

Advertising duo mark their 50th anniversary

By KATIE KERWIN

Half a century hasn't been long enough, say advertising agency partners Larry Michelson and Leonard Simons, who recently celebrated their golden anniversary in business together.

After 50 years, the Troy businessmen said they want to ease up a little on their work, but neither is planning to retire soon.

"We've known each other close to 60 years," said Simons, 74, the more gregarious of the duo. "We've never had an argument about business or a harsh word."

"It's been the fastest 50 years I know of—that I could ever dream of," agreed Michelson, 75, the more soft-spoken partner.

Not that business was always easy for the pair. Starting out together in early 1929, 10 months before the great crash in the stock market, Simons recalled that he and Michelson were "working day and night."

"For kids, we did all right," he said. "We made so much money we didn't know what to do with it." Feeling proud of their financial sense, they invested all of their earnings in stocks that fall.

"About a month later, we didn't have a dime," Simons said with a wry smile. The young partners accepted their loss with the tolerance of youth, said Simons, who, undaunted by financial peril, got married the following January.

But we never had a year that we didn't make a decent living," Simons said. "We'd take a lot of small accounts and work hard to build them up. Sometimes we did too good a job for our clients," he said ruefully.

Accounts like Pepsi-Cola, Pfeiffer Brewing and Wrigley Supermint grew as the companies prospered and the advertisers eventually turned to larger agencies.

Sometimes the decision not to handle large, national accounts came from Michelson and Simons themselves, though.

"We had the chance one time to get the Hudson Motors account," Simons remembers. The partners decided it was too big and turned the offer down. They made a similar decision when offered the national account for American Safety Razor, because they would have had to shuttle back and forth between Detroit and New York.

"If you bite off more than you can chew, then you can't service everyone," Simons said. That's why, the ad men explained, they tried to keep their staff to 30-35 members, with either Michelson or Simons the contact man for all of the firm's accounts.

Elias Brothers' Big Boy restaurant chain is now the agency's largest account. Advertising for Lauder's Scotch, a division of Hiram Walker, which they handled for about 25 years, is another of their major accounts. Velvet Peanut Butter, Acme Sporting Goods, Fisher Wallpaper and Osterman Jewelers are also handled by the firm.

BUT THE PAIR'S favorite account in 50 years of business was Zip Gasoline.

"It was imported from Rumania and sold for about 10 gallons for a dollar," Simons recalls. "The guy took his business to Canada and farmers used to come with barrels to buy the gas."

It was Simons-Michelson's first non-syndicated account and Zip Gasoline was running weekly newspaper ads. "It was so exciting," Simons said. "I had free rein to do whatever I wanted."

The business encountered some unusual clients over the years, Michelson agreed, and put them in touch with

some interesting characters. "But the best testimonial about the business, as far as I'm concerned," said Michelson, "was my son's decision to come into the business." He said his son had decided not to join Simons-Michelson, but changed his mind after graduating from college.

"He told me, 'Any business that can hold your interest and retain your enthusiasm—that's what I want to do,'" Michelson's son, James, and Simons' son-in-law, Morton Zieve, handle most of the operations at the agency, now named Michelson-Simons-Zieve. The two senior executives act mainly as consultants.

SIMONS RECKONS he has been in the advertising agency business longer than anyone else around. "I beat him by two weeks," he chuckled, glancing over at Michelson.

"It's the only job I ever had," Simons continued. Right out of high school, he was hired as assistant art director and office boy at a local agency. Two weeks later, his friend and card-playing buddy, Michelson, landed a job with the same firm.

The young men earned \$25 a month, "enough for carfare and lunch money," Simons said. Their boss said they would teach them the business. Within 7½ years, the two had become associate managers of the office. But they decided after a few more years that they weren't getting anywhere, Simons said, and in January 1929, went into business for themselves.

Over the years, both men have had offers to leave the partnership, but neither was ever interested, Simons said. "They tried to break us up and they tried to merge us into other agencies, but it didn't work."

