

Building a legacy

CONSTRUCTION:

Company has played a key role in region's big projects

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Photos of some of the area's most iconic structures line the walls at E.E. Austin & Son Inc.

Some are nearly 100 years old, like the 1924 photo of workers using horse-drawn carts to build Veterans Stadium. Other photos are more recent, such as one of the Tom Ridge Environmental Center's elevator tower as it was being constructed.

"Veterans Stadium was our first big job, along with a similar stadium in New Castle," said Clement "Cle" Austin, president of E.E. Austin & Son. "Before that, we were mostly building homes."

It has been 110 years since E.E. Austin, a former schoolteacher and farmer, moved to Erie from southern Erie County and began using wood from his farm to build houses.

Now, the company run by his great-grandson helps build multimillion-dollar structures, such as the Courtyard Waterfront Hotel on Erie's bayfront, and renovates historic buildings, such as the former Pennsylvania Armory and the Chautauqua Institution Amphitheater.

"Our main business is building," said Austin, 69. "We supply concrete to



DAVID BRUCE/Erie Times-News

Clement "Cle" Austin is president of E.E. Austin & Son, the Erie company that his great-grandfather founded more than a century ago. While the founder made his mark building houses, the company today focuses on larger-scale construction.

other companies, but our main interest is construction. We focused our efforts in the 1980s, after we got out of the aggregate (sand and gravel) business. We also used to run a hardware store until the 1950s."

Erie-based E.E. Austin & Son currently employs 135 people. The number is down from 190 workers in 2011, due to a decline in company revenue.

The downturn is attributed to a reluctance in both the public and private sectors to invest in new buildings, Austin said.

"This appears to be the new normal," Austin said. "We see that municipalities and private companies are very conservative with construction investment. For example, the

Erie School District has announced \$200 million of needed improvements, but there is no funding for them."

The company survives by being flexible, Austin said. It helps build and renovate schools, wastewater treatment plants, retail stores, college buildings, hospital expansions and industrial buildings.

It also prides itself on doing the job correctly and safely, Austin said. E.E. Austin & Son recently completed the Occupational Safety and Health Administration Challenge Program.

The program improves workplace safety and health through a process that includes lessons about safety planning and the implementation of safety

and health-management programs.

"The most important part of the program is that every single person with E.E. Austin & Son and our subcontractors will be able to go to work and be comfortable, and not worry about being injured," Austin said.

Austin, a civil engineer, said he plans to lead his great-grandfather's company for another seven or eight years, if his health is good.

"This job energizes me," Austin said. "I like to get out. I like Erie, and I like the people."

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AROUND THE REGION



CHAUTAUQUA INSTITUTION: Jason Muscarella, of E.E. Austin & Son, installs boards on the amphitheater ceiling in June.



LORD CORP: Eric Andree, a concrete finisher with E.E. Austin, works at the company's new Summit Township facility in 2013.



PRESQUE ISLE DOWNS & CASINO: Avery Schou, of E.E. Austin, delivers concrete grout into a pump at the Summit Township site in 2006.