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The evolution of insulation, and a peek inside new windows



Ask the Expert

BY DARREL HAY

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It's time for a construction history lesson as we sit down with local contractor legend Einar Johanson

Johanson's company, Einar Johanson Insulation and Glass, Inc., is revered in the Seattle area and is one of the longest-operating independently owned construction firms in the state.

Johanson, eminently humble and unassuming, fittingly met me at a McDonald's recently. He drove up in 1983 El Camino with 227,000 miles, which is plastered in bumper stickers and was blowing blue smoke.

DH: Tell me again how long you have been in business.

EJ: Almost 50 years now.

DH: My gosh, that's a very long time to be in business – especially for a guy who looks only slightly the far side of 29

EJ: I started out as a fisherman, you know.

DH: Ballard! Of course, why didn't I figure you for that? You were initially an insulation contractor, right?

EJ: That's right. We started off with Al Foil and Intra-Foil. One of our first jobs was military housing at Fort Lewis.

DH: Those were radiant barriers, but when did we start seeing insulation as we know it?

EJ: Rock wool has been made since the 1890s. First place I purchased it was as slag from the Ruston smelter.

DH: My understanding is that attic insulation was not commonplace until the late '50s

EJ: Silva-Wool made by Weyerhaeuser was basically shredded wood waste treated with fire retardants. One of my competitors was selling that back in the middle and late '50s. It has a reddish tint. The FHA (Federal Housing Administration) started requiring higher insulation levels in ceilings in the middle '60s, and that's when things started to take off.

DH: Did you ever use asbestos-containing vermiculite or spray foam insulation with formaldehyde?

EJ: No, we never installed those products, thankfully.

DH: I understand you added windows later, right? Those are two very competitive businesses.

EJ: Window replacements now make up 75 percent of our business. We have 18 employees and several have been with me for decades.

If you treat people well and pay a good salary with benefits, it will all return in loyalty and quality of work. The same is true with customers. Treat them right, provide good value, don't use pressure sales tactics. I have never had a customer sue me and don't expect that will ever happen.

DH: You're in the window business and never had a lawsuit? Windows and their installations are prone to leakage problems more than just about any building product other than siding, so how can that be?

Statistics have shown that 30 percent of all windows leak water and it seems almost every condo built between the late 1980 and 2003 in Western Washington has had a lawsuit related to leaky windows and siding. **EJ:** Strange as it may sound, we're in it for the long term. We use quality materials, train employees to do a good job, provide drip caps and caulking and warrant our installations. There is a difference – a big difference – between a quality window and low-bidder window. Cheap windows and untrained installers just aren't up to the job.

DH: Vinyl windows cannot be nailed or screwed along the top. I see many of the larger, wider windows flex outward at the top, breaking the caulking inside and sometimes the glass, or warping the frame. How do you prevent this?

EJ: The windows have to be built with strong frames and internal reinforcement. Aluminum sleeves inside the larger windows help the window stay secure. The base of the windows must be shimmed and supported properly. This is critical. The bottom of the window gives when not supported well. Furthermore, thicker, heavier glass makes the window even stronger.

DH: Has the advent of vinyl windows been a boon?

EJ: Not necessarily vinyl in and of itself. Replacing all those fogged aluminum double-pane windows from the '70s and '80s is our bread and butter.

Later, Einar drove back to Ballard in his El Camino. His most prominent bumper sticker reads, "Columbus used a Norwegian map." Einar copyrighted that bumper sticker and distributed them years ago. A true treasure, that man.

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