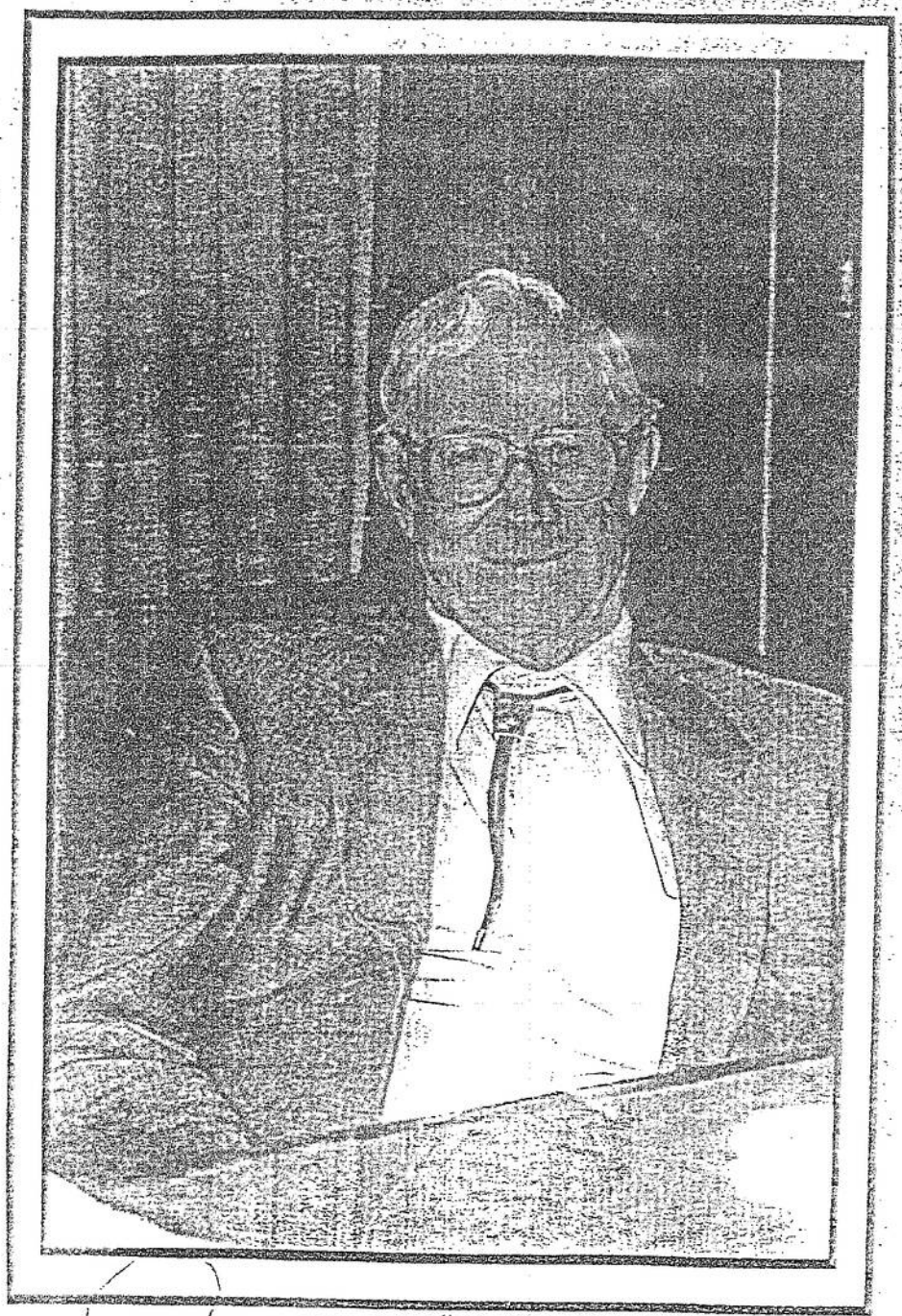


George Armstrong

If you harbour a pre-conceived picture of "The Legend of George Armstrong", approaching his office in the West part of Fort Frances may cause a bit of a disappointment. First impressions are of an old stucco building, looking much like an old house, with paint peeling off windows, electrical wires into and out of the walls... My first thoughts were "This is not where George Armstrong should be conducting his business." Once inside, however, disappointment gives way to fascination with all of the old photos on the walls. Pictures of old logging trucks (circa 1937), old machinery, horse drawn sleds with huge loads of pulp logs, and one, that must be at least a metre and a half wide, dated 1929, showing the employees of Shevlin Clarke Ltd.

George comes out to meet me, a tall, handsome man with a shock of white hair and a wonderful, warm grin. He has a sort of "John Wayne" image, and always wears a suit, white shirt and string tie. He shows me into his office, and, nestling into a black leather sofa, I listen to how this all began. He is modest in his telling, and would much rather dwell on the historic details than how he has made it from a farm in Dance township to a multi-million dollar local industry that employs as many as 120 people in the summer months.

George Ansley Armstrong was born to Sarah and Edward Armstrong on November 27, 1915, on a farm in Herbert, Saskatchewan, 30 miles from Swift Current, the oldest of six children - three girls and three boys. Ed was born in Peterborough, Ontario, and as a young man worked as a brakeman for the railroad, travelling between Calgary and Montana. Sarah was born in Sarnia, and moved before the turn of the century with her family to Roleau, Saskatchewan (now a suburb of Regina), where her father had a horse and cattle ranch. One day after they had been there a few weeks, a rider on horseback stopped by the farmhouse and said that he had noticed that there was never a lamp left burning in the window at night. He said that you must always keep a light on, in case a traveller should get lost. There was a lamp left burning in the window thereafter. Ed and Sarah met years later while travelling on the same train, were soon married and moved to Herbert.

George remembers little of the time prior to starting school in the early 1920's in Bullshead, (now a suburb of Medicine Hat). As a young boy of six he walked the mile to school with his teacher, who, George said, insisted on going first along the path to knock the rattlesnakes out of the way. He remembers there being so many snakes that pigs were brought in to eat them.

