

History of Ironworkers Local 8

By J. Jamakaya

In 2001, We celebrated the centennial year of Ironworkers Local 8. However, while researching Local 8's history, we discovered that Milwaukee ironworkers were actually organized by 1896, making us 5 years older than we thought!

Our official celebration was based on the charter issued by the International Association of Bridge and Structural Ironworkers of America on February 1, 1901 to the **Housesmiths and Bridgemen's Local Union No. 8** of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Although the words "Housesmith's and Bridgemen's" were dropped long ago, that charter still hangs proudly in the board room of Local 8's office in Milwaukee.

A little more digging revealed, however, that an earlier charter was issued to Local 8 on June 26, 1896 by the *National* Association of Bridge and Structural Ironworkers. This was the name our International used before it formally adopted the term "International" at its convention in 1900. The following year, under its new title, the International re-issued charters to many of its locals, including the one in Milwaukee.



Original Logo

Origins of Local 8

Frank J. Weber played a key role organizing Milwaukee's bridgemen and ironworkers in the years before the first charter was issued. Weber was a tireless advocate for unions at that time, employed as an organizer by the American Federation of Labor (AFL). He helped establish the Wisconsin State Federation of Labor in 1893, became its first President, and served as its General Organizer for 23 years. In that role, he fostered the growth of many local unions in various trades throughout the state. Historian Robert

Ozanne says that the advice and encouragement Weber gave to first time unionists - like Milwaukee ironworkers - was invaluable.

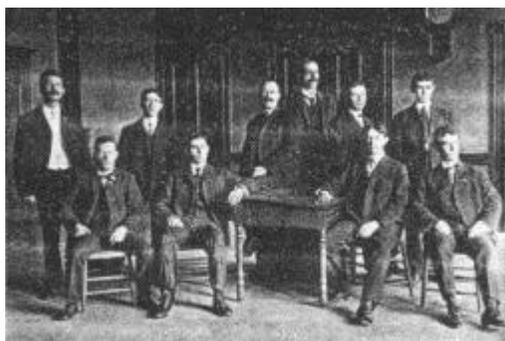
Many factors contributed to the foundation and growth of Local 8.

A Strong Union Town: By the 1890s, Milwaukee was developing into a strong union town. It was a center of agitation for the 8-hour day. Carpenters, bricklayers, plumbers, teamsters, brewery workers, cigar makers, typographers, and even shoemakers had already organized into local unions. Immigrants, many with trade union backgrounds from their homelands, swelled the ranks of workers and organized for better pay and working conditions.

City Expansion: Milwaukee was a thriving, expanding city. Its population grew from 204,000 in 1890 to an astonishing 374,000 in 1910. There was new construction going on everywhere, from residential housing to commercial buildings to bridges and industrial plants. There was work galore, especially for those in the building trades.

Power in Numbers: Like men in the other trades, Milwaukee's bridgemen and ironworkers undoubtedly organized themselves because they wanted to be respected for their special skills and to present a united front to the contractors who hired them. They hoped this would give them more leverage in seeking better pay and working conditions.

Support for Fellow Ironworkers: Another compelling reason they banded together was to pool their resources and provide financial support to the families of men killed on the job. One hundred years ago, there was no insurance or worker's compensation, and safety measures on job sites were non-existent. Early issues of *The Bridgemen's Magazine* recorded the sad toll from this dangerous work. In 1906 alone, five members of Local 8 died in work site accidents, among them **Harry Gunderson**, who was crushed by a 9-ton column; **T.J. Sullivan**, who fell from a girder; and **John Phelan**, hit by a falling truss. By that time, the union was able to give the families of these men \$100, which represented about one month's pay. It seems small today, but it was the beginning of ironworkers looking out for their own.



Leaders of Ironworkers Local 8 in 1905

Early Leaders

Like many young organizations, Local 8 had its struggles and growing pains. At the time of its founding in 1896, it had only 16 members. Among its earliest officers were **James Harvey, Joseph Brett, Thomas Daily** and **M. J. Shea**. They had the daunting task of recruiting new members, asserting ironworkers' jurisdiction amidst the other trades, and negotiating with companies that were often anti-union.

After members elected **William E. Reddin** their President and Business Agent in 1905, Local 8 achieved firm financial and organizational footing. Bill Reddin provided great leadership and stability to Local 8 for the next 28 years until his death in 1933.



Bill Reddin

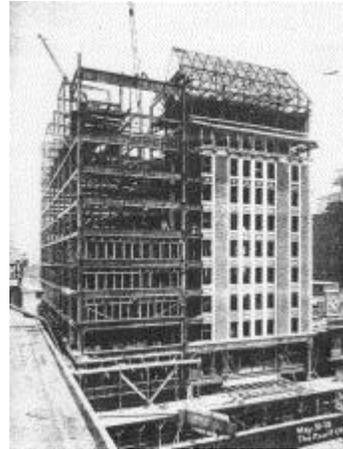
During his productive tenure, Reddin helped increase membership to more than 250. He succeeded in expanding the geographic jurisdiction of Local 8 beyond Milwaukee's city limits to encompass nearly half of the state of Wisconsin. As a member of Milwaukee's Building Trades Council, he cultivated cooperative relationships with other unions. He devised inventive promotional methods and he stood up against the union-busting tactics of groups like the National Erectors Association.

Another outstanding leader of Local 8 was **Adam Sladky**. Sladky toiled as an ironworker for 40 years and served as Local 8's Recording Secretary for most of that time. He was a delegate to eight International conventions, the first in 1901, the last in 1936. As Recording Secretary, Sladky wrote the minutes to Local 8's meetings and sent frequent updates about jobs in the Milwaukee area to *The Bridgemen's Magazine*. Sladky's writing provides us with most of what we know about Local 8's work in the first decades of the 20th century. It's an impressive record of hard work and proud achievements.

Building Milwaukee



*Local 8 Crew working a job for Volkmann, 1906
Note the cloth caps.*



Wisconsin Hotel, 1913

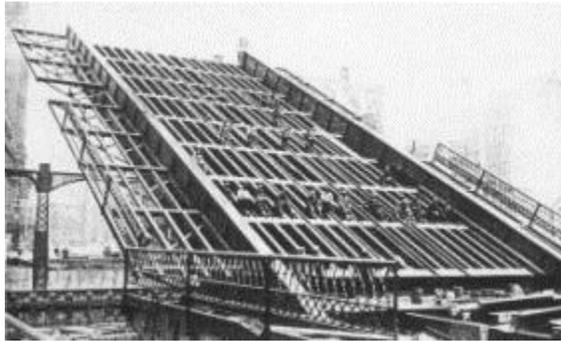
To put it simply, members of Local 8 built the modern infrastructure of Milwaukee in the first decades of the 20th century - from the bridges spanning the Milwaukee and Kinnickinnic rivers to the viaducts over the Menomonee Valley, from the breweries and tanneries and manufacturing plants to the schools and theaters and department stores.

