

# Forging a path forward

## Third generation takes the reins at Interstate Mechanical Corp

By Jean Hansen

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The quality craftsmanship and innovative solutions that Interstate Mechanical Corp has provided in Siouxland for more than 100 years will be continued by a third generation as James Olson and Wes Hunold take ownership this year.

The Olson family entered the mechanical contracting business when James P. Olson, a mechanical engineer, started James P. Olson Co. in 1965. He specialized in providing commercial and industrial piping, plumbing and heating services.

His major projects included St. Luke's Regional Medical Center and the Swift Meat Packing plant in the Bridgeport Industrial Park in Sioux City.

Prior to starting his own business, James P. attended Morningside College until he was drafted into the Army during World War II to be a B-29 pilot. Upon returning to the states, he finished college at Iowa State University and earned his engineering degree. He came back to Sioux City and worked for Hagan Co. as a project engineer from 1952 to 1963, obtained his professional engineer's license, and was employed by Labelle Engineering as a consulting engineer from 1963 to 1965.

James P. Olson died suddenly in 1974, and his sons, Rich and Steve Olson, took over the family business. Rich, who attended Iowa State University for two years, had been working as a draftsman at the company for a year when his father died.

"Dad needed a draftsman. I was living in Ames (Iowa), and he asked me to come back to work for him. Even though I had been around it all my life, I never planned to be in the family business. I just landed in it," Rich said.

Steve had a business and accounting degree from Briar Cliff and was an apprentice plumber at James P. Olson Co. at the time of his father's death.

In 1983, Rich and Steve Olson, and Dave Beaubian purchased Interstate Air Conditioning from Bill Menzel. They merged James P. Olson Co. with Interstate Air Conditioning to form Interstate Mechanical Corp., which the firm is known as today.

Interstate Air Conditioning was started in 1912 by J.E. Johnson as a sheet metal contractor under the name Interstate Cornice Works. The first major projects included a ventilation system for the State Capital Building in Lincoln, Neb., and the Masonic Temple in Sioux City. The name of the business was changed to Interstate Air Conditioning Corp. in 1954.

Since the merger, Interstate Mechanical Corp's business has encompassed plumbing, heating, building management systems & temperature controls, air conditioning, ventilation, sheet metal work and industrial piping.

"We did the same things that we were doing separately before - mechanical contracting, but combined, we were able to offer greater efficiencies and a single source of responsibility," Rich said.

Rich has always done some drafting and design for Interstate Mechanical Corp, but his main focus has been running the day to day operations, including insurance, job estimating, cost accounting and project management.

Steve started out working in the field as a plumber while Rich was working in the office. That all changed when the merger took place and the business grew larger.

"Steve's major interest was handling more of the business side. It was what he enjoyed," Rich said. "When we bought Interstate, everything was on a large enough scale that we decided he should come into the office and help run the day to day operations. We more or less had specific jobs to do. He did some project management along with business management."

Dave Beaubian retired from Interstate in 2005, and Steve and Rich bought out his part of the business.

"We like to do repeat work for existing customers. Our emphasis is to develop a good relationship with customers and provide a quality service to them," said Rich.

To meet more of their customers' needs, Interstate Mechanical Corp has expanded services and acquired other companies.

One of their biggest additions has been architectural metal. Interstate can make metal roofs, metal flashing, building panels, and more.

"We've always done a little bit, but in the last 10 years, this architectural metal part of our business has really grown. There has been more of it out there and there is a demand for metal building panels," Rich said. "The whole need for recyclable buildings products has taken off and we have added equipment to facilitate that."

Interstate has made metal panels for Dakota Valley School, the Sioux City Public Museum, Bishop Heelan, and Hinton Community School, among other buildings.

To expand their product offerings even further, Interstate purchased Metal



Interstate Mechanical Corp has been in business since 1912. An old photo of their location is painted on the wall in their lobby. Today, Interstate Mechanical Corp is located at 418 Iowa St. (Submitted photo)



Interstate Mechanical Corp in Sioux City makes architectural metal wall panels, wall and window flashings, and commercial grade gutters & downspouts. Architectural Metal is a new direction that Interstate Mechanical Corp has taken in recent years. Interstate Mechanical also does mechanical fabrication, plumbing & HVAC, industrial piping, and more. Top left: Pictured is Bishop-Heelan, where Interstate Mechanical Corp installed composite panels. Above is a Dust Collection System. (Submitted photos)

Specialists in Sioux City in December 2015.

"With the equipment we have, we're able to do light gauge general sheet metal work, but they (Metal Specialists) have the equipment to work with heavier gauge metal than we do. By buying Metal Specialists, we added that capability. We can do a greater variety of things," Rich said.

With the addition of Metal Specialists, Interstate can perform specialty welding, custom fabrication, stainless steel, aluminum and carbon steel, metal fabrication, and rolling and bending.

Most of the time their jobs are within a 100 mile radius of Sioux City, but occasionally they are farther away.

Interstate has always had unusual projects, but one of their most unusual jobs, according to Rich, was making 357 aluminum insulated, heated and air conditioned dog houses for military dogs in Afghanistan seven years ago.