"I've had no complaints," Michelson said. "We work side by side."

Simons said their formula for successful partnership is fairly simple: "I call it respect."

When discussing business, the men say they have been able to read the emotions in their partner's eyes and will back off in deference to the other's strong conviction, when necessary.

THE PARTNERS also share many philanthropic interests. The firm has donated money and free publicity to numerous charitable causes through the years.

Michelson began in advertising as the writer, and Simons the amateur artist. Today, Michelson is still the "pen-and-ink" man, and his partner the more vocal and visible figure.

Simons, who seems to have a finger in almost every philanthropic pie in the metropolitan area and beyond, has accumulated an amazing array of plaques, certificates and tributes, which now cover the walls in his Troy office.

"He has more," Michelson tells visitors. "I had bigger walls at the old office," Simons replies with a smile.

But Michelson's contributions are also notable, although his quiet work may attract less notice, his partner will insist. "He made the money and I gave it away," jokes Simons, a fundraiser who refers to himself as "a gold-plated panhandler."

IN 50 YEARS, the two have seen a great transformation in advertising. "The whole nature of the business has changed," Simons commented.

When they began, advertising was almost entirely in newspapers, magazines and circulars. "All of a sudden, radio came in," Simons said. Advertising men were expected to be improvisers, "cute and clever," he said. The advent of television only furthered that trend, the men said.

But the challenges and changes were more stimulating than discouraging in the long run, according to the partners.

"It made you want to get up in the morning," Simons said. "I'm sick and tired of this business. I wish I'd done something else."

Simons has now reduced his working day to afternoons only, and plans to spend more time on another of his passions, international travel. Michelson prefers to remain more active in the business, still working full-time.

"We want to take it easy now," Simons explained.

"Easier," corrected Michelson, with a gentle smile.



Larry Michelson and Leonard Simons stand outside their Troy office beside the banner their employees put up to celebrate the two men's 50-year partnership. Time has not strained the bonds of friendship, said the pair, who have remained close through a half century in business.

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Pianist James Tocco performs in Detroit

Detroit born pianist James Tocco will perform a solo recital at Pro Musica's second concert of the season, Feb. 23 at the Detroit Institute of Arts.

The keyboard training that started with a neighborhood piano teacher has led this Detroitite to accomplishments recognized worldwide.

Pro Musica of Detroit is bringing Tocco to Detroit as one of its annual series of three Friday evening programs. Each concert is followed by a social hour where members of the audience and guests enjoy a chance to chat with the artists and other members of Pro Musica.

Tocco went to the former Austin High School in Detroit. His first scholarship enabled him to study music at Wayne State University.

This was soon followed by a scholarship to the Salzburg Mozarteum, and when he won a scholarship from the French government.

Within a few seasons, the young pianist was playing in concerts on the Continent and Asia and had won an impressive number of competitions. He is one of only a few American pianists to win eight major international competitions, including first prize at the 1973 Munich International Competition.

South America, Russia, and the Middle East.

Tocco made his New York debut at Alice Tully Hall and now plays there regularly. He was the first pianist to be invited by President and Mrs. Gerald Ford to perform at a state dinner at the White House and was one of 13 young American pianists chosen to commission a work from an American composer and perform it in the Kennedy Center during the bicentennial season.

In addition to his concert performances, Tocco serves as artist-in-residence at Indiana University, and during the summers, performs at Wolf Trap Center near Washington, D. C.

Pro Musica has been active for more than half a century, bringing to the Detroit area artists on the threshold of world renown and composers performing their own works.

While the emphasis is on season membership subscriptions, a limited number of single admissions are also available for this and the final concert this year. The third concert, April 27, will feature the operatic tenor Cesar Antonio Suarez.

Inquiries regarding tickets and memberships should be addressed to Pro Musica, 740 Hawthorne, Grosse Pointe Woods 48236, phone 881-9750. Season memberships are \$20. Single admissions are \$9 and may be purchased by mail order.