

SMITH BROS & WILSON LTD



Built to Last

SMITH BROS. & WILSON AT 125 YEARS







Built to Last

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Built to Last: Smith Bros. & Wilson at 125 Years

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ISBN 978-1-7781294-0-7

Writing and indexing by Lana Okerlund, West Coast Editorial Associates

Design by Erin Anderson, KA Creative Group

Copy editing by Audrey McClellan, West Coast Editorial Associates

Proofreading by Lucy Kenward, West Coast Editorial Associates

Printed and bound in Canada by Mitchell Press

Published in Canada by Smith Bros. & Wilson (B.C.) Ltd.

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Foreword

IN 1952, MABEL SMITH, wife of SBW co-founder Alexander Smith, compiled the history of SBW's first fifty-five years in a book titled *Some Building in the West*. Inspired by how those chronicles preserved the stories of the company's early progress, we decided to publish a new book that would build on the earlier volume.

In addition to including more information about the people and projects from SBW's earliest decades, we wanted to capture the stories from the second half of the 1900s through to the present day. This seventy-year period has featured both spectacular growth and heavy turbulence as the company moved through several of the boom-and-bust cycles that have always characterized western Canada's resource-based economy. In the last two decades alone, we have gone from a period of tremendous uncertainty about SBW's survival at the beginning of the new millennium, to the current resurgence of our company and its legacy.

Through it all, SBW's values have stood the test of time and have held our company together. Pride in our work, fairness in our business dealings, an organized approach, and a willingness to take on and manage risk have led to our consistent success, project after project, year after year—with generations of committed people always making the difference in SBW's outcomes.

SBW started as “a family company and became a company of families”—as Michael Shields, Alexander and Mabel Smith's grandson and a former SBW director, put it. Early in our history, Smith Bros. became Smith Bros. & Wilson because a key person in the organization came to the fore in serving our clients and the company. That lesson carried on through successive generations. Those most capable of fulfilling our heritage have always been allowed—in fact, strongly supported—to shift into leadership and ownership roles so they could guide SBW through both growth and turbulence successfully.

The purpose of this book is to help everyone who reads it understand how SBW's values and culture developed and evolved, know why we have had staying power for 125 years, and see the consistencies in both the challenges and successes we've experienced throughout our history.

As Clark Campbell has said, “This story is not just about the past. It is about what we take from the past for the future.”

We hope you enjoy our story.

Jeff Musialek, Murray Saunders, Clark Campbell & Susan Johansen



SBW's history book steering committee, September 2021. Clockwise from left: Jeff Musialek, Susan Johansen, Clark Campbell, and Murray Saunders.



Smith Bros. & Wilson, from the very beginning, has had an objective of excellence in the work they do, and that idea of excellence continues. The people at the company today are obviously different people with different skills, yet the basis of it all is unchanged: just really good people running what historically has been a very good company.”

MICHAEL SHIELDS, GRANDSON OF SBW CO-FOUNDER
ALEXANDER SMITH AND FORMER DIRECTOR OF SBW

INTRODUCTION

Smith Bros. & Wilson
Made of Solid Brass

SBW's former head office at 8729 Aisne Street, Vancouver. When the letters spelling out the company's name were being moved to SBW's new head office in 2019, they were discovered to be made of solid brass.



“The letters weren't made of wood after all. They were made of solid brass.”

JEFF MUSIALEK

IN THE SPRING OF 2019, Alex Bautista, the yard foreman for Smith Bros. & Wilson (SBW), propped a ladder against the side of the company's weathered Aisne Street office and climbed up to remove the letters spelling out the business's name. In SBW's long history, there were several dark times when it looked like those letters might have to come down with the company's closing, but on this day in 2019, they were coming down because of a resurgence.

Riding a tide of higher-than-ever business volume, and with a new generation of people who were modernizing business practices and technology, SBW had grown dramatically in the previous decade. A move to new, company-built headquarters was now in the offing, and the letters were coming along.

“We initially thought the letters were made of wood,” says SBW president Jeff Musialek, who joined SBW in 2013 and was instrumental to its rejuvenation. “They were really deteriorated and looked pretty sketchy, but we thought they'd be a nice artifact to bring into the new building.”

Constructed by SBW's own crews, the new office building in Surrey was a showcase of everything the company stood for: attention to detail, expert craftsmanship in its exposed concrete and heavy timber construction, a non-hierarchical layout, plenty of spaces for people to connect and collaborate, and an honour wall featuring projects and awards since SBW's founding in 1897. Jeff envisioned that the letters, after some cleanup, would add another layer of history to this display.

Jeff watched as Alex started to pull the letters off the Aisne building. “Holy, these are heavy!” the foreman exclaimed. As Alex brought the letters down one by one, Jeff took a closer look. “The letters weren't made of wood after all,” Jeff says. “They were made of solid brass.”

Each letter weighed about thirty to forty pounds and was a foot tall and three inches thick. Strung together to form the company's name, they stretched about twenty-five feet across. Although they were tarnished, the brass letters were worth a small fortune.

Before relocating to Aisne Street in 1979, SBW's Vancouver headquarters were at 1267 Richards Street. The brass company sign was first installed above the entrance sometime between 1929 and 1979.

SBW's senior partners, Tim Harrington, Murray Saunders, and Clark Campbell, were just as stunned by the discovery as Jeff. But as they looked at the letters, recognition glimmered. Before moving to the Aisne Street location in 1979, SBW had been headquartered on Richards Street in downtown Vancouver. Tim had joined the company a few months before its move from Richards Street, and Murray had often visited his dad, Bob Saunders, at his office there in Bob's days as Vancouver branch manager and then company president. Tim and Murray both vaguely remembered the company sign on the Richards Street building façade. Were those the same letters?

Sure enough, an old photo of the Richards Street location showed the brass letters above the main entrance. SBW had built that office back in 1928, so it was possible the letters were over ninety years old—or even older, given that SBW had first come to Vancouver in 1921 when it expanded on the Regina, Saskatoon, and Lethbridge locations it had at the time.



[RIGHT] The brass letters being installed on the side of SBW's new head office at 9788-186th Street, Surrey, 2020.

[OPPOSITE] Celebrating its 125th anniversary in 2022, SBW—like the solid brass letters spelling out its name—has stood the test of time.

The letters were somewhat worn around the edges, just like SBW had sometimes felt over the years, but both sign and company were made to last. Brass is known for its superior quality, strength, durability, resilience, malleability, and conductivity—characteristics that SBW has demonstrated for close to 125 years. Quality workmanship is SBW's trademark. The company's culture and values have proven strong and durable over five generational transitions and innumerable challenges. Being malleable and adapting to new markets and new ways of doing things have been key to the company's longevity. And the way team members always work with each other, subcontractors, consultants, and clients to bring the best to every project—that's conductivity.

In August 2020, SBW team members old and new watched as the vintage brass letters, now polished and gleaming, were installed on the side of the building that would carry SBW into the future. "It was a great feeling to see those letters go up," says Jeff. "They're part of our history and now part of our future, all in one."

Brass is known for its superior quality, strength, durability, resilience, malleability, and conductivity—characteristics that SBW has demonstrated for close to 125 years. Quality workmanship is SBW's trademark.





“They’re part of our history and now part of our future, all in one.”

JEFF MUSIALEK



“The men who made
Smith Bros. & Wilson
a reality . . . took wood,
stone and steel to make
buildings of beauty and
usefulness.”

LETTER TO MABEL SMITH FOLLOWING THE
PUBLICATION OF *SOME BUILDING IN THE WEST*

1

Laying the Groundwork *1897 to 1909*

Setting the Cornerstone in Greenwood

IF SMITH BROS. & WILSON (SBW) had a cornerstone, it would be found in Greenwood, British Columbia, dated 1897.

Newly incorporated as a city that year, and growing in a hurry, Greenwood had arisen as a settlement only a few years earlier, when mineral resources were first discovered in the surrounding Kettle River Valley.

By 1895–96, reports of the rich lodes of ore in the area were a regular feature in northwest US newspapers. “Kettle River Country: The Vast New Land Where Enormous Ledges of Ore Lie Close to Broad Meadows and Fertile Farms,” read a typical headline, this one from the *Spokane Chronicle* in Washington State in 1896. “Sawmills Cannot Cut Lumber Fast Enough for the Rapid Growth.”

Those sawmills were feeding the building boom of hotels, business blocks, houses, restaurants, stables, churches, and schools springing up in Greenwood and nearby towns like Anaconda and Grand Forks, which served as hubs for the prospectors and entrepreneurs flocking to the area.

At least one such news item must have caught the eye of building contractor Duncan Smith in Coeur d’Alene, Idaho. In addition to his work on various construction projects around Coeur d’Alene, Duncan operated a sash-and-door factory and served as chairman of the town’s board of trustees, a role later given the title “mayor.”

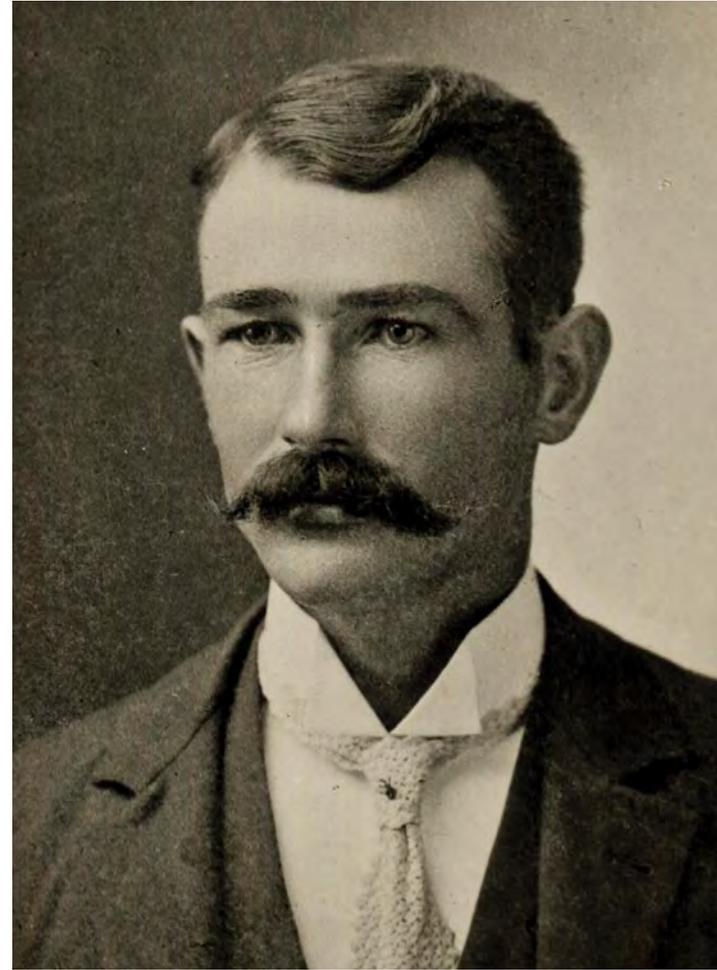
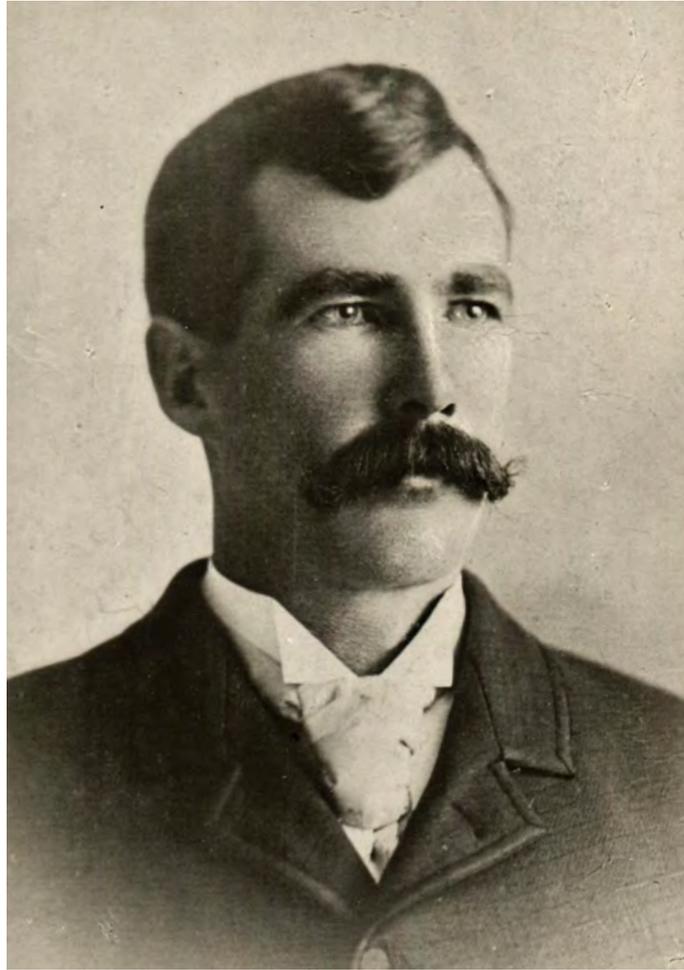
No stranger to following a good opportunity when he saw one, Duncan likely shared the reports about the Kettle Valley with his youngest brother, Donald—or D.D., as he was more commonly

known—when the latter arrived in Coeur d’Alene in April 1897. D.D. was coming from Duluth, Minnesota, where he and another brother, Alexander, had been logging and working in construction around Lake Superior.

When Duncan’s sash-and-door factory burned down a few months after D.D.’s arrival, the two brothers moved on to Spokane, where they began taking building contracts under the name of Smith Brothers. But perhaps the fire was the nudge they needed to explore the opportunities they were hearing about north of the border.

As recounted in SBW’s 1952 history book, *Some Building in the West*, “Late in the fall of 1897, D.D. went to a new mining camp in B.C. (later called Greenwood),” about seven miles from the international border—hence the area’s nickname, the Boundary district. With the Columbia and Western Railway not yet completed, D.D. had to travel the last eighty miles by stage along a wagon road. Despite the difficulties of getting there, once in Greenwood D.D. concluded that “the ore was of a very high grade and that prospects seemed excellent, so he sent for Duncan, who also had to come the last eighty miles by stage.”

This 1897 start in Greenwood marked the beginnings of the business that would evolve into SBW. The arrival of Alexander in 1898 rounded out the trio of brothers, who would, in the new century, build on this Greenwood cornerstone to create one of the largest general contracting companies in all of western Canada.



(Left to right) The Smith brothers, Duncan, Alexander, and D.D., ca. 1890s. The trio founded SBW in Greenwood, B.C., in 1897.



[OPPOSITE] Alexander Smith's lumber camp on the south shore of Lake Superior, Wisconsin, 1892. Alexander is standing in the front row, fifth from left. D.D. Smith, in dark hat, pants, and suspenders, is in the middle row, behind and to the left of the man in the white apron.

The Path to Greenwood

WHEN THE SMITH BROTHERS MOVED from the United States to British Columbia to establish their contracting business, they were, in a national sense, returning home.

Born in Canada near Owen Sound, Ontario—Duncan in 1861, Alexander in 1865, and D.D. in 1871—the three were from a large family headed by Scottish parents, Donald and Catherine (née McPhe). Siblings Catherine, Mary, Maggie, John, Peter, Flora, and Eliza made up the rest of the Smith clan, with Duncan, Alexander, and D.D. fitting in as third, fifth, and eighth eldest, respectively. In 1877, the family moved from Owen Sound to nearby Manitoulin Island, where Donald Sr. continued his farming occupation.

Four years later, in 1881, twenty-year-old Duncan and sixteen-year-old Alexander branched out on their own, going to Duluth to become carpenter's apprentices. Duncan became the foreman of a construction crew for the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) at Jackfish Bay on Lake Superior in 1882, with Alexander working under him.

When Duncan went west to Coeur d'Alene after completing the CPR contract, Alexander remained in Duluth, working at various lumber camps nearby. The rest of the Smith family moved from

Manitoulin to Duluth in 1890, and “in time, Alexander and a brother-in-law bought timber rights and built and operated their own lumber camps on the shores of Lake Superior, both in Minnesota and Wisconsin,” states *Some Building in the West*. “D.D. also worked in the camps. When the weather was unsuitable for logging, he and Alexander built houses, a school, and other buildings in Duluth.”

In 1895, Alexander married Mabel Phillips of Castile, New York, and the couple welcomed their first daughter, Marion, the subsequent year. (It was Mabel who would go on to write *Some Building in the West* in 1952.) Duncan, in Coeur d'Alene, was a married man by that time too, having wed Mary F. Buckley in 1886.

D.D. was not yet married, and perhaps it was this that made him the choice as the Smith brothers' emissary to the Kettle Valley in the fall of 1897 after he joined Duncan in the west. At any rate, when the window of opportunity opened to build something together in Greenwood, all three brothers were ready to go.

“The contractors, Messrs. Smith Bros. & Travis, deserve the greatest credit for the work they have done, as notwithstanding a scarcity of competent labor, they have completed the job in 60 days.”

ROSSLAND WEEKLY MINER,
NOVEMBER 16, 1899,
ABOUT A SEVENTY-ROOM
ADDITION TO THE HOTEL
ESCALET IN COLUMBIA, B.C.

Building in the Boundary

IN GREENWOOD, THE SMITH BROTHERS initially joined forces with another partner, Fred Forest Travis, to form Smith Bros. & Travis in 1899. Born in Wisconsin, Fred was active in Idaho and Washington State at the same time as Duncan Smith, so it seems likely that they knew each other prior to becoming partners in Greenwood.

Smith Bros. & Travis met with immediate success in Greenwood and the surrounding area, building numerous houses, hotels, churches, business blocks, and municipal buildings. As the main supply centre and seat of government for the whole of the Boundary district, Greenwood had grown to a population of 3,000 by 1899, up from only 400 the year before.

Despite the partnership's early momentum, Fred Travis resigned in the spring of 1900 to do business under his own name. Duncan, Alexander, and D.D. continued on under the company name of Smith Bros., and they didn't lose a step in advancing their firm's reputation for quality work in Greenwood and beyond. As Mabel wrote in *Some Building in the West*, “The ‘Glory Hole’ [copper mine] at Phoenix was operating at that

time, and they constructed many houses, business blocks, and mine buildings in the thriving community, operating at first from Greenwood.”

One such building was the handsome Graves-Williams business block completed in October 1900, which the local newspaper called “a fine building . . . that Phoenix may well be proud of.” The Morrison-Anderson Block followed, the work continuing despite the onset of snowy mountain weather. Then in June 1901 they were awarded the Bank Block, anticipated by the *Phoenix Pioneer* to be “the finest building yet put up in Phoenix.” Working on that project as a brick contractor was John Wilson, who would play an important role in the company's story in the years ahead.

With all of this activity going on in Phoenix, D.D. opened a Smith Bros. branch there in 1901. D.D. had both a new wife and baby by this time. He had returned to the Duluth area in 1899 to marry Dorothea Frances McGeoch, and their daughter, also named Dorothea, had been born in Anaconda, the neighbouring town to Greenwood, in February 1900.



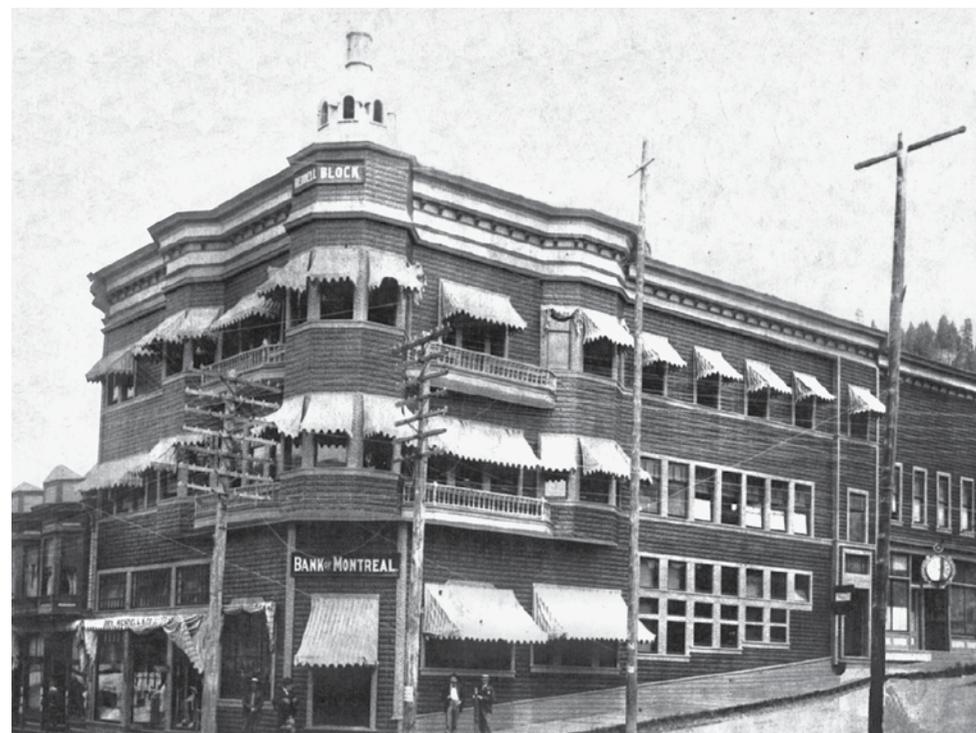
Greenwood

Baptist Church (1899) [p. 19]
Rendell Block (1899) [p. 19]
Fire hall (1900)
McMynn House (1902)
Courthouse (1903) [p. 21]



Phoenix

Graves-Williams Block (1900)
Morrison-Anderson Block (1900)
Bank Block (1901)
**Snowshoe Mine bunk and
boarding houses (1901)**



[LEFT] Greenwood, B.C., 1900. SBW constructed numerous business blocks, houses, and churches in the rapidly growing town—including the Greenwood Baptist Church (bottom centre) in 1899.

[RIGHT] Rendell Block, Greenwood, 1901. This building, which SBW completed in 1899, housed the Bank of Montreal on the first floor—the start of a long relationship between SBW and the bank. In addition to constructing numerous Bank of Montreal branches throughout western Canada, SBW used the bank’s services for decades. In a 1952 letter, M. Hunter, a Bank of Montreal manager in Vancouver, acknowledged the long, productive relationship between the two companies: “We are indeed proud of our many happy years of doing business together and value the friendly relations which have existed,” he wrote. “It is our earnest wish that we may be privileged to share in the further years of continued success which, we feel, lie before you.”



Grand Forks

Granby Company copper smelter (1902) [p. 20]
Schools, business blocks, and houses, including the smelter manager’s residence and homes for Duncan, Alexander, and D.D. Smith and their families (1901-3) [p. 20]

Revelstoke

School (1902)
Business blocks and houses (1902)



Also in 1901, as Mabel recounts in her book, “Alexander moved to Grand Forks, B.C., where the brothers had received a contract from the Granby Company for one of the first copper smelters to be built in Canada, on the north fork of the Kettle River. This was their first really large contract and this site soon became a hive of activity. After several months, the first molten copper was poured, the glow at night being visible a mile or more from the plant.”

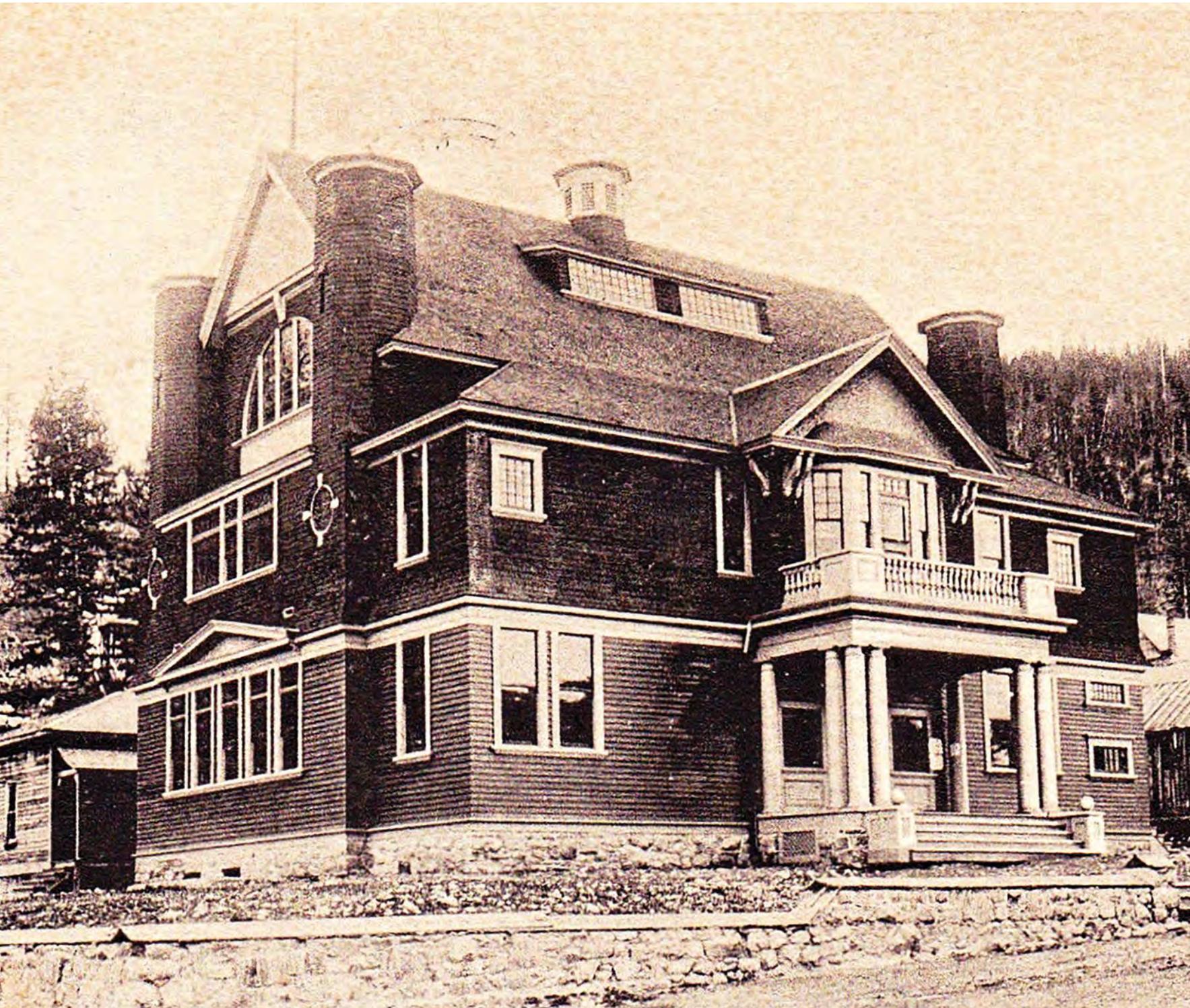
When the Granby copper smelter was complete, it was the largest non-ferrous smelter in the British Empire and the second largest in the world, and Smith Bros. had a highly visible monument to the company’s ability to execute large and complex construction projects.

This was also the conclusion of the glowing summary of Smith Bros.’ building record in the *Nelson Daily News* when the company won the contract to erect the provincial courthouse back in Greenwood in November 1902: “Smith Brothers are well known in the Boundary district, they having done a lot of building work in it during the past four or five years,” the article stated. After listing

their accomplishments in the form of the Phoenix business blocks, the large bunk and boarding houses erected at the Snowshoe Mine, the schools built in Grand Forks and Revelstoke, and the Granby smelter, the article concluded that “with such a record for substantial work there appears to be little doubt that they will also make a good job of the Greenwood courthouse.”

That expectation started to be fulfilled before the ink was even dry on the contract. Anticipating that Smith Bros. would be successful in its bid for the job—and in a move characteristic of the company’s continuing reputation for always being prepared and organized to meet project schedules—D.D. had men and teams ready for three weeks prior to signing the contract so the excavation work might begin before frost made the ground too difficult to break.

When construction of the courthouse was complete in the summer of 1903, the *Boundary Creek Times* called it one of the handsomest buildings in the district, one that “reflects credit on Messrs. Smith Bros., the contractors.”



[LEFT] Greenwood courthouse, 1903. SBW's early craftsmanship can be seen in the clear-grained coast cedar, turned wood pillars, high ceilings of red cedar, and hammerbeam roof trusses of Douglas fir. The courthouse, now home to Greenwood City Hall, is regarded as one of the city's most iconic Victorian-era structures. In honour of its historical connections with Greenwood, SBW will be renovating the heritage building in 2022.

[OPPOSITE LEFT] The Granby Company copper smelter, Grand Forks, 1902. This was SBW's first major contract and one of the largest non-ferrous smelters in the world at the time. In addition to building large extensions to the furnace buildings, SBW put up a sizable house for the converter plant, a mill building, accommodation for the ore bin and other machinery, and the mine manager's residence.

[OPPOSITE RIGHT] Homes of (left to right) D.D., Alexander, and Duncan Smith, Grand Forks, 1902. The brothers built these houses at the foot of Observation Mountain while engaged on the nearby Granby smelter project. SBW also built schools, business blocks, and other homes in the area.

“It was a core part of the plan, when the Smiths started, to go where there were opportunities to build things.”

CLARK CAMPBELL



Into the Crowsnest Pass as Smith Bros. & Wilson

[ABOVE LEFT] The Coleman Mercantile Company, the general store that the Smith brothers bought when they established SBW in Coleman in 1904. While putting up 200 buildings for the International Coal and Coke Company and other clients in the Alberta town, Duncan and Alexander Smith used the second floor of this building as SBW's office and their living quarters.

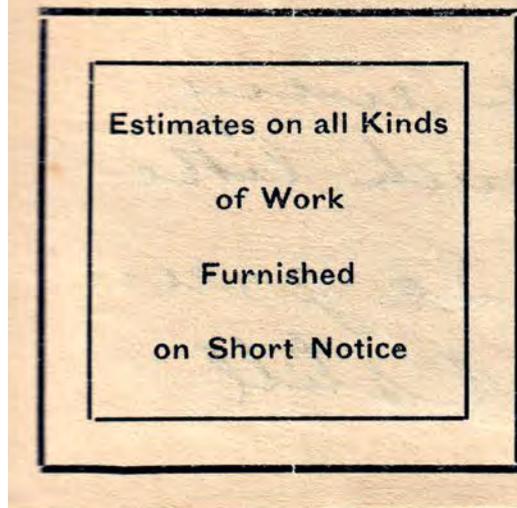
[ABOVE RIGHT] John Wilson, the brick contractor and stonemason who worked with the Smith brothers on multiple projects in the early 1900s and became their business partner in 1904. Although John left SBW in the mid-1920s, his surname remained part of SBW's name.

SMITH BROS. MOVED ON FROM the Kettle Valley not long after completing the Greenwood courthouse: D.D. moved to Fernie, B.C., in 1904 to oversee building contracts for the Trites-Woods Company. Later that year, Duncan and Alexander moved to Coleman, Alberta, just over the provincial border in the Crowsnest Pass (then styled as Crow's Nest Pass) area, where they had been awarded contracts by the International Coal and Coke Company for the mine manager's home, the tippie, and other mine buildings. Bert Younghusband, who had joined Smith Bros. in 1899 in Greenwood and had worked on the Granby smelter, transferred to Coleman as superintendent.

Coleman was a brand-new company town, surveyed in the fall of 1903 and incorporated as a village in 1904, and Smith Bros. erected a hotel, a school, churches, houses, and other

buildings there in 1903–5. “For a few months, until the hotel was completed, they had no shelter but a shack, which also served as an office where they drew plans and made out specifications for many of the buildings in Coleman [and nearby] Blairmore and Frank,” Mabel wrote in *Some Building in the West*. The Smith brothers also built their own sash-and-door and finishing plant in Coleman, and bought a small general store called the Coleman Mercantile Company, where they put a manager in charge.

In 1904, John Wilson, the brick contractor who had worked on several projects with the Smiths in the previous few years, including the Bank Block in Phoenix and the school in Revelstoke, became a partner in the firm. Although John never was as prominent as the Smiths in the leadership of the company, he would be linked with them from that point on in the business's new name: Smith Bros. & Wilson.



Smith Bros. & Wilson

Contractors and Builders.

Frank Alta July 3 1905

Expanding to the Prairies

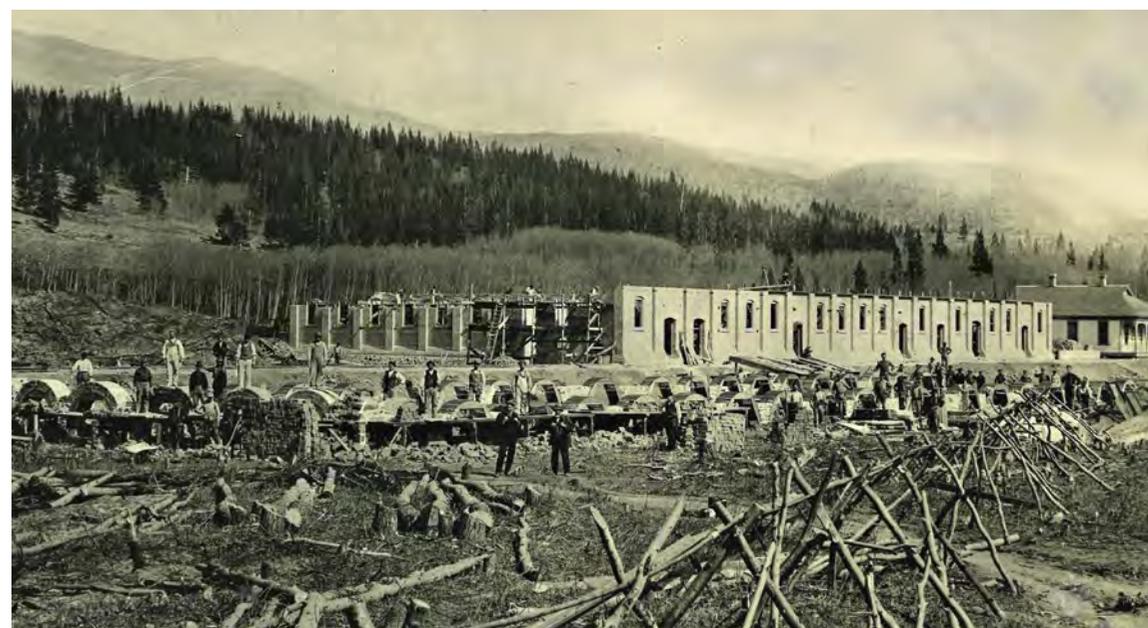
WHILE WORKING ON COLEMAN PROJECTS through 1904 and into 1905, SBW also secured contracts in nearby Frank, which was rebuilding following the horrific rock slide that had destroyed many buildings in the town and killed numerous residents in April 1903.

The importance of Frank to SBW increased when the company secured the contract to build Canada's first zinc smelter there for Canadian Metal Co., a syndicate of French mining interests. It was the largest such smelter in North America at that time, and Governor General Earl Grey participated in the opening ceremonies.

As the project progressed, Alexander moved to Frank with his family, which now included three more daughters: Isabel (1898), who like his eldest daughter, Marion, was born in Duluth, and Louise (1901) and Doris (1903), both born in Grand Forks.

While Alexander oversaw the Frank project and D.D. finished up in Fernie, the Smith brothers once again adapted to changing economic conditions by looking to new markets that offered longer-term opportunities for SBW. In 1905, Duncan opened not just one but two new SBW branches.

The first was in Lethbridge, Alberta, about eighty miles east of Frank. Business was lively in the growing prairie city from the moment SBW secured a footing there, and Alexander moved to Lethbridge from Frank in 1906 to take charge of the busy branch. Assisting him was bookkeeper Charles Keating, hired in 1905. Bert Younghusband also transferred to Lethbridge as superintendent.



[TOP] SBW letterhead from July 3, 1905, when the company was active in Frank, Alberta.

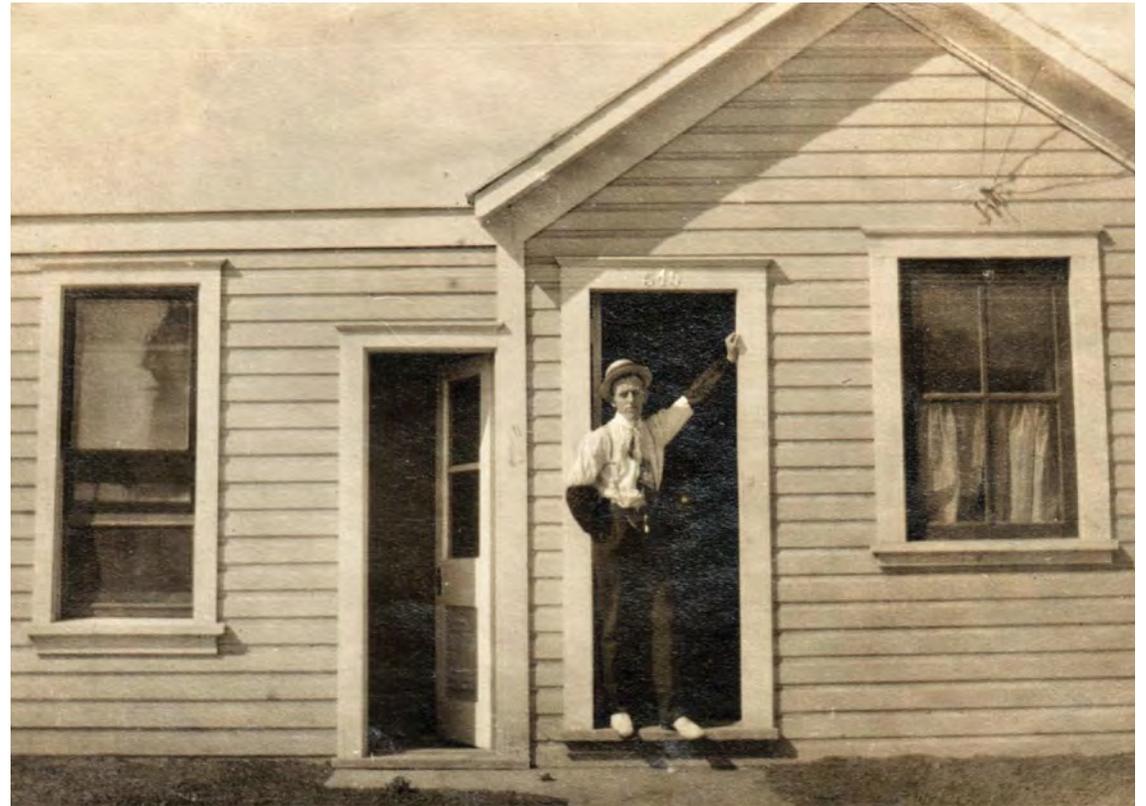
[BOTTOM] The Canadian Metal Co. zinc smelter under construction in Frank, 1905. SBW had numerous other contracts in Frank as part of the rebuilding following the 1903 rock slide that destroyed a large portion of the town. As Mabel Smith wrote in *Some Building in the West*, "In spite of geologists' warnings that another slide might occur at any time, the building of the smelter and the rebuilding of Frank went on. Frequently masses of rock would crash down the bare face of Turtle Mountain less than a mile away."

Two Homes Built by S.B.W. for
MABELA. SMITH.



SHOP AND OFFICE.

RESIDENCE OF ALEXANDER SMITH.



Fernie

Trites-Woods Company
buildings (1904)

Coleman

**International Coal and Coke
Company tippie, mine manager's
residence, and other mine
buildings (1903-5)**

Hotel, school, churches, and houses
(1903-5)

Frank

Canadian Metal Co. zinc
smelter and other buildings
(1903-5) [p. 23]



Lethbridge

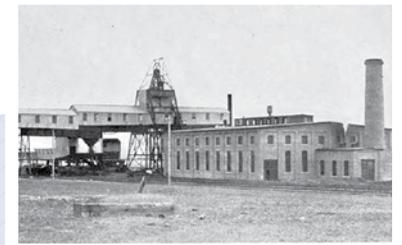
Galt Hospital nurses' home (1905)
Bentley Block (1906)
Hudson's Bay store (1906)
First public kindergarten in Alberta (1906)
Hotel Dallas addition (1907)
Lethbridge Brewery (1907) [p. 25]



[LEFT] Lethbridge Brewery, ca. 1907-13. SBW built both the original brewery in 1907 and an addition in 1914.

[OPPOSITE LEFT] Lethbridge, Alberta, where SBW opened a branch in 1905. An early keeper of company scrapbooks indicated various buildings of interest, including SBW's office and shop toward the bottom left, and the next-door residence of Alexander Smith, who moved to Lethbridge in 1906 to manage the branch.

[OPPOSITE RIGHT] SBW's Lethbridge office at 540 8th Street South, 1906.



CPR central station (1907)
Galbraith House (mayor's home) and numerous other houses (1907-8)

Central School (1908)

St. Augustine's Church and parish hall (1908)

YMCA (1909)

Sherlock Block, first three storeys (1909)

Lethbridge courthouse (1909)

Northwest Jobbing Co. warehouse (1909)

Galt Coal Mine No. 6 shaft (1909)

Western Canada Agency warehouse (1909)

Lethbridge fire hall (1909)

Regina City Hall, 1908. SBW landed the contract to build the Romanesque Revival “gingerbread” city hall not long after opening its Regina branch in 1905. In a 1953 letter to the company, long-time SBW business partner C.M. Willoughby wrote, “Having been born in Regina, I can well remember the stir and excitement that was created when the city hall was being built. As we know, it is a landmark in Regina and a credit to the firm that built it.”



The second branch Duncan opened in 1905 was in Regina, Saskatchewan. D.D. soon moved his family—which now included two more daughters, Florence (born 1902) and Evelyn (1904)—to Regina so he could manage the new location. John Wilson also moved to Regina.

The start-up of this branch coincided with one of the highest-profile contracts the company had been awarded to this point: the new Regina City Hall, a contract worth \$108,000 at its signing and more than \$150,000 by the building’s completion in 1908. When it was finished, the Romanesque Revival city hall received rave reviews in newspapers across Canada, with the *Montreal Gazette* calling it the “finest civic building west of Toronto.” Celebrations of the building’s opening lasted for a full week.

In both Regina and Lethbridge, SBW’s frequent newspaper ads calling for applications from “first-class” carpenters and bricklayers—“none others need apply”—indicate not only the company’s busy slate of projects, but also its early focus on quality craftsmanship and the value of attracting and keeping talented people, business hallmarks that have persisted to this day.

George Johns was one of those who answered the call for carpenters. Arriving in Canada from England in 1904, he joined SBW in 1907 and would go on to prominent roles at the company in the years ahead. Another future leader who came aboard in this period was Harold Johnson, also an Englishman, who’d trained with a firm of architects before coming to Canada in 1905. He joined SBW as a general utility man and estimator in Regina in March 1907, then transferred to the Lethbridge branch the following year.

Duncan also moved back to Lethbridge in 1908, where business was still vigorous compared to the fading scene in Regina. He evidently remained keen on Saskatchewan, though. In March 1908,

the *Lethbridge Herald* reported that he was spending the summer in Saskatoon “to see to the opening of a new branch and [to go] after everything in the way of contracts that may be moving in Saskatoon.”

Duncan’s persistence started to pay off when SBW was successful in its \$26,700 bid to build Saskatoon’s Land Titles Building, which was to handle the growing number of prairie settlers filing homestead claims in the young province. John Wilson came over from Regina to superintend the project. Later in 1909, SBW also secured the contract to build forty station houses along the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway’s main line between Winnipeg and Edmonton, each house worth \$5,000 to \$10,000.

Duncan was also no doubt readying the branch to respond to an upcoming tender for the initial buildings of the new University of Saskatchewan campus, to be situated on the banks of the South Saskatchewan River. Although it was the kind of project that every general contractor in town would be eager to have, Duncan’s confidence was high that SBW had an excellent chance of winning the day.

In its first dozen years, SBW was already demonstrating a number of the traits that would prove so essential to its continued success and longevity. Its record of repeat business in small communities was a testament to the integrity, reliability, and quality work of its talented team. The willingness of key employees to repeatedly move with SBW as it entered new markets indicates the kind of loyalty a company can only earn by treating people well and rewarding their efforts.

SBW’s ability to handle a diverse range of projects also stood out—from houses, hotels, and business blocks to enormous industrial facilities and some of the finest public buildings being erected at the time. The company had nimbly moved from its initial work in frontier mining towns to gain solid footholds in some of western Canada’s fastest-growing urban centres, where governments and businesses were spending huge sums of money on ambitious building projects on a scale not seen before in this part of the country. With its highly praised track record, SBW was perfectly positioned to take on not only the University of Saskatchewan, but also an increasing number of landmark buildings in the decades ahead.



Regina

Wascana Hotel (1907)
Darke Block (1907)
Masonic temple (1907)
Regina City Hall (1908) [p. 26]



Saskatoon

Land Titles Building (1909)

Elsewhere

40 Grand Trunk Pacific Railway
station houses between Winnipeg
and Edmonton (1909)



“The buildings show from the beginning that they were built to last.”

LETTER TO MABEL SMITH FOLLOWING THE PUBLICATION OF *SOME BUILDING IN THE WEST*

A large, stylized number '2' is centered on the page. The number is rendered in a dark blue color with a lighter blue shadow effect, giving it a three-dimensional appearance. The top curve of the '2' is slightly open, and the bottom horizontal bar is also open on the right side. A smaller, solid red number '2' is positioned inside the upper curve of the larger blue '2'.

2

Building on the Foundation
1910 to 1929

A Prewar Growth Spurt

IN THE SUMMER OF 1910, carpenter Sam Wright showed up for his first day on the construction site for the University of Saskatchewan's Agricultural College in Saskatoon. Having apprenticed as a carpenter in England, Sam was still new to Canada when SBW hired him to work on the building, the first of five the company was contracted to put up for the new campus.

Years later, in 1949, Sam told a reporter from *Western Construction and Building* that his first day on the job initially looked like a bust when the foreman who'd hired him failed to show up to put him to work. Sitting disconsolately beside his tools, Sam "attracted the attention of a dignified gentleman who paused to ask Sam why he was not working. Sam said his foreman was nowhere to be found, and the stranger eyed him with greater interest. So Sam was a carpenter, was he? Sam looked like he could handle men; how would he like to try out as foreman of a construction gang?"