The men of Local 8 erected the Water St., Michigan St., Oneida St. (now Wells St.) and Cedar St. (now Kilbourn Ave.) bascule bridges in downtown Milwaukee. They built a bridge over the KK river for the Chicago & Northwestern Railroad. They erected the Bartlett St. and Holton St. bridges, and many others. The 6th, 16th and 27th St. viaducts connecting the south side to the center of the city were massive undertakings, stretching over several years. Milwaukee ironworkers played a crucial role in their construction and benefited from the steady work.

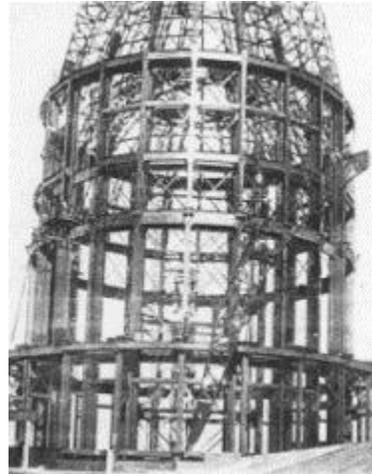
Local 8 helped build many of the factories that made Milwaukee an industrial power - Harnischfeger, Allis Chalmers, International Harvester and Falk, to name a few. The brewers also kept Local 8 busy.

In 1901, Adam Sladky wrote to *Bridgemen's Magazine*:

"The Brewers Assn. are doing their share of building to their plants and keep us busy. They are the life of the iron craft. Just finished Pabst, now Schlitz will erect two buildings, one seven-story steel and one four-story steel structure. Others follow suit - Blatz, Miller and all the rest."



Local 8 men on the Oneida (Wells) St. Bridge, 1912



Work on the dome of the State Capitol, 1911

Other important projects and buildings Local 8 worked on included: the Northwestern Mutual Life building, the Wisconsin Hotel, Milwaukee Vocational School (now MATC), Lincoln and Riverside High Schools, Gimbel's and Schuster's Department Stores, St. Mary's Hospital, the Empire Theater Building (current site of the Riverside Theater), the Wisconsin Telephone Co. building on Broadway, the Milwaukee Auditorium (mainly roof trusses), the Municipal Building next to City Hall and the Plankinton Building on Grand (Wisconsin) Ave.

But members of Local 8 also went beyond Milwaukee to work. They built bridges in Oshkosh and Manitowoc and coal conveyors in Sheboygan. They worked on the huge J.I. Case plant in Racine. They also erected the structural elements of much of the State Capitol Building in Madison, including its majestic dome. When work was slack in Milwaukee, they worked for the railroads in Illinois and Iowa and built rigs in the mining regions of Minnesota and Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

This work was accomplished with none of the modern machinery and methods available to us today. In the decades before cranes became available, derricks were the primary means of hoisting heavy loads. The men themselves did much of the hauling and lifting with chain fall hoists and hand-operated winches. They did their work without benefit of the many safety precautions that are mandatory today. In 1901, they made just 35¢ an hour. By 1921, they were making \$1 an hour, which was considered a good wage in those days.

Two veteran ironworkers, **Leo Price**, who became a member of Local 8 in 1908, and **Charles Volkmann**, a member of Local 1 from Chicago, formed their own erecting companies and provided work for union men on many important projects over the years. Price Erecting, run by Leo's descendants, is still in business today. Other contractors who provided work for the men of Local 8 were Worden & Allen, J.C. Thielacker, Strobel Steel and Milwaukee Bridge. (American Bridge and Wisconsin Bridge angered ironworkers by often hiring non-union labor.)

During these early years, Milwaukee was the host city for two International conventions. The first took place September 15-22, 1902 and drew 60 delegates from 19 states. President Frank Buchanan announced that membership in the International was up to 10,000. *Bridgemen's Magazine* reported on the absence of friction at the Milwaukee convention, in contrast to the previous convention in Boston:

"It would seem that Milwaukee beer is much more conducive to the transacting of business than are baked beans."

The 15th annual convention of the International was held in Milwaukee September 18-25, 1911. The meeting, held at the St. Charles Hotel on Water St., was dominated by discussion of the McNamara case.



local 8 rallies in support of John McNamara at Borchert Field in Milwaukee, 1911

Union Busting and the McNamara Case

None of the progress Local 8 made in its first 30 years came easily. There was no right to strike in those days, and companies used everything from court injunctions to hired thugs to exclude and destroy unions. Despite this, strikes were still mounted against companies that used scab labor or unfair practices.

Even the brewers sometimes tried to manipulate and shortchange union workers. In 1910, the blanket agreement of the Brewers Association with the Building Trades Council expired and the brewers refused to renew it, preferring to negotiate contracts with individual locals. The Council advised union men in *all* trades to walk off their jobs at the breweries. This solidarity paid off because eleven days later the strike was won, and a general agreement satisfactory to all trades was adopted.

There were setbacks as well. In 1913, Local 8 signed a 3-year agreement with a representative of the local Erectors Association. It called for a wage increase to 62½¢ per hour on July 1 and an increase to 65¢ in July of 1914 to last for two years. But when July of 1914 arrived, some contractors refused to honor the second wage increase. A strike was called, lasting three long months. In the end, Local 8 conceded defeat and reluctantly returned to work at the lower rate.

The founding of the **National Erectors Association** (NEA) in 1905 created special challenges for all building trade unions, but especially ironworkers. The NEA, which represented many of the largest companies in the country like American Bridge and U.S. Steel, declared for the open shop. It worked relentlessly against unions, blocking organizing drives, locking out union men and crushing strikes.

Frustration with these unfair tactics led to desperate measures. Between 1908 and 1911, dozens of bombings occurred at work sites across the country. Although no one was hurt in these incidents, financial damage to the erectors was considerable.

But in October of 1910, an explosion at a printing plant of the *Los Angeles Times* newspaper resulted in 20 deaths. The owner of the *Times*, Harrison Gray Otis, was leader of the city's Manufacturers & Merchants Association and an outspoken opponent of everything union. Not surprisingly, the newspaper headline the next day read: "UNIONIST BOMBS WRECK THE TIMES." The mayor of Los Angeles hired William J. Burns, a detective for the NEA, to investigate the case.

In April of 1911, police raided an Executive Board meeting of the Ironworkers International at its headquarters in Indianapolis. **Secretary Treasurer John J. McNamara** was seized and, without benefit of extradition proceedings, forcibly transported to California to face charges in the *Times* blast. The famous civil liberties attorney Clarence Darrow was brought in to defend McNamara, but it quickly became clear that a fair trial was impossible. McNamara, who hadn't even been in Los Angeles at the time of the blast, was sentenced to 15 years in prison.

