

BUSINESS FRIDAY

SPOTLIGHT

New Berlin company weathers economic storm

Historical preservation, stained glass company one of biggest in U.S.

By LEE COLONY
Freeman Staff

NEW BERLIN – A reputation for quality work can keep a business going through the bad times until the good times roll around.

Just ask Heidi Gruenke Emery. Her family's business has weathered the business storms that have come and gone in nearly 115 years of business, anchored soundly because of its rock-strong reputation.

At a time when art and cultural undertakings may take a back seat to the more basic needs of life, Conrad Schmitt Studios continues to do business in Wisconsin and across the nation.

Some of the work is because of the nature of the multiyear projects they undertake that began prior to the economic downturn. Another reason is on a more emotional level, the tie between a community and its past.

"There's a lot of planning involved in the projects we do, and fund raising," Gruenke Emery said. "A lot of time and effort is put into these projects. We have been lucky to have been able to stay busy."

"But I also believe in the idea that people recognize that stained glass and historical churches, buildings and theaters are something special. They are something that should be maintained and celebrated and protected for the future. People are usually committed to these. It is usually a labor of love for our clients."

Conrad Schmitt takes in about \$10 million annually, said Patty Zimmerman, company publicist. Their business focuses on two areas, decorative restoration and conservation, as well as restoring and creating original stained glass pieces.

Zimmerman said both sides of the business are considered one of the largest in the nation for their specific line of work. The business is bolstered by its main studio building of 20,000 square feet and a 14,000 square-foot building that houses its stained glass studio and storage space for such items as scaffolding.

Conrad Schmitt has worked to restore or conserve the decorations on historical sites, theaters and churches across the United States and abroad.

"The fact is, we have the privilege to work in these spaces that are so sacred or important to people and their communities," Gruenke Emery said. "Many times, we might work on a project for several years and we become friends with these people ... We have an incredible staff, too, that wants to do something that has a lasting impression and quality that is long lived."

Staff members research the background of a site to determine its original artwork and other decorations. From there, they conserve or restore original decorative features such as paint, plaster, molding, guild, murals, sculptures and mosaics. Some of the items are brought back to the studios in New Berlin to be worked on, while

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AT A GLANCE

Company: Conrad Schmitt Studios

Location: 2405 S. 162nd St., New Berlin

Founded: 1889, in Milwaukee

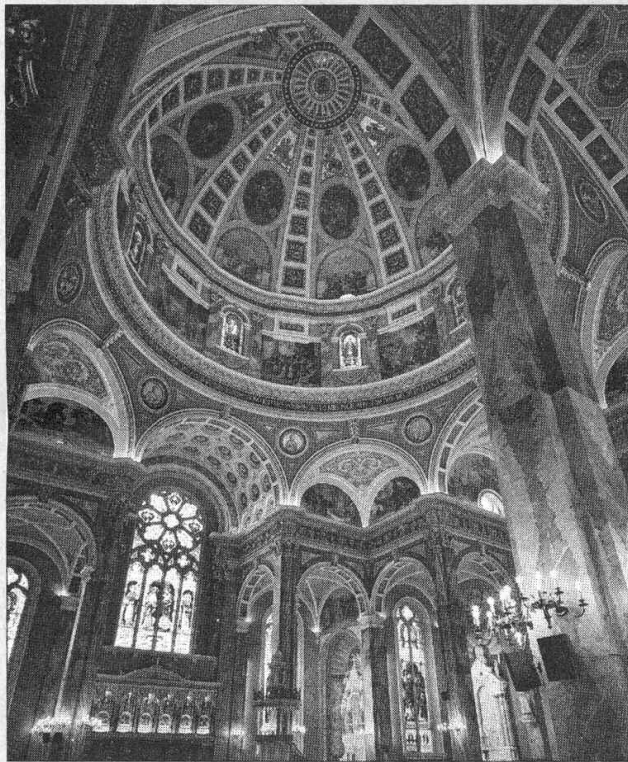
Employees: 80

Owners: Three generations of the Gruenke family – Bernard O. Gruenke Sr., who joined the studio staff in 1936 and purchased the company from the Schmitt estate in 1951; son, Bernard Gruenke Jr.; grandchildren Heidi Gruenke Emery, B. Gunar