The "dignified gentleman" was none other than Duncan Smith, and Sam readily agreed to his new boss's offer. Little did the two men know then that the ties between SBW and the Wright family would be bound for the next century and beyond.



But back to the spring of 1910: With its successful bid on the University of Saskatchewan contract, SBW truly arrived in Saskatoon. Over the next eighteen months, the company's crew of several hundred men erected the first five buildings to grace the new campus, putting SBW on the map as a major educational building contractor in western Canada.



Saskatoon

Ross Block (1911)
University of Saskatchewan, Agricultural College (1912) [p. 31]
University of Saskatchewan, Stock Pavilion (1912)
University of Saskatchewan, Power House (1912)
University of Saskatchewan, Engineering Building (1912)
University of Saskatchewan, Saskatchewan Hall (1912)



University of Saskatchewan, Dean of Agriculture residence (1912)
University of Saskatchewan, Emmanuel College (1912)
Third Avenue Methodist Church (1912) [p. 32]
University of Saskatchewan, President's residence (1913)
Connaught Block (1913)
Glengarry Block (1913)



[OPPOSITE & LEFT] Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier laying the cornerstone of the University of Saskatchewan's first building, the Agricultural College, on July 29, 1910, and the completed building, 1912. SBW built the college and several more of the original buildings for the new university in 1910-12.

The moment the university building project received the go-ahead from the province in the spring of 1910, Duncan Smith had a team of twenty-five men ready to begin excavation work. Over the course of that year and through 1911, SBW's crew of several hundred workers finished the excavation work and erected the exterior of the buildings using limestone from a large nearby deposit of glacial boulders. With power shovels still a thing of the future, the giant rocks had to be removed with pick, shovel, and dynamite.

Interior work followed during the winter of 1911-12. When the campus opened to students in the fall of 1912, the fine limestone structures SBW had constructed stood proud and strong—built for a century and then some.



Lethbridge

Henderson Lake Park grandstand (1911)
 Galt Gardens bandstand (1911)
 Fleetwood School (1911)
 Manual Training School (1912) [p. 35]
Wesley Methodist Church (1914)



Regina

YWCA (1912) [p. 37]
 Credit Foncier building (1912)
First Baptist Church (1912)
 Assiniboia Club (1912)
 RCMP "A" Block barracks (1913) [p. 36]



“He lives to build’
is the motto
Saskatoon has
constructed for
Duncan Smith.”

*SASKATOON DAILY
STAR, MAY 14, 1918*

Duncan made his presence in Saskatoon permanent while work on the University of Saskatchewan progressed, moving his family to the city and devoting his time to growing SBW’s newest branch. The next few years brought a flurry of activity as SBW constructed several more buildings at the university as well as the Third Avenue Methodist Church and the Ross, Connaught, and Glengarry Blocks. Bert Younghusband moved to Saskatoon to be superintendent of the busy branch.

Meanwhile, under Alexander Smith’s management, the Lethbridge branch also had a steady slate of business in these years, building the grandstand at Henderson Lake Park, the bandstand in Galt Gardens, Fleetwood School, the Manual Training School, and Wesley Methodist Church.

And in Regina, managed by D.D. Smith, SBW’s achievements included the YWCA, the Credit Foncier building, First Baptist Church, the Assiniboia Club, “A” Block barracks for the RCMP, and Holy Rosary Cathedral.



[RIGHT TOP] Alexander Smith (right) and an architect (left) on the construction site for the Wesley Methodist Church, Lethbridge, ca. 1913-14. Alexander managed the Lethbridge branch from 1906 to 1924, when SBW closed this location and Alexander moved to Vancouver.



[RIGHT BOTTOM] D.D. Smith, ca. 1920. D.D. managed SBW's Regina branch for forty years.

[OPPOSITE LEFT] Duncan Smith, ca. 1918. In addition to heading up SBW's Saskatoon branch for its first dozen years, Duncan was the leading force in SBW's expansion to new market locations in western Canada.

[OPPOSITE RIGHT] Third Avenue Methodist Church, Saskatoon, 1912. In an interview he gave to *Western Construction and Building* in 1949, SBW's president Sam Wright said the church was the most perfect building in Saskatoon in terms of both architecture and construction.

“ [Alexander Smith] has not only been the architect and builder of his own fortune, but has also been a most potent element in adding to the improvement and adornment of [Lethbridge]. ”

ALBERTA, PAST AND PRESENT, 1924

“ [D.D. Smith is] one of the best-known contractors in [Regina]. ”

LEADER-POST, FEBRUARY 25, 1919



Y.M.C.A. BUILDING

Smith Bros. & Wilson

BUILDERS AND CONTRACTORS

Lethbridge - Regina - Saskatoon

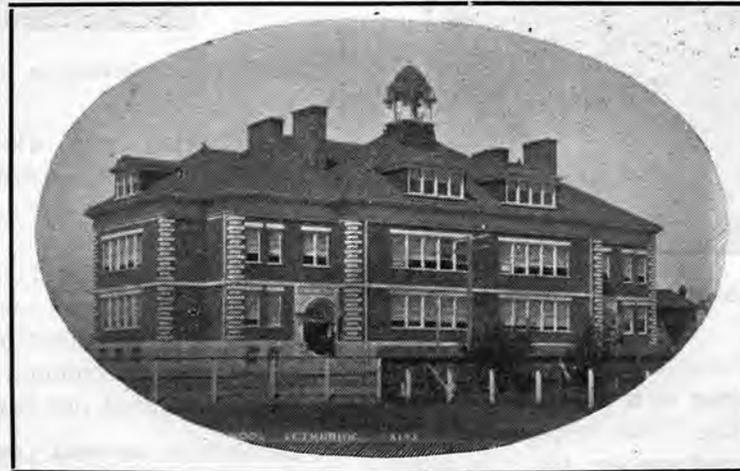
Estimates Given on all Kinds of Work
Fireproof Buildings our Specialty



COURT HOUSE

SASKATOON

We have just completed the BANK OF HAMILTON, and have at present under construction the new UNIVERSITY BUILDING, amounting to $\frac{3}{4}$ of a million dollars. The Land Titles Building is another of our jobs.

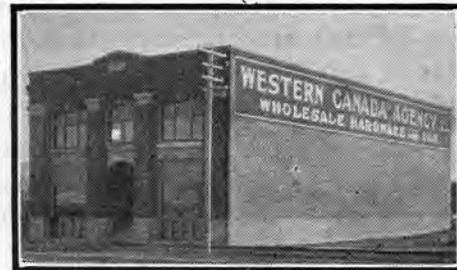


CENTRAL SCHOOL

LETHBRIDGE

Besides the Illustrations shown, a few other buildings erected by us in Lethbridge during the past 2 or 3 years are :

THE HUDSON BAY STORES, NORTH WEST
JOBGING CO.'S WAREHOUSE. LETHBRIDGE
BREWERY. FIRE HALL. NORTH W. SCHOOL
CITY POWER HOUSE. FLEETWOOD SCHOOL

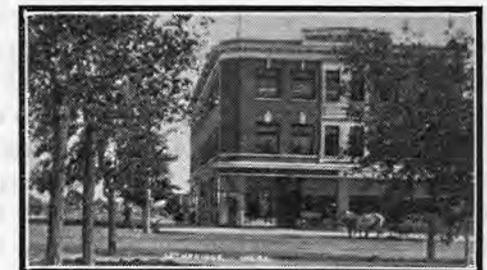


Western Canada Agency Warehouse

REGINA

A few Buildings erected by us of recent years are the

DARKE BLOCK, a Five storey reinforced Building throughout. MASONIC TEMPLE. CITY HALL, WASCANA HOTEL, and several large warehouses



Sherlock Bldg. Strictly Fireproof Throughout

An SBW ad from the *Lethbridge Herald*, 1911. In its ads during this period, the company proudly displayed its portfolio of completed projects in the growing prairie centres of Lethbridge, Regina, and Saskatoon.



Manual Training School, Lethbridge, 1912. The Classical Revival building is now on the Alberta Register of Historic Places and is home to the Bowman Arts Centre.



P. T. W. M. P.



[RIGHT] The badly damaged YWCA after the cyclone that ravaged much of Regina on June 30, 1912. SBW had completed the building only a few months before the storm. In a letter of thanks published in the *Leader-Post* two weeks after the cyclone, the YWCA board wrote that they had been “saved a great deal of worry at this time through the kindly thoughtfulness of the architect, Mr. Pristin, and the contractors, Smith Bros. & Wilson, who took charge of the removing of the debris and the arranging for repairs the very day after the storm.”

[OPPOSITE] The RCMP “A” Block barracks, Regina, 1913. The building is now a Classified Federal Heritage Building, noted for its excellent craftsmanship in the Tudor Gothic style.



SBW’s Regina branch was also actively involved in the rebuilding that followed “the Cyclone,” which ravaged much of Regina on June 30, 1912. One of the most destructive tornadoes in Canadian history, the storm caused millions of dollars in property damage, killed twenty-eight people, and injured hundreds more. Both the YWCA and the First Baptist Church were among the buildings most severely damaged. Demonstrating SBW’s character and care for clients, company crews were hard at work the day after the storm to begin repairs on these and other buildings.

Holy Rosary Cathedral, Regina.
SBW started constructing the
Romanesque Revival-style
church in 1912 and completed it
in 1917.



Becoming Smith Bros. & Wilson Ltd.

WHEN NEWS OF THE REGINA CYCLONE reached Duncan and Alexander in Saskatoon and Lethbridge, their first thoughts must have gone to the well-being of their brother D.D., his family, and the Regina branch's many other employees and clients. But soon they must also have thought about the impact of the storm on their business. Only three months earlier, on April 3, 1912, Regina had become the head office of the newly incorporated Smith Bros. & Wilson Ltd.

The decision to incorporate had come at a time when each of SBW's three branches showed strong prospects for growth. As company founders and branch managers, Duncan, D.D., and Alexander Smith held the majority of the shares, with 250 apiece. The original articles of association were also signed by three other members of the company: John Wilson and Bert Younghusband, with fifty shares each, and Charles Keating, with fifteen shares. Duncan and D.D. were appointed president and vice president, respectively (the three brothers would exchange these roles periodically in the coming years), Charles Keating became secretary-treasurer, and the head office was recorded as 1723 Rose Street, Regina.

Fortunately, the June 30 tornado had no major impact on the company's people or its new headquarters, and it was soon business as usual.

When Bert Younghusband left SBW in November 1912, his fifty shares were divided between the three Smith brothers. This increase in their majority stake may have rankled John Wilson, whose dissatisfaction with the disparity between his and the Smiths' stake in the company is hinted at in the minutes of the January 1913 directors' meeting. When John proposed to take an equal number of shares as held by one of the Smith brothers, the other directors rejected the idea, saying that it was beyond their power to approve. John remained a minority shareholder until the mid-1920s, when he withdrew from the company.



[LEFT] Vibert (Bert) Younghusband, one of SBW's six original shareholders and a key hand at the company from 1899 to 1912. Bert was superintendent of the Saskatoon branch when he left SBW to pursue opportunities elsewhere. He later became vice president and a director of the Foundation Company of Canada in Montreal.

[ABOVE] D.D. Smith's certificate for 250 shares in Smith Bros. & Wilson Limited. The formal certificates were dated and issued a year after SBW's incorporation on April 3, 1912.

“Smith Bros. & Wilson themselves undertook the important task of excavating for and constructing the foundations. The work was pushed with all the speed that is characteristic of western energy. . . . It was pushed energetically, but it was done with all due care.”

LEADER-POST, AUGUST 31, 1918, ABOUT SBW'S WORK ON THE T. EATON WAREHOUSE IN REGINA

A Quiet World War

THE WORLD WAR ONE YEARS were relatively quiet for SBW, with little recorded about the war in company minute books, and only a few key projects completed in each branch.

Two of these were the construction of a power plant and a filtration plant on the flats of the Oldman River below Lethbridge. The filtration plant was “one of the most modern in operation on the continent at that time,” Mabel Smith wrote in *Some Building in the West*. SBW also constructed the head gates on the Saint Mary River for the Alberta Railway and Irrigation Company, later taken over by the CPR.

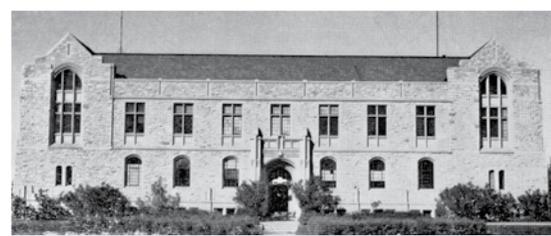
During the business slowdown in Saskatoon, Duncan took a one-year, 16,000-mile motoring trip through western Canada and the United States, along with his wife and a niece. Tales of their journey appeared in local newspapers following their return in August 1916.

After the war ended in 1918, the construction business, and the economy more generally, was slow to revive in

each of SBW's three prairie branches. Contributing to the sluggishness was the global flu pandemic that arrived in Canada in 1918 along with returning soldiers. The so-called Spanish Flu did not spare Saskatchewan or Alberta, killing about 10,000 people in the two provinces combined by the time it ended in 1919. To curb the spread of the disease, some municipalities required people to wear masks in public; closed schools, public gathering places, and non-essential businesses; and even quarantined entire communities.

Throughout this challenging period and into the early 1920s, the construction industry pressed on where it could, as did SBW. Overall, though, business was fairly quiet compared to the prewar years. But as in the past, SBW's leaders weren't content to be stuck in the doldrums for long. While waiting for economic conditions to improve in the prairies, they looked for a more energetic market elsewhere. This time, their instincts led them back to the province where the company had started.

[OPPOSITE] University of Saskatchewan, Qu'Appelle Hall (1916).

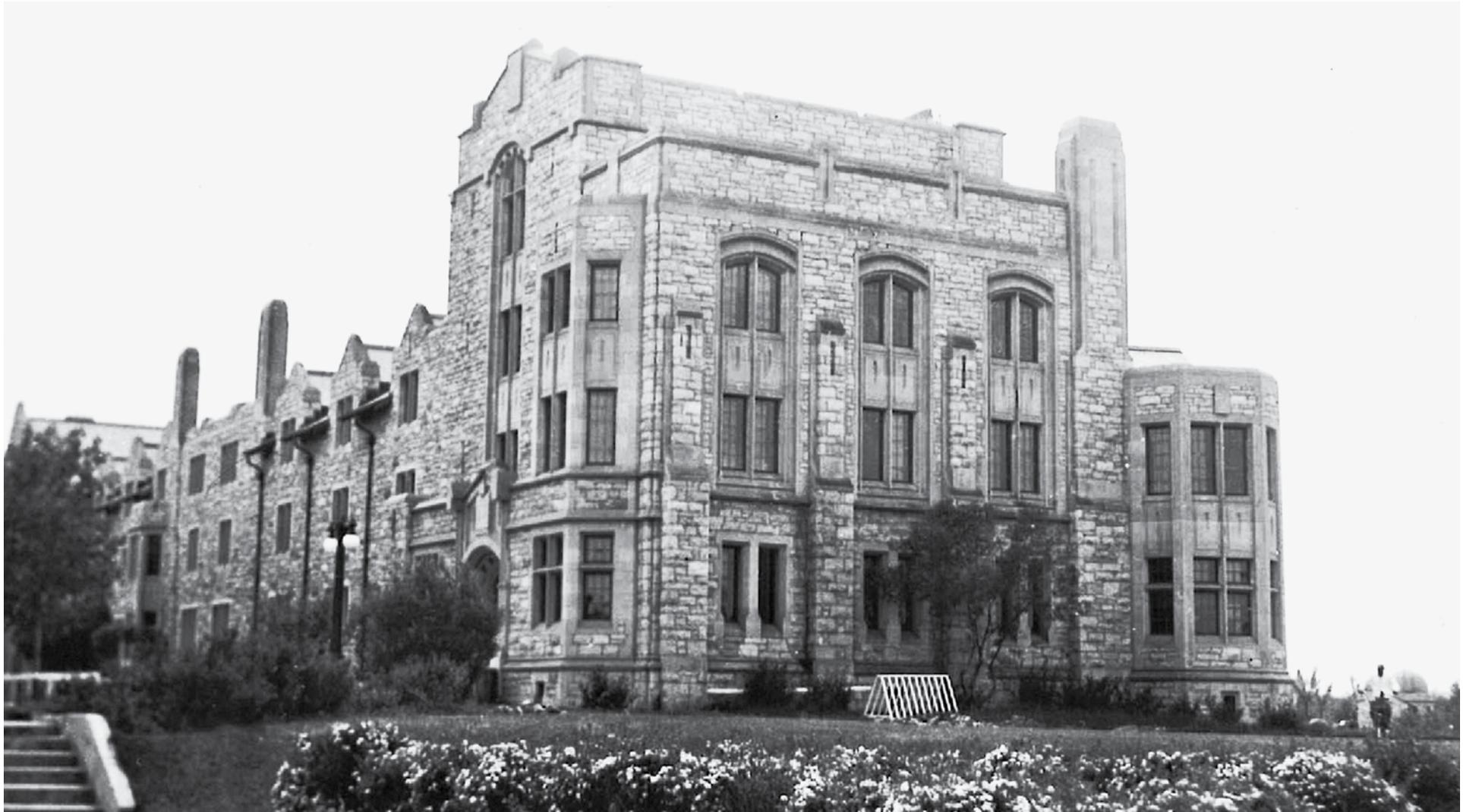


Saskatoon

- University of Saskatchewan, Qu'Appelle Hall (1916) [p. 41]
- University of Saskatchewan, Physics Building (1920)
- University of Saskatchewan, Engineering Building addition (1920)
- University of Saskatchewan, St. Andrew's College (1922)

Regina

- Holy Rosary Cathedral (1917) [p. 38]
- T. Eaton distribution warehouse (1919)



Elsewhere in Saskatchewan

Lignite and briquette plant, Bienfait (1921)



Elsewhere in Alberta

Agricultural colleges, Youngstown, Raymond, and Gleichen (1919)

Lethbridge

Oldman River power and filtration plants (1918)

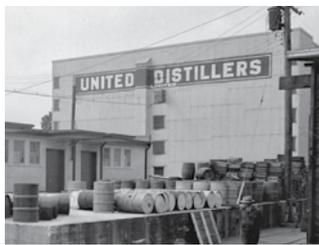
Duncan Smith holding his daughter, Marjorie, who was born in 1923. In a letter she wrote to SBW in 1997, Marjorie fondly remembered her childhood impressions of her father's business: "I always loved to see the buildings. When I was small, my father's idea of fun on a holiday was to take mother and me to explore the unfinished buildings."

Coming Full Circle: The Return to British Columbia

"BIG FIRM TO LOCATE HERE," read the headline of an article in the *Vancouver Daily World* on June 28, 1921, announcing SBW's intention to return to British Columbia. "Pleased with Outlook: President Looks to See Vancouver the Centre of Great Building Activity."

The president of SBW at the time was D.D. Smith, who reported that his brother Duncan would be arriving in Vancouver in due course to oversee the opening of SBW's newest branch. "Vancouver is ideally situated for handling work here, in Seattle and in Prince Rupert," D.D. said. "I am satisfied that there will be very great activity in building work now that the price of labour and materials has gone down."

Putting Sam Wright in charge of the Saskatoon branch—the first non-Smith branch manager in SBW's history—Duncan was



Vancouver & Lower Mainland

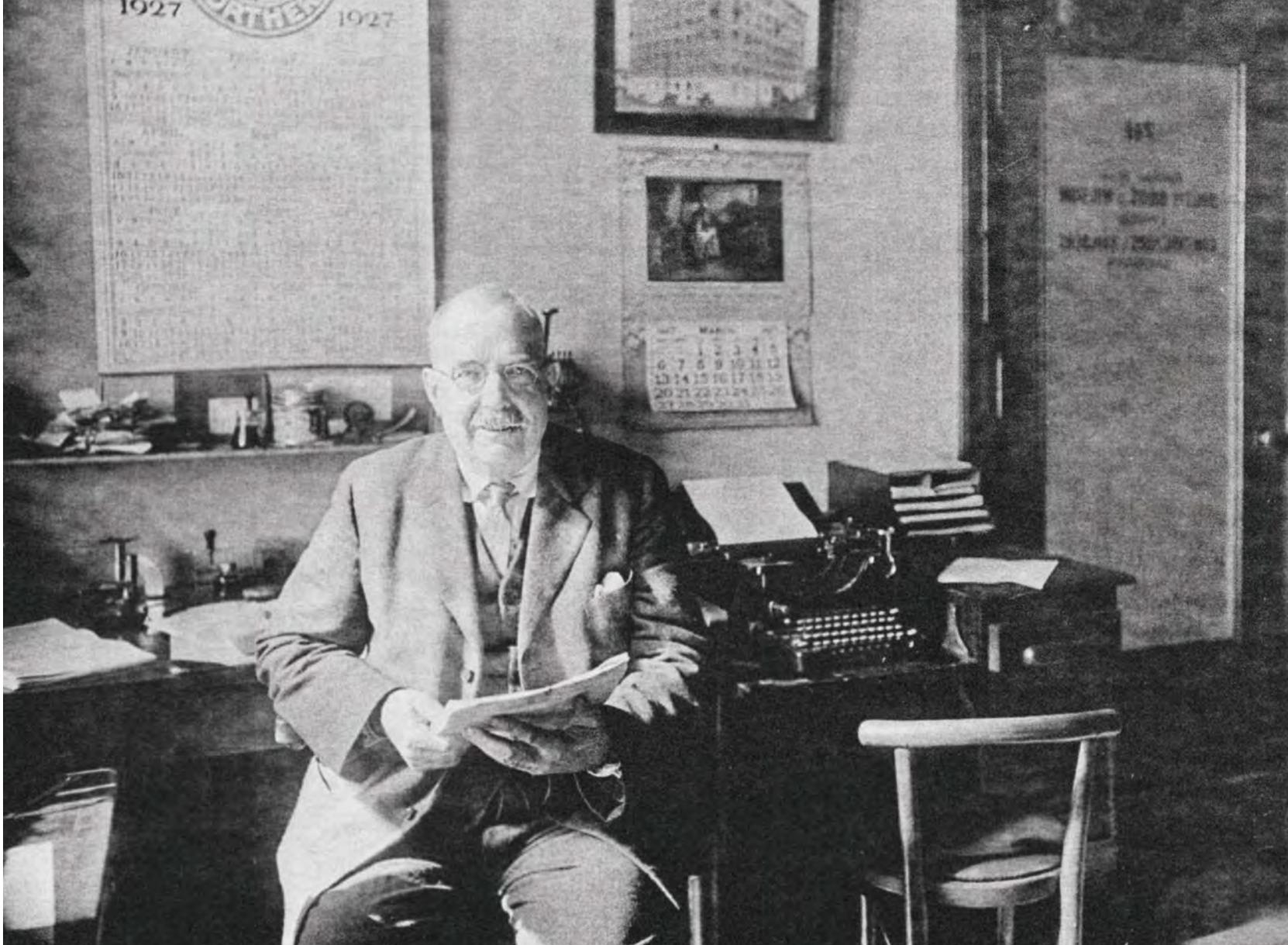
Devonshire Apartments (1924) [p. 44]
University of British Columbia power plant (1924)
Westminster Brewing Company plant (1925)
United Distillers plant (1925)
Winter Garden dance hall (1925)
William Dick Building (1926) [p. 46]



en route to Vancouver by July. He made another road trip of it in a specially built "house-keeping trailer," according to a notice in the *Saskatoon Daily Star*, setting up camp each night along the way. Riding along with Duncan was his second wife, Lora, whom he'd married in April 1921 after the death of his first wife, Mary, the previous year.

The new Vancouver branch got off to a good start, winning its first contract in October 1921 to build the nurses' home at the Tranquille Sanatorium, the provincial tuberculosis hospital on the northeast side of Kamloops Lake. Other than that, however, it took almost two more years for SBW to land the big catch it was looking for on the coast—and what a catch it was.

Grace Hospital (1927) [p. 47]
Kitsilano Junior High School (1927) [p. 47]
Laura Secord School upgrade (1928) [p. 47]
SBW office and warehouse building (1929) [p. 45]
Bank of Montreal, three branches (1929-30)



Duncan Smith in SBW's office in the Credit Foncier Building on West Hastings Street, Vancouver, 1927.



Victoria

Panama Pacific grain elevator, Ogden Point (1928)



Elsewhere in B.C.

Tranquille Sanatorium nurses' home, Kamloops (1921)

Vancouver's Devonshire Apartments under construction, ca. 1923-24 (left), and completed, 1924 (right). The apartment hotel was the single-biggest building job in Vancouver since before World War One. The Devonshire was demolished in 1981—the implosion took only six-and-a-half seconds.



When news broke in September 1923 that SBW had won the contract to construct the Devonshire Apartments, it was billed as the largest single building job in Vancouver since the prewar years. At a cost of more than \$550,000, the ultra-modern apartment hotel at the northeast corner of Georgia and Hornby Streets symbolized the beginning of a new era of prosperity for Vancouver, and for SBW.

As always, Duncan had a crew ready to begin work the moment the building plans were approved. By mid-October, the *Vancouver Daily World* reported that SBW had already awarded subcontracts for excavation, structural steel, cement supply, cut stone, brick supply, plumbing, electric wiring, terra cotta supply, and plastering, and that “speedy progress has been made on the excavation for the massive foundations of the big seven-storey structure.” As Duncan had hoped, SBW and its subtrades were able to take advantage of weeks of dry weather before Vancouver’s typical wet winter conditions set in. In July 1924, only ten months after SBW was awarded the work, the Devonshire opened to rave reviews about the beauty and quality of its construction and finishings.

With SBW’s profile on the rise in a now-booming Vancouver, company directors decided to devote more attention to the west coast branch, closing what had become a fairly dormant Lethbridge location in 1924 and moving Alexander Smith and Harold Johnson from there to Vancouver. The increased capacity this brought to SBW’s B.C. branch, along with a sharp pencil in contract bids and a twenty-five-plus-year track record for quality and integrity, helped the company win and execute a diverse range of projects in the Lower Mainland in the next few years.

In 1928, in a show of optimism about its prospects in Vancouver, SBW decided to construct a \$15,000 warehouse building at 1267 Richards Street to serve as its new city headquarters. Designed by architects Gardiner & Mercer, the modern reinforced-concrete building was ready for SBW to move in by March 1929. It would be the company’s Vancouver home for fifty years.



SBW's new office and warehouse building, 1267 Richards Street, Vancouver, 1929. Located on the west side of the block between Davie and Drake, this was the company's Vancouver headquarters for fifty years. A newspaper article in the 1950s quoted Walter Douglas, the Vancouver branch manager at the time, as saying, "We're a conservative company" to explain the "lack of show in [SBW's] modest home."

“Smith Brothers & Wilson Ltd. is universally known as a firm of contractors which has accomplished much in making Vancouver what she is growing to be—a veritable city of stability.”

VANCOUVER SUN,
SEPTEMBER 23, 1926,
FOLLOWING THE
CONSTRUCTION OF
THE WILLIAM DICK
BUILDING





“The company from the very beginning has had an objective of excellence in the work they do. That idea of excellence continues on.”

MICHAEL SHIELDS,
GRANDSON OF ALEXANDER
SMITH AND FORMER
DIRECTOR OF SBW



After being established in 1921, SBW’s Vancouver branch was slow to get off the ground in a sluggish post-war economy, but a mid-decade building boom changed both the company’s and the city’s fortunes. Some of SBW’s marquee projects during this period were (clockwise from opposite) the William Dick Building (1926, now on the Canadian Register of Historic Places), Grace Hospital (1927), Laura Secord School (1928 upgrade seen here in progress), and Kitsilano Junior High (1927).

Strong Showings in Saskatchewan

“The fine structure which has been erected on the bank of the South Saskatchewan River is a credit to its builders, and rightly deserves the admiration which is being heaped upon it by the public.”

SASKATOON DAILY STAR, APRIL 14, 1925, ABOUT SBW'S WORK ON THE PEARSON TUBERCULOSIS SANATORIUM

AS IN VANCOUVER, SLUGGISH POST-WAR economic conditions in Saskatoon and Regina took a few years to turn around. A few decently sized projects sustained SBW's operations in the first half of the decade—such as the \$181,000 general contract for the new provincial tuberculosis sanatorium in Saskatoon—but it wasn't until mid-decade when construction activity returned to livelier days.

Of all SBW Saskatchewan projects during this period, the magnificent Hotel Saskatchewan—the fourteenth of the grand luxury hotels that the CPR built across the country—stands out for several reasons, not least of which was that SBW put it up in only eleven months, a remarkably short span that carried on right through the extremely cold prairie winter.

When the twelve-storey hotel opened on May 23, 1927, supervising architect R.H. Macdonald praised SBW as the general contractor, as well as the twenty-seven subcontractors who'd worked under SBW in the course of the project: “I am pleased to state that the work performed by all the contractors employed compares favourably with the best work done for us elsewhere in Canada,” he said.



Saskatoon

Pearson Tuberculosis Sanatorium and nurses' home (1925–26)

University of Saskatchewan, Engineering Building replacement (1926)

Kresge store (1926)

Eaton's store (1928)

[OPPOSITE] The Mayfair Apartments, Regina, 1929. The Mayfair is one of several apartment blocks that SBW built for workers of the new General Motors assembly plant, constructed by SBW in 1928. The Chateau-style Mayfair building is on the Canadian Register of Historic Places.

“The whole building tells its own story of the diligence and skill displayed by the western firms employed . . . It seems incredible now, on looking back, that it was only as recently as June 23, 1926, that the contract was placed. Work was started and in 133 days the foundations were laid, the frame, floors, walls and roofing done, and heat turned on. And in less than eleven months this building, so complicated and varied in all its necessities, appointments and decorations is now finished and ready to open for business.”

The General Motors plant—the first such plant in Saskatchewan—was an entirely different type of structure, but an equally impressive accomplishment for SBW. Granted the contract at the beginning of July 1928, SBW completed the plant by December, a mere five months after the first sod was turned.

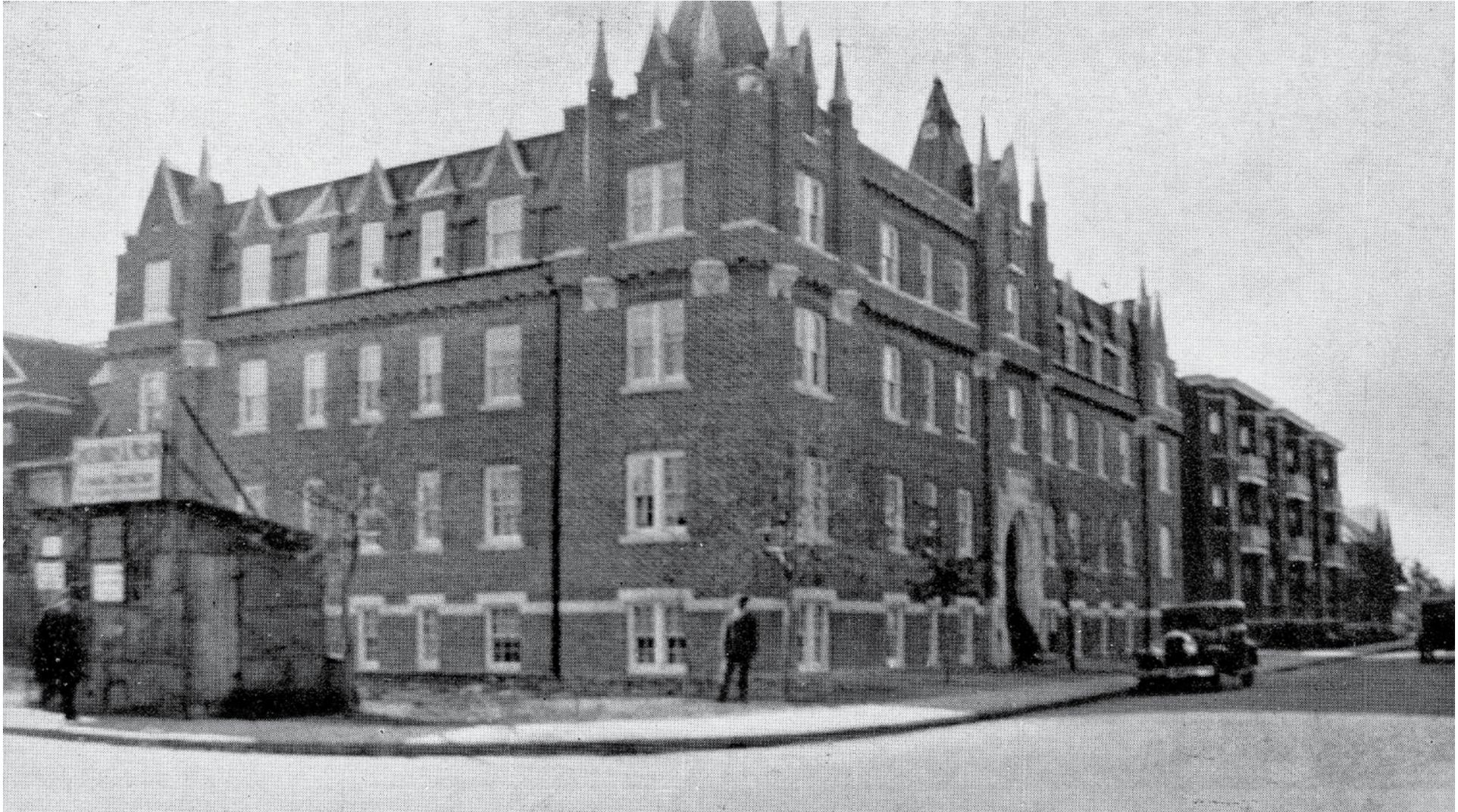
While enjoying this string of successes in Vancouver, Saskatoon, and Regina, SBW also made a splash in Calgary at the end of 1929, when its \$1.3-million tender to build the city's new post office/federal building was the winning bid.

Winter Fair building (1929)

Imperial Oil plant (1929)

Bank of Montreal addition (1929)

Quaker Oats addition (1929)



Regina

Hotel Saskatchewan (1927) [p. 51]
 Regina Fairgrounds grandstand
 (1928)

General Motors plant (1928)

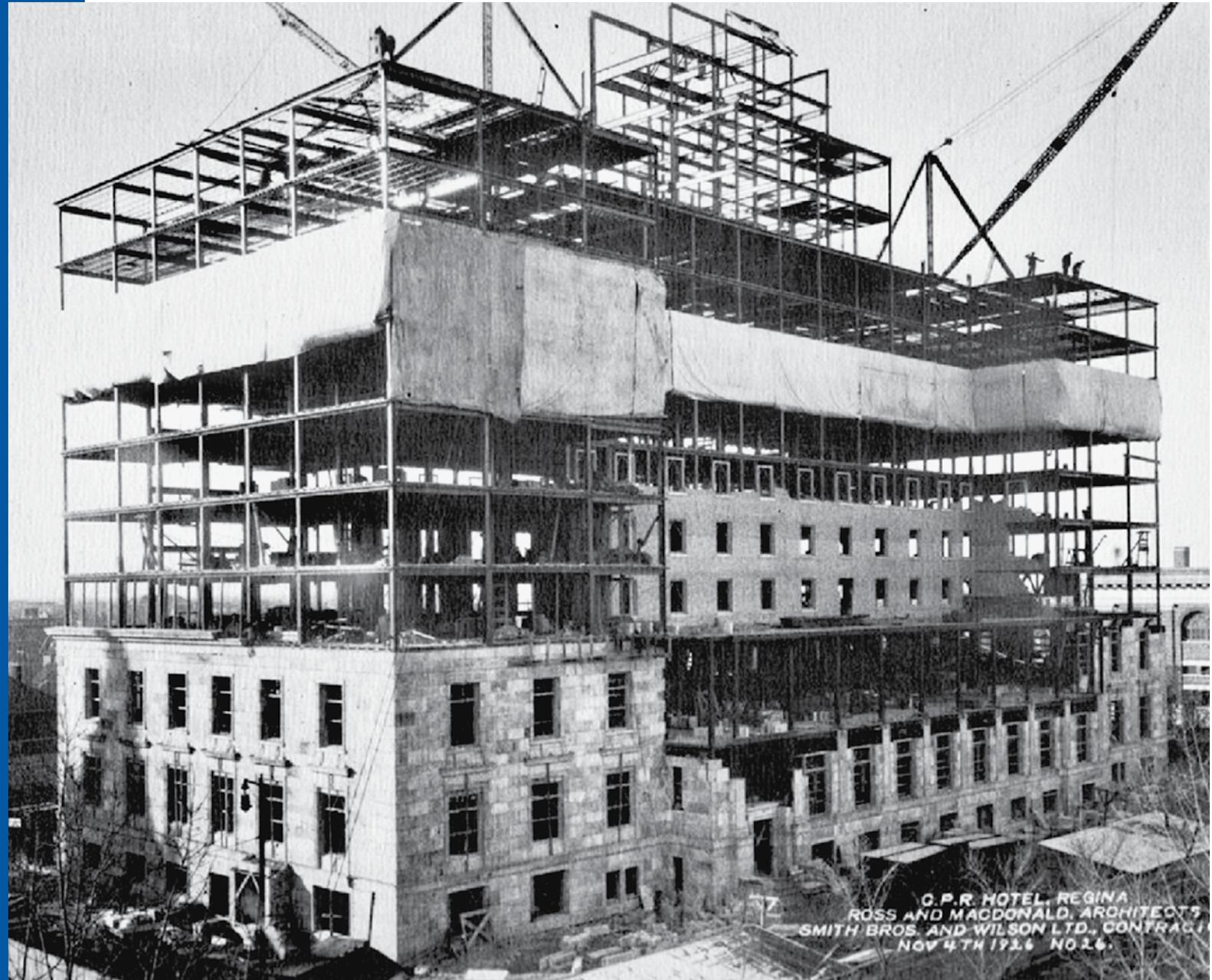
Safeway, four stores (1929)
 Mayfair Apartments (1929) [above]
 Frontenac Apartments (1929)

Elsewhere in Saskatchewan

Courthouses, Wynyard, Gravelbourg, Shaunavon,
 and Prince Albert (1926–27)
 Grant Hall Hotel, Moose Jaw (1927)
 International Harvester warehouse and showroom,
 Weyburn (1927)

“The Hotel Saskatchewan was done in an unbelievable eleven months. It has a concrete interior and a brick façade, and everything was lifted by a gin pole, a manual hoist. Now you have the overhead cranes that do all the lifting, but this was all manual, no concrete pumps, and through the winter in Saskatchewan. It was a tremendous feat.”

MURRAY SAUNDERS



[ABOVE] Regina’s Hotel Saskatchewan under construction, 1926. Built in a remarkable eleven months by SBW and dozens of contractors, the luxury CPR hotel was described in a local newspaper as “a triumph for western builders.”

One thousand men worked in rotating day and night shifts to complete the hotel on time. As *Castles of the North* describes, “Construction ran right through the exceedingly bitter winter. In spite of canvas windbreaks around the work site, temperatures within sank to between minus 20 and 30 degrees Celsius. Before the hotel boilers and furnace could be installed, stonemasons carried around fire pots to keep frost out of the mortar until it set.”

[OPPOSITE] The completed Hotel Saskatchewan, 1927. At twelve storeys, the finished hotel was the tallest building in Regina by a good measure for many years. Now on the Canadian Register of Historic Places, it remains a major city landmark to this day.





The Strength of a Team

AS SBW GREW throughout the 1910s and 1920s, the Smith brothers showed a willingness to move key people up into leadership roles and let them manage with a fair bit of independence. Whether intentionally or not, they were grooming those who would eventually succeed them as leaders of the company.

The Smiths also created a culture that recognized and rewarded talent, hard work, loyalty, and teamwork. They were quick to give credit where credit was due for the firm's accomplishments, presenting strong performers with salary bonuses and the opportunity to participate in the company's success as shareholders.

Harold Johnson and George Johns, both of whom joined SBW in 1907, were two such up-and-comers. Harold became a key figure in the Lethbridge office, earning an invitation to purchase company shares and become a director in 1915. When Harold transferred to the Vancouver

office in 1924, he was instrumental to the branch's strong performance. In 1929, the Smiths demonstrated their trust in him when they gave him the authority to sign documents for the Vancouver branch when the company's secretary-treasurer was unavailable.

George Johns also became a shareholder and company director, in 1920. As superintendent in Regina, he oversaw construction of the Hotel Saskatchewan, the General Motors plant, and many other significant projects. George's sons, Bill and Jack, followed their father into the company in 1925 and 1931, respectively, and they, too, showed early promise.

Sam Wright quickly rose through the ranks as well. From that first day with SBW in 1910, when he arrived as a carpenter and left as the foreman, through to his role as Saskatoon branch manager starting in 1921, Sam was recognized as an integral part of SBW's success in Saskatchewan. In 1929, he became a shareholder and a director of the company.

[OPPOSITE] (Left to right) Alexander, D.D., and Duncan Smith in the yard of Duncan's home at 1695 Pine Crescent, Vancouver, ca. early 1920s. Duncan and Alexander moved to Vancouver after establishing an SBW branch in the city, while D.D. divided his time between Regina, where he managed the SBW branch and head office, and Victoria, where his wife and family resided.

Adam Turton and Walter Douglas also earned recognition during this period. Born in England and joining SBW in 1913, Adam was the superintendent on many of the Regina branch's biggest projects. Walter, a Scot hired on in Regina in 1921 after serving in the war, started as a carpenter and quickly moved up to superintendent as well.

Several others who were more skilled with a calculator than a hammer joined the company's core management group too. Edward Long, who started as an accountant in Saskatoon in 1913 and was approved to buy shares that same year, was promoted to secretary-treasurer in 1919 when Charles Keating left the company. Edward subsequently moved to Regina and kept a keen eye on the books throughout the booming 1920s, and he was instrumental in helping D.D. Smith win numerous marquee projects in Regina, such as the Hotel Saskatchewan and the General Motors plant. Tragically, in 1928, his life and his time at SBW were cut short when he died after a brief illness at the age of fifty-two.

Replacing Edward as secretary-treasurer was George Barre, a whip-smart accountant who had joined SBW in 1920 after spending the war years as chief accountant for the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway in Melville, Saskatchewan. George also became a shareholder in 1929.

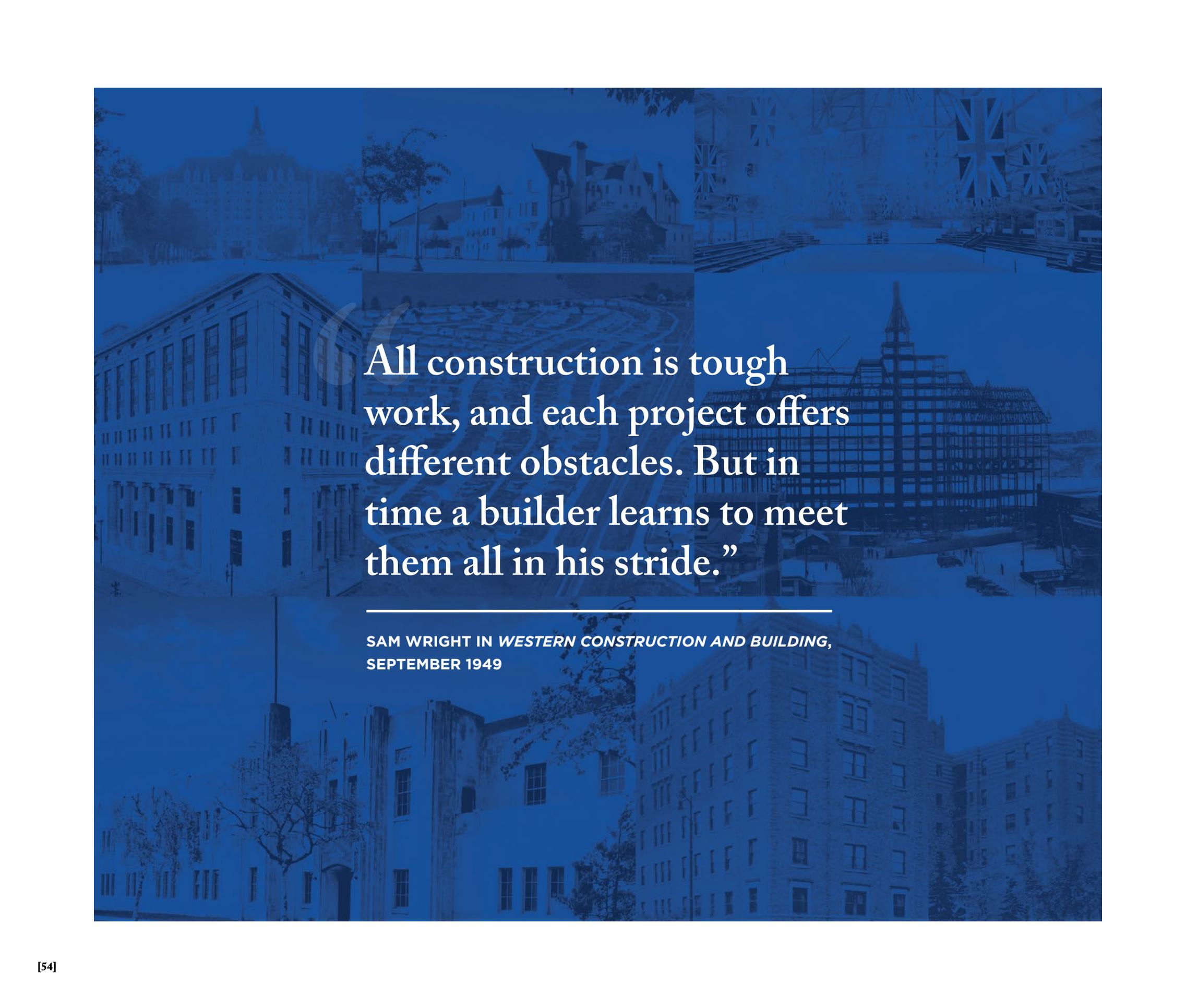
Finally, Ernest Lord, who started as an estimator for SBW's Regina branch in 1928, was quickly proving indispensable. Originally from Vancouver, he spent the war overseas with the Royal Engineers before taking a post as assistant chief engineer on a river improvement project in China. He lived in China for eight years before returning to Canada and joining SBW. In 1929, Ernie, as he was known, took a stake in the company when he purchased Edward Long's shares.

