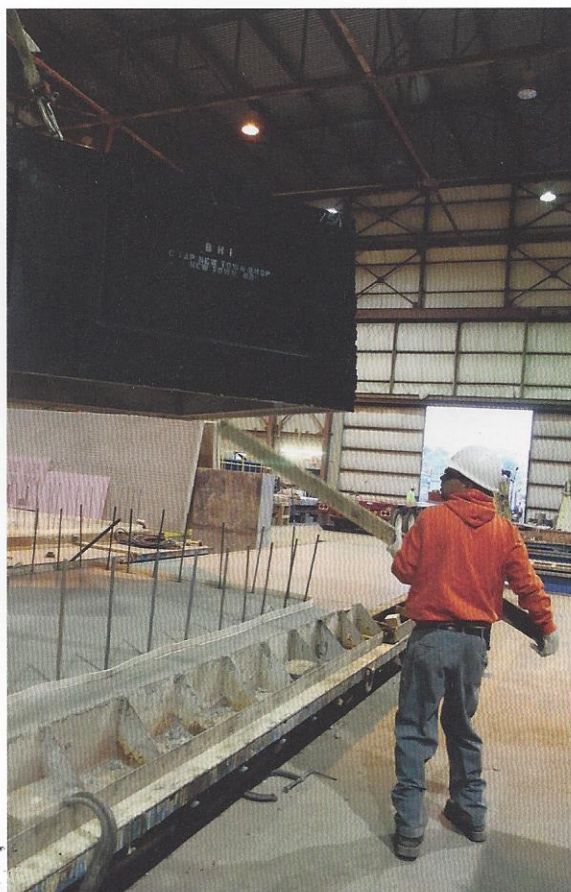
"People trust us now, even when they don't know us, because they see we're certified," he said. "In fact, we can't get DOT work without being certified now. NPCA has come a long way where most of the states in our area now adopt its standards.

"If you're certified, you bid the work. If not, you can't even throw a number out there."

Not only has NPCA helped Crest Precast improve over the years, it also helped get its start on the Internet. Twenty years ago, Mader visited The Precast Show where Tony Shanks, president of Jensen Precast, introduced him to the Web. The discussion started about the search list that appeared when "grease interceptors" was typed in at the time.

"The only items that came up about grease interceptors were the ones made for under commercial sinks," he said. "I was like, 'Wow!' He couldn't find any precast ones. So, when I went back home, I teamed with our local newspaper to develop a Web page for us."

He spent weeks writing categories and descriptions for each individual product line and, to this day, those write-ups still appear in top Google searches. In fact, the company now depends on those searches as it receives 20% of its sales from



Above: Crest Precast's foundation product, the residential septic system.

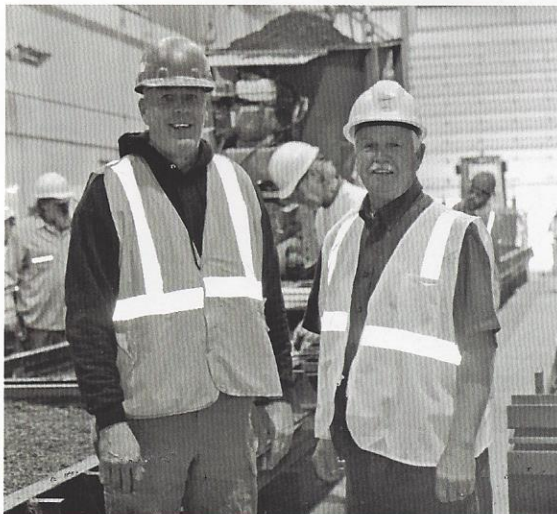
Left: A production team member guides a 15,000-gallon tank through the plant to prepare for shipping. The largest tank the company produced was 40,000 gallons.



“WE’RE REALLY EXCITED
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MANUFACTURING TORNADO
SHELTERS.”

— Steve Mader, Crest Precast president and co-owner

Steve and
Gary Mader,
co-owners of
Crest Precast
in La Crescent,
Minn.



the Internet. Never in his life did he believe he could sell precast on the Internet.

Since the company now sells specialty precast items made to order for customers across the U.S., management makes an effort to keep the website fresh with up-to-date product information. The comments received from visitors still amaze Mader every day.

“At first I was hesitant to answer each comment, yet our Web person told me to. ‘Yes, of course, respond back to everyone,’” he said. “The other day I asked what a person was looking for and out of the blue I got a new request to make a 40-person storm shelter. It’s all because they find us on the Web.”

The Web also helps the company schedule products and coordinate delivery schedules using Google Docs. Multiple personnel can access information at the same time in different locations.

STORM SHELTER LEADERS

One popular item sold online is an above-ground storm shelter. The company got into the business three years ago after noticing manufacturing competition was slim in the Midwest.

Mader said any precast company could sell storm shelters with two key components in place – the marketing to sell the product and the engineering team to make certain the final product can withstand the force of an EF5 tornado. Engineering is important since it helps determine if a certain size building won’t overturn or disintegrate when faced with 250-mile-per-hour winds.

The company has seen an increased need for tornado shelters over the years and manufactures both residential and commercial shelters. The 8-person capacity residential units look similar to garden sheds and are seamless except for the triple-locked door. It also features a small escape hatch should a tree or car become lodged up against it during a storm. The door swings in, making it easier to escape into when high winds approach.

