

America's Builders

Gypsum Board: A Building Success Story

(NASPA)—Although it's easy to take drywall for granted, the story behind the invention and phenomenal growth of this product in American construction is a remarkable one.

The first drywall panel was patented by United States Gypsum Company in 1917, but it took decades before the product gained widespread acceptance. In fact, as recently as 40 years ago, the majority of interior walls in U.S. homes and commercial buildings were still constructed with plaster.

Today, drywall (also known as gypsum board or wallboard) accounts for about 95 percent of all U.S. interior wall construction. To meet this huge market demand, manufacturers produce a staggering number of these panels, with the most popular size measuring 4 by 8 feet. Consider these facts:

- In 2001, U.S. Gypsum, the nation's leading drywall manufacturer, produced nearly 10 billion square feet of its SHEETROCK Brand Gypsum Panels, or enough drywall to build 1.2 million average-sized homes.

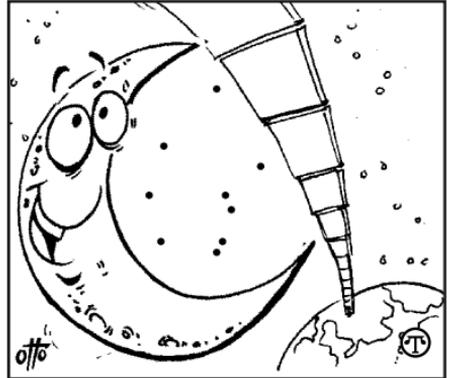
- Since 1917, the company has produced enough wallboard to build more than 36 million average-sized homes.

- Laid end to end, this drywall would stretch to the moon and back 29 times, would wrap around the earth's equator 551 times and would fill the Sears Tower 224 times.

Despite its current popularity, drywall wasn't an immediate "hit" in the construction industry. Initially, the panels were used almost exclusively for utilitarian purposes.

"The fact was, gypsum board walls didn't look very nice," said Kevin Moyer, product manager with U.S. Gypsum. "While the gypsum panels produced in the 1920s and 1930s were remarkably similar to the drywall that we know today, there wasn't an effective method for joining them to each other to create a smooth, visually appealing wall surface."

In early applications, gypsum panels were attached with batten strips or perforated steel strips, creating an industrial look that wasn't appropriate for main-



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stream residential and commercial construction.

Realizing that improvements were needed, U.S. Gypsum worked to develop a series of improved joint compounds and joint tapes. In the early 1940s, the company introduced an innovative ready-mixed joint compound that greatly facilitated board finishing. With these refinements in place, drywall was finally ready to take center stage in the residential construction industry.

The breakthrough moment for gypsum board occurred during the post-World War II housing boom. Facing an unprecedented demand for economical housing, builders turned to gypsum board as a means to reduce construction time and costs, while still providing a quality interior wall surface.

Gypsum board manufacturers now mine and quarry more than 15 million tons of natural gypsum rock each year. Despite this high usage, gypsum rock remains one of the most abundant minerals in the world. The other materials used to make drywall, including paper and corn and wheat starches, are all either recycled or renewable, making drywall an environmentally friendly building material.

With all these benefits going for it, it's no wonder that gypsum board is now used in nearly every new home and commercial building in the country. It's one of the biggest building success stories of the 20th century, and it's a sure bet that drywall will continue to be the material of choice for 21st century building as well.