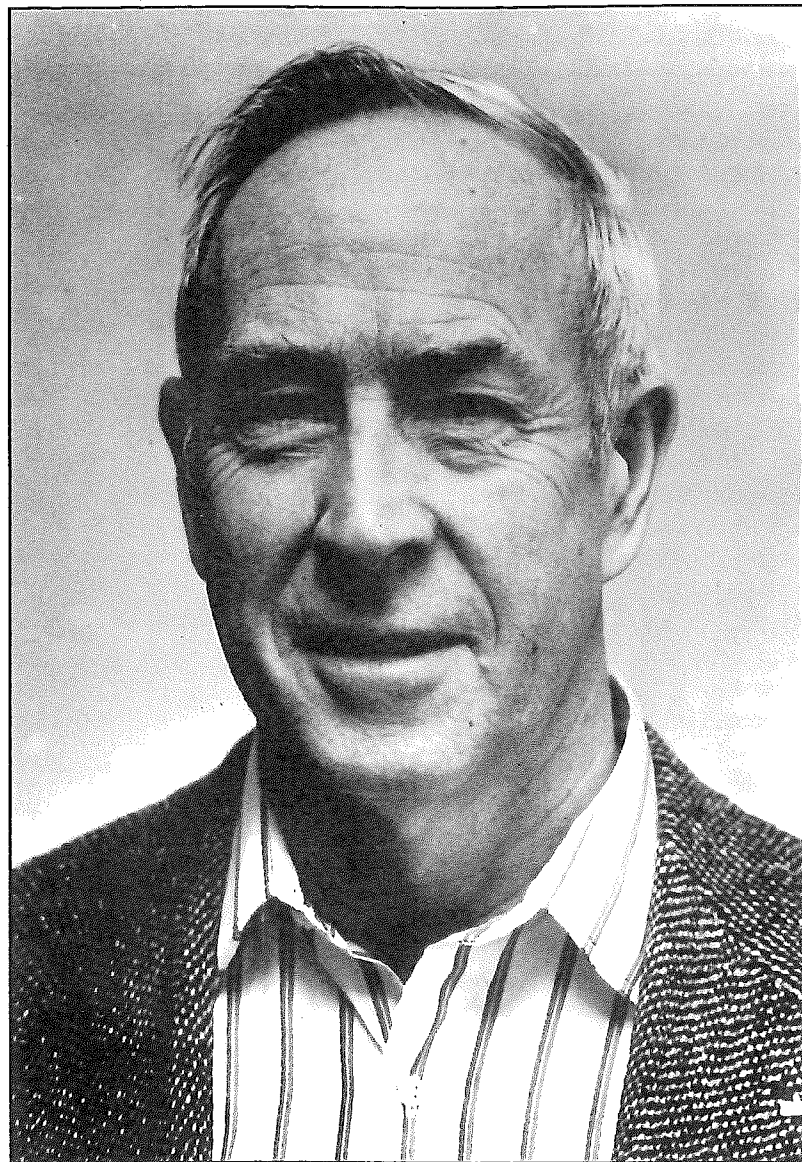


## HERBERT LANG



*As head of Anchorage Sand & Gravel and through long hours of community service, Herb Lang helped build Alaska.*

By Jack E. Phelps

The Alaska Highway was only five years old and statehood was more than a decade away when Herbert Lang first came to Alaska. He came because "there had to be some place better in the world," and he found that some place in Alaska's vast, unpopulated land and awe-inspiring mountains. But many come to Alaska; Lang stayed to play a major part in building his adopted state.

Lang enrolled in the University of Alaska, receiving a degree in agriculture in 1951. After a stint in the Army during the Korean conflict, Lang studied for his MBA at the University of Pennsylvania. Returning to Alaska, he went to work for the territorial Department of Agriculture. Eventually, he moved over to the land office and, after statehood, continued with the state Division of Land. While there, he was involved in writing land leasing and homestead policies for the infant state.

But the challenge began to wear thin for Lang and, as "things became more bureaucratic," he left state government and went into real estate as a broker and appraiser. He was so employed in 1964 when the earthquake hit, and the incident led to an abrupt change in the course of his career. The old Anchorage Sand & Gravel (AS&G) plant downtown was badly damaged by the quake, and the owners sought Lang's talents to help them assess their options. The company decided to sell; Lang was interested.

## BUILDING AN EMPIRE

"I put together a group to buy the company, and the deal closed in early 1965. Part of the deal was that I would run it," Lang says.

