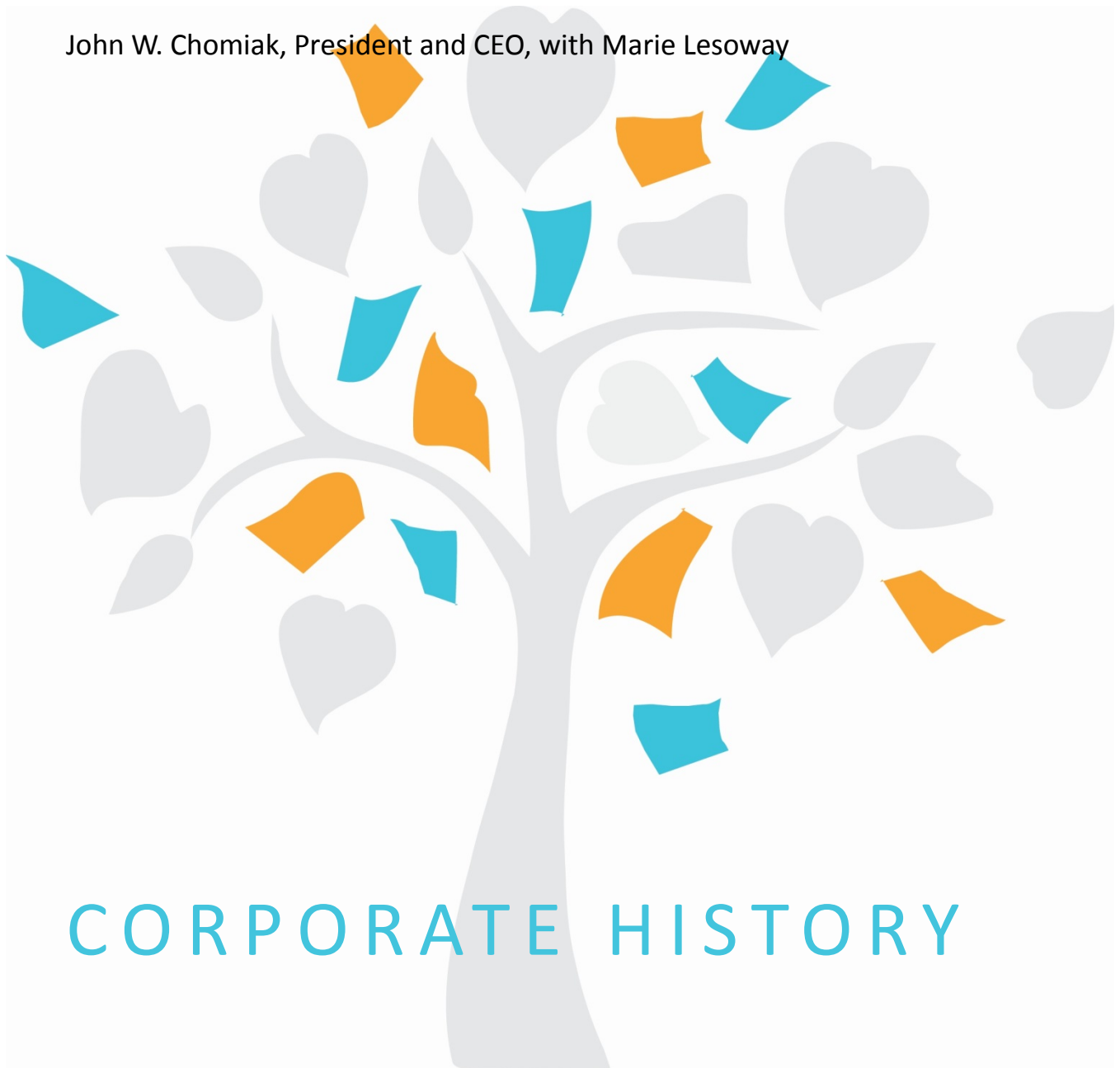


# The Hemisphere Story

Reminiscing as we celebrate 55 years

John W. Chomiak, President and CEO, with Marie Lesoway



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**It is adapted from a speech that President and CEO John W. Chomiak delivered to his staff at Hemisphere Engineering Inc. at the 2012 Christmas party.**

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*In 2012, Hemisphere Engineering celebrated its 55<sup>th</sup> year in business with a huge party for clients and friends. The year also marked CEO John Chomiak's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary with the company. In 2015, Hemisphere joined forces with the MCW group of companies.*



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# The Hemisphere Story

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## Our Beginnings

Hemisphere's story begins when Alberta was still farming country and the oil patch was in its infancy.

