

Obituary

Peter Jensen Reid Skellerup

14 January 1918 – 15 May 2006



Caring benefactor and city father

The loss of the Skellerup group of companies to corporate raider Ron Brierley, in 1987, saddened Peter Skellerup but the Christchurch

industrialist was above any bitterness.

Skellerup was upset as much for his workforce, which he treated as his extended family, as for himself and his family.

His multitude of interests kept him busy as the empire he had helped build was dismantled. He never lost his courtliness. He continued to give to Christchurch and its citizens in many ways.

Skellerup was the second son to assume the top office in Skellerup Industries, which was established by his father, George. He succeeded his brother, Sir Valdemar Skellerup, as executive chairman in 1982. From then until the 1987 takeover, he headed the company and a host of subsidiaries. He was the last family member to hold an executive position with the company.

Skellerup died in Christchurch at the age of 88.

His sister, Margery, says he was a typical boy of the 1920s. As younger members of the family, the two were "great pals" - except when he linked up with other boys in the street to play tricks on her.

After a childhood of climbing trees and building huts, Skellerup attended Christchurch Boys' High School. There his deep feeling for Christchurch showed in a prize-winning essay he wrote on the city.

He left school in 1934 and joined the family's Latex Rubber Company as an office boy. His task of learning the business from the bottom-up was interrupted by World War 2, in which he served with the army, against the Japanese, in the Solomon Islands.

Meanwhile, he had married Rita Grogan, in 1941. They had four children. After she died, in 1985, he married Evelyn Rogers, who died in 1999.

Resuming his progress in the firm after the war, Skellerup became a manager with Marathon Rubber and a director of the parent company in 1949. He was made a joint managing director in 1955 and deputy chairman in 1977.

He continued his directorships of subsidiary companies and led a hard-fought battle to establish the Dominion Salt works in Marlborough. His determined efforts were successful and the works became hailed for their contribution to the national economy through import-substitution.

By the time an ailing Sir Valdemar handed over the reins to his younger brother, in 1982, Skellerup factories at Woolston employed 1800 people, mostly in rubber-related manufacturing. One of the first tasks Skellerup set himself was the establishment of a centralised head office building in the south-east Christchurch suburb.

His sister says Skellerup was very close to his staff. He knew not only their names but those of their spouses and children. When he heard of families in difficulty, he was always there to help. He extended this in his funding of the Skellerup Health Centre in Woolston.

His generosity to good causes was legend. Former city councillor Derek Anderson, a member of the

Woolston Brass Band, says he was amazed at how readily and generously Skellerup responded to a request for band sponsorship. As Skellerup Woolston, the band dominated national competitions.

He helped raise half the cost of the Sir Walter Nash Appeal for a children's hospital in Vietnam, in 1970.

The family's Danish ancestry was important to Skellerup and he and Margery researched it thoroughly. He served as honorary Danish consul for the South Island, and then for New Zealand, from 1964. He received a Danish knighthood in 1981 for his services.

The trusts, boards and committees on which Skellerup served (and on many of which he held high office) read like a Christchurch directory of associations. His interests ranged from the arts to horticulture, and to the Antarctic, which he visited in 1969 to work on the preservation of historic sites.

Chief among his interests was local government. He was a Christchurch city councillor from 1958 to 1980 and deputy mayor for the last six of those years. As chairman of the parks and recreation committee for 15 years, he was the prime mover behind establishment of QEII Park for the 1974 Commonwealth Games and as a facility for eastern Christchurch. He was on the Lyttelton Harbour Board for 12 years, three of them as chairman, and the Canterbury United Council. He was awarded the CBE in 1979 for services to the city.

The greatest row to erupt during Skellerup's time on the council was the proposal for a road through North Hagley Park, which was backed by Mayor Ron Guthrey. As parks and recreation chairman,

Skellerup fought against the scheme. He took great satisfaction from his victory in this battle.

His sister says Skellerup had “a great warmth of feeling for Christchurch”. He was proud to have escorted the new Queen Elizabeth II and her husband around the city in 1954.

He was a courteous, gentlemanly type, honest and caring by nature. Although not given to rowdy partying, he enjoyed socialising with business people and made strong friendships with many. He also loved travel and maintained friendships all over the world.

*Peter Jensen Reid Skellerup, born Christchurch, January 14, 1918; died Christchurch, May 15, 2006. Predeceased by first wife Rita and second wife Evelyn. Survived by son George, daughters Karen, Alex and Linda, nine grandchildren and four great-grandchildren.

Mike Crean

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