



Universe Machine: Half a Century Strong

By Nerissa McNaughton

*With 50 great years behind
them, Universe Machine is on
top of the world.*

“I was kind of an entrepreneur as a kid. I had a little business raising rabbits back in Germany. I always had that dream of having my own business. That’s how it started,” says Kurt Feigel Sr., founder and president of Universe Machine.

Feigel Sr. launched the company alongside two business partners in 1965 and has never wavered from their mission to “manufacture, modify and repair steel products for the oilfield, petrochemical, mining, forestry and related industries.”

“We’ve enjoyed steady growth over the years,” Feigel Sr. says. “50 years in business, and we never had a losing year. We came through, even during the low times. There were other operations that grew faster than us, but most of them are not around anymore. There is always a danger in growing too fast.”

Along with sustainable growth, Feigel Sr. credits the Universe Machine values of honesty with employees and suppliers, using technology to provide products at competitive prices and creating a healthy work environment for the staff as a big part of the company’s success.

That’s not the only way the company has provided outstanding service for half a century. Kurt Feigel Jr., Feigel Sr.’s son and company’s general manager says with pride, “We want to do the job right, or we won’t do it. We are known for that. Our customers trust us.”

Feigel Jr. started at the company as a child, cleaning and doing odd jobs at the shop. It was always his plan to join his father’s company.

"I gave him no choice!" jokes Feigel Sr. "I enjoyed it!" Feigel Jr. banters back.

In 1965, the company had just three employees – Feigel Sr. and his partners. Today, 125 employees engage in valve modification and repair, machining, welding, fabricating, millwrighting, laser/PTA heat treating & cladding. The state-of-the-art shop is neatly segmented into divisions for maximum efficiency, and houses an incredible array of equipment.

Not only can some of the largest metal working machinery in Western Canada be found here, but Universe Machine also has numerous innovative patented products which it designs and manufactures on site. These include hydraulic power tongs and backups, friction bite units, pneumatic kelly spinners, hydraulic power units, valve testing equipment, and waste shredders.

A walkthrough their offices and a tour of the large plant reveals outstanding organization, efficiency and cleanliness. Employees smile. It's busy. It's impressive but for the Feigel's, it's all in a day's work. "It's how we stay ahead of the competition," Feigel Sr. smiles.

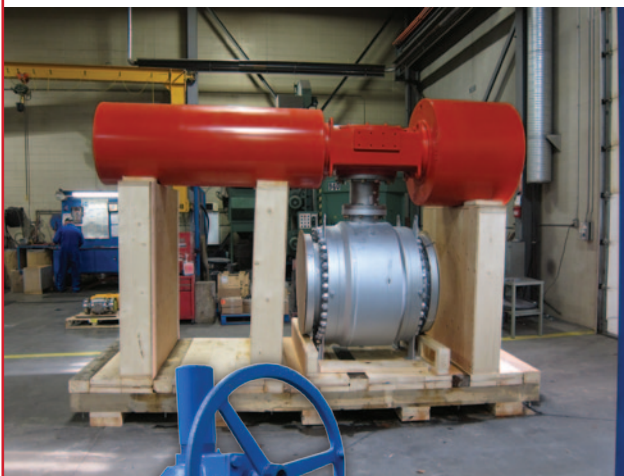
The smiling employees are another part of Universe Machine's success story.

"We have very qualified, long term employees that are quite knowledgeable. It's about quality," says Feigel Sr. of his staff. He goes on to say that the ideal employee for him is one that is willing to work and listen. "Give us your best and we will reward it," says the company president.

"It's a challenge to get good employees," admits Feigel Jr. "When you have them, it's a lot easier to run operations. It's like the saying 'happy wife, happy life'. Happy employee, happy business!"

Universe Machine's longest term employee, besides Feigel Sr., was John Paul Duvold, who started as a machinist in 1969 and served as divisional manager from 1990 until his retirement in 2014 (45 years).