Prosperity, Pride, and Prudence

LOOKING BACK AT SBW'S STELLAR 1929 results at their annual meeting in January 1930, company directors Duncan Smith, D.D. Smith, Alexander Smith, Harold Johnson, George Johns, Sam Wright, and George Barre were proud of what SBW had accomplished. Alexander especially recognized Saskatchewan in a motion "congratulating the Regina branch for the wonderful showing they have made during the year 1929, and particularly Mr. Sam Wright for his excellent showing at Saskatoon." Duncan heartily seconded the motion.

The directors were likely enthusiastic about Vancouver too, where construction activity continued at a breakneck pace. "Not since prewar years has there been so many important new blocks completed during the year or so much construction still under way in the business area as at present," the *Vancouver Sun* reported in a December 1929 article headlined "Millions Spent During the Year."

Still, the directors' optimism about the future must have been somewhat cautious. After-effects of the US stock market crash of October 1929, multiple poor crop years, and increasing unemployment and labour unrest across western Canada were creating conditions they couldn't possibly ignore. For now, SBW was still on the upswing—but a downturn seemed not far away.



All construction is tough work, and each project offers different obstacles. But in time a builder learns to meet them all in his stride.”

SAM WRIGHT IN *WESTERN CONSTRUCTION AND BUILDING*,
SEPTEMBER 1949



Weathering Challenges and Change
1930 to 1949

“Smith Bros. & Wilson . . . have erected a great many of the finest public, office, and industrial buildings of the west.”

“FINE NEW BANK BUILT BY SMITH BROS. AND WILSON,” *CALGARY HERALD*, JULY 13, 1932

A Strong Start to a Turbulent Decade

THE TIDE OF SUCCESS THAT CARRIED SBW into 1930 continued for the first few years of the new decade. A string of high-profile projects in Regina, Saskatoon, Calgary, and Vancouver put SBW's name in local newspapers on a near-weekly basis, highlighting the company's efficient progress, the quality of the structures it was building, and the employment these projects were generating at a time of swelling joblessness.

The New York Stock Exchange crash in the fall of 1929 had triggered the Great Depression that would forever characterize the 1930s. Western Canada's resource- and export-based economy was particularly hard hit, and crop failures due to drought, grasshopper infestations, and hailstorms increased the proportions of the disaster on the prairies. By late 1930, unemployment and homelessness were reaching crisis levels. Government and civic building projects, like the ones SBW had in progress or started in this period, offered a lifeline to those lucky to get on one of the crews.

Balfour Apartments, Regina, 1930. When the Balfour opened, the *Morning Leader* praised SBW and its subcontractors for their accomplishment: “Since construction work commenced, the work was hurried forward, but at a pace that has not impaired the stability or efficiency of the structure, which, fully modern in every way, is a landmark in the residential history of the city.” The Balfour is now on the Canadian Register of Historic Places.



Regina

Balfour Apartments (1930) [p. 57]
Regina Post Office/Federal Building (1930)

Saskatoon

Bowman Brothers warehouse and offices (1930)
Saskatoon Post Office/Federal Building (1930)
Bessborough Hotel (1932) [p. 61]

Calgary

Prudential Medical and Dental Building (1931)
Calgary Post Office (1931) [p. 58]
Bank of Montreal (1932)



“It was my privilege to become well acquainted with the Smith brothers during the construction of the Balfour Apartments. Through the friendship and business association which developed as a result, I considered myself fortunate in being associated with men of exceptional business ability, sound judgment, and absolute integrity.”

LETTER FROM C.M. WILLOUGHBY, HOUSTON, WILLOUGHBY & COMPANY (INVESTMENT SECURITIES), FEBRUARY 13, 1953, ABOUT THE 1930 BALFOUR APARTMENTS PROJECT



Vancouver & Lower Mainland

- Children's Aid Society (1930)**
- Bank of Montreal (1931)
- Vancouver Art Gallery (1931) [p. 59]
- Bessborough Armoury (1933) [p. 59]



Victoria

- Kresge store (1930)**

- Second Narrows Bridge counterweight (1933)
- Capilano Brewery (1934) [p. 59]



These projects also held off, at least for a few years, the effects of the Depression on SBW's own financial picture. For example, the company's work on not just one or two but three central post offices/federal buildings gave SBW a strong base of business in Calgary and the two Saskatchewan branches through 1930 and into 1931. In the same period in Calgary, SBW also won contracts to build the twelve-storey Prudential Medical and Dental Building and the imposing new Alberta headquarters for the Bank of Montreal.

Initially overseen by D.D. Smith and the Regina branch, these Calgary projects, and activity in Regina itself, earned the branch special praise at SBW directors' meetings for several years running. Alexander Smith moved in 1932 "that a very hearty vote of thanks be given to the staff of the Regina office for their wonderful showing during the year 1931 and the previous year as well, especially in view of the difficult conditions prevailing throughout the world at the time."

SBW's Vancouver office also stayed busy in the early 1930s with a series of projects that included the new home of the Children's Aid Society, the art deco Vancouver Art Gallery, the Bessborough Armoury, a counterweight on the Second Narrows Bridge, and reconstruction of the Capilano Brewery.

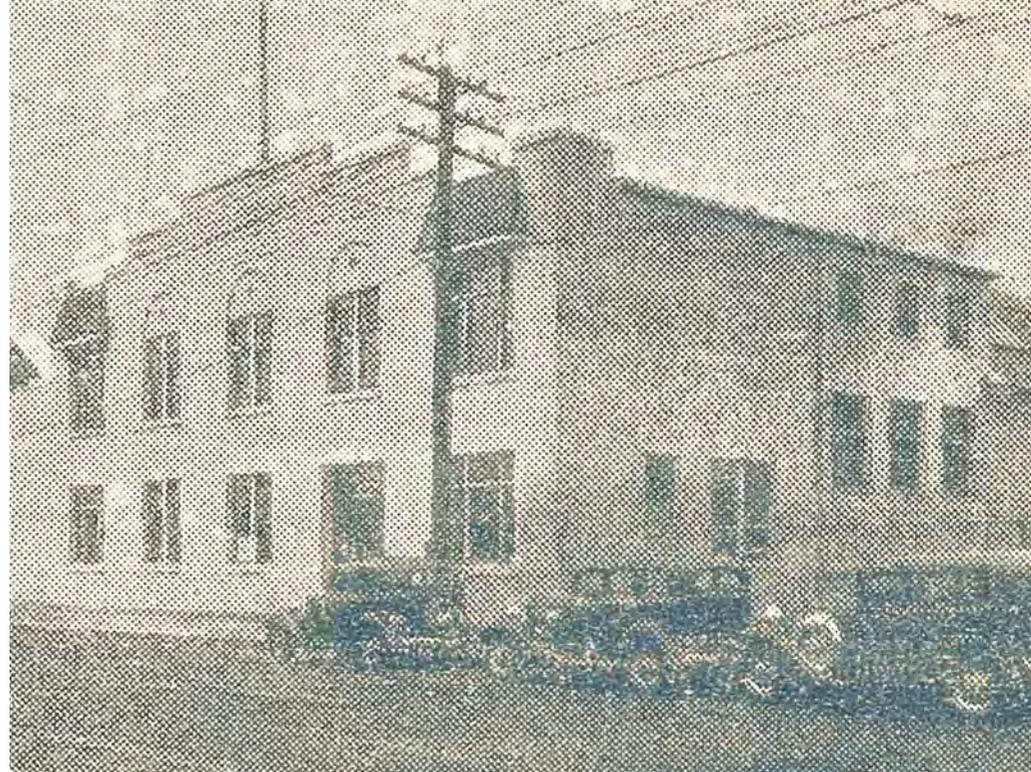
But perhaps SBW's most impressive project during the early Depression was what came to be known as Saskatoon's "Castle on the River" or, more familiarly, "the Bess": the spectacular Bessborough Hotel.

[ABOVE] The Calgary Post Office (also called the Public Building), 1931. This project, plus post offices/federal buildings in Saskatoon and Regina, helped carry SBW's Saskatchewan branches through the initial years of the Great Depression. The Modern Classical building is now on the Alberta Register of Historic Places.

[OPPOSITE TOP LEFT] Vancouver Art Gallery under construction, 1931, with SBW's sign visible at front left. SBW was one of the "public-spirited firms" acclaimed in local newspapers for donating services and material to advance the civic project.

[OPPOSITE BOTTOM LEFT] Bessborough Armoury, Vancouver, 1933, one of two armouries that SBW built in the years leading up to World War Two. The armoury is now on the Canadian Register of Historic Places, noted for its Art Deco design and quality craftsmanship.

[OPPOSITE TOP & BOTTOM RIGHT] SBW's scrapbook news clippings noting the completion of the Capilano Brewery, Vancouver, July 14, 1934. The project marked the beginning of SBW's long history of brewery work in Vancouver.



GENERAL CONTRACTORS and Builders of MODERN ARCHITECTURE

Sincere Congratulations

are extended the officials of the Capilano Brewing Co. Ltd. on their achievement.

The up-to-date equipment and modern construction are in keeping with present demands.

Our best wishes are combined with the following firms who participated in this construction:

Dominion Bridge Co. Ltd.

W. G. Jenner

Campbell & Grill Ltd.

J. Boshard

J. H. McRae

Moscrop Bros.

Siegunrdson Syndicate

Alex Garr

Gordon & Belyea Ltd.

Wallstone Stucco & Flooring Co. Ltd.

Evans, Coleman & Evans Ltd.

Diethers Ltd.

SMITH BROS. & WILSON Ltd.

1267 RICHARDS

VANCOUVER, B.C.



[ABOVE] The Bessborough Hotel, Saskatoon, under construction, 1932. SBW built the luxury CNR hotel during the height of the Great Depression. According to *Castles of the North*, over 3,000 people applied for construction work, and “hundreds of men would hover around the building site ready to jump at the chance if a position became available.” Two men lucky to land spots on the construction crew were future hockey star Gordie Howe and his father; fifteen-year-old Gordie helped build the retaining wall around the Bessborough’s garden.

[OPPOSITE] The completed Bessborough Hotel, 1932. The hotel’s opening was delayed for several years due to the lingering Depression. When the Bessborough finally welcomed guests in 1935, it symbolized the return to better days. Still regarded as one of Saskatoon’s most significant landmarks, the Bessborough is on the city’s Register of Historic Places.

The Castle on the River

THE BESSBOROUGH WAS the Canadian National Railway’s (CNR’s) Saskatoon answer to the CPR’s Hotel Saskatchewan in Regina—also built by SBW. But where the Hotel Saskatchewan was in the relatively unadorned Modern Classical style, the Bessborough’s Châteauesque design featured steeply pitched copper roofs, a dramatic central tower, turrets, oriel windows, gargoyles, and other fanciful ornamentation.

SBW’s \$2-million contract for the general construction work on the opulent structure was announced at the end of September 1930, and by November the steel skeleton of the twelve-storey hotel was already taking shape. Despite weather conditions that ranged from mild one day to frigid the next, the stonework, brickwork, and other construction continued largely uninterrupted right through the winter. For the rest of 1931 and into 1932, as many as 300 men had a hand in building and finishing the grand hotel.

As the Bessborough neared completion in the spring of 1932, a representative of the architectural firm that had designed it paid tribute to SBW for doing “so much to make the building an adornment to the city.” When construction was complete in May, workers were said to have snake-danced from room to room at a raucous wrap party.

But the rest of Saskatoon would have to wait to celebrate their Castle on the River. Unable to afford to furnish the luxury hotel, the CNR postponed the planned June 15 opening indefinitely. The Bessborough sat largely empty for the next few years as the Great Depression continued to take its toll.



“The overnight guest, and the man on the street, pause before the exterior [of the Bessborough Hotel] and comment on the craftsmanship.”

“BUILDING WILL STAND AS MONUMENT TO INGENUITY OF MAN,” *SASKATOON STAR-PHOENIX*, DECEMBER 7, 1935

“The Seaforth Armoury project started in the summer of 1935 with clearing the land, and the regiment marched in less than a year later. You can’t build a building like that today in that time, even with all the new equipment.”

MICHAEL SHIELDS, GRANDSON OF ALEXANDER SMITH AND FORMER DIRECTOR OF SBW

Brightness in the Gloom

BY THE TIME SBW’S DIRECTORS sat down in early 1934 for their annual meeting, the weight of the Depression was finally noticeable in SBW’s financial results and business outlook. As one measure to reduce the strain, the directors—now including Ernie Lord, who had joined the board in 1931—voted to cut the salaries of officers and staff by 10 percent “until such time as conditions warranted increases.”

Even so, that year’s operations still produced a small net loss. At their January 1935 meeting, the directors agreed to further financial measures, such as reducing the depreciation rate on plant and equipment in Regina and Vancouver “due to the fact that most of this Plant was not in use during the year.”

Although the company was back in a small net-profit position at the end of 1935, business remained worryingly quiet over the next few years. But even in this gloomy time, there were a few bright spots. One was the Bessborough Hotel’s long-awaited grand

[OPPOSITE] (Left to right) Seaforth Armoury, Vancouver, 1936, and Walter Douglas, SBW’s site manager on the armoury project and the company’s future president. Walter served with the Seaforths as a young man in Scotland and became the unit’s regimental sergeant during World War Two. The armoury is still the home of the Seaforth Highlanders and is on the Canadian Register of Historic Places.

opening in December 1935, which Saskatoon celebrated with elation. “Great Craftsmanship Shown in Hotel Construction” and “Building Will Stand as Monument to Ingenuity of Man,” proclaimed headlines in a special edition of the *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix* devoted solely to the hotel. It was gratifying to everyone involved in the project to finally see the beautiful hotel come to life. Another highlight during these dark years was the 1935–36 contract to build a second armoury in Vancouver, this one on Burrard Street for the Seaforth Highlanders. Walter Douglas, who had transferred to the Vancouver branch in 1932 and previously served six years with the Seaforths while a young man in Scotland, was appointed as SBW’s site manager on the project, and many of the workers he supervised on the construction were Seaforths as well. The opening of the Scottish baronial-style armoury in August 1936 was celebrated with much pomp and pageantry, including the trooping of the regiment’s colour (flag) past the Governor General, Lord Tweedsmuir.



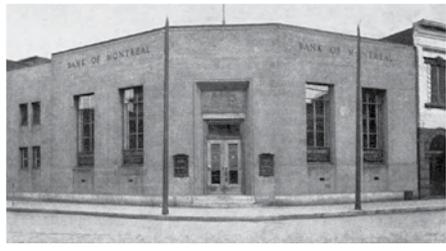
Constancy amid Change

SEVERAL MONTHS AFTER THE OPENING of the Seaforth Armoury, SBW had its own momentous occasion to observe when Duncan and Alexander Smith retired from active management of the company in early 1937. Both now in their seventies, the brothers remained involved in SBW as directors for the time being, but their days drumming up new business, estimating projects, and overseeing the inner workings of the company they'd founded were at an end.

D.D., ten years younger than Duncan, stayed on as SBW's president and as Regina branch manager. Assisting D.D. in Regina were company vice president George Johns, secretary-treasurer George Barre, and engineer Ernie Lord.

Sam Wright remained the head of the Saskatoon office, while in Vancouver, Harold Johnson succeeded Alexander as branch manager and was made a company vice president. Supporting Harold on the west coast were Walter Douglas as general superintendent and Douglas Mathews as branch secretary.

Though the Smith brothers no longer had a direct hand in two of SBW's three branches, the culture they had instilled in the company remained strong under Sam's and Harold's leadership. Both men exemplified what hard work, integrity, loyalty, and a dedication to quality achieved at SBW.



Ontario

**Bank of Montreal,
Fort William (1937)**

Saskatoon

CNR station (1939) [p. 65]

Elsewhere in Saskatchewan

Battleford mental hospital (1936)



[LEFT] Canadian National Railway station, Saskatoon, 1939. When the station opened, the *Star-Phoenix* called it the “essence of fine construction and conveniences.”

[OPPOSITE] Safeway warehouse job site at Hamilton and Nelson Streets, Vancouver, 1937. As the year unfolded, signs of economic recovery in all of SBW’s markets suggested that the worst of the Depression was over.

Recovery

AS 1937 UNFOLDED, it seemed that the worst of the Depression had now passed. Contracts to erect a new government mental hospital in Battleford, Saskatchewan, and a Bank of Montreal branch in Fort William, Ontario, were helping to carry SBW’s Regina and Saskatoon branches. A project to build the modernist Chown Memorial Church was doing the same in Vancouver.

In a sign that SBW’s directors felt more optimistic, they granted additional salaries to key staff at the 1937 directors’ meeting. That summer brought more evidence that both SBW and the Canadian

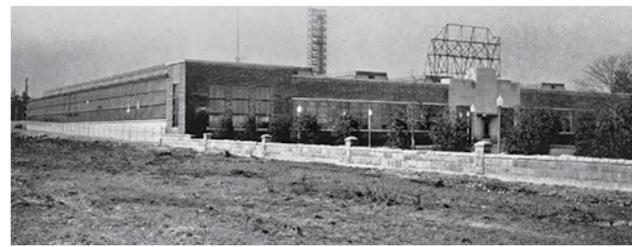
economy had turned a corner, when SBW landed the \$292,000 contract to build a new Ford assembly plant in Burnaby. When the plant opened with great fanfare in June 1938, it was hailed as “the most modernly designed and equipped plant in Canada, and perhaps on this continent.”

The good news continued in the fall of 1938, when SBW broke ground on the new CNR station in Saskatoon. Celebrating the station’s opening in December 1939, the *Star-Phoenix* called it the “essence of up-to-date architecture and construction,” “streamlined, efficient and beautiful.”



Vancouver & Lower Mainland

Seaforth Armoury (1936) [p. 63]
Chown Memorial Church (1937)
 Safeway warehouse (1937) [p. 64]



Ford assembly plant (1938)
Mc & Mc (McLennan, McFeely & Prior) Building (1939)



“At the site of the flying school . . . there is no feverish rush or confusion as the 200 men employed go ahead steadily with their appointed jobs. Their efficiency is demonstrated, however, by the speed with which the buildings are rising.”

“CITY HAS BENEFIT OF LARGE PAYROLL FROM AIRPORT JOB,”
SASKATOON STAR-PHOENIX,
JULY 18, 1940

A Wartime Boom

THE GLOWING NEWSPAPER ARTICLES about the CNR station’s grand opening were a credit to SBW, but the news was overshadowed by the much larger story of the day—that of the new war in Europe.

World War Two was only two months old in December 1939, but already reports of sea battles, aerial fights, casualties, and the enlistment of local men were crowding the pages of Canadian newspapers. As the nation ramped up its contributions to Allied defence efforts, the papers also carried stories about the industrial boom that put a definitive end to the Depression. All three of SBW’s branches participated in the flurry of war-related construction projects over the next few years, putting up hospital units; army, navy, and air force barracks and officers’ quarters; numerous buildings for Commonwealth Air Training Plan flight schools; two prisoner-of-war camps; and hundreds of houses for industrial war workers, military families, and veterans.

[OPPOSITE] SBW ads in the *Vancouver Sun*, August 31, 1943 (left), and June 27, 1942 (right). During and after World War Two, SBW’s branches in Vancouver, Saskatoon, and Regina built hospitals, military barracks and officers’ quarters, Commonwealth flight schools, naval facilities, prisoner-of-war camps, and hundreds of houses for Wartime Housing Ltd.



Saskatoon

No. 4 Service Flying Training School, 30+ buildings (1941)
HMCS *Unicorn* naval barracks (1943)
Dundurn Army Camp workshop (1943)
First Baptist Church (1945)



Regina

No. 3 Air Observatory School (1940)
No. 15 Elementary Flying Training School (1940)
Grey Nuns Hospital additions (1941-45)
Wartime Housing Ltd. project (1946)



WE ARE IN THE FIGHT!

Canada's army is now actively engaged with the enemy and is upholding the traditions established twenty-five years ago. There is still a stiff fight ahead and your best effort is needed to bring victory to our arms. Are you doing your share?

Smith Bros. & Wilson Ltd.
GENERAL CONTRACTORS

1267 Richards St. Vancouver, B.C.

"We Are Glad To Be
Associated With Army Week"

June - 1942



SMITH BROS. & WILSON
LIMITED

GENERAL CONTRACTORS

VANCOUVER, B.C.

SASKATOON, Sask.

REGINA, Sask.

1267 RICHARDS ST.

MArine 3729

Elsewhere in Saskatchewan

St. Peter's Hospital, Melville (1942)

Lethbridge

Prisoner-of-war camp (1942)

Elsewhere in Alberta

Prisoner-of-war camp,
Medicine Hat (1942)

“The work is proceeding slowly, but there is not the slightest intention to let cold weather stop us.”

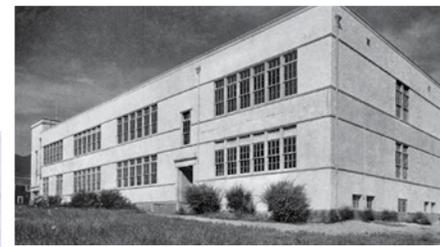
SAM WRIGHT, QUOTED IN *SASKATOON STAR-PHOENIX*, SEPTEMBER 23, 1943, ABOUT CONSTRUCTION OF THE HMCS *UNICORN* BARRACKS



[LEFT] Wartime Housing Ltd. project on Sea Island, Vancouver, 1943. During World War Two, SBW's Vancouver and Regina branches built several housing projects like this one for industrial war workers, military families, and veterans. The *Vancouver Sun* reported that SBW built more wartime houses in the Vancouver area than any other contractor.

[OPPOSITE] Shaughnessy Military Hospital chest unit, Vancouver, 1946. SBW built the 150-bed hospital for the Department of National Defence to treat war veterans with tuberculosis. The building is now home to the Healthy Minds Centre, part of the B.C. Children's Hospital complex.

In addition to the war-related work, SBW built numerous other projects in this period, including schools in Vancouver and Prince George, hospitals or additions in Melville and Regina, and the First Baptist Church in Saskatoon.



Vancouver & Lower Mainland

Royal Canadian Air Force, Jericho Station engine-testing house (1940)
Vancouver Technical School and Girls' Vocational School (1940)
Wartime Housing Ltd. project, North Vancouver (1942)

Wartime Housing Ltd. project, Sea Island (1943) [above]
Westview School, North Vancouver (1944)
Shaughnessy Military Hospital chest unit (1946) [p. 69]



It was a dizzying volume of business by any measure, and increasing labour and material shortages as the war continued added to the challenge of managing it all. SBW advertised regularly for

carpenters and labourers for “essential war work,” but the low availability of experienced workers, in particular, slowed progress on some projects. Even so, SBW always found a way to get the job done.



Elsewhere in B.C.

Esquimalt Naval Dockyard ordnance building (1940)

Wartime Housing Ltd. project, Prince Rupert (1943)

Prince George High School (1944)

The End of an Era

THE WARTIME PERIOD BROUGHT not only many business gains for SBW, but also a series of retirements and untimely losses that marked the end of an era and the start of a new one.

First, in 1939, George Johns retired as general superintendent in Regina, though he stayed on in an advisory capacity as a company director and vice president.

Then, in April 1941, came the sudden death of Douglas Mathews, who kept the books for the Vancouver branch. Returning to the office one Monday evening, Harold Johnson found Douglas slumped over his desk. Vernon Dunnett, who'd previously worked for SBW in Regina, returned to the company to become the acting secretary for the Vancouver branch, a role that was later made permanent.

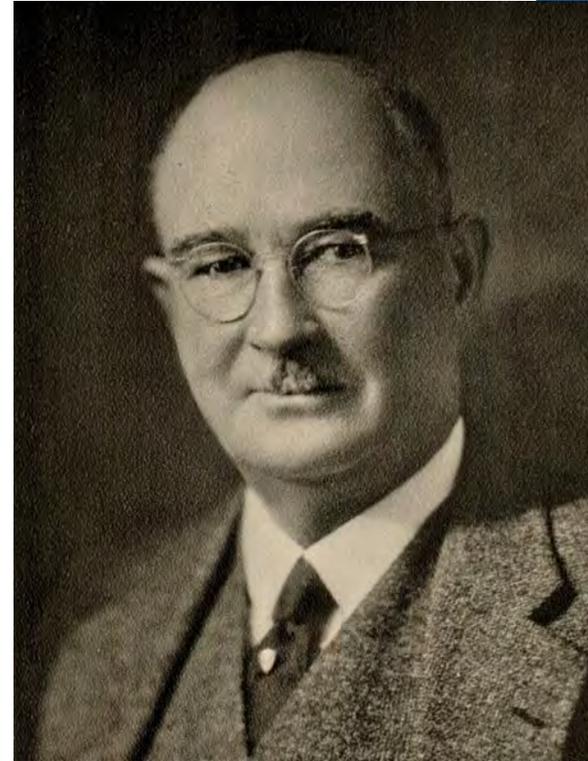
As shocking as Douglas's death was, the next series of losses struck at the very heart of the company as all three Smith brothers passed away, one after the other.

Duncan was the first to go, dying on June 13, 1942, from stroke-related complications. He was eighty-one years old. Surviving him were his second wife, Lora, and their nineteen-year-old daughter, Marjorie.

Alexander went next, passing away in Harrison Hot Springs, B.C., on April 8, 1943, at the age of seventy-seven. In addition to his wife, Mabel, Alexander was survived by all five of his daughters, plus six grandchildren. Marion was married to William (Bill) Mackie; Isabel was married to Roy Shields and had two children; Doris was married to Norman Tinling and had three children; and Alice was married to Ralph Argue and had one child. Alexander's middle daughter, Louise, was not married at the time of his death, but she later wed Campbell Kelleher; she had no children.

Finally, on June 4, 1945, D.D. passed away suddenly while at his summer home in Regina Beach, Saskatchewan. He was seventy-four years old and was still serving as SBW's president and Regina branch manager at the time of his death. Surviving D.D. were his wife and one daughter, both named Dorothea. The younger Dorothea was married by this time to Joseph McClain; D.D.'s two other daughters, Florence and Evelyn, predeceased him in 1919 and 1942, respectively.

(Left to right) Duncan, Alexander, and D.D. Smith, ca. early 1940s. The brothers died within three years of each other—Duncan in 1942, Alexander in 1943, and D.D. in 1945. Losing the company's founders in such a short span was a blow to the people of SBW, but a new generation of capable leaders ensured the company's continuity.



“The Smith brothers, some of whom I knew intimately and had a profound respect for . . . have left splendid monuments all across the West. To those who remain, the tradition of the Smith family is an example which they should be proud to carry on.”

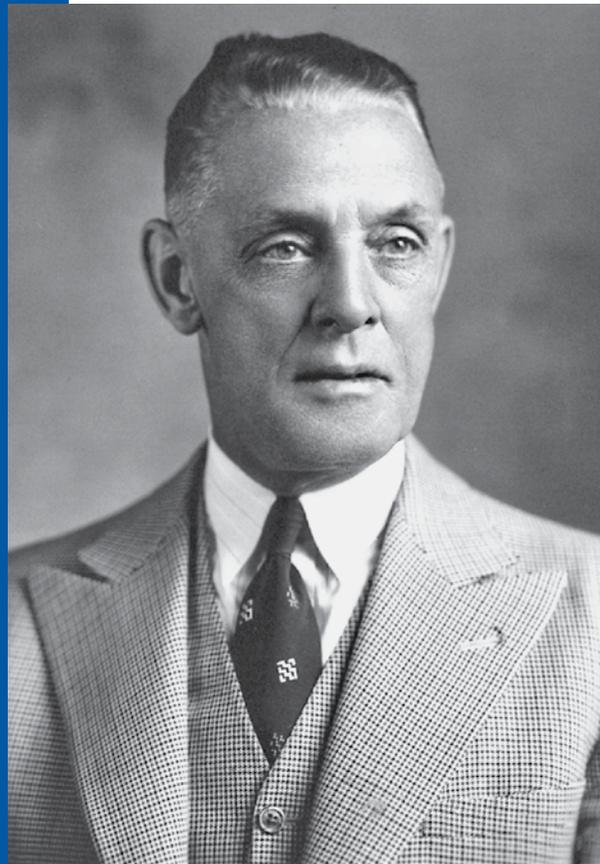
LETTER FROM JOHN SCHOFIELD, ARCHITECT ON THE BESSBOROUGH HOTEL AND OTHER SBW PROJECTS, FEBRUARY 24, 1953

SBW's original fourth-named partner, John Wilson, also passed away in this period, on June 27, 1943. Although he had left the firm two decades earlier, his obituary highlighted the numerous SBW projects he'd worked on—testament to his connection with the company that still bears his name.

Upon the Smith brothers' deaths, their majority stake in SBW remained in companies that held their shares in trust for their descendants. D.D.'s wife and daughter ended their association with SBW in 1946 by selling their stake to existing shareholders, but Duncan's widow, Lora, and Alexander's daughter Louise joined SBW's board as proxies of their holding companies. Through them, the Smith family still had the majority vote at directors' meetings, but it was no longer directly involved in SBW's management.

“Getting involved in industry associations is a value that’s engrained in our culture as a company.”

CLARK CAMPBELL



Sam Wright, ca. mid-1940s. The long-time Saskatoon branch manager succeeded D.D. Smith as SBW president in 1945.

Onward and Upward

LOSING ALL THREE COMPANY FOUNDERS in the span of three years might have been a seismic upheaval for SBW had it not been for the succession planning that had already groomed a new generation of leaders in the branches and on the board of directors.

Sam Wright—the Saskatoon branch manager and, as of 1940, a company vice president—stepped smoothly into D.D. Smith’s shoes as president. Ernie Lord, also a vice president by this time, succeeded D.D. as Regina branch manager.

The Vancouver branch remained stable with Harold Johnson as manager and vice president. Harold was Alexander Smith’s successor not only at SBW, but also in terms of his commitment to the Vancouver General Contractors Association. Alexander had served as a vice president of the association in 1930–33, and Harold became a vice president in 1941 and then served as president in 1944–46. Both men paved the way for SBW’s involvement in industry associations right through to the present day.



(Left to right) Harold Johnson, Walter Douglas, and Vernon Dunnett, key figures with SBW in Vancouver in the 1940s and '50s—Harold as branch manager and a company vice president, Walter as general superintendent, and Vernon as branch secretary-treasurer. All three also served on SBW's board of directors.

“The name Smith Bros. & Wilson is referred to with admiration and respect by all who have had the privilege of being associated with them. It is very pleasing to us to realize that the standard of quality set by the founders continues with others in your service.”

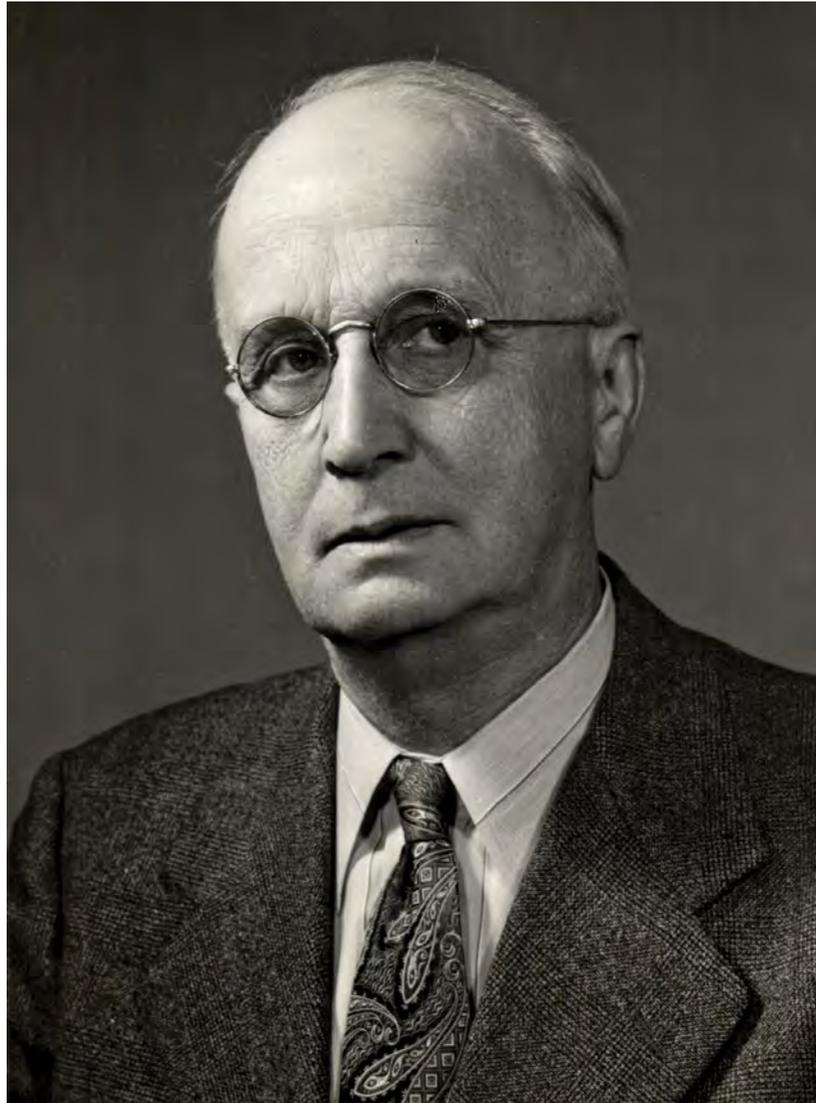
LETTER FROM NORMAN
JESSIMAN, GENERAL
MANAGER, GYPSUM, LIME
AND ALABASTINE CANADA,
FEBRUARY 18, 1953

Other key figures lending stability in the initial post-Smith years were general superintendents Walter Douglas in Vancouver and Bill Johns in Regina (replacing the retired Adam Turton). Both were also elected as board directors—Walter in 1942 and Bill in 1947. Secretary-treasurer George Barre and Vancouver secretary Vernon Dunnnett rounded out the leadership team, with Vernon also becoming a director in 1947.

Just as the Smith brothers had brought these men up in the company and steeped them in SBW's culture and traditions, the new leadership group now did the same for newer members of the team. In Regina, these included Bruce Wiebe, who joined in 1941, and John Lord (Ernie's son), brought on as an estimator in 1945. In Saskatoon, key newcomers were Bill Schindel, who joined as a labourer in 1946, and Cliff Wright (Sam's son), who started as an apprentice in 1947. And in Vancouver, Paul Hlady joined as a bookkeeper in 1946, Walter Vandervoort as chief estimator in 1948, Bob Saunders as a field engineer in 1949, and Don Clark as a carpenter in 1949 (following in the footsteps of his father, long-time foreman Matt Clark).

With this capable, talented group—along with the many others who contributed to SBW in ways both big and small—the company did not miss a beat as the surge in construction that began with the war continued to swell in the post-war years.

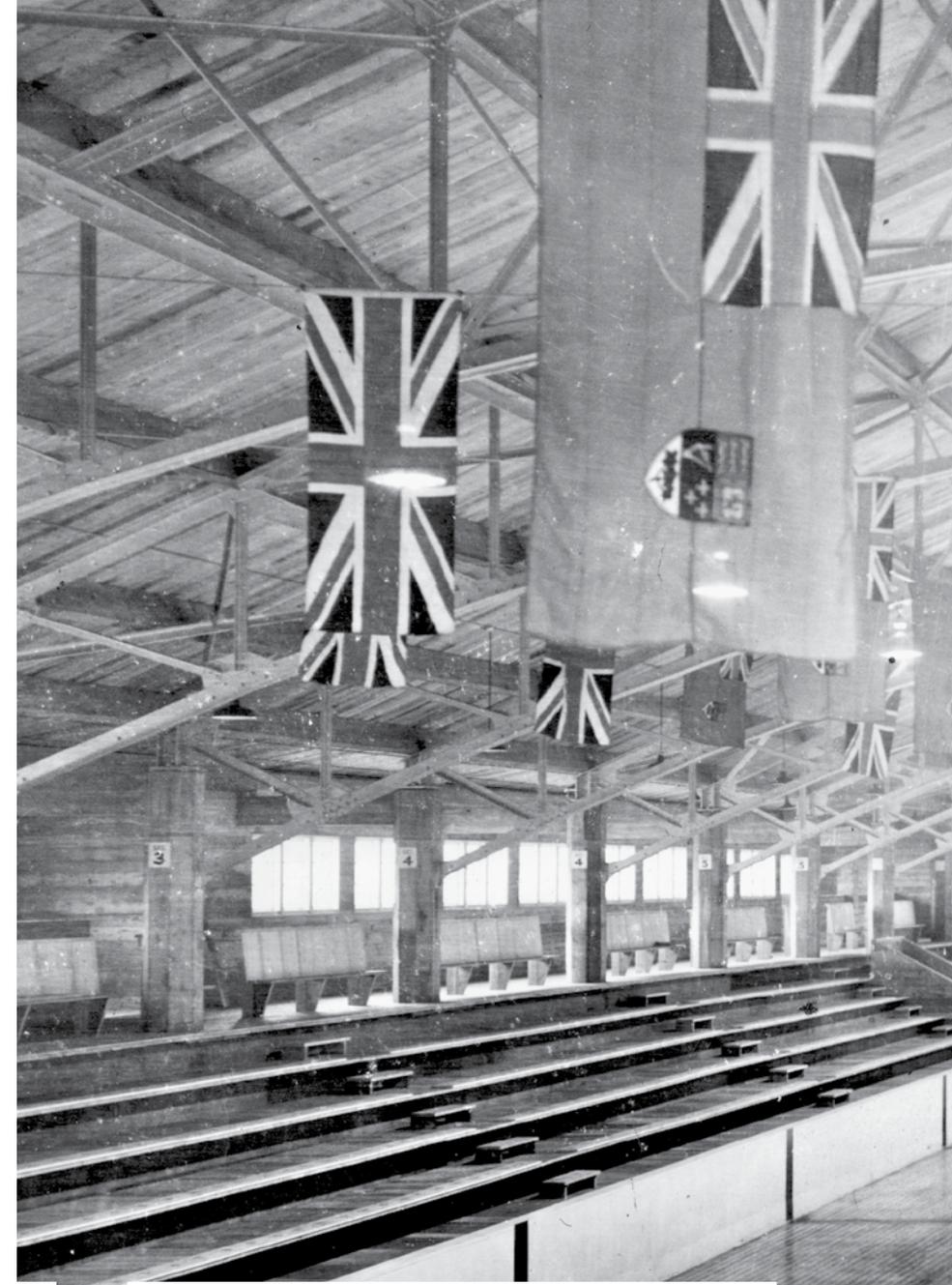
[OPPOSITE] (Left to right) Ernie Lord, George Johns, and Bill Johns, leaders in the Regina branch in the 1940s and '50s. Ernie succeeded D.D. Smith as Regina branch manager in 1945 and was a company vice president. George retired as branch superintendent in 1939, but remained a company vice president and board director for several decades. Bill Johns, George's son, became branch superintendent in 1947 and branch manager in 1957 after Ernie's retirement.



Kelowna Memorial Arena, 1948. SBW opened a temporary field office in the city in 1945 to handle this and other projects in the area in the mid- to late 1940s.

At the March 1949 directors' meeting, all three branch managers expressed great confidence about current and future business. Harold Johnson reported that "the Vancouver branch had over \$4,000,000 of work under way in British Columbia" and that the volume coming up was "very high." Ernie Lord also reported a strong roster of in-progress and future projects in Regina, and Sam Wright did the same for Saskatoon, adding that "there were good prospects for plenty of work."

Having weathered the Great Depression, a second world war, labour and material shortages, the loss of the company's three founders, and the transition to a new leadership group, SBW ended this period on a note of resilience. The company's strengths—quality, integrity, reliability, teamwork, loyalty, diligence, and adaptability—were deeply embedded after more than fifty years in business. With another great economic wave building on the horizon, SBW was more than ready to make the most of it.



Saskatoon

Wheat Pool flour mill, grain elevator, and vegetable oil plant (1949)

Modern Press Building renovation (1947)

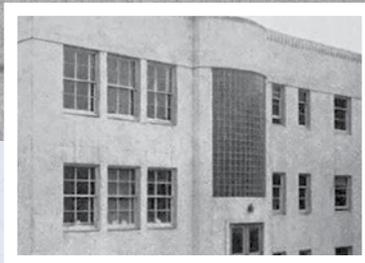
Yaeger Fur Building (1946)

University of Saskatchewan, Medical College (1947)



Regina

Campion College extension (1948)
Beth Jacob Synagogue (1949)



Vancouver & Lower Mainland

Children's Hospital addition (1946)
Grace Hospital addition (1947)
Vancouver Breweries bottling shop and warehouse (1949)
CKWX transmitter plant (1947)
West Burnaby United Church (1949)

Elsewhere in B.C.

Wartime Housing Ltd. project, Kimberley (1947)
Kelowna High School (1948)
Kelowna Memorial Arena (1948) [above]
Okanagan Telephone building, Vernon (1949)



Most people in the construction industry would agree with me that your company is the very essence of fair dealing and good business management. We consider it a pleasure to have been associated with your firm. We hope that the future will remain as bright as the past.”

LETTER FROM S.W. WELSH, FRED WELSH & SON,
FEBRUARY 17, 1953



4

Reaching New Heights
1950 to 1969

“They used to say that if you could work for SBW, you were good enough to work for anybody. They had that kind of reputation. You were just proud to work for them.”

ROBBIE MORRICE

A Culture of Camaraderie and Respect

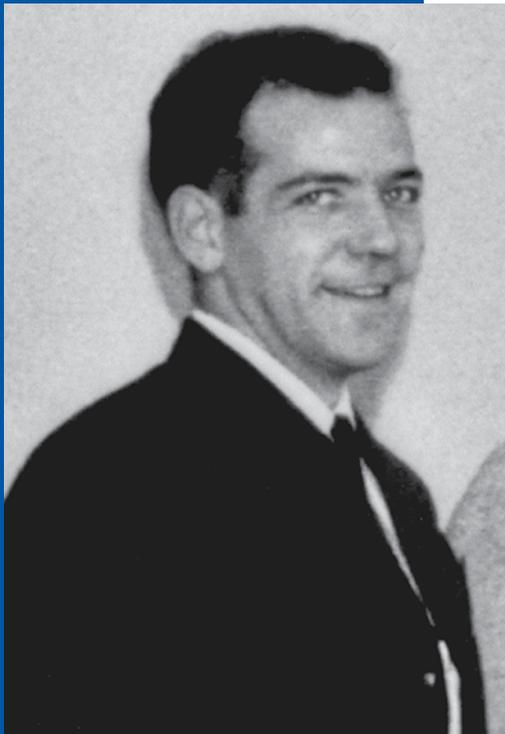
IN EARLY 1950, YOUNG FIELD engineer Bob Saunders showed up to SBW’s job site at John Oliver High School in Vancouver, ready to make his mark. Having joined the company in late 1949, he brimmed with confidence at the prospect of applying his skills to the John Oliver project, his first major assignment for SBW.

Bob’s son Murray chuckles about what happened next. “Dad had a real presence about him, and he was an extreme Type A personality with high standards. Back then, engineers did all the surveying, and Dad, assigned as the project engineer, got on site and locked horns right away with a crusty carpenter foreman named Ed Rinta. They had a classic fight on day one, and then they were friends from that moment on.”

The start of Bob and Ed’s friendship said a lot about the culture at SBW. It was a workplace where people could have an animated exchange about the best way to do something, yet still come away respecting and liking each other. Where everyone cared about getting the job done, but cared even more about doing it with quality and integrity. And where people were expected to take the initiative and pull their own weight, yet always remember they were part of a team.

“For the people who worked for the company, SBW was part of their family, and they had an attachment,” says Michael Shields, Alexander Smith’s grandson, who also worked for SBW as a labourer in his late teens. “Even when people went to other places, they never seemed to lose their affection or attachment to the company. It was like belonging to a club, and there was pride in being a member.”

“You had to produce hard at SBW, but they looked after their people,” says Robbie Morrice, who joined the Vancouver branch as an apprentice carpenter at the beginning of 1954 and became a long-time general superintendent. “And you got to know all the people in the company—we were all friends.” Contributing to the friendships were things like a company bowling league, in which everyone, from branch managers to labourers and even some spouses, participated.





[ABOVE] Lord Byng High School, Vancouver, 1951. The SBW-built annex (left) housed an auditorium, science labs, a music room, a library, a double gymnasium, and seven classrooms. In B.C., SBW put up at least ten schools in the booming post-war period—an achievement that the *Vancouver Sun* called “the school building record” for local contractors.

[OPPOSITE LEFT] Robbie Morrice, early 1950s. Robbie joined SBW in Vancouver as an apprentice carpenter in 1954. Recalling his interview with Walter Douglas, Harold Johnson, and Walter Vandervoort at SBW’s Richards Street office, Robbie says, “I went in in my muddy boots and clothes. They took me into Walter Douglas’s office and put me through the grill. When they were finished with me, they said, ‘Congratulations, you’re now an indentured apprentice.’” Robbie later became general superintendent and stayed with SBW until 1980.

[OPPOSITE RIGHT] Bob Saunders, 1952. Bob joined SBW’s Vancouver branch as a field engineer in late 1949. He quickly stood out for his leadership potential—a trait he exhibited well before joining the company. As a defenceman and the captain of the UBC hockey team while completing his engineering degree, he was called “undoubtedly the greatest team man on the squad” by the school’s newspaper, *The Daily Ubysey*. “His spirit and exuberance serve as a standard which keeps the entire team hustling at all times.” Thanks in part to Bob’s play and leadership, the 1948–50 squad he captained was the first hockey team to be inducted into the UBC Sports Hall of Fame, in 2000.



Regina General Hospital, 1950. SBW completed the hospital under five separate contracts.



Regina

General Hospital (1950) [above]
 Municipal Transit headquarters (1950)
 Luther College gymnasium (1950)
 Canadian Legion Memorial Hall (1951)
 Firestone warehouse (1951)

Elsewhere in Saskatchewan

Weyburn Hospital (1951)

Vancouver & Lower Mainland

Gladstone Secondary School (1950) [p. 83]
 St. Paul's Hospital centre wing (1950) [p. 84]
 Mayfair School (1950)
General Electric offices and warehouse (1950)



Gladstone Secondary School under construction, Vancouver, ca. 1948-49. SBW won the \$1.2-million contract in 1948 and completed the school—said to be one of the most modern in Vancouver—in 1950.