He's been running it ever since, and under his leadership the company grew into a small empire of aggregates and block, concrete and sand, ready-mix and asphalt. From the window of Lang's office on O'Malley Road, most of what you can see directly to the west belongs to the company. A plot of land a half-mile long between O'Malley and Klatt makes up the heart of Anchorage Sand & Gravel's operations.

During Lang's leadership, Anchorage Sand & Gravel has grown from a 20-acre site on First Avenue into an enterprise that sprawls over 90 acres at two locations. Revenues have increased eight-fold. The original plant, badly damaged by the earthquake, was replaced in 1965. That operation was replaced in turn by a newer plant in 1987, complete with the most modern electronic controls.

New services were added. In the late 1970s, Dimond Fabricators Inc. was added to provide reinforcing steel of all kinds. Another wholly-owned subsidiary, Alaska Soil Recycling, was started during the 1980s. Also added was a concrete block plant with robot block carriers.

Looking back over his nearly three decades at the helm, Lang has seen many changes, not only in the Anchorage landscape, but in business conditions as well. The biggest shift in his own industry, he says, is that "we used to mine gravel locally. Now it's all imported by train from the valley." In 1993, nearly three million tons of gravel were brought to the company's south Anchorage yard by rail.

There are those who would argue that Herb Lang is AS&G, and perhaps they are right. One telling fact is that when MDU Resources Group Inc. of Bismark, N.D., bought the company last March, the agreement stipulated that Lang continue as president for two years. Under his leadership AS&G rose, Phoenix-like, from the Good Friday earthquake; he led the small company to growth for over 25 years; Lang

is clearly the one to lead the company into this third phase.

## BUILDING A COMMUNITY

But if Lang defines AS&G, the converse is certainly not true. His involvement in the greater Alaska community runs both wide and deep. He has served, for example, on the board of Humana Hospital (now Alaska Regional Hospital) and that of the YMCA. He spent six years on the Anchorage Assembly, two as president. He also served for three years on the Anchorage Planning and Zoning commission when Anchorage first became a borough. From 1979 to 1985, he served on the Board of Regents for the University of Alaska.

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BOB BALLOW

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Nor does he take his civic involvement lightly. According to long-time associate Bob Ballow, currently president of The Office Place, Lang is "never a token member" of any board. "If he is involved, he feels obligated to participate," says Ballow. "He is always an active participant."

Ballow remembers Lang spending "whole weekends on assembly packets" preparing to make decisions at an upcoming meeting. He would actually schedule his vacations to make sure he could attend the meeting of whatever charity or civic board he was involved in at the time. "He has contributed a lot to this community," Ballow says. "I don't think people realize the extent of his commitment."

Presently, Lang serves as chairman of the Alaska Industrial Development and Export Authority (AIDEA), and sits on the board of the Alaska Energy Authority. He also is on the boards of "four or five different corporations."

Among his many activities, Lang himself considers his six years on the Board of Regents to be the most satisfying. "I was schooled there," he says. "Serving on the board was a privilege." He served the Regents both as treasurer and as president. "I did lots of budget work," he remembers. "They always wanted me to be treasurer. I tend to gravitate toward numbers. I'm more helpful in that arena."

## KEEPING FAITH

Ballow also points out another side to the multi-faceted Lang. "He was the main mentor in my business career," says Ballow. Ballow worked for Lang for 17 years before taking over the helm at The Office Place. During that time, he says he learned from Lang the importance of patience and perseverance, and about overcoming business and personal challenges.

"I learned from him that you have to keep faith in what you're doing, you can't control what others do," says Ballow. "Herb always focused on what was under his control." Also, Ballow says, Lang is "the most ethical person I've ever been around. He's above board on everything."

For all his business accomplishments and his involvement in what Ballow calls "the statewide community," Lang's real passion is trekking.

"I've hiked all over this state and around the world," Lang says. He has gone on treks in Italy, France, Switzerland, Nepal and many parts of Africa. One of his more enjoyable trips, he says, was to southern Kenya and Tanzania where he climbed on Mount Kilimanjaro. He has also taken a long walking tour of northern Kenya.

"With a guide, of course," he adds. "You can't just wander around out there."

Even the most formidable challenges of the business world have proven to be no more a match for Herbert Lang than the miles of veldt that have fallen beneath his tread. But those who have known him over the years agree that Alaska is a much better place because Herb Lang has worked — and walked — in the Last Frontier. □