

Zeitschrift: The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK
Herausgeber: Federation of Swiss Societies in the United Kingdom
Band: - (1953)
Heft: 1215

Artikel: 17th Anniversary Dinner and Dance of Acrow (Engineers) LTD.
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-694345>

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17th Anniversary Dinner and Dance

OF

ACROW (ENGINEERS) LTD.

at the GROSVENOR HOUSE, PARK LANE, W.1.

on FRIDAY, OCTOBER 2nd, 1953.

In our last issue we informed our readers, that it is our intention to publish from time to time descriptive accounts of individual or collective business ventures of members of our Colony.

Firms to be mentioned in these articles need not necessarily be Swiss, as long as the principals are of Swiss origin, who by their personal efforts have attained an important leading position in the respective concerns.

An invitation kindly extended to our Editor to attend the 17th Anniversary Dinner and Dance of Acrow (Engineers) Ltd., of South Wharf, Paddington, London, W.2., which took place on Friday, October 2nd, at the Grosvenor House, Park Lane, W.1., has prompted us to make a start with a firm which owes its almost meteoric success to a compatriot of ours, Mr. W. A. de Vigier, who holds the position of Managing-Director and Chairman of this concern with a yearly sales turnover of £3 million in Great Britain alone, and which has, one can safely say, revolutionised part of the building industry.

Before giving a description of this imposing function, which was attended by over 1,500 guests divided between the company's office staff, work people, agents and customers, we deem it opportune to render an account of how Mr. de Vigier, — who hails from the historic town of Solothurn, also known as "La ville des Ambassadeurs", — from very small beginnings, has become one of the captains of industry, well-known not only in this country but the world over.

During an interview which was kindly accorded to the writer some time ago, an extraordinary story of a successful business career was revealed, which reminds one of many of the achievements of well-known industrial magnates in our great sister republic of America.

Who ever meets Mr. de Vigier for the first time is at once struck by his forceful personality, his dynamic energy and congeniality.

He started his engineering career in the early twenties in Switzerland. Like so many of our young countrymen, he soon felt the urge to try his luck in foreign lands. In the year 1936, he landed in this country, with great expectations but little money — in fact his worldly belongings amounted to about £50 which even in those days was a modest amount to set oneself up in business, but where there is a will, there is a way and the way was found. A work-shop, with a payment of £15 down was procured, underneath one

of the Bow arches; admittedly in not one of the fashionable quarters of this great Metropolis, where he started manufacturing his labour and material saving devices.

The next acquisition was an office consisting of a small back room in Charterhouse Chambers at the modest rental of £16 per annum to be paid in quarterly instalments.

By these outlays in establishing himself his capital by this time was strained to its utmost, but still heavier expenses had to be faced. It became necessary to engage workmen as well as a foreman, the latter alone demanded a wage of £4.0.0 p.w.; he was engaged under the *proviso* that his employment would only last as long as the business could afford to pay him, this was agreed to. This man must have felt confidence in the business capabilities of his employer, and the soundness of the goods which were to be put on the market and he received his reward, within a few years, this, no doubt, farseeing work-hand became a Director.

Equally important became the question of office staff, this matter was solved by Mr. de Vigier appointing himself to the post of office boy, shorthand typist as well as salesman.

These were anxious times for our friend, and much midnight oil must have been burned in facing the innumerable problems with which this young business man was confronted with.

It is not an uncommon thing, that few people give credit to the ideas of a "youngster"; many to whom he introduced his goods treated him a visionary or even as a "crank", but undetermined by some of the early setbacks, and with full confidence in the soundness of his merchandise he persisted in his endeavours, hoping that the day of recognition would come — and it came —, when two large building contractors became aware of the advantages of his products.

Some small orders were placed by various firms, and what was equally important, credit was accorded to our friend, which enabled him to acquire the necessary material, and a delivery van — an old Morris Cowley — for his goods was purchased for the princely sum of £16.0.0

Soon more orders were forthcoming, larger credits were put at his disposal, in short the time arrived when the business could be put on a proper footing, and from that day onward, Mr. de Vigier never looked back, slowly but surely business expanded, and

the foundation of a large and profitable concern was laid; with renewed energy and determination this young business man put heart and soul in his venture.

Three years after the company was formed, two of London's largest buildings — the steel framed Adelphi facing the Thames from the Strand, and the reinforced concrete Berkeley Square House — were using 8,000 Acrow props. For the first time sales figures for the year surpassed the £100,000 mark and the initial capital rose to £10,000.

Afterwards the company made the bold decision to use aluminium for its products, foreseeing the possibility of a shortage of steel, a new venture the "Rolstore Mobile Unit Storage" a unique and economical method of utilising storage space was introduced and many other new products.

The yearly turnover of the Company during the last few years increased by leaps and bounds and exceeds today £3 million per annum. Factories were built at Saffron Walden, Essex, Harefield, Middlesex, Sydney, Australia, and Johannesburg. Associated Companies were formed in Canada, United States, Venezuela, Argentina, and Rhodesia. All these

Companies are under the personal supervision of Mr. de Vigier, who has become a veritable "globe trotter".

Some time ago, the H. C. Drayton group, the shrewdest and most vigorous Financial group in the City, paid over £300,000 for a 36 per cent interest in Mr. de Vigier's firm, and they insured his life for £200,000. What greater sign of confidence could be bestowed by the City to our young compatriot.