Vancouver School Board administration building (1950)
 Bank of Montreal drive-through branch (1950)
 Lord Byng High School expansion (1951) [p. 81]
John Oliver High School (1951)

Kitsilano War Memorial Community Centre (1951)
 Academy of Medicine (1951)
Vancouver Art Gallery addition and modernizations (1951)
 Liquid Carbonic plant (1951)

Elsewhere in B.C.

Rutland High School (1950)
 Kelowna Telephone building (1950)
 Penticton Telephone building (1951)



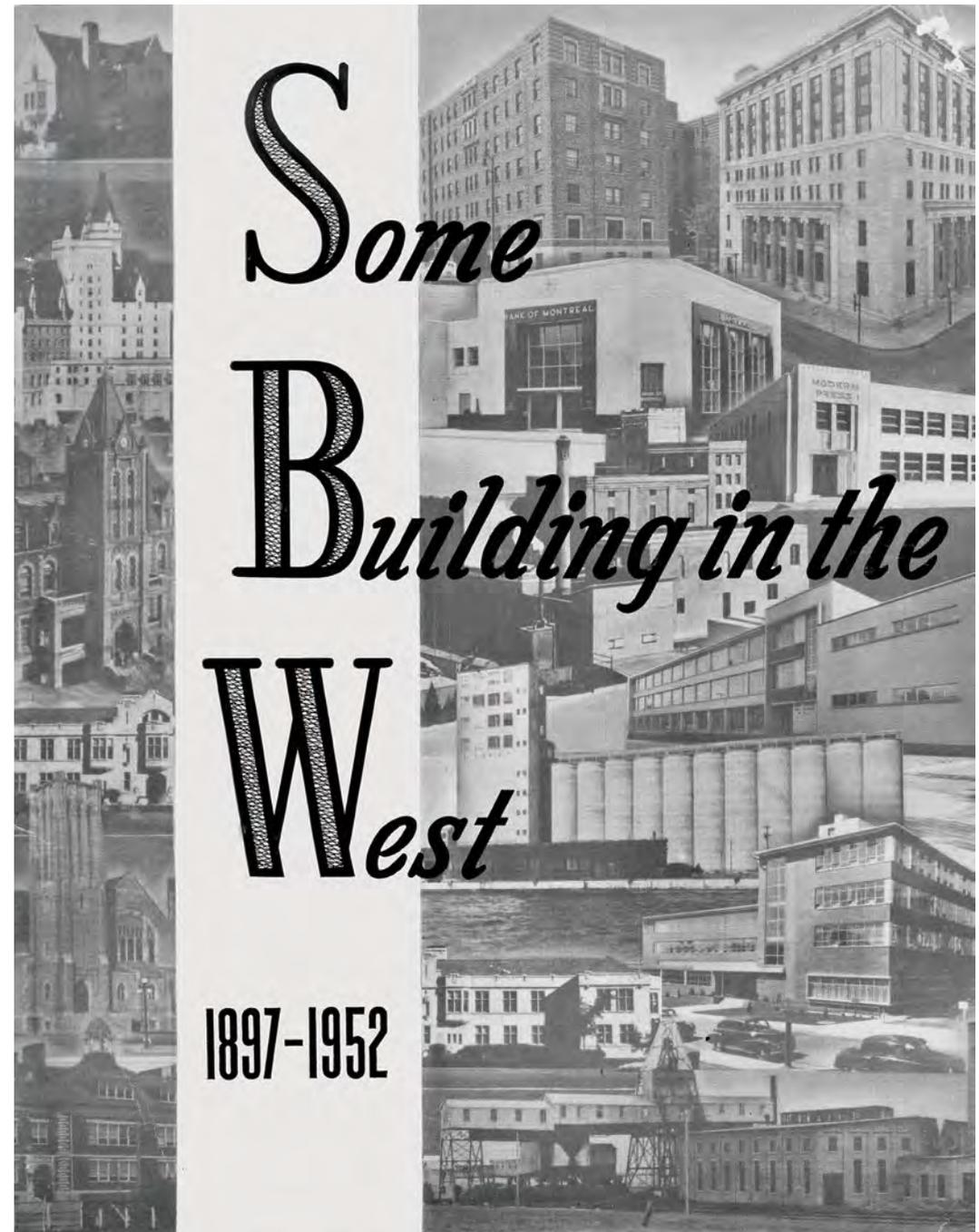
St. Paul's Hospital centre wing, Vancouver, 1950. A large number of hospitals, schools, and other government, commercial, and industrial buildings made business lively for all of SBW's branches throughout the booming 1950s.

Employee loyalty to SBW showed up in the number of people who stayed with the company for a decade or, in some cases, much longer. Of the ninety-one employees listed in the 1952 company history book, *Some Building in the West*, eleven had been around for twenty years or more, and another thirty-one between ten and twenty years.

The close-knit feelings among those who worked for SBW also extended to their relationships with clients, subtrades, architects, and other business partners. “Dad didn’t talk much about his work days,” says Don Johns about his father, Jack, “but he did talk a lot about his friends at the company or in the subtrades.” When Jack moved from Regina to Saskatoon in 1950 to become Sam Wright’s assistant and chief estimator for the branch, Don says that his dad found it hard to leave the close relationships he had with the subtrades and begin again in a new city.

Following the publication of *Some Building in the West*, a cascade of letters from subtrades and clients showed that the deep regard SBW had for them was mutual. “The tradition and reputation of the founders established a position in the construction business that is possibly unequalled in Canada,” read one such letter from Norman Jessiman, the general manager of Gypsum, Lime and Alabastine Canada. “It has been our company’s privilege to serve your company on almost every project from Winnipeg west during the past forty years, during which time our business relationship has been of the very best.”

Another letter, this one from A. Campbell of Dominion Bridge Company, read, “Our connection with your firm has been a very long and a very happy one.” And J. Monteith of Kelowna Builders Supply simply said, “As you know, the company is ‘tops’ as far as I am concerned.”



The cover of *Some Building in the West*, the SBW history book written and compiled by Mabel Smith and Alice Argue, Alexander Smith’s wife and daughter. The book was widely praised by SBW’s directors, subtrades, and clients and is an invaluable record of the company’s first fifty-five years in business.



Unprecedented Growth

WHEN SBW PUBLISHED *Some Building in the West* in 1952, both the company and the economies it operated in were enjoying the beginnings of a long, sustained period of growth and prosperity. The return of almost a million veterans after World War Two had led not only to the historic baby boom that would define a generation, but also to a construction boom of houses, schools, hospitals, and commercial and industrial buildings in Canada's growing metropolitan areas.

On the housing front, the military-related work that SBW did in the 1940s continued well into the '50s as the federal Department of National Defence spent millions shoring up infrastructure across the country. SBW's contracts included two housing projects for the Royal Canadian Air Force—one in Saskatoon and the other in Comox, B.C.

In addition to John Oliver High School, SBW put up numerous schools, hospitals, and other public buildings. Business was lively on the industrial and commercial sides too, with multiple warehouses, factories, breweries, shopping centres, and banks featuring in project lists—including the first drive-through bank in Vancouver, for the Bank of Montreal.

At their annual meetings in the first few years of the decade, SBW directors spoke with satisfaction about the healthy profits the business was generating and the prospects for ample work ahead. At the March 1954 meeting, for example, president Sam Wright rose to “thank all the shareholders and the executive of the firm for their splendid co-operation in bringing about such a very fine financial statement and the excellent results that had been obtained during the [previous] year.”



Saskatoon

Royal Canadian Air Force,
housing project (1952)

Regina

Bank of Montreal (1952)
CKCK Radio transmitter station and studio (1954)

Vancouver & Lower Mainland

Burnaby Hospital (1952)
Pearson Tuberculosis Hospital (1952)
Simpsons Sears shopping centre, Burnaby (1952)



[OPPOSITE & LEFT]
 Sicks' Capilano Brewery, Vancouver, under construction, ca. 1952, and completed, 1953. Located on Burrard Street just south of the Burrard Street Bridge, the brewery was acquired by Molson in 1958. SBW had an ongoing presence at the facility for over sixty years.



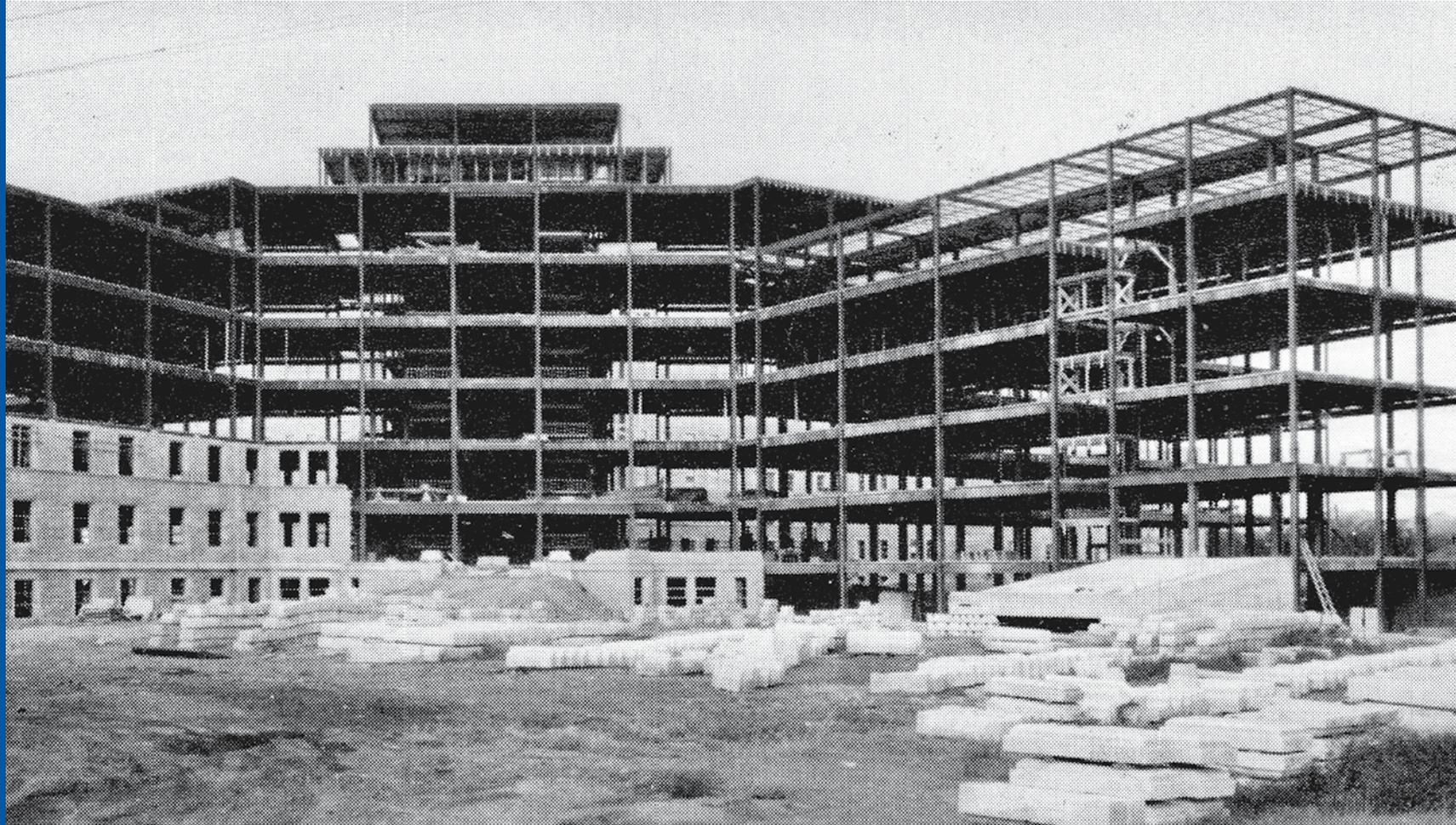
Vancouver Breweries addition (1952-53)
 Continental Can factory, Burnaby (1953)
 Sicks' Capilano Brewery, later acquired by Molson (1953) [above]

Vancouver Technical School addition and alterations (1954)
 St. Vincent's Hospital wing (1954)
 Mercantile Bank of Canada (1954)

Elsewhere in B.C.

Royal Canadian Air Force, officers' quarters, Comox (1952)

University of Saskatchewan Hospital under construction, Saskatoon, 1949. Material and labour shortages extended the completion of this project to 1955. During the course of the work, SBW hauled in 16,000 tons of sandstone from the banks of the South Saskatchewan River for masons to cut for the exterior walls of the hospital and auxiliary buildings. The project employed about 100 stonemasons at various stages, with about thirty brought in from Scotland.



“Throughout Saskatchewan are many landmarks . . . standing firm through the years, solid evidence of the quality workmanship of our company, a company which has grown up with our province and has faithfully served the citizens of Saskatchewan through bad times and good.”

SBW NEWSPAPER
AD, MAY 16, 1955,
TO COMMEMORATE
SASKATCHEWAN'S
GOLDEN JUBILEE

Shareholders enjoyed sizable dividend payouts, and key executive members—Sam Wright, Harold Johnson, Ernie Lord, Walter Douglas, Bill Johns, Vernon Dunnett, and Jack Johns—were awarded special annual bonuses as thanks for their contributions. Jack was a director by this point, having replaced the late secretary-treasurer George Barre in 1952.

During the early 1950s, the directors also started looking into a group medical insurance plan and a company pension plan. These ideas were signs not just of prosperous times and SBW's characteristic concern for employees' welfare, but also of broader social trends toward universal health coverage, Old Age Security, and employer benefit programs.

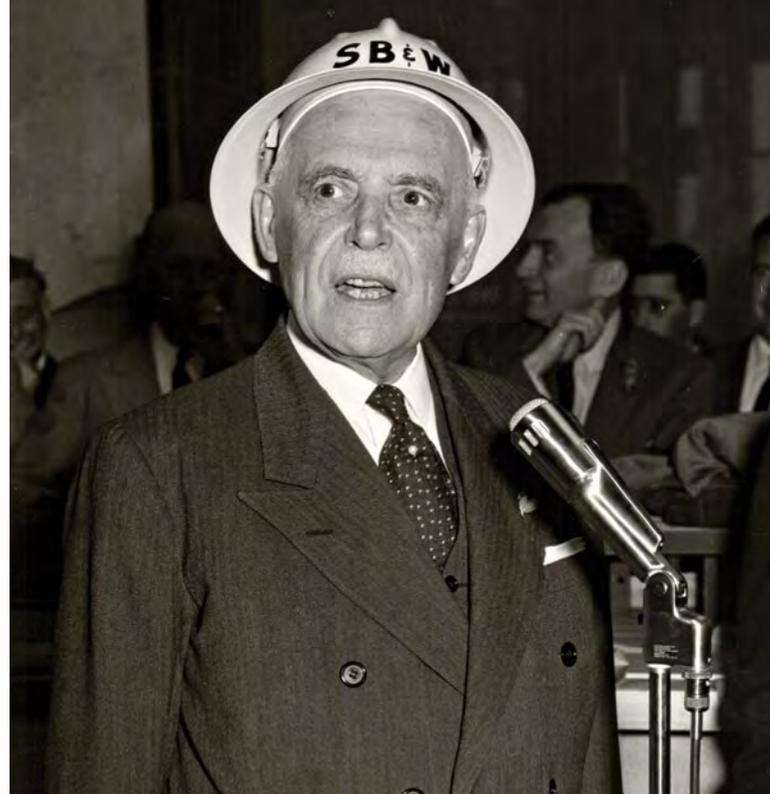
A Legendary Project

AT THEIR MARCH 1954 MEETING, the SBW directors' enthusiasm and generosity were no doubt fuelled by news announced just a few days earlier: the selection of the company's \$9.6-million tender to build the Vancouver Post Office.

Coming only a few months after another big win—the \$3.2-million contract to build the new Regina Post Office—the Vancouver Post Office was SBW's largest contract to that date when it was signed a few months later. The project was also massive in physical size: 600,000 square feet occupying an entire city block in downtown Vancouver. At the time it was the largest welded steel-frame structure in the world, the only building in Canada to have a rooftop landing pad for helicopters, and the single-biggest construction permit the City of Vancouver had ever issued.

"The post office was legendary for SBW," says Murray Saunders, whose father, Bob, was the chief engineer on the gigantic facility. From the time ground was broken in June 1954 to the official opening in March 1958, the post office project dramatically increased SBW's stature in the Vancouver market, with frequent newspaper articles reporting on construction progress and profiling SBW and its people.

One *Vancouver Sun* news feature in the fall of 1954 marvelled at the understated nature of the contractor responsible for the colossal project. "A layman would expect the nerve-centre for a \$10 million job to be a hive of activity with engineers, consultants and various assistants lining up in front of the manager's door all day long," the November 30, 1954, article read. Instead, "an old-world atmosphere pervades [SBW's] operation—no fuss, no hurry."



Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent visiting the Vancouver Post Office under construction, May 3, 1957. Photos of him wearing an SBW safety helmet appeared in newspapers across the country. The speaking platform that Bob Saunders designed for the prime minister's appearance later became the foundation for the Saunders's family cabin in Vernon. "It's still there to this day," says Bob's son Murray.

The article further pointed out that although "a small sign at the door of the stairs [to SBW's office] notifies job seekers that no help is wanted, this doesn't discourage people from applying by mail. Every day the letters come in from various parts of the U.S. and as far away as Panama."

While there were more job seekers than SBW or its subcontractors could take on, as many as 500 people were on the post office crew at the height of its construction. One was Robbie Morrice, who worked on the project as a young apprentice. "I was at the post office off and on, starting when they were up around the third floor," Robbie remembers. "I worked on the walls on the northeast corner. I also worked on the basement, and at that time you could drive trucks down in there. Everything had to be dug by hand, and there were compressors going and cement-finishing machines, and there was no air circulation. Everyone who worked in there got very sick with all the fumes, so they put in some air fans. And then, later on, I went back for a third time and I worked with another fellow, Jimmie Wong, to put \$60,000 worth of hardware on the doors—door locks, push plates, and handles. That would have bought six brand-new houses at the time!"

[RIGHT & OPPOSITE] Vancouver Post Office under construction, 1954, and completed, 1958. The project was gigantic in every way: the highest-value contract for SBW and the biggest building permit issued by the City of Vancouver to that point; 600,000 square feet covering an entire city block; an excavation that removed 140,000 cubic yards of rock and dirt, leaving a hole that could have held 420 neatly stacked 1,000-square-foot homes; 7,300 tons of steel in the largest welded steel-frame structure in the world; enough poured concrete to make forty-two miles of sidewalk; and 300 to 500 workers at the peak of construction.

When the post office opened in 1958, the *Province* called it “more than a big, beautiful building. It is really a glimpse into the future.”



Saskatoon

University of Saskatchewan Hospital (1955) [p. 88]
 Saskatoon City Hall (1956)
 Department of Agriculture science lab (1955)
 Jubilee Heights housing complex (1956)
Intercontinental Packers plant (1957)



Regina

Regina Post Office (1955)
 Regina Telephone building (1955)
 Safeway store (1955)
 Champion College addition (1956)
 Shell Oil building (1957)

Salvation Army hostel (1957)
 RCMP officers' mess and barracks block (1957)



Vancouver & Lower Mainland

Abbotsford High School (1955)

Industrial Engineering plant, Burnaby (1956)

University of British Columbia, B.C. Research Council lab (1955)

St. Paul's Hospital nurses' residence (1956)

Elsewhere in B.C.

Comox Air Force Base (1955)

“[The post office] is the biggest building contract ever awarded in Vancouver. We're kind of proud of this building.”

WALTER DOUGLAS, QUOTED IN THE
VANCOUVER SUN, NOVEMBER 9, 1956

SMITH BROS & WILSON LTD.

General Contractors and Engineers



for
VANCOUVER'S
Magnificent New
POST OFFICE



M. U. Douglass
Project Manager



R. G. Saunders, P.Eng.
Chief Engineer



W. D. Vandervoort
Chief Estimator



Walter Douglas, M.B.E.
Vice President & Manager

SMITH BROS & WILSON LTD.

VANCOUVER

1897

PIONEERS IN WESTERN CONSTRUCTION

1958

REGINA

SASKATOON

SBW's ad on opening day for the Vancouver Post Office, *Vancouver Sun*, March 14, 1958. The men featured in the ad—Martin Douglass, Bob Saunders, Walter Vandervoort, and Walter Douglas—all held key leadership roles at SBW for decades.

Not pictured here is Harold Johnson, who was instrumental in securing the post office contract but who retired as Vancouver branch manager before the project was completed. Walter Douglas, Harold's successor, said at a directors' meeting that SBW "was considered one of the big five contractors in Vancouver, and a lot of this prestige was due to the wonderful work of Mr. Johnson." Harold planned to remain an advisor to SBW's board of directors after his retirement, but he died in 1956 at the age of seventy-one.

A Glimpse of the Future

WHEN THE VANCOUVER POST OFFICE officially opened on March 14, 1958, the *Province* newspaper said that it was "more than a big, beautiful building." With its functional design, innovative structural steel frame, miles of conveyor belts, modern sorting machines, and rooftop helicopter pad, "it is really a glimpse into the future."

One could also glimpse SBW's future among the Vancouver team members who delivered the post office so successfully. Walter Douglas, for example, started the project as general superintendent and ended it as the Vancouver branch manager, succeeding Harold Johnson in 1955 when Harold retired after forty-eight years with the company.

Bob Saunders, the chief engineer on the post office, had also proven himself—not only as a skilled technician, but also as a natural leader. "Dad designed all the formwork on the post office, and his draftsmanship, all done by hand, was impeccable," says his son Murray. "He was a hard worker and very bright, and he was very personable. He always had a good rapport with everyone."

The chief estimator on the post office, Walter Vandervoort—or "Van," as he was often called—also stood out as a key figure who was willing to give his all for SBW. "The post office was a hard-bid job," says Murray, "and Van actually had a heart attack closing the tender, or shortly thereafter. He survived, fortunately. He was a real character."

At a directors' meeting midway through the post office contract, Walter Douglas praised the high calibre of both Bob and Van, recommending that each be invited to buy shares in the company. The other directors agreed, extending the same invitation to Bruce Wiebe and John Lord in Regina and Cliff Wright in Saskatoon.



[CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT] Bob Saunders, Walter Vandervoort, and Paul Hlady, 1955; Cliff Wright (standing at left with members of the Canadian Construction Association), 1958; and Jack Johns, ca. early 1950s. In the mid- to late 1950s, all became part of SBW's core management group.



“The Smith brothers would heartily approve of the way the management of SBW is carrying [on].”

LORA SMITH, SBW
SHAREHOLDER AND
DIRECTOR, 1956

Around this time, the directors seemed once again to be thinking about succession. George Johns, still a vice president and advisor to the board, said as much in 1955 when he stated that “in the near future, some of the older directors would have to resign from the board and make room for younger men.”

It was a few more years before the board’s makeup would really change, but a pair of back-to-back retirements altered the management group significantly.

First, in the spring of 1957, Ernie Lord announced his retirement after twenty-nine years with the company, though he remained a board director for the time being. Bill Johns took Ernie’s place as Regina branch manager, and Bruce Wiebe took on Ernie’s secretary-treasurer duties.

The following year, Sam Wright retired as president after forty-eight years with SBW. He too remained a director, but his departure triggered a management shuffle right across the company, with Walter Douglas becoming president and general manager, Bob Saunders named assistant manager for the Vancouver branch, Jack Johns succeeding Sam as Saskatoon branch manager, and Bill Johns becoming a company vice president and the manager for Saskatchewan overall. Paul Hlady also joined the core group in 1958, stepping in as secretary for the Vancouver branch to fill the void left by Vernon Dunnett’s death the previous summer.

When the new management group took the reins, SBW was continuing to enjoy strong financial results and excellent prospects. Year after year for the rest of the 1950s, branch managers reported that they had more than enough work on hand and were confident in SBW’s ability to win its share of new projects coming up. “The profit picture looks good,” Walter Douglas said in one typical report in 1958.

But by the end of the decade, the growing consensus was that the long building boom was reaching a saturation point. Speaking in late 1958 as SBW president and as the president of the Vancouver General Contractors Association, Walter Douglas said that “current levels of activity . . . might well be maintained in the earlier months of 1959,” but that he did “not anticipate a return to what we had here in 1956–57 in the way of bountiful times.”

Saskatoon

Medical Services Building (1958)
Saskatchewan Power Corporation office
building (1958)
Hudson’s Bay store (1959)

Regina

Bolodrome (1958)
Exhibition Curlodrome (1958)
YMCA (1959)

South Saskatchewan Dam buildings (1958)
Saskatchewan Power Corporation warehouse (1959)
Bank of Montreal addition (1959)

An Unexpected Turn

AS SBW ENTERED THE 1960s, signs of slackening conditions were everywhere. Branch managers reported that there were fewer large jobs out for tender and there was keen price competition for the projects that were coming out, with some competitors underbidding to win the work. Pockets of labour strife were further unsettling conditions. When Walter Douglas was elected president of the Vancouver Builders Exchange in February 1960, he was heading up an increasingly turbulent industry in that city, but the no-nonsense, “ruddy-faced Scot,” as one Vancouver newspaper described him, seemed the right person for the times.

So it was a great loss not only to SBW, but also to the Vancouver construction industry, when Walter died of a heart attack on March 28 while in Regina for an SBW board meeting. He and his wife had just had dinner with the other directors at the Hotel Saskatchewan when he complained of a sore arm, then collapsed. He was sixty-six years old when he died.

Convening their meeting the next morning, SBW’s stricken directors observed a moment of silence out of respect for their late president. George Johns made a motion to express the directors’ deep regret for Walter’s untimely passing and extend their sympathy to his wife and family.



[ABOVE LEFT] Walter Douglas, 1955. Walter served as SBW president from 1958 to March 1960, when he died of a heart attack while in Regina for an SBW board meeting. In addition to his leadership of SBW, Walter was heavily involved in local construction industry associations. As president of the Vancouver General Contractors Association and the Vancouver Builders Exchange, one issue he tried to advance was apprenticeship, believing that careful and proper training would ensure the development of first-class journeymen—a trademark concern for quality craftsmanship that also defined SBW.

[ABOVE RIGHT] Bill Johns, ca. late 1960s. After Walter Douglas’s untimely death in 1960, Bill succeeded him as company president. Like Walter and others at SBW, Bill was actively involved in construction industry associations. He served as vice president of the Regina Construction Association in 1967 and president in 1968.

[OPPOSITE] SBW president Sam Wright (standing left) and Saskatchewan MLA Lachlan McIntosh (standing right) at the official opening of Saskatoon City Hall, 1956. Sam retired in 1958 after forty-eight years with SBW. At a company board meeting, director Louise Kelleher said that Sam “had the finest record during his long service with the company.” Walter Douglas succeeded Sam as company president, and Jack Johns took over as Saskatoon branch manager.

Vancouver & Lower Mainland

Vancouver Post Office (1958) [p. 91]
Jericho housing project (1958)
Grace Hospital extension (1958)
B.C. Electric substation and office building (1958)

Chilliwack General Hospital extension (1959)
Eaton’s warehouse and service building (1959)
Dominion Bridge office (1959)

[RIGHT & OPPOSITE]

W.M. Farrell Building under construction for B.C. Telephone, 1957 (completed 1960), and O’Keefe Brewery, 1961, both Vancouver. Although business in the early 1960s was not as lively as in the previous decade, SBW’s Vancouver branch outperformed the Saskatchewan locations in this period with a string of sizable projects like these.



While the directors had been planning for future succession, they had not anticipated this shocking turn of events. As they looked around the board table, their most experienced branch manager, Regina’s Bill Johns, seemed the most obvious choice to succeed Walter as president and general manager. Thrust into this position “ready or not,” as Bill’s daughter, Carol, later described it, Bill expressed appreciation for the advice that his father (George Johns), Ernie Lord, and Sam Wright had given over the years, and stated that he would be “looking forward to it more so in the passing of Mr. Walter Douglas.”

Also at that March 29 meeting, the directors promoted Bob Saunders to Vancouver branch manager—initially in an acting capacity to give the new president “time to assess the staffs of the company before making any recommendation.” The role was made permanent later that year, and Bob also soon joined the board of directors.



Saskatoon

Federated Co-operatives
warehouse (1961)

Regina

Catholic monastery (1961)

Vancouver & Lower Mainland

Department of National Defence housing units, Chilliwack (1960)
W.M. Farrell Building for B.C. Telephone (1960) [above]
O’Keefe Brewery (1961) [p. 97]
Fidelity Life building (1961)
Vantel Broadcasting (1961)



“Dad loved to bid the weird and wonderful that would involve schemes and making up tools and devices. Where there’s risk, there are rewards.”

MURRAY SAUNDERS

A New Era

BY 1961, THE FORECAST DOWNTURN for western Canada’s construction industry had shown up on SBW’s books. At that year’s annual meeting, Jack Johns reported that permits in Saskatoon were down one-third compared to the same time the previous year, and competition was keen. John Lord, who started reporting for Regina after Bill Johns became president, said, “The picture is anything but bright for the next year. We certainly have enjoyed a very fair share of the work but competition is very bad, forcing the margin down.”

Despite these gloomy reports, president Bill Johns stayed upbeat: “Our firm still has a fair volume,” he said, adding that he felt SBW depended mostly on about “eight key personnel who were men dedicated to the success of our firm. For the service and co-operation of these men over the past year, he expressed his thanks.”

The directors decided that four of these men—Bob Saunders, Walter Vandervoort, Paul Hlady, and Bruce Wiebe—should be entitled to acquire more company shares. They also singled out Cliff Wright as deserving “half the credit for the operation at Saskatoon.” Cliff was also a shareholder by this time, having received a transfer of some of his father’s shares in the mid-1950s. Sam Wright would continue to transfer shares to Cliff in the early 1960s.

Of all these “key personnel,” Bob Saunders’s leadership talent stood out, and he was made a company vice president in 1963. His influence was growing outside SBW’s walls as well. Like the Vancouver branch managers before him—Alexander Smith, Harold Johnson, and Walter Douglas—Bob was actively involved in industry associations. After joining the board of the Vancouver Builders Exchange in 1961, he was immediately appointed chair of its membership committee.



Saskatoon

Saskatchewan Technical Institute (1963)

Regina

Central Library (1962)
Bank of Canada office (1962)

Elsewhere in Saskatchewan

Holy Family Hospital, Prince Albert (1963)

“It was obvious that Saunders was not going to be a mere figurehead at the Exchange when given a job,” says *A Single Voice*, the book about the association’s history. “Over the next years he would be one of the most active figures in B.C. on behalf of the construction industry.” Knowing that the business was as much about people and relationships as it was about technical skill, Bob “would always stress the importance of social functions in the life of the construction association.” Bob was elected first vice president for the Builders Exchange in 1963 and vice president of the Vancouver General Contractors Association in 1964.

Even with Bob’s increasing involvement in these associations, he never lost sight of his number one priority: the success of SBW’s Vancouver branch. Under Bob’s leadership and with the help of his key lieutenants, Walter Vandervoort and Paul Hlady, the Vancouver team won a string of sizable projects in the early 1960s. “This is a period of great expansion in British Columbia,” Bob reported to the board, “and there is a tremendous amount of work being tendered on at the present time.”

By comparison, the Regina and Saskatoon branches combined were doing about half as much business as the Vancouver location, with Regina particularly struggling. There were a few good-sized projects, such as the Saskatchewan Technical Institute in Saskatoon, the Central Library and Bank of Canada office in Regina, and the Holy Family Hospital in Prince Albert—but large jobs were scarce, and competitive pressures often forced SBW to bid with very low markup.

Things came to a head in 1964. By this time, SBW’s board of directors was heavily weighted with those who preferred to see the dynamic Bob Saunders lead the company in place of Bill Johns. Long-time director George Johns, Bill’s father, had passed away in 1962, and Bob’s close friends and allies, Walter Vandervoort and Cliff Wright, had become directors in 1963. The Smith family majority shareholders, represented by Duncan Smith’s daughter Marjorie Fisher and Alexander Smith’s daughter Isabel Shields, evidently supported Bob too. At the April 1964 annual general meeting, they made and seconded the motion to appoint forty-year-old Bob Saunders as the company’s president and general manager, forcing Bill Johns to step aside. A new era for SBW had begun.

Vancouver & Lower Mainland

Mc & Mc (McLennan, McFeely & Prior) warehouse and office building (1962)
St. Paul’s Hospital laboratory and laundry (1962)
Pacific National Exhibition Agrodome (1963)
Mission Hospital (1965)

Elswhere in B.C.

Nanaimo General Hospital (1962)
B.C. Vocational School, Kelowna (1963)
B.C. Forest Products Crofton paper mill (1965)

A Strong Nucleus of People

BOB SAUNDERS WASN'T THE ONLY PERSON to take centre stage in this period. Walter Vandervoort, Cliff Wright, Bill Katerenchuk, Paul Hlady, and Bruce Wiebe comprised the core management team that coalesced around Bob in the early years of his presidency and helped him implement the changes he felt were necessary to revitalize SBW for the future.

Walter Vandervoort, chief estimator in Vancouver, was appointed company secretary-treasurer in 1965. This placed SBW's overall financial administration in Vancouver and allowed Bob to move the official head office from Regina to his home base of 1267 Richards Street.

Cliff Wright's emergence as the key figure in Saskatchewan took place over several years as Bill and Jack Johns gradually stepped back. Cliff was a natural leader in the mould of his dad, Sam, who died in 1965. "Cliff's will to succeed and never-give-up approach, no matter how tough it got, and his way with people and how he could make each individual feel special" were just some of the qualities that stood him apart, says Rick Schindel, who worked with Cliff for years.

Bill Katerenchuk—who joined SBW in 1961 and was project superintendent on the Port Alberni pulp mill and general superintendent on the Crofton paper mill—also became a key member of Bob's senior team. When SBW moved into Alberta and established new branch offices in Edmonton in 1967 and Calgary in 1968, Bob appointed Bill as Alberta manager. Bill also joined the board of directors in 1968.

In 1969, Bob appointed these three men executive vice presidents—Walter for B.C., Cliff for Saskatchewan, and Bill for Alberta—to serve as an executive committee. This committee would meet regularly "to discuss the changing needs of our industry, the coordinating of purchasing and standardization procedures," Bob wrote in his annual report. Paul Hlady took Walter's place as company secretary-treasurer and joined the executive committee too. Bruce Wiebe remained secretary for Saskatchewan, and W. Hewko was named secretary for Alberta.

For the time being, Bob left Jack Johns as vice president and Saskatoon manager, but he replaced Bill Johns with Bruce Wiebe as the Regina manager. Bill's career with SBW, and the Regina branch's future, had been on tenterhooks since 1965, when the directors considered closing the floundering location before deciding to let Bill try to turn things around. Aided by people like estimator Vic Serdula, who joined SBW in 1962, Bill had managed to keep the branch afloat, but it wasn't quite enough. In 1969, with Regina once again producing a net loss, the directors put the branch back on review and asked Bill to accept an early retirement. After forty-four years with SBW, Bill agreed to step aside, though he remained a board director into the 1970s.



[CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT]

Bob Saunders, Walter Vandervoort, Cliff Wright, Paul Hlady, and Bruce Wiebe. After Bob was appointed as SBW's new president in 1964, this core management team ushered in a new era for SBW, one centred in Vancouver rather than in Saskatchewan—though the latter remained an important part of the company's overall operations. Walter and Paul were key figures in B.C., and Cliff and Bruce in Saskatchewan.



“In my dad Cliff’s era, they performed on a handshake. SBW and my father and Bob Saunders all had such integrity. People completely trusted them, and that value system was pushed through the company. They knew there are more important things than just maximizing profit.”

LORNE WRIGHT, SON OF CLIFF WRIGHT, GRANDSON OF SAM WRIGHT, AND PRESIDENT OF WRIGHT CONSTRUCTION, AN SBW JOINT-VENTURE PARTNER



MacMillan Bloedel Port Alberni pulp mill, 1966. While Bill Katerenchuk superintended SBW's construction of the No. 5 mill, he and Bob Saunders often went hunting on the weekends. In March 1964, they asked Robbie Morrice to look after the job so they could go on just such a trip for the Easter long weekend. "That was double time all the way through, so I was happy to do it," says Robbie. However, just before Robbie was scheduled to leave Vancouver for Port Alberni, a magnitude 9.2 earthquake struck off the coast of Alaska and triggered a tsunami. Six gigantic waves—including one three storeys tall—crashed into Port Alberni starting around midnight on Good Friday, uprooting trees, tossing around cars and boats, and washing away entire homes and other buildings. Miraculously, no one was killed. "That tsunami flooded out the whole mill job," Robbie remembers. "Bill and Bob didn't go hunting that weekend."



Regina

Miller Composite School (1966)

Saskatoon

Cancer and Medical Research Building addition (1966)
 University of Saskatchewan, Central Heating Plant addition (1966)
 Market Mall (1966)
 Saskatchewan Technical Institute addition (1966)
 Walter Murray Collegiate vocational wing (1966)

Edmonton

University of Alberta power plant (1967)

Scenes from SBW office parties, mid- to late 1960s. (Top) Paul Hlady (in glasses) and unidentified man, 1964. (Bottom) Bill Cann (standing) and Don Grant (seated, centre), ca. 1969. Bill joined SBW as a mechanic in 1964, and Don came aboard as a surveyor in 1969.

A few other memorable figures in SBW's history arrived in this period, mostly in the Vancouver branch. One was Joe Burnett, who joined as a project superintendent in 1963, drawn to SBW by the high regard that the local industry held for the company. Bill Cann, whom Murray Saunders calls "the best small-tool mechanic in B.C.," came aboard in 1964.

A few years later, in 1967, Ted Skodje joined and was made general superintendent for B.C. "Ted was really bright and was a fantastic promotor of apprenticeship," says Murray. Fred Usselman started the following year, in 1968, after retiring from a successful lacrosse career. He was the initial superintendent on the Board of Trade Tower before Robbie Morrice took over and Fred returned to the office. Bob appointed Fred executive assistant, responsible for co-ordination of special projects, at the end of 1969.

Three more new faces in this period were estimator Al Thompson, accountant Walter Matiash, and carpenter apprentice George Blair. George joined in 1969 after someone from SBW came to speak to his class at the Vancouver Vocational Institute. "They came in and said that they wanted to hire the top person in the class, and that was me," he remembers. "They did that annually, taking the top people from the class. That's how they built the staff. And SBW was the company you wanted to work for if you wanted opportunities."



“Dad never wanted to work anywhere else. There was a sense of pride and camaraderie at SBW, a sense of something solid.”

PAULA HLADY, PAUL HLADY'S DAUGHTER

Vancouver & Lower Mainland

Pacific Press Building (1966)
 North Vancouver Centennial Community Centre (1966)
 City of Vancouver, central works yard (1966)
 Vancouver International Airport, utilities building (1967)

Elsewhere in B.C.

MacMillan Bloedel Port Alberni pulp mill (1966) [p. 102]
Selkirk College, Castlegar (1966)
 Cowichan District Hospital (1967)
 Prince George Secondary School (1967)



Bob Saunders no doubt had all of these people in mind when he reported to the board at the end of the decade that SBW “had a good nucleus of managers and engineers ready to move up when their time came.”

At the board level, Peter Shields, Alexander Smith’s grandson, replaced his mother, Isabel, as a director in 1969. Peter was a civil engineer and had been project superintendent on the Crofton mill project, and he would be an influential member of SBW’s board for years to come.

As the new executive team was taking shape in the mid- to late 1960s, the company won and delivered an impressive array of projects that brought record-breaking volume in several of these years—particularly in the booming B.C. market, though the Saskatchewan branches and the new Edmonton location also experienced brisk business.

In each of 1966 and 1967, SBW smashed its own profit records. Perhaps it was this, along with Bob’s persistence, that finally led the board to approve the pension plan, salary continuance plan, and group insurance plan that had been lingering in review mode since the 1950s. “This is a milestone in the history of Smith Bros. & Wilson,” Bob said at the 1966 board meeting after the directors voted in favour of these proposals.

[LEFT] Peter Shields, ca. late 1960s. Grandson of SBW co-founder Alexander Smith, Peter joined the company’s board in 1969.

[OPPOSITE LEFT] Board of Trade Tower, Vancouver, 1969. Due to its use of gang forms, a new concrete construction method for SBW and much of the industry at the time, the Board of Trade Tower “is the project I’m proudest of from my time at SBW,” says Robbie Morrice, who ran the exterior part of the project while Fred Usselman led the interior work. “We could pour a floor a week,” says Robbie. “Nobody else in Vancouver was doing that. I really enjoyed working on that tower because my hands were never tied. I was told to get the thing up there, and I had some good men working for me to do it. It was a real accomplishment.”

[OPPOSITE CENTRE] Martello Tower, Vancouver, 1969. At thirty-two storeys, the high-rise was the tallest apartment block in Vancouver at the time of its construction.

[OPPOSITE RIGHT] Evergreen Place, Winnipeg, 1969. This was one of SBW’s first major projects in Winnipeg, leading to the opening of a new branch there in 1970.



Winnipeg

Evergreen Place (1969)
[p. 105]

Saskatoon

Queen Elizabeth Power Station
extension (1969)

Regina

Regina Union Centre (1968)
Saskatchewan Wheat Pool addition (1968)
YWCA (1968)

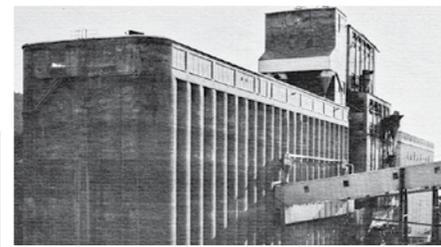
Edmonton

Wilkinson Steel plant (1968)
Salisbury High School (1969)
Clover Bar generating station (1969)
Rosslyn reservoir (1969)



“A lot of my memories about SBW are not of the company. They’re about the relationships.”

GEORGE BLAIR



Vancouver & Lower Mainland

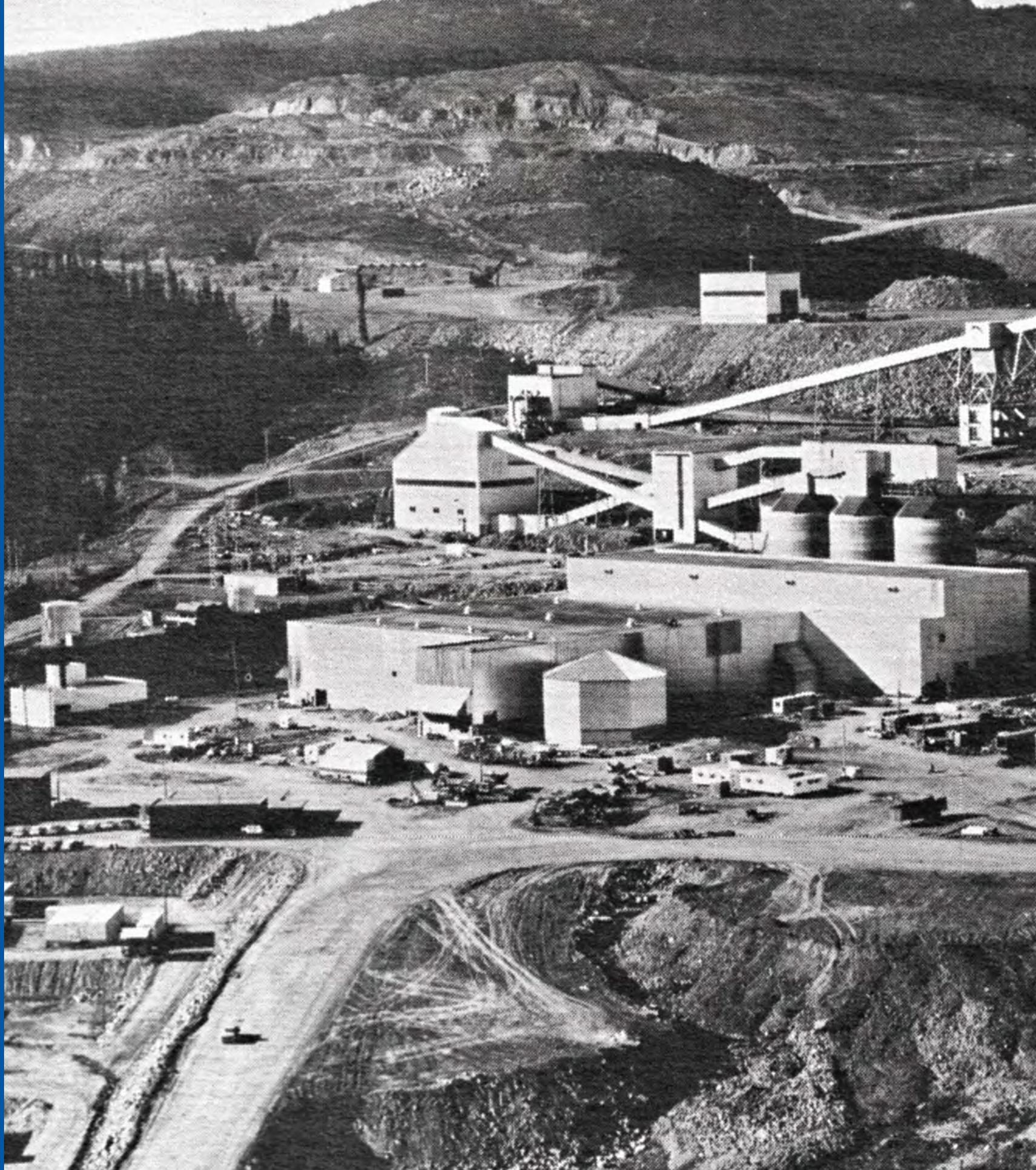
University of British Columbia, Ladner Clock Tower (1968)
Board of Trade Tower (1969) [above]
Martello Tower (1969) [above]

Elsewhere in B.C.

Prince Rupert grain elevator (1968)
Vernon Jubilee Hospital addition (1968)
Brenda Mines concentrator plant, Peachland (1969) [p. 106]

“During the 15-year period, 1954–69, SBW’s Vancouver branch carried out \$120 million of major contracts, 30 jobs valued individually at over \$1 million.”

