

BUSINESS OF ENERGY

JUNE 2021

Universe Machine 3 Generations: Kurt Feigel Jr., Markus Feigel, Kurt Feigel Sr., Nathan Feigel and Konrad Feigel.



LOCAL COMPANY WITH A UNIVERSAL IMPACT

UNIVERSE MACHINE IS PROUD TO SUPPORT ALBERTA'S ENERGY
INDUSTRY FROM ITS BASE IN EDMONTON, ALBERTA



Universe Machine Management Team: Ron Feigel, Fred Aleksic, Andreas Schmidt, Garry Czurlok, Vlad Pohnert, Doug O'Neill, Kurt Feigel Sr. and Kurt Feigel Jr.

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by Nerissa McNaughton with photos by Epic Photography Inc.

For nearly 60 years Universe Machine Corporation has manufactured, modified, and repaired metal products for the energy and heavy industries. The company was founded in Edmonton and is known as a reliable manufacturer, an innovator, and a wonderful place to work in the province.

Alberta runs on energy and since this commodity is constantly in flux, events locally and abroad influence and affect the manufacturers servicing the industry. Those involved in supplying the oil and gas sector with the products it needs to thrive are companies helmed by visionaries that can weather the storms, pivot when necessary, have grit and determination while constantly seeking ways to maintain growth no matter what phase of boom or bust the province is in.

Universe Machine and the family that owns and runs it embodies all this - and more.

Universe Machine was founded by Kurt Feigel Sr. He arrived in Canada at the age of 18 in 1960 and planned to stay for a year or two. Sixty plus years later, he's still here.

"The longer I stayed, the more I fell in love with Canada, then with Erna, whom I married in 1962. We started a family and launched Universe Machine in 1965," says Kurt Sr., founder and CEO. "I wanted to provide for my young family while having the freedom to forge my own path."

In 1965 Universe Machine was a three-person operation in a 2,000 square foot building. By the end of the 1980s and after three expansions and



Universe Products Division: Power Tong Equipment, Ron Feigel and Fred Aleksic.



Universe Valve Repair & Modification Division: Jakob Fuss and James Rieland.



Universe Manufacturing Division: Machining a large part to size on a CNC Vertical Boring Mill, Rolf Reukema.

growing assets of large equipment, the building had grown to over 50,000 sq. ft. in Edmonton's southeast industrial area. The 1980s was also the beginning of the innovative and high-quality line of Universe Power Tong Energy Equipment, engineered and built in-house. Universe product expansions later included Hogs – an industrial waste shredder for the forestry industry, and a variety of valve test stands.

The early 2000s saw the largest expansion to date, which led to Universe Machine becoming a modern manufacturing company with up to 200 employees in a 100,000 sq. foot facility. This expansion made Universe Machine's valve division the largest of its kind in all of Canada.

Today, Universe Machine continues to be a leading company in Edmonton and in Alberta, both in the products it produces and the way the team is led. It is a family business with both Kurt's family and original employees' families working together. The oldest son, Kurt Jr. took over the reins as president in 2014 with a broad vision to expand, diversify and modernize Universe Machine as a leader in Western Canada and globally for manufacturing, modifying and repairing metal products for heavy industry. Cousin Ron Feigel, business development manager, completed his machining apprenticeship at Universe Machine and later returned to the company to work in administration. The third generation of Feigels, which includes Kurt Jr.'s sons, comprise the next generation of the family working in the business.

Universe Machine has grown to include the following divisions:

Valve repair and modification: As the largest authorized repair and modification facility of its kind in Canada and the only Canadian company with membership in the Valve Repair Council, Universe Machine provides hydro testing, trim changes and extensions, along with full valve refurbishing back to OEM specifications. Under this umbrella, Universe Engineering provides CRN# and certified processes.

Machining and welding: Those in this division enjoy working on some of the largest and most unique components in western Canada for a wide variety of projects and under certifications such as ISO 9001:2015, APEGA and ABSA. Work is industry-tested to, and exceeds, the highest standards.

Products: This division offers engineered equipment that is patented, tested, and proven for industries' harshest conditions. Under this umbrella, equipment is innovated for the oil and gas, valve and forest industries.

How did Universe Machine continue to grow year over year?

“Over 55 years of success has been attributed to, first of all, hard work,” says Kurt Jr. “And, it is very important to also have good employees and people around, which creates a strong team. We have a strong retention because we run our company like a family. Everybody is important. Many businesses in our industry face numerous ongoing changes so it’s important to operate lean, remain flexible and adapt quickly. We have demonstrated how we can adapt quickly!”

An example of this adaptation was seen at the onset of the pandemic.

“Business dropped significantly near the beginning of the pandemic but has improved somewhat since we also provide essential services to keep necessary equipment operating in Western Canada,” explains Ron. “We had to run leaner to survive, even before COVID as the Alberta economy struggled. However, this has spurred innovation and efficiency improvements. It has led to exploring further diversification, automation, and increasing capabilities. Having more time and resources enabled us to discover new opportunities, to ramp up R & D and to continue innovating our current line of products and services. This has proven to be beneficial in the short-term, and we are confident this will provide long-term benefits as well.”