McNamara's incarceration was only the beginning. The leader of the NEA, which was pushing the investigations, had sworn to destroy the ironworkers union. Soon, federal indictments for conspiracy and transportation of explosives were issued against 42 ironworker leaders at both the International and local levels. One of those charged was Local 8 Business Manager Bill Reddin.

Ironworkers around the country, including Milwaukee, had come to McNamara's aid, raising defense funds and protesting the miscarriage of justice. Members of Local 8 now rallied around their own leader, Bill Reddin. He was tried in federal court in Indianapolis, found guilty and sentenced to three years in prison. An appeal was denied, and he ultimately served two years and three months at Leavenworth prison.

But members of Local 8 were convinced of Reddin's integrity. Just weeks before his trial, they presented him with a gold watch and chain as a token of their "esteem and confidence." Upon his return to Milwaukee in 1916, he was greeted by a crowd of union supporters, and Local 8 and the Building Trades Council held a public reception to celebrate.

Reddin was immediately re-elected to office and served as Business Manager of Local 8 until his death in 1933. Both Reddin and Local 8 survived this intense period of union busting and moved on, but more challenges - and opportunities - lay ahead.

The Great Depression Years



Work on the 16th Street Viaduct, 1928

In mid-1928, Recording Secretary **G.J. Weckman** reported to *The Bridgemen's Magazine* that Local 8 seemed to be experiencing "an era of prosperity at present... There seems to be plenty of work coming our way but very little for the non-union men so to say."

He cited work in progress on the Public Safety Building on W. State Street, erection of the 16th Street viaduct across the Menomonee Valley and the Cedar Street (Kilbourn Ave.) bridge over the Milwaukee River, as well as construction of the new County Hospital on the far west side. He also wrote hopefully about plans for the new \$6 million County Courthouse, which the men of Local 8 did, indeed, work on over the next few years.



Construction nears completion in this photo from 1930 or 1931.



Work began on the current Milwaukee County Courthouse in 1929.

(Both photos courtesy of the Milwaukee County Historical Society)

But the stock market crashed in 1929, and within a short time the economic repercussions of the Crash rolled across the country.

Just two years after Weckman's optimistic report, in August, 1930, Bill Reddin wrote to *The Bridgemen's Magazine*:

"Work is at a standstill. We do not want members to come here under a false impression, thinking they will be able to get work. Most of the large projects are practically completed. At the present time, we have a number of members unemployed... Stay away unless you can afford to take a compulsory vacation."

The unemployment situation got much, much worse. Tens of thousands of businesses throughout the U.S. collapsed. Factory production stalled and construction projects were stymied by lack of investment capital. By 1933, 15 million Americans were out of work. Among them were many ironworkers. In the late 1920s, membership in the Bridge, Structural and Ornamental Ironworkers International was nearly 30,000. By 1933, the number plummeted to 10,318.

In a crisis atmosphere where there was little construction work being initiated, some ironworkers, desperate to support their families, left the trade to take whatever jobs they could find. Others took to the railroads in search of work elsewhere. Ironworkers have always had a proud tradition of booming out - going where the work is. But many of the men riding the rails in the 1930s met with more disappointment than opportunity.

The Bridgemen's Magazine did its part by publishing a complete list of ironworking jobs available across the country, noting the location, the size of the project and the erecting company. Often, hundreds of men would show up for a job that needed just a 10 or 20-man crew. Several old-timers from that era recalled how unemployed men would literally camp out near work sites, watching and waiting for a worker to be injured or dismissed. They were eager to be close at hand if the foreman suddenly needed a replacement.

From 1930 to 1935, membership in Local 8 fell. It wasn't until the late 1930s that membership rose to and then surpassed the level achieved just before the Depression: about 250-270 members. Like ironworker locals around the country, Local 8 was also forced to accept wage cuts. The hourly wage of \$1.20 paid to all ironworkers in 1931 was reduced in 1932 to \$1.05 for structural and ornamental workers and to 90¢ for rodmen. This situation was not unique to Milwaukee. The International found that wage rates around the country fell by an average of 15.9% in the 1930s.

Given the terrible economic and social conditions, it is a credit to the leaders of Local 8 that the union survived and then prospered. Bill Reddin remained Business Manager and Financial Secretary until his death in 1933. He was succeeded by **Joseph F. Burns**, who

held the position for two years. Then in 1935, **Herbert J. Mueller** was elected Business Manager. With the exception of a 2-year term in the 1950s, "Turk" Mueller, as he was called, served as Local 8's Business Manager for 25 years, until 1960. Also providing leadership and stability to Local 8 was **Gustave (Gust) Damske**, President of Local 8 from 1925 through 1950.



*Coming down at Shorewood High School.
Photo: LaVern Heinz*

"New Deal" Programs

If there was any positive side to the Depression years, it was the long overdue pro-labor legislation adopted during the administration of Democratic President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Foremost among these reforms was the **National Labor Relations Act**, adopted by Congress and signed by President Roosevelt in 1935. This law established for the first time ever the right of workers to organize into unions and bargain collectively. It restricted unfair labor practices by employers, like firing union organizers or allowing only company-run unions. It also set up the National Labor Relations Board, an independent body, to oversee union elections and investigate and rule on complaints of unfair practices. The National Labor Relations Act was a great turning point in labor history and contributed to the rapid growth of organized labor in mid-20th century America.

A second reform with vast implications for working people was the **Social Security Act**. The desperate conditions of so many unemployed workers and of widows, children and the elderly during the Depression stirred the conscience of the nation. Congress finally acted to provide a basic safety net for all Americans.

The Social Security Act created a national system of old age insurance based on payroll deductions which were matched by employers. It provided federal aid to the states for the disabled as well as to mothers and their dependent children. It also established a national program of unemployment insurance funded by federal, state and employer contributions.

In 1937, Congress passed the **National Apprenticeship Act** which promoted the formation of apprenticeship programs in workplaces and the application of labor standards to apprenticeship contracts. It launched a Federal Committee on Apprenticeship with equal representation by employers, labor and the public. It also created the Apprenticeship Training Service, which is now called the Bureau of Apprenticeship and Training, housed in the Department of Labor.

Another critical reform, the **Fair Labor Standards Act**, was passed in 1938. It mandated a minimum hourly wage for workers employed by firms engaged in interstate commerce. The first minimum wage was set at 40¢ per hour beginning in 1940. This law also called for time-and-a-half pay for all hours worked in excess of 40 per week.

Each of these far-sighted reforms of the Roosevelt era provided long-term benefits for all working Americans. But in the depths of the Depression, the administration also focused on the immediate task of getting people back to work. Among the "alphabet soup" of New Deal agencies, the PWA and the WPA provided opportunities for Local 8's ironworkers.