In 1923 the family moved to Kingsford Township, North of Emo, and for one year George attended the Donald Young School in Emo. The following year he, along with about 14 other pupils, went to a

small one-room school in Dance. George stayed for three years, then quit, completing what would be his formal education at the age of 10. He makes no apologies now, says he could read and write, and "Education isn't everything...the lack of formal education doesn't mean you can't learn".

His father farmed about 50 acres in Dance, and was employed by the railroad from August to January. An article taken from a Fort Frances paper, dated October 27, 1938, under "POLICE COURT' notes: "Edward Armstrong, of Dance Township, was arraigned in Police Court before Magistrate Cruso Wednesday morning, charged under the Forest Fire Prevention Act., Section 9, for setting fires without permission. He was given the option of 90 days in jail, or a fine of $150. and costs. The fine was paid. Armstrong pleaded guilty to having started a fire but stated in his defence that the particular triangle piece where he set the fire was for purposes of backfiring around his buildings. He said it was already ablaze and that he started another fire in the hay and brush as a fire guard. He burned up about an acre or less. The government water wagon was on the road. When the fire had burned sufficiently, with proper guarding around his buildings, he put it out, he said. Testimony was submitted in court that the fire which he had set had nothing to do with the big fire on Monday."

George helped out on the farm (they had cattle, sheep, chickens), and got his first job delivering mail to Harry Blake, a fisherman who preferred not to come to town any oftener than he absolutely had to. Harry lived in a small shack on Northwest Bay, near the mouth of Stamp Creek, and paid George $1.50/wk to pick up the mail from the post office in Burriss every Saturday and bring it back to him, a distance of more than 13 miles.

While much of the country suffered under the stress of the depression, George remembers little impact on his family on the farm. His father was still employed every fall, they had lots to eat, neighbours seemed to be no richer nor poorer than the Armstrongs.

In 1930, when George was 15, he worked cutting a right-of-way road in Dance, walking 3 miles to work and another 3 back. Leaving home at 6 a.m., he would return at 7 p.m., secure in the knowledge that he had earned about $1.20/day. He worked all that winter for roughly $100.00. At 17 he began hauling railway ties and pulpwood with a team of horses, North of Devlin. And so began a career that would span more than six decades, and involve millions of dollars.

At 19 he purchased his first vehicle from Jim Tyne, (now Voyageur Ford Mercury), a second-hand 1934 Chev 3-Ton for which he paid $650. The following year he sold this, financing a new Ford 3-ton

for $1,100. Trucks of this size were not common, and he remembers Linton Judson having the first such vehicle, Harvey Hart the second, and he the third. In 1936 George moved to Fort Frances, and lived in the Emperor Hotel for 8 years.

Pictures on his office walls show his trucks hauling logs and ties for what was then Ontario Paper Company; he was also under contract with Campbell and Holmes Lumber Company. When required, he could remove the rack, install a box, and haul gravel, most often for the Department of Highways. In 1937 he bought another truck, another in 1938, and in the spring of that year his "fleet" went into action, contracting out to Thomlinson Construction from Thunder Bay, paving the road from Fort Frances to Devlin. His was the first to haul logs on sleighs behind the truck, contracted out to J.A. Mathieu and Shevlin-Clarke.

In January of 1938 George fell ill, going from 220 pounds down to 150, and he entered the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota where he was diagnosed as having problems relating to his goitre. He was to remain there until April. (George says that when a someone is a first time patient at Mayo they are issued a registration number that they carry forever. In 1938 his number was 1,000,347...he recently read that in 1991 they had issued over 5,000,000!!) When he had recovered and returned home he began hauling gravel for the highway from Fort Frances west to Devlin.

Two years later he went West to Carberry, Manitoba, and then on to Dauphin, where he received contracts for hauling gravel for municipal airport construction. Working these jobs until winter, George then returned to Devlin. Some weeks later he travelled to Fort Frances to meet the train... he had purchased a carload of twenty horses while in Manitoba, and was to rent them out for hauling logs out of the bush. In the spring of 1941 the George Armstrong Company got the contract from J.A. Mathieu to rebuild the road from Flanders south to Lac La Croix (Camp 63), and with two trucks and a bulldozer he rented from Frank Curtis they worked from the first of August until the first snow fell. Loading gravel onto trucks in the middle of the bush in 1941 was no easy task, but George and his foreman, Don Christian knew that where there was a will there was a way. Using logs, they constructed a three sided parking area or 'hopper' along one the side of the gravel. They would back the truck into this area with the truck box directly under the hopper. Up on the mound, George and Don would grasp the handles of gravel 'scrapers' (similar to today's snow scoops, but with a pointed blade), while a team of horses pulled the scrapers through the gravel and up the hopper to be dumped through the hole, into the waiting truck box below. Horses and men would go 'round and 'round, scooping and dumping until the boxes were filled. Eventually the horses hooves would become sore from walking through

the loose rocks, and they would have to rest. (Often George would shoe the animals himself.) If the horses became too disabled, the men would load the gravel by hand. Some of the rocks were large and not easy to load, and at one point George thought that if they could put more weight on the bulldozer blade it would dig in deeper. So he climbed up and stood on the blade, holding on to the cable for support, and in this manner they continued loading the trucks.

By the spring of 1942, George had amassed a fleet of three trucks. Don Christian and Dan Grouette (George says Dan smoked 4 packs of cigarettes a day!!) were driving the trucks, taking gravel from Steep Rock and building roads around Steep Rock Iron Mines in Atikokan.

Later that year George shipped two steel Cat-wagons to Halifax, where they were re-crated, loaded and shipped OHMS for Kingston, Jamaica. George says they were to be used in the war. He had sold them for $5,000 a piece. Four or five months later, he was standing in front of "Doc" Boyle's house on Mowat Avenue, talking with George Weir and Bill Fontana, and noticed an envelope poking out of the snow at his feet. He kicked at it until it was exposed, and saw that it was addressed to George Armstrong Company. Opening it, he discovered a cheque for $10,000, payment for the cat-wagons!!. It had been dropped by the mail girl and buried for weeks, perhaps months, in newly fallen snow. I asked him "Didn't you miss it?" and he replied "No, I didn't ... I guess it wasn't that much money."

