

Man of Steel

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Business First of Buffalo - by Thomas Hartley

Mark Patton started his company in 1978. Now he builds skyscrapers.

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The opening in 2005 of Seneca Niagara Casino & Hotel added a glistening, 26-story, steel-framed structure to the skyline of Niagara Falls, N.Y. The tallest building ever built in the Cataract City, the five-color glass facade and LED-lit features of the 604-room hotel and expanded casino complex lights up the night sky like none other in its history.

Contour Steel Inc. played a major role in the \$200 million hotel project - \$350 million when it includes the casino built in 2002. "we were the erector for all the structural steel components for the hotel and events center adjacent to it. It was one of our most successful projects in our 28 years. Everything just clicked," said Mark Patton, company president and sole stockholder. The hotel tower required 6,500 tons of structural steel beams. The steel was made by American and European companies and supplied by Buffalo Structural Steel Inc., an Amherst fabricator that has partnered with Contour for years on numerous projects.

What's Happening: Contour Steel is a structural steel company that mainly erects buildings and bridges. It also has an industrial division that does plant modifications and bridge rehabilitation work.

Customers: Industrial and commercial businesses, government entities, utility companies and others.

Past Projects Include: The new Corning Glass Museum; Tops Market's regional distribution complex in Lancaster; Ford Motor Co.'s Woodlawn Stamping plant upgrade; additions and upgrades to General Motors Corp.'s Powertrain engine plant in Tonawanda; a new coating plant for American Axle & Manufacturing; and a 600-megawatt power plant in Albany.

History: The company was established in 1978 by Patton, who was an ironworker and foreman with U.S. Steel Corp's American Bridge Division, and a partner. "We realized there was a need for a company that could handle smaller pre-engineered metal building projects," he said. "One of our first jobs was bus shelters for the NFTA in the Buffalo area. That tells you how small our first work was." The first big break came in 1982 when Contour Steel landed the contract for the new Hyatt Hotel in Buffalo. It was the beginning of a long string of major projects that in the 1980's included the

Army's conversion of Ft. Drum in the 1980's into headquarters for the 10th Mountain Division. It took three years to complete. Contour Steel contributed 15,000 tons of structural steel to it. The half-a-billion-dollar job still stands as the company's biggest in terms of dollars and time. Other major projects sent Contour Steel to Michigan for three years - General Motors Corp.'s World Headquarters in Detroit, another project at Wayne State University, and the University of Michigan's Life Sciences Building, which was a \$5 million project for the company. "We had a presence in Michigan from 1998 to 2004," Patton said.

Other Projects of Note: Buffalo Niagara Airport, Bausch & Lomb world headquarters; Erie County Courthouse; Marine Midland Arena (now HSBC Arena). The company also has rehabbed dozens of bridges, including many on the Erie Canal System - including the Exchange St. lift bridge in Lockport - and Norfolk Southern Railroad bridge over Clinton Street in Buffalo.

Biggest Challenge: "To maintain the level of excellence that we strive for with new employees is our biggest challenge," Patton said. "The building trades industry around here is not attracting young people. One reason might be that Western New York doesn't have a constant construction market. We get our share, but it is not constant like some other towns." Replenishing his company's work force with quality people is important from a personal standpoint, too, because Patton doesn't know who will take over the business when he retires. "I don't have a family member - son or daughter who is going to inherit this company," said Patton, 53, who has one child. "My son has no interest in it. He is a computer engineer who starts law school in September."

Proudest Achievement: "We are most proud of our safety record and that we can accomplish what we are trained for. Our supervisors are enormously well qualified and very conscientious about safety. The most horrible day in Patton's professional life occurred in 1982 when a worker was killed in a fall while working at the Kenmore Avenue and Main Street station of Buffalo's rapid transit system project. The irony was that for a company where employees sometimes climb several hundred feet into the air, the only fatal accident in the past 25 years happened when a foreman fell backwards off of a scaffold just give feet off the ground. The cause was never proven, Patton said. "To build the size structures and bridges that we do, use the methods that we have to use, accomplish it and be able to go home every night safely is our biggest accomplishment," he said.

What's Ahead: Some projects that Contour will be working on this year include a large windmill farm in Wyoming County where the company will install 63 windmills., each 300 feet high, for Nobel Environmental Services LLC; Destiny USA shopping mall, a \$400 million to \$500 million project near Syracuse where the company will erect 11,000 tons of steel beams; a bridge span on the 219; and the Ridge Road bridge replacement over the railroad yard in Lackawanna. Contour also worked on the HealthNow New York corporate headquarters building in progress in downtown Buffalo.

Territory: The company has completed projects in New York City, including the Alvin Ailey Dance Theater and New York University law school, but Patton tries to avoid the Big Apple while focusing on the Northeast. “New York is a rough town to do business in,” he says. “It’s so difficult to get steel delivered to the site. When you work in Manhattan, because there’s nowhere to store anything, you have to unload the truck and put the steel up as it comes in.”

Revenues: \$12 million to \$15 million

Employees: The company works year-round, but employment peaks at about 100 from March through November.

Most Important Lesson Learned About Running a Business: “You are only as good as your people. Also, over the years it has been proven that you have to constantly see where your horizons are, where your markets are. You can’t be sedentary, and you don’t want to close the door on any possibility. We take inquiries from all over the Northeast and answer them all, whether we can do the work or not.”