The **Public Works Administration** and the **Works Progress Administration** funneled billions of federal dollars to states and localities for work relief efforts. Some projects were derided by critics as "make work" schemes, but many provided essential infrastructure for our nation and its cities. PWA/WPA funding built 650,000 miles of highways, thousands of bridges and dams, 125,000 public buildings like courthouses and schools, and hundreds of navy vessels, including the aircraft carriers Yorktown and Enterprise.

In Milwaukee, one example of PWA funding which provided employment to members of Local 8 for almost a year was the building of the huge Linnwood Avenue Water Treatment Plant along the lakefront. The job provided much-needed employment for Local 8 men, and construction of the purification facility also resulted in a notable improvement in the quality of Milwaukee's drinking water.

Local 8 managed to weather the hard times of the Depression. Its Business Manager, Turk Mueller, who became legendary for his no-holds-barred negotiating style, even managed to win gradual increases in wages from the Building Trades Employers Association. By the time of the 1941 contract, structural and ornamental ironworkers were to be paid \$1.50 per hour, rodmen \$1.37½.



Three-Quarters of a rivet gang, 1940's

Ironworkers and World War II

With the approach of World War II, the U.S. set about re-building its defense industries. This put many building tradesmen, including ironworkers, back to work. Many plants had to be converted from peacetime to wartime production. This involved the erection of new additions, generating stations, conveyor systems and storage facilities, as well as the installation of heavy equipment. Local 8 members worked on plant conversions for A.O. Smith, Cutler-Hammer, Ampco Metal, Bucyrus-Erie, Globe Union, Nordberg, Ladish, J.I. Case, Massey-Harris and other companies.

During World War II, Local 8 members also found work in Wisconsin's shipyards, from Sturgeon Bay to Manitowoc and south to Milwaukee and Kenosha. They helped to build and repair tugs, freighters, even some mine sweepers. Their skills as riggers were especially valued in the wartime shipyards, when lifts of major tonnage were very common.

Ironworkers **International President P. J. Morrin** was insistent that rigging jobs, especially in the navy yards, go only to qualified union ironworkers:

"This is an important branch of our trade as the nature of the work in the various government navy yards requires highly skilled riggers, especially in the placement of machinery, heavy guns and gun mounts, some of which run as high as 135 tons. On work of this kind it is absolutely necessary to use skilled riggers, not only for the safety of such machinery or equipment but for the men employed on such vessels."

Of course, members of Local 8 also served in all branches of the armed services, seeing action in both the European and Pacific theaters of war. Some ironworkers were especially recruited to serve in the "**Seabees**," the construction battalions whose job was to keep naval shipping and aviation facilities in fighting trim. For ironworkers who went

to war, dues were suspended for the duration of their military service. They were welcomed home afterward as members in good standing.



*Rod work at Miller Brewing Block House.
Photo courtesy of Hennes Trucking*

Post War Work and Wages

The immediate post-war years and the decades of the 1950s and '60s were generally good for the ironworkers of Local 8. Wages rose, work was plentiful, and new health and pension benefits were initiated.

Wage Rates: Pay rates had remained stagnant through the war years. The Labor Department's Wage Stabilization Board approved just one increase for ironworkers in 1944 and it was only 7¢. At the time Pearl Harbor was attacked, structural and ornamental ironworkers were making \$1.50 per hour and rodmen were making \$1.37½. At the time of the German and Japanese surrenders, the pay rates were just \$1.57½ and \$1.43¾, respectively.

But wage rates rose consistently over the next few years so that by 1950, all ironworkers (including rodmen, who had been paid at a lower rate) were making \$2.35 per hour. In 1960 they made \$3.67. By 1970, the hourly rate was \$6.06. Ten years later, in 1980, the hourly wage was \$11.36.

Building Boom: The rationing of vital materials for the war effort had caused a lull in construction on the home front. After the war, the pent-up demand for housing and commercial properties was a boon to the building trades.

On November 30, 1948, Local 8 Business Manager Turk Mueller sent a letter to contractors informing them of a planned wage increase and asking that they submit a list of jobs already begun under current contractual provisions. The contractors' response gives us a snapshot of the kinds of work Local 8 men were engaged in at mid-century.

Projects in Milwaukee included: Deaconess Hospital, an addition to Schuster's on Mitchell Street, the diesel shop for the Milwaukee Road Railroad, the gymnasium at Whitefish Bay High School, a fermenting cellar and stock house for Schlitz, a new boiler

house at Pabst, a Post Office branch on the south side, and a Wisconsin Telephone Co. building on N. 35th Street.

Outside of Milwaukee, jobs included a railroad trestle in Hartford, a power plant in Menasha, the Johnson Wax Tower and St. Catherine's High School in Racine, the Oak Street Bridge in Neenah, Winnebago State Hospital, a hydroelectric plant in Iron Mountain, Michigan, and sewage treatment plants in Waukesha and Fond du Lac.

Contractors employing Local 8 men included: Milwaukee Bridge, Badger Wire and Iron Works, Wisconsin Bridge and Iron, Atlas Iron and Wire Works, Capitol Erecting, John Hennes Trucking, Chilstrom Erecting, the Chicago & Northwestern Railroad, Immel Construction out of Fond du Lac, Miller Erecting out of Racine, and C.R. Meyer & Sons out of Oshkosh.

Sports Venues: Among the biggest projects Local 8 ironworkers contributed to in the 1950s were the building of Wisconsin's great sports venues: County Stadium in Milwaukee to house the soon-to-be-world-champion Milwaukee Braves, and the now legendary Lambeau Field in Green Bay, home to the Super Bowl-winning Green Bay Packers. Local 8 members also built the Milwaukee and Brown County Arenas. Each of these structures took several years to erect and employed hundreds of union workers.

In 1956, Congress passed the **Interstate Highway Act**, establishing the wide-ranging Interstate system. Over the next 13 years, more than \$30 billion was funneled into highway and bridge construction around the country. Local 8 ironworkers helped build the "I" system in Wisconsin, although the construction was burdened by jurisdictional disputes.

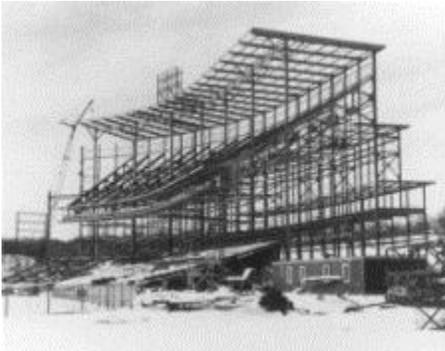
At the State AFL-CIO Building Trades Conference in 1959, Turk Mueller blasted the "big four" highway construction unions for bargaining what he called "lousy" wage rates for workers. The Carpenters, Teamsters, Laborers and Operating Engineers served on a joint committee that negotiated with the Wisconsin Road Builders Association. Mueller, and his successor, **Earl "Red" Spicer**, fought continuously to see that all bridge and structural work on the new highways was done by qualified ironworkers and properly recompensed.



