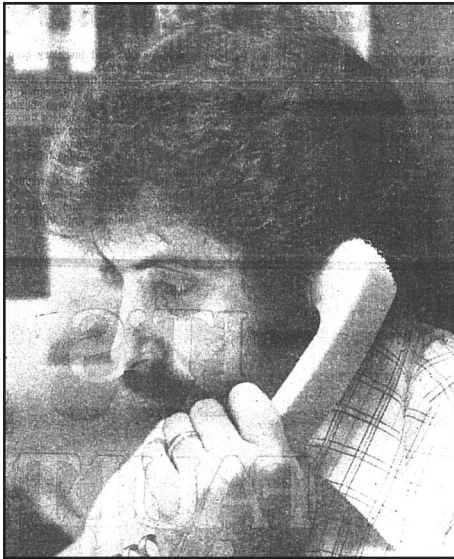
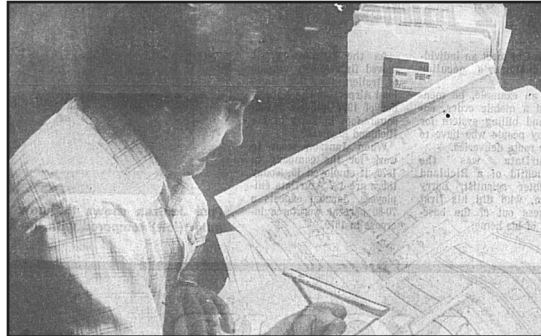


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Much of O'Brien's business is done over the phone in his Hermiston office.



Tom O'Brien studied blueprint plans for his construction project in Libya.

'Mighty tough years' lead to contracts in Libya

By BOB WYNNE
Herald Staff Writer

Jim O'Brien is the epitome of the local boy "who made good."

At 26, O'Brien, owner of O'Brien Construction Co., heads one of the fastest growing pre-fab steel construction businesses in the Mid-Columbia.

And his quality work at home has resulted in several contracts in Libya.

In 1978, O'Brien who is based in Hermiston, did \$2 million worth of work overseas.

And he predicts 1979 will be even brighter.

But the construction business hasn't always been so good to O'Brien, who grew up in Whitstran and graduated from Prosser High School.

"There were some mighty lean years there," O'Brien said. "During our first year in business (1974) we did not get anywhere.

"I was working with one or two other employees. We grossed around \$85,000 total."

O'Brien started in the steel metal building business with a \$1,600 loan, which he admits

looked like throwing good money after bad until 1976.

"That's when things really started rolling," he said. "I got in with another steel building franchise and started to get some jobs."

And last year O'Brien expanded into the international building business, a field where, he says, the "sky is the limit."

O'Brien credits his success to an "all-out effort to satisfy the customer."

"I firmly believe that a satisfied customer is the best form of advertising," he says. "People are our best asset."

O'Brien's international operation in Libya is building a 50-man modular housing camp, complete with recreation room, kitchens, laboratory and office.

Also included in the project are a 36,000-square foot shop and two million-bushel grain storage buildings.

The structures are being built in Sebha, in southern Libya, as part of Howard Kartchner's 20,000-acre irrigated land development.

O'Brien said opportunities for American businessmen in the Middle East are great.

"The Arabs really want American products," O'Brien said. "They have the money and they want the best."

Doing business in the Middle East is really a challenge, however. "The Arabs are sharp businessmen and they know what they want," he said.

The Arabs prefer to do business with Americans, O'Brien added.

"Americans are willing to work with the Arabs to solve problems," he said. "That's what they really like. We just keep charging ahead."

He said he does miss some of the conveniences when working abroad, like telephones.

"The pace is a lot slower over there. But it really is the only time I relax."

O'Brien said his firm will continue to expand through 1979 both in the Mid-Columbia and abroad. Jobs in Venezuela and Saudi Arabia are planned and the firm plans to open an overseas office in England.

New offices are also being built in Hermiston and in Kennewick.