* * *

The 1st anniversary Dinner of the company was held in 1937, at the old Manchester Hotel in Aldersgate, about 30 persons being present, five years later (1941), the anniversary Dinner took place at the Café Royal, with nearly 300 guests; at the 10th anniversary Dinner celebrated at the Dorchester Hotel in 1946, the attendance nearly reached the thousand figure, and in 1951, (15th anniversary) for the first time, the Grosvenor House, Park Lane, was chosen, the attendance then reaching about 1,300. On the 2nd of this month the Grosvenor House, — which can boast of having the largest ballroom in Great Britain if not in the world — was again the meeting place with over 1,500 guests being invited, in fact the actual



MR. W. A. de VIGIER ADDRESSING THE COMPANY.

Banqueting Hall proved to be too small so that some of the company had to be accommodated in the gallery. I should not be surprised if in another five years time the Albert Hall will have to be chosen.

This party, which can be truly called of gigantic dimensions, — as our picture shows — started punctually at 7 o'clock with cocktails being served at four large tables in the gallery. Stewards directed the visitors untiringly to the various bars, where drinks of all kinds were served.

One almost forgot, that this party was held in the heart of London, practically every language was spoken, even "Schwyzerdütsch" could be heard. What struck me most forcibly was the happy and care-free atmosphere which prevailed. In spite of great numbers, one felt that this was really a big family re-union. Directors, Managers, Agents, members of the Office staff and work people, some in ordinary attire, mixed freely with each other. Representatives and business friends from the four corners of the globe, some who had travelled thousands of miles, mostly by air, to attend this party, greeted each other and re-newed old acquaintances. Mr. de Vigier, accompanied by his charming and attractive wife, greeted personally a great number of the gathering.

Then suddenly the red-coated Toast-Master, in a stentorian voice announced that dinner was served; to the music of the Len Lee Quintet, the visitors took their seats. The imposing Banqueting Hall, richly decorated with flowers and flags of almost every country, was a wonderful sight.

After grace was said by the Chairman, the Menu consisting of "Le vol au vent Régence, Le suprême de Turbotin Dugléré, Le Caneton d'Aylesbury Rôti à L'Anglaise, Les Petits Pois à L'etuvé, Les Pommes Croquettes, Les Cerises Jubiléés, Le Parfait Glacé Vanille, Le Café," was served, whilst the orchestra played untiringly many well-known melodies.

Now came the moment for the Toasts, the first one, as customary, was proposed by the Chairman, Mr. W. A. de Vigier, to H.M. the Queen, and was enthusiastically honoured, whilst the orchestra played the national anthem.

Second on the list was the Toast "The Staff", given by the Chairman, who, on rising from his chair received a vociferous ovation from the entire company.

Mr. de Vigier passed in review the achievements of the firm during recent years, dealing with the extension of the company's activities overseas, both in export trading, and also in the establishment of many Associate Companies. He gave some figures dealing with the increased annual sales and the considerable increase in overseas trade, saying that the remarkable progress made was in no small way due to the persistent and conscientious effort of each individual member of the Aerow organisation. In conclusion, he thanked the customers, old, new and prospective for their patronage, renewing his pledge that the company would continue to give them the very best, in quality of product, in value for money and in service second to none.

On resuming his seat, the Chairman received loud applause, and a little girl, the daughter of a workman, presented Mrs. de Vigier with a beautiful bouquet of flowers.

A magnificent presentation was also made to Mr. de Vigier, on behalf of the staff of the London Head Office, followed by a presentation by the group of overseas executive, and by the executive and staff of the American companies.

The Chairman, visibly touched by these munificent presents, warmly thanked the donors. As one good turn deserves another, Mr. de Vigier, then presented a large number of the staff with silver presents and cheques, in recognition for faithful services rendered to the company.

This ceremony proved once again, what a happy spirit exists between the Management and Staff. During the dinner I had an opportunity to learn of many friendly acts, and the personal interest shown by the Chairman towards his staff, which helps to create this friendly atmosphere.

The Chairman's Toast to "The Staff" was replied to by Mr. J. Elliot who warmly thanked Mr. de Vigier for the many proofs he had shown of understanding the problems of even the humblest one of his employees, assuring him of the constant loyalty of the staff, and their whole hearted collaboration.

After the Toast "The Guests" proposed by Mr. A. V. Bauscher and responded to by Mr. G. S. M. Phillips, the official part of the evening came to its close, and the Banqueting Hall was cleared for dancing, for which Victor Silvester and his ballroom orchestra supplied the music.

Victor Silvester, who conducted his band personally, was successful in enticing hundreds of couples onto the dance floor, and judging from the gay laughter of the revellers which echoed throughout the Hall everyone seemed to enjoy themselves.

For those amongst the company, "whose dancing days were over", a capital Cabaret was supplied, featuring the Victoria Palace Tiller Girls, who danced the naughty Can-Can; the eyes of one of my neighbours, a jolly old boy, nearly came out of their "sockets." Miss Pat Kirkwood, the well-known Music Hall artiste, known to many by her appearance on Television, sang and danced most charmingly. To end the Cabaret performance the Tiller girls appeared again, this time dressed as French poodles. Their act was deservedly acknowledged with loud applause. Afterwards dancing was resumed and refreshments were served.

The evening's organisation was in the capable hands of Mr. W. A. Best, who really and truly did his best to make this function one of the most enjoyable ones, I have attended for many a day; thanks should also be given to the Management and Staff of the Grosvenor House, can claim no mean share in the success of the evening.

* * *

In conclusion I would assure our compatriot, Mr. W. A. de Vigier, how proud we are, that he too belongs to the country, which we so affectionately call "La Patrie", by his great achievements which are equal to the best traditions of our homeland he has added to the good name which our country so happily enjoys everywhere. We wish him, and his organisation ever increasing success in their future business activities.

ST.



GENERAL VIEW OF



ANQUETING HALL.