In 1942 two major events happened in George's life. One was a steam shovel, and the other was Kay (Kirsti) Broman, born in Halsua, Finland on July 5, 1922. Kay and George first met at a country dance in the Spring of '42. At that time she was working as J.A Mathieu's private secretary, and George was hauling lathe from Mathieu's mill. (The lathe was cut into stove lengths, and was sold to local residents for $2.50 a half ton load.) If Kay worked late and missed her ride home she would catch a ride with George. She says that she worked "awfully slowly" those days. She claims she wasn't initially smitten, not at the onset, although a cousin's husband told her that George was the man she should marry. It wasn't until George dated Freda Ash, who told Kay that she had been out the previous night with a really interesting man, that Kay began to take this man seriously.

During the winter George resumed hauling logs to the mill, and in the spring of 1942 went back to work rebuilding a tote road for Ontario Paper Company from Ernie Bruffels farm on the north side of Calm Lake to Turtle Dam. This necessitated the construction of a

wooden trestle bridge over Canyon Hill Creek. Tragedy struck when a tree fell on one of the workers, killing him. His body was brought to the lake by wagon, then to town by boat. It was also during the construction of the bridge that George accidently cut the end of his thumb off. Ernie drove him across the lake where he caught a freight train to the hospital in Atikokan. The next day he caught the passenger train back to Fort Frances, where Dr. Leishman treated his injury. His men teased him that he certainly went to great lengths to see Kay.

Not long after, George presented Kay with a diamond, then a few days confessed that his mother disapproved of their marriage, saying that she felt that the two didn't know one another well enough. Kay promptly gave the ring back. After a few days 'cooling off' period, she changed her mind, accepted his offer and a year later, on March 8, 1943, they were married in the Presbyterian Manse; later, the newlyweds honeymooned in the Fort Frances Hotel. George, who is habitually prompt, was late for his wedding.

Kay was a patient wife. George was a wild young man, and liked nothing better than a "good" fight. He and Kay would go to the dances at Blackhawk; George would do little dancing and would never back down from a fight. He would beat everyone up, go home and say he had a great time!

The company grew and George bought his first steam shovel early in April of '43 from the city of Duluth, for two thousand dollars. The coal-burning shovel was likely the start of the present day limited company, and was first used to dig a ditch from the site of the old Fort Frances Brewery to 8th street down to the junction of the CNR & DWP spur. It also came in handy when the road to Couts' Camp, north of Nestor Falls had a wash out, and George was hired to fill and repair the damage. Pictures in an old album show the shovel outfitted with a "clam" claw, a device built by the company that adapted the shovel for loading logs. Similar to the more modern "hia-bob" equipment used by Boise to-day, the claw would scoop logs and load them on to trucks or horse-drawn sleighs that had been fitted with "bunks". The shovel was sold years later for scrap, a decision that George and Larry regret today.

Also that year George was hired by an American firm, Hammermill Paper Company, to build a road from Wycliff, 40 miles east of Sioux Lookout, to Sturgeon River. Again equipment was sent by CNR, and as there was no siding, they unloaded on the main line, paying for the time they were holding up rail traffic. Thirty inches of fresh snow fell on October 8, and the workers were forced to stop working, return to Fort Frances, and finish the road the following year.

Road building in the 40's was necessary to allow the lumber and paper companies access to the uncut timber not accessible by main roadways, and George capitalized on this. Often it meant setting up camps, sometimes just tent camps, other times more permanent locations to house men and horses while the roads were being built. The men would begin at some geographical location, a town, a lake, and work their way through the bush in the direction the road was to take. Usually George himself would go on foot to blaze the path, seeking the easiest, most cost-effective route to take. A bulldozer would follow, clearing and piling the trees and brush, then a steam shovel if necessary, and then the bulldozer to dig the ditches and lay culverts, and finally the trucks to lay the gravel.

It is probably safe to say that few men have walked as many miles as George, through swamp, rough terrain, hills and frozen lakes in search of gravel, or the shortest, easiest route through bush, where one day cars and trucks may travel. If there is gravel there, George will find it, as he has with roughly 17 deposits in this district alone. Of one, at Off Lake, George says, with a grin, "Now that one, that's real, real big!" Outside of the district, North of Wabigoon, a new pit yields an excess of 5 million yards, another 12 miles east of Dinorwick, not quite so large. In the 1970's, an Edmonton appraiser valued his West End pits and the rock quarry inside at $6,000,000. The present day office building that sits on this property was once a house belonging to Carmody's. In May of '48 George purchased it along with one acre of land from Carmody for $45,000, and has provided customers with crushed rock, gravel, sand and earth fill since. He has added to the existing building, and has secured more land surrounding the pit and now owns a total of 80 acres at this site, which also houses his crushers, washing plant and storage yard. The company has been removing gravel since 1948 and George claims there is still as much left as he has taken. He says the pit area was once a river, and when the glaciers came through they filled the river bed with sand, moving the river further south. Over a three week period in 1992 40 trucks (30 of which the company had rented) hauled 170,017 tons of clay out of the area. New piping replaced old (at a cost of $25,000.00) to pump approximately 3000 galllons of water a minute into property George owns in Crozier, into the creek and eventually into Rainy River. One of the buildings here, a huge warehouse, now used to store idle equipment and as rental space of Boise Cascade, was a former CNR building that the company moved from the CN yard to the gravel pit site. It is a massive building, two stories high, 130 feet long and 30 feet wide, believed to be the longest of its kind ever to be moved in one piece. The crew moved it across country, from the CN yard west along the railroad to the Frog Creek crossing, where they were met by Mayor Joe Livingston and a number of police vehicles. For reasons unknown to George, Mayor Livingston had decided that he

would stop the movers there at the crossing. George, remembering the day, smiles as he tells how he jumped from his car, telling the officials that "There aren't enough of you here to stop me! Now get out of my way and let us through"... and they proceeded over the tracks and on to his gravel pit. It is estimated that there are 145 thousand board feet of lumber in the building, and it required about a half million dollars worth of equipment to move it.

