Obituary

Peter Jensen Reid Skellerup

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 had learned the business from 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.

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.

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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

We had walked through a hushed forest of ancient Nothofagus; had eaten our lunch amidst a grove of spooky Dracophyllum and now we were suddenly out in the open among stunted alpine hebes and podocarps. It was a dream come true for this New Zealand native plantophile. As I struggled to keep up with the tall bloke striding ahead of me up the track to Mt. Arthur, I marvelled how at 78, Lawrie Metcalf had come to be one of New Zealand’s most renowned plantmen.

Metcalf lives with his wife Lena just out of Nelson city and within sight of Mt. Arthur in the north of the South Island. The move to Nelson (reputedly the sunniest place in New Zealand) occurred only recently after a lifetime spent mostly in Christchurch and Invercargill. At an age when most people have well and truly retired, Metcalf spends his days tending his rambling garden full of mostly New Zealand natives, running a mail order nursery and writing yet another book on some aspect of New Zealand’s unique flora. His latest offering released by Timber Press is “Hebes, A Guide to Species, Hybrids, and Allied Genera”. This follows on from his 2001 “International Register of Hebe Cultivars” and sundry other books specialising in New Zealand’s native flora.

It was in 1928 that Metcalf was born in Christchurch. As a schoolboy, Dr L.W. McCaskill (1900–1985) noted educator and naturalist encouraged him to take an interest in growing native New Zealand plants. Metcalf received his horticultural training in Christchurch and then spent some time working at Duncan and Davies Nursery in New Plymouth. He then left his native shores and spent some time working in both the Adelaide and Melbourne botanic gardens, before setting sail for the UK. “I wanted to work at Kew Gardens” said Metcalf in an interview late in 2005, “but once I had seen them, I felt that they were not up to the standard of the Christchurch Botanic Gardens. So instead I got a job in Sussex at Ingwersens Hardy Plant Nursery where I stayed for about 12 months.” He then went on to work at Hillier Nurseries, arguably one of the most famous nurseries in the UK if not the world. After a short stint there, he went on to be a gardener at Winkfield Place in Berkshire, where Constance Spry and Rosemary Hume were running a Domestic Science School for girls.

It was while he was at Winkfield Place, that a letter came from the Director of Christchurch Botanic Gardens offering him a job as the Assistant Director. He returned to New Zealand in 1955 to take up this position, marrying in 1962 and having three children. Metcalf stayed at Christchurch until 1977 managing a staff of 39, before moving to Invercargill to take up the position of Director of Parks and Recreation with the Invercargill City Council. “It was a job with tremendous scope,” said Metcalf.