

Balzer's Canada Inc.



In the Land of the Living Skies



By: Greg Akeson



**“ONE SHOP, ONE TRUCK,
AND ONE SET OF TOOLS”**

An interview with Ron Balzer

President - carries on his family’s legacy, while leading the company into the future.

The story of Balzer’s Canada Inc. began in 1937 with Ron Balzer’s grandfather. At that time, as Ron explains, the business was “a one-man operation,” which consisted of “one shop, one truck, and one set of tools”. Over the course of the following decades, the business expanded to include Ron’s father and uncle. The scope of the business also expanded to include, not just residential work, but larger commercial projects. In the 1970s, the business began to take on even heavier industrial projects. By the 1980s, Balzer’s Canada Inc. had expanded into new markets such as pipe and steel fabrication, pulp and paper, power plants, refineries, potash mines, and also added a maintenance division to service the aforementioned markets.

As Ron proudly puts it, the company has branched off into other areas, including electrical work and structural steel. As such, the company is an employer of many skilled tradespeople with some employees having been with the company for upwards of 50 years. Ron details the scope of Balzer’s operations: “We employ boilermakers, pipefitters, iron workers, electricians, labourers, carpenters, millwrights, you name it. We are involved in a lot of different industries, and we employ a lot of different trades” Balzer’s employs an annual average of around 500 employees, but some years have seen as many as 800, depending on the workload.



“we went from building schools and hospitals to building power plants and refineries”.



"AGRI-BUSINESS IS BOOMING."



Ron's involvement with Balzer's began when he was quite young. Though he knew at an early age he wanted to be a worker, taking over the family business was not necessarily at the top of his mind. His entry into the business came at a more gradual pace by working summers and weekends as a 15-year-old. It was not until the 1970s when he realized that working in the family business is where he wanted to be. By 1993 he had worked his way up to CEO of Balzer's and with that, helped to usher in a new corporate culture that included the hiring of veterans. Ron recalls some of the other achievements undertaken by Balzer's since he came to the helm: "we added a maintenance division, expanded our electrical and structural steel divisions, opened a new office and shop in Calgary. We also expanded our Saskatchewan operations. We currently sit on 20 acres of land, and we have seven buildings on site"

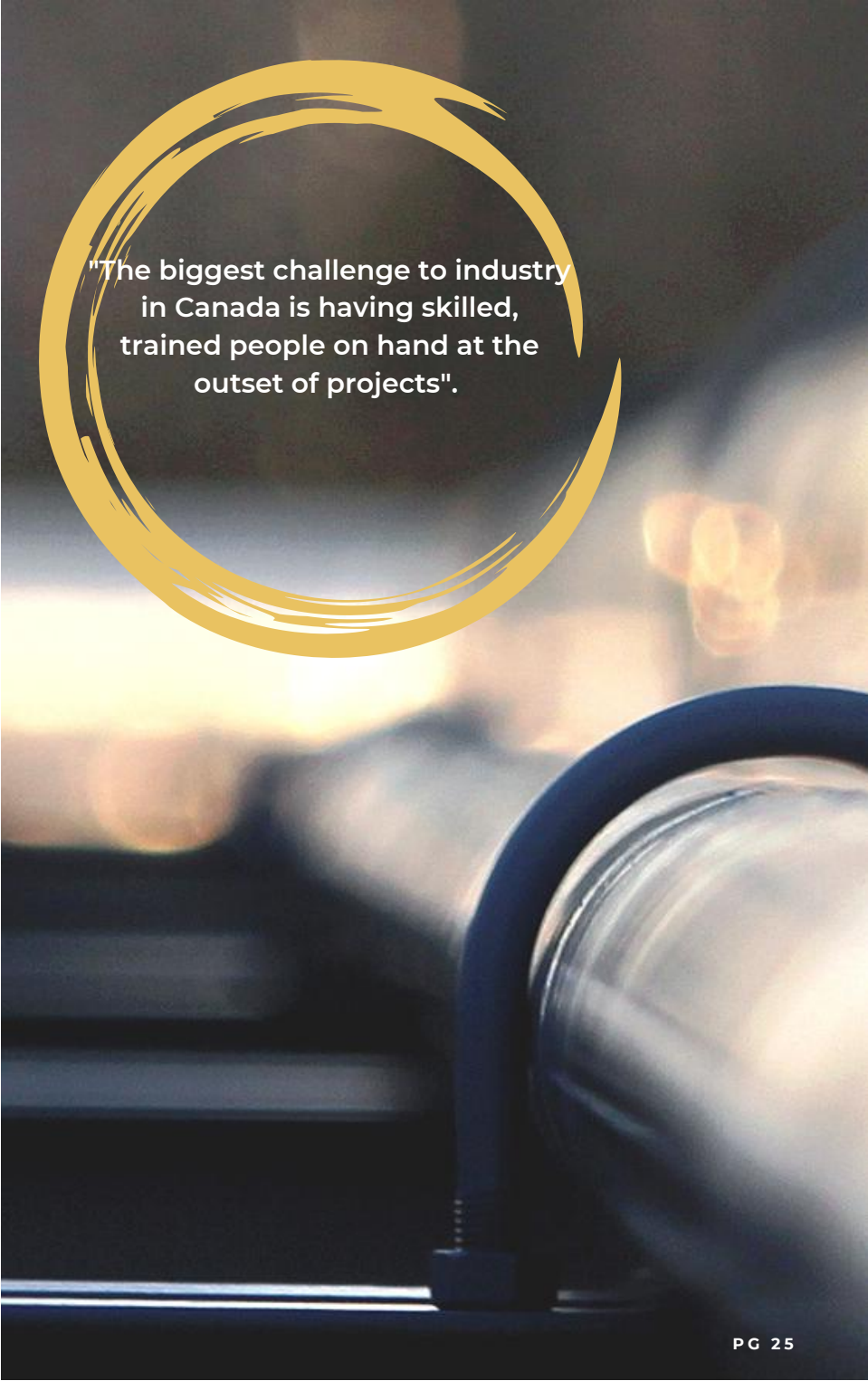
At the present time, Ron's goal is to remain as a leader in the industry. Of the many projects Balzer's has been a part of over the years, he is most proud of the ones he has "physically worked on, such as The Prince Albert Water Treatment Plant, the Co-op Refinery in Regina, and some of the SaskPower projects, like Boundary Dam, and Shand Power Plant". Projects on the horizon for Balzer's include potash mines in Saskatchewan, operated with companies such as BHP Billington and K+S Canada. Balzer's is also working on nuclear plants planned for the next decade. In addition, Ron notes that "agri-business is booming. There are several plants being built in the Saskatchewan area for processing.