Across Highway 11, just north of the west end pit, the company operates a ready-mix concrete plant from which he can supply and deliver concrete to any specifications required by its customers. This plant supplied all of the concrete necessay both above and below the water for the construction of the Noden Causeway in the 1960's.

In 1944 George noted that Captain Billy Martin was hauling gravel from a large pit on Reef Point, and enquired of Captain Billy about purchasing the property. Billy said it belonged to a Mr. George H. Crosby, and h eknew that it wasn't for sale. George took matters into his own hands and contacted Mr. Crosby to see if he would sell the 96 acres. Crosby, who owned Iron Mines in Crosby Minnesota, said that he would probably never return to this area, and would sell the property to George for $681.00 in Canadian funds. Mr. Crosby had purchased it in 1905 for $1.00 an acre. At the time the property had a 65 foot face of gravel above the water line; it boasts two miles of shore line, of which 80% is beach. In order to access the gravel, and to build himself a cottage on the point, George had to punch in a road, approximately 3.5 miles, the present-day "Reef Point Road". Hacquil Construction was hired to provide the paving, and set up their asphalt plant along side the gravel pit at the end of the road. According to George, he paid for the entire length of road access, and those people now enjoying cabins and homes off this road had it built for them at no cost. George has maintained all but a couple of lots on the west shore of the point for himself and his family. One of the lots was sold to a friend, John Owen, because John had always said to George, "One day, when I retire, I would like to buy a piece of your property on Reef Point," and George would agree. The "one day" happened when John came to visit and said "Here I am, George, I'm retired." So George sold him the property.

It was also in 1944 that George got the contract from O&M to build a road from Flanders to Calm Lake Dam, about 6.5 miles on a cost plus 10% basis. This job was to last the summer of 1944. Everything, machinery, men, supplies, trucks, had to be shipped to Flanders by train. Once there, the men stayed in a boarding home run by Ronald Mathieu. Mathieu's boarding house was primarily for loggers, and the camps in those days were pretty rough. The men

were logging mostly Norway or White Pine, which was used for ties or sent to a sawmill; lathe was made from the edgings. Camp kitchens sat up to 150 at a time at tables 80 feet in length. Meals were as orderly as could be enforced, with the men having to maintain the same seating arrangement for every meal. Head cooks ruled their kitchens with a meat cleaver. Bull cooks were responsible for keeping fires going in the bunk houses and the kitchens all night long, and bread would be set out at night (in boxes with lamps left burning to provide heat for the rising) to be baked fresh each morning. Cooks were hard to find, paid well, and given separate sleeping quarters off the main kitchen. No alcohol was allowed in camp, and vanilla and lemon extract was difficult to keep around. Horses were housed in the barn during the winter, and were treated very well, in some cases better than the men.

While the men were working on the road, a drama was unfolding not too far from their camp. On June 10, Mrs. Viola Jamieson and her two boys, Arthur, 8 and Harold, 10, drove their boarder to work and returned to their home, about a mile from Flanders. When Viola entered her house, she was grabbed by a young man, held and eventually tortured, while three other men looked on. The men had robbed the Jamiesons a few weeks earlier, taking approximately $1200 from a sugar bowl. Believing that there was more money hidden, they had returned and were attempting to force Mrs. Jamieson to reveal where she was hiding the balance. Although she repeatedly told them that there was no more, they beat her, then lit newspapers on fire, holding them against her body. When this didn't work, they built up the fire in the woodstove, and held her against it, burning her until she fainted. Realizing that they weren't going to get any more information from the women, they threw her down into a root cellar, then ran outside, grabbed Harold and Arthur, and threw them down with their mother, securing the door above them. Hours later, Harold had managed to dig himself out, and ran to the site where the men were working for help. George attempted to calm the frantic boy, and, mustering his crew of 17 onto a truck, drove to the Jamieson home where they found the critically injured woman. The men made a makeshift bed in the back of the truck, and, lifting Viola on, carefully travelled to Flanders, a trip that now took nearly an hour. The manager of the mill called the CPR agent to flag the next train through, and Viola was brought to Fort Frances, where she died on July 4. Two of the men were arrested in Atikokan, one in Kenora, and one a short while later in Morris, Manitoba. Three were subsequently hanged in Fort Frances.

Meanwhile, about ninety miles east of Fort Frances, the first indication of the magnitude of the ore reserves at Steep Rock had been discovered some years previous, and the diversion of the Seine River and the draining of Steep Rock Lake were now a serious

consideration. Underground shaft development had been unsuccessful due to the extremely heavy inflow of water, and diversion and draining seemed the only alternative in mining the orebody. It was a bold plan of immense size, called by The Northern Miner "One of the Great Canadian Engineering Triumphs of All Times". In Steep Rock, the Men and the Mines, author Bruce Taylor describes ....."The plan called for diverting the river's flow from the Steep Rock Lake portion of the system by forcing it to flow from Marmion Lake through Raft Lake and Finlayson Lake in a circuitous route around Steep Rock Lake, eventually joining the Seine River system to the west. Steep Rock Lake could then be isolated from the system with a series of dams and pumped out to expose the ore on the lake bottom."

Taylor goes on to say "The problems that the successful bidder would face on this project were horrendous--the severe climate, the isolation, the rugged hard rock shield country, the lack of access roads, the project itself (which would have been difficult enough in any setting), and the difficulty of getting construction equipment during war time, and the time constraint (a construction schedule of only sixteen months) convinced the majority of contractors that it would be an impossible task".

The successful contractor was C.A. (Charlie) Pitts, and work on road construction to provide access to the excavation sites on the diversion was to start immediately. In the winter of 1943, George Armstrong Company equipment was a part of the concentration of equipment leased to begin road access, and by late winter the road had reached the southern tip of Finlayson Lake.

In the fall of '44 George bought a link belt drag line for $14,700. which he used for digging dams and ditches on the estate of J.A. Mathieu. Mathieu wanted a pond built on his land for ducks and other exotic water birds, and hired Armstrong equipment to dig it. George says that when he asked J.A. how big he wanted it, he said "I'll stand here, you keep walking. When I yell 'stop', that's how big I want it." That winter the company hauled logs in the Flanders area, also for J.A.

