DUTCH MIGRANTS BUILDING TASMANIA

SOUTH EASTERN BUILDERS

Reflections by Andrew Vanderschoor

I was the Accountant for South Eastern Builders (SEB) for only 2 years, 1970 and 1971. We then moved to Geelong, Victoria.

One of the founders was Gerald Betlehem, and he stayed with it until its closure around 1976 ?

I don't have much info, but here it is

SEB founded around 1955, after the Arie H Betlehem (AHB) and J P Herweynen (JPH) families had moved down from the Penguin area to Kingston. They had been among the early member families of the fledgling Reformed Church of Penguin & Ulverstone.

SEB founding Directors were AHB, JPH and probably their respective sons Gerald Betlehem and Jan Herweynen. I don't know whether other Betlehem sons worked there progressively, but Herweynen sons Lammert, Johan, Pieter and Cornelis did. In my short time there I remember that Henk Wierenga [uncle of the editor] was Construction Manager, Lammert H was a Site Manager , and Cornelis H a Site Manager. Founding Directors AHB and JPH had just retired, late 1969 [when I started]. John H was now Managing Director [and sometimes confused with his brother John - it was so much easier in Dutch, when the eldest was Johannes and the younger was Johan, ed.].

A Herweynen son-in-law, Piet Petrusma, was SEB Accountant until end 1969, when he became Company Secretary/Accountant of Risby Builders and Hardware. After my departure to Geelong, SEB re-engaged Piet Petrusma as Accountant and appointed him as a Director of the Board.

Establishment of SEB was not well regarded by a number of ABC (Australian Building Corporation) parties, who saw SEB (correctly) as a direct competitor in the local building industry. I remember some snide references to SEB as "Those South Eastern B.....s". [Many of the SEB workers had started with the ABC and moved across at the end of 1959 when the pioneer company was restructured after the death of Eerke van der Laan, ed].

At its peak, the SEB company employed 90 - 100 men. Fred Hartog and Bertus Verdouw (subsequently a founding director of Laver Constructions) were among the early employees.

SEB was first based in a large property on the corner of Maranoa Road and Sophia St, Kingston, where the Betlehem family lived, and had a sizable galvanised iron joinery workshop and materials storage there. [Arie Betlehem and Eerke van der Laan conspired to purchase the property on the opposite corner for the construction of Calvin School, ed.].

Subsequent business premises were in Hobart: first at 169 ? Liverpool St, cr Harrington St, and then at 167-169 Campbell St, based on two substantial Federation houses there - offices, materials storage, joinery workshop.

Empress Towers was probably the company's signature project. During a low business period in the mid 1960s, SEB constructed "Empress Towers" in Salamanca/Battery Point as an own project, probably partly to maintain all or most of its workforce intact. It seemed a very ambitious project and drew much public attention [because of it's location in an historic precinct, and the use of slip form concrete pour construction, the first in Tasmania, ed.]

At 11 storeys the Empress Towers was the tallest residential building in Hobart, perhaps still today. 3 units per floor, 33 in all. [It was designed by the Dutch migrant architect Kees Kok, ed.] To give the project impetus, the Directors and senior personnel themselves each purchased a unit, probably touted as "purchased off the plan" (and factually so). 7 units between them, I think. The name was linked to the newly commissioned Tasmanian government passenger/vehicle/freight ship the "Empress of Australia" which plied Sydney-Hobart. Empress Towers was constructed "100 yards " from the ship's roll on roll off berth, a novelty at the time.

In my short time there, SEB major contracts were the large Howrah Water Reservoir, the TVT6 Television Station buildings in New Town, and Industrial Modifications at EZ Company, New Town. In that time they also acquired the Tasmanian agency for "Cunic", high quality internal office walls and commercial and shop fitouts. Gerald Betlehem continued that agency after SEB closed down, and the Cunic company, expanded to general housing construction, still operates today [albeit having changed ownership several times, ed].

A few bits of Personalia:

Noel Webster. In 1970 Noel Webster was the Truckdriver/Yardman. In the latter function he had custody of all the tools and implements onto and returned from all the project sites. Noel lived near Oatlands, a long way to commute each day. One time, nearly home, he remembered he had not put the various paint brushes into water. Oh dear, tomorrow morning they would all be stiff, and would have to be thrown out. What a waste (just $200 today ??) He was a very conscientious employee. He returned to Hobart, and put them in water.

The Bocchino Brothers, Italians. Concrete finishers. It was an era of many concrete floor constructions. There were many Italian migrant concrete finishers, from their Italian fine marble and aggregate work backgrounds. Nino Bocchino and his brother were widely acknowledged as the best concrete finishers in Tasmania, master craftsmen - 'concrete artists" really, and very fast. I think we had double Workers' Comp Insurance on them. I think they were later connected with the Italian marble works opposite Buckingham Bowls in New Town Rd

Cor Herweynen. In about 1960, 1961 ? Cor was the Tasmanian Apprentice of the Year. Not just as a Carpentry Apprentice, no, as against all trades, and Tasmania wide. It was a high honour indeed and also to SEB as his employer company. On a personal level he was held in awe by his contemporary teenagers, such as myself. What an Achiever !! And he got an excellent award

Andrew Vanderschoor