

## The Rempel Brothers

By David F. Loewen

The 1970s and 1980s were marked by turbulence in British Columbia's construction industry (the worst labour unrest in Canada, according to some), as open-shop contractors had been excluded from working on government contracts, due to legislation passed by the NDP government which allowed only unionized employers to bid on government contracts. That inequity would be corrected, thanks in large part to the involvement of Ewald and Ed Rempel and their company, Rempel Bros. Concrete.

Dietrich and Margaret (Fast) Rempel, along with their two sons, George and Ewald, emigrated from Russia to Canada in 1926. They settled briefly in Manitou, Manitoba, where two more children joined their family. In 1934, the Rempel family moved to Abbotsford on the West Coast. Four more children joined the family in BC, including Edward, their sixth child. Here they were engaged in berry farming.

Not long after joining his parents on the berry farm, Ewald launched into the gravel trucking business. In 1964, brother Clarence started a concrete business and invited Ewald to join him. Edward joined the two brothers in 1967, forming Rempel Bros. Concrete. Sadly, Clarence's involvement was short-lived, as he died of a heart attack in 1975.

Over the next twenty-one years, the company grew rapidly. Rempel Bros. Concrete initiated several innovations that provided the company with an economic advantage. The company pioneered the "tandem-tandem" concrete mixers in Canada, which provided trucks with the largest legal carrying capacity in Western Canada (they were already used south of the border), and was one of the first in western Canada to implement computerized concrete batching.

In the 1970s, the BC construction scene was a volatile one as unionized and open-shop contractors faced off against each other. Of approximately 100,000 certified trades people in the province, roughly two-thirds were non-unionized (Sorenson). As a result of provincial legislation under the NDP government, open-shop contractors were disallowed from bidding on the construction of a school in Trail, BC. That event galvanized independent businesses across the province into forming the Independent Contractors and Businesses Association (ICBA), which included a variety of industries in addition to the construction industry. Its appeal in rural BC was pronounced.

When open-shop contractor Kerkhoff Construction of Chilliwack won the bid to build the Kamloops courthouse, unionized truck drivers refused to deliver concrete to the building site. Upon invitation, Rempel Bros. Concrete sent trucks and drivers who breached the picket lines

and delivered locally sourced concrete. Such action was to be repeated many more times across the Lower Mainland and Fraser Valley. Rempel Bros. Concrete was key to the growth of open-shop construction in BC, as it supplied open-shop builders with cement, a fact that many builders and developers today, small and large, will attest to. Several times, unions tried to organize Rempel Bros. Concrete, but the family had built a loyal and well-cared-for employee group, and every effort failed. If the unions had been able to certify Rempel Bros. Concrete, they could have choked off the concrete supply and put open-shop builders out of business.

At one point, Rempel Bros. Concrete was the largest open-shop concrete company in the province, thanks to the Rempels' persistence in bidding, advocacy for open shop, and belief in treating their employees fairly.

Because of Ed Rempel's role in advocating for independent contractors, his family experienced harassment and threats. "At night, they would come up and down our driveway, flashing their lights. We would see the cars out there. Sometimes they would get out of the cars and there would be six big guys in our driveway, at our home" (Myrtle-Anne Rempel). On one occasion, their sixteen-year-old daughter was followed in her car from school and had to detour from the empty residence to a nearby Rempel Bros. plant before the trailing vehicle sped off. Some of their friends feared for their own safety if they continued to socialize with them. The tension in the mid-1970s was pronounced while Ewald, Ed, and Myrtle-Anne played roles in helping ICBA become established.

In Vancouver, a False Creek condo development became the flashpoint of tension between the unions and independent contractor Kerkhoff, with as many as one thousand picketers on site. News coverage recounted nasty confrontations, including Ewald Rempel and non-union workers being pelted with feces. An attempt to run over Ewald Rempel resulted in him on the hood of a vehicle. Ultimately, court intervention brought a tentative peace to the construction scene – until Expo '86.

When the bidding on the Expo site construction began, unionized and open-shop contractors resumed the "battle." Premier Bennett threatened to cancel Expo if the two sectors could not agree. During the pivotal negotiations over who would build the Expo '86 projects – open shop or building trades unions – Ed Rempel was a key player. It was so controversial and heated at the time that when Ed met with Expo boss, Jimmy Pattison, he was asked to get off the elevator two floors below and then take the stairs. ICBA, prompted by people like Ed Rempel, assured Pattison that they could build Expo. A resolution was reached which marked the first time in BC history that unionized and open-shop companies worked together amicably on a site. As a footnote to this story, Ewald Rempel and Jimmy Pattison developed a personal friendship. Ewald and Ethel Rempel were invited as guests to the dinner honouring Prince Charles and Princess Diana at the opening of Expo '86.