Kay was still working for Mathieu's, had purchased her first fur coat and had enjoyed its warmth all winter. No one had explained to her, however, the importance of having it stored properly. So in the Spring she carefully wrapped it in a blanket and put it in the closet. That summer moths discovered it, and when she retrieved it in the fall, it was ruined. George consoled her, saying "Never mind, Kay, now you have a nice suede leather coat."

She had planned to keep her job until she had her debts paid off, but decided to quit when she realized the longer she worked, the

more she owed. So she resigned and concentrated on taking care of George and their first child, a little girl born March 20, 1944 that they named Lorraine.

On the first of June, 1946, Kay gave birth to their second child, this time a boy, Larry.

As his family was growing, so was his fleet of trucks.... to five in 1945 when he bought the first 5-Ton to be seen in this area. He paid $3100 for it, and people came from Marathon, Thunder Bay and Kenora to see it. He now owned four 3 Tons and the new 5-Ton. He also purchased his first bulldozer, a D-4 Caterpillar which was shipped by train to Flanders to be used in building the road to Calm Lake Dam.

That spring the Armstrong Company was hired once again by Hammermill to build a half-mile spur from the main line into a camp eight miles west of Wycliff at a small town by the name of Robinson. Here the logs were dumped into the Sturgeon River where the boomed logs would float down the river to be hoisted on to flat cars (or gondolas) then shipped to a paper company in Cleveland. This job was costed out, and for every dollar George saved Hammermill, the Armstrong Company earned seventy-five cents. In winter months, the logs would be hauled on to the ice, secured by boom timbers; at break-up in the spring the logs would float downstream. Sometimes there would be log jams, especially on the Namikan River, and the logs would have to be dynamited if the men were unable to dislodge the "pin" log. Boom logs would be made from the biggest, longest timbers, with holes in each end bored by hand-held augers.

Summer months found the company was busy in Atikokan, helping to build the road from Atikokan to the Steep Rock Lake iron ore property, and building a marshalling yard for the CNR...22 spurs, each a mile long, allowing access to the mine for railroad cars hauling iron ore. Armstrong Company build eight control dams for Steep Rock, three in the winter of 1955-56, a $175,000 contract, and five more in the fall of 1959. Atikokan was booming, and in the next few years George and company would put in sewer and water lines and new streets as the small town grew. He built Atikokan's radar station, and in 1954 the company built a redi-mix plant to respond to the demand of housing construction. A dam was constructed at the headwaters of the Atikokan river controlling the town's water supply. George also owned several houses in Atikokan, but as things slowed down with the mine closing, he saw the turn the local economy was taking and sold these in the mid '70's.

On November 8, 1948, Kay and George celebrated the birth of their

second son, Lyle. People kidded them that although George was away a good part of the time, he must have managed to visit at least once every two years. Lyle's birth was the only one that George was not present for, for although he kept coming home to check on Kay, he was away when the baby was born. The following year, George's mother passed away at the age of 52.

The George Armstrong Company Limited was officially formed in June of 1950, a month after their fourth child and third son was born. They named the baby James Edward, after George's father. Kay found herself very busy as the mother of four children, now aged six, four, two and a newborn. She remembers a time when Fort Frances was alerted to a scarlet fever scare, and she and the children were confined to the house for what seemed to be an endless month. George, often with his dad, would drive for miles, spending so much time in his gold Lincoln that Kay threatened to bury him in it.

In the winter of 1952, Kay and George took their first "extended" holiday, a trip to Fort Lauderdale, Florida. They repeated this trip many times together, George driving because Kay hated to fly.

That same year George's brother Gerald was travelling across the ice on Shoe Bay with a truck loaded with logs. It was late in the season, he was moving his last load before breakup, and the ice was bad in spots. He hit a soft spot and his wheel broke through. In his attempts to unload the weight to free his truck he was pushing a gear when he was struck on the head and killed instantly. George was in Des Moines, Iowa at the time, and was called home to help the family through this tragedy. Gerald died on March 20, Lorraine's eighth birthday.

The Armstrong family of six had lived for many years in a two bedroom apartment on First Street across from the High School, and were rapidly outgrowing the living space. Kay had been looking for alternative living quarters, and had found a house on Second Street, just around the corner from their apartment. The house belonged to Fort Frances Vet, Dr. Nealy, and the asking price was $8,000.00. George looked at it and decided it was not the house for them. A few months later, a letter came from their landlord, informing them that they had "too many kids" and they would have to move out of the apartment. So they purchased "Doc" Nealy's house on Second Street, only by now it was worth $10,000.!! During the move, George thought it just as easy to load their refrigerator onto a dolly and wheel it himself to the new house. Kay had left him in charge of Jimmy, who was only two at the time. He arrived at Second street with the fridge, but without Jimmy. He had <u>lost him</u> somewhere along the way!! A frantic Kay called the police, and he was located some six blocks from home. George says that is the closest that he and Kay have come to a divorce.

In 1954 the Company purchased a Cedar Rapids rock crusher for $80,000. The market was there to justify such an expensive piece of equipment...anyone needing crushed rock prior to this would have had to travel as far as Winnipeg, Thunder Bay or Toronto to buy it, and the economy was booming.

George was working long hours, building his company, always on the lookout for a new lucrative venture, and when he would finally end his day, he looked forward to going home and putting his feet up. One such long day, he returned home to find Kay ill with the flu, and four hungry children wondering what to do for dinner. George who never cooks, decided it couldn't be that difficult, and, finding a pot, proceeded to dump meat, potatoes, and peas together. Lorraine says that her brothers had a fetish about keeping their food separate on their plates, to the point where one boy prefers to use a different fork for different foods, and the idea that everything was coming out of one pot killed their appetites. Lorraine ran upstairs to Kay, crying "Mom, I know he is going to kill us!" George held fast, insisting "What you don't eat now for dinner you will eat tomorrow for breakfast and for lunch."

