

Power adaptors

T.L. Wallace Construction, Inc.

Full-service construction business not afraid to branch out

By Heather Hudson

What does a successful business do when a multi-million dollar industry falls flat? The good ones reinvent themselves to fit the demands of the market.

T.L. Wallace Construction, Inc. is a study in adaptability. In its 40-year history, it has expanded into new territory, including seven states, started new divisions and amassed a small army of more than 250 loyal employees.

Will Noffke, vice president of the Heavy Civil Division, says the secret to this successful business is twofold.

"Treat your people well and with respect and they'll turn in an honest day's work," Noffke said.

And?

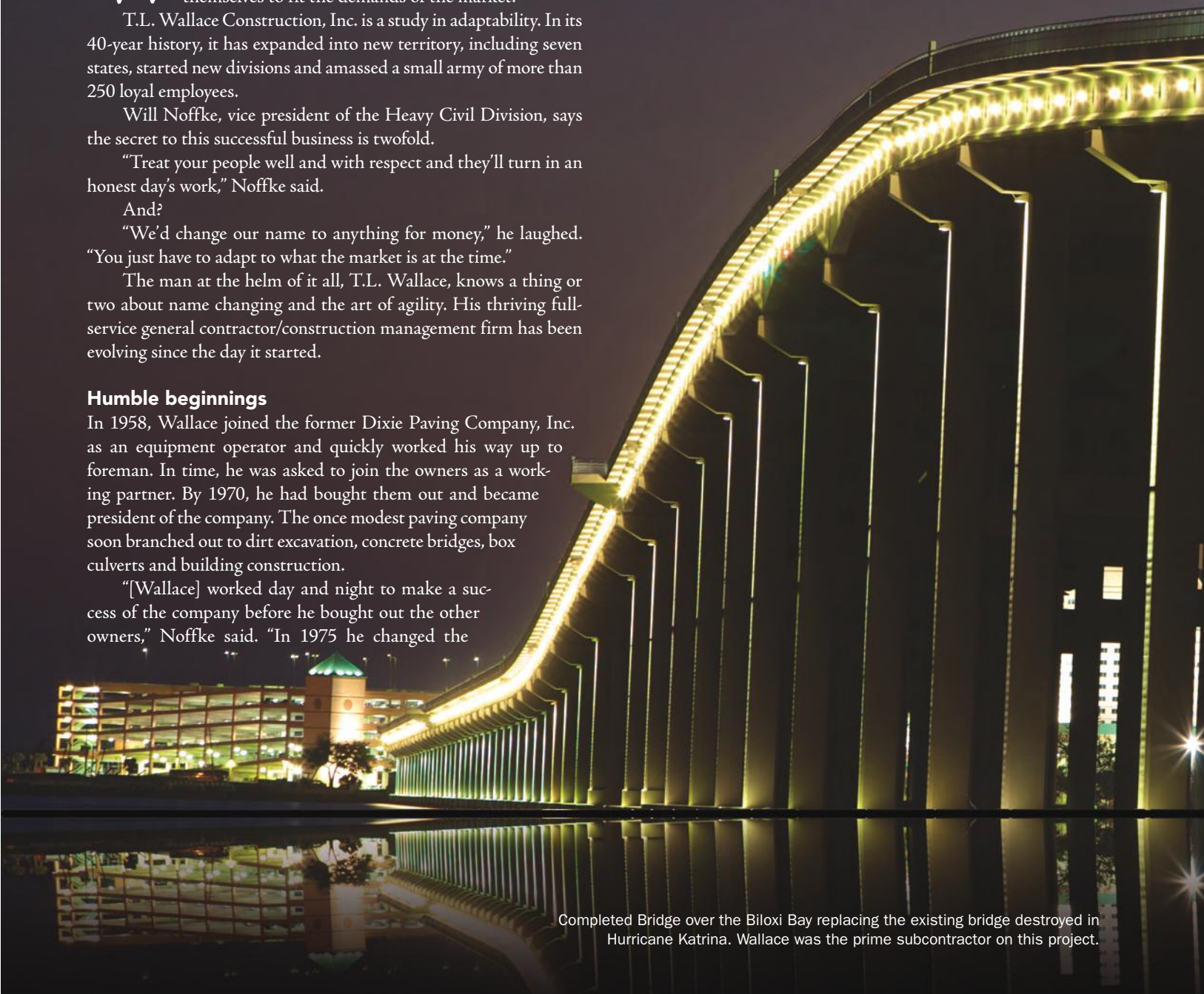
"We'd change our name to anything for money," he laughed. "You just have to adapt to what the market is at the time."

The man at the helm of it all, T.L. Wallace, knows a thing or two about name changing and the art of agility. His thriving full-service general contractor/construction management firm has been evolving since the day it started.

Humble beginnings

In 1958, Wallace joined the former Dixie Paving Company, Inc. as an equipment operator and quickly worked his way up to foreman. In time, he was asked to join the owners as a working partner. By 1970, he had bought them out and became president of the company. The once modest paving company soon branched out to dirt excavation, concrete bridges, box culverts and building construction.