“CONTRACTS WORTH \$50 MILLION HELD BY SMITH BROS. & WILSON,” UNTITLED NEWSPAPER CLIPPING IN SBW SCRAPBOOK, JUNE 15, 1970





An Optimistic Outlook

BY THE TIME THE 1960s came to a close, Bob Saunders's prominence in industry associations had risen significantly. He was president of the Amalgamated Construction Association of B.C. (successor to the Builders Exchange and the Vancouver Construction Association) in 1965 and 1967, national vice president of the Canadian Construction Association (CCA) in 1968, and senior vice president of the CCA in 1969, on the path to becoming the president of this organization in early 1970.

These positions gave Bob and SBW a regular voice in provincial and national newspapers about the issues facing the construction industry, and some of Bob's comments in these articles hint at the things that concerned him about SBW's future as well. In 1965, for example, Bob suggested that increasing labour union demands were "getting out of hand" and threatening the solvency of unionized contractors, like SBW, despite a busy building scene. "There is so much work going on that contractors have to give in to union demands or stop working, and they can't afford to shut down projects."

In another feature in 1969, Bob said that the construction industry was "the most controlled business in the country, regulated by all levels of government, from federal down to municipal. It is this control and restriction which does not permit us to be as efficient as we are capable of being." And in another article, Bob cited high taxes, rising interest rates, and increased wages as other looming issues.

Despite these concerns, Bob was optimistic about the 1970s. Canadians, he said, "will require 2 million new homes and double the number of schools, hospitals, factories, and office buildings." And in western Canada, he was confident that SBW was in just the right spots to build many of them.

[OPPOSITE] Brenda Mines concentrator plant, Peachland, 1969. This \$4.5-million contract, along with numerous other \$1-million-plus projects, brought record-breaking volume to SBW as it closed out the 1960s.



Over the years, the company has earned a reputation for reliability second to none. The key, of course, is people—our greatest asset. The experience and expertise of our people are what have built this company and are what keep it in the forefront of a changing industry.”

SBW BUSINESS BROCHURE
FEBRUARY 1979

A large, stylized number '5' is centered on the page. The number is rendered in a dark blue color with a slight 3D effect, appearing to be slightly offset from the background. A smaller, solid red number '5' is superimposed over the center of the larger blue number.

5

Repairing the Cracks
1970 to 1989

“For three-quarters of a century Smith Bros. & Wilson Limited have been serving the construction requirements of Western Canada. With offices in all major cities in the four western provinces, the Company is able to service the needs wherever these may occur throughout the entire area.”

SBW BUSINESS BROCHURE, 1971

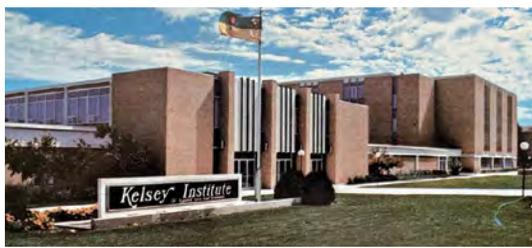
Cracks beneath the Surface

WHEN BOB SAUNDERS BECAME PRESIDENT of the Canadian Construction Association in February 1970, the national spotlight that shone on SBW showed a company with limitless potential. Outwardly, at least, the momentum that had lifted SBW to new heights in the 1960s seemed to be building even higher in the new decade.

In mid-June, a glowing three-page newspaper profile—“Contracts Worth \$50 Million Held by Smith Bros. & Wilson”—highlighted how SBW, “a pioneer in contracting for major building and engineering construction projects in Western Canada,” was “still growing strongly in volume, diversity and geographic spread.” In addition to detailing projects in the company’s B.C. and Saskatchewan strongholds, the article gave special attention to the growth of the new Alberta division, headed up by Bill Katerenchuk.

“When the Edmonton office was opened in 1967, it had two contracts totalling \$1.2 million, supervisory and office staff of four, field force of 20, payroll budget \$60,000,” the article stated. “Today its operations extend throughout Alberta and even to Winnipeg . . . with a staff of 35, average field crew of 200, and annual payroll of \$1.6 million . . . Work under way in Edmonton, Calgary and Winnipeg is valued at \$20.9 million”—almost half the total \$50 million in contracts that SBW had in hand at the time.

[OPPOSITE] Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau (front left) and SBW president Bob Saunders (front right), November 30, 1970. Bob became president of the Canadian Construction Association in 1970, a national role that gave him—and SBW—a strong voice on issues affecting the construction industry.



Saskatoon

Kelsey Institute of Applied Arts and Sciences (1970)
Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation headquarters (1970)
 Zeller's mall (1970)
 Kilburn Hall (1970)
 University of Saskatchewan renovations (1973)
 RCMP museum (1973)
 Bank of Montreal main branch renovations (1973)



Regina

Regina Public Library
 mezzanine (1972)
 Miller Composite
 High School addition
 (1973)

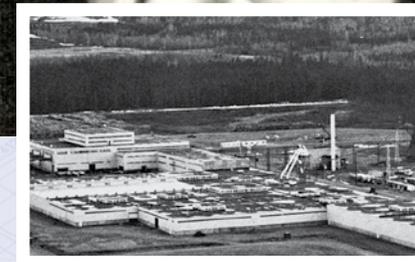


Calgary

Kingsland Gardens (1970)
Calgary Market Mall (1971)
 Western Centre (1972)

Edmonton

Londonderry Plaza (1970)
 Crescent Place Apartments
 (1970) [p. 114]



Vancouver & Lower Mainland

University of British Columbia, Woodward Library (1970)
Bamberton silos (1970)
CP Air engine-testing facility (1971)
Foremost Foods plant, Burnaby (1971)
University of British Columbia, Geological Sciences
Centre (1972)

Hollyburn Plaza, West Vancouver (1972)
H.Y. Louie warehouse, Burnaby (1972)
New Vista high-rise, Burnaby (1972) [p. 115]
Woodward's parking garage (1972)
North Vancouver seniors' centre (1973)
No. 2 and No. 7 fire halls (1973)
Kapilano 100 building, West Vancouver (1974) [p. 115]

Elsewhere in B.C.

Northwood pulp mill, Prince George (1970)
Bulkley Valley Forest Industries sawmill, Houston (1971)
Hiram Walker distillery, Winfield (1971)



John Lord, 1970. John, son of long-time SBW director Ernie Lord, joined the company in 1945 and was a key figure in Regina before leaving to form his own contracting firm in 1962. In 1970, SBW welcomed him back as a trusted hand to manage the new branch in Winnipeg. Throughout his career, John shared his SBW colleagues' commitment to participating in industry associations, serving as both Saskatchewan vice president and chair of the General Contractors section of the Canadian Construction Association, twice president of the Regina Construction Association, and president of the Saskatchewan Construction Association. John stayed with SBW until 1975, when the Winnipeg branch closed.

Not long after this article ran, SBW installed John Lord as manager of an official branch in Winnipeg, where the company had built the Evergreen Place apartment block and had numerous other projects in the works. The new branch not only gave more attention to the burgeoning Winnipeg market, but also allowed SBW to state that it now had offices in all major cities in western Canada: Winnipeg, Regina, Saskatoon, Edmonton, Calgary, and Vancouver, plus a branch in Vernon, B.C., set up in 1967–68 to handle projects in the Okanagan.

As positive as all this seemed, behind the scenes in the summer of 1970, SBW was grappling with a sudden sharp downturn in B.C. and Saskatchewan, where widespread labour strikes and lockouts all but cancelled that year's peak construction season for unionized companies. "The cost to the economy is colossal in terms of lost employment and earnings to construction workers, added expenses to suppliers and contractors, delays to the buyers and users of construction services and lost business to retailers and others that is normally generated by construction activity," said Bob Saunders in a July 7 article in the *Province*, whose headline, "Building Hopes 'Dashed,'" said it all.

At SBW's 1971 directors' meeting, B.C. manager Walter Vandervoort reported that the strikes had reduced the company's profits in the province by \$150,000—and the problems weren't over yet. Labour strife and inflation continued to hammer the market, to the point where the B.C. division's profits were down 90 percent by the time the directors met again in the spring of 1972.



[CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT] Scenes from the Vancouver office, 1970: B.C. manager Walter Vandervoort, accountant Walter Matiash, secretary Lillian Giles, employees W. Hewko (standing) and Terry Senft (seated), and secretary-treasurer Paul Hlady and secretary Edna Brooks. At the time, SBW was dealing with a sharp downturn in business and profitability in B.C. and Saskatchewan due to ongoing labour strife and rampant inflation.



ACE
CORP
MELTON

MELTON

The Saskatchewan division didn't fare much better. Regina posted an operating loss for 1970, prompting the directors to once again consider the closure of that branch. By 1972, Saskatchewan's total profits were down 65 percent from the previous year. "Fewer projects are out for tender," reported Cliff Wright. "The profit picture for the coming year is not good."

By contrast, the Alberta division was on fire, with profits increasing almost twelve-fold in the 1970–71 fiscal year. By using Selkirk Construction, a new wholly owned, non-union subsidiary, to fulfill contracts, the Alberta branches had largely avoided the work stoppages experienced in B.C. and Saskatchewan, and Bill Katerenchuk had led the company into residential developments and shopping centres.

But even in profitable Alberta, things were not quite as they appeared. The Alberta operation turned out to be built on much looser footings than the sturdy foundations underpinning the B.C. and Saskatchewan branches. When cracks appeared, they not only brought the Alberta division down like a house of cards, but threatened to destroy all of SBW along with it.

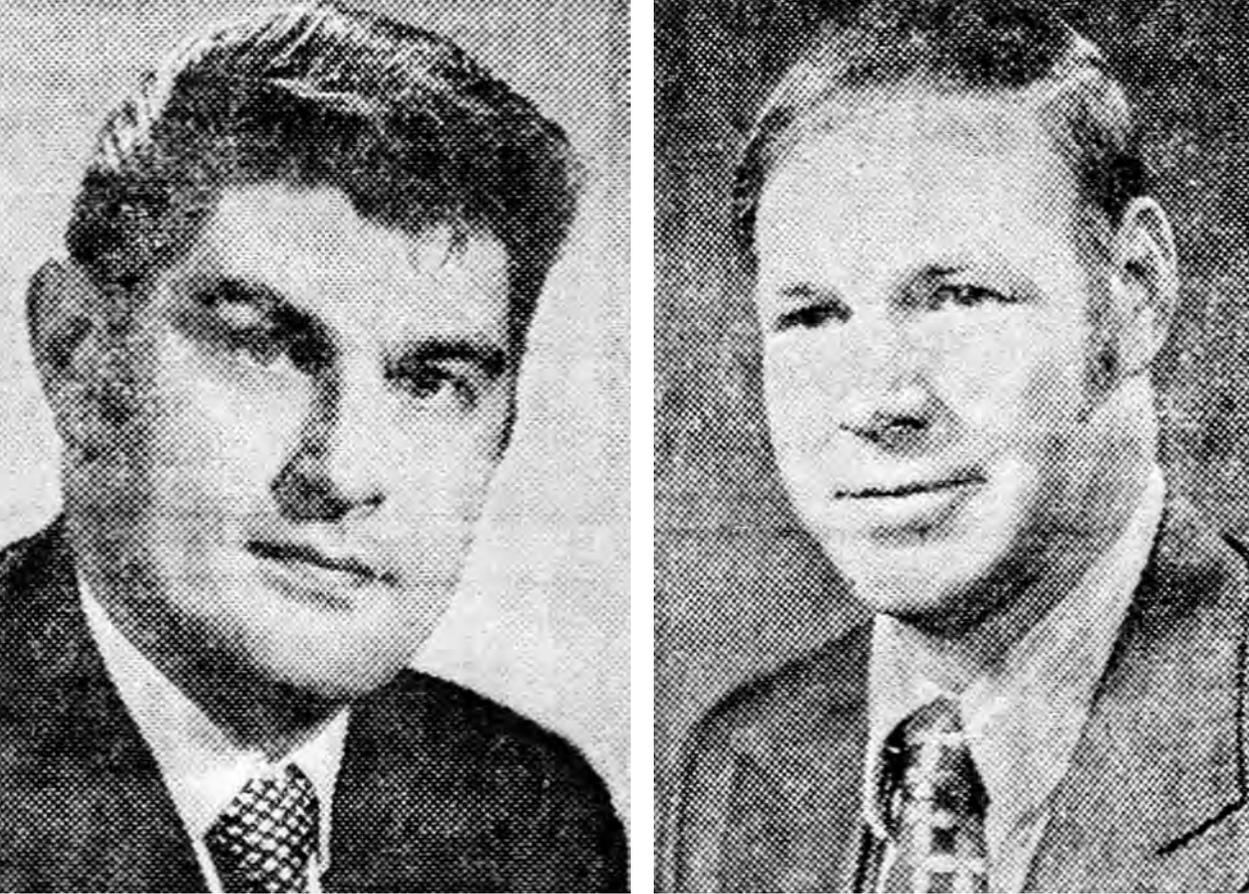


[ABOVE LEFT] New Vista high-rise, Burnaby, completed in 1972. SBW won this project in a memorable way. After SBW and a competitor submitted the exact same bid, \$1,368,000, for this project, the tie was broken with the cutting of cards. Bob Saunders drew the seven of hearts, narrowly beating out the competitor's draw of the five of hearts.



[ABOVE RIGHT] Kapilano 100 building, West Vancouver, 1974. The distinctive twelve-storey office tower was developed in a partnership between Squamish First Nation and Park Royal Shopping Centre.

[OPPOSITE] Crescent Place Apartments, Edmonton, 1970. Established in the late 1960s, the Edmonton and Calgary branches grew rapidly in their first few years of operation, mainly through shopping centre and residential or commercial high-rise projects like this one. Serious problems with the Alberta division's management came to light in 1971, forcing the closure of the two provincial branches and nearly bringing all of SBW down with them.



Cracks Become Crisis

THE FIRST PUBLIC SIGN THAT SBW had a problem in Alberta came in December 1971, when Bob Saunders abruptly removed Bill Katerenchuk as the head of the division. A newspaper notice dated December 10 announced that Fred Usselman had replaced Bill as Alberta regional manager for both SBW and Selkirk Construction, and that Joe Burnett had been appointed general superintendent for the Edmonton branch. The board of directors demanded Bill's resignation as both an employee and a director.

Seemingly overnight, Bill had gone from rising star to *persona non grata*. What had gone so wrong, so fast?

The answer lies in the problems that Bill's successors, Fred and Joe, were left to clean up in his wake, particularly on the Londonderry Plaza in Edmonton and the Western Centre in Calgary. Due to substantial design changes and Bill's poorly negotiated contracts, SBW was soon embroiled in legal action to recoup the considerable cost overruns it had incurred on these projects.

The financial consequences of these and other issues in Alberta were grave. When the directors reviewed SBW's financial statements in May 1973, they were looking at a total net loss of over \$382,000—the first loss for SBW since the Great Depression, and certainly the largest in the company's history to that date.

In his presidential report for the board meeting, Bob indicated that further labour strikes in B.C. and continuing poor conditions in Regina were factors in the loss, but he reserved his harshest comments for the Alberta situation. "Our Alberta operations continue to cause the Company its greatest concern," he wrote. "Not only are we suffering substantial loss from operations, but we are still faced with many of the [legal and contractual] problems that I reported to you last year. This has severely restricted our local managers in acquiring new work due to a heavy demand on their time to cope with these problems."

[OPPOSITE] (Left to right) Fred Usselman and Joe Burnett, 1971. Fred, who joined SBW in 1968, replaced Bill Katerenchuk as Alberta regional manager in 1971 when the latter was forced to resign. Joe, who joined SBW in 1963, was appointed general superintendent for the Edmonton branch. The two were charged with cleaning up the numerous problems in the Alberta division that threatened the solvency of SBW as a whole. Thanks in large part to their efforts, the situation was mostly resolved by 1975.

With the amount of working capital perilously low, Bob and the executive committee—which now also included Fred Usselman and John Lord—resolved to close underperforming offices, sell some properties and surplus equipment, and step up efforts to collect on overdue accounts. These measures couldn't be implemented overnight, however. Some progress had been made by the time the board met again in August, but much more was required to satisfy the Bank of Montreal's demands that SBW reduce its line of credit to an acceptable amount by the end of September. Secretary-treasurer Paul Hlady reported what the company was up against: "At the present time we have \$1,932,962 in accounts receivable in Alberta, all of which will practically require court action to collect and most certainly will not be available to us by September 30th."

Bob's son Murray Saunders, who was seventeen in 1973, vividly remembers his dad's focus on cash as he fought to save the company in those dark days. "Dad used to say, 'An army marches on its stomach, and a contractor marches on cash,'" Murray recalls. "I was on the annual 'Quack Club' hunting trip in southern Alberta with Uncle Don—Dad's twin brother—when Dad called and told Don that SBW was in real trouble. This was the first time since the war that Dad had ever missed the trip, and it was due to SBW's financial issues."

With SBW unable to reduce the line of credit to the Bank of Montreal's requested level, the bank called the entire loan amount on October 5. At an emergency board meeting one week later, Bob and the other directors gathered with SBW's solicitors and auditor to determine what to do next. As one solicitor stated for the minutes, "It is illegal to operate an insolvent company, and [SBW is] very close to being in that position."

The only path forward they could see was to ask Canadian Indemnity, SBW's bonding company, for help to persuade the bank to relax its position and work out a program to keep SBW going.

Thanks to the strong relationship between Bob Saunders and Canadian Indemnity's regional vice president, Bob Vickerstaff, the bonding company agreed to this request, on one condition: that SBW's directors show their confidence by putting up some personal guarantees. The directors agreed, with Peter Shields guaranteeing \$40,000, Bob Saunders and Cliff Wright both guaranteeing \$15,000, and the other directors guaranteeing \$5,000 to \$7,000 each.

The directors knew they had a lot of work to do to climb out of the deep hole SBW was in, but they had saved the company from imminent bankruptcy and bought some much-needed time. By returning to what SBW had always done best—honest, high-quality work—they were confident that better days were ahead.

“SBW’s employees were treated with respect and made to feel they were part of the family. The ‘SBW way’ was to allow project managers, superintendents, and staff to manage and work independently, but help was always available if needed.”

JOE BURNETT

Back from the Brink

IT TOOK SEVERAL YEARS, but by the spring of 1975, SBW was once again in the black. Fred Usselman and Joe Burnett had largely resolved the problems in Alberta, John Lord had overseen the closure of the Winnipeg branch and amicably left the company, and surplus assets had been sold in various branches. With the company in the best working capital position in its history, and with a new banking arrangement with the Royal Bank, SBW returned to a normal contractor–bonder relationship with Canadian Indemnity.

As relieved as they were by these developments, the directors were perhaps even more relieved by the upward trend they were once again seeing on the revenue side, thanks in no small part to a suddenly booming Saskatchewan. “The market is remarkably strong, with no indication of a let-up in the volume of work,” Cliff Wright stated in May 1975. “Larger types of jobs are available and [we’re] now able to survey the market and choose the type of work with high yield,” he said a year later.

The board commended the Saskatchewan team for the terrific showing in the province. “I would like to express my appreciation . . . to that gang in Saskatchewan who really put the icing on the cake,” Bob wrote in his 1977 report. He and other directors especially recognized Cliff, who as head of the Saskatchewan division had resumed management of the Saskatoon branch after Jack Johns’s retirement in 1973, and Vic Serdula, who had become Regina branch manager that same year following the death of Bruce Wiebe.

[OPPOSITE] (Left to right) Harbourside Holiday Inn, Vancouver, 1975, and Dawson Creek and District Hospital, 1977. These were just two of the projects that helped improve SBW’s profit picture in the mid-1970s. A second Holiday Inn in Saskatoon and other projects in Saskatchewan contributed significantly as well.

Saskatoon

Holiday Inn (1975)
Sandy Bay School gymnasium-auditorium (1975)

Regina

YMCA (1977)

Elsewhere in Saskatchewan

Weyburn Union Hospital additions (1976)



Vancouver & Lower Mainland

Harbourside Holiday Inn (1975) [above]
 St. Vincent's Hospital (1975)
Seton Villa, Burnaby (1975)

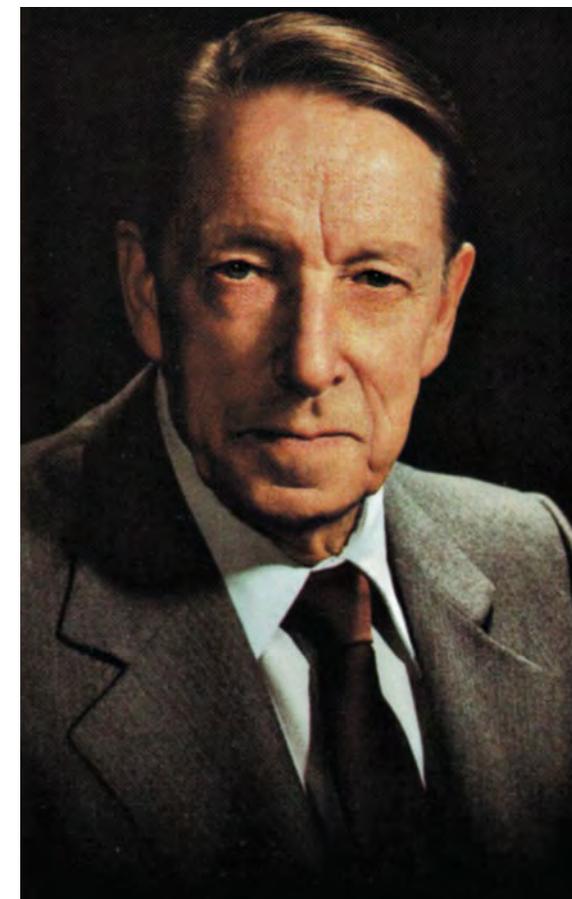
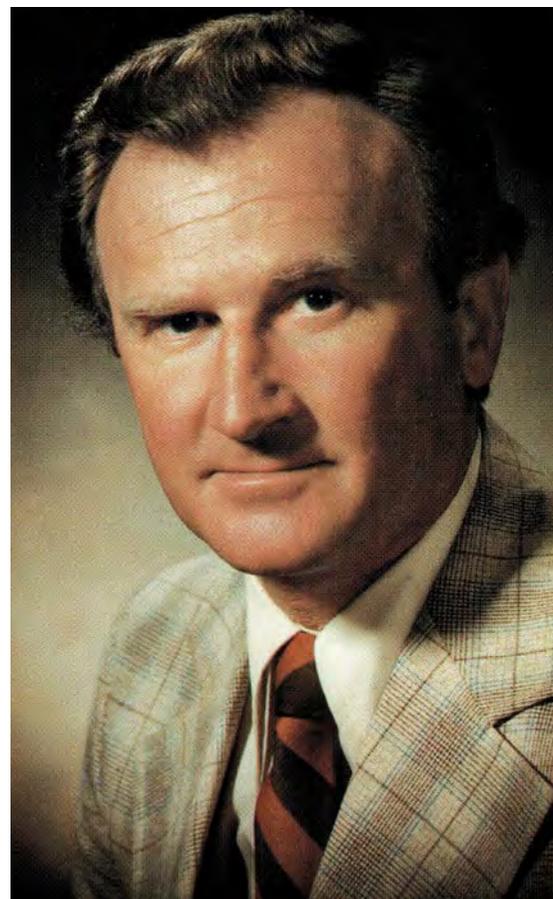
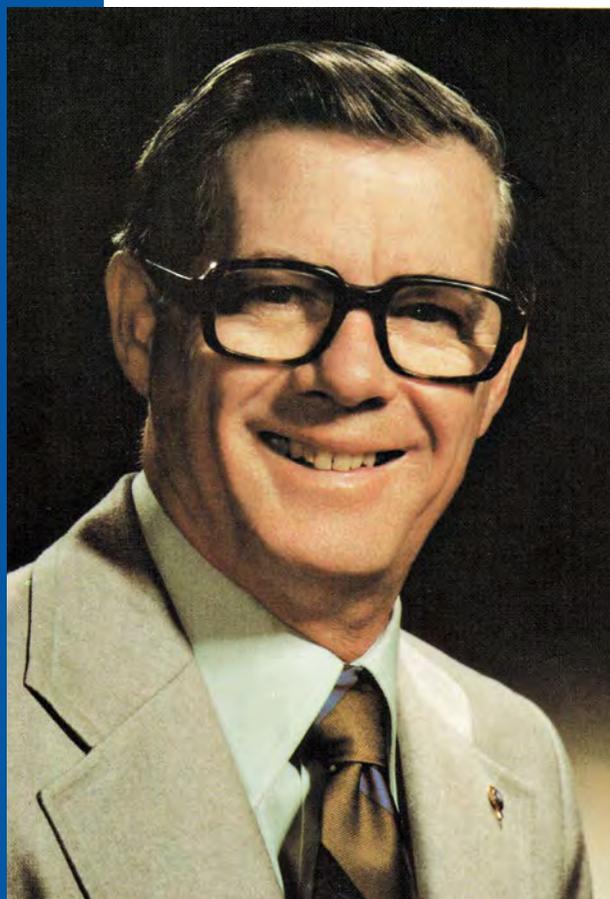
Lynn Valley Lodge, North Vancouver (1977)
 Vanterm Group buildings (1977)
 Shaughnessy Place (1977)

Elsewhere in B.C.

Powell River recreation centre (1976)
 Dawson Creek and District Hospital
 addition and alterations (1977) [above]
 Port Alberni No. 4 pulp mill (1977)

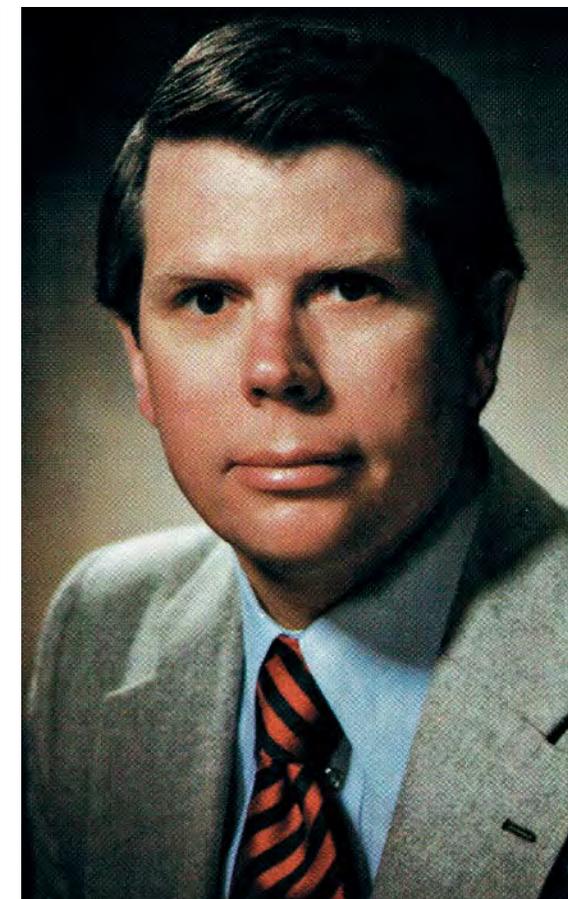
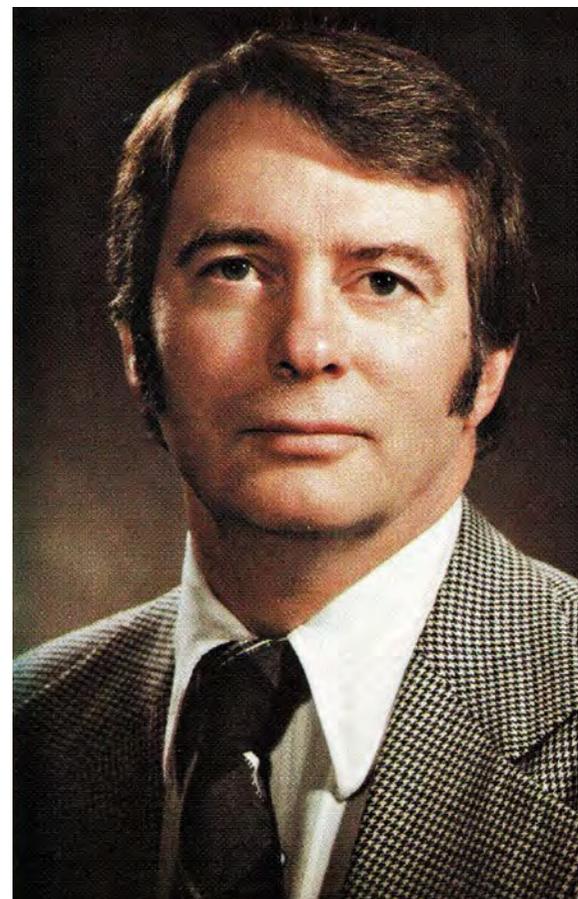
“The success of a company such as ours does not depend on just one person. It is a team effort on the part of all our people.”

BOB SAUNDERS, 1977
PRESIDENTIAL REPORT



[ABOVE AND OPPOSITE, FIRST FOUR PHOTOS] Bob Saunders, Paul Hlady, Walter Vandervoort, and Cliff Wright, 1979. These four men shepherded SBW through the company’s near bankruptcy in the early 1970s and the economic and competitive turbulence that marked the rest of the decade. Remarkably, Cliff not only managed SBW’s Saskatchewan operation, but also served the City of Saskatoon as a politician, first as an alderman starting in 1966 and then as mayor from 1976 to 1988.

[OPPOSITE, LAST THREE PHOTOS] Marjorie Fisher, 1971; Peter Shields, 1979; and Michael Shields, 1979. The three descendants of the original Smith brothers—Marjorie was Duncan’s daughter and the Shieldses were Alexander’s grandsons—served on SBW’s board and represented the interests of the Smith family shareholders for decades. Marjorie left the board in 1977 when she sold her shares to Bob Saunders, Cliff Wright, Paul Hlady, and Peter Shields, making them majority owners of SBW.



Somewhat overshadowed in Bob's 1977 report was a sentence of great significance to the future of SBW: he, Cliff Wright, Paul Hlady, and Peter Shields had become majority owners of the company after acquiring the shares of Marjorie Fisher and several minority shareholders.

With the sale of her shares, Marjorie had also resigned as a board member. "This is the first year that I have attended any annual meeting at which Mrs. Marjorie Fisher did not attend," Bob wrote, "and I would like to express my appreciation to the many years of service she rendered to the company." Also gone from the board by this time were long-time directors Bill Johns and Ernie Lord, who had withdrawn in 1975 and 1976, respectively, due to poor health. Taking Ernie's place as a director in 1976 was Peter's brother, Michael Shields.

More Turbulence

ALTHOUGH THE UPSWING IN SASKATCHEWAN, and increased financial prudence, helped return SBW to profitability, the economic situation across western Canada remained turbulent and unpredictable.

Walter Vandervoort and Cliff Wright regularly traded places as the manager with either the gloomiest or sunniest branch report during this period. Labour strikes, unanticipated financial losses on projects, high inflation, and heavy competition on too few tenders all featured in their reports, as did occasional market booms and spikes in profitability. Noting that in fiscal year 1979–80, B.C. had gone from a large profit to a small loss and Saskatchewan had gone from a small loss to a large profit, Bob wrote, “These figures indicate the vulnerability of construction companies to market swings . . . [and the importance of] having operations in separate parts of the country in order to minimize the impact of these market swings.”

As if the seesawing markets weren’t enough to manage, Canada was in the midst of adopting the metric system, and SBW, along with everyone else, had no choice but to make the switch away from imperial measurements. “The greatest problem during the conversion period will be the danger that an employee will make a serious mistake while estimating the cost of a proposed construction job,” said Rob Foley, a project supervisor with SBW in Regina and the metric officer for the Regina chapter of Construction and Specifications Canada, in a 1978 newspaper article.

Fortunately, SBW seems to have avoided any major conversion slip-ups, but this was yet another complexity in an already complex time, especially considering the high number of bids SBW was submitting in hopes of gaining some anchor contracts. In 1979, both Walter and Cliff reported that their branches were bidding about four to seven jobs a week—most of them lost to non-union firms or “the developer-builder class of operation” butting into the market, as Cliff put it. Considering that estimates were all prepared manually at the time, this was an enormous amount of work with no guaranteed payoff.

Noel Corrin, who joined the Vancouver branch as a field engineer and estimator in 1978, remembers the atmosphere in the office when a bid was due: “On the closing days of tenders, everyone pitched in. The phones were ringing off the hook and all the estimators were taking quotes, even if you didn’t have anything to do with that estimate before. And it was all verbal, your-word-was-your-bond type of thing. A subcontractor would just say ‘\$150,000 for the drywall’ and you’d write it down, then all of those handwritten sheets were passed to the estimator looking after the job. Everyone was hands on deck, and Bev Lingren, the receptionist, was pulling her hair out because she was directing calls.”

Regina

Hudson Bay air tanker base and equipment and air terminal building (1977)
St. Athanasius Ukrainian Catholic Church (1978)
Saskatchewan Sports and Recreation Unlimited renovations (1979)
Municipal police station renovations (1979)

Elsewhere in Saskatchewan

North Battleford Airport terminal and radio facility (1978)

Walter Vandervoort (on phone) with an unidentified SBW employee on bid-closing day, ca. late 1970s. “Captain Vandervoort, as we called him—he started with SBW right after the war—was pretty sharp,” says Murray Saunders about SBW’s long-time chief estimator. “He was six foot five, and when I was younger, he’d say to us kids that he was five foot seventeen. He was a real character. How he manually calculated everything by hand . . . it was amazing.”



“SBW had a stellar reputation for not playing hanky-panky with subtrades. We always worked on the basis of ‘Give me your best price, and if you’re low, we’ll use you if we get the job.’ We took our best shot and hoped we’d get the work, and if we had carried subtrades to get that job, we’d use them.”

NOEL CORRIN



Vancouver & Lower Mainland

- Abbotsford senior citizens’ high-rise (1978)
- Vancouver Public Safety Building east wing (1978)**
- University of British Columbia Library addition (1978)
- Alder Bay Housing (1979)



Elsewhere in B.C.

- Alberta Wheat Pool elevator (1979) [p. 124]
- Lowland long-term care facility (1979)

- McCulloch Court, Vernon (1978)
- Blackcomb Lodge (1979) [p. 130]
- Kent Federal Corrections Institution, Agassiz (1979)**



“It was stressful when you were taking bids,” agrees Bev, who started in the Vancouver branch in 1970 and was the only female employee there for years. “We had to take information from subcontractors and put it all together, and to type up tenders you had to be exactly accurate or the company would have lost its shirt. When we were successful in a bid, everyone had a big cheer. When we were not successful, sometimes we had a big cheer, too, for all the work we’d put in.”

All of this effort did bear fruit, with SBW landing enough work to sustain its three branches. Given the financial straits the company had recently experienced, however, and seeing numerous contractors going out of business, SBW’s executive committee was extra-cautious about controlling costs and managing working capital. One practical move it made in 1979 was to sell the valuable downtown Vancouver property on Richards Street and move to a newly purchased property at 8729 Aisne Street, where the company could have more yard and head office space at a lower cost.

That cautious attitude continued into the new decade. Retaining more earnings than in the past for a future rainy day, SBW reported the highest net worth to that point in its history in 1980. The conservative approach seemed wise given the troubling economy and an uncertain construction industry. “Labour contracts have expired in all areas of the country, and the settlements that are being made are expensive,” Bob wrote in the spring of 1980. “Interest rates, although subsiding somewhat in recent days, are at an all-time high and construction projects that would normally be proceeding are sitting on the shelf.” Conditions would only continue to worsen.



[ABOVE] Notice announcing SBW’s move to a new office at 8729 Aisne Street, 1979.

[OPPOSITE] Alberta Wheat Pool elevator, Vancouver, 1979. Projects like this helped sustain SBW’s three branches—Vancouver, Saskatoon, and Regina—during the difficult economic times of the 1970s and ’80s.

Unwavering Loyalty

THROUGH THE DARKEST DAYS of the 1970s and '80s, even when SBW teetered on the edge of bankruptcy and missed a payroll or two, employee loyalty remained strong as steel.

“I remember my cheque bouncing once, but I didn’t really worry about it,” says Don Grant, who had joined the Vancouver branch in 1969 as a surveyor and was working on the Holiday Inn project in 1974 when his pay didn’t come through. “I just figured another cheque would show up—and it did. I was never out of work.”

SBW earned that kind of loyalty from years of doing right by people—such as the 1981 move to provide financial guarantees for certain employees in danger of losing their homes due to sky-high mortgage rates, then hovering around 20 percent. But what really made employees come and stay at SBW were the other people who came and stayed. Drawn by the company’s “old-fashioned values,” as a 1979 brochure described them—values like integrity, craftsmanship, and respect—people were proud to come into work every day and do their bit to help each other and the company succeed.

“The long story short is that I ended up at SBW for nearly twenty years because we had a good nucleus of people who worked pretty hard for the company—but not stupidly or crookedly,” says Don. “We were all good, honest, loyal people, and we liked each other.”

Tim Harrington remembers sensing the company’s character from the moment he sat down for his 1979 job interview with Bob Saunders, Paul Hlady, and Al Thompson, who was made B.C. branch manager after Walter Vandervoort’s retirement that year. “They seemed like good, honest, down-to-earth people. I knew I could trust them,” Tim says. His impressions only grew stronger after he was hired as a junior estimator.

The same holds true for Bill Sparks, whose career with SBW started in 1981, when he joined as a carpenter. “The one thing with SBW is, they’ve always treated workers well. If you were a good worker and they thought you were going to progress in the company, they would always try to move you onto a new job. They always looked after their employees that way. That never changed.”

“There are always tiffs and arguments in any workplace, but at SBW there was no acrimony,” adds Noel Corrin. “Everyone got along. People would gather at coffee time and would chew the fat in the lunchroom. There were parties and get-togethers, and there were no barriers socially, no hierarchy. What was important was making sure we got the job done, and everyone pitched in to help. It was almost like a family.”

[OPPOSITE] Scenes from SBW social occasions, late 1970s to early 1980s. (Top, left to right) George Blair, Noel and Anne Marie Corrin, Don and Trudy Langner. (Bottom, left to right) Unidentified, Don Langner, Don Grant, Tim Harrington, unidentified, and Robbie Morrice.

Employee loyalty at SBW was always high thanks to the company’s fair treatment of its workers, honest dealings with clients and business partners, commitment to quality work, and camaraderie inside and outside the office.



“It was a big deal to say you worked for SBW. It was known as an honest and upfront company, well respected by the subtrades. We’d get good prices and good performance from the trades because of SBW’s integrity.”

GEORGE BLAIR

“It’s not just one family company. It’s a company of families in a sense.”

MICHAEL SHIELDS,
GRANDSON OF ALEXANDER
SMITH AND FORMER
DIRECTOR OF SBW

Not only did workmates feel like family members—for some they *were* family members. “We have a long history of people joining and staying with the company and going from second to third generation, or more,” says Murray Saunders, who himself was one of these second-generation employees. He followed his dad, Bob, into the business in 1972, first as a labourer in the summer and then as a carpenter apprentice.

The Morrises were another family chain of employees in this period, beginning with Robbie in 1954, then bringing in Robbie’s dad, Walter, during the Vancouver Post Office project, and continuing with Robbie’s son Jim, who started in Vernon as a summer labourer in 1974, came back as a carpenter apprentice in 1977, and worked his way up from there.

The Wrights also had a long legacy at the company, starting with Sam, continuing with his son Cliff, and then extending to Cliff’s son Lorne, who joined as a carpenter apprentice in 1981. Other prominent multigenerational employees over the years were the Clarks (Matt and son Don), the Whites (Bill and son Bill), the Lords (Ernie and son John), the Johnses (George and sons Bill and Jack), the Campbells (Clark and son Ryan), and the Schindels (numerous extended family members).

Whether employees were part of a family chain or not, “the constant around here has been the quality people we’ve had over the years,” Murray says. “Without good people, you can’t do anything. That’s all a construction company is: the people you have—and the cash in the bank.”

[OPPOSITE, TOP LEFT] Robbie Morrice (left) receiving a twenty-five-year service award from Bob Saunders (right), 1979. Robbie was just one member of the Morrice family to work at SBW over the years; his father, Walter, worked with the company during the Vancouver Post Office project, and his son Jim joined the company in the 1970s, became a long-time general superintendent, and retired in 2020.

[OPPOSITE, TOP RIGHT] Murray Saunders (left) holding a portrait of his father, Bob, and Paul Smith (right) holding one of his grandfather, Paul Hlady, 2019. Murray followed his dad into the construction business in 1972, while the younger Paul worked at the company for a few years in the 2010s while earning his business degree.

[OPPOSITE, BOTTOM] (Left to right) Rick and Bill Schindel, 2009. Numerous members of the Schindel family—fifteen as of 2021—were instrumental in SBW’s Saskatoon branch and later at Wright Construction after it bought out that location.



“Our staff will be taxed as they never have been before to cope with some of the problems that lie ahead. We are grateful that we have many long-term employees who have served the company well. In a large measure, it will be their efforts that will carry us through this very difficult period.”

BOB SAUNDERS, 1982
PRESIDENTIAL REPORT

Back to Survival Mode

WHILE LOYAL EMPLOYEES and time-honoured values bolstered SBW through good times and bad, maintaining a steady flow of “cash in the bank,” as Murray put it, was harder to achieve—especially when skyrocketing interest rates and runaway inflation were leading Canada into the worst recession since the Great Depression.

From 1981 to 1983, Bob’s annual presidential reports took on an increasingly concerned tone. “There has been a record number of bankruptcies throughout the land, and red ink has been plaguing the balance sheets of a great many corporations,” he wrote in 1983. SBW was still solvent, but it wasn’t spared the red ink. For the first

time in Bob’s years with the company, he reported that both the B.C. and Saskatchewan operations had suffered losses, combining for a total net loss of \$233,000.

Bob also reported that SBW had written off over half a million dollars in receivables due to the bankruptcy of several clients in Whistler. SBW had been involved in the developments at Whistler and Blackcomb mountains since 1978–79, when plans to turn the area into a world-class ski resort were still mostly on paper. Winning general contracts to build the Blackcomb Lodge, the Windwhistle Pub/Hearthstone Lodge, and the Whistler Village Inn, SBW had started off with high hopes, even buying some condo units in what seemed like a sure investment.



[BELOW] Construction of Whistler's Windwhistle Pub/Hearthstone Lodge, 1980.

[OPPOSITE] Construction of the Blackcomb Lodge, 1979.





Saskatoon

Sion High School renovations (1982)

Regina

Bessborough Hotel renovations (1980)
Government House restoration (1980)
Regina City Hall parkade (1981)
RCMP headquarters (1981)

Vancouver & Lower Mainland

Delta long-term care facility (1980)
Lougheed Community Centre and Library (1980)
Delta Laundry (1980)
Capilano College (1981)



Unfortunately, things hadn't gone quite as planned. The Blackcomb Lodge and Windwhistle projects were uneventful, but the same could not be said for the Whistler Village Inn. In mid-January 1982, as SBW carpenters were doing their last bits of finishing work on the hotel and the attached Keg restaurant, a leaking propane tank in the restaurant sparked a fire that nearly burned everything to the ground.

SBW foreman Al Snickars was working on the second floor with a partner when "people started to scream, 'Get out! Get out!'" he remembers. "We didn't believe them at first, but when we started to smell smoke, we ran out." They were lucky to escape, as strong winds helped the blaze spread quickly. Fortunately, no one was injured, but by the time the fire was extinguished, it had caused heavy damage to the roof and the second and third floors. SBW spent the next year and a half on the reconstruction, and the associated insurance and legal claims took years to settle in the company's favour.

In the meantime, interest rates went through the roof, and the market for Whistler-Blackcomb properties fell through the floor. SBW was proud of the work it had done, and the resort's time would eventually come. For now, though, the tumultuous Whistler experience was not the financial boost SBW had hoped for.

[OPPOSITE] Fire consuming the Whistler Village Inn and Keg restaurant, January 13, 1982. SBW was just finishing work on the building when a leaking propane tank sparked a fire that all but destroyed the structure. Murray Saunders was one of the SBW carpenters who worked on the rebuilding after the fire, and though he knows the fire was a headache for many, he remembers the time fondly. "Danny Watson, a wiry, spirited Scotsman, was our superintendent on that, and some really good tradesmen were up there too. Groups of us would go out for dinner or have the odd beer together. It was a great experience."



Elsewhere in B.C.

West Vancouver Public Safety Building (1981)
 Royal Arch Masonic care home (1981)
 Langley mail-processing plant (1982)
 Aldergrove long-term care facility (1982)
 Rosewood Manor (1982)

St. Joseph's Hospital, Comox (1980)
 MacMillan Bloedel machine foundation, Powell River (1980)
 Kelowna long-term care facility (1980)
 Windwhistle Pub/Hearthstone Lodge, Whistler (1980) [p. 131]
Whistler Village Inn (1982) [p. 132]

[RIGHT & OPPOSITE] Vancouver General Hospital parkade, 1983, and the Wawanesa office building, Vancouver, 1984. As foreman on the parkade, Jim Morrice remembers the project not only for its complexity—“I was running like crazy, with two hammerhead cranes, thirty carpenters, and a subcontractor doing all the decks”—but also because retired B.C. branch manager Walter Vandervoort was in hospital across the street, observing all the action from a window in his ward. “Later that year, after Van’s release from the hospital, he came up to me at the company Christmas party,” Jim recalls. “He said, ‘Every day, I and the old boys in the ward would sit and watch you work, and no one moved faster than you.’”



Vancouver & Lower Mainland

Delta Airport Inn (1983)

Vancouver General Hospital parkade (1983) [above]

North Vancouver courthouse (1983)

Maple Ridge seniors' high-rise (1983)

Wawanesa office building (1984) [p. 135]

Peace Arch Hospital (1984)

SkyTrain Operations and Maintenance Centre (1984)

Maple Ridge Hospital extended care unit (1984)

Expo 86 Saskatchewan Pavilion (1985) [p. 138]

Expo 86 Aviation Plaza structure (1985)

Waterfront SkyTrain Station (1985) [p. 136]



A Brief Reprieve

IN THE SPRING OF 1983, Bob started to sound more optimistic. “In spite of the difficult period, in which we have suffered badly, it finally looks like our economy has bottomed out,” he wrote in his annual report. Saying that 1983 would still be “a survival year,” Bob looked forward to “filling our order books for 1984.”