It starts in the fall of 1957, when three talented, ambitious young fellows left their jobs with fertilizer giant Sherritt Gordon and struck out on their own to start an engineering business. Danish-born Aage Tottrup was a mechanical engineer. Peter Vinkenburg was an electrical engineer who immigrated to Canada from somewhere in Europe. Frank LaRose was a Saskatchewan boy who was trained as a surveyor.

All three men were industrially inclined, but they had a lot to learn about running a business. The learning would come, in time. But first, they needed a name for their new venture. They took the V-i-n from Vinkenburg's name and the T-o from Tottrup's and came up with Vinto Engineering.

Sometime in 1958, Vinto hooked up with another Danish-trained engineer, Erik Hedegaard. Erik had a full-time job with Angus Butler, but he did some moonlighting for Aage Tottrup, and in 1959, he joined the company. Erik was a first-rate mechanical engineer who insisted on technical excellence—no matter what the project.

It was Erik who hired me, on October 2, 1962. He took me under his wing right from my first day on the job, and he was proud of me when I succeeded him as president 20 years later.

## The First Decade: Building Our Reputation with Schools

Vinto's earliest work came via the building engineering path. Thanks to Erik Hedegaard, Vinto created a reputation as Alberta's experts for building schools.

Erik's mechanical designs were so streamlined and precise that, in many cases, heat loss calculations didn't need to be done. That was because all Vinto-designed schools were heated and ventilated with a unit ventilator system, as it was known then. This was a wall-mounted unit that drew fresh air from the outside. The size of the room dictated the size of the ventilator unit it needed.

It was a unit ventilator problem, in 1963, that changed my life forever. I was sent out to troubleshoot a problem at the high school we designed in Onoway. It was there that I met my late mother-in-law, who was a teacher at the school. And later, I met the girl who would be my wife.

Vinto did a lot of schools in its first five years of operation. We did schools at Cut Knife and Maidstone in eastern Saskatchewan, schools in small communities around Edmonton, and a number for the Edmonton Public School Board.

### *Vinto's First Project*

Vinto's very first project was the mechanical systems for a school designed by architect John (Scotty) McIntosh, who is a past president of the Alberta Association of Architects.

Scotty built a very successful firm that still exists in Edmonton under the name Workun Garrick and Partners. I'm proud to say that the partnership our company established with its very first project and its very first client has stayed solid to this day.

We did many schools for Scotty McIntosh over the years. Scotty's schools always had blue doors.

### *My First Project*

When I joined Vinto, in 1962, I worked with Scotty McIntosh's colleague—Morley Workun—on Edmonton's Hillcrest School in West Jasper Place, in what's now the Rio Terrace area. This was Canada's first "Total Energy School." It was the first school in the country to generate its own power, heat and air conditioning.

The heating and cooling plant that Vinto designed for Hillcrest was basically two Caterpillar engines. The engines generated power, and the heat from their water jackets and exhaust was captured and recycled. In the winter, this heat was used to keep the

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school warm. In the summer, it was used to operate an absorption chiller that provided air conditioning. The cooling aspect was a big feature and a major innovation at the time: schools in those days were not air-conditioned.

Because of the two engines, the schematic drawings for Hillcrest School were very busy and complicated, with a complex array of piping that had to be followed carefully. Vinto brought in Birgith Hedegaard, Erik's wife, to help with the design. Before the Hedegaards came to Canada, Birgith and Erik had worked together in engineering offices in Denmark. Birgith colour-coded all the piping to make the drawings easy to read. It was a simple trick, but one that made a big difference.

When Hillcrest School opened its doors sometime in 1963, it was a "green" building all round. "Building green" has been our company's trademark right from the get-go, and our energy-efficient design was groundbreaking.

There was only one problem.

The noise from the Caterpillar engine exhaust was keeping the neighbours awake at night. Erik and I spent many late nights listening and figuring out how to reduce the decibel rating of the engines. But we continued to get complaints about the noise.

One night, I happened to tell Erik about the time I had busted the muffler and manifold on our Oliver 99 tractor, on the farm. We were busy with fieldwork and parts were hard to get, but driving that noisy tractor was bringing out the worst in me. In desperation, I took a couple of stovepipes along with a T-section and some haywire, and fitted that around the exhaust pipe as a temporary fix.

Erik thought my solution was worth a try, so we went downtown to WW Arcade (now the Hardware Grill). We found a stovepipe that had a T-section for an outlet, and installed it on top of the muffler of one of our Caterpillar engines. Amazingly, the noise level reduced dramatically! So then we instructed the R. Angus shop that sold Caterpillars to fabricate a made-to-fit T-section for its engine mufflers. And at last, the community was able to sleep.

## Early Years

When I joined Vinto, our office was in rented space on 123 Street and 106 Avenue. We shared the top floor with Reginald Jarvis, who had a small electrical engineering consulting firm across the hallway. Reginald was the electrical engineer on Vinto's Hillcrest School project. He was a real gentleman, and he taught me how gentlemen solve problems and negotiate agreements.

