



King of the Corridor

Over 40 years, engineer Charlie Weir built a local company and left a uniquely Alberta legacy

BY Cynthia Dusseault

as a youth growing up on a farm near Lougheed, Alberta, Charlie Weir had neither engineering nor land surveying in mind as a career. In fact, with the Second World War raging overseas in 1943, he decided to put his education on hold after completing Grade 11, follow a passion to fly and join the Royal Canadian Air Force. He received training as a navigator at various bases throughout Canada and was then sent overseas. But the timing was a little off. "I landed in Britain the day the war ended," he says. "I spent three months over there, but mostly I was visiting the pubs."

Weir returned home unharmed by his travels along the British beer circuit. He completed high school and decided against working on the family farm in favour of attending university. "The fact that I was in the Air Force meant that all of my university would be paid for," he says. "I wanted to be a doctor, but I didn't have Latin, so I decided on engineering. And I'm glad I did." Engineering has always been a logical career choice for ex-military personnel, since the possibility of returning to active service always exists and since many military positions are technically demanding.

While pursuing a bachelor of science in civil engineering at the

University of Alberta, Weir spent two summers articling as a land surveyor under A.G. Stewart, at Stewart, Little & Stewart, a land surveying company in Edmonton. Just as he had learned how to chart courses through the sky as an air force navigator, he was now learning how to chart courses through land. He graduated in 1950; two years later, Weir had become a qualified Alberta Land Surveyor, Dominion Land Surveyor and Saskatchewan Land Surveyor. He completed his master's degree in civil engineering and was made a partner at Stewart, Little & Stewart, which shortly after changed its name to Stewart, Weir & Co. Ltd.

Weir was instrumental in developing the engineering arm of the company, bringing in numerous consulting projects. He was the consulting engineer for the Secondary Roads Study in Alberta and provided consulting services for many municipalities and counties throughout the province. In the 1970s, Stewart, Weir & Co. began to specialize in performing site surveys for oil companies. It was boom time in the oil-rich province and there was unprecedented growth in the pipeline industry and in oil sands development. The most important projects he worked on were pipelines; Weir was project manager of the Athabasca Tar Sands Corridor Study, worked on

numerous other pipeline corridor projects throughout the province and consulted for Alberta Environment on the TUC (Transportation/Utility Corridor). The corridor field was in its infancy and the engineering arm of the company became a major player.

"Our company kind of initiated transportation corridors – rights-of-way – where you put pipelines, roads, highways and power lines all together to conserve land," he explains. These multi-use corridors incorporate necessary transportation and utility routes but also focus on minimizing the use of land to reduce the impact on the environment and ensure that land is conserved for other uses, such as agriculture and recreation. "I was good at that – putting corridors together," says Weir.

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Weir spent 38 years with the company, eventually becoming senior partner and then CEO. Reflecting on his professional career, he identifies one of his most important accomplishments as helping to build a company that remains a respected Alberta-based consulting firm. But Weir was far more than a company man; throughout his working years he devoted much of his time to the professional organizations and associations to which he belonged. He held numerous positions with the Alberta Land Surveyors' Association (ALSA), and served as president in 1957. He was also active in the Canadian Institute of Surveying (CIS), and was president of that organization for a term as well. His professional affiliations as well as his committee, board and council activities extend far beyond that: to APEGGA, the Roads and Transportation Association of Canada, the Canadian Petroleum Association, the American Congress on Surveying and Mapping, Consulting Engineers of Alberta and the list goes on, attesting to Weir's ongoing commitment to his profession. "One of my major activities was my involvement in the International Federation of Surveyors [FIG]," says Weir. FIG supports international collaboration to promote the development of the surveying profession. Over the course of 16 years, from 1972 to 1988, Weir served FIG in many capacities, most notably as representative of the federation in 1976 at the United Nations Conference on Human Settlement. He was also head and member of several Canadian delegations to international meetings of the federation. Weir's wife, Kathleen, better known as Kay, believes that the proudest moment of

her husband's professional career may well have been when he was elected as FIG president, a position he held from 1985 to 1987.

Weir retired from Stewart, Weir & Co. in 1990 and ran his own private consulting practice for a short while. Since corridor planning is closely related to environmental issues and since a great deal of his volunteerism revolved around environmental issues he (he served on the APEGGA Standing Committee on the Environment, and on FIG's Task Force on Environmental Development) it's not surprising that in 1991 he was offered a position on the newly formed Natural Resources Conservation Board, which assesses non-energy project proposals that may impact the province's natural resources.

"I was asked to be one of the founding members of the board," he explains. In his 60s at the time, he accepted a five-year, full-time appointment.

When that appointment ended, retirement beckoned, but Weir accepted one more position, consulting for Jim [James] Hole. "They were classmates, and Jim asked him to consult," Weir's wife explains. The company was Lockerbie & Hole, a large Canadian construction company founded by Jim's father, Harry Hole Sr.

Even in retirement, Weir does not sit still. Right now he's reorganizing his office. "It's supposed to be the spare bedroom," he chuckles, looking at the accumulation of certificates and documents that represent his full career. "I like being busy," he says, smiling at his wife, who adds, "We're happy. We've done everything we really needed to do."

WEIR'S ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- **Royal Canadian Air Force:** enlisted in 1943
- **University of Alberta:** graduated with a Bachelor of Science in engineering; eventually obtained a master's in civil engineering
- **Surveying:** qualified as a land surveyor in several jurisdictions. Held positions at the Alberta Land Surveyors' Association, eventually becoming president of both ALSA and the Canadian Institute of Surveying
- **Partner:** became a partner in Stewart, Weir & Co. Ltd., developing the engineering arm of the company. Became senior partner and CEO
- **Corridor expert:** served as project manager of the *Alberta Tar Sands Corridor Study*, initiating transportation corridors that bundled highways, pipelines and power lines in a single thoroughway
- **Professional affiliations:** held positions with several professional organizations, such as APEGGA, Roads & Transportation Association of Canada, Canadian Petroleum Association and many others. Served with the International Federation of Surveyors as president representative to the United Nations Conference on Human Settlement
- **Conservation:** served as founding member of the Natural Resources Conservation Board