

Obituary Noel Roscrow AM – Mr SOLA

Noel Roscrow, the man who led ophthalmic and sunglass lens manufacturer SOLA International from scratch to become a world leader in plastic-lens manufacture, died at Victor Harbour, South Australia, on 19 September. He was 85 years of age.

He was born in Heywood, Victoria, in 1926. His World War I veteran father, Harold, was killed in a road accident when he was five years of age, he and his brother Donald becoming Legacy wards in the care of their mother, Nellie. Most of their young years were spent in the Western districts of Victoria with relatives. Mr CW Werner, who had an optical business in Toorak, was his Legatee, and offered the 14-year-old a seven-year apprenticeship.

When World War II broke out, although too young to enlist, he lied about his age and enlisted. He spent two sessions in jungle warfare training in Queensland, after which he was discharged with ulcers and weighing 7.5 stone and returned to his apprenticeship in optics.

Upon completion of his apprenticeship, he started an optical dispensing business in Colac in competition with OPSM, which was most unimpressed and very quickly bought him out.

In 1951, he joined the prestigious optical organisation of Laubman & Pank as an optical mechanic. He attended evening college at the then SA School of Mines, finishing high-school examinations and continuing with special selected subjects. He rapidly progressed through various positions within the company and in September 1956, Scientific Optical Laboratories of Australia Ltd was established, the beginnings of the name 'SOLA'.

Twelve months later, he was appointed a director of SOLA, whose main activity was the design and manufacture of optical machinery in conjunction with Don Schultz's brother, Ross Schultz who was a precision engineer. That led to involvement in machinery sales to optical laboratories throughout Australia.

In 1959 patents were established to protect the manufacturing process of lenses from CR-39 material, after Don Schultz had taken sample lenses overseas. The next year, Noel Roscrow became the first managing director of Scientific Optical Laboratories of Australia Ltd, heading a staff of nine.

1960-1961 was a period of consolidation. SOLA 'Gold Coaster' sunglasses were marketed, clip-on manufacture commenced, stock-lens dies became available and plano-lens production reached an unprecedented 350 pieces per day.

In 1962, Noel Roscrow and Ron Ewer left on their first overseas trip to obtain orders. With the promise of further large orders looming, premises consisting of 17,000 square feet on 371 South Road, Black Forest, were purchased that year, with staff of 40 by then.

1964 was a period of rapid growth and the demand for SOLA products and services continued to rise dramatically and further expansion became essential. The company was producing 1,100 plano lenses per day.

Noel Roscrow continued to find markets for anything that would bring cash into SOLA while Ron Ewer continued to battle with cure times, cycles, etc. Liquidity and budgetary problems escalated in direct ratio with the need to expand, with costs of necessary trips interstate being kept to an absolute minimum, including sleeping in cars en-route to save accommodation costs. Gradually, the company grew to become a world leader in CR-39-lens manufacture, with Noel Roscrow leading the company's entry into many markets, including the United Kingdom, the United States, Japan, Italy, Brazil, New Zealand, throughout Asia. Its expansion was both rapid and massive.

In 1970, the company moved to new, much larger premises at Lonsdale, on the outskirts of Adelaide, which it still occupies under the Carl Zeiss Vision name (Zeiss merged with SOLA several years ago).

One of Noel Roscrow's finest hours was when he (largely) managed to convince the venerable British glass-manufacturing company Pilkington that it should buy SOLA for \$42 million (about \$300 million in today's dollars) – a huge price at the time that (jokingly?) was said to be four times what the company was worth. But the cultures of SOLA and Pilkington were poles apart and before long it was not a happy time for the two companies, nor for their respective staffs. The main problem was that SOLA had grown so quickly that its management practices were almost left behind in the never-ending quest for yet more sales and for manufacturing capacity to satisfy demand.

In 1981, by mutual agreement, Noel Roscrow stepped down as managing director of SOLA. His workload and energy expenditure had been enormous over the years and was considered to be doing him harm; he needed a less-hectic way of life. In time, Pilkington sold SOLA to an American investment company, which in turn merged it with Carl Zeiss and walked away.

On 7 December 1981, the then chairman of SOLA, the late David Pank, made the official announcement to staff, with great dignity and feeling:

Noel Roscrow led SOLA from the very beginning. He has repeatedly emphasized that nothing could have been achieved without the skill and dedication of a tremendous SOLA band of academics, tradesmen, clerical and production staff and managers at all levels.

However, Noel brought to the enterprise his own unique and particular (some even say peculiar!) mixture of knowledge, entrepreneurial drive, energy,

persistence, vision and sheer cheek – which allowed the efforts of others to show up where it must count ultimately – in the marketplace.

No-one can maintain indefinitely the pressure and the pace which has been typical of everything Noel Roscrow has done. He is wise indeed to recognize this and to seek a way to ease the pressure while still maintaining contact with SOLA and his friends around the world.

In his eulogy at Noel Roscrow's funeral on 22 September, a long-serving director of SOLA and colleague Bob Jose's words summed him up:

Few, if any people in Australia, have led such a dramatic worldwide change in their industry.

Noel's vision was to convert the existing glass spectacle lens market to one of lighter, safer, more functional and potentially cheaper plastic lenses and to build a company from scratch to achieve that aim. That project involved, without any outside help, inventing, designing and manufacturing all the machines to make the molds and to develop the chemical compounds to cast the lenses.

Much of the research for this work was done by Noel's colleague, Ron Ewer. Noel himself took responsibility to lead the project and to find enough income from anything to keep the work going. Great encouragement was given by David Pank and Don Schultz of Laubman & Pank.

At the start, in 1960, about 90 per cent of lenses were glass. At SOLA's peak in 1998 over 90 per cent were plastic and SOLA companies around the world produced over one third of them.

Noel Roscrow lived life to the fullest; he worked hard and he played hard. He leaves his wife Ali, children Ken, Robert and Ann and their partners, six grandchildren and nine great grandchildren.