When I joined Vinto, we were a group of three. Our drafting board was a door laid flat and propped on a stack of bricks, along with a T-square. I also had several slide rules, which were well used.

Our filing system was a number of standard, letter-sized boxes about 6 inches deep. We had a separate box for each project, and we piled the boxes one on top of another on several continuous shelves. One night, I was working late after a very busy day during which I'd had to complete a design and attend several site meetings. It was about midnight, and I had to have a report out by morning. I needed something from one of the file boxes, but when I reached to get it, that box and a number of others came crashing down, spilling their contents all over the floor.

It took several hours of crawling around on hands and knees to refile everything. But even in those days, "the project was the boss," and I knew I wouldn't be getting any sleep until I had solved the problem, one way or the other.

## A New Era

In 1966, Vinto president Erik Hedegaard hired a senior mechanical engineer by the name of Steve Bruskiwich. It was the combination of Erik's technical expertise and Steve's business smarts that propelled Vinto forward into a new era.

Erik was what I call a technocrat. He was a technical expert who insisted on doing things properly. Anything less than excellence on the engineering side of things was simply not acceptable.

Steve brought a complementary skill set to the table. He was an able leader with a lot of marketing and business development savvy. He was the one who established our company's golden rule that "satisfied clients are repeat clients."

It was my good fortune—and Hemisphere's—that both Erik and Steve were excellent mentors. They taught me a lot.

### *From Schools to Hospitals and New Horizons*

Business and technical excellence was the winning combination that propelled Vinto forward. It gave us the competitive edge we needed to take on projects like the Walter C. Mackenzie Hospital, Southgate Shopping Centre, the Oxford Towers in downtown Edmonton and the award-winning Coquitlam Shopping Centre.

Our company also built a lot of hospitals in rural Alberta. On every project, we followed the principle that our work was not done until our clients were completely satisfied.

In the 1960s, Vinto did the mechanical systems for the Wainwright Hospital, which has now been replaced. The building was a Y-shaped structure designed by architect Charlie Blais. For some reason, there were many heating problems, so Erik and I decided to drive out to Wainwright and do a thorough investigation. We arrived late in the afternoon, put on white coveralls, and at about 5 p.m., we got started.

All the heating was in a crawlspace, and we climbed in through the boiler room. We spent the next four or five hours crawling through on our hands and knees, ending up at the end of one of the Y segments. Rather than crawling back to the boiler room, we decided to get down through a trapdoor in a small, narrow room where medicines were stored. The trapdoor was about the width of the room, and when I pushed it to get out, it trapped a nurse at the far end of the room. Not surprisingly, she freaked out at the sight of us two dirty guys emerging from the hole! It took some fast talking to settle her down.

### **Growing the Company**

Vinto grew as Alberta grew, and our reputation as a good place to work gave us the pick of new graduates from institutions like NAIT, which opened its doors in 1963.

In about 1968, Vinto moved from our original 123 Street office to fancier digs in the Dominion Bridge Building on 120 Street and 106 Avenue. In the early 1970s, we opened a branch office in Dubai. In 1975, during the boom era, we opened our Calgary office, which soon had a staff of 30. In 1977, we purchased our current Edmonton building. In 1981, we became Edmonton's first computerized engineering company.

## Weathering Hard Times

The 1970s were boom times for Alberta, and boom times for Hemisphere. We had a staff of about 170 and offices in Edmonton, Calgary, Vancouver, Regina, Yellowknife, Penticton and Dubai.

In the early 1980s, disaster hit.

With the Western Canada Energy Tax imposed by the Trudeau government, projects were cancelled overnight. Hemisphere's Oxford Tower design for Calgary's Eau Clair centre was practically complete, but it died on the drafting table. We killed all our subsidiary companies to reduce the legal and accounting expenses. We sold our Dubai operation to the locals. We sold our Vancouver and Penticton offices to our staff at those locations, and basically gave our Regina office back to Yoneda Engineering. We closed our Canada North Office in Yellowknife. Our Calgary office was reduced to fewer than 10 people who operated as an Edmonton team, but at a distance.

We cut our staff from 170 to fewer than 40. And in 1983, with the handful of people who were left, we rebranded ourselves as Hemisphere Engineering Inc.

## The Story Continues

Over our 55-year history, Hemisphere completed more than 16,000 projects. We've worked in hundreds of communities across Canada and around the world. We've built airports, arenas, museums, concert halls and specialized research laboratories. Our technical expertise is the best there is.

I feel very privileged to have spent almost my whole career with this amazing company. And I'm very honoured to be part of Hemisphere's remarkable story.