



### Neon jungle

It may look like a scene from Las Vegas or a sign jungle in New York. But, believe it or not, this is a view of The Bypass in Prince George. The picture was made with a 200mm lens, which has the effect of compressing distance.

— Citizen photo by Brock Gable

## 500 MACHINE OPERATORS

# Independents form association

In less than a year, the Canadian Association of Independent Machine Operators has grown to a membership of 500, embracing the entire province and heading eastward through Alberta.

Alex Crabbe, association manager, said the idea of the association developed early in 1979. A steering committee of five developed into one of about 15, and by the time the charter meeting was held, May 5, about 100 people showed up.

Crabbe said he has worked up to 14 hours a day, sometimes right through the week.

"I feel the independent operator needs some sort of protection . . . so he isn't raped and pillaged (when dealing with large companies)," he said.

"We're accomplishing something," he said, referring to what he terms, "nothing short of phenomenal growth."

Some detractors have said all the association has done is to offer a group insurance. Crabbe admits that insurance—40 per cent lower than ICBC for some coverage—is part of the service.

But another part of the association's worth is intervention on the member's behalf, with government bodies, with companies and contractors. In one case Crabbe said, he was working to get money owed to a member for more than a year.

Crabbe has averaged about three major meetings a month since the association started. These were

with government, with groups such as the association, with combinations of companies, groups and government. The meetings have been from Victoria to communities north of here.

Subjects of those meetings ranged from safety in the forest industry, to calls for new legislation to protect the independent operator from unfair business practices in dealing with large companies.

When the idea of the association first developed, it only encompassed skidder operators. But later pressure was brought to bear on them by those who were not skidder operators, but who wanted similar protection of an association.

"We had gravel haulers, snipper operators, truckers who were interested. Since then we've been pressed by people in the oil fields to expand to include them too," Crabbe said.

Not all members work in the forest industry. Some are gravel haulers who work within the city.

The aim is eventually to spread the association throughout Canada. The immediate target is for 1,000 members shortly after the first anniversary date.

"There should be fair basic rates for all machine operations, regardless of where it operates in Canada," Crabbe said.

Once those rates were established, then adjustments could be made to take local conditions into consideration.

Right now the association, in conjunction with

other associations, is calling for B.C. legislation that would provide for a written and signed contract for equipment operators in the forest industry.

"Now, the way it works, a company or contractor says, 'I'm paying this. Take it or leave it,'" Crabbe said.

While he admits the members are in business for themselves, and should be willing to operate in a free enterprise system, he said there should be some protection under law, for people with investments amounting to several thousands of dollars.

## STARTED WITH NUTS AND BOLTS

# Siding company prospers

This is the 10th year of development for W. R. Ventures Ltd., with expansion now extending from Fort St. John to Prince Rupert.

If any business can refer to itself as a "nuts and bolts operation," this company can: when it was started, the basic income was from such sales.

Back in 1966 Bill Knippel brought his family from Regina, to B.C., settling in Prince George to work for the company which had transferred him here.

"My father has been in the construction supply business ever since I can remember (15 years)," recalls son Bryan, who is manager of the business.

Bill was here a short time, when wooed away from the firm which sent him here. He went to work for Alcan building supplies in 1969—the first step on his way to selling siding.

By 1970, he saw the tremendous opportunities such a business could expect, quit Alcan and opened the business that still operates from 1580 Ogilvie (at least until July 1, when a move to new quarters is planned).

Bill and Bryan held the business to-

gether, hiring help when needed.

"We started out as a family operation. Everybody chipped in on the work," Bryan recalls.

Bill said, "my first order in Prince George (for installation of siding) was from Multi Builders Ltd., for \$230."

Selling Aluminum siding then was not easy. From the late 50s and early 60s a number of fly-by-night operators had gone through B.C. like gas through a funnel, leaving broken promises and disgruntled customers behind.

It was because of this uphill battle that both Knippels recall that first order so distinctly.

But their operations were built on a family which intended to stay, hold to its commitments and gain respect.

The business grew steadily. "We like to think it's something unique in the industry," Bill says.

And it is. Suppliers rate it as one of the biggest independent siding businesses in B.C. and ranks high in Canada as well.

The firm now employs about 20 people full time and in summer months will have more than 30 on the payroll.

When vinyl siding came on the market, proving to be a reliable product, it was added to the firm's list of offerings. Now the firm sells any type of siding, from cedar, through aluminum and vinyl, including roofing and awnings. No longer is the business aimed at homes, but commercial buildings as well.

Half the business is new installations and half is for home improvement.

Bill Knippel says a constant problem is finding workers who have high standards of craftsmanship.

"There will always be a market for their services."

And their services pay off well too—last year two of the workers, on contract, earned in excess of \$30,000 each.

From the first contract, when the Knippel family was called upon to do only the front of a house, to now, the firm with two branches supplying siding to entire homes and commercial buildings, is indeed a mark of progress.

The firm's growth seems to have kept pace with that of the city they now call home.

# Free Heat Machine a hot item

In the past five years a Prince George-based firm rose from being a part-time venture to becoming one of the leading such businesses in B.C.

Curt Flynn's Fireside Heating Systems Ltd. began in 1975 as a husband and wife operation, with him remaining at his job.

The backbone of the business was and still is the Free Heat Machine—a unit which is inserted into existing masonry fireplaces, converting the low efficiency traditional units to about 75 per cent efficiency, says Flynn.

Basically it incorporates the bent pipe grate system with a glass faced front panel which

controls draft and, with blowers, ejects hot air into the room.

The original trade style was Cal-North Enterprises Ltd. but early in 1979 the name was changed to the current one.

Flynn also opened a branch office in Surrey—reversing the usual trend of Vancouver area head offices and branches elsewhere in the province.

The Surrey branch sales are dedicated toward the Free Heat Machine, while Prince George's head office also handles several other lines of stoves, fireplaces and accessories.

Flynn's business also acts as

wholesale distributor for Free Heat Machine.

"It's half our gross sales," he said.

With public concern for rising heating fuel costs, wood and coal burning units are becoming increasingly popular.

Flynn says his sales volumes have been tripling each year. Part of his success is the units sold. He says they are top quality.

Costs for callbacks to repair faults under warranty total less than one per cent of the gross sales.

But another reason for success is that he and his sales force are dedicated to teaching

the new unit owner how to operate and maintain its safety.

"We spend the time to counsel people on the safe burning of wood . . . to use dry wood instead of green to reduce creosote . . . to clean chimneys regularly and inspect them between cleanings."

"I would like to see a qualification standard set up in the industry so that people who sell stoves and fireplaces were more than clerks," he said.

At Fireside, new employees are diverted from selling heating units until they have received full training, says Flynn.

# Growing with Prince George



## 15 Years of Progress

Before even deciding to build our shopping centre at its present location we could see the potential of the area . . . we could see the growth and development would be great and exciting and wanted to be part of it. We knew the city would grow well past us on all sides and that one day our Shopping Centre would be surrounded by a busy progressive community. Some people thought we were "building out of town" by placing the Spruceland Shopping Centre on the bypass . . . but we knew better. We knew we would be in the centre of the area's retail business. It's our privilege to participate in and contribute to the progress of Prince George and area in 1980.

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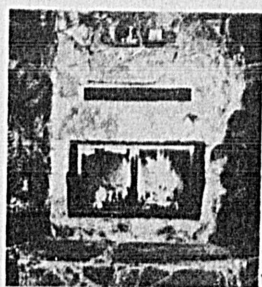


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