Gruenke

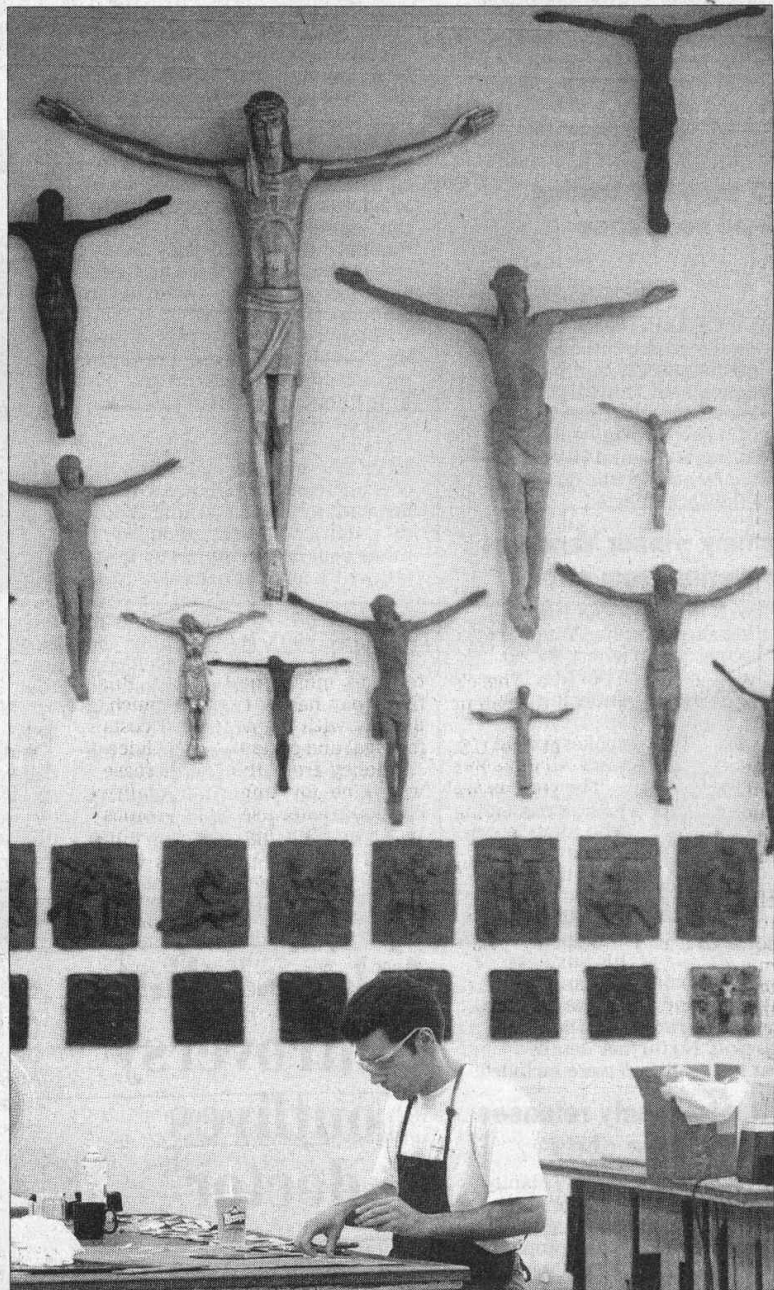
Examples of work: Local sites include the Pabst Theater, St. Josaphat's Basilica, Holy Hill and St. John the Evangelist. It has also worked on the Waldorf/Astoria hotel in New York, the dome on the Iowa State Capitol and the Basilica of the Sacred Heart at University of Notre Dame.

For more information: www.conrad-schmitt.com



Submitted photo

Left, St. Josaphat's Basilica was restored by Conrad Schmitt Studios of New Berlin. Right, models of a crucified Jesus Christ hang on a wall while Mike Budney works with stained glass at Conrad Schmitt Studios Inc. on Tuesday.



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others are labored over at the original site.

Artists from the studio spend hours painstakingly bringing back the church or historic site to its original flavor. For instance, they spent more than 18,000 hours in a one-year period working on the decorative restoration of the University of Minnesota-Minneapolis' Walter Library built in 1924.

The business also creates stained glass for new churches or additions to existing ones.

"It's a fascinating business," Zimmerman said. "We do a lot of historical research, and sometimes we have to study historical photos to help recreate a decorative scheme. It's a little bit of detective work, like when a church burns and the window lies in shards all over the ground and needs to be reconstructed."

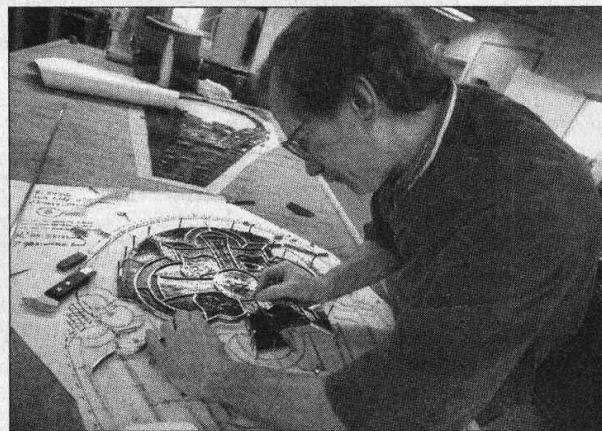
The other aspect to this is the tradition of art and craft that is conducted in the studio. These are processes that have been handed down for 100 years, from one generation of artist and craftsman to the next. We have a range of equipment, too. There is an anvil that must be 150 years old, but there is a computer stenciling equipment in another area. There is a range of

technology and talent that goes into historic preservation."

Gruenke Emery said the ingredient to their 100-plus year success is the same thing that has helped them stay afloat during the most recent economic time – reputation and quality.

"A lot of our business is based on reputation, a lot comes from referrals from previous clients," Gruenke Emery said. "We maintain the quality of our work because our name goes on the project. We want to make sure everyone is happy with what we have done. That's a good part of the reason we've had such success in our industry."

(Lee Colony can be reached at lcolony@conleynet.com)



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Matt Saladin, a glazier at Conrad Schmitt Studios Inc., assembles a stained glass window.