"It was a really interesting project," he said. "We were a subcontractor of Thermo Bond Buildings, LLC in Elk Point, S.D. "One of their people responded to a government request for proposals. They submitted a pencil sketch and the government picked them. They asked if we would build the dog houses and we developed their sketch into a workable design. The project took a little over a year to build from start to finish. We built 51 dog houses a month for seven months."

"We have always had projects that have required us to use some imagination and come up with something original," he said. "That's been our forte. We have sought after that sort of thing. We enjoy something that's a little different."

In the last year, Rich has been more of a consultant for the family business and James and Wes have been in charge of the day to day operations. Steve passed away in March of 2015.

"James and Wes have really taken over and done a great job," he said. "It was Steve's and my intention to get a succession plan in place where we could retire and the business would be in a place to go forward. James and Wes fit the bill."

James, Steve's son, is in charge of architectural metal, which is one of Interstate's niches, and Wes, Steve's son-in-law, is the senior project manager in charge of all the construction, plumbing and HVAC. Each has his own team of professionals working with them.



Top right: Interstate Mechanical Corp installed standing seam and flatlock panels at the Sioux City Public Museum. Above: At Dakota Valley High School, Interstate Mechanical Corp installed a fabrication panel, cap metal, conductor heads and downspouts. (Submitted photos) Left: Interstate Mechanical Corp owners are, from left: James Olson, Wes Hunold and Rich Olson. James and Wes are third generation owners of Interstate Mechanical Corp. Rich Olson is a second generation owner. (Journal advertising photo by Jean Hansen)

Wes and James have known each other for 15 years as family and have worked collaboratively for the past six years. That relationship has made it easy to bounce ideas off each other and their personalities complement each other to make the business run smoother.

They are united in their goal to continue to honor the business practices left by James P., as well as Rich and Steve, focus on the quality of work they do, and keep refining the process to make their products more efficient and, when installed, be the best in Sioux City.

"We are improving upon what we do. We want to be the expert in our field, which takes time. It means having cutting-edge equipment and staying up to date on what's happening around us. We have a solid base and want to grow from there, which we do. We can always improve," Wes said.

James said it is also important to them to treat everyone the way their father and uncle treated them.

"I take a lot of pride in being in the family business, myself being the third generation. Rich and Dad treated their employees and customers as a large family. Processes may change, but they always cared about everyone they worked with. It's what is conveyed to everyone we work with. It's what draws me into this work. We continue to honor the foundation my dad and Rich built over the years," he said.

"We understand the vision Rich and Dad had. They were rebuilding the business. We continue to focus on understanding their values. Taking care of employees and taking care of customers, improving on that, and always keeping those core values at the forefront, is what drives us," he said.

James continued, "Our vision for the future is to be the contractor who customers look to partner with to help provide solutions. Interstate has a diverse customer base including many commercial and industrial owners. Currently, we are finishing a very large project at the new CF Industries plant.

"Interstate, which currently has 85 dedicated employees, will continue to be a full-service mechanical contracting company. Our plumbing and HVAC departments will largely focus on building and customer based work. We will also focus on our custom fabrication and Architectural Metals. We want to be the firm where people look to partner with to help find solutions.

"The future looks bright for our employees and Interstate Mechanical," said James. "My partner, Wes, and I want to focus on our associates' personal development and career growth. In addition to that, we are building a culture of safety. Their safety, and their families' well-being, is a huge core value of ours."

Both bring a background that has enabled them to thrive in their capacities at Interstate.

James attended Briar Cliff University for business with an emphasis on marketing and human resources, and worked a couple of summers as temporary help in the family business, filling in where he was needed. He did paperwork in the office, drove truck for the sheet metal shop, did submittals, performed plumbing work at Lowe's Home Improvement when it was being built, and other tasks.

After college, James worked five years in outside sales for a large firm in Minneapolis that manufactured sheet metal projects and ductwork.

He was traveling a lot and Interstate was growing, thus requiring more project management staff, so he came back home to work in the family business in 2011.

"I worked with Mike Murphy and I apprenticed with him to learn architectural metal fabrication. My focus now is project management in architectural sheet metal and metal wall panels," James said. "It has really grown in the last 10 years. Architects want to see it. It's market driven and something we love to do."

Wes also has a business degree with an emphasis in marketing. Prior to starting at Interstate, he worked at Menards as a department manager for the electrical department.

Like James, he has been around a family business since an early age. His father was in construction, so he was familiar with putting up walls, doing concrete work or installing ductwork.

Wes began working at Interstate in 2005, estimating and managing HVAC projects.

"I'm helping with temperature controls and the mechanical portion of the business," he said.

No matter what they are doing, James and Wes are involved with projects from their conception to completion.

"We don't work on a job a little bit, then pass it off," James said. "The field work is coordinated so people and materials are where they are supposed to be meeting with customers. It's not an assembly line."

In the architectural metal part of the business, James is the point of contact, while other staff members provide the manpower and technical support, and build the products to specifications. It's a team effort.