"[Wallace] worked day and night to make a success of the company before he bought out the other owners," Noffke said. "In 1975 he changed the



Completed Bridge over the Biloxi Bay replacing the existing bridge destroyed in Hurricane Katrina. Wallace was the prime subcontractor on this project.



Hanging beams in Marion, Co. for a bridge over the Pearl River on Hwy 43

name to T.L. Wallace Construction, Inc., just the way it should be.”

Today, the company is one of the largest contractors in Mississippi and is licensed to work in Louisiana, Arkansas, Texas, Tennessee and Florida. They’ve been known to work on everything from oil rigs in Texas to bridgework in Louisiana to cleaning up after the BP oil spill off the coast of Florida in 2010.

Even though the company has experienced sustained growth and is prepared for just about anything, Noffke says there have been a few jobs over the years that threw everybody into a tailspin.

One of them was a result of natural, national disaster. After Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005, the eastbound lane of the I-10 freeway outside of Biloxi, Miss. was shut down after six 52-foot spans were moved due to heavy flooding and barges with cranes slammed into the bridge. The impact knocked the deck 37 inches out of line and broke the concrete piling.

“We got an emergency contract to tear that bridge out and rebuild it. We had 31 days to do it, which is not a lot of time. There was a \$100,000 a day penalty and bonus and that got us moving,” Noffke said.

“By working 24 hours a day, seven days a week, we were able to remove the bridge, drive new pile and have the bridge reopened in 21 days.”

As if the timeline wasn’t stressful enough, there was nowhere for crew members to stay, so most of them slept in their trucks or drove 40 miles out of town to a church that had been spared from the storm’s wrath. Food and fuel were scarce and another hurricane just barely missed the work site, which added to the drama of the situation.



Driving 16-inch test pile in Attala County on Hwy 12. There were 10 different bridge sites on this project

The company is justifiably proud of their hard work under pressure and credits the experience with helping them do even better on more routine jobs with what they learned.

“The main reason we were able to do that bridge in such a short time is that we used concrete with super accelerators in them to help it cure faster than normal. We were hanging beams within a day of pouring the caps,” Noffke explained.

“We also used maturity meters in the concrete to make sure it met the criteria before we went on to the next step. They worked so well, we’ve used those meters on lots of jobs since then.”

The dedication of the crew on that job is emblematic of the commitment everyone in the company displays, says Noffke. Most of the 16 foremen throughout the divisions have worked with T.L. Wallace Construction for more than 20 years.

“I’ve been here 24 years and most of them have been here longer than I have. Mr. Wallace has always treated them well and they have a great loyalty to him,” he said.

Noffke credits good equipment, an award-winning safety record, a family atmosphere, competitive wages and steady work as motivation for staff to remain with the company throughout their careers.

While there isn’t the same volume of bids that there once was, thanks to an uncertain economy and a stalled highway program in Mississippi, Noffke is optimistic about the future.

“We hope that it’ll go back to the glory days of the late 1990s and early 2000s,” he said. “In the meantime, we’re continuing to do quality work everywhere we can get it.”

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From humble beginnings doing double surface treatment on county roads in Mississippi, T.L. Wallace Construction now has seven divisions:

Commercial Division – Includes program and construction management, pre-construction services, general contracting and design-build. Marquis projects of late include a \$25 million joint venture to construct two-thirds of the building pad of a brand new Nissan plant in Canton, Miss. The contract called for excavation and placement of about two million cubic yards of embankment compacted in place and lime treatment of sub grade.

Industrial/Plant Construction Division – Executes industrial projects from the ground up, including retrofitting and constructing, and installing complicated tanks and vessels. They also build and customize safety plans for industrial projects.

Disaster Response Division – This division took on real momentum after Hurricane Katrina. In the wake of the deadly storm, the division cleared the streets and highways around the most devastated areas. They also installed temporary housing units all over the Mississippi Gulf Coast and modular homes to replace the initial FEMA trailers.

Heavy Civil Division – Split into bridge, marine/pile driving and concrete projects, this division is one of the mainstays of the business. In the last 20 years, there's been a boom in new bridge construction in particular and the company has positioned itself to be a major player in the industry. Foundation work, shoring, steel and concrete piling, reinforcing steel and setting and placing concrete and steel beams are specialties.

Excavation Division – With a huge fleet of earth moving equipment, this division has always been a busy one. They can move between 500,000 and 750,000 cubic yards per month and process the material in embankments to the densities required by rigid specifications. There are rarely shortages of projects for the team of expert operators in this side of the business.

Asphalt Division – What was once the cornerstone of the business remains a vital part of the company's bottom line today. This division meets the requirements of any DOT, FAA, State-Aid, commercial or residential specifications and is responsible for hundreds of highway paving jobs in Mississippi and Louisiana.

Utilities Division – Crews on this team install gravity sewer mains, low-pressure sewer force mains, water mains, sewer lift stations, sewer and water treatment plants and storm drainage. They're often called on to accommodate developers with a total infrastructure package. ▼

Photos courtesy of T.L. Wallace Construction, Inc.



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