Steeling Back the Metal Building Industry

Long before the Beatles invaded North America or Elvis stomped his Blue Suede Shoes, Ralph Ward knew heavy metal was going to rock the planet - the heavy metal of metal building systems.

"I think there was always the potential for metal building systems as a booming industry and it seems over the last decade or so it's really caught on," says Ward, Chairman of the Alberta Metal Building Association. "I would guess that about 40 percent of Canadian low rise non-residential buildings are built by the metal building industry. A couple of decades ago metal buildings made up only about 10 percent."

And while heavy metal music has gone the way of disco and 8-tracks, it's expected metal buildings, which were originally developed in the 1940's, will be around long after the swan song of today's music.

"Not only are the buildings very solid but they also are quicker and cheaper to build than traditional buildings," explains Ward, adding colors, designs and all other specifications can usually be tailored for a customer within two months because of their unique structural format.

A metal building system consists of a series of integrated, carefully designed, factory fabricated components that are put together like "a Meccano building set," he says.

Because of the buildings' versatility it's no wonder they've also been a hot ticket item in Alberta. In 1994, Canadata reported non-residential low rise floor area of 9.3 million square feet or 45 percent of the Alberta market.

"Albertans are buying them because of what metal buildings can do for them," says Chris Maksymic, controller at Makloc Industries in Nisku. "It used to just be a box. Now we can give the customer what they want, when they want it, and how they want it."

Though the industry is booming, it wasn't long ago that it was feared metal building in Alberta was about to take a turn for the worse.

Effective January 1, 1992, the Alberta Government passed legislation stating that only journeymen or apprentice ironworkers could be hired to erect structural steel on metal buildings.

Consequently, the people who spent a big chunk of their lives becoming adept at putting up the buildings would have been forced to watch as certified ironworkers did their job.

"We were very, very perturbed when we heard this had passed without our industry even having a say," explains Chris Maksymic. "Some of our staff have been doing this their entire lives and can do it better than anyone, then all of a sudden we're supposed to hire ironworkers? That would have been atrocious."

As well as costing long time employees their jobs, bringing in ironworkers would

have been more expensive and probably not as effective, Ward says.

"The idea of having to hire ironworkers really caught the industry by surprise because everyone had been training their own workers to do the job," says Ward. "Ironworkers would require a whole new set of training to take place because the jobs really weren't the same."

A metal building assembler unloads the building system from a truck transport and organizes the components as they are unloaded. After several bays of structural steel have been erected, plumbed and squared, work crews can start on other phases of erection simultaneously. Insulation is then laid over roof structurals, roof panels are placed and screwed down or seamed and roof curbs, ridge vents, light panels, access hatches, flashing and other accessories are erected. Finally, gable trim, gutter and down spouts, which are also supplied by the metal building system manufacturer, are erected to close in the building shell.

Conversely, conventional structural steel fabricators supply only the steel skeleton of the building. Parts are rarely shop-finished and ironworkers have considerable on-site fabrication and fitting up in contrast to a metal building systems erector who puts together the metal building structure quickly in Meccano set precision, with the structural component only accounting for 20 percent of his time.

Faced with the prospect of losing some of their best staff, and increasing their costs, the metal-workers got together to express their grievances. A formal authorization from 50 contractors (that included petitions from metal building assembly workers regarding potential loss of employment) was submitted to the government in September 1993. Then, 11 months later, the metal building systems firms decided to create an Association to ensure their voice would be heard.

"The Alberta Metal Building Association has 57 members already," explains Ward, adding a year ago 25 members made up the Association. "Companies are joining in as they see we're making a difference."

The Association's lobbying efforts resulted in the government agreeing to create a course specifically designed for metal building systems' workers. Once the 10-week apprenticeship course is passed and 3,000 hours of on-the-job training have been accumulated, the worker will have the title of Ironworker - Metal Building Systems Erector. For more experienced metal workers who have more than 6,000 hours and four years experience, only the exam has to be written to achieve grandfather status.

"Once they have the training these people will be able to move from company to company and maybe province to province a lot more freely," says Ed Friesen, the program developer at Advanced Education and Career Development, Apprenticeship Division.

Friesen has spent the last two years helping develop the course, but he says he's even a bit taken aback by the interest the program has created.

"Our only concern is we may not have enough time to get everyone through the grandfathering process," he says, adding they've already received more than 140

applicants from people who want to be certified before the deadline of May 15, 1996.

For those who were worried about their jobs only months ago, the course provides a second chance.

"This should give us some job security because we'll be qualified to do our jobs again," says Larry Clisby, the special projects manager at Makloc Industries. Though he's been in the Metal Building Industry since 1971 and "done just about everything than can be done with metal," he said the legislation made him realize the importance of staying on top of the learning curve. He hopes to achieve grandfather status sometime over the next few months.

"If you want to stay employed you need all of the expertise you can get. This is just one more thing we'll be able to add to our resumes."

Roger Geisinger, project manager for pre-engineered buildings at Clark Builders, hopes the advanced training will be a boon to experienced staff and incoming staff alike.

"We haven't seen a great influx of apprentice-like people," he says, adding he hopes the training will give the profession more of an identity thereby attracting new people. "Our average age seems to be getting a year older every year right now. I hope this will change that."

Whether the course is able to entice new staff into the fold remains to be seen, but it has already gotten industry leaders singing its praises.

"This will really be the first formal training for metal builders in Canada," says Ward, adding the same legislation that once threatened the fabric of the industry ended up strengthening it because all of the metal building firms worked together. "The training should further improve the skill level of current metal building workers and perhaps entice even more clients."

"This will stabilize our industry," adds Maksymic. "And Alberta is going to be leading the country. It's certainly something to be excited about.