Kurt Jr. adds, “As the pandemic took hold and borders closed, we quickly started to re-evaluate priorities and focus more on our own back yard; in other words, western Canada. We shifted our engineering to more R & D work on new or improved products and services, some for the western Canadian forest industry with products we could quickly take to market locally, and others for the oil and gas industry that would hopefully be ready to roll out internationally as the COVID crisis eventually ends. This was not only good for keeping staff busy during a very slow time but was also helpful in boosting morale within the entire organization as management looked and planned ahead for a brighter future.”

He continues, “However, Universe Machine is not the only one who stands to profit from the efforts the company is taking to invest in research and development during challenging times. This move will enable Universe to produce products more efficiently in the future, thereby staying globally competitive, satisfying customers’ needs and keeping Albertans employed. In other words, investing in research and development means investing in Canada’s future economy, and that is the best way to reinvest stability and growth into our future.”

With his many years in the business, Kurt Sr. speaks to why resilience and innovation are important in the energy industry.

“Resilience as defined by Merriam-Webster is, ‘an ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change,’ says the founder. “Some of the misfortunes or changes we have experienced are our harsh environment, a cyclical economy with many legislative changes and changes in government. Our resilience shines when we are creative and willing to collectively work together to meet the misfortunes with calm, compassion and to bounce back with a renewed adaptability and hope of success.

“Regarding innovation, Edmonton is known as a blue-collar service centre that designs, manufactures and repairs all manner of commodities. Perhaps it is not widely recognized how many amazingly talented, humble, and innovative people we have here in Alberta. They are inspiring to work with! Many world-leading products and inventions encompassing numerous industries quietly came to life here in this province.

“Resilient and innovative Albertans have played a significant role in making Canada such a wealthy and highly regarded country to live, work and play in.”

As the business development manager, Ron helps navigate the ever-changing world of governments, policies, and legislation.

“With the recent change of government, provincial policies have become more accommodating and helpful for energy industry businesses, but our Federal Government has increased Alberta’s energy industry difficulties with regulatory changes, damaging new policies and not supporting or enabling wise utilization of Alberta’s abundant natural resources,” explains Ron.

He goes on to say how local communities and consumers can be supportive now, and in the future despite the ongoing changes. “In general, it is good to buy local wherever possible, supporting regional and Canadian businesses. Every Canadian should lobby the government to support infrastructure and the reduction of red tape to allow Canadians to develop and market our natural resources across Canada instead of importing. We should support removing roadblocks that impede selling our highly regarded and environmentally superior resources worldwide.”

As the decades ticked away and Kurt Sr.’s business grew to involve his family and grandchildren, he looks back very fondly on his decision to remain in Edmonton.

“I was very fortunate to have a lot of good people and great local businesses that helped along the way,” he reminisces. “Edmonton feels like a close-knit and caring community where people and businesses help each other succeed. What I appreciate in Edmonton is that there still seems to be a fair bit of mutual respect, trust, and collaboration. With small businesses here especially, it seems easier and quicker to get things done and deals can still be closed verbally or with a handshake.

“As for the province, Alberta is truly magnificent with the Rocky Mountains to the west, wide open spaces to the north, and filled with vast and diverse natural resources throughout that have greatly contributed to the wealth of not just Alberta, but all of Canada. I especially respect the hard-working, resilient, and innovative nature of Albertans who have wisely utilized Alberta’s energy and natural resources we have been blessed with. That provincial utilization helps improve the entire country.”

Universe Machine is very invested in giving back to the community. The company robustly

supports the next generation of industrial innovators by supporting the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology’s (NAIT) mechanical engineering, machinist, and welding trades programs and the University of Alberta’s mechanical engineering program.

“Kurt Jr. is also personally involved with the Alzheimer Society of Alberta and Northwest Territories, is the chair of the Alberta Red Tape Industrial Manufacturing Panel. He sits on the board of the Shepherd’s Care Foundation which is now comprised of seven senior care centers in Alberta that care for over 2,000 seniors and employ 800 staff,” adds Ron.

For his contribution to Alberta’s heavy industry and the employees and students within it, Kurt Sr. was honored with a Pinnacle Award in 1993 and was an Alberta Business Hall of Fame inductee in 2019.

Yet, the family remains ever humble, instead shifting the praise for Universe’s many accomplishments to include others.

“There are too many great employees, businesses and people to mention,” says Kurt Sr. “But I would like to acknowledge several very long-term customers including Stream-Flo/ Master Flo and Enbridge Inc./Interprovincial Pipeline. Both have been utilizing our services since near the time Universe Machine began in 1965. Advocacy groups like the Canadian Federation of Independent Business and the Canadian Taxpayers Federation have been helpful, along with our board of advisors – Allan Scott and Terry Bachynski.”

Universe Machine is the company with a solid past and an eye on the future. No matter what comes its way, the family business is ready.

“It does look like supply and demand for oil and other natural resources will continue to balance out in 2021, and we are confident our industry will thrive as businesses continue to adapt and governments change or adjust for the better. In the meantime, Universe Machine will continue to run lean and efficient, innovating, and diversifying,” concludes Ron. “In summary, our focus will be on continuous improvement and effectively mentoring the next generations.” 