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Products Division



The Feigels have done their fair share of teaching on the shop floor, but that willingness to listen and learn is not just for the employees. Feigel Sr. takes that lesson to heart as well. "If you listen, you find answers. Some people have a problem with listening," he counsels. "You have to give until you get. In other words, you have to be an example to others around you and treat them right. You will be rewarded by them doing a good job."

Feigel Jr. agrees with his father but also has a slightly different take on the company. He spearheaded the implementation of computer and software systems at Universe Machine, and as the young up-and-comer, it was a challenge.

"People don't like change. It was a very slow process," he remembers; but the general manager was adept at working with, not against the grain. "People don't really change very much, so you have to learn to work with their strengths."

Never one to rest on his laurels, Feigel Jr. is excited about the next half a century for Universe Machine. "We are constantly looking at improving across all divisions. When things are slow

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we shift into R&D mode to retain our staff and improve our services and products.”

“Given that our vision is stay one step ahead, we will remain a leader in the industry,” adds Feigel Sr.

As one can expect, a company with five decades under its belt has some memorable moments. For Feigel Sr., one of those moments was being asked to machine a heart implant valve in 1966. “I machined the first heart implant valve that was used in the University of Alberta!” he says with a huge grin. “I have no idea why they came to us. We were just a tiny machine shop at the time. They brought me the material and had a drawing. They said, ‘can you machine this?’ I said, ‘sure’.”

Some of their work is truly out of this world.

“We’ve built valves used in the NASA launch facilities as well as for pipelines across Canada” Feigel Jr. says.

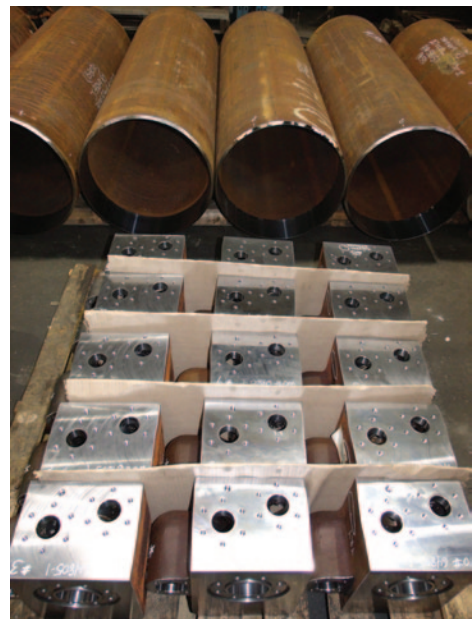
When Universe is not making history in hearts or space, you can find their products across Canada and in many other countries including the United States, Russia, China, South America and the Middle East; and when the employees are not creating products for world-wide application, you’ll find them just as hard at work in the community.

In 1969, Feigel Sr. was one of the founding members of the non-profit Shepherd’s Care Foundation, a recognized leader as a senior’s and an aging-in-place care facility. Shepherd’s Care Foundation now employs 700 people and cares for over 1,700 residents. Feigel has been on the board for 46 years and was also the chairman for many years.

Universe Machine also supports the Department of Mechanical Engineering at the University of Alberta and the machinist program at the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology (NAIT). The company sponsors several golf tournaments annually, as well as contributing to various local charities.

Speaking of golf, it’s a sport both Feigel Sr. and Jr. enjoy. Feigel Sr. golfs after stepping away from 60 years of playing soccer

Machining and Welding Division



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("from age 9 to 69," he grins) and Feigel Jr. enjoys racing and instructing in the world of high performance driving.

Universe Machine is well rounded inside and out. The vision and leadership of the Feigels have created an incredible company with outstanding values and world class products. It has been recognized by a Pinnacle Award for being the best machine shop in Alberta, and achieved numerous licences and certification over the years.

The Feigels say it just comes down to good long term employees and supportive customers.

"We are very fortunate to live in such a great province and country," concludes Feigel Sr. "Thank you clients, staff and stakeholders for all your support!"



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