In particular, he had his eyes on some major upcoming Vancouver projects associated with Expo 86, the World’s Fair that would coincide with the city’s centennial in 1986. A new Automated Light Rapid Transit system (ALRT)—now known as SkyTrain—was one of the showcase developments celebrating the fair’s futuristic theme. Much of the construction work was certain to go to unionized contractors, and Bob was determined that SBW would be one of the successful bidders.

Elsewhere in B.C.

Kelowna General Hospital (1983)
Kelowna Air Terminal addition (1983)
Whistler Convention Centre (1985)

Saskatoon

James Alexander School (1984)

Regina

Thomson School renovations (1983)
Heritage Manor (1984)

Elsewhere in Saskatchewan

Ducharme School, La Loche (1984)

“When you’re working on your tools—and I worked on them for a number of years—it’s extremely gratifying when you finish at the end of the day and you look down and see that that concrete wall is poured and stripped and you’ve done a good job and it’s in the right place. It’s a tremendous feeling of accomplishment.”

MURRAY SAUNDERS



Waterfront SkyTrain Station, Vancouver, 1985. The \$9-million contract for the station and the \$14.6-million contract for the SkyTrain Operations and Maintenance Centre in Burnaby (completed in 1984) were the start of SBW’s long relationship with TransLink (originally called Metro Canada). They were also prime examples of the complex jobs SBW excelled at. The two people assigned to run the jobs for SBW—Murray Saunders and Tim Harrington—proved their leadership potential through their successful delivery of these projects.



In July 1983, those expectations were met when SBW was awarded the general contract to construct the SkyTrain Operations and Maintenance Centre in Burnaby. A second contract to build Waterfront Station followed in early 1984.

Reminiscent of the Vancouver Post Office project from the early 1950s, when SBW's future leaders were pivotal to the job's successful completion, one could again glimpse SBW's future in the two people assigned to run the SkyTrain projects: Murray Saunders and Tim Harrington.

Murray was made the foreman for the Waterfront Station job, and Tim the project manager for the maintenance facility. This was the first time that an estimator, in this case Tim, worked on-site as opposed to in SBW's office, but it was indicative of the magnitude and complexity of the work. "The maintenance centre took me into the big leagues," says Tim. "From that point on, I felt like I could project-manage anything."

Murray agrees. "These were difficult, difficult jobs," he says. "But they were exactly the kind of projects that SBW has always been good at—the weird and wonderful jobs that need more talent and precision than the average project. TransLink became a tremendous client."

“We were very lean in those days. That’s where having good tradesmen really helped. We all had good training, we knew what we were doing, and we worked hard. We did things once and we tried not to make mistakes.”

JIM MORRICE



[LEFT] Expo 86 Saskatchewan Pavilion, Vancouver, 1985. The pavilion, which was the first project that Clark Campbell managed for SBW, included an exhibition building and a ten-storey tower in the shape of a grain elevator—one of the tallest structures on the Expo site.

[OPPOSITE TOP] Don Clark (left) and Bill Sparks (right) taking a break from their work on the Saskatchewan Pavilion for Expo 86, 1985. “Don was the one who got me started at SBW in 1981 and was one of my first supervisors,” Bill says.

[OPPOSITE BOTTOM] Clark Campbell, ca. mid-1990s. Clark, an estimator, approached SBW for a job in 1984 after reading an article about the company’s work on the SkyTrain Operations and Maintenance Centre. “My interview with Al Thompson, the chief estimator at the time, was only about fifteen minutes in when he asked, ‘When can you start?’” Clark recalls. Clark served as estimator and project manager on a number of jobs before leaving SBW in 1987. He returned in 1991 and became a key leader and shareholder in the company.

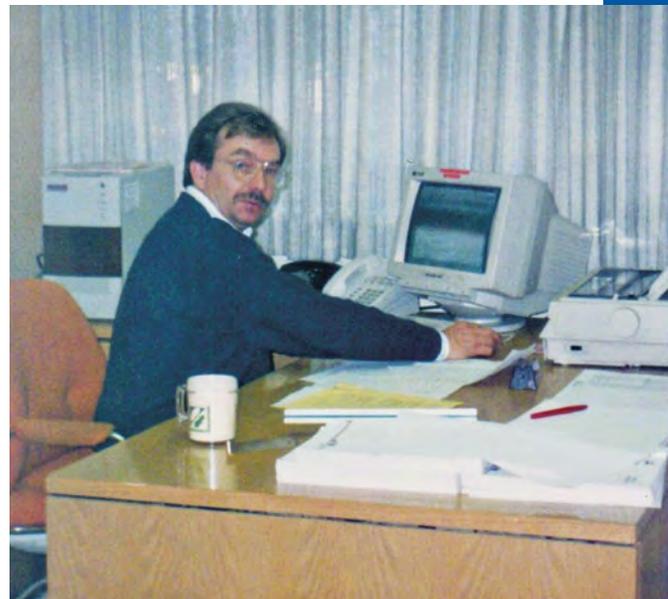
Despite the inherent challenges of such complex jobs, both projects came in on time and to the client's high satisfaction. So did several other projects for Expo 86—the Saskatchewan Pavilion, the Aviation Plaza structure, and a seismic upgrade of the main VIA Rail station. Clark Campbell, new to the Vancouver office in 1984, was assigned as project manager for the ten-month pavilion project, and he was the estimator on the VIA Rail project.

The SkyTrain and Expo jobs, plus a burst of other contracts during this period, put the B.C. branch in the black for a few years running. Even so, the picture for SBW as a whole wasn't pretty, with the Saskatchewan division now experiencing annual losses nearly the size of B.C.'s profits. More worrying still was the fundamental problem SBW had in both markets: more and more work was going to lower-priced non-union contractors.

“Overcapacity in the industry coupled with low work volumes and the ever-increasing presence of the non-union sector [is having] a severe impact on all levels of the industry,” Bob wrote in one of his annual reports in this period. “Profit margins are squeezed to the extent that for many contractors they are non-existent—many companies are taking work at cost simply to keep their doors open.”

Although SBW's participation in a government work-sharing program had cut the workweek, and SBW's salary costs, down to four days while employment insurance paid workers for the fifth day, SBW's financial health remained shaky. Bob forecast that “unionized contractors would be out of business in two to three years if the non-unionized sector continues to grow at its current pace.”

Quite simply, for SBW to survive, something had to change.



“When the whole country was in a downturn, SBW opted to cut workers' pay and take part in a Canadian government plan to subsidize the lost wages rather than lay people off. That symbolized the company's whole philosophy to me: that it was not just about dollars and cents, but people and people's lives.”

NOEL CORRIN

“It will be hard work for the rest of the year, but we are fortunate to have the horses to get the job done.”

BOB SAUNDERS, 1985
PRESIDENTIAL REPORT

Coming through a Perfect Storm

FOR UNIONIZED CONTRACTORS like SBW, competition from non-union companies had been building since the 1970s, when union wage demands, work-to-rule practices, and work stoppages started causing chaos in the construction industry. In B.C., many pinpoint the developments at Whistler-Blackcomb as the point when things really started to shift in the non-union sector's favour for private-sector construction projects.

“After the huge cost overruns that the unions caused in Whistler, the private sector figured, ‘We can do without these guys,’ and they did,” says Murray. “Open-shop companies grew and grew to the point where we couldn't compete.”

The same thing happened in Saskatchewan, where Cliff constantly reported the encroachment of non-union contractors, including companies from outside the province. He urged his fellow SBW directors to consider creating a non-union subsidiary, like the company had once done with Selkirk Construction in Alberta, to compete. “If the firm does not set up a non-

union company soon, the workload in Saskatchewan will continue to shrink,” he said in early 1984.

The other directors agreed with him, and Selkirk Construction was revived in Saskatchewan later that year. A different provincial labour code precluded them from doing the same thing in B.C. just yet, but Bob and Paul resolved to keep on investigating the idea.

Although Selkirk Construction did indeed bump up the volume of work coming in, it still wasn't enough, and fierce competition squeezed profit margins so tightly that SBW's Saskatchewan division couldn't even cover its operating expenses. Meanwhile, the B.C. market had slowed down again after Expo 86. To make matters worse, a poor estimate and multiple problems on a project to build the Prince Rupert Performing Arts Centre were leading to a loss that threatened to be upward of half a million dollars. SBW B.C. entered the 1986–87 fiscal year with the lowest volume of work on hand in years, and it also looked like another strike or lockout was looming.

Saskatoon

University of Saskatchewan Hospital expansion (1986)

Regina

Maidstone Hospital (1986)

Rainbow Housing (1986)

Overall, it was a perfect storm of conditions that, for most companies, would have ended the story right there. But Bob Saunders, Cliff Wright, and Paul Hlady weren't the type to give in without a fight. In a series of dramatic but carefully orchestrated moves over the course of 1986 and 1987, they literally took the company apart in order to save it.

Their most remarkable decision was to separate the B.C. and Saskatchewan divisions. As Bob pointed out in his report in the spring of 1987, "One of the strengths of the Company over the many years of its existence is that it operated in two major economic areas—Saskatchewan and British Columbia. When one area was weak, the other area gave it support."

The 1986–87 fiscal year, however, "saw both of our operations suffer from weak economies, with the result that we recorded the greatest single loss in our history." The directors decided that each division had a better chance of survival if it were fending for itself.

In Saskatchewan, Cliff bought out the company's assets in Saskatoon in exchange for his shares in SBW and a cash payment. Initially operating as S.B.W. Wright Construction before eventually dropping the "S.B.W.," the Wright family assumed control of that branch effective August 31, 1987. Unable to complete a similar arrangement with Vic Serdula in Regina, SBW phased out that location before closing it permanently in 1987. The Selkirk Construction subsidiary was also wound up the same year.

In B.C., Bob, Paul, and their fellow directors, Peter and Michael Shields, set about restructuring the company to improve its viability. To reduce overhead, Bob, Paul, and B.C. manager Al Thompson took early retirement from their salaried roles, though Bob and Paul stayed actively involved in resetting the situation to secure a future for those coming up behind them.

“The separation between SBW in B.C. and Wright Construction in Saskatchewan was amicable, and we’ve always continued to be great friends.”

LORNE WRIGHT

Vancouver & Lower Mainland

Carling O'Keefe Brewery (1986)
Metrotown Centre, Burnaby (1986)
VIA Rail, Expo 86 renovations and upgrade (1986)
Pacific Coast Terminals (1986–87)

Elsewhere in B.C.

Prince Rupert Performing Arts Centre (1986)
Vernon overpass (1987)

“I have always been very proud of the work SBW did in Regina, and the role that my family had in it. They built a good part of Regina, and they’re just wonderful buildings. I always had the impression that the company cared about building well—building for years.”

CAROL JOHNS ZAKAIB,
BILL JOHNS’S DAUGHTER



Part of the reset was to help George Blair and Noel Corrin, two up-and-comers in the Vancouver branch, establish a non-union company called Pillar Construction. “When Bob and Paul came to us with their idea, I had no hesitation at all,” says George. “I thought it would be great—and it was.” Superintendent Don Grant moved over to Pillar too. Don Langner and Walter Matiash, Paul’s key hands in the office at the time, also helped get the new company off the ground, though they remained SBW employees.

The other part of the reset involved the potential windup of the unionized B.C. operation, but a few factors made the directors take a wait-and-see approach before any decisive action. One consideration was the new round of collective bargaining between the construction industry and building trade unions, which would impact the unionized sector’s competitiveness. Another consideration was an in-progress project to build the new acute care tower at Chilliwack General Hospital. SBW won the \$18-million contract in 1986, and this,



[OPPOSITE & LEFT] Chilliwack General Hospital acute care tower, 1988, and the Canadian Autoparts Toyota plant, Delta, 1988. The hospital project was particularly important to SBW's survival in the late 1980s. Facing increasing competition from non-unionized contractors, SBW sold its Saskatchewan division to Cliff Wright in 1987 and concentrated solely on B.C. from that point on.

along with ongoing work on Molson Brewery and a \$4.2-million expansion of the Canadian Autoparts Toyota plant in Delta, more than covered the B.C. branch's operating costs in 1987 and 1988.

The Chilliwack Hospital project was also more evidence that Murray Saunders and Tim Harrington made a pretty solid team, with Murray a natural leader of people in the field, and Tim a strong administrator. As the estimator who developed SBW's bid on the hospital, Tim knew that keen competition would come from another unionized contractor whose home base was in Chilliwack. "The tender was complicated, as all hospitals are, and as I was

putting the estimate together, I remember thinking that we didn't have a hope in hell," he says. "When we heard we'd won it, the first thing Paul Hlady did was walk down to my office and ask, 'What did you miss?' I was thinking the same thing! I thought, 'Oh my god, what have I done? How did we get this?'"

But Tim's estimate had indeed factored everything in, and "it ended up being a fantastic success," Tim says. "Murray was the foreman on the job, and together we cemented relationships with a bunch of good trade contractors our same age. That was a big turning point for us."

“The pulp mills, the breweries, the manufacturing plants, the hospitals—SBW excelled on complex, difficult jobs like those. They kept us going.”

MURRAY SAUNDERS

[OPPOSITE] (Left to right) Murray Saunders, Bill Cann, Tina Davies, and Tim Harrington, 1990. In a bold move in 1988, SBW’s directors decided to create a new operating company called Smith Bros. & Wilson (B.C.) Ltd., with Murray, Tim, Bill, and Don Langner comprising the new leadership team that would take SBW into the next decade.

By the time the new hospital tower opened at the end of 1988, SBW’s directors were convinced that Murray and Tim could make a go of running the unionized company if they had a fresh slate to start with. They devised a plan to create a new entity, Smith Bros. & Wilson (B.C.) Ltd., that would carry the proud legacy of the old SBW forward, but leave its burdening liabilities behind. The original Smith Bros. & Wilson Ltd. would retain ownership of SBW’s land and building on Aisne Street, but otherwise cease operations.

Murray remembers the day Bob called him, Tim, Don Langner, and Bill Cann into his office to get their take on the plan. “Dad said, ‘Look you guys, you need to have a president and a secretary-treasurer,’” Murray remembers. “So I said, ‘Tim’s president, and Don’s secretary-treasurer.’ And then Don said I should be the VP. Those were the roles the company needed, and we filled them.” Bill was also appointed to a role in the new company, as director of plant operations.

Unionized contractors in B.C. still had some huge competitive hurdles to overcome, but a leaner SBW was now in the hands of a new generation of leaders who were prepared to take on the challenge.

Vancouver & Lower Mainland

Chilliwack General Hospital, acute care tower (1988) [p. 142]
Molson Brewery expansion (1988)
Canadian Autoparts Toyota plant expansion (1988) [p. 143]

Elsewhere in B.C.

Howe Sound Pulp and Paper expansion, Port Mellon (1989) [p. 152]





Smith Bros. & Wilson in the 1990s is a much different company from the one formed by the three Smith brothers in 1897. Although technology and equipment have dramatically changed the way we conduct our business today, the basic principles adhered to at SBW remain the same: integrity, craftsmanship, and pride in one's work. The scope and variety of construction projects we have to show for our perseverance is proof of these principles at work.”

SBW BUSINESS BROCHURE, 1991

A large, stylized red number '6' is centered in the upper half of the slide. It is set against a background of a solid blue color with a large, faint, light-blue circular graphic element behind it.

Adapting to Shifting Ground
1990 to 2009

“SBW has always collected people who have construction in their blood. People join us not just because they want a job; they come because they want to build things and they want to build things right.”

TIM HARRINGTON

A New Generation Takes the Lead

WHEN THE CALENDAR FLIPPED TO 1990 and SBW entered the ninth new decade in its history, its chances of making it to a tenth seemed anything but certain. Even with the decisions made in preceding years to focus on the B.C. market, reduce overhead, and play to SBW’s industrial strengths, the long-term viability of the operation was still an open question.

“The ’90s weren’t the greatest time for the construction business, particularly for unionized general contractors,” says Murray Saunders, who with Tim Harrington had the task of leading SBW into its next era. Both in their early thirties, Tim and Murray were the youngest team to head up SBW since the Smith brothers had founded the company, but both were steeped in the values that had always made SBW resilient, and neither was afraid of a challenge.

“We were a great combination,” says Tim. “Murray was a carpenter and had all the hands-on field experience and knowledge. I was more the project manager and knew the estimating side of it. We had our own areas to take care of, and it worked perfectly.”

Controller Don Langner, director of plant operations Bill Cann, and, starting in 1991, senior estimator Clark Campbell rounded out the leadership team. Clark had left SBW in 1987 and had done well with a real estate developer, “but I always liked SBW’s values, and I knew Tim and Murray were reliable, straight-up, honest people,” he says. Tired of repeatedly working on wood-frame walk-up condos, Clark was also drawn back to the complex industrial jobs that SBW excelled at, and to the company’s collaborative culture. “For a long time, Murray, Tim, Bill, and I would come in early every morning and talk about the jobs and the best way to tackle them,” he remembers.



(Left to right) Bob Saunders, Paul Hlady, Don Langner, Murray Saunders, Tim Harrington, Peter Shields, Jim Morrice, and Bill Cann, Dolphin Lodge Resort, 1990. Although challenging industry conditions meant SBW was facing an uncertain future, its new, young leadership group—Murray, Tim, Bill, Don, Jim, and Clark Campbell (not pictured)—were steeped in the values that had made SBW resilient for over ninety years. Guided by the mentorship of Bob and Paul, the team was ready and committed to seeing SBW past its centennial and into a new millennium.



(Left to right) Bob Saunders, 1993, and Paul Hlady, ca. 1990. As they eased into retirement in the early 1990s, both men maintained a regular presence at the SBW office, acting as sounding boards for the company's new generation of leaders. Both were also role models for SBW's culture and values. As the company's long-time attorney, Rob Wynick, puts it, "Paul had a glint in his eye; he liked what he was doing, he knew what he was doing, and he liked to have fun. He treated people fairly and cut a deal when he had to. Bob was the same way. When he spoke, people listened—but he didn't take advantage of that in negotiating deals. He was fair. The nicest thing the old guard did was turn the company over to the new guard and let them run with it. They turned it over and saw the company move on."

Just as builders learn to build by building, SBW's new leaders learned to lead by leading—and Bob Saunders, the best leadership mentor they could have asked for, was usually just a few steps away. “He was always there for us,” says Murray of his dad, who regularly appeared at the office even after retiring. “Any questions we had, he was more than willing to answer. He introduced us to his contacts, helped with labour relations, and threw as much at us as we were able to take.”

“Bob was my most important mentor,” Tim says. “I learned so many things from him—like when you got into a disagreement with trade contractors, Bob understood that if you got to lawyers, you had already lost. Sometimes I felt in my heart that we were in the right and that someone shouldn't be getting away with something, but Bob knew that if you make it a big war, no one wins. He always seemed able to quietly get to a result and move on. That takes strength.”

Conversely, when SBW was in the wrong, “Bob always said, ‘If we make a mistake, we own up and fix it,’” Tim remembers. “We did the concrete on some projects, and we were proud of our concrete work. If a pour didn't come out well, though, we did it again because it wasn't up to our standards. When we did something, we did it right.”

Paul Hlady, the well-liked former secretary-treasurer, was also close at hand as a sounding board. Paul's relationships with SBW's bankers and bonding company were hugely important to pass on smoothly, and his handle on every last cent set the high bar that Paul's successor, Don Langner, eventually passed on to his successor, William Doss. “Don always said that his way of structuring the filing in accounting—so that everything balanced to the penny and you could find everything you needed in a second—that came from Paul,” says William.

In July 1992, just shy of his sixty-fifth birthday, Paul passed away from colon cancer. His absence was keenly felt in the company he'd given forty-six years of his life to. “Dad always just loved working for SBW,” says his daughter Sharon Smith. “He loved his job and he loved the people.”

Although Paul's time as an advisor to the new leadership group was cut short, his and Bob's mentorship helped provide the continuity that had always been key to SBW's longevity. Since the Smiths' time forward, most retiring leaders had stuck around in some form of advisory role, in many ways serving as the scaffolding that allowed SBW to scale new heights with each generational transition.

A Tough Grind

AS PRIMED AS SBW'S NEW MANAGEMENT team was to make its mark, the company was up against some challenging conditions. "The government cut back on a lot of construction in the early '90s, and the industry took a dive," says Brian Logan, SBW's surety director since 1990. "Companies that were doing \$50 million a year were suddenly doing \$5 million, and there were fifteen bidders rather than five on every job."

"It was a tough grind," says Murray. "How we survived is amazing considering that we were a union contractor in a market that was 80 percent dominated by open-shop companies. We were good at what we did, but low price wins every day." And when it came to pricing, SBW was hampered by restrictive union agreements.

"Until the early 1990s, all of our agreements had language that prevented us from subcontracting even non-union work that we never did ourselves, like electrical and mechanical," Murray explains. "We finally won the right to use open-shop electrical and mechanical contractors in about 1990, but otherwise, these dinosaur agreements really hindered our ability to procure work."



Although being a unionized contractor priced SBW out of much of the market, it was an advantage with certain industrial clients, like unionized pulp and paper plants. "Murray has always had a great relationship with the unions in different parts of the province, and the [union] locals were always looking to get their members working," says Clark. "When SBW went into pulp and paper towns like Port Mellon, Murray just had to pick up the phone and say, 'We need ten guys,' and we'd go from there, whereas open-shop companies had to put up ads to get the labour."

[ABOVE & OPPOSITE] Howe Sound Pulp and Paper mill, Port Mellon, and Celgar pulp mill, Castlegar, ca. 1988-92. As a unionized company, SBW was often underbid by non-unionized contractors for a large segment of the construction market, but its union status gave it the edge with clients like pulp and paper companies. Projects like these in the late 1980s and early to mid-1990s helped keep SBW afloat through some very lean years.



“Meeting the strict tolerances and time constraints of large industrial clients is an essential element in SBW’s long list of construction achievements. Most of our industrial clients are repeat customers. Whether their renovation projects are large or small, we take great pride in being asked back to handle our clients’ ongoing construction needs.”

SBW BUSINESS BROCHURE,
1991

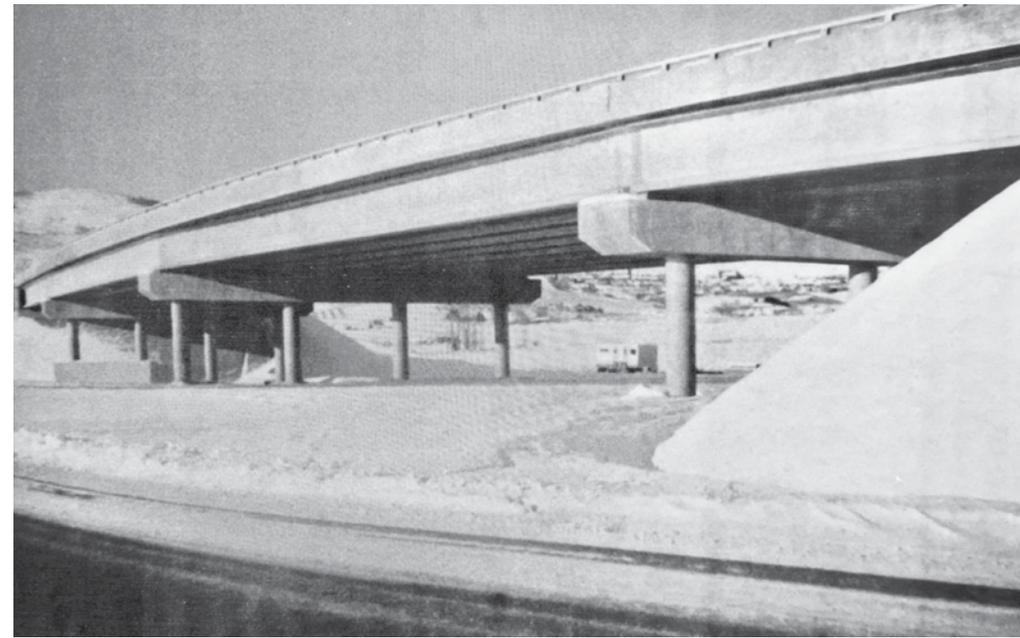
“Clients always kept coming back to SBW. They had the opportunity to use other contractors, but they kept on using SBW, and that speaks volumes. If you treat people fairly and the quality of your work is good, people will hire you again.”

ROB WYNICK, SBW'S LONG-TIME ATTORNEY



A series of projects in Port Mellon for Howe Sound Pulp and Paper and in Castlegar for Celgar’s pulp mill kept SBW afloat even as a lot of other contractors closed their doors. Ongoing work with Molson and Labatt Breweries also helped, as did civil projects like the Swan Lake overpass in Vernon and the Pacific Point building in Vancouver.

Repeat clients like these valued the expertise, quality, and integrity that SBW consistently brought. Aware that skilled and conscientious people were the company’s most valuable asset, Tim and Murray did everything they could to retain them, even when times were tight. “SBW has always been good at keeping people around who know what they’re doing,” says Tim. “We couldn’t have good people on one job and then lose them, so when the tough times came and we didn’t have work for them, we didn’t send them home. We protected them. We’d get a small makeup job or find something else for them to do. That built loyalty. Financially it could hurt, but in the long run it paid off.”



[ABOVE] Swan Lake overpass, Vernon, 1990.

[OPPOSITE] Pacific Point, Vancouver, 1991. SBW had the structure contract (demolition, shoring, excavation, reinforcing steel, concrete forming, placing and finishing work) on this twenty-nine-storey condo building.

Vancouver & Lower Mainland

Greater Vancouver Regional District Lake City Operations Centre (1990)
Dairyland additions and alterations (1991)
Molson Brewery by-product facility (1991)
Pacific Point, phase 2 (1991) [p. 154]
Capilano College Library (1993) [pp. 156, 157]

Elsewhere in B.C.

Swan Lake overpass, Vernon (1990) [above]
Howe Sound Pulp and Paper thermomechanical pulp plant,
Port Mellon (1991) [p. 152]
Celgar pulp mill expansion, Castlegar (1992) [p. 153]
Safeway store, Trail (1993)

“You know, when you do the tough stuff, there’s a lot of pride at the end of it that you got through all the challenges of actually building these architects’ very unusual structure.”

TIM HARRINGTON



In 1992, SBW won a \$9-million contract for the new Capilano College Library in North Vancouver that promised to put lots of people to work on an interesting challenge. It was a complicated architectural concrete job, one of the “weird and wonderful” projects, as Murray likes to call them, that SBW relished. “One of the things we had to do was cut down a bunch of trees and then suspend one of them from the ceiling of the rotunda in the exact spot where it had been cut down,” Tim recalls. “There were a bunch of odd, challenging things like that, and we did them very well.” SBW even won the Award of Excellence in General Contracting from the Amalgamated Construction Association and *Journal of Commerce* for its work on the stunning structure.

The trouble was, the project went considerably over budget, and by the time the library was finished in the early fall of 1993, SBW was looking at an enormous loss—one it could ill afford. “That job almost cost us the company,” says Murray. Once again, SBW needed to catch a break to keep going. And once again, it came just in the nick of time.

[ABOVE & OPPOSITE] The interior and exterior of Capilano College Library, North Vancouver, 1993. SBW won an award for its work on the complicated architectural concrete job, which included challenges like suspending a tree from the ceiling in the exact spot where it had been cut down to make way for the structure—an example of the “weird and wonderful” projects that SBW did so well. Unfortunately, this project also came with a substantial financial loss that once again threatened the company’s future.





[ABOVE] Neville Scarfe Education Library, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, 1996. The two phases of this project were worth a combined \$22 million to SBW and provided some much-needed financial relief after the losses from the Capilano College Library. SBW's chances of winning the work went up considerably when another prequalified contractor pulled out, leaving SBW one of only two bidders. When estimator Clark Campbell landed in the hospital for an emergency nephrectomy on the day he was supposed to kick off the job as project manager, Tim Harrington smoothly stepped in, and Jim Morrice and Bill Sparks then led the construction work with their trademark diligence and quality. By the time Clark was back at his desk in early 1994, Tim had successfully negotiated the second phase of the project.

[OPPOSITE] (Left to right) King George SkyTrain Station, Surrey, 1994, and West Coast Express Waterfront Station under construction (completed 1995), Vancouver. Repeat clients like TransLink valued the expertise, quality, and integrity that SBW consistently brought.

Steady Work through the Door

WHEN THE NEWS CAME IN SEPTEMBER 1993 that SBW had won the bid to build the new Neville Scarfe Education Library at the University of British Columbia (UBC), a cheer went up across the company. “That came along at a good time,” says Jim Morrice, who served as the project superintendent. “You can be thinking you’re going to close your doors, then two minutes later you’re successful on a bid, and off you go again.”

Estimator Clark Campbell was initially slated to manage the project, but on the afternoon following the kickoff meeting, Clark landed in St. Paul’s Hospital for emergency surgery to remove a kidney. “After the nephrectomy, I was on dialysis, waiting for a kidney transplant,” says Clark.

Worried about lingering issues related to the Capilano College Library job, and with the Scarfe project just taking off, Clark initially suggested he delay the transplant, but Murray wouldn’t hear of it. “That’s the type of dedication Clark has had for our



“Even when the economy is challenging, companies need to win work to keep going. If you don’t have new work coming in, then the business isn’t going to survive.”

CLARK CAMPBELL

company,” Murray says. “I told him to get his new kidney and that we could manage until his return.” Tim took over as the project manager for the Scarfe job, and Clark had his transplant surgery on Christmas Day. The surgery was successful, and Clark was back at work by early 1994.

Meanwhile, Tim negotiated a second phase of the Scarfe project: a seismic upgrade and renovations to existing structures. Together, the two Scarfe contracts were worth \$22 million to SBW, among the highest-value pair of projects to that point in the company’s history.

Several sizable jobs for the client soon to be known as TransLink also contributed to SBW’s resilience during this period. One was the new King George SkyTrain Station, completed in 1994, and the other was the new Waterfront Station for West Coast Express, the commuter railway that opened in 1995. SBW also completed a smaller expansion project for the Stadium SkyTrain Station in 1995.

A few smaller jobs were memorable too, such as building a forty-five-metre cylindrical silo in Exshaw, Alberta, for Lafarge Cement in 1995. One of the things that made this project stand out was the slipform technique it required—a continuous concrete pour into a moving form. “Dad was a bit of an expert in that, and he was bound and determined that we’d get the experience,” says Murray.

The bid was successful, and Clark was tapped to manage the concrete pour. “I’d never done a slipform before, and it was exciting,” he says. Around the clock for nine days, shifts of labourers had to add a continuous flow of rebar and concrete to create the cylinder, while the platform they were working from rose three to twelve inches an hour. “It was a very organized flow of work, and they had to make sure the cylinder didn’t move and that it came out plumb,” Clark says.

One Saturday night toward the end of the concrete pour, a structural engineer came out from Quebec to inspect the project. Clark remembers reading the engineer’s report the following Monday

morning. “He claimed that some of the rebar was too close to the exterior surface of the concrete. The rebar had to be two inches in, and he said we were one inch in. His inspection had happened a day and a half before we received the report, and in the meantime the silo had risen another thirty feet.”

The crew took corrective action for the remainder of the concrete pour, and SBW later hired a painter to apply a special coating over the entire exterior of the silo. The subcontractor in charge of the rebar took responsibility for the problem and for the painting expense—testament to the strength of SBW’s relationship with subtrades. “We didn’t end up in court, and that’s always a good thing,” says Clark.

In addition to the challenges experienced on the complex job, there’s another reason that the Exshaw silo project stands out in people’s memories: it was the last estimate prepared by the venerable Bob Saunders.

Vancouver & Lower Mainland

King George SkyTrain Station, later part of TransLink (1994) [p. 159]
Stadium SkyTrain Station expansion (1995)
West Coast Express, Waterfront Station, later part of TransLink (1995) [p. 159]

Pacific Boulevard water treatment plant (1995)
University of British Columbia, Neville Scarfe Education Library and seismic upgrades (1996) [p. 158]

Alberta

Lafarge Cement homogenizing silo, Exshaw, Alberta (1995) [p. 161]



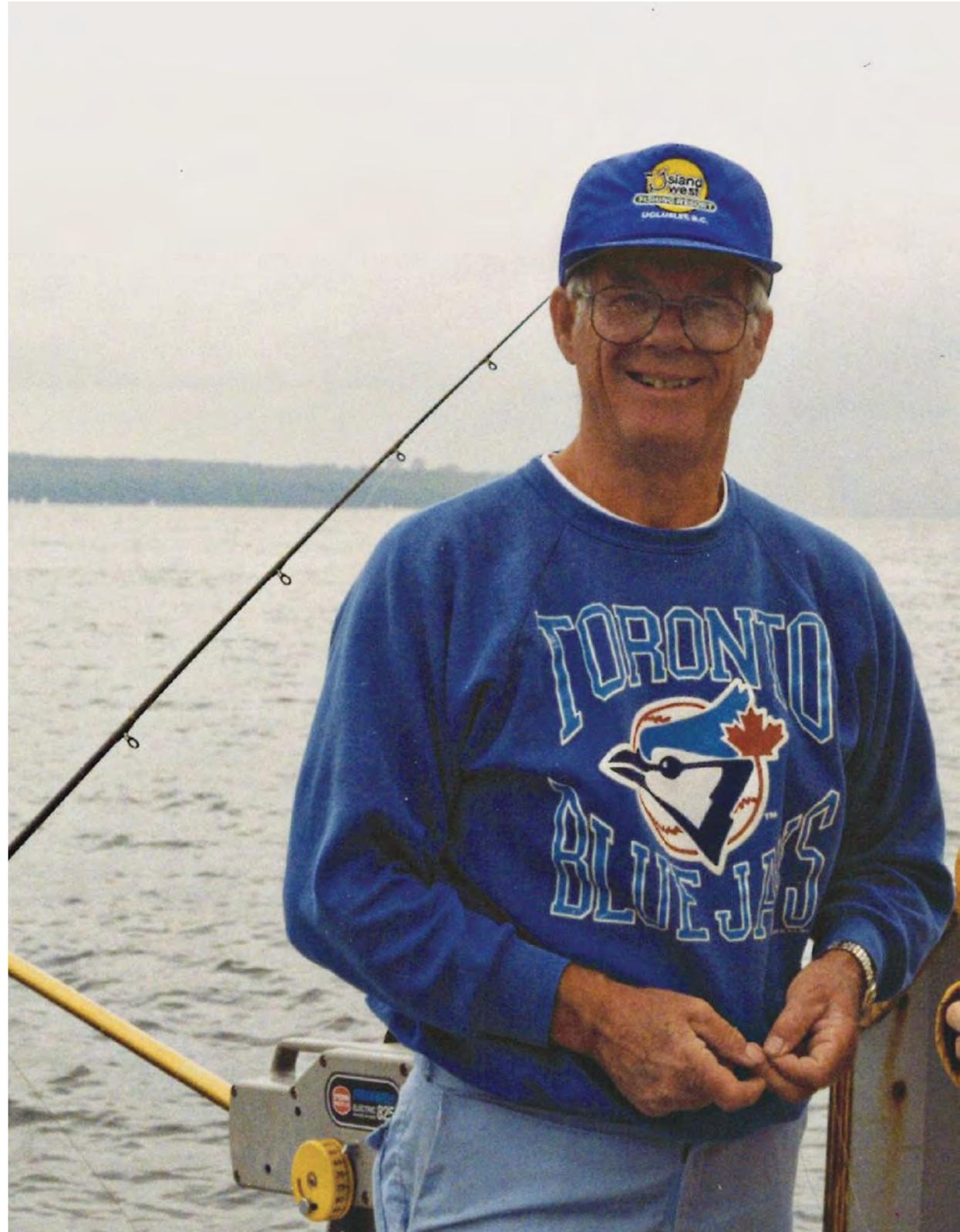
Lafarge Cement homogenizing silo, Exshaw, Alberta, 1995. SBW used a slipform technique to pour the concrete for this forty-five-metre silo. Around the clock for nine days, labourers added a steady flow of rebar and concrete while the platform they worked on moved up three to twelve inches an hour.

Bob Saunders on a fishing trip, 1993. Bob died of a heart attack on April 1, 1996. When news spread of his passing, tributes poured in from all corners of the construction and business community he had served for so long.

“Saunders played a key role in virtually every major construction movement since he graduated as a civil engineer in his mid-20s,” the *Journal of Commerce* noted in an article about his legacy, with his achievements “reading like the list of accomplishments of 10 men.” He served as vice president of the Vancouver General Contractors Association; president of the Vancouver Construction Association; founding and life member, director, and chair of the Amalgamated Construction Association; founding and life member and chair of the Construction Labour Relations Association; director of the B.C. Construction Association; life member, director, vice president, president, and labour relations committee chair of the Canadian Construction Association; and recipient of the CCA’s Robert Stollery Award for leadership and excellence in the construction industry. He also served as chair of the B.C. Business Council, president of the Vancouver Kiwanis Club, director and committee member of the Canadian Labour Market and Productivity Centre, and member of the Industrial Relations Council of B.C.

“In all my years associated with construction, I have never met a person, anywhere in Canada, that gave more of himself than Bob Saunders, and to an industry that gives guarantees to no one,” said Chuck McVeigh, former president of the Construction Labour Relations Association, in his moving eulogy to Bob. “He was the most unselfish person I have ever met. Everything Bob did for the construction industry he did with his own particular style, with articulation, with class, and as an eloquent spokesman for the industry, always in a manner that left us with a feeling of pride of being associated with the construction industry and in being associated with Bob Saunders. . . . He could always put things in perspective and could always laugh at himself. His strongest quality was his personality, the engaging way he had of meeting and greeting people. He truly was one of those guys that would walk into a room and light the place up.”

The Saunders family and the Canadian Construction Association created the Robert G. Saunders Memorial Award as a permanent legacy in his honour.



Goodbye to a Legend

BY 1996, SEVENTY-TWO-YEAR-OLD BOB SAUNDERS had cut back on his appearances at the office as the new leadership team grew increasingly comfortable. He liked having more leisure time to fish, hunt, and golf, and he enjoyed time with his wife, Vi, and their children and grandchildren at the family cabin in Vernon. He and Vi also regularly spent a few winter weeks in Palm Springs, often with Bob's twin brother, Don, and his wife, Elsie.

On March 31, 1996, Bob and Vi returned home from just such a trip. Bob attended to a bit of business before turning in for the night. As he slept in the early hours of April 1, he suffered a massive heart attack and died.

"It was a shock," says Murray about learning that his dad was gone. The news spread quickly among Bob's family and friends, including, of course, his SBW family and the industry he'd been part of for close to fifty years. "It went through the industry like lightning," Murray remembers. SBW closed the office on the Monday Bob died, and hundreds of people attended his funeral later that week.

Every SBW team member who knew Bob has a story to tell about the way he influenced them. "He had a way of giving you the drawings and his ideas and then letting you go and do it, but when you had an issue, you could go to him," says Jim Morrice. "One time when I made a mistake, I went to Bob and said, 'I screwed up.' And he said, 'Mr. Morrice, how are you going to fix this?' That was the way he dealt with it. Mistakes happen. It's how you deal with them that counts."

"When I think of Bob, we're at a big dinner at the golf and country club," George Blair remembers. "It was a room full of key personnel—supervisors, foremen, workers—and he stood up and introduced everyone and said something positive about each and every one—even our spouses. He had that ability to get up and talk about everyone in the room. You felt like he cared."

Bill Sparks, too, recalls how Bob could make everyone feel like a valuable member of the team. "He came out to a job site not long after I started at SBW. He came over to me and asked me how I was doing, and he knew my name. I was quite surprised because we hadn't been introduced. I thought that was really something, for the president of the company to come over and talk to me and know my name. I'll always remember that."

As a permanent legacy in honour of Bob, the Saunders family and the Canadian Construction Association created the Robert G. Saunders Memorial Award, presented annually to a CCA general contractor who demonstrates commitment and dedication to the Canadian construction industry—qualities that Bob exemplified throughout his career.

Centennial Milestone

AT THE JUNE 1996 annual shareholders' meeting for the original Smith Bros. & Wilson Ltd., directors Peter Shields, Michael Shields, Murray Saunders, Beverly Hlady (Paul's widow), and Don Langner observed a moment of silence in recognition of and respect for the late Bob Saunders.

But as Bob would have wanted, they soon moved on to the business at hand: the health of the operating company, Smith Bros. & Wilson (B.C.) Ltd. Murray's report was cautiously optimistic. Two major projects—the Waterfront commuter rail station and phase 2 of the UBC Scarfe Library—had been completed that year, and ongoing work on the Annacis West Channel Bridge and various smaller projects was proceeding well. Income was stable, with some good prospects on the horizon.

(Left to right) Annacis West Channel Bridge, Delta, and Labatt Breweries fermentation cellar, New Westminster, both 1997.





“Ever since I was a child, Dad always pointed out the projects that Smith Brothers had worked on. My kids had to do the same thing. Every time we went by one of our buildings, I’d point it out and say, ‘You know who did that?’ ‘Yes, Dad, Smith Brothers did that,’ they’d say. There’s a sense of pride and accomplishment in those things. It’s extraordinary.”

MURRAY SAUNDERS



(Left to right) Murray Saunders, Don Langner, and Tim Harrington, 1997. As vice president, controller, and president of SBW, respectively, Murray, Don, and Tim had really found their management footing by SBW’s centennial year. “We were a great combination,” says Tim.

Even more significant was Murray’s update on the union front, which remained SBW’s most pressing competitive issue. “The future is going to be interesting due to the fact that the labour climate of the province is changing dramatically,” he reported, explaining that the Carpenters Union was leaving the Building Trades Council and organizing a wall-to-wall, all-employees classification. “That would eliminate two union certifications—operating engineers and labourers—that are currently hindering the process of obtaining work due to the lack of wage concessions during tendering,” he said, adding that the Carpenters Union had been more progressive in working with contractors to alleviate the situation.

In other words, things were potentially starting to shift in the direction that SBW wanted them to go. With his late father’s knack for labour relations, Murray had his finger on the pulse of the evolving situation, and he promised to keep the other shareholders posted.

Company's tender tossed out over matter of seconds

Time waits for no tender, says B.C. Supreme Court

Five killed, one injured as car and logging truck collide

PRINCE GEORGE — A logging truck was thrown from a collision with a car on Highway 16 near Prince George, RCMP said today. The driver of the logging truck suffered minor injuries. Highway 16 was closed at Dome Creek for several hours as police investigated the accident. Names of the dead weren't released.

Police school admits offence

The provincial training school for police and firefighters admits it broke a pollution law. B.C. conservation officer Rick Hildebrand said Wednesday the Justice Institute of B.C. has pleaded guilty to federal Fisheries Act charges laid after a diesel spill in Maple Ridge. The institute uses diesel fuel to make fires during firefighting exercises, but last April some diesel from its tanks flowed into Zirk Creek in the Kakaka Creek watershed. A judge has imposed a \$1,000 fine and ordered the institute to give another \$5,000 to the Bell-Irving fish hatchery, which is also in the Kanaka watershed. Provincial prosecutions of provincial government agencies are unusual, but not unprecedented.

"Just because they happen to be an arm of the provincial government doesn't make them immune to prosecution," Hildebrand said. "If there's an offence committed, they still have to be held accountable."

Information line relieved

VICTORIA — The province's toll-free telephone service for obtaining information about government was supposed to close on March 1 but will instead remain open for another year. Enquiry B.C., which gives callers the appropriate names and phone numbers for government services before transferring their calls, was threatened by budget cuts. Employment Minister Dan Miller said Wednesday.

The number of calls to the service has greatly increased recently. This year, the service is expected to handle 1.6 million calls. The cost of Enquiry B.C. was about \$2 million in 1996-97 and is expected to grow to \$2.7 million in the next fiscal year.

Ex-basketball star in court

DUNCAN — A former Canadian basketball star has made his first court appearance on drug charges. Bill Robinson of Chemainus and co-accused Jamie Nestley of Crofton are charged with cultivation of marijuana and possession of the drug for the purpose of trafficking. The charges stem from a Jan. 3 raid on a Vancouver Island property that netted police 1,500 pot plants, growing equipment and some harvested marijuana. Robinson, 48, led the Canadian men's basketball team at the Montreal Olympics in 1976.

The Duncan judge hearing the case is expected to excuse himself from any future hearing involving the accused. Provincial Court Judge Brian

The B.C. Teachers' Federation should be funded by the province for special treatment

without regard to gay students, staff

The president of the B.C. Teachers Federation wants to combat homophobia in the schools with sensitivity training for both teachers and university students studying to become teachers. Alice McQuade said Wednesday that creation of such a program by the teachers' union is already supported by teachers in B.C.'s three largest school districts and the federation executive. The merits of initiating the program will be debated March 15 at the annual general meeting of the teachers' union. McQuade believes all teachers want training and direction on how to eliminate homophobia and "heterosexism", which she describes as a built-in societal bias against homosexuality. She predicts her membership will give the program a green light, but conceded teachers may disagree over whether it

other challenges facing gay and lesbian students in that district. The proposal had been endorsed by the Coquitlam Teachers Association. McQuade says the Coquitlam board failed to deal with the issue by saying no to Warren. School board chair Maxine Wilson said trustees concluded it was inappropriate to single out homosexual students with a special policy at a time when the district is also struggling with racial issues related to the rapid increase in immigrant students. Wilson doubts the teachers' federation can change a situation, saying the homophobia issue is best left to school districts and individual schools. She said a new anti-discrimination policy to be adopted by the Coquitlam district will achieve Warren's goals without singling out homosexuals for

largest school districts of Vancouver, Surrey and Coquitlam, and in Burnaby, North Vancouver and Kamloops passed motions urging the teachers' federation to set up a program. Vancouver Secondary Teachers Association vice-president Irene Lanzinger said not all teachers supported the motion in the city. Lanzinger said homosexual students face discrimination, for example, in life skills classes, which focus only on heterosexuality. She believes gay and lesbian students should at least be recognized in the curriculum. "There are undoubtedly gay and lesbian students in our classrooms, just as there are gay and lesbian teachers," Lanzinger said. "They deserve equity. They deserve a curriculum that reflects their sexuality as well as the mainstream."