Today, those with knowledge of ICBA's history will tell you that Ed and Ewald Rempel championed the right of all trades people to participate in the building of this province,

regardless of union status. Today, the open-shop sector constitutes 85 percent of the construction industry (Sorenson). And yet, recent provincial legislation has excluded open-shop contractors from bidding on significant government infrastructure projects, like the Patullo Bridge replacement.

At its peak, Rempel Bros. Concrete had a fleet of eighty-eight mixer trucks and eight plants throughout the Valley and Lower Mainland. In addition, it had portable operations at Tumbler Ridge, Trail, Port Hardy, and Hedley, with over 250 employees. The company had diversified to include steel, piledriving, concrete products supplies, and sand and gravel. In 1988, Rempel Bros. Concrete was sold; some of the other companies were retained.

#### Sources

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#### *Ewald Rempel (1926-1993)*

Ewald was born in Russia the year the family emigrated to Canada. As a child living in Manitoba, Ewald developed a serious illness causing a constant fever and a sore on his leg that would not heal. At one point, some thought he would not survive. His parents had heard that BC had built its first children’s hospital in Vancouver and so they uprooted their family of four children from Manitou, Manitoba, and made the ten-day drive across the mountains. Seven-year old Ewald was taken to what was then called the BC Crippled Children’s Hospital (now BC Children’s Hospital). After surgery, he had a long period of recovery – his leg was in traction for six months, and in total he spent eighteen months in the hospital.

Ewald attended Huntingdon Elementary School and Philip Sheffield High School in Abbotsford. He did not finish his formal education, deciding in favour of joining his parents in their berry farming endeavour. He joined brother Clarence in the foundational years of Rempel Bros. Concrete.

During his years in business, Ewald served as president of the BC Ready Mix Association as well as president of the BC Home Builders Association. Following the sale of the company, he served as a board member and chair of Fraser Valley Credit Union (later Prospera Credit Union) for eighteen years.

Beyond his business, Ewald was deeply invested in his community and church. He served on the board of Habitat for Humanity and contributed his organizational abilities to the construction of the Fraser Valley Child Development Centre (then referred to as the “Lego building”). Ewald is described by many as a role model for younger entrepreneurs, for whom he often generously provided start-up loans.

Ewald served on the board of the Church of the Nazarene for most of fifty years, and on both the finance and building committees. In addition, he served on the Regional Conference finance committee and generously donated to the national missions board for overseas work. He taught adult Sunday school and sang in the church choir.

Ewald is remembered for his fierce loyalty, natural generosity, and gentle spirit.

#### *Ed Rempel (1936-2018)*

Ed was born in Abbotsford and attended Philip Sheffield High School. In 1957, he married Myrtle-Anne Reimer and moved to Fort St. John, where he became supervisor and then superintendent of the McMahon Oil & Gas Refinery in Taylor Flats. The Rempels lived here for eight years.

In 1966, Ed moved his family to Langley, where he bought an Imperial Oil bulk plant, which he sold in 1967 to join his brothers Ewald and Clarence in Rempel Bros. Concrete Ltd.

When the company was sold twenty-one years later, Ed stayed on for an additional three-year period as president. Following that, he and Myrtle-Anne became involved in other businesses, including Rempel Bros. Concrete Inc. (a USA enterprise), Greenbank Sand and Gravel, Lower Mainland Steel, Lower Mainland Concrete Products, Apollo Concrete Products, and many other companies.

Ed served on numerous boards and committees: the board of governors of BC Institute of Technology (BCIT); board of governors for the Matsqui-Abbotsford Police Association; president of the Amalgamated Construction Association of Canada; president of the BC Concrete Association; president and co-founder of the Independent Contractors and Businesses Association (ICBA); member of the Economic Development Advisory Committee for the City of Abbotsford; member of the BC Tax Assessment Board; board member of the United Way; member of the board of governors of the Youth for Christ organization; board member of the Robert Schuller Ministries; and a member of the Sevenoaks Alliance Church finance committee.

Ed loved the business, but he was passionate about his family. He enjoyed classical music, and especially the singing of soprano Kiri Te Kanawa; he was an avid reader of mostly history, business and biographies; he enjoyed cycling, tennis and running for about fifty years until he became ill; and he memorized poetry and the scriptures and did the New York Times crossword puzzles each day to keep his mind active.

His motto always was “Take the High Road.” He was a visionary who had a deep spiritual faith.