On March 9, 1957, fourteen years and one day after they were married, Kay gave birth to their second daughter, Kathy, the last of their five children.

As in most Canadian homes, Christmas was a time of great excitement at the Armstrongs. The kids were just too excited to sleep, and would sneak downstairs at three or four in the morning to check to see if Santa had arrived. Lorraine remembers George's steps on the floor above, and everyone scrambling to hide. George would be standing at the top of the stairs, his long legs hanging out of his boxer shorts, yelling "Get back into bed....it's too damn early to be up!" He was big, and could be loud, but the kids weren't afraid. As soon as they heard him go back to bed, they were out looking again.

Due to nature of the business, the majority of the parenting would, of course, go to Kay. George would come home and pat the kids on their heads, commentting on how fast they "were growing", and check on their progress at school. Lorraine and Kathie remember him asking "Kay, how could they fail that class when we live so close to two schools? I used to walk three miles to school, three miles home, and sometimes I'd go home for lunch, and I'd get good grades".

In 1958, George purchased two and a half miles of river front in Barwick that would involve the Provincial Government, cause controversy and some hassles some twenty years later.

By 1959 the company had attained a reputation in the road construction business that allowed them the opportunity of being one of the prime contractors in the long awaited Highway 11 connection that would link east to west over Rainy Lake. Aside from the scenery, the most spectacular part of this highway occurs at the Noden Causeway, the largest prestressed concrete structure in the British Commonwealth. Costing $7,341,898.00, with two miles of rock embankment and more than a mile of bridge structure, the span is fifty feet at its highest point. The Armstrong Company's contributions were many, including the sub-contract for road building for 10 miles on the east end of the Atikokan-Fort Frances section, the road building contract for 12.5 miles east and west of Bear Passage bridge, and a general contract including building the rock fill and gravel approaches to the west end of the Causeway high level structure, and the east end of low level structure for fifty feet. Several other sub-contracts included all of the ready mixed concrete for the Causeway bridge structure and under and above water supports, the sub-contract for lifting and placing into position the massive 65-ton high level deck and support concrete girder components from the ice surface in winter and the road construction and bridge cement aggregates of sand, gravel and crushed rock.

Called one of the "engineering feats of the century, utilizing new theories of construction to counteract an unstable lake bottom and heavy ice pressure", the contract for the bridge was let to MacNamara Construction. By the fall of 1959, pilings had been driven into the lake bottom where in some places drillers found 50 feet of clay overlying bedrock, and a water depth of 40 feet in others. MacNamara engineers had decided to wait until the ice was out the following spring to float barges out to set the girders in place that were to span the pilings.

Don Christian, superintendent of George Armstrong Company at that time, felt that they could hurry construction along by doing the job in the winter, and he approached George with this idea. He planned to fashion two machines using drag line cranes that would hook onto each end of the girders to raise and set them in place on the concrete caps. MacNamara engineers checked over Don's plans, and were amazed at the simplicity and common sense approach, but George expressed concerns over the weight that the cranes, the 64 ton concrete girders and the trucks needed to move them would place on the ice. Don had another idea, however, and when the ice was approximately two inches thick, enough to safely support a man's weight, he used water pumps and a spray nozzle that he designed to spray a thin mist of water over the ice surface. Before too long the ice had been built up to a depth of 56", three feet beyond its normal thickness. The trucks, with their giant cargoes, rolled onto the ice,and the pulleys lifted first the cement caps, and then

the girder components, into place.

The highway was officially opened on June 28, 1965. Premier John P. Roberts, in his dedication, said, "Now with this newly completed 87 mile stretch between Fort Frances and Atikokan, Highway 11 becomes a second trans-Continental road link across Northern Ontario. for 1,056 uninterrupted miles from Toronto's waterfront to Rainy River, the venturesome motorist can follow an exciting new circle route through villages, towns and cities and vast regions of Northern wilderness, connecting with the Great River Road of the United States. The outstanding achievement that has made comopletion possible is the island-hopping Noden Causeway."

Don is justifiable proud of the role that his company played in this immense project, and says "George thanked me with a 'Good job, Don,' and a brand new 1962 Chev Impala."

In May of 1965, George opened up the gravel pit on the property in Barwick that he had purchased from the Government in 1958. For the next ten years thousands of tons of gravel were removed before it was discovered that this area was of vast archaeological and historical significance. A report to The Honourable Lily Munro, Minister of Citizenship and Culture, dated February 5, 1987, states in reference to ...."The properties located at the Long Sault Rapids on the Rainy River west of Fort Frances ... there is no site that is larger or richer in the world than the site found on the property here at Long Sault". The report goes on to say "The importance of the site is that it constitutes a village area in the proximity of the mounds.... (which indicates) the continuous occupation of the site from the Paleo-Indian period, about 7,000 BC to 5,000 BC, the archaic period from approximately 5,000 BC to 500 BC, the woodland period from about 1,000 BC to 1650 AD and the historic period which followed".

George says that no one had ever told him the importance of preserving the area, or to stop excavating, nor had any steps ever been taken to expropriate the land. He states that if the government had acquired the land in 1975, when the village and the area of its extent were apparent, the pit would have been one-third the size that it is now, and very substantial areas of archaeological significance that have now been destroyed would have been preserved. As recently as 1981 he received a contract from the province for 80 miles of road building and on the documentation showed the gravel being removed from his Long Sault pit. He took out more than 100,000 tons of gravel for the highway and the pit was extended in accordance with plans approved by the Province.

Gravel is no longer being removed from the site, and George is still waiting for the government's decision as to whether this area

will be designated under the Ontario Heritage Act as a property of archaeological or historical significance, and what compensation he would therefore be entitled to.

In 1967, George bought and developed 220 acres of land west of Highway 11 across from the old golf course east of Fort Frances, and a year later built the Lakeview Trailer park, now renting 110 units. Two years later he acquired another 600 acres, this time at Shoal Lake. He will eventually subdivide and sell lots from this property that he purchased from Russell Cone and Cecil Seville.

