
The Elevator Constructors

by Richard Bermack

Contributing Writer

Elevator constructors are a cross between coal miners and custom car mechanics. They work in dark, narrow shafts, but instead of descending deep into the earth, they ascend to the top of skyscrapers. In that narrow space they build a high performance car that transports passengers safely from floor to floor, up and down a hoistway. And as with coal mining, working in a cramped, dark environment makes elevator construction a dangerous occupation. "You are trusting your life to the people you work with," temporary mechanic Michael Knight explains. "The person above you, below you, to the side of you, any screw-up can have repercussions."

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There are a little over a 1,000 elevator constructors in Northern California and Nevada. Knight's father was an elevator mechanic, and for generations this elite trade was a father and son operation; only family members got jobs. In the past, someone could work as a helper for 30 years and retire as a helper, never making it to mechanic. The union apprenticeship program has changed all that. Anyone who wants to can take a written test to join the program. Those who successfully finish the four-year program are eligible to become mechanics.

Elevator construction requires wiring, welding, rigging, machine assembly and fabrication. "The best thrill of it all is to ride in an elevator and have somebody say, 'Wow, we got here so fast and I didn't even feel it going up.' That is when you know you are the real deal," brags Knight.

Organized Labor visited members of the International Union of Elevator Constructors Local 8, working on a 60-story skyscraper in downtown San Francisco. Local 8 represents elevator constructors from south of Bakersfield to the Oregon Border and East to Northern Nevada.

Fred Tamuty, Construction Mechanic, 30 years

You know you have been in the trade a long time when the buildings you worked on as new construction get torn down for newer, bigger construction.

I started out as a helper like everyone else. I was working at a machine shop, and some of my buddies said come over and work with us. So I did. I liked the mechanical assembly, and not working inside a factory or office, and that at the end of the you can see you made something.

In some ways things have changed, and in some they are the same as 100 years ago. This company uses new equipment to hoist rails; others still use a rope and a windlass wrench like 100 years ago. It's lots safer now. In the past we worked without handrails and without safety harnesses. It required a lot more knowledge and skill. You sometimes did things that were really scary. I had a few close calls, got a few stitches from sharp edges.

Michael Knight, Temporary Mechanic, 11 years

I can't see myself doing anything else. I love it. This is the stuff. Building elevators gives me a rush: finding little mess-ups here and

there, and then putting them together and making them work. Something comes up bent or twisted, something doesn't work right, or something doesn't fit. You have to actually think to figure out how to make them right. I like solving problems. It takes some brains, not just slapping together an erector set, ABC.

When your kid asks you what you do, and you say, "I built this elevator you're riding in," and his eyes get real big, that is a great feeling.

Arnoldo Graeda, First Year Apprentice

I heard stories about working on elevators and it sounded like a lot of fun, so I took the test and got in. You wouldn't expect to be building an elevator hanging 10 floors above a building, putting things together, when before you didn't even know how they worked. Welding and drilling holes, you learn something new every day when you are working with a good mechanic, like Mike.

And then you get to see the finished product. The car has people in it and you know it's a safe car. It makes you feel real good. It's all about safety. Elevators hold people, and in the long run, your mother or father could be going up in an elevator you built. So you have to make sure everything is all right. It's exciting. Not that many people get to say they've built an elevator. Only a small number of us are doing it.

Abe (Lalo) Rodriguez. Elevator Mechanic, 26 years

I've worked on elevators from every company except Mitsubishi. They are all different and all the same. Just like a Chevy or a Ford, the parts look the same, but they are each a little different. I started in Houston, Texas, then 15 years in LA, and 8 years up here. I was going to college and was told I could get work in Houston in elevators. I thought I would be pushing the buttons, like an elevator operator, and would do it for a year and make some money and go back to college. But the money got better and better, and this is what I like to do. We work with our hands, do piping and welding, rigging, all the trades in one. It's fun. All the co-workers try to help each other. And all the jobs are different. Even if it's the same elevator, the building is different, the way the general does the work. Some have no idea what we need. Even though we ask them, sometimes the hoistways are too big or too small, and we have to cut and readjust to make it work, elongate the rail brackets, install spacers for the car seals. You have to fabricate right on the job site to make it work.

Donald Huls, First Year Apprentice

A friend's father retired after 30 years in elevators. I read some of his books and thought elevators are pretty wild stuff. School's been interesting. Who would have thought there were so many differences in cables, different lays and grooves, and each has different traction, which affects the speed of the car.

Vick Kowell, Elevator Mechanic, Over 30 years

I had just got back from Viet Nam and got a job as an apprentice working on the elevators during the construction of the Transamerica Building. The shape of the building was pretty unusual.

Technology has changed. We don't use false cars anymore. Now we build the car first, and then rope it up. Before we built a platform without overhead protection. I saw a false car run out of cable and go down 10 floors. Now we use as much protection as we can.

It was a privilege working with all the old timers who came up through the business. They were excellent mechanics, and I learned a lot from them. Now I love to teach the young guys and tell them as much as I can.

When it came to teaching, the old guys were horrible. They never let you look at the layouts and had you running. But it was for your betterment. When I look back on it, I appreciate it. They had a lot of talent. Things are simpler now. They knew their stuff. It was an honor to work with a lot of them. Back then, you learned hands on, and if you were good enough, you got promoted. With the apprenticeship program, the young guys are given more knowledge and opportunity. They let you look at the elevator print, where the old guys were afraid for their jobs and didn't want to share. Back then the helpers didn't even have coffee with them. The helpers had to sit by themselves, and all the mechanics were over in a group. There were guys who had been helpers for 30 years and never got to become a mechanic. Now they are encouraged to become mechanics. I think it's good for the business, and the mandatory schooling is excellent.

They were pretty gutsy, those old guys. They would walk on the beams, and you don't see that any more. Do I miss that? Not one bit. I will turn 60 soon, and I want to leave in one piece.

Dan Rice, Elevator Mechanic, 20 years

I enjoy the changes over the years: different controls, different machines, and different methods of installation. Growing up, my father took me along to a lot of jobs. Later, when I was working in the trade, I tore out a few of the elevators he put in. That made for some interesting dinner conversation.

What I like best is we do everything from start to finish, our own wiring, our own welding, our own hoisting. That's what is unique about our trade. It gives us a lot of pride in the work. My favorite job is

the spiral escalator we put in for the Nordstroms at 5th and Market. That was a challenge.

Alex Raymond, First Year Apprentice

My father was in the elevator trade. I liked what he said, about the money, the work, and the security, everything about it, and particularly being in the union. He talked a lot about the union. It feels good belonging to an organization like this.

Hoisting and rigging really impressed me, the different techniques for lifting heavy objects and machines. I had never seen anything like that before. Like putting a 5,000 pound machine on the side of a 60-story building. It took four of us. I had the radio and was on top of the roof directing the guy on the crane. I've only been working 8 months and they let me do that

Dave Allgeyer, Elevator Mechanic, 30 years

How did I get in to the trade? My dad was an electrician, but no one was hiring. So he had a few connections and got me into elevators. I went through good times and bad and am now looking forward to retirement. Will I miss it? I'll miss bullshitting with the guys. We really looked after each other.