

BENJAMIN (BEN) TORCHINSKY (1926–2013)

By Victor Sowa, 2014

Prepared (with permission) from information from Agra Foundations, 2006



Friends and colleagues of Benjamin Torchinsky were saddened to learn of his death on December 23, 2013. Ben was born in Calgary, Alberta in 1926. In 1947 he received a Bachelor of Science degree in Civil Engineering from the University of Alberta and a Master of Science degree in Civil Engineering in 1949. From 1947–1949 he was a Sessional Instructor in Civil Engineering at the University of Alberta.

In 1949, he joined the faculty of the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon. He held the position of Assistant Professor and then Associate Professor in the Civil Engineering Department of the College of Engineering. During this time while conducting research for the Saskatchewan Research Council on cracking and deterioration of buildings, he realized that shallow foundation systems such as conventional spread footings were not performing satisfactorily with the swelling soils encountered in the City of Regina.

For foundations to perform satisfactorily in these areas, it was necessary to use deep foundations extending below the “active” zone of seasonal moisture variation. He concluded that a bored type concrete pile was the most economical deep foundation system that would extend below the active zone, and which he recommended in areas with potentially active clay soils.

In 1952 he founded B.B. Torchinsky & Associates Ltd., which specialized in soil mechanics and foundation consulting engineering. Two years later he started the piling company, Western Foundation Borings Limited which subsequently became Western Caissons Limited to construct bored type pile foundations.

In 1957, due to the increasing tempo of his outside interests, he resigned from the University of Saskatchewan to manage the business enterprises. As president, he directed the rapid growth of the firm until it provided services across Canada and the United States, as well as overseas. By 1970 these engineering and construction companies were consolidated into publicly traded AGRA Inc. and in 2000 AGRA merged with U.K. based AMEC plc. Torchinsky retired from AGRA in 2000.

There were many entrepreneurial “firsts” in Torchinsky’s career. In the early 1950s he pioneered the installation of deep piles and caissons in Western Canada; by the mid-1950s

he established the first cable television system in Western Canada (Cablenet); in 1960 he built the first canola oil refining plant in Canada; in the late 1970s he established the first all-news radio network across Canada (CKO); and at the turn of the century he spearheaded construction of the first electronic toll highway in Canada (Highway 407 in Ontario).

In 2003 he received an Honorary Doctor of Science Degree from the University of Alberta, his alma mater. His accomplishments have also earned him many awards. He was nominated by the Canadian Geotechnical Society for the 1997 Sir John Kennedy Medal, which he received, and which is the most distinguished award from the Engineering Institute of Canada. He was also named, Fellow of the Engineering Institute of Canada in 1997. He was awarded the Beaubien Award in 2001, the highest recognition presented by the Association of Consulting Engineers of Canada.