Roof trusses, Brown County Arena, 1958



*Installing equipment at Miller Brewing.
Photo courtesy of Price Erecting.*



*Work begins on Milwaukee County Stadium in
1951.*



*The state-of-the-art (for that time) facility opened in
1953*

Both above Photos courtesy of the Milwaukee County Historical society

The Struggle to Gain Benefits

Health and Pension Benefits: In the 1950s, membership in Local 8 soared to over 500. Considerable discussion had already taken place about establishing a health insurance plan for members. The details of a workable plan needed to be devised, and Local 8's Bargaining Committee had to obtain the agreement of the contractors, who were organized at that time into the **Building Trades Employers Association (BTEA)** of Milwaukee.

When negotiations began for the 1952 contract, Local 8's bargaining team sought a 15¢ increase in the hourly wage and the establishment of a Health and Welfare plan to be funded, initially, by an employer contribution of 5¢ per hour per worker. The BTEA was willing to grant only a 7¢ hourly wage increase and to discuss the future *possibility* of a health plan. Four other local unions in the Building Trades Council, representing operating engineers, laborers, cement finishers and truck drivers, also came to an impasse

in their negotiations with the BTEA. With the membership's consent, Local 8 allied with these building trade unions and all five went out on strike on April 16, 1952.

The strike lasted for one month. For the ironworkers, it resulted in the BTEA agreeing to a wage increase of 9½¢ per hour and the creation of a **Health and Welfare Fund** supported by the 5¢ per hour employer contribution. In the 1960s, that contribution rose to 10¢, then 15¢ and 25¢ - the increases being roughly commensurate with the rise in wages. The agreement stipulated that trustees from both the union and the contractors association were to oversee and administer the fund.

Ironworkers had worked hard to get it, and they were very glad to have the health and welfare benefit. The plan included general medical, hospitalization and disability coverage for themselves and their families. Many retirees who worked at that time recall how the health benefit kicked in at about the time they were newly married and having kids in the 1950s, so the hospital coverage was especially welcome. It also helped to cover the immediate costs of any injuries or illnesses.

Efforts by Local 8 leaders to win pension benefits were fueled by their commitment to provide better support for ironworker retirees in the future, but the Pension Fund took a little longer to institute.

In the mid-1950s, other building trades were also exploring the possibility of setting up pension funds. The solution ultimately devised was to establish the **Building Trades United Pension Trust Fund**, to be jointly managed by representatives of the building trades and the contractors. The Pension Fund, supported by employer contributions, was started in 1959. The first agreement required contractors to pay into the new fund 10¢ for each hour each member worked (up to 40 hours per week). Today, that contribution stands at \$2.63 per hour.

The 1966 contract expanded benefits even further by initiating a **Vacation Fund** for Local 8 members. The Vacation Fund was operational for the next 20 years until being dissolved in the 1980s. By that time an **Annuity Fund** had been established.

A New Office: Since the earliest days of Local 8, the union had always rented space for its office and meeting hall. From about 1915 through the 1930s, Local 8 rented space in Brisbane Hall, the home of many Milwaukee unions, at 536 W. Juneau Ave. Then, Local 8 moved into offices in the Metropolitan Block Building at 1012 N. 3rd Street.

By 1962, with membership expanding and finances on a sound footing, Local 8 was able to purchase a building at 6225 W. Bluemound Road. The Bluemound Road office served as Local 8's headquarters until 1979.

Among the leaders of Local 8 who contributed to these advances were **Robert A. Pilot**, who was Business Manager from 1951-52, **Earl Spicer**, Assistant Business Agent under Turk Mueller, **Bob Zimmerman**, **Robert Warren**, **Raymond Ross**, **Harold Johnson**,

Gust Damske, Ray Flynn, John Carney, Edward K. Preuss, Abel Revoir, James P. Hamill and, of course, Turk Mueller.

An era of Local 8 history passed in 1960 when Turk Mueller retired. In April of 1961, 500 people attended a testimonial dinner in his honor in the Crystal Ballroom of the Schroeder Hotel in downtown Milwaukee. Among the guests were ironworkers, officers from the International, and colleagues from many of the building trades, but there were contractors, politicians and community leaders as well.

Turk didn't disappoint. After listening to the tributes, he rose to acknowledge the speakers and declared: "There isn't anyone here that I haven't raked over the coals."

One old-timer recalled for this history that when Turk attended Milwaukee County Labor Council meetings, he insisted that everyone present show the union label on the clothes they were wearing. "You'd better be able to show those labels or you'd get a hell of a dressing down," he said. Others said Turk wasn't afraid to resort to fisticuffs to get his point across.

Some say his bluster and rough edges would probably not be acceptable in union leadership today, but there's no question that Turk Mueller, like Bill Reddin before him, fought for his members and built Local 8 into a bigger and stronger union.



"Turk" Mueller (left) and "Red" Spicer, his successor as Business Manager at Turk's Retirement dinner, 1961.

(Photo courtesy of Gladys Spicer)



Local 8 members helped build the famous horticultural domes in Milwaukee's Mitchell Park.

(Photo courtesy of the Milwaukee County Historical Society)

The Mackinac Bridge & Local 783



*The Mighty Mackinac Bridge, a job well done.
Photo: MDOT*

In the 1950s, members of Local 8 were among the many ironworkers who helped to construct one of the modern wonders of the world - the Mackinac Bridge. The 5-mile long suspension bridge crosses the Mackinac Straits, connecting the upper and lower peninsulas of Michigan. Construction took almost 3½ years and involved 3,500 workers, many of them ironworkers from Michigan and Wisconsin.

"Mighty Mac," as it is often called, stands as one of the proudest accomplishments of ironworkers everywhere. Its construction led to the establishment of Ironworkers Local 783, which gained sole jurisdiction over the Upper Peninsula. Local 783 has its own proud history, but its fate was ultimately entwined with that of Local 8. In 1994, seeking strength in greater numbers, Local 783 merged into Local 8. But first things first!

The Story of Mighty Mac: Plans for building a bridge to cross the Straits of Mackinac went back to the 1880s. Such a span would significantly reduce travel times and costs for business and commercial interests as well as for average folks heading to private destinations. In the 1930s, the State of Michigan set up the Mackinac Bridge Authority to assess its feasibility. It wasn't until 1953 that the Authority was ready to proceed after issuing bonds worth more than \$99 million to private investors.