Many years earlier Rocky Inlet was the site of one of the first sawmills on Rainy Lake. The property where the mill had been was owned by a Mr. Lockhart, who eventually sold it to Freddy Hilbert, who operated a mink farm. During the 1920's, when Mr. Lockhart operated his sawmill, Rocky Inlet was a little community of about thirty homes, mostly owned by people employed at the mill. George says that a horse and cart would come by daily to deliver water from the lake to the residents. In 1968 Hilbert sold the property to George and he and his brother Vernon built a new sawmill, valued at $1,267,000, including the buildings and machinery. In mid September of that year the tie mill went into operation, with an initial production of 750 ties during one shift, eventually turning out six ties a minute. A year later when the construction of the mill was completed, the barker went into operation. It was placed in the centre of the mill, and fed logs either to the right into the conveyor for sawing into lumber, or to the left where ties were cut. A chipper was used to convert the edgings into chips for the papermill digesters. The tie mill handled up to six tie bolts a minute in full operation. At first, logs were trucked from the water to the mill and the ties were fed onto another truck for conveying to the grounds. Eventually the spur was extended right to the mill site so that the ties moved by conveyor directly from the mill into the boxcars. The sawmill also made grain doors, selling "thousands and thousands" to the CNR. In July of 1971 Vernon died suddenly of a heart attack. George continued to operate the mill for several years after, but shut it down in 1973. Except for the chipper, which was sold, the building and machinery remain on the site, waiting for a buyer.

The company was once again busy in Thunder Bay in 1968, building the Lakehead Expressway from Gulf Link road west 2.5 miles to Highway #17, including the Neebing River Bridge, and northerly to John Street, and in 1969 rebuilding the highway from Sioux Lookout to Hudson, about 8 miles. Also that year the company got the contract for rebuild on Hwy 599 from Savant Lake north 7.5 miles.

In 1970 the Company began construction on the Manitou Access Road, known as Highway 502. Construction of the new route required that

more than 1.8 million cubic yards of rock be dynamited and removed. Completed a year ahead of schedule, the 150 km highway was officially opened October 31, 1980 at a cost of $33 million dollars, the initial outlay of which was supplied by Northern Affairs and the remainder by the Ministry of Transportation. Transportation and Communications Minister James Snow and Northern Affairs Minister Leo Bernier were present to dedicate a cairn in recognition of the opening. It is the northern most section of the Great River Road that stretches from Baton Rouge Mississippi to the south, north to Dryden, Ontario.

After the completion of highway 502 the company got the contract for paving from the eastern limits of Fort Frances 15 miles east to Nickle Lake through Couchiching Reserve. The job took only two months for rebuilding and paving.

During this ten year span the company was busy on other job sites, including building a coal terminal in Thunder Bay, along the shores of Lake Superior. From the fall of 1976 to the spring of '77 the company used as many as 117 trucks working 24 hours a day to move 2 million tons of gravel from various deposits in the area to build the terminals, and the railroad berms in and out of the terminals. To-day potash, as well as coal, is being shipped out of Thunder Bay ports.

The spring of '72 saw the company busy hosting the largest heavy equipment unreserved auction ever held in Northwestern Ontario. The site of the auction was the west end property, and interested people came from all across the country, and from United States to bid on crawler tractors, wheel loaders, scrapers, trucks cranes and attachments. The auction was arranged and conducted by Stewart Equipment Company Limited of Calgary.

George, who had been very close to his mother, also found a good friend in his father, Ed. The two men had become a familiar site, driving around the district together as George checked on the company's progress or scouted for gravel. Ed had lived for many years in the old Irwin Hotel, before moving to the Rainy Lake, and had worked different jobs for the company. One of his jobs was riding the crusher, watching to make sure that it didn't get blocked, and stopping the machinery when it did. He had to quit this particular job as it was too noisy for him. He was invited to Florida for vacations with George and Kay. In March of 1976, he passed away.

After much controversy, and eventually a referendum, the town decided, by a small margin, to overcome a major traffic problem over the CN tracks at the east end crossing by Pithers Point Park by erecting an overpass. George got the contract, and in 1982

completed the job at a cost of $2,610,670.00.

The company was hired in 1985 to put in Sewer and water for the Defense Depot in Armstrong, Ontario. George was in residence at the King George Hotel during some parts of this job, and he noticed that the whiskey in the bottle on his dresser kept gradually disappearing. One night, as he was sleeping, he was wakened by the squeak of his door. He looked up to see a hand reach in, pull the bottle off the dresser, and return it moments later, a little depleted. George reported it to the owner the next day, and was given three new bottles; the thief turned out to be the owner's wife. One day when George was paying for his lunch at the Hotel, the man waiting on him called him by name, and told George that he once worked for the company, before George fired him.

Today, Larry, the oldest son, and now Vice-President, runs most of the jobs although not in George's absence. George is the "mobile unit" driving around overseeing all that is going on. He says of Larry, "He's good... there is nobody that I know that could do the job he is doing to-day."

George and Larry agree that one of the most challenging jobs the company has faced has to be the Kenora by-pass. Started October 24 1984, and completed October 3, 1986 at a cost of $6,210,000, the contract required "grading, drainage, granular base and structure on Highway 17 north from 2.8 km East of Highway 596 easterly 5.0 km including Winnipeg River east branch structure and Sunnyside Road from 0.1 km east of Hwy 596 easterly 1.4 km." Although this may sound like any other contract off the shelves in George's office, the difficulty came from a number of areas. Firstly, they had to provide access from the main line across the Winnipeg River to Dufresne Island, where the bridge would eventually be, a span of 60 feet wide and 150 feet deep. They built a temporary causeway, but the Ministry claimed that was obstructing the flow of the river, so they removed the causeway, and used a 40' x 50' barge as a floating ferry to access the island, floating necessary equipment across. At one point the barge carried a caterpillar tractor weighing 50 tons, or 100,000 pounds. Once on the island, the men discovered a large beaver dam had caused formation of a large pond, so a helicopter from Kenora was hired to blast the dam to drain the pond. Once most of the water had drained, equipment was used to dredge out the base of the pond, then the hole was filled in with crushed rock taken from earlier blasting.

