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Keeping Tradition

Colley Elevator has been serving the Chicagoland area for more than 110 years.

by Craig Zomchek

Colley Elevator Co. opened its doors the year the first Model T left one of Henry Ford's automobile assembly plants in Detroit. The company's founder, C.B. Colley, was a former engineer for a large multinational elevator company. After working in all aspects of the business, in 1908, he decided to strike out on his own. More than a century later, the company he founded continues as the longest-operating independent elevator company in the Chicagoland area.

In its first few years of business, Colley not only installed elevators and dumbwaiters, but also painted water towers and did whatever odd jobs enabled his company to survive. It evolved into one of the primary low-rise elevator installers in Chicago over the years. In the latter half of the 20th century, Colley started manufacturing cylinders, slings, platforms, power units, cabs and other elevator components. During this time, the focus shifted from new installations to service and maintenance. Rounding out its niche, Colley also transformed to take on modernization projects in place of new construction. New construction, which had been a primary early offering, is still a complement to the company's portfolio, with four or five new installations per year.

By adjusting to market demands throughout the century, Colley grew to become the third-largest independent elevator company in Illinois. In 1986, the company moved from Franklin Park to its current location in Bensenville. In 2011, it expanded into the adjacent industrial property. Today, it operates out of a 14,000-ft² building that enables the company to stock inventory to service the 1,700-plus elevators in its portfolio.



The Colley Elevator name has been prominent in the Chicagoland area for more than 110 years.

The Team

For more than 80 years, Colley was family-owned. In the 1980s, the final member of the Colley family stepped down after suffering a debilitating stroke. At that time, my father, minority partner Ray Zomchek, purchased the outstanding shares and ran the company as president. I joined in 1996 to help in the shop, later moving to the office in 2000. In 2007, I became a partner, along with International Union of Elevator Constructors Local 2 mechanic Dennis Jedd. In 2012, another Local 2 mechanic, Cory Kojima, became our fourth partner. In 2017, Jedd ended his 40-year elevator career, leaving my father, Kojima and me to run the company.

I believe in surrounding myself with the best and brightest. In addition to adding individuals with field experience to our management team, in 2008-2009, I served as president of the Chicago Elevator Association (CEA), and in 2016-2018, I served a three-year term on the National Association of Elevator Contractors (NAEC) Board of Directors — 2017 as vice president and 2018 as president. The experiences I shared with industry greats from both of these organizations will remain with me forever.

Our Vision

Our company believes in steady and controlled growth. We strive to be the preferred service provider in the low- to mid-rise maintenance and modernization categories. We're not interested in vanity projects or volume. One of our strengths has been a focus on our maintenance mechanics. Giving them the time and freedom necessary to perform their jobs correctly has paid us back in dividends. Monitoring route sizes has taken a considerable effort, and, at times, we have had too much labor capacity. Though some would see this as a cost, service calls have been cut by 50%. Our philosophy is, if you hire great mechanics and give them the time, resources and freedom to work on their elevators, you will reduce shutdowns. An additional benefit we provide for our full-maintenance contract customers is the ability of their mechanic to order any needed part, no questions asked.

Personally, my goal has always been to build a strong foundation of employees, customers and suppliers. Our office and field staffs share in Colley's vision of striving to be the best we can be, and we believe this gives our customers the benefit of real elevator maintenance and quality installations. By listening to our coworkers, we have changed the way we do business. A strong foundation and solid business practices will attract customers looking for great service. This is the kind of dedication that earned

Continued



The PPE table in the Colley training area

Colley the coveted 2019 Ellie Award for Best Contractor-North. It's also put us in the running for the 2020 award.

Today and the Future

Even before the pandemic hit, we were cognizant of giving back to our community, especially to the men and women who have served our country. Last year, we donated more than

US\$40,000 in time and materials to install a new hydraulic elevator at the Elk Grove Village, Illinois, Veterans of Foreign Wars Hall. After two years of planning and working with other trades and professionals, we turned over a new, nonproprietary elevator to this organization.

COVID-19 is actually Colley's second pandemic, though no company records survive regarding the first, the Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918. These past few months have been an extremely unsettling time, but we're dedicated to doing what's right for our staff and customers. Equipping our entire office and field personnel with PPE was the first step in trying to address the situation. Becoming flexible with our time-off policy to try to tailor to each employee's unique situation was another challenge we faced. Happily, we have been able to keep all our employees on the payroll throughout the crisis.

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Colley partners (l-r) Cory Kojima, Ray Zomchek and Craig Zomchek



Colley moved into this office/shop space in Bensenville, Illinois, in 1986.

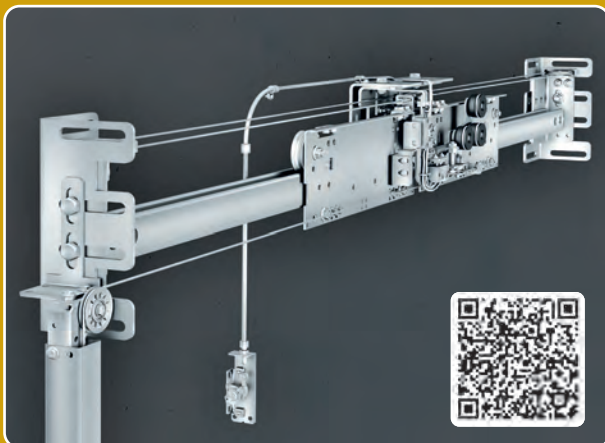


The more than 1,700 elevators in Colley's service portfolio are supported by a well-stocked warehouse.

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We started the “Colley Stimulus Program” to support local restaurants to continue our efforts toward giving back. The company purchased lunch for the office and shop staff for more than 70 business days, from the start of Illinois’ shelter-in-place order to the reopening of indoor dining. I also started a GoFundMe page on behalf of the company to benefit local hospitals and food banks. The effort raised more than US\$8,000 in donations, which were divided among the Northern Illinois Food Bank, Greater Chicago Food Depository, Loyola University Hospital and Elmhurst Hospital.

Along with the pandemic, we’ve also seen an extraordinary amount of social unrest. This has caused us to do extensive soul-searching and have internal conversations to try to make sense of the anger on all sides. There are many philosophies on the current state of affairs, but no matter the position, we should all agree that we need to raise the river to provide more opportunities and positive influences in underserved areas. This led us to create an internal initiative to reevaluate our supply chain. If we are able to find good suppliers, people and partnerships that promote diversity and have diverse ownership, everyone wins. We plan to do our best moving forward to create a positive impact in underserved areas.

Though 2020 has brought a unique set of challenges, we’re excited about the opportunities we see in our industry. Completing our first 112 years in business, we can’t wait to see what the next 112 will bring.



Craig Zomchek is managing partner at Colley Elevator Co. and has been in the industry for 25 years. He holds a double major in Marketing and Management from DePaul University, as well as an MS in Business in Strategy, Execution and Valuation. He is a licensed elevator inspector in the State of Illinois and has formal training in electrical engineering, electrical construction, electrical code and ASME A17. He has worked his way up through all phases of the business and is actively involved in the industry. From 2008 to 2009, he served as president of CEA, and from 2016 to 2018 served a three-year term on the NAEC Board of Directors (2017 as vice president and 2018 as president).