Once the technical plans were laid and funding was secured, the massive project was ready to go. The Merritt-Chapman & Scott Corp. won a \$25.7 million contract for foundation work, while the American Bridge Division of U.S. Steel was awarded a \$44.5 million contract for erecting the superstructure. Foundation work began in May of 1954. The north and south towers were erected in 1955. The catwalks and cable went up in 1956. Roadway trusses were installed and decking was completed the following year, enabling the first traffic to cross the bridge on November 1, 1957.

Even today, statistics on the Mackinac Bridge are awesome. Its total length is 5 miles; the length of its steel superstructure is 3.6 miles. Its north and south towers rise 552 ft. above the water, while the tower piers extend as far as 210 ft. below water. It consists of 931,000 tons of concrete, 71,300 tons of structural steel and almost 12,000 tons of cable wire. The total length of cable wire used would stretch for 42,000 miles. Ironworkers drilled more than 4.8 million steel rivets and fastened more than one million steel bolts! "Mighty Mac" is indeed an engineering and construction wonder.



*Work in progress on the Mackinac Bridge.
(Photos courtesy of MDOT)*

Local 783 History: When construction on the Mackinac Bridge began, jurisdiction of ironworkers in Michigan's Upper Peninsula was like a patchwork quilt. Local 563 out of Duluth controlled the western half of the U.P., Local 8 had jurisdiction in two southern counties, Locals 25, 340 and 426 controlled the eastern counties, and several other counties were "open" territory.

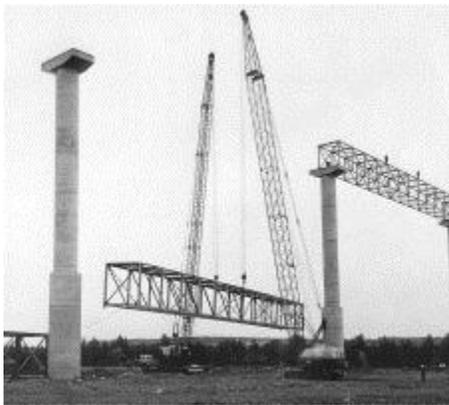
The International sent in **General Organizer Robert V. Poole** to oversee the interests of all ironworkers employed on the bridge. From his own observations and after consulting with local ironworkers, he concluded that the U.P. should be united under the jurisdiction of one local. Many men agreed. **Ray Himebaugh** worked closely with him to contact ironworkers throughout the U.P. to get the necessary signatures to obtain a new charter. Local 783 was officially established on November 22, 1957.

It wasn't all smooth sailing. It took some time before Duluth-based Local 563 conceded its jurisdiction to Local 783. And the recession of the late 1950s, which dried up jobs, challenged the financial viability of the fledgling local. But Local 783 survived those lean times and went on to represent ironworking "Yoopers" for 37 years.

Among the significant projects Local 783 worked on were power plants at Escanaba, Presque Isle and L'Anse; the Kinross and Sawyer air bases; the Houghton, Menomonie and International bridges; the Kinross, Baraga, and Munising prisons; and Lake View Arena and General Hospital in Marquette. They worked on the Soo Locks in Sault Ste. Marie, and many of the paper mills (Mead, Champion, etc.) and mines (White Pine Copper, Palmer, Tilden and Randville).

A combination of factors led to Local 783's merger with Local 8 in 1994. Longtime Business Manager **John LaVallee** explained that the smaller number of members (around 225 compared to 1,000 in Local 8) "made it more difficult to establish the kind of benefits and programs the men really deserved, especially good health care coverage. We felt we could accomplish more for our membership by combining forces with Local 8."

Like Local 8, Local 783 was a mixed local, with members trained and experienced in all aspects of ironwork. Both locals shared a common base of contractors and worked on similar projects for the paper and mining industries. Wisconsin ironworkers had worked in Upper Michigan and their northern brothers had worked jobs in Wisconsin. "We always had a good relationship with Local 8," LaVallee commented. "Members of both locals shared a strong work ethic too, so it seemed like a good fit, and I think it has been."



*Groveland Mine in Randville, Mi., 1963
(Photo: Gundlach Champion)*



*Michigan Tech College Topping Out.
(Photo: Gundlach Champion)*

The 1970s and '80s

By the 1970s, conditions for ironworkers had improved dramatically from those their brothers had labored under in the first half of the century. Wages had risen consistently, health and pension benefits were in place, stricter safety measures were mandated and enforced, and apprenticeship standards had been strengthened.

Technological progress led to big improvements in equipment over the years. Advances in hydraulics increased crane capacities exponentially. Old-timers who spent much of their days unloading and hauling materials are especially happy to see cranes doing much of that work today. Electric power drills have largely replaced air drills. Mass production and use of high tension bolts has, for the most part, meant the end of the classic 4-man rivet gang. Rodmen today wear wire reels on the side of their belts rather than the cumbersome shoulder rolls of old.

Yet despite these changes, the basic hand tools of the trade remain the same. And of the work itself, Local 8 Business Agent Jim Jorgensen says: "Physically, it hasn't changed a bit. It's tough. There's nothing easy about iron work."

Safety Issues and OSHA: Safety issues have always been a prime concern for ironworkers. Local 8 contracts in the 1930s and '40s contained basic safety provisions. They called for proper planking of floors, the use of steel cable rather than chain or hemp slings, sufficient stiffening or support at load points, protection of signal devices, and elevator fall protection.

A simple but revolutionary safety measure - the hard hat - became standard work gear in the 1950s. The most common injuries ironworkers sustain are head injuries from falling loads or from falls off of platforms or equipment. As with any change, some workers at the time griped about having to wear the hard hat, but there is no question that it has dramatically reduced the number of deaths and head injuries among all workers on construction sites. Today, the hard hat has become a proud symbol of all workers in the construction trades.

With the creation of the **Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA)** by Congress in 1970, the federal government made a commitment to protect the safety and health of American workers. The agency's mission was to establish and enforce standards for safety and health in all areas of work.

OSHA convened a committee with representatives from the construction trades and the building contractors to develop safety standards for the steel erection industry. The rules they issued brought more far-reaching changes to ironworkers on the job, including the use of safety belts and harnesses at heights of over 25 feet, the increased use of hydraulic lifts ("man baskets") rather than floats (work platforms rigged to the structure), stiffer scaffolding requirements, and more guard railings along scaffolding and work sites.

(New, strengthened OSHA standards adopted in 2001 address continuing hazards related to crane safety, column stability, double connections, fall protection and worker exposure to overhead loads.)

OSHA also has an educational arm which provides safety training to workers around the country. All ironworkers in Local 8 take the OSHA course as part of their apprenticeship training.



All members of Local 8 are trained and certified as welders.

Apprenticeships: Apprenticeship standards have risen over the years and Local 8 is justifiably proud of its Apprenticeship Training Program.

