

Manny Fine: A Straight Shot to the Top

The former executive director of DFI has led a charmed life. He was blessed with formidable talent and brains, his school grades were all “honors” level, and his career was a series of promotions and accomplishments.

Fine did have a family tradition within the construction industry. In fact, he says he comes from three generations of bricklayers. His family did have a relative in the industry in New Jersey, and the Fine family moved there briefly, from Canada, until the U.S. depression made it impossible to sell the homes they had under construction. One-year-old Manuel then moved with his family back to Canada. He attained dual citizenship until he relinquished the American status and became Canadian. Somewhere during his early life, a civil engineer friend of his father took an interest in the young boy and encouraged him to follow the same profession.

The young Fine’s stellar academic record had one exception: he failed his French classes. He had to repeat a year of high school to graduate, but even this turned out to his benefit. Already thinking about training to become an engineer, he filled his curriculum with courses in technical subjects relevant to studies for his chosen profession.

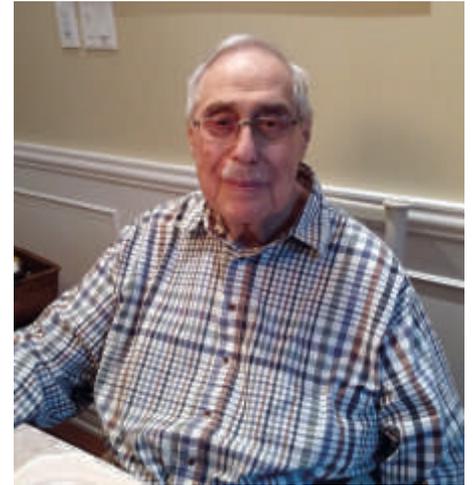
Fine was in school during World II, when all male high school students in Canada were designated as “cadets.” He reached the rank of lieutenant colonel, becoming the commanding officer of the 2,000 students at Central Technical School, a forecast of his future leadership skills. With his extra mandatory year for having failed French, he fulfilled the requirement of senior matriculation, necessary for university admission. At the University of Toronto, he passed each year with honors. His summers, while at university, were spent as an officer cadet in the Canadian Officers Training Corps (COTC),

qualifying as a lieutenant in the Canadian Army Supplementary Reserve.

Working as an Engineer

Fine’s first job, in 1952, was for Public Works of Canada (PWC), where he continued to excel. The engineers were placed in four ranks. He achieved the highest rank in an “unheard of” short time. In fact, PWC created a new “fifth” rank by moving work projects to Fine’s geographical district. Next, he entered private sector construction, enticed by a job offer from Russell Construction, a Toronto-based subsidiary of Balfour Beatty, a U.K. firm, which included a 20 percent pay increase and various roles in engineering, estimating and managing work. He worked five years for this firm bidding work and overseeing bridge construction, marine work and dredging for the firm’s heavy construction division.

When the parent company decided to close down the Canadian subsidiary, Fine joined the international division of McNamara Corporation, headquartered in Toronto. He worked in various capacities, eventually becoming assistant chief engineer. He enjoyed working in other countries, and often he oversaw five or six separate projects simultaneously, mainly in Latin and South America, and traveling constantly. Fine proved very valuable to his employer, so much so that the company paid for Fine’s wife, Ruth, to travel with him, at times, to project sites. The couple had three young children at the time, which complicated family life and their schooling. During 1966 to 1968, Fine became the onsite project manager of the New Second Lock project being built by McNamara in Sault Ste. Marie, Mich., for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and then returned to a head office position in the heavy construction division upon completion of the job.



Then, things changed for the worse. Fine recalls vividly the day, in February 1972, when he participated in a “Saint Valentine Day’s Massacre.” The event Fine alluded to was when the entire McNamara staff was assembled in the firm’s main boardroom, and then told that “almost all of them” would lose their jobs that day during a dismantling of the company. In retrospect, Fine thinks his employer had tried to grow too fast. He survived that mass firing and actually helped with the company reorganization, taking over projects previously assigned to others.

Very soon afterwards, Fine ran into Bill Bermingham, a fellow COTC officer cadet from his days at the Royal Canadian School for Military Engineering, who told Fine he was “the type who always landed on his feet.” The next day, Bermingham offered him a job at the Bermingham Group of Companies. He remained at his old friend’s company for 23 years, becoming vice president of the construction company and president of the pile driving equipment manufacturing company. He sums up his skills, saying his bailiwick was scheduling, bidding and seeing jobs to completion, which he continued to do throughout his career.

Challenges

Asked about challenging projects he undertook, Fine cites the Pickering nuclear generating station on the north shore of Lake Ontario, east of Toronto. The policy for constructing nuclear facilities at that time was that if direct bearing on rock was not feasible, the structures had to be founded on piles driven into the rock underlying the site. The site was very large and work continued for about three years, with several rigs driving H-piles. A good proportion of the piles were battered piles, which Birmingham were particularly well equipped to install. Fortunately, he says, Birmingham had negotiated a good price for the job. So, there was sufficient revenue to cover company overhead for several years and to allow the company to expand, bidding on and obtaining other work concurrently.

Fine and DFI

Fine began his DFI connection as Birmingham's staff representative, and went on to serve on many committees and

to receive DFI's Distinguished Service Award in 1998. He relinquished his position as president of DFI upon retirement from Birmingham, and then became the executive director of DFI from 1994-1998, executive director of the Ontario Association of Foundation Specialists from 1994 to 2016 and executive director of Heavy Construction Association of Toronto from 1994 to 1998.

Peter J. Smith, current executive director of the Heavy Construction Association of Toronto (HCAT), comments on his colleague, "Both he and Fine were presidents and directors of HCAT and of the Ontario Association of Foundation Specialists." He says Fine has an enduring legacy at all of these organizations and at Birmingham Construction: "All newcomers were and are always compared to Fine's technical depth and incredible organizational skills." Smith adds that Fine is a "clear and practical thinker with good commercial sense, and a true gentleman and family man." Smith adds that when

people speak of the skill sets of others, they usually get lists of positives, ending with "but." Not the case with Fine, Smith says. He has never heard a "but."

Another legacy Fine leaves is that of having scholarships for university students established in his name. His scholarships cap off his lifetime of leadership and concern for the future of engineering education. In addition, the scholarships are a continuation of his roles as head of every organization to which he has belonged. There are two scholarships funds in his name, one at the University of Toronto and the other with the DFI Educational Trust, which is supporting two students each year from universities in Ontario. The total principal sum for the DFI Fund is \$100,000.

Fine continues to make use of his talent. Today, the retired engineer still works – gratis for any organization to which he belongs.

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