

Wirtanen Electric

Electrical Training Foundation helps students train through apprenticeship program

Wirtanen Electric is one of the Alberta Chamber of Resources' oldest member companies. Ernie Wirtanen joined the Alberta and Northwest Chamber of Mines, the precursor organization to the Alberta Chamber of Resources, in 1954, and credits much of the success of his company to the contacts he has made over the years through his association with the Alberta Chamber of Resources.

In 2001, Ernie Wirtanen was presented with the Alberta Chamber of Resources Uncommon Friend Award, an award named after a book about the human side of great leadership and achievement. The book documents the qualities that drove visionaries who shaped the 20th century including Thomas Edison, Henry Ford and Charles Lindberg and others. Mr. Wirtanen was honored for establishing the Wirtanen Electric Training Foundation—a stand-alone facility that provides pre-apprenticeship electrician certificate programs, with fees subsidized by Mr. Wirtanen.

Wirtanen Electric was established in 1953 as a Division of the Dutton Group. Over the years, the company has been involved in many large and noteworthy construction projects including both the Edmonton and Calgary airports, and the airports situated in Inuvik and Saskatoon. Industrial plants include CIL, Fiberglass, Inland Cement Building products,

the Gulf Strathcona Refinery, Stelco and the IPSO Pipe Plant.

Mining projects have always played a major role in Wirtanen Electric's growth, and projects completed include the mines at Echo Bay, Port Radium, Cassiar, Canada Tungsten and Eldorado Beverlodge.

In 1962, when Mr. Wirtanen took over sole ownership of the company, he diversified, and the focus was changed to the rental side of the business, renting instruments, test equipment, transformers and apparatus. Wirtanen now has a fleet of 5,000 rental instruments as well as 250,000 KVA transformers.

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Over the years, the rental business has evolved from strictly instrumentation to providing Relocatable Power Supply of Standard Temporary Power Centres (STPC). These units have been supplied to all of the major oil sands and refinery construction projects, which have been completed in Alberta over the past decade. The equipment, originally designed in 1958, has been updated and can now be modified to meet specific plant requirements.

After 50 years in the electrical business, Mr. Wirtanen decided it

was time to contribute back to the industry. Under the name of "Community Social Responsibility," the Wirtanen Electric Training Foundation was established in September 2001. The school was named for George Wirtanen, Ernie's son, who served as President of the Company until 1999, when he passed away.

A classroom was constructed in one of the company's vacant building along Gateway Boulevard. A qualified instructor was employed who had the ability to teach both high school and the Red Seal electrician program. Since 2001, the school has enrolled 152 students, and 141 have completed the

courses and are now employed in the electrical trade. Many of the students' tuition fees are subsidized by the Foundation. There are currently four sessions per year, each lasting 10 weeks.

To meet increasing demand, the class size has been increased to 16 from 12. Students are referred by the Alberta Electrical Contractors Association and Merit Contractors Association. Wirtanen Electric is prepared to demonstrate its program to those who want to set up similar programs within their organizations or community. ■