

Wrapped in gold

Story by Cathy Breienbacher

Even as firefighters battled a November 2001 blaze atop the Old Capitol building at the University of Iowa, students and other onlookers began collecting funds to restore the 160-year-old icon.

That's right in keeping with B. Gunar Gruenke's philosophy about preserving and restoring historic structures. Gruenke is vice-president of Conrad Schmitt Studios of New Berlin, which did the gold leaf work to bring "Old Cap" back to its glory.

"There's the old saying that if you don't know where you've been, how will you know where you're going?" says Gruenke, who lives on Lake Nagawicka. "It's a respect and honor for our forefathers, something you almost have a requirement to do."

It took two Conrad Schmitt employees four weeks' time to do the gold leaf work. That came after a new, 12,000-pound dome was constructed in Galena, Ill. and moved by truck to an airplane hangar in Iowa City, 115 miles away.

"One of the biggest challenges was that the material they used for the fabrication of the metal was a new product, rather than the old copper or lead domes," says Gruenke. After the artisans were satisfied they had the correct procedure, they applied gold-tinted sizing to the primed surface. "Once it's just tacky, then you lay the gold leaf," explains Gruenke. The gold leaf is just 1/2,500th of an inch thick, Gruenke says, "if you hold it up to the light, you can see through it, that's how thin it is."

The gold leaf material cost some \$8,000, with the gilding contract totaling \$30,000 — a small fraction of the \$6 million restoration costs, but critical to the look of the finished project. The dome was placed back atop Old Cap in February.

Even though the dome would be installed five stories into the air, restoration officials demanded that the smallest of flaws be eliminated, Gruenke says. "We did it perfect, then they picked it up with a crane (to install it atop the cupola) and we had to go in to touch it up," laughs Gruenke.

Locally, the firm has done gilding work at the St. Josaphat Basilica, the Mitchell Building, St. Anthony Church and St. John Vianney in Brookfield. It also has helped restore some of Milwaukee's most beloved interior spaces such as the Pabst Theater and the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist. **ASW**



Conrad Schmitt Studios was selected to replace the gold leaf on the Old Capitol in Iowa.