HELMETS TO HARDHATS

Helmets to Hardhats became known to Ron through a Construction Labour Relations Association of Saskatchewan meeting where he is the chairman. It was through the Association's connections to H2H that he became aware of their good work. Ron was "very impressed with the goal and the organization," where he "initially volunteered with H2H and then was elected to the board of directors", which is a volunteer position, as with all Board positions, where he remains to this day.

Balzer's employs veterans both in the trades and management. For instance, a recent veteran hire is the head of their Safety Division in Alberta. Another veteran hire, an apprentice pipefitter, worked his way to Journeyman and also won the Skills Canada Competition a number of years ago. When considering the unique qualities veterans bring to jobsites, Ron aptly puts it: "The first word that comes to mind is presence. Veterans are very aware of the entire scope of the work that they are doing. They are not just filling in time to get a paycheque. We find the vets don't need the same type of training either. Sure, they are going to need skills-training.



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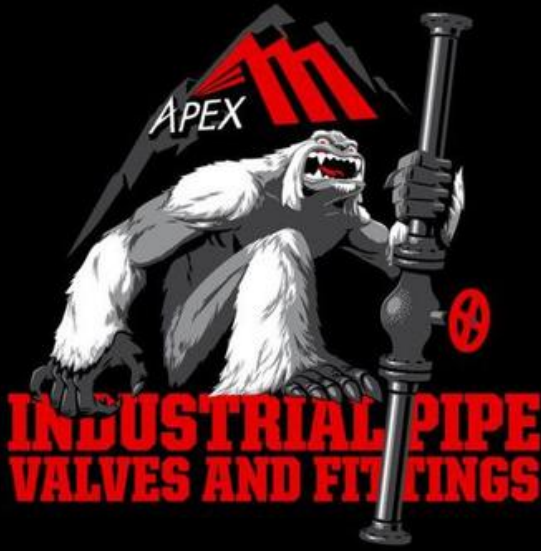
"I'm talking about other things: self-discipline, eagerness to be on the job site, they are there on time and ready to work, they are accountable and great in a teamwork situation." In addition to these qualities, veterans tend to have an easier time relocating for work opportunities, due to the nature of military life. The biggest challenge to industry in Canada is having skilled, trained people on hand at the outset of projects. H2H helps industries and the trades by making those important connections between veterans and employers. H2H also has its own training program of which the trades are a big supporter. Ron notes: "trade unions and business managers are all on board with the (H2H) program".

When asked about the process H2H goes through in order to place a Veteran, Ron explains: "We try to anticipate (future projects) as much as we can, so we can say, 'we are going to have a need here for boilermakers, or pipefitters,' so we try to get some of those people out into the trade in anticipation of a big project that's going to be starting. This gives (veterans in the H2H program) the adequate time to get trained".

It should be noted that H2H has made great progress for veterans in a few very concrete ways. Ron is particularly proud of one such initiative: "You could have a guy that was overseas, representing Canada, pulling a semi trailer, with a piece of equipment that is worth \$50 million," Ron explains. "Maybe he's served long enough, and he comes back to Canada, and his license isn't good enough to drive a job truck. That's all changed. That's all changed as of a few years ago. We lobbied the government, so basically, if you have your military license, you'll get your Canadian commercial license. It only makes sense, you have to do the same amount of training, so why do it all over?" Essentially, this allows military drivers to shift gears with ease when they leave the service and find employment in the trucking industry.

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In addition, when a person opted to leave the service in the past, they were noted as having “quit” the service and were not offered any programs, but just recently, financial assistance has been made available, thanks to H2H’s lobbying. Ron paints a poignant picture: “If a fellow was in the military for five, ten, 15, 25 years thinks, ‘I’ve had enough, I’ve served my country enough, now I want to start another career,’ then he would leave the military and they would deem him as a ‘quitter.’ And he wouldn’t be given any special programs. It has always been different in the US. The US had a bill in place since World War Two, Canada did too, but Canada looked after disabled Veterans. But if you had a guy who was healthy and he left the military because he had had enough, there was no financial help for him. There is now”.

This is a major improvement, because, as Ron learned, “there are many homeless Veterans on the streets of Toronto and Vancouver, living in cardboard boxes”. Helping veterans use their military driving licenses in civilian settings and getting financial aid to Veterans when they leave the service, are two clear ways H2H has aided Veterans.

In the case of Balzer’s Canada Inc., the success of the H2H program is very clear. Our Veterans now have better opportunities to integrate back into civilian life and our industries are reaping the benefits through acquiring much needed, skilled, hard-working people.

“...there was no financial help for [Vets]. There is now”.



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