It was on this job that George made what he calls "one of my few mistakes, one that cost me some money". He had tendered a portion of the job at $45,000, instead of $445,000. Once discovered, there was nothing that could be done about it, but he called Larry and said "I think you made a mistake on this tender". Larry, knowing

the origin of the error, told George to check his copy of the contract, and there it was .... a mistake that cost the company $400,000. Now, nearly ten years later, George is able to brush it off, saying "We still made money on the job."

A large map in the office shows the company's activities and accomplishments extending 400 miles to the North, East to Manitowadge, and West to Kenora. Equipment has been rented to companies in the United States. What Larry calls "our Marine Division" consists of three steel barges, one 40'x 50', one 30'x 40' and one 30'x 30', and two steel tugs, 50 feet in length.

One of the more recent big contracting jobs is the building of a new $25 million secondary treatment lagoon for Boise Cascade Canada. Phase I of this project involves building a 1,500 by 600 foot settling basin, along with piping to connect the old lagoon to the new basin. George is quick to tell you that there was not even one small leak when mile long maze of 36 and 48-inch piping was connected. Should you just happen on to the site, you might suspect that a huge meteor had gouged the gaping hole, now resembling a lunar landscape. Giant pieces of equipment appear dwarfed by the magnitude of the lagoon, a massive crater surrounded by large dikes. Seven miles of ditches, fifty four feet wide on top and sixteen feet deep allow the silt in the water that collects around the site to settle before it is pumped through a mile of pipe into the river. Over 18,500 truckloads of material have been moved from the site since construction began in November 1991; 67,000 tons of rip-rap and granular material form the base and the sides of the lagoon, 160,000 cubic yards of dirt for the basin, and 350,000 cubic yards of peat, which has been moved from the site and is piled nearby to be sold at a later date. It took 215,000 cubic yards of dirt to build the mile of large dikes surrounding the basin, which will hold up to 105 million gallons of effluent, compared to approximately 85 million in the old lagoon. Effluent will be held for twelve days in the new lagoon, as compared to only four days in the old. The second phase of this project, which includes the installation of two new settling basins and a second new aeration cell, is already in the planning.

In the summer of 1990 the company rebuilt 12 kms. of the Armstrong highway north of Thunder Bay. A part of this was the revision of a mile long hill with an exceptionally steep grade that the company was forced to both re-route and cut through. The job was completed in the Spring of '91 at a cost of $10,000,000.

As a young man in his early twenties, George was interested in prospecting, and spent many hours looking for evidence of base metals. His interest in mining continues as a hobby today -- a fairly expensive hobby. He says that he has spent a half a million

dollars on diamond drilling to explore his properties east of Swell Bay on Rainy Lake, and west and north of Nickle Lake at Watton Township, on Savant and Sturgeon Lake and Pocket Pond, and is confident that there is money to be made on some of these sites. The most promising, George feels, is at Swell Bay, where there is the potential for large deposits of zinc and copper. Minova Mines spent $4,000,000. in the area before sending the unpatent claims back to George and moving on the the Northwest Territories to a claim of a minimum of 13,000,000 tons of ore, and are prepared to build 300 km of road to the ocean to ship the metal. George would have received 10% of anything found at Swell Bay.

Does this man find time for leisure? He loves to watch wrestling, on T.V. and live, although he is hard pressed to find family members who will go with him to live performances. His antics and "shadow boxing" are just too embarassing. He loves to surprise Kay with diamonds, which she grudgingly accepts. These are a vast improvement over the handy-dandy tomato slicer that he presented her with one Christmas. In the summer he loves feeding his ducks at their summer home on Reef Point where he has put up Wood Duck boxes and bird houses. He can sit for hours and watch the ducks, ordering everyone to "sit still because the ducks are coming". You can phone him anytime for a weather report; he knows the temperature within two degrees and how much rain or snow has fallen in the last half hour. He and Kay enjoy playing bridge with their good friends, Jim Munroe and his wife Emily. He eats at the Holiday Inn three or four times a week, and has his daily "coffee clatch" with his cronies at the Rainy Lake Hotel. He is very health conscious, and maintains his weight to a half a pound. He has a yearly check up at the Mayo Clinic, where he met Dr. Ray Randall and his wife Pricsilla. The Randalls have visited Kay and George every August for the last 25 years. Dr. Randall is now retired.

He enjoys time with his family, and regularly visits his sister Eva and her husband Sid Ross who live in Fort Frances. His sister Laura, who was married to Don Wright (who at one time worked for George) is widowed and lives in Atikokan, and his youngest sister Doreen and her husband Colin Coates live in Sudbury.

Kay and George's five children have given them the joys of eleven grandchildren. Lorraine and husband Bill Elliott, (Bill is the Sheriff in International Falls, Mn.) have two children, Bobby Jon, married to wife Ann, and Natalie, an airline Stewardess; Larry and Mitzi's Nicole and Shane and both very active students in Fort Frances High School. Nicole has plans to be a Grade two teacher. Lyle and wife Cheryl have one daughter, Faith, aged 10; Jim has two children Trina and James, and Jim is step-father to wife

Brenda's son Colin. Kathie and husband Arnold Johnson have three ...Jennifer 17, who wants to be an accountant or an actuary, Jorma 15, interested in auto mechanics and Katie, 14 in Grade 8, who loves horses, singing and her guitar. Jennifer and Jorma, both in High School, are actively involved in soccer and hockey. Larry and Mitzi's three-year old daughter Allison died in 1973 from diabetes, an illness that also affects Lyle, Jimmy and Katie.

Ask George to what he attributes his success, and he will tell you that it is part luck, part hard work, and knowing how to do the job, any job, and how to do it well, before you start. He says that he has been very fortunate, and there may have been some element of risk, but he made sure he could make money on a job before he would attempt it.

At seventy-seven George shows absolutely no signs of slowing down, and dismisses retirement before the word is spoken. George the business man is alive and well, and most certainly prospering. George the man? Well, he's in there somewhere, but is extremely difficult to find, and even more difficult to pin down. The business man is overwhelming the personal one. One gets the opinion that only the business man knows the man, and he isn't talking.