But Tom Criss, a representative for the 100-member Parents Response Association, said the board is acting negligently by pushing ahead with plans to counsel gay students without notifying them about the health risks of homosexual lifestyles. The group is considering a legal challenge to the policy. The new guidelines call for district schools to ensure homosexual students and staff a "safe and secure learning environment" through counselling and heightened awareness of harassment and violence. "We're not condoning any lifestyle, merely the safety of all students," trustee Corrie Rosenstein said. Jay Hood, a 19-year-old gay student, is happy with the board's actions. "In a public forum they weren't afraid to take action, and to take the public backlash that might result."

Company's tender tossed out over matter of seconds

A judge rules that a bid to build a power plant for B.C. Hydro failed to meet the deadline.

NEAL HALL
Sun Staff Reporter

A company that put in a bid to build a \$13-million power plant for B.C. Hydro has learned a hard lesson about filing its documents on time. A judge ruled this week the bid for construction submitted by Smith Bros. & Wilson (B.C.) came in seconds past the deadline, even though the clock at

B.C. Hydro was running fast. The company presented its tender to the counter at 11:01 a.m. on Jan. 21. Hydro had advertised the deadline at 11 a.m. B.C. Hydro initially rejected the tender as late. But after Smith Bros. complained the utility's clock was inaccurate, Hydro checked and said the next day the bid was received was on time. But a few days later, Hydro again reversed its decision. Smith Bros. filed an application in B.C. Supreme Court, seeking a declaration that its bid was submitted on time

or, alternatively, a contract had been formed when Hydro decided to accept the tender as being on time. Justice Duncan Shaw noted B.C. Hydro's evidence was that it would consider all tenders on time if they were time-stamped before the clock turned 11:01. He also considered the evidence of Harry Lee, then Hydro's time systems expert, who tested the Widmer time-stamp clock at Hydro's counter against an atomic clock, which is accurate within a second every 1.6 million years. Lee found the Widmer clock was running fast by as much as 60 seconds.

Smith Bros. argued the clock didn't record seconds so 11 a.m. should be considered the period up to 11:01 and, based on the inaccuracy of the Widmer clock, the company's tender was submitted before the deadline. The judge, however, dismissed the application by Smith Bros. He noted the advertisement stated the deadline was 11 a.m. "local time," which he decided was the time according to the clock at Hydro's counter. Hydro would breach its duty of fairness to other tenders if it considered the Smith tender as being on time, he said.

Headlines from the *Vancouver Sun*, February 27, 1997, and *National Post*, April 1, 1997, along with page B3 from the *Vancouver Sun*, February 27, 1997. For every bid that SBW won, countless more went to other contractors—a fact of life in the construction business. But in 1997, a particularly hard-to-take loss occurred when SBW's bid to build a \$13-million power plant for B.C. Hydro was accidentally submitted thirty-three seconds after the deadline.

"We really needed the work, and we were chasing every trade down for the best price until the last possible moment," says Clark Campbell. "We got a late price from a steel contractor with a considerable difference, but it was difficult to make the adjustment because it was a unit price contract. We sat there and wondered, 'Do we make a change or leave the number?' We decided to make the change, so we phoned our runner—one of our shop employees who had our bid documents ready to submit at B.C. Hydro's office—so he could handwrite the new price onto the tender form. But when the runner got to the desk to submit our bid envelope, the receptionist said that it was late. The clock read 11:00, so the runner said, 'I'm not late! Stamp it, stamp it.' So she stamped it, but by that time the clock showed 11:01. They opened our bid the next day, and we were the low bid—and we would have been the lowest if we hadn't made the change. But because our bid was late, it was declared invalid."

Arguing differences between B.C. Hydro's counter clock and atomic clock, SBW filed a legal suit to have its bid reconsidered. The case ended up in the B.C. Supreme Court, but SBW unfortunately failed to win the day.

Ex-federal AIDS official hired to help plan strategy against disease for B.C.

The provincial government has hired a former federal AIDS program worker to help guide the government on strategies related to the disease. Health Minister Jay MacPhail said J. Moffat Clarke will act as a liaison between the government and community groups. He will also coordinate communication between various ministries and AIDS agencies. Philip Harnan, communications director of AIDS Vancouver, said while he's pleased Clarke has been hired, he hopes the government doesn't delay implementing recommendations in the recent report on the provincial AIDS strategy. The report covers a range of issues from home care to programs for intravenous drug users. Working under Mike Corbett, assistant deputy health minister, Clarke will now seek further comments from community groups on the report, which was recently published in draft form. MacPhail said her ministry is spending \$28 million in the current fiscal year on AIDS education, prevention, drug therapy and other programs. "There is a lot of work to do in terms of ensuring that this funding and other AIDS-related programs across government are achieving the maximum effect and being put where they

NOW,
LITERALLY
MORE
TO READ.

“We found the feeling that prevailed throughout the room . . . was one that spoke volumes about the past of the company and its relationship with its employees.”

CLIFF WRIGHT

Another item on that meeting’s agenda was SBW’s upcoming centennial in 1997. Plans for a celebration unfolded over the months that followed. On October 24, 1997, party attendees were treated to a bus tour featuring fifty-six of SBW’s finest projects in the Lower Mainland. A festive reception at the Royal Vancouver Yacht Club capped off the night.

Attendees from SBW’s present and past were effusive in their praise of the event. “The bus tour reinforced the great role that Smith Bros. has had in shaping our city, and will no doubt continue for another one hundred years,” wrote Don Logie, grandson of Harold Johnson, Vancouver branch manager from 1937 to 1955.

“I wish to thank you and your group once again for the exceptional reception that your organization put on last Friday, celebrating your centennial. I must say I am proud to have worked with an organization that could celebrate 100 years of participation in the construction industry in western Canada,” former general superintendent Ted Skodje wrote.

“We found the feeling that prevailed throughout the room on the Friday night was one that spoke volumes about the past of the company and its relationship with its employees,” wrote Cliff Wright, who came from Saskatchewan to celebrate the company he and his father had done so much to build. “One didn’t have to look very hard to recognize the feeling of true pride in the role that each one had played in the company in the past. The number of companies that could inspire that kind of feeling are very limited indeed, and it has to be a matter of incredible satisfaction to all those who played a part in organizing this very significant event. Thanks once again for including us and inviting Bill Schindel, Morris Houle, Cam Osler, and their wives to experience this unforgettable evening.”

Vancouver & Lower Mainland

Pacific Elevators ship loader facility (1997)
Annacis West Channel Bridge (1997) [pp. 164–65]
Labatt Breweries fermentation cellar (1997) [p. 165]
Canadian Airlines facilities (1998)

Vancouver International Airport, Pier C upgrade (1998)
Labatt Breweries storage cellar and Budweiser aging upgrade (1999)
Royston Road underpass (1999)



Scenes from SBW's 100th-anniversary party, October 24, 1997. (Clockwise from top left) Don Grant and George and Sandy Blair. Bill Sparks. Bev Lingren and her husband, Art. Cliff Wright and his wife, Betty. Michael Shields, Marjorie Fisher, Peter Shields, and Sandy Argue (all descendants of the Smith brothers).

Elsewhere in B.C.

Richmond City Hall (1999) [p. 170]
 Molson Brewery fermentation cellar and seismic upgrades (1999)
 I.W.A. Building, Langley (1999)

Howe Sound Pulp and Paper warehouse, Port Mellon (1996)
 Brilliant Dam restoration (1997)
 Cranbrook recreation centre (2000) [p. 170]



[ABOVE] (Left to right) Richmond City Hall, 1999; Cranbrook recreation centre, 2000.

[OPPOSITE] City of Vancouver Chess Street works yard, 2003.

As the concrete contractor on these projects (as well as the Chinatown Millennium Gate on page 172), SBW drew on decades of experience constructing high-quality concrete structures.

For the city hall, SBW won a trade contractor award from the Vancouver Regional Construction Association, and for the Chinatown Millennium Gate—which SBW superintendent Jim Morrice called “a work of art”—SBW was a finalist in the B.C. Ready Mixed Concrete Association’s 2006 Awards for Excellence in Concrete Construction. The company was also lauded for the cast-in-place concrete walls for the works yard, which feature a complex decorative relief of bold geometric figures. SBW cast all fifty-two patterned wall panels in six weeks.

Moving Forward in a New Millennium

FOR THE REMAINDER OF THE 1990S, SBW pulled in a steady volume of business, particularly in the industrial sector. Having passed its one-hundredth anniversary, and well into the fourth generational change in its history, the company entered the new millennium with pride.

In June 2001, Murray reported to shareholders that business prospects were “encouraging and positive.” Although he was alluding to a few potential projects when he said this, he was also optimistic about happenings on the labour front.

As both SBW’s labour relations specialist and the chair and then past chair of the Construction Labour Relations Association (CLRA) from 2000 to 2003—positions once held by his dad—Murray had a front-row view of the events triggered by the Carpenters Union’s transformation from a craft-based to a wall-to-wall union. In 2004, two of the largest unionized general contractors in the province, PCL and Dominion, decertified from their agreements. “SBW wasn’t big enough to do the same thing at the time,” Murray says, “but the playing field for union and non-union contractors was slowly levelling, and that’s what we wanted.”



Murray’s involvement in the CLRA continued an important tradition at SBW to make its voice heard in these kinds of industry developments. Tim Harrington and Clark Campbell were actively involved too—Tim on the board of the Vancouver Regional Construction Association (VRCA) in 1996–2000 and Clark on the boards of the Quantity Surveyors Society of B.C. (2000–2004) and the Canadian Institute of Quantity Surveyors (2003–6). Clark also later served on the board of directors for VRCA from 2011 to 2017, including a term as chair in 2011–13. “It’s important to be part of these organizations,” Clark says. “In any business, whether it’s construction or any other kind, you want to create an environment where you can thrive as an industry. Since the Smith brothers’ time, SBW has always had this drive to work with other contractors and subcontractors to effect change.”

“SBW’s objective is to perform quality work as opposed to quantity work.”

**MURRAY SAUNDERS
AT ANNUAL GENERAL
MEETING, MAY 12, 1999**

“SBW wouldn’t have come up at number one in a Google search in 2004, but many industry insiders knew them very well.”

GARY CHEEMA



Vancouver & Lower Mainland

TransLink, RTP2000 Operations and Maintenance Centre (2001)
TransLink, Sapperton Station Plaza and Commercial Station (2002)
Justice Institute of B.C. expansion and renovation (2002)

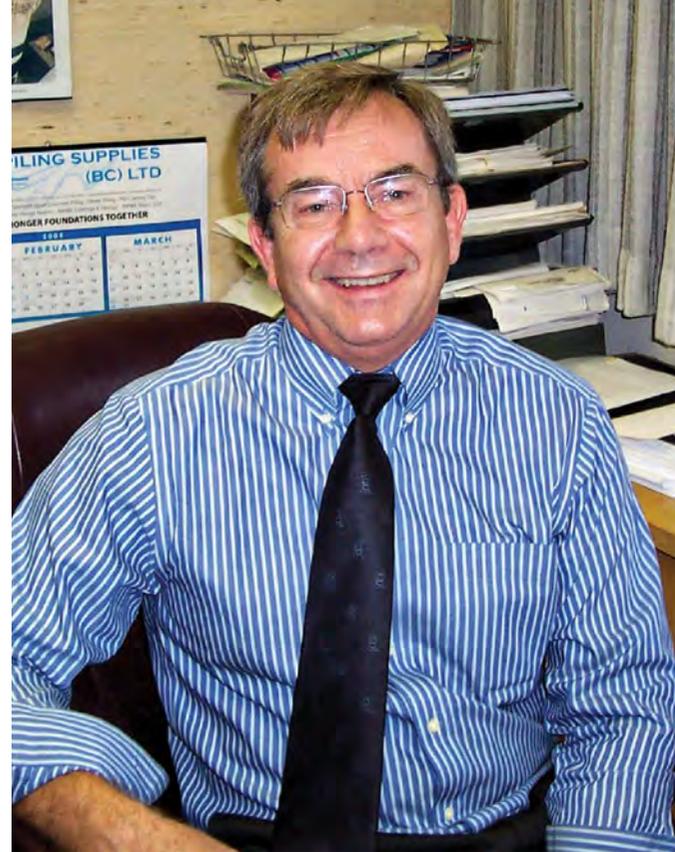
Chinatown Millennium Gate (2002) [above]
Children’s and Women’s Health Centre of B.C.
parking and access reconfiguration (2002)

SBW's industry association involvement was also key in drawing talented young people to the company over the years, and this was the case with Gary Cheema in 2004. When Gary and several of his classmates in the Architectural and Building Technology program at the B.C. Institute of Technology (BCIT) placed second in the national Student Bid Competition, Clark was the VRCA board member who came to BCIT to present their award.

Gary and Clark chatted only briefly at the award event, but it was Clark and SBW that Gary immediately thought of when it came time to find a work placement for his practicum later that month. "What really resonated with me about Clark was what seemed like a genuine interest in helping me and working with me, so I called him up to see if I could visit SBW for a week," says Gary.

Clark readily agreed, and Gary's initial impressions grew stronger after spending time in SBW's Aisne Street office. "I remember Clark trying to teach me the simplest things, with zero frustration," Gary remembers. "He stayed back a couple of hours after the office closed to teach me how to do a proper estimate, even though he could have done it in much less time, and still had to redo it afterward. That willingness to help goes back to the culture of the company, and it was moments like that that really connected me to SBW."

When Gary's practicum ended and exams drew near, he started to consider his full-time employment prospects. Once again, SBW kept coming back to his mind, and an economics teacher who knew the company helped him frame his choice. "I could join a big company and be pigeonholed in a corner and work on the same



stuff for the next ten years, or I could work for a smaller company like SBW, with a good culture and where I could advance my career much faster." Gary called Clark to request an interview, and "everything else is history," he says.

Gary's hopes for variety and challenge came to fruition. "My first role at SBW was in estimating, helping Clark out with whatever he needed. After about six months, I was estimating and coordinating small jobs, and then in 2005 I was made the project coordinator/manager on the Lynn Valley Care Centre—the biggest care facility SBW had built to that point. One could say it was sink or swim, but at the same time, I knew I wasn't by myself. Clark, Murray, and Tim were always just down the hall."

[ABOVE] (Left to right) Clark Campbell, 2008, and Gary Cheema, 2015. Clark's involvement on the board of the Vancouver Regional Construction Association led to him meeting Gary in 2004 at the B.C. Institute of Technology, where Gary was completing the Architectural and Building Technology program. Gary joined SBW later that year, and he would go on to become a shareholder and key figure at the company.

[OPPOSITE] Chinatown Millennium Gate, Vancouver, 2002.

Elsewhere in B.C.

Lions Gate Hospital, acute care tower and MRI addition (2003)
City of Vancouver, Chess Street works yard (2003) [p. 171]
Vancouver International Airport, International Terminal upgrades (2004)
Vancouver General Hospital renovations (2004)

Crestbrook Forest Industries Skookumchuck pulp mill foundations (2001)
Labatt Creston Brewhouse expansion (2002)



Another new arrival in 2004 was William Doss, who joined as an accounts payable clerk reporting to Don Langner. William, too, appreciated the broad exposure he got to the inner and outer workings of SBW. “I learned everything about the company—not only accounting, but also estimating and project management and the details of our industry. The whole picture.”

William also appreciated SBW’s integrity and attention to detail, starting with the way Don managed the books. “The accuracy I saw, I was impressed. Things had to match by the penny. They had to balance. I liked that. I found in the company what I wanted.” When Don retired in 2006, William succeeded him as controller.

Bill Cann also retired in this period, in 2009, selling a big chunk of his shares in the company to Clark, and later some to Gary. The latter agonized over the decision to buy shares when the

opportunity arose, and he initially decided to decline. “I was already stretched,” he says. “I was the only person working in my household, just married, bills to pay. I wanted to buy the shares, but I couldn’t afford it.” When Murray heard that Gary had said no to the shares, he did something that Gary will never forget. “Murray approached me and said, ‘You have an opportunity here and you’re going to be part of it, so I’ve paid for you.’”

Gary was shocked. “I said to Murray, ‘Are you serious? How do I pay you back? What are the terms?’ And he said, ‘Don’t worry about it, there’s no interest. You can pay me back in instalments.’ I knew Murray’s integrity, the respect he has in the industry and with the people, so I agreed. I cleared the loan within four years. Murray’s gesture to get me involved in the company . . . it changed my life.”



[LEFT] Bill Cann holding his last SBW paycheque, 2009. Bill, whom Murray Saunders called “the best small-tool mechanic in B.C.,” managed SBW’s yard and equipment for years. When he retired in 2009, he sold a large chunk of his shares in SBW to Clark Campbell, and later some to Gary Cheema.

[OPPOSITE] (Left, left to right) Don Langner and Tim Harrington. (Right) William Doss. William joined SBW in 2004, and he succeeded Don as controller when the latter retired in 2006. William credits Don and Don’s predecessor, Paul Hlady, for the meticulous financial records he inherited from them.



[LEFT] (Left to right) Clark Campbell, Tim Harrington, and Murray Saunders holding the Vancouver Regional Construction Association's General Contractor of the Year Award, 2008.

[OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT] Mountain View Cemetery Masonic area, Vancouver, 2008; TransLink, Yukon rectifier station, Vancouver, 2009; pedestrian bridge, Burnaby, 2009; Lynn Valley Care Centre, North Vancouver, 2009. In the mid- to late 2000s, a series of good-sized projects like these, along with SBW's industrial focus, helped the company ride out the 2008-9 recession with relative ease.

An Unwinnable Game

IN 2007, SBW PASSED ITS 110TH ANNIVERSARY in typically understated fashion, letting its long record speak for itself. A flow of good-sized projects was keeping everyone busy, and the steady beat of business came to feel almost reliable, with none of the drama that accompanied the rollercoaster of profits and losses in previous decades.

Even when the 2008-9 recession pummelled much of B.C.'s construction industry, SBW escaped the turmoil thanks to its industrial focus and limited participation in the residential market. "We actually picked up quite a bit of work in that period," says Murray. "Not huge, but enough to keep us going."

Nevertheless, labour agreements restricting SBW's right to subcontract remained a major barrier to growth. "We weren't able to access some of the trades we needed, and we weren't invited to bid on various jobs because of that," says Murray.

New shareholder Gary Cheema remembers the uncertainty he felt in this period as he watched SBW's market share shrink and the company's real value decline. "We were just project to project, and there were times when we didn't know how we could keep moving forward," he says.

As the decade ended, it was clearer than ever that SBW was playing an unwinnable game. Like their leadership predecessors, however, Murray, Tim, and Clark were not willing to concede the game before trying their best to change its rules.

Vancouver & Lower Mainland

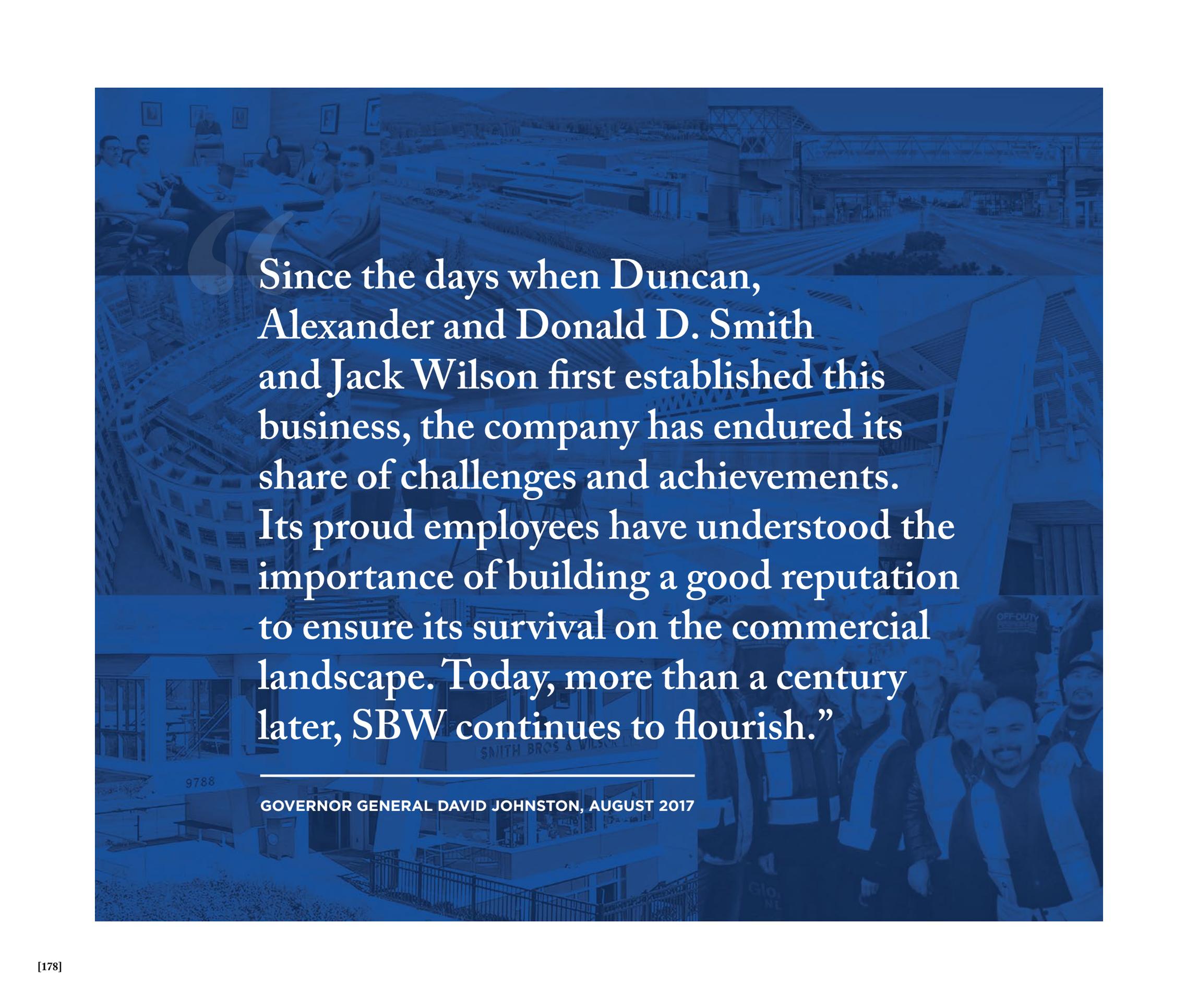
TransLink, RTP2000 VCC guideway (2005)
 Killarney community pool (2006)
 Canadian Autoparts Toyota plant expansion (2006)
 B.C. Children's and Women's Hospital, Jean Matheson Pavilion (2007)

Chevron Refinery cooling tower and lower tank row (2008)
 South Coast Millwork dry kiln (2008)
 Molson Brewery fermentation expansion (2008)



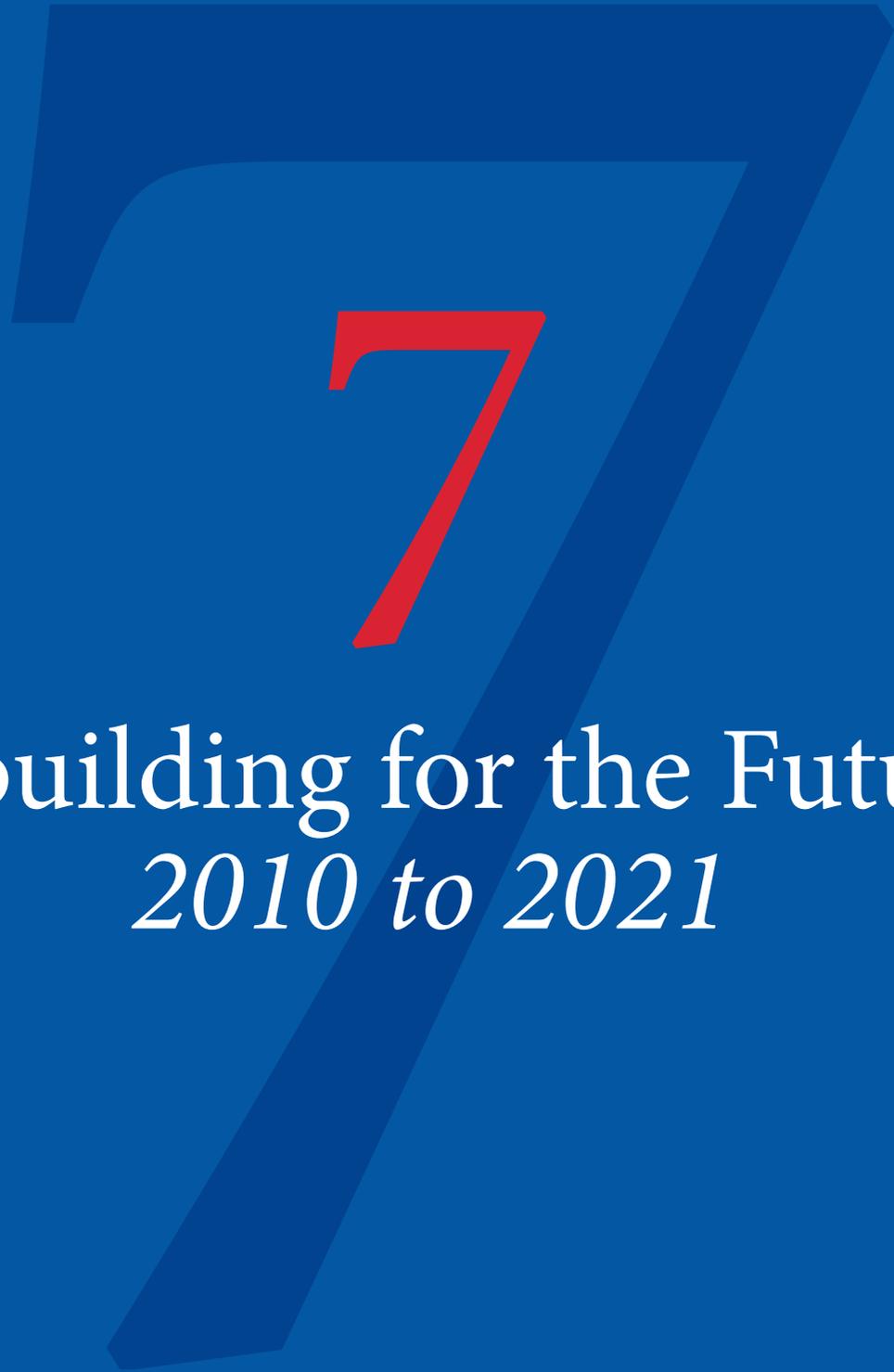
City of Vancouver, Mountain View Cemetery Masonic area and building works (2008) [above]
Walter Moberly Elementary School seismic upgrade (2009)
TransLink, Yukon rectifier station (2009) [above]

Lynn Valley Care Centre (2009) [above]
Lynn Valley Town Centre and Library (2009)
City of Burnaby pedestrian bridge (2009) [above]



Since the days when Duncan, Alexander and Donald D. Smith and Jack Wilson first established this business, the company has endured its share of challenges and achievements. Its proud employees have understood the importance of building a good reputation to ensure its survival on the commercial landscape. Today, more than a century later, SBW continues to flourish.”

GOVERNOR GENERAL DAVID JOHNSTON, AUGUST 2017



Rebuilding for the Future
2010 to 2021

“There’s Nothing That a Big Job Won’t Cure”

IN EARLY 2010, VANCOUVER WAS ABUZZ as host city, along with Whistler, of the Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games. SBW, like much of the local construction industry, had experienced an uptick in business in the lead-up to the games, but by the time the big show came to town, work in hand was lower than it had been in decades. “We were in a real dry spell,” says Murray Saunders.

Clark Campbell puts a starker spin on it: “Frankly, we weren’t growing enough to meet inflation, so in real value, we were decreasing. We were stuck in a loop: we had to get the work before hiring anyone, but we had to hire people before we could get the work. For the large jobs we tried to chase, the owners said we weren’t big enough. They didn’t believe we could do it. We weren’t even treading water anymore. We were going under.”

Even though things looked bleak, Murray, Clark, and SBW president Tim Harrington pressed on. “We’d been through multiple peak-and-valley scenarios before,” says Murray, “and like my mother used to say, ‘Don’t worry, there’s nothing that a big job won’t cure.’”

Sure enough, a big job arose just when SBW needed it most. In December 2010, the City of Burnaby chose SBW to build the new Edmonds Aquatic and Community Centre. The \$32-million bid was the company’s largest win to that point in its history.

“I was down in my office when I heard the estimators start whooping and hollering,” Murray remembers. “I actually teared up a bit. It had been about a year since we’d picked up a job. I was moving to semi-retirement by that point and thinking maybe it was time to go out the door, and then along came that project. It was a big job, and it carried the company and kept a whole bunch of people going for a few years.”



[OPPOSITE] Edmonds Aquatic and Community Centre, Burnaby, 2013. This \$32-million contract—SBW’s largest to that point in its history—came along after an extended dry spell following the 2010 Winter Olympics.

Vancouver & Lower Mainland

Columbia Square Plaza (2010)
Vancity Savings Credit Union branches (2010-14)
TransLink, smart card and faregate projects (2012)
Edmonds Aquatic and Community Centre (2013) [p. 181]



(Left to right) Murray Saunders with retired carpenter Al Snickars, 2016. For a decade and a half, Murray led SBW's efforts to loosen the labour-agreement restrictions that had steadily diminished the company's competitiveness with non-unionized contractors. By the time this photo was taken, SBW and other unionized contractors had won the subcontracting rights they sought and levelled the playing field with their non-unionized counterparts—a major achievement that unlocked tremendous future potential for the company.



As the Edmonds facility took shape, developments on the labour relations front also seemed to be shifting in SBW's favour. "In the 2010 round of collective bargaining, our committees at the Construction Labour Relations Association decided we would push hard for what we needed," says Murray. "Through the extremely hard work of labour relations officer Greg Sewell and the brilliant labour lawyer Barry Dong, we finally started to get somewhere with a new deal over the next few years."

After spending months of his life at the Labour Relations Board, Murray will never forget the day in June 2012 when Greg and Barry called to say that arbitrator Michael Fleming had made his decision: SBW and other unionized contractors in the sector—meaning those with the four signatory trades of carpenter, labourer, cement mason, and operating engineer—had won the right to subcontract work without restriction. It was the game changer SBW had long been pushing for.

"That decision allowed us back into a huge part of the market that we'd been shut out of for decades," says Murray. "We were automatically more competitive because the prices we got from all the trades were a little sharper. The right to subcontract was the great equalizer. Without it, I don't believe SBW would have survived, and I think even the unions would agree it has benefited both sides." In particular, Murray points to the leadership of Brian Cochrane of the International Union of Operating Engineers and Jan Noster of Construction, Maintenance and Allied Workers of Canada, "who lived by what happened and moved forward. We've had a tremendous relationship with our unions ever since."

Back in 2012, though, the labour decision didn't trigger an immediate rush of business through the door. By the end of the year, with the Edmonds project nearing completion, everyone at SBW once again started to wonder where the next big job would come from, and if they could stay afloat in the meantime.

"I was concerned that I might be the last president of SBW," Tim says. And then came the day in January 2013 when he answered his ringing phone, and everything changed.

A Meeting of the Minds

THE PERSON ON THE OTHER END of Tim's line that day was Jeff Musialek, who had recently left his senior role overseeing a competitor's B.C. division. "I had crossed paths with Jeff over the years and was aware of him as a really good guy, but I didn't really know him well," says Tim.

After some initial niceties, Jeff got to the point of his call. "He asked if we could meet to chat about the potential for him to join SBW," Tim says, recalling the shock he felt at Jeff's words. "I was just . . . holy cow! I told him we would definitely want to talk about that."

After hanging up with Jeff, Tim immediately called Murray, who was in Hawaii at the time. "When Tim asked me what I thought about Jeff Musialek potentially joining our team and buying into the company, I said, 'Shit, yeah. Let's get him in!'" Murray remembers.

For his part, Jeff was not merely shopping around for a new job. After launching his former firm's B.C. commercial division in 2005 and building it to more than \$400 million in volume within the first few years, he had recently become disenchanted with the company's changing strategic direction. After amicably parting ways with the firm and cashing out his ownership shares, he had money in his pocket and was looking to invest both it and himself in a company that shared his values and vision. After doing his research, he had homed in on four firms to contact—and SBW was at the top of his list.

"Originally as a drywall subcontractor on a few SBW jobs, and then as a competitor for several years, I knew that the company had a lot of integrity and a high level of participation in the local construction community," Jeff says. "I knew they treated people fairly and did solid, quality work. I always had a lot of respect for them."

That feeling intensified after his first sit-down with Tim and Murray. "There was a meeting of the minds," Jeff says. "Murray and Tim really resonated with me."

The positive impressions were mutual. "I thought he would be a good asset no matter what," says Tim.

As discussions with Jeff gained traction over the ensuing weeks, Murray and Tim brought Clark and SBW's remaining shareholder, Gary Cheema, into the conversation. It didn't take long for them to see that Jeff would be a valuable addition. "I knew Jeff was a go-getter, but when I first sat down with him to talk about him coming to SBW, all I could think was 'Wow,'" says Clark. "Soon I was like, 'Let's shake hands, let's get on with it, let's move.'"

"After we were introduced and I learned more about Jeff, I started getting excited about this guy who wanted to come in and transform our company," says Gary. "I was silent throughout the process until I knew who he was, and then I got vocal about bringing him on board."

Jeff believed that SBW had the opportunity to regain—even surpass—the market stature it had once enjoyed, and he presented a persuasive strategy for getting there. “He said that we were good and trustworthy and honest, but that we weren’t using all of our capacity,” says Tim. “And he was right.”

“We were comfortable, kind of wearing our pajamas, but Jeff was like, ‘No, you’ve got a niche here,’” says Gary. “Other contractors were taking a step forward and doing only large projects, leaving a big gap in the market. Jeff said there was no reason why SBW couldn’t fill that vacuum and become a \$200- to \$300-million company. He understood that Murray and Tim and Clark have paid their dues, but that SBW is not over with them. We can keep going.”

“Jeff saw the opportunity,” says Murray. “He’s very charismatic and bright, just like my dad was, and I knew he could bring in a whole new energy and all kinds of horses with him. But I had no idea then that he’d be as good as he is. He cranked it up like you wouldn’t believe.”

Jeff Musialek, 2021. Jeff joined and became a shareholder in SBW in 2013 and was key to the company’s resurgence in the years that followed.



SMITH BROS & WILSON



The Trust to Rebuild a Classic

AFTER JOINING THE COMPANY in May 2013, Jeff's initial impressions that SBW "was like a classic car that needed to be taken out of the garage and rebuilt to its former glory" only deepened. At the same time, it was clear that this classic car needed some modernization to win the contemporary race.

"Procurement methods, work practices, and technology had all changed, and SBW hadn't really kept up with those changes," says Jeff. "They were a solid group of honourable people who knew they had a problem, but they couldn't solve it from where they were."

"Our people were good, but we were getting long in the tooth," Clark agrees. "Jeff came in with a whole new point of view that lifted us out of the doldrums."

Jeff was struck by this kind of openness to his ideas. "I felt no resistance," he says. "Murray, Tim, Clark, Gary—everyone here—had so much pride in the company and its legacy, and they were relieved to have a plan to move it forward. It was like they welcomed me with a warm hug."

An immense sense of trust quickly grew between the SBW veterans and the newcomer, tangible proof of which came not long after Jeff joined the team. "When I bought

into SBW," he says, "I cashed out some RRSPs as part of the purchase, and I had to pay quite a bit of tax on that. I later received a notice that the Canada Revenue Agency had made an adjustment and that I had seven days to pay another \$150,000." Not having enough ready cash to cover the hefty bill, Jeff told his new partners that he had no choice but to cash in some SBW shares to cover the taxes.

"Murray walked out of the meeting room, came back with his chequebook, and wrote me a personal cheque," Jeff remembers. "All he said was 'Pay me back when you can, and we're good.' No one had ever done anything like that for me in my life! I could share a bunch of stories like that about the trust and generosity in our partnership group—and that culture is deep. Murray and the others experienced the same thing with their own mentors in this company."

Murray and the other partners didn't just trust that Jeff would repay a loan—which he did within the year—but that SBW's culture would be safe in his hands. To a person, it was essential that SBW modernize for the future without losing the characteristics that marked its long, proud past.

“There’s a million times when people at SBW had to have faith in what we were doing. When we talk about SBW being a family of families, it’s about having incredible trust in people you’d do anything for.”

JEFF MUSIALEK

Reopening Doors

ONE OF THE FIRST modernization initiatives Jeff instigated at SBW was construction management, a new model for procuring work. “Traditionally, general contractors worked in a hard-bid role, where the owner and the architect were in charge and there was a bit of a church and state separation between them and the contractor,” he explains. “That started to evolve in the 1980s, and construction management emerged as the dominant method.”



[RIGHT] International Union of Operating Engineers Local 115 renovation.

[OPPOSITE] Vancouver General Hospital Willow Chest Centre demolition.

Both Vancouver projects, completed in 2014, were among the first construction management projects that SBW secured after Jeff Musialek joined the company.

In the construction management model, “a contractor gets involved early to help clients, architects, and engineers with the design, costing, and scheduling of a project,” Jeff says. “When it converts to a fee number, everyone agrees on the scope and the timing. It’s more collaborative, projects are more predictable in the end, and there’s much less conflict.”

To oversee this new process, building owners started hiring project managers as go-betweens, and “that’s one of the reasons SBW got stuck,” says Clark. “We weren’t penetrating the group of project managers who were now the ones hiring contractors, so we weren’t prequalifying for projects. Jeff understood construction management

and had developed relationships with project managers. Once we got into that group through him, we were finally talking to the people who brought the work.”

Now that they were working with the construction management model and competing on a level playing field with non-unionized contractors, SBW’s business volume started climbing dramatically. “From 2013 on, we continually surprised people in the market,” says Jeff. “They assumed we were fading away, but instead we started breaking through new thresholds in terms of the size and type of work we were winning.”

Vancouver & Lower Mainland

Vancouver General Hospital, Willow Chest Centre demolition (2014) [p. 189]
International Union of Operating Engineers Local 115 renovation (2014) [above]
TransLink and Vancouver Shipyards/Seaspan projects (2014)
Lions Gate wastewater treatment plant (2014)





(Left to right) Gary Cheema and Jim Morrice on-site at the B.C. Nurses' Union expansion project, 2015. Along with SBW's senior partners—Murray Saunders, Tim Harrington, and Clark Campbell—and other company veterans, Gary and Jim were role models of the integrity and concern for quality that SBW sought in newcomers to the company.

Having shrunk to about ten people in the office and a dozen in the field by 2013, SBW now had to rebuild its capacity to handle the growth—but not just any people would do. “We’ve always been careful about bringing in the right people,” says Tim, whose careful stewardship of SBW was always rooted in the mission statement he had crafted: “To maintain our history of providing superior construction value for our clients through excellent quality construction services, using our highly skilled and dedicated employees.”

Jeff also knew the perils of hiring the wrong people just to keep up with growth, having experienced them when launching his former firm's B.C. commercial division. “At SBW, I learned to be more focused and thoughtful about the kind of work we were doing and the kind of people we hired,” he says. “Murray and Tim and Clark's integrity served as the model for the ‘SBW way’—the kind of company we wanted to remain and the people we wanted to bring in.”

In late 2014, the need for new talent took on greater urgency when SBW landed a \$37-million bid to build the innovative Surrey Biofuel Facility—SBW's first major construction management project of that scale. To run it, Jeff turned to Tyler Brown, a trusted colleague from his pre-SBW days. Tyler was young, bright, and technologically savvy—and he fit the mould of integrity and quality that SBW prized.

Tyler had already agreed to join SBW as its new general superintendent when the Surrey Biofuel win came through, but the project stepped up his intended start date. “I had given notice to the company I was with, and planned to take a bunch of banked vacation days before starting at SBW, when Jeff phoned and said he needed me right away,” Tyler remembers. “That was December 2014, and I didn't see another holiday until the following summer.”

The opportunity to oversee the ground-breaking biofuel facility job was instant evidence for Tyler that he'd made the right decision to join SBW. It had taken some persuasion for him to leave a large, sophisticated contractor and come to what he saw as a small, dated firm, but “over a few beers with Jeff swapping stories and comparing situations, I became convinced that I would have more fun at SBW,” Tyler says.



Tyler not only liked and trusted Jeff; he was also drawn to SBW's senior partners. "I met Murray, Tim, and Clark at a local restaurant, and I found them to be so honest and down to earth. They were the owners of a construction company, but they weren't arrogant or entitled. I felt immediately comfortable with them."

Now here he was, in charge of one of the biggest and most complex jobs SBW had ever undertaken. To get it done right, on time and on budget, a skilled senior project manager was essential. For that role, Tyler and Jeff turned to Rick Murray, another long-time colleague and friend of both.



Rick was based in Kelowna when Jeff offered him the job, and he'd been in Alberta for close to a decade before that. As a result, he was even less aware of what was going on at SBW than Tyler had been. "Frankly, I knew nothing about SBW other than that Jeff and Tyler had gone there," Rick says. That fact alone was a "pretty good selling feature," he says, but after doing his own research, he was drawn to SBW's smaller size and family-oriented culture—and the chance to be more than a cog in a big, corporate machine. "At SBW, there aren't a bunch of egos. Everyone knows everyone, and the ability to make decisions and influence things here is more immediate."

(Left to right) Rick Murray, 2018, and Tyler Brown, 2021. Tyler and Rick were two of the trusted former colleagues whom Jeff Musialek recruited to come to SBW—Tyler in 2014 and Rick in 2015. The first SBW project for both was a major one: the Surrey Biofuel Facility, with Tyler as general superintendent and Rick as the project manager.



Surrey Biofuel Facility exterior and interior, 2017. The innovative facility was SBW’s first major construction management project and one of the biggest and most complex jobs SBW had ever undertaken to that point.

Built of structural steel and tilt-up concrete walls, the facility required extraordinarily careful planning. “Before the main building went up, we had to construct the giant seventy-metre-tall chimney on the east end of the property, or we wouldn’t have been able to put the crane on-site to lift it,” says Rick Murray. “We made the four massive sections of the chimney in London, Ontario, then trucked them across the country in the middle of January. We had to coordinate and plan the heck out of it because we had one shot to get it right—and we did it.”

To subsequently tilt up the massive cast-in-place concrete panels for the main facility—twelve inches thick and some weighing as much as 100,000 pounds—“we had the largest mobile crane in Vancouver on-site for months,” says Tyler Brown. “Putting up those walls required a sequence of moves with this giant crane, and each move of the crane took a few days. A lot of technical expertise had to go into the planning and staging of those panels so we didn’t box ourselves into a corner.”

When the state-of-the-art building went into operation in 2017, it was the first of its kind in North America. It symbolized not only a new way of handling waste as a society, but also the modernization taking place at SBW during this same period.



Vancouver & Lower Mainland

B.C. Nurses’ Union expansion (2015)
 Burnaby Auto Mall (2016)
 Deltaport rail maintenance building (2017) [p. 193]
 Surrey Biofuel Facility (2017) [above]

City of Vancouver, West Annex retrofit (2017)
 West Vancouver Police Services and Municipal Hall (2017) [p. 193]
Tilbury LNG expansion (2017)

Rick made the move to SBW in early 2015. Knowing the biofuel facility was a proving ground for the opportunity to become a partner and buy shares in the company, Rick stared down “one of the most complicated tilt-up concrete projects I’d ever seen,” he says. “It was a kind of building I’d never seen before for a biofuel processing system I’d never seen before, and it was a P3, a public-private partnership, design-build project for the City of Surrey, the first of its kind, working with primary consultants from Europe who hadn’t done this kind of building in Canada before. There was no historical data about how to do any of this, so we had to figure it out from scratch.”

The monumental building and seventy-metre-tall chimney went into operation in 2017. For its work on the structure, and on the West Vancouver Police Services and Municipal Hall project, completed in the same period, SBW won Silver awards from the Vancouver Regional Construction Association.

“Surrey Biofuel was seminal in terms of our evolution,” says Jeff. “It’s a state-of-the-art facility and one we’re really proud of, and it got us in the door of other clients later on.”

[BELOW LEFT] West Vancouver Police Services and Municipal Hall, 2017.

[BELOW RIGHT] Deltaport rail maintenance building, 2017. SBW’s first project with GCT Deltaport, one of the largest container terminals in Canada, was a key part of the facility’s modernization. SBW put up the rail maintenance building while the terminal operated 24/7.



“Technology now allows us to exchange really complicated information more quickly, but the fundamentals of our business are the same as they’ve always been.”

JEFF MUSIALEK

New Tools for a Modern Company

WHILE THE SURREY BIOFUEL PROJECT was under way, Jeff, Tyler, and Rick kick-started a number of initiatives to modernize SBW’s technology and equipment.

“When I started in 2013, SBW was running like a late-’80s/early ’90s company when it came to computer systems,” says Jeff. “For example, everyone had their own laptop and did their own thing. Other than a central filing system, used mostly for accounting and estimating, there was no unified computer system or backup storage. There was nothing for project management, and safety records were all kept manually.”

The status quo was manageable for the volume of work SBW had at the time, but not for the growth Jeff and the other partners now envisioned. Still, no one wanted a big corporate IT system that would take the human touch right out of the equation. “In some ways, SBW’s manual methods were a bit refreshing,” says Jeff, comparing their flexibility to the sophisticated but rigid system he’d experienced at his former company. “We needed a happy medium where we’d have some controls, but without handcuffing ourselves with too much process.”

“I’ve worked in places where technology was more a hurdle than a help,” Rick adds. “There’s a whole generation coming up who use technology not as a toy, but as a tool, and our job was to find the most relevant and efficient tools to help our people be more productive and make their jobs more rewarding.”

Over the next few years, a series of IT projects helped SBW achieve this vision—starting with a new server that connected everyone on a network, and continuing with specialized software applications for various aspects of the business, including Procore for pre-construction, safety management, project management, and financial management; Primavera for scheduling; Spectrum for accounting and overall business administration; ToolHound for asset management; Beck for estimating; Revit for 4D scheduling and modelling; and a GPS laser system for surveying.

New technology also came into play in the yard, which in 2013 was “jam-packed full of stuff that had been there for decades,” says Tyler, who understood and respected why so much had been saved. “The habit of keeping everything came from a time of frugality. In the days when there wasn’t a lot of work, the thought was that they might need that stuff again.”