The demand for commercial storm shelters has also increased. Crest Precast manufactures units large enough to house 250 people. In 2014, the company built The GSI Group LLC, a grain storage manufacturer, three 250-person storm shelters. In addition, BASF Corp. ordered its second and Caterpillar ordered its 26th. Large corporations are requesting storm shelters to protect employees while at work.

“We’re really excited that we’re a leader in manufacturing tornado shelters,” he said. “We really think by being first, we’re going to get future business.”

Other niche precast product markets the company is involved with include manufacturing bathrooms for state parks and large tanks for ARC, a Minneapolis-based aquatic recreation supplier. The demand for installing large tanks underneath public splash pads and kiddie pools is to avoid massive amounts of chlorinated water reaching city sewers. Crest Precast partners with ARC by manufacturing the tanks and providing shipping to the final destination. Crest Precast also manufactures tanks and vaults for a Wisconsin-based designer for zero-depth pools to conserve water as people enter and exit the pool.

“It’s a really neat market for our large tanks and they are big tanks – 8,000- to 10,000-gallon tanks,” he said. “Some of these projects use multiple tanks to handle surge flows.”



A SOUND WALL BUSINESS

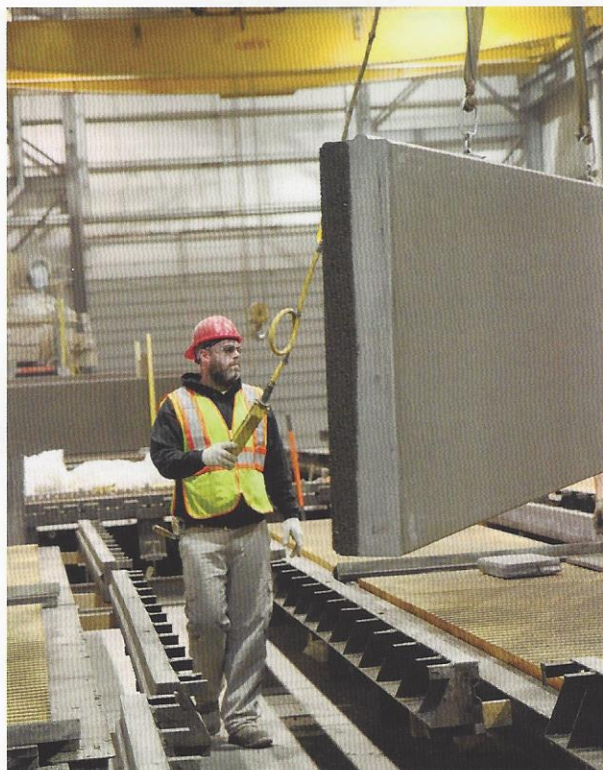
It's not easy to get started in the sound wall industry in Minnesota and Wisconsin, as local DOTs require strict product specifications such as barriers should show no signs of deterioration due to harsh winter weather conditions and freeze/thaw cycles.

Mader said Crest Precast struggled for years to get its sound walls approved and found no easy solution to sell the product. However, a chance encounter with JBM Solutions changed that and now the future for the product line looks very promising.

Five years ago, the company became a licensee of JBM Solutions with rights to produce JBM75®, a wood fiber concrete consisting of mineralized wood chips, cement and water. The results were positive as JBM75® is not only extremely durable, it absorbs 85% of highway noise. WisDOT had previously approved the dual-sided composite sound wall many years ago and started erecting them all over the state. A recent project Crest Precast just completed included manufacturing 1,400 panels for the Highway 14 West Belt Line project in Madison.

Word of the sound wall success must have traveled across state lines as the company just received approval from Minnesota DOT to erect the walls there as well. The state is considering the dual-sided sound walls since current wood plank walls are deteriorating and letting in too much light and sound through the wall.

Crest Precast performs daily in-house testing to ensure the quality of the composite walls and recently created its own



video showing a delamination test that showed the complete bond between wood and concrete sections. Each DOT project also requires a sound transmission loss, noise reduction, salt scale and freeze/thaw test.

Above: Crest Precast's sound walls along Highway 14 in Madison.

Left: Each dual-sided composite sound wall is capable of absorbing 85% of highway noise.



Crest Precast is adding a 12,000-square-foot addition to one of its three plants. Construction on the addition started September 2014.

CELEBRATING 50 YEARS

To celebrate 50 successful years in the precast concrete business, the company is building a large addition to one of its three plants in La Crescent. Mader said the sound wall business has taken on a new depth and that more capacity is needed to keep up with demand.

"We're excited about being on Minnesota's list, but we

honestly can't handle much more work," he said. "That's why we're adding 12,000 square feet of production area. I've never seen the future for this product look so bright."

The company was hesitant at first to begin planning, designing and engineering for the new addition after seeing how much it would cost to build. However, as the phone kept ringing with new sound wall jobs and other leads, the decision to build was clear. Equipment such as a batch plant and cranes have already been purchased in preparation for the new building. All that's needed is for the steel workers to arrive to put the building together, he said.

The 50-year celebration presented a perfect time for the whole company to look back and reflect on how much business has grown. Management even worked on big plans for turning over the business to the next generation and bought new equipment to boost confidence.

Mader said it's a neat feeling knowing that a backlog allows the company to hire more people and not slow down staff hours during winter months.

"I think we have a good thing going on now," he said. "It's always been good, but now, it's even better." **PI**

Sara Geer is NPCA's internal communication and web manager, and is managing editor of Precast Inc.

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