

Seaway Painting

Interview with owner Steve Vlahakis

Seaway Painting is a family-owned business that has been painting on the Mackinac Bridge since 1995. This spring they will begin painting the top half of the north tower and beginning this week they are back to painting the exterior of the Icebreaker Mackinaw.

Steve Vlahakis and his sister Irene Zannis own Seaway Painting LLC. They grew up in the business that was started by their parents in 1963. The company specializes in industrial painting on transportation, electric utility, government, and manufacturing infrastructure. Nationwide it employs 80 to 100 employees.

I interviewed Steve in his office, the small house between the Holiday Inn Express and Baywinds Apartments. Baywinds is the



Steve Vlahakis explaining the level of painting completed last year (in yellow)



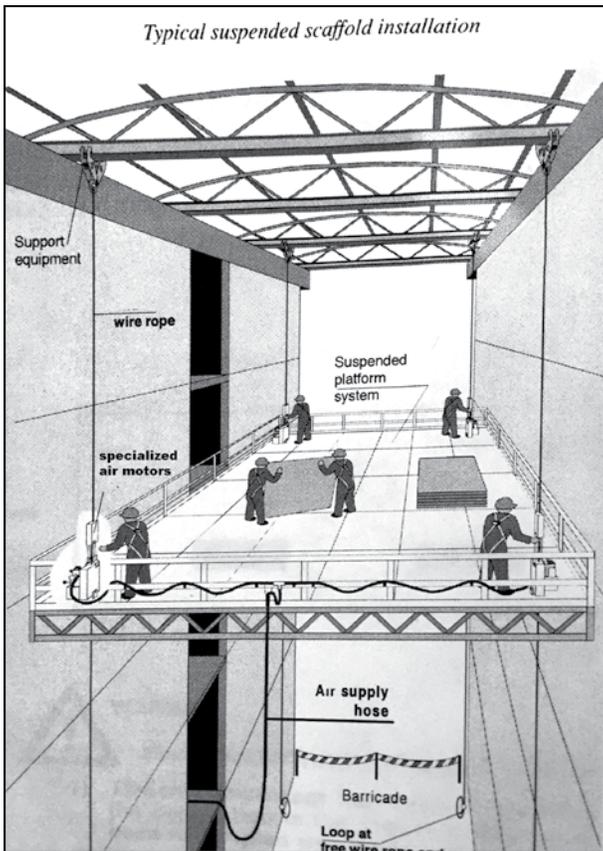
Last summer's painting with the tower wrapped

apartment building that Seaway built as a replacement for the Quarterdeck Motel, to serve as employee housing. Today the building houses some Seaway employees as well as others.

The workflow

Although Seaway has painted many bridges, the Mackinac Bridge north tower has required specialized equipment to access the work area. The project started earlier with a design, aided by a former bridge painter now working for Seaway, who invented the outriggers to be fashioned to the top of the tower. These will be the attachment point for the cables used to raise and lower the paint scaffoldings. These outriggers are already in place and four cables will be dropped to attach to the work platform. Then the parachute-fabric wrapping will enclose the work area. The Mackinac Bridge Authority engineers limit the cocooned area to 20 feet high at a time to avoid putting excess weight on the bridge.