Even so, the yard and much of what was stored there were largely unusable. Over two years, about three-quarters of the old equipment was purged. Anything salvaged was barcoded and entered into SBW’s new asset management system, as were new tools and equipment like PERI panels—a plastic and aluminum formwork system that is ten times more expensive than traditional plywood formwork, but lasts much longer and is easier to use. “You don’t have to be a carpenter to use it,” says Jeff. “Once you’re trained on the system, you can bolt it together and it’s square, it’s level, it’s plumb.”

As they tackled these and other initiatives, Jeff, Tyler, Rick, and other newcomers were constantly struck by the trust and support they received from SBW’s senior partners. “This wasn’t a bunch of old crusty guys who dug in their heels and didn’t want us to change anything,” says Rick.

“They were totally open to our ideas. They asked questions to gain confidence, and the more they got to know us, the more confident they became. They gave us their blessing and let us roll with things to bring the company a decade or more ahead of where it was. That’s pretty amazing.”

Still, some of the initiatives were harder to implement than others. For example, “when we integrated the new accounting system with the project management software, we began showing our people what our costs were,” Jeff says. “That was a big jump from the way things used to be done, but everyone ultimately accepted that it was about empowering our team members.”

Implementing a modern safety program proved to be another big adjustment. Safety had always been a priority at SBW, but “it was managed and passed down in an old-fashioned sort of word-of-mouth way,” says Jeff. “They had a good safety record, but there was limited documentation and no consistent, proactive plan.”

As general superintendent, Tyler was tasked with bringing SBW’s safety management system into line with contemporary regulations and client expectations. After an external consultant laid the initial groundwork, it became clear that a dedicated internal resource was needed.

“The years we spent on all the technology and equipment initiatives passed in a blur, but I never once thought they were too monumental or hard a task. There were a whole bunch of good people working on them with me. If we’d had to create a different culture or find good people—now that would have been hard. But we didn’t have to do either of those.”

TYLER BROWN

“For a lot of companies, especially larger ones, safety is for marketing. They do things because the client likes them to, it looks nice on paper, it wins them points. SBW doesn’t believe in that. We don’t do anything that doesn’t make sense for workers in the field. Their safety is what it’s all about.”

PATRISHA WONG

In 2016, Patrisha Wong joined SBW as construction safety coordinator to champion the ongoing rollout of the new safety management system. Patrisha, an industrial safety expert, had heard only good things about SBW from her engineer husband, Jonathan, who had joined the company in 2015 and was heavily involved with many of its new technology applications. Coming off a maternity leave and looking for a new job, she’d approached Jeff about connections to other employers that he might make for her, and she was thrilled when he asked her to lead SBW’s safety system transformation instead. “SBW was everything I was looking for in an employer,” she says about the opportunity to join an established, family-like company and at the same time contribute to significant change.

“When I arrived, SBW had paid for safety management software and there were some skeleton procedures in the system and one generic orientation. That was it,” she says. “No one was trained on how to use it and no one was watching over it. B.C. safety regulations were being dramatically upgraded as technology advanced, but a lot of our superintendents were not used to new technology. We had a lot of catching up to do.”

With the full backing of the company’s partners, Patrisha steadily converted naysayers into supporters, to the point where Procore is now “used on every single project to orientate our workers and subcontractors.” Equally important, “safety is no longer something people grudgingly do,” she says. “It’s something they want to incorporate into planning and scheduling and constructability. It’s not a cherry on top, but part of the foundation.”



(Left to right) Patrisha Wong and Jonathan Wong, 2018. Patrisha joined SBW in 2016 and was instrumental in modernizing the company's safety management system. Jonathan joined as a project manager in 2015 and was heavily involved in many of the initiatives to modernize SBW's use of technology.

“When you add it all together—client relationships that are almost as old as Smith Bros. & Wilson itself, employees who choose to stay with a company that keeps them on, highly developed expertise in certain niches, a firm sense of purpose—it’s no surprise the firm has reached the anniversary that it celebrated this September.”

MARK PASHLEY,
BUSINESS IN VANCOUVER,
OCTOBER 10-16, 2017

120 Years Young

IN 2017, SBW CELEBRATED ITS 120TH anniversary, a milestone that had seemed far out of reach only a few years before, but which now felt like the start of a new, rejuvenated era. Congratulations came from all corners, including from Governor General David Johnston, who praised SBW’s 120-year record of “creating jobs and contributing to Canada’s prosperity. . . I am pleased to congratulate all SBW employees on their hard work in achieving this milestone. May you enjoy many more prosperous years to come.”

Both internally and in the market, the company was surpassing all expectations. “The volumes we were doing were rivalling what we did in the late 1960s,” says Murray, “and the influx of new people was just fantastic.” In addition to the Surrey Biofuel Facility, which wrapped up earlier in 2017, projects like the \$34-million West Vancouver Police Services and Municipal Hall, the \$18-million B.C. Nurses’ Union building expansion, and the \$10-million Deltaport rail maintenance building had put SBW back on the list of general contractors who could handle some of British Columbia’s biggest construction projects.

“Pioneering Construction Company Is 120 Years Young,” read the headline of a *Business in Vancouver* article featuring the keys to SBW’s success. Topmost was the company’s commitment to its industrial and civil niches. “We don’t pursue all types of work,” Jeff said in the article. “We stay focused, and when there’s a type of work that suits our skills and we can offer value, then that’s what we’ll do.”

The focus on “quality work as opposed to quantity work,” as Murray had put it twenty years earlier, was particularly top of mind at the time. “West Van wanted a beautiful public building, and we used our own crews for that,” says Jeff. “Other clients, like the City of Surrey, the City of Vancouver, and TransLink, all have high standards, and theirs are the kinds of projects where we and our crews fit.”



(Left to right) Jim Morrice, Jeff Musialek, Shadi Nassiri, Michael van Senden, and Mike Price at SBW's 120th anniversary celebration, 2017. Past and present members of the SBW family gathered to toast SBW's proud history and its extremely promising future. "We were all included in the 120-year anniversary party, and it was so wonderful to be reminded of the legacy of SBW," says Sharon Smith, Paul Hlady's daughter. "Dad would definitely have been excited about SBW's rejuvenation and to see the company carry on."

“We distinguish ourselves by looking for things that are difficult and require thoughtfulness to deal with. That’s our niche in the market. Other companies look for efficiencies by doing easy things repeatedly. Our thing is looking for what’s really hard and complicated. We like an ugly job.”

JEFF MUSIALEK

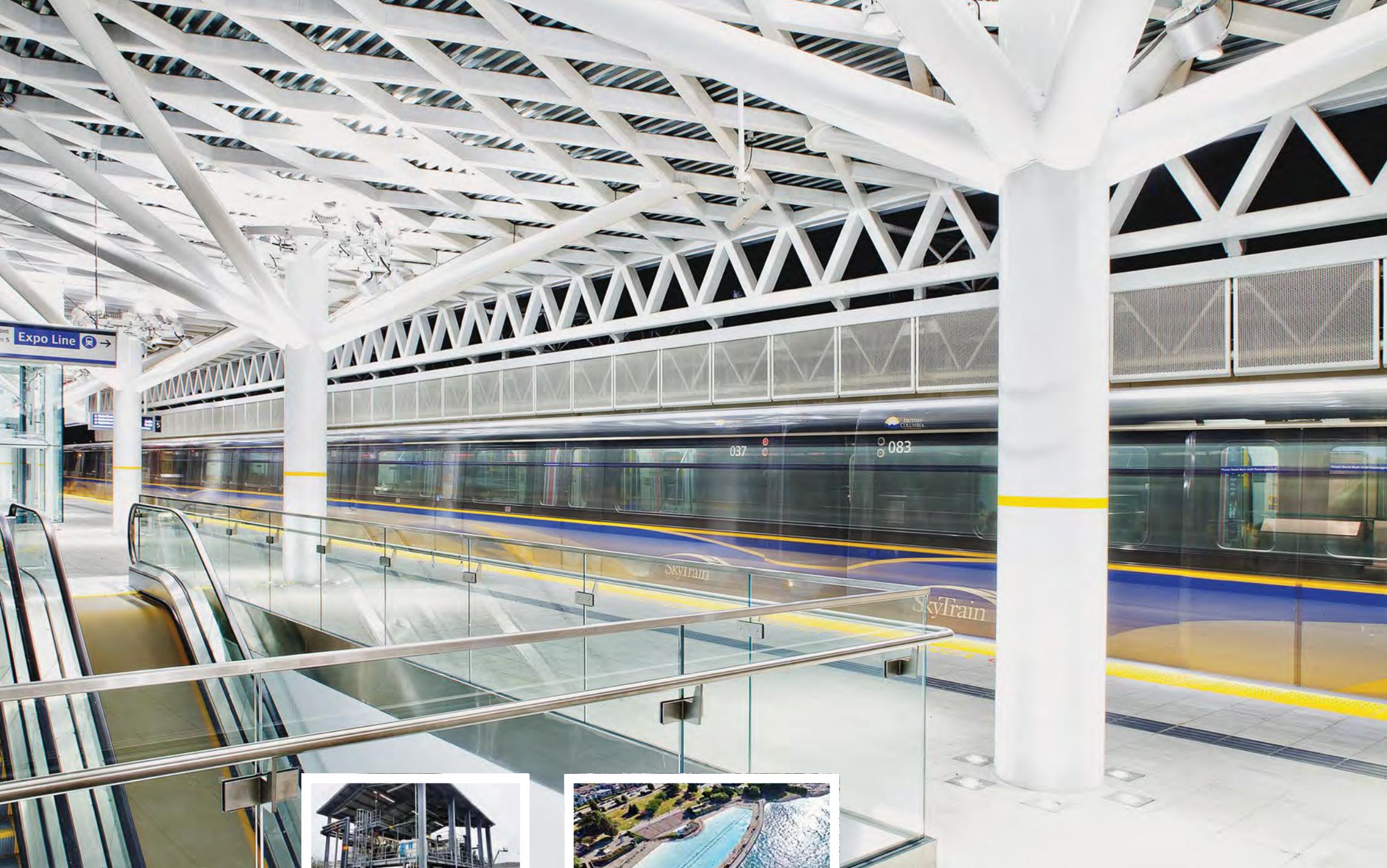


And when it came to projects in that zone, SBW had much to celebrate in its milestone anniversary year. A handful of sizable contracts won in 2017 promised to make the next few years SBW’s best ever. The \$15-million renovation of Vancouver Central Library and the \$42-million upgrade of TransLink’s Commercial–Broadway SkyTrain Station were particular standouts, but even they were outshone by a project that encapsulated both proud past and bright future for SBW: the Molson Coors Brewery in Chilliwack, a contract more than double the size of anything SBW had ever done before.

[ABOVE] Jeff Musialek and Clark Campbell (holding award, left to right) with Vancouver Regional Construction Association board chair, Jason Glue (far left), and president, Fiona Famulak (far right), at the VRCA Awards, 2018. SBW won Silver awards for its work on the West Vancouver Police Services and Municipal Hall and the Surrey Biofuel Facility (see pages 192–93).

[OPPOSITE] Vancouver Central Library levels 8 and 9 renovation, Vancouver, 2019. The \$15-million project involved the conversion of the top two floors of government offices into new public spaces and an urban green space, all while keeping the library open to thousands of visitors each day.





Vancouver & Lower Mainland

Seaspan groundwater treatment plant (2018)

Kitsilano Pool remediation (2018)

Vancouver Central Library levels 8 and 9 renovation (2019) [p. 201]

Vanterm maintenance building expansion (2019)

TransLink, Commercial-Broadway SkyTrain Station upgrades (2019) [above and p. 203]

Molson Coors Brewery (2019) [pp. 206-7]



[OPPOSITE & ABOVE] Commercial-Broadway SkyTrain Station upgrade, Vancouver, 2019. SBW extended the Broadway platform and built an overpass connecting it with Commercial Station. “It was a very complicated job working above Broadway and around the active SkyTrain line,” says foreman Bill Sparks. “We were dealing with the public all the time, and we had to shut down Broadway for a weekend to lift the walkway across the street and make sure everything was aligned and was going to work. You have only so much time on a project like that, so everyone works together to solve problems as fast as you can.”

This project, along with the library renovation (page 201) and the 2018 remediation of Kitsilano Pool (page 202 inset), earned SBW multiple awards from the Vancouver Regional Construction Association—a Gold for the library and Silvers for the station and pool.

Past Meets Future: The Molson Coors Brewery

STRETCHING BACK TO LETHBRIDGE, Alberta, in 1907, SBW's experience building, expanding, reconstructing, and maintaining breweries had long been a source of pride. In Vancouver, the company's history with Molson was particularly valued. Since the 1952–53 project to build Molson's flagship brewery on Burrard Street—called Sicks' Capilano Brewery until Molson acquired it in 1958—SBW had been an ongoing presence at the facility for various maintenance projects. “We had the slogan that we built the Molson Brewery and we never left,” says Tim.

By 2015, the facility was showing signs of its age, and the prime real estate it sat on was extremely valuable. Tightly connected with the management group at the Burrard plant, Murray started hearing that a big move was in the offing, so it was no surprise when the brewer—now called Molson Coors after a 2004 merger—announced that it had sold the Burrard property and would be building a new 400,000-square-foot facility in Chilliwack.

“As soon as we learned about the new brewery, we started knocking on doors and talking,” says Jeff. The initial response from Molson Coors was disappointing, to put it mildly. “They said, ‘We love you guys, but this is not for you.’ We weren't even going to make the shortlist of contractors invited to bid.”

Although Molson Coors perceived SBW as a small service provider, the SBW team felt more than capable of building a new brewery under a construction management model. “We'd completed the West Van Municipal Hall and the Surrey Biofuel Facility, and we were in the midst of the Commercial–Broadway SkyTrain Station project—all of them in the construction management format,” says Jeff. “We had developed systems, hired people, invested in equipment. We were ready and we knew we could do it—we just needed to convince Molson Coors of that.”

On the strength of their relationship with SBW—particularly with Murray—the local Molson Coors team made a last-minute decision to hear SBW's pitch. Tyler was just heading into an important banking appointment in Surrey when Murray called to tell him to get down to the Burrard plant, pronto. “I had to skip my appointment, jump in my truck, drive down there, and run into an interview with Murray and Clark and a whole panel of people—architects, engineers, and owners—and ad lib answers to all their questions,” Tyler recalls. “No pressure!”

Even under those circumstances, the SBW team won the day and were invited into the bidding process.

Convincing Molson Coors' familiar Vancouver team to give SBW a chance was one thing; persuading the decision makers in Montreal and Toronto was another. "The people in eastern Canada didn't really know us well, so unlike with the other contractors they were considering, they asked to visit our job sites," says Jeff. "They walked halls and rigorously talked to everybody involved in our projects—our field people, subtrades, consultants, and, of course, clients. The Surrey Biofuel Facility was a real winner for them, and Rick Murray was instrumental in that. They also liked our safety program, our procurement process, our local knowledge, and the experience and capacity of our very capable team. In the end, we convinced them."

In February 2017, Molson Coors chose SBW for the pre-construction phase—almost always, and indeed in this case, the first step to winning the construction contract. "That was a big day," says Jeff. "We shut down and went out for lunch and had a big celebration."

The very next morning, a seven-person team from Molson Coors set up shop at SBW's Aisne Street office, and "we were on fire from that moment on for the next two years," Jeff continues. "Our typical big jobs were about \$30 million and 150 people at peak at a job site. For this project, we had about thirty-five project management staff on site and a field crew of 750 at its peak. That's a lot of people, equipment, and tools to organize to get the job done in a high-quality way. This was a \$100-million, state-of-the-art brewery and a big step for SBW, but the new people we'd hired had been there before, we had the systems, and we executed it. That moved us into another realm. It proved that all the work we'd done and systems we'd put in place were worth it. It put us back on the map."

“The new Molson Coors Brewery was a special project to carry our history forward, especially winning it in the same year when we were celebrating 120 years. To be building another Molson Brewery was a feather in our cap.”

CLARK CAMPBELL



MOLSON COORS

1130
Westside Rd
Yuba Co
City Centre
0.3 mi



Molson Coors Brewery, Chilliwack, 2019. Despite having built Molson's flagship brewery on Burrard in the early 1950s and maintaining it for the next sixty years (see page 87), SBW was not initially a contender to build the brewer's new facility in Chilliwack. But in 2017, the SBW team pulled off an upset win when they beat out bigger competitors for the job.

The largest project in SBW's history to that point, the \$100-million contract was also the most complex, involving thirty-five project management staff on-site and a peak field crew of 750. After a challenging start that threatened to send the project sideways, Rick Murray and Tyler Brown took over its management and reset the on-site working environment and cooperation between SBW's and Molson's contractors. "It was such a tough job, from our perspective and from the client's perspective," says Rick. "The first thing I did on the job site was arrange daily coffee and doughnuts for everyone, which picked up morale and immediately changed the tone.

"Then, just before the Christmas break, we—SBW and Molson Coors—also arranged to feed the entire project crew a full turkey dinner. We arranged a mess hall on-site where the workers could eat in shifts, and I personally made tickets and passed them around to the various groups. That job was straining, confrontational, combative, and busy every day, and it was a reboot to put that aside for a few hours and just have a meal together."

The new brewery opened in 2019, perceived by all as proof that SBW was back on the map as a major general contractor in B.C.

“One of my favourite things about SBW is that it feels like a family. When you grow, that can get lost, but that hasn't happened here. We all care for each other as if we were family as opposed to just co-workers, and we are all driven to do more to help the company succeed. You can't motivate that with money or force. That comes from within.”

ANGELA VERIGIN



Scenes from some of the company events that contribute to SBW's fun, family-like culture.

[CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT] Susan Johansen and Angela Verigin at the annual golf tournament, 2018; (left to right) Mike Pidgeon, Tim Harrington, Angela Verigin, Larry Rahn, Susan Johansen, Alex Bautista, and Ernie Bayate at the Christmas Wish Annual Toy Drive, 2019; Jeff Musialek (right) congratulates retiring project superintendent Mike Price (left) at the 2019 golf tournament dinner.



An Old Partnership for a New Time

IN FEBRUARY 2019, SBW went into celebration mode again when it was awarded the general contract for the expansion of Peace Arch Hospital in White Rock. The project was noteworthy not just for its size—a contract worth about \$62 million—but also because “it brought SBW into the large-hospital realm again,” says Jeff. “We were out of that market for about twenty years or so.” What’s more, it was a joint venture with an old friend: Wright Construction.

After Cliff Wright assumed control of SBW’s Saskatchewan operation in 1987, Wright Construction had grown to become one of the larger general contractors in that province. When Cliff died in 2014, his son, Lorne, took over as president.

From the same generation, and with the ties between the Saunders and Wright families going back decades, Murray and Lorne had kept in regular touch over the years, trading information about their respective markets and casually talking about their two companies working together again someday. When Murray introduced Lorne to Jeff, those talks soon turned into action.

“Jeff is such a dynamic person, and Murray is like his father, with the same integrity and the same twinkle in the eye,” says Lorne. “When we started spitballing ideas, we quickly got right to the engagement—there was no need for dating here. It was so seamless because our history is the same as SBW’s history, so the cultural match was a non-issue.”



“There’s a big emotional connection with Wright,” Jeff says, “but the partnership also works in practical terms. It makes sense to collaborate and share knowledge, and it’s a diversification strategy to spread the risk out. That’s the way SBW was structured from the beginning. When the Saskatchewan division was down, B.C. was up, and vice versa. The company would put the resources where the market was hot.”

After a few initial bids that went no further, the Peace Arch Hospital was a satisfying win to launch the new joint venture. Since then, SBW and Wright Construction have partnered on several more bids—notably a number of long-term care facility projects—and have taken on a third partner, Vancouver Island-based Kinetic Construction. “We can now offer bonding capacity and field capacity in the Lower Mainland with SBW, northern B.C. with Wright, and Vancouver Island with Kinetic,” says Jeff. “The partnership gives all three parties a way to be bigger players.”

SBW’s Jeff Musialek and Murray Saunders (front left and right) with Lorne Wright and Rick Schindel (back left and right) of Wright Construction, Palm Springs, 2019.

Peace Arch Hospital expansion project in progress, White Rock, 2020. The large project was noteworthy not only because it marked SBW's return to the large-hospital market after a twenty-year absence, but also because it was a joint venture with Wright Construction—the company established by former SBW vice president Cliff Wright when he bought out SBW's Saskatchewan operation in 1987.





“SBW and Wright Construction have a shared history, and we each bring certain strengths to the relationship. As partners, we’re 1 + 1 = 3. We’re stronger together.”

LORNE WRIGHT,
PRESIDENT, WRIGHT
CONSTRUCTION

“There’s a sense of family and support and trust at SBW. You see it in the honesty and integrity, the good intentions, the willingness to take a risk and go out on a limb and do things for each other and our clients. Our projects are tough, but it’s fun to go to work.”

RICK MURRAY

Planning for the Next Generation of Leaders

FROM 2013 TO 2020, SBW’s business volume and employee count approximately quintupled. As a respected industry pioneer offering the growth curve and career opportunities of a start-up, the company was an attractive draw for both experienced industry professionals and those just embarking on their careers.

In addition to the already-mentioned Tyler Brown, Rick Murray, Jonathan Wong, and Patrisha Wong, experienced SBW newcomers like project managers Michael van Senden and Daniel Metry, director of construction Mark Verigin, superintendent Ian Thompson, office manager Angela Verigin, financial officer Giancarlo Romano, and chief estimator Rob Pellaers all rapidly established themselves as key figures in SBW’s glory years 2.0. So did the comparative SBW veteran Gary Cheema, who “was knocking the ball out of the park,” says Jeff, with the new special projects group he was appointed to run in 2019.





“I feel like I belong to SBW. Even when I wasn’t a shareholder, I felt like a piece of the furniture. I’m proud to be part of this company.”

WILLIAM DOSS



SBW’s rapid growth and stable culture, along with the generational transition under way at all levels of the company, have attracted numerous experienced industry professionals to join the team over the past few years, with some quickly establishing themselves as key figures in SBW’s glory years 2.0.

[CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT] Rob Pellaers, 2021; Ian Thompson, 2021; (left to right) Ben Black, Daniel Metry, Tanner Smith, and Lyle Allen, 2018; the accounting team of (clockwise from left) Mike Pidgeon, Giancarlo Romano, William Doss, Josephine Ching, Iryna Strilets, and Paul Smith, 2019; (left to right) Angela Verigin, Murray Saunders, and Mark Verigin, 2019; (left to right) Michael van Senden and Alex Bautista, 2018.

“We never think, ‘Let’s just make a good buck on a project and back away.’ Every owner who has worked with us in the past wants to work with us in the future, and they sometimes have just a tiny job and wonder if we can take care of it. And we can.”

GARY CHEEMA



Within this group, Jeff and SBW’s three senior partners saw the future leaders of SBW—and that future was coming soon, with a generational transition under way at all levels in the company. Tim planned to retire in 2020, as did former general superintendent Jim Morrice. Murray, who was already in semi-retirement when Jeff joined, was eyeing August 2022, his fiftieth anniversary with SBW, as a good time to step back further. Clark also planned to start easing back, and controller William Doss planned to exit in about 2026.

In 2020, as part of a larger succession plan, SBW’s five existing shareholders—Murray, Jeff, Tim, Clark, and Gary—invited William, Tyler, Rick, Jonathan, Patrisha, Michael, Daniel, Mark, Ian, Angela, Giancarlo, and Rob to acquire shares in the company.

“It felt really good to see these young, up-and-coming people, like I once was, become shareholders,” says Tim. “Construction companies very rarely get past two generational transitions. Three generations, no. You never see that. Here we’re at five or six. That’s why I didn’t want to be the last president. I want to see the company and the culture keep going.”



[OPPOSITE] Gary Cheema, director of the special projects group (SPG), 2018.

[ABOVE] (Left to right) Tanner Smith, SPG project manager, 2018; an SPG sign at one of its job sites, 2020. The SPG was created to focus on shorter-cycle projects up to about \$15 million—jobs that the construction management model doesn't really work for, but that allow SBW to establish or deepen client relationships and give up-and-coming team members valuable experience running all aspects of a project.

“The SPG is the most profitable unit in the company, with about twenty people in the field and office,” says Jeff Musialek. “They’ve done incredibly well and shown there is value in working with existing or new clients on smaller jobs. The SPG is also a good place for a young, talented person to complete the whole cycle of a job with lower risk for the company. By cycling people through that network, we’re advancing people’s careers and our capabilities.”



“It’s a wonderful company. What’s made SBW is the people. The people I’ve been able to meet—unbelievable. At SBW and with the trades, we’re like a second family.”

MURRY SAUNDERS

“I’ve got to go find that guy who told me to call SBW for a job back in 1979. I’ve loved my career here. I’m so happy that I stumbled onto SBW.”

TIM HARRINGTON



“For me, these four—Tim, Murray, Clark, and Jim—are the pillars of what SBW is today.”

[ABOVE & OPPOSITE] (Left to right) Tim Harrington, 2020; Murray Saunders, 2017; Clark Campbell (left, with Al Snickars, right), 2021; Jim Morrice, 2021.

“For me, these four—Tim, Murray, Clark, and Jim—are the pillars of what SBW is today,” says Jeff Musialek. “All of them have integrity and care deeply about the values and legacy of this company, and they each brought specific strengths to form a strong and really complementary team.”

“Tim is incredibly analytical. He has a really strong ability to drill down into the details and develop a deep understanding of the situation, whether it’s productivity for formwork or looking at our expenditures. He always focuses on what makes sense. Some people are focused on the way something feels, but Tim wants the math done right. He’s going to want to see the numbers.”

“Murray is the kind of charismatic leader that people gravitate to. He’s the heart and soul of the company, a father figure in the current era. He also has great business acumen and big-picture understanding of the way this business works. Our corporate memory is his memory.”



“I took a pay cut to come back to SBW from the development world. I did that because I wanted to work with reliable, straight-up, honest people. At SBW, we’ve always been firm, but fair.”

CLARK CAMPBELL

“What I’m proudest of is my family’s longevity at SBW, from 1954 until now. Driving around and looking at all the projects we’ve done, it’s pretty amazing. SBW has a footprint in darn near every hospital in Vancouver, so many schools, the SkyTrain system, breweries, the post office—you name it. That’s our history. That, and the people.”

JIM MORRICE



“All of them have integrity and care deeply about the values and legacy of this company.”

“Clark is a really well-rounded guy who has always worked hard grinding out the minutiae of our day-to-day business: downloading the drawings, making sure the invitations get out, keeping the addendums straight. He’s incredibly organized. The other thing is that Clark has a very gregarious personality and is on a million boards, has been a mentor to a whole bunch of kids who want to get into this line of work, and has been the face of the company in that way for many years.”

“Finally, Jim is all about quality. He’s a check, check, check guy. Tim, Murray, and Clark really leaned on Jim to make sure things happened the right way. Some people shrug their shoulders and cut corners, but Jim, it doesn’t matter what job it is, his pride is that it’s an SBW job, and he’ll never relent on quality.”

“Our office on Aisne was too small, too crowded, too inefficient, and the heating and cooling were a struggle—but people didn’t come and stay because we looked good on the outside. They came and stayed because they saw the long-term opportunities and the culture on the inside. Our super-hard-working, very smart team members all came for the opportunity and the people, not for where they sat.”

RICK MURRAY

A New Home

IN MAY 2020, AFTER FORTY-ONE years on Aisne Street, SBW moved into bright and gleaming new headquarters at 9788-186th Street in Surrey’s Port Kells neighbourhood.

SBW hadn’t actually owned the Aisne Street property since 1988, when Smith Bros. & Wilson (B.C.) Ltd. was created as the new operating entity with Tim and Murray in charge. The old company’s directors at that time—Bob Saunders, Paul Hlady, and Peter and Michael Shields—had retained ownership of the Aisne Street building and land and leased it back to SBW (B.C.). When Bob, Paul, and Peter died, their shares in the property passed to their beneficiaries, including Bob’s son Murray.

By the time Jeff arrived in 2013, the building and yard were looking a little past their prime. The land they sat on was increasingly valuable, though, and when the property owners received an unsolicited purchase offer in 2015, it was too tempting to ignore. “Murray came and asked us what we wanted to do,” Jeff recalls. “The property owners

wanted to see SBW do well, so they gave us the option to match the offer. When we assessed it, we decided that the purchase price was insurmountable for us, so we started looking around for a new office and yard.”

The search initially proved difficult, but in 2016, Gary found the perfect piece of land in Surrey. “Almost all of our employees lived south of the Fraser, and it made so much sense to move, so we bit the bullet and bought the property,” says Jeff.

The initial intent was to erect a relatively inexpensive building, but the more Jeff thought about it, the more he became convinced that SBW’s new home should be a showcase. Over the next three years, as a rejuvenated SBW racked up project wins, modernized business practices, and formed its new leadership team, the company worked with architect Michael McNaught to create a building that represented the craftsmanship, innovation, and culture that had brought SBW to this point and would carry it into the future.

[OPPOSITE] (Left) Bill Sparks (in hardhat) with carpenter Jim Van Hombeeck on-site at the B.C. Nurses’ Union expansion project, 2015. (Right) Jim Morrice supervising the installation of the company sign on the new head office, 2021. Jim Morrice and Bill Sparks led the talented team who constructed SBW’s new headquarters.



To lead the construction work, “there was never any doubt it should be Jim Morrice,” says Jeff. “Jim embodied quality in everything he had ever done for SBW, and we knew he’d do an amazing job for this.”

“I was planning to retire,” says Jim, “but when Jeff asked me to do the new building, I said yes.” Jim hand-picked a crew of about ten people he had worked with for decades, including foreman Bill Sparks. Also nearing retirement, Bill was honoured to work on the capstone project with his long-time mentor. “That was a nice way to end both of our careers,” Bill says. “There was a lot of pride involved in that building.”

When the new building was ready in the spring of 2020, both Jim and Bill were characteristically understated about the excellence they and their crew had achieved, but others poured on the praise. “Our new office is a piece of artwork,” says Rick.

“When you walk into the building, you look at all the mitres, 45-degree-angle corners—they’re perfect,” raves Jeff. “Our architect said the concrete is so perfect you could eat sushi off it—super-smooth, flat, no bubbles. We hand-built everything using our own crews, and the result is a showcase of the highest skill we have. You don’t see that level of craftsmanship much anymore, but it’s what we’re known for.”

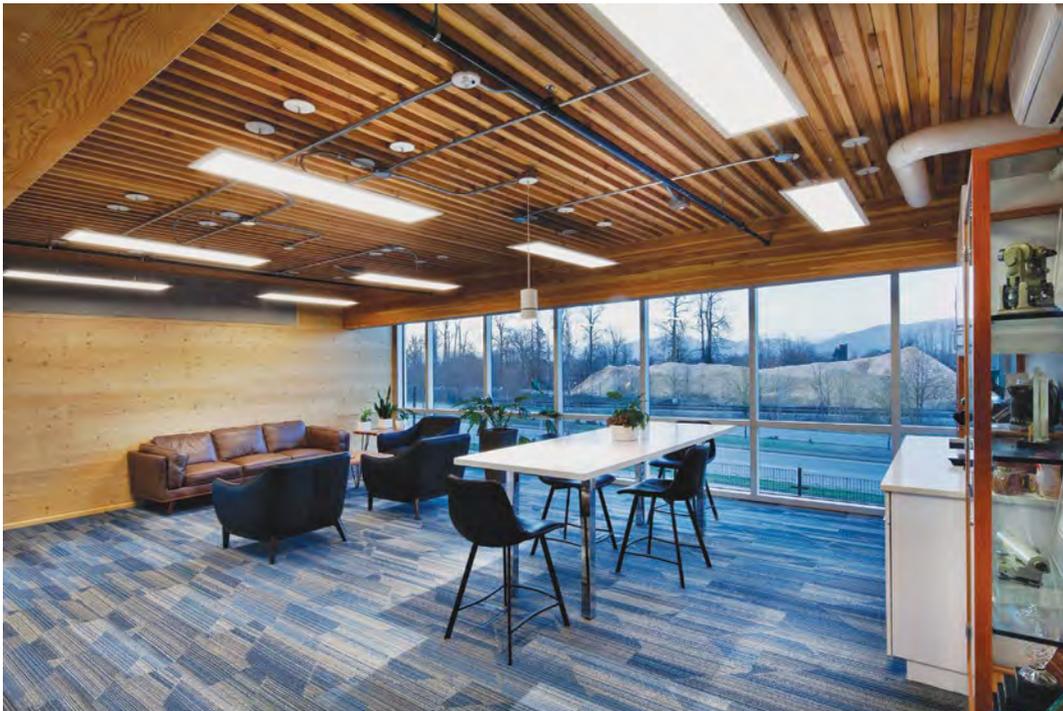
“One of the big things about the new building is the quality. It’s our own building, so we wanted to make sure everything is just the way we want—beautiful concrete, a lot of woodwork, lots of different finishes. It was a challenge at times, as it involved some things we’ve never done before, but it was still construction, and we’ve always learned things pretty quick.”

JIM MORRICE





SBW's new head office under construction, 2019 (opposite), and completed, 2020 (pp. 222-23). In its eye-catching exterior and the exposed architectural concrete, timber panels, and arrangement of the interior spaces (this page), SBW created a showcase of the craftsmanship, innovation, and culture that had brought the company to this point and would carry it into the future.



“SBW, the whole company, always treated the workers so well. No matter who was in charge of the company, they’d come up and talk to you, take an interest in what was going on and how the job was going. The other great thing is the quality of work that SBW has always done. Being expected and able to do a good-quality job is one of the reasons I kept working here all these years.”

BILL SPARKS



9788

S·B·W



SMITH BROS & WILSON LTD

OFFICE
NO DELIVERIES
WAREHOUSE

DRIVE
WAY



Staying Resilient in a Most Unusual Year

AS SBW WAS PUTTING THE FINISHING TOUCHES on the new Port Kells office in March 2020, the global COVID-19 pandemic threw a sudden and dramatic spanner in the works. Provincial governments across Canada—and governments around the world—declared states of emergency and introduced a variety of lockdown measures to combat the deadly novel virus. With stay-at-home orders and numerous businesses ordered to close, “we were suddenly facing a very dramatic and uncertain situation,” says Jeff.

“The restrictions and infection risk had negative impacts on our business and personal well-beings,” SBW’s corporate magazine, *Building the West*, reported. “We had to learn to be patient, redo plans, and somehow minimize the hardship felt by all.”

Among the plans SBW had to shelve, at least for the time being, was the grand opening it had intended to host at its new Surrey home. “Moving into the new building was a big milestone for the company, and we wanted to show off who and what we are to the outside world,” says Jeff.

Although the indefinite delay of the grand opening was disappointing, a more serious concern was whether the construction industry would be allowed to keep operating. Jeff gives a lot of credit to the Vancouver Regional Construction Association for rallying the B.C. industry to share best practices and talk through contractual situations in the event of a partial or full shutdown. “People were open with one another. It wasn’t adversarial at all. We were facing a real crisis, and it was admirable the way everyone responded. That says a lot about our industry.”

In April, the industry was declared an essential service. “It was initially a real challenge to adopt new practices like social distancing and cleaning,” Jeff says, “but all of our projects in B.C. carried on. Construction in Ontario and Quebec, by contrast, was totally shut down. It was a disaster for our counterparts there.”

Even though work went on in B.C., it was an enormous responsibility to ensure everyone stayed safe on the job. Often, procedures and protocols had to be developed within days of emergency announcements, but SBW’s characteristic adaptability came through. At one point, an SBW team even designed and built efficient non-porous handwashing stations for project sites—including hot water provisions.

Some of SBW's safety measures during the global COVID-19 pandemic, 2020.

[RIGHT] One of the physical-distancing stickers installed on the floor of SBW's new head office. Even though the pandemic rocked economies across the globe, triggered extended lockdown measures to prevent transmission, and posed a serious threat to those who contracted the disease, SBW and its team remained resilient, connected, and resolved to carry on.

[OPPOSITE] (Left to right) Various safety protocols in use while providing a team lunch to workers on the Peace Arch Hospital project; team members maintaining physical distance and wearing masks in the job trailer at the Peach Arch Hospital job site.



“I tell lots of people about SBW's longevity. I'm part of the fifth generation here, and I have a bunch of senior partners who are very generous and open. They had no reason to let me in other than that they wanted 125 years to become 150 years. That's what we're here to do.”

RICK MURRAY

The design of the company's new building was another thing working in SBW's favour during this time. Where the Aisne Street office was overcrowded and poorly ventilated, the Port Kells building has state-of-the-art HVAC systems, high ceilings, and private offices for everyone, all of which helped alleviate concerns about aerosol transmission of the virus. "Everyone has a door, so that let us institute cleaning protocols and social distancing requirements," says Jeff. "As a result, we were able to maintain about 80 percent capacity of people in the office. That's significant in terms of our collaboration. We've been socially responsible and rule-following, but we've been able to function relatively normally. I'm really proud of our group."

By the time the pandemic entered its second year in March 2021, a population-wide vaccination program was shining some light at the end of the long, dark COVID tunnel. Nevertheless, the economic repercussions of the pandemic were starting to show up in local construction projects. Most serious was a dramatic rise in materials costs as a result of COVID-related impacts on the global

supply chain for steel—"which is in everything," says Jeff. With the price of steel up about 30 percent by the spring of 2021, some now-unviable projects were postponed or cancelled.

Even so, Jeff remained optimistic about SBW's work in hand, pointing to the \$140-million project to build the iconic Harry Jerome Community Recreation Centre in North Vancouver and the \$174-million construction management contract for the new Martini Studios complex in Langley—the largest single contract in SBW's history—as evidence that the company has what it takes to not just ride out the storm, but also thrive. "We're a well-managed company, we have good, capable people in the field and the office, and we've invested in good systems," he says. "We're going to hold together. The company has adapted to many surprising challenges in the past, and we'll do it again."

"I feel exactly how Bob Saunders put it in the 1980s: we may be in for some tight times, but we have the best people to get us through."



Vancouver & Lower Mainland

University of British Columbia, David Lam Building levels 4 and 5 renovation (2020)
SBW new head office (2020) [pp. 222-23]

University of British Columbia, Museum of Anthropology roof replacement (2020)

University of British Columbia, Robson Square upgrade (2020)

TransLink, Lonsdale Quay Exchange upgrade (2021)

TransLink, Richmond Transit Centre upgrade (2021) [p. 227]

Canadian Cancer Society renovation and development (2021)

Roddan Lodge (2021)

Apex Terminals remediation (2021)

Martini Studios pre-construction (2021) and construction (to be complete 2024)

Capilano University façade replacement (2022)

Peace Arch Hospital expansion (2022) [p. 210-11]

[TOP] The Richmond Transit Centre upgrade, 2021. With the construction industry in B.C. declared an essential service during the COVID-19 pandemic, SBW was able to continue working on this and numerous other projects.

[BOTTOM] Rendering of the Harry Jerome Community Recreation Centre, North Vancouver, to be completed in 2025. SBW won the \$140-million contract in August 2021 in a bid to replace the North Vancouver Centennial Community Centre, which SBW built in 1964–66 in a contract worth \$1.3 million.



“Many companies close their doors by the time they get to be SBW’s age, but we now have a group who will carry this thing on for another thirty years. It’s pretty cool.”

MURRAY SAUNDERS

Elsewhere in B.C.

TransLink, SkyTrain Operations and Maintenance Centre upgrades (to be complete 2023)
University of British Columbia, UNY Substation switchgear replacement (to be complete 2023)
Univar River project (to be complete 2023)
Harry Jerome Community Recreation Centre (to be complete 2025) [above]

Ucluelet Secondary School seismic upgrade (2021)



“The founders of the Company and the key [people] following, as well as their employees . . . have upheld the tradition of the firm to succeed in building well.”

MABEL SMITH IN *SOME BUILDING IN THE WEST*

CONCLUSION

125 Years & Standing Strong—2022



William Doss's hardhat and "cheque protector," a device formerly used at SBW to imprint cheques with numbers for security purposes.

WHEN THE SMITH BROTHERS—Duncan, Alexander, and D.D.—first crossed into B.C. in 1897 to build a construction business in the rough-and-tumble gold-rush town of Greenwood, they couldn't possibly have imagined that their company would last for 125 years and counting, let alone that their family name would be on the side of the gleaming, modern building that SBW calls home in 2022.

To the Smiths' nineteenth-century eyes, SBW's twenty-first-century headquarters would look the stuff of dreams. The brothers would marvel at the large, light-filled space with its exposed architectural concrete and huge mass timber panels. They might wonder what all the high-tech gadgets and stand-up desks are for, and they would notice that today's SBW team is far more diverse than the workforce of their day.

Yet once the Smiths started talking to the people at SBW, they would recognize the same core values they'd instilled in their company in its first half century. They would hear some familiar client names in project meetings, and discover that SBW was still building breweries, hospitals, libraries, university buildings, and a myriad of complicated industrial structures—not to mention the project to renovate the Greenwood City Hall in 2022, nearly 120 years after the Smith brothers erected it as a courthouse in 1903 (see page 21).

The SBW of today is, in many ways, a far cry from the company the Smiths founded, but it's also very similar. "It's still construction," as Jim Morrice says. Through the eras of the Smith brothers, Sam Wright, Walter Douglas, Bill Johns, Bob Saunders, Tim Harrington, and Murray Saunders, and, now, Jeff Musialek, bids have had to be submitted. Projects have had to be designed and planned and sequenced. Many things have had to be measured. Crews have had to be managed. Bills have had to be paid. Innovation and technology have changed the way much of this is done, but the basics remain the same—and SBW is very, very good at them.



(Left to right) Office manager Angela Verigin on Administrative Professionals Day, 2021; Senior SBW partner Clark Campbell (left) and his son, SBW proposal writer Ryan Campbell (right), 2021.

“The construction industry has become increasingly specialized. Many general contractors have lost the ability to do much of their own work because they can subcontract to specialists. SBW is one of two local general contractors who still have a large workforce, and that goes back to the longevity of the company. We’ve got carpenters who have worked with us for forty years. That comes out in their skill, craftsmanship, and pride. We don’t fit the just-get-the-job-done projects. Our people want to double-check everything to make sure it’s right. They can’t help themselves.”

JEFF MUSIALEK

As Jeff and the rest of SBW’s young leadership team look ahead to year 126 and beyond, all they can see is opportunity. “We have the capacity now to take on much larger projects, like we used to in an earlier era,” says Jeff. “We’ve positioned ourselves as one of the larger general contractors, and when big projects come out, SBW will be one of the players. Despite the turmoil and uncertainty we’re experiencing these days, we’ve positioned ourselves a tier up. We’re well positioned for growth.”

Opportunities to prefabricate buildings and building elements, as well as more joint ventures, are also in view. “I’d like us to get back into a position where we have the capacity to take financial positions in projects, or the mechanism to offer financing options for our clients,” Jeff says. “We’ll also look for more opportunities to partner with others who have skills we don’t have. We need to develop some real estate assets as well, so we can better handle risk and change in our future.”

[OPPOSITE] (Left to right) Yard foreman Alex Bautista, 2019; Jeff Lovett, general superintendent of the special projects group, 2021.



“The reasons we’ve been able to pick up good work and good people are the same things that brought us to this point: having respect for each other and being willing to succeed as a group.”

GARY CHEEMA



[ABOVE] General superintendent Tyler Brown, 2021.

[OPPOSITE] (Left to right) Senior partners Murray Saunders and Clark Campbell and controller William Doss, 2021.

“There are no limitations,” says Tyler Brown. “We have the smartest people in our industry, we all like each other, and we work together well. We can out-think and out-plan any of our competitors. We can execute extremely complicated projects and punch above our weight class. We don’t have the costs of a massive company, but we have the expertise of a massive company, and that’s super exciting.”

No matter what, the entire SBW team is committed to hanging on to what brought the company to its 125th year—all those things that the Smith brothers and their successors would recognize and that make SBW the company it is. “The new generation of people here bring experience with big-company processes and technologies and projects, but we don’t want to lose SBW’s old-fashioned values,” says Rick Murray. “That’s who we want to be.”

“You have a choice about which way a company goes,” says Jeff. “I have a vision that SBW will get bigger, but there’s a threshold where it’s no longer the kind of company we want it to be. With the good group of people we have right now and will continue to attract, I think we can stay in the zone for a long, long time.”



“The future’s looking very promising, with all kinds of opportunity out there. We’ve got a great team of people here, and I can’t see anybody holding us back.”

MURRAY SAUNDERS

Contributors

Chapters 1 to 3 of this book draw extensively on *Some Building in the West: 1897–1952*, compiled by Mabel Smith (Alexander Smith’s wife) and Alice Argue (their daughter). Without this resource and the wonderful scrapbooks that Mabel began keeping in SBW’s earliest days in Greenwood, B.C., much of the company’s history would have been lost with time.

In addition, special thanks go to the author of this new edition of our history, Lana Okerlund, and to everyone who participated in interviews, provided archival information, gathered photos, or offered feedback at various stages of the writing and publishing process:

Amandalei Bennett	Gary Cheema	Bev Hlady	Brian Logan	Murray Saunders	Angela Verigin
George Blair	Noel Corrin	Paula Hlady	Doreen MacLean	Michael Shields	Patrisha Wong
Tyler Brown	William Doss	Susan Johansen	Jim Morrice	Sharon Smith	Lorne Wright
Joe Burnett	Jeanie Fisher	Don Johns	Robbie Morrice	Al Snickars	Rob Wynick
James Calhoun	Don Grant	Jan Jonker	Rick Murray	Doreen Sorensen	Carol Johns Zakaib
Clark Campbell	Tim Harrington	Bev Lingren	Jeff Musialek	Bill Sparks	

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The stories in this book were primarily drawn from personal interviews, the Saunders family archives, and the SBW archives of scrapbooks, minute books, letters, brochures, photos, and project lists.

In addition, the following sources were invaluable.

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Whistler Museum

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About the Author

Lana Okerlund is a Vancouver-based writer and editor and a partner of West Coast Editorial Associates. She has written over a dozen corporate and personal history books, including for MNP, B.C. Bearing, and descendants of the founders of the Oppenheimer Group. Her writings about B.C.'s historical booksellers have appeared in *British Columbia History*, *Amphora*, and her blog, agreeableplace.com.

www.westcoasteditors.com



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