In the first half of the 1900s, an individual who wanted to become an ironworker - often the brother or son or nephew of ironworkers - came to Local 8's office to obtain a work permit. He was directed to take that permit to a contractor who was looking for help and willing to take on an apprentice, or a contractor wrote a letter to the union expressing a willingness to take on the prospect as an apprentice. The apprentice was then paid half of a journeyman's wages while he learned the trade alongside veteran ironworkers.

In the 1950s, a more formal apprenticeship system developed with the establishment of a Joint Apprenticeship Committee, made up of three representatives from Local 8 and three from the building contractors. (Today, the committee's make-up is 5/5.) Applicants who appeared before the committee were asked about their experience and skills and had to perform some exercises like tying knots. Once approved by the committee, they received their permit and were required to work at least 4,500 hours in a satisfactory manner before achieving journeyman's status. They had to pass an aptitude test and another oral interview before receiving their journeyman's book.

In the early 1970s the law changed and new apprentices were indentured through the state of Wisconsin, rather than through individual contractors. The amount of time and training to achieve journeyman status was increased. Each apprentice had to work for three years (and at least 6,000 hours) on the job and had to attend classes related to the trade. Currently that instruction time amounts to about 400 hours. Given that Local 8 is a "mixed" local whose members perform all aspects of the iron trade, the core curriculum, taught by longtime journeyman ironworkers, is based on three major units: structural ironwork, rod work and rigging. Classes include welding and related job skills as well as OSHA training.

The greater emphasis on education and training is fueled, in part, by OSHA, according to **Gil Toslek**, Local 8's Apprenticeship Coordinator. He commented:

"Today, with all the safety aspects and the cranes and equipment and the millions of dollars worth of stuff that's used on job sites, worker's lives are in each other's hands. There's more pressure to improve everyone's training, not just the apprentices."

Indeed, even journeyman ironworkers take "refresher" courses from time to time, whether to learn about new equipment or to become familiar with new regulations. The apprenticeship and training program is funded today by a 30¢ per hour employer contribution.

Local 8 apprenticeships in Wisconsin are governed by the Bureau of Apprenticeship Standards, part of the state's Department of Workforce Development. Apprenticeships in Local 8's territory in Upper Michigan are governed by the Bureau of Apprenticeship Training in the federal Department of Labor. This is just one of many bureaucratic challenges faced daily by the officers and staff of Local 8.

The first Apprenticeship Coordinator at Local 8 was **Richard (Dick) Eyestone**. **Bob Haase** took over in 1976 and held the position until 1995. Haase says he's especially proud of Local 8's welding program, which he estimates has turned out almost 1,000 certified welders over the years. Gil Toslek has held the reins since Bob's retirement.



Construction of Tower Drive Bridge in Green Bay, 1979.

Purchase of the Adler Lane Property: Most of the apprenticeship and advanced journeyman instruction takes place in Local 8's Apprenticeship Training Center, a facility that was remodeled on land purchased in West Allis in 1975 by the Joint Apprenticeship Training Committee. In 1979, the deed was transferred to the Joint Apprenticeship and Advanced Journeyman Training Trust Fund which, in turn, sold half of the property to Local 8. The union had outgrown its office space at 62nd and Bluemound and officers had been planning to move to an expanded facility.

The Grand Opening of Local 8's latest headquarters took place in November of 1980. Ironworkers **International Secretary Juel D. Drake** sent a letter of congratulations, touting Local 8 for the careful financial management and planning that enabled it to make such a significant investment in its future.

Some of the officers of Local 8 who helped organize the purchase and move were **Earl Spicer, Russ Pride, John R. Armstrong, Harold Schmidt, David J. Cross, and Bob Haase**



Milwaukee Area Iron Workers Training Center in West Allis.

Russ Pride, who served as Business Agent under Business Managers Earl Spicer and Bob Zimmermann from 1968 on, was himself elected Business Manager after Red Spicer's retirement. Pride served as Local 8 Business Manager from 1978-86.

Fellow officers and union members give Pride credit for helping to establish Local 8's **Annuity Fund**, formally known as the **Union Individual Account Retirement Fund**, in 1978. This fund is proving to be a major supplement to the Pension Fund. Unlike the Pension Fund, which is a defined benefit that pays out a certain amount of money to each retiree every month, the annuity allows the retiree more freedom to manage his account, drawing out a lump sum, making occasional withdrawals, or letting it continue to grow. It's not an exaggeration to say that the retirees love it.

Pride is also respected for bringing Local 8 through the 5-year-long recession period during the Reagan years, when the construction industry was in the doldrums. Despite the economic downturn and unemployment among ironworkers, Pride and Local 8's Negotiating Committee were successful in winning consistent wage and benefit increases.

Reciprocity: Pride and others in Local 8 also championed the concept of reciprocity, the idea that "the money follows the man." Years ago, if a member of Local 8 worked in another ironworker local's territory, that local would retain any benefits the worker had accrued in its own trust funds. Because of this, a lot of old-timers lost out on benefits. Today, Local 8 respects reciprocity, so all benefits earned by Local 8 workers employed outside its geographical jurisdiction are sent back to Local 8. Likewise, ironworkers from outside Local 8's territory who work here have their benefits sent to their locals. It's an issue of fairness the International has endorsed and that Local 8 helped to usher in.



*Aerial view of Milwaukee's Harbor (Hoan Bridge) under construction in 1971.
(Photo courtesy of the Milwaukee County Historical Society.)*

Building the Future

In the last three decades of the 20th century, Local 8 ironworkers continued to do what they do best - build the infrastructure of our communities.

Some of the big jobs included: expansion of Midtec Paper in Kimberly and Wisconsin Tissue Mills in Menasha; the Harbor (Hoan), North Ave. and Locust St. bridges in Milwaukee; the First Wisconsin Center and large office buildings at 100 E. and 411 E. Wisconsin Ave. in Milwaukee; power plants at Pleasant Prairie, Port Washington, Point Beach and Oak Creek; and additions to and renovations at Allen Bradley, Ladish and American Motors in both Kenosha and Milwaukee.

Other projects involved new hospital buildings in Waukesha, West Allis, Menomonee Falls, Green Bay and Appleton; expansion of the Marinette County Courthouse; Earth Station 3, the satellite communications facility in Lake Geneva; Tower Drive Bridge in Green Bay; rebar work for the Metropolitan Milwaukee Sewerage District; and buildings on the campuses of the University of Wisconsin, Michigan Tech, Lawrence University, and St. Norbert and Alverno Colleges.

Contractors on these jobs have included Oscar J. Boldt Construction, C. R. Meyer, Price Erecting (a signatory to Local 8 contracts since 1915), Lunda Construction, Chilstrom Erecting, Oneida Erecting, Gundlach Champion, John Hennes Co., Interstate Erecting, Azco Inc., and C.D. Smith.