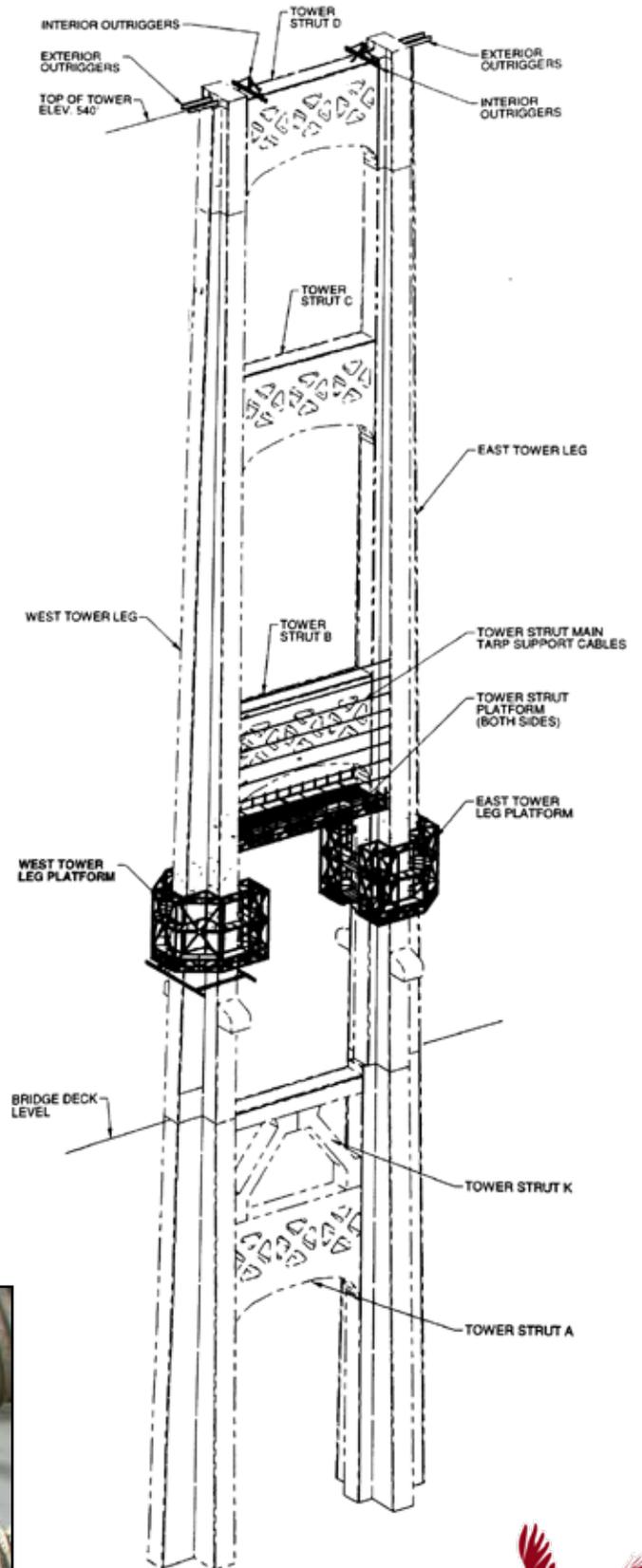


The crew will start by painting the three struts. Struts are the horizontal sections connecting the two towers. For this work a platform was constructed to span the struts. It will be raised and lowered by four specially built Germany air motors, powerful enough to handle the man-riding weight of the paint platform, equipment and workers.

Once the struts are painted then Seaway will install the C-shaped painting platform, custom built by Moran Iron Works, which will allow them to slide up the tower legs as they paint.



Air handling and debris removal are a big part of the job



MACKINAC BRIDGE - NORTH TOWER





The crew

The bridge crew will consist of 20 union workers who will sandblast off the current paint and then apply a 3-coat system of first, a zinc primer, second an epoxy intermediate, and finally a urethane top coat. The work is done in two shifts, 10-hours a day, seven days a week unless there is a tourism event on the bridge. For special events they clear their equipment and take vacation time.



Although this photo was taken from a competitor, Bridge Bros., it gives a feel for working inside the tented area

They expect to have the tower painted by November and the Icebreaker by fall. Most of these employees live locally, many from the Soo, some from Cheboygan. Vlahakis stressed that these worker feel like a family, they spend a lot of time together, their safety depends on each other, and it is a challenging job that builds camaraderie.

The lessons

“The Mackinac Bridge is the most challenging bridge we have ever done. And we have worked on bridges all over the country,” said Vlahakis. Why? Vlahakis explained it is a challenge dealing with the traffic, weather, and events. Suspension bridge work requires dealing with weight limitations, access problems, containment for lead etc., and engineering.

The Icebreaker

A 6-member crew will perform the Icebreaker work, described by Vlahakis as a “fun job.” They will apply a 2-coat Sherwin Williams paint system, starting with an epoxy primer followed by a urethane top coat. Again a big challenge will be working around the public, the ship’s visitors.



Vlahakis is enthused about the projects here and the Cut River Bridge job they will also perform this summer. He also likes the community despite his cold reception this week.