In 1970, Local 8 members were touted in the pages of *The Ironworker* for the "Rigging Job of the Year." The challenge involved lifting a 60 foot long, 260 ton nuclear reactor vessel 55 feet up then lowering it and placing it laterally through a 28x30 foot opening into its containment shell. That impressive job took place at the Point Beach nuclear plant.

In 1999, *The Ironworker* again recognized members of Local 8, who labored with ironworkers from Local 584 out of Oklahoma to complete Milwaukee's 1,221 foot high Digital Tower Complex.



Digital Communications Tower rises high above Milwaukee's landscape, 1999.

Recent or current projects employing many Local 8 members include the erection of Milwaukee's impressive new baseball stadium, Miller Park, with its awe-inspiring retractable roof. Members in Michigan's Upper Peninsula have been busy with maintenance on the Mackinac Bridge, now more than 40 years old. They've been replacing the traveler system under the roadway and repairing structural members. Meanwhile, in Green Bay, there was the long-awaited renovation of Lambeau Field.

The tragic crane accident that took the lives of Local 8 ironworkers **William DeGrave**, **Jerome Starr** and **Jeffrey Wischer** at Miller Park in 1999 was a stark reminder to everyone of the dangers inherent in structural ironworking. Local 8 responded quickly by collecting money for the families of the fallen workers and by proposing legislation (along with Operating Engineers Local 139) called the **Safe Building Act**.

The Safe Building Act calls for the certification of operators and the licensing of ironworkers by the state of Wisconsin. Its purpose is to ensure that all individuals working as operators and ironworkers in Wisconsin are fully capable and skilled. If adopted by the state legislature, the Safe Building Act could become a model for other states and the nation.

Local 8 has always stepped forward to meet the needs of its members and the challenges of the industry. In 1989, in the wake of the economic recession, the membership approved creation of a **Defense Fund** to focus on market recovery. In 1995 and '96, three full-time organizers were hired to recruit non-union workers and contractors. In 1995, Local 8 had just 12 apprentices in training. Today, that number is about 180. Membership, as well as the number of signatory contractors, has increased. Although the robust economy of recent years contributed to those gains, there's no question that Local 8's investment in organizing efforts has been fruitful. Active membership today stands at about 950 members.

Throughout its history, Local 8 representatives have also been very vocal at International conventions, speaking up for the rank and file by introducing resolutions and debating issues on the floor. At the most recent convention in 1996, Local 8 was instrumental in getting the \$1 per month per member organizing fund established within the International.

In 2001, as Local 8 celebrated its 100+ year anniversary, members enjoyed a wage rate and benefits package that ironworkers at the turn of the 20th century - who earned just 35¢ per hour - could hardly imagine.

The total wage and benefits package for journeyman ironworkers in southeast Wisconsin in June of 2001 stood at \$36.97 per hour. (In the Fox Valley area the total was \$35.16, in Upper Michigan, \$35.12 or \$32.84 based on the cost of the project.) This includes contributions for health and welfare, pension, annuity account and apprenticeship and skill improvement. Each of these benefits and other advances in working conditions over the years came about through the concerted efforts of the officers and members of Local 8, standing together as one united union.

Such progress has meant new challenges, especially for the leadership. Business Manager **Brent Emons** notes that with all of the new benefits and funds and federal regulations, union leaders must be educated on a "mind-boggling" array of rules and procedures: ERISA laws, OSHA standards, unemployment and worker's compensation, the governance of trust funds, collective bargaining, Taft-Hartley provisions, jurisdictional disputes, contract language, and more.

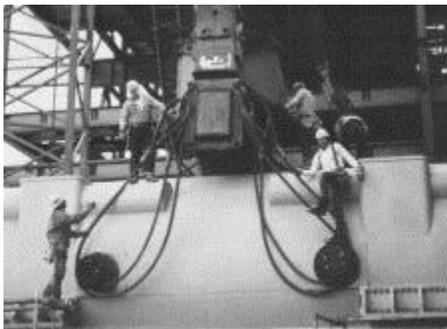
"It's mind-boggling when you take an iron worker from the field and elect him to office. I don't think the average iron worker realizes how much you have to learn to protect the membership and, hopefully, increase their benefits. It's challenging at times, but it's also rewarding - working to do the best that you can for your members."

Jack Martino, Local 8's President for the past 18 years, is enthusiastic about recruiting new members and sees great opportunities for young people in ironworking.

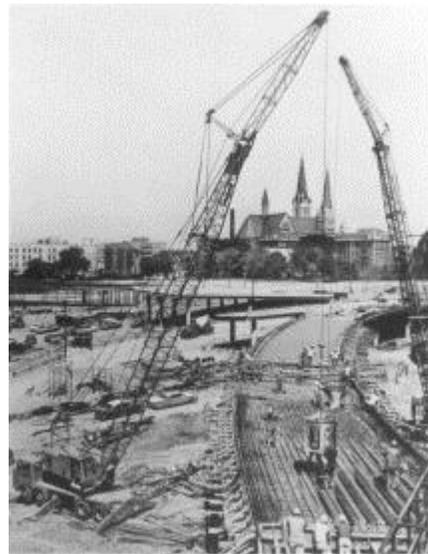
"We offer them an opportunity with our apprenticeship program to be trained in a skilled trade, to work and earn money while they learn, to do interesting work and to be productive members of the community. You can make a decent living as an ironworker, be associated with a lot of nice people and do well for yourself."

Both Jack Martino and Brent Emons are confident that with the younger talent now emerging from the ranks, Local 8's tradition of hard work, fair play and strong leadership will carry on well into the next 100 years.

MORE PHOTO MEMORIES-



Pleasant Prairie Powerhouse



*Marquette Interchange work.
(Milwaukee County Historical Society)*



Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank the officers, members and office staff of Ironworkers Local 8 in Milwaukee, Brillion and Marquette for their time, patience and assistance with the creation of this history. General Organizer George Cross and others at the International in Washington, DC lent valuable advice as well. Thanks also to the many retirees who spent time sharing their stories and adventures in ironworking. I regret that space did not permit the inclusion of many of their personal stories - some were funny, some heroic, and some too risquÃ© to print!

Thank you, too, to all those individuals, contractors and archives who provided photos for this history, especially Price Erecting, John Hennes Trucking and Gundlach Champion. The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel Library, the Milwaukee County Historical Society, the State Historical Society of Wisconsin and the Michigan Department of Transportation were particularly helpful.

As I began my research, I was shocked to find no mention in any existing history books of Local 8, any of its colorful leaders, or its role in building so many of the extraordinary structures people seem to take for granted. In the short time I had, I did my best to compile a thorough overview of Local 8's

achievements in the past 105 years. It is only a beginning. I hope this history will be revised and expanded in the future. The ironworkers of Local 8, who have literally built the infrastructures of whole communities in Wisconsin and Upper Michigan, deserve their place in history.

- J. Jamakaya

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