



Reg Isley: "Everything we dream of having can be built with a good design."

BY DEANNA KENT-MCDONALD

WHEN REG ISLEY WAS GROWING UP ON A HOMEstead outside Beaverlodge, his father, a trapper in summer and a construction worker in winter, was away for weeks on end. Young Reg spent countless hours in his father's dusty, dirt-floor-workshop, devouring stacks of old *Popular Science* and *Popular Mechanics* magazines, studying the fantastic designs. He learned how to remove the gas engine from a washing machine and attach it to his bicycle - "it was seven miles to school on a dirt road," he explains.

Isley didn't want to trap or farm. At 17, he desperately wanted to become an aeronautical engineer. But his family couldn't afford to send him to university. Instead, alone and scared to be away from home, he found himself on a bus bound for Edmonton, and after a 2 a.m. transfer, onward to Calgary. His destiny was a practical education in welding at SAIT and later NAIT, one that has served the founder of the Risley Group of manufacturing companies extremely well over the past three decades.

A juxtaposition of brilliant and down-to-earth, with an intense voice and eyes that never rest, Isley returned to Peace Country after graduation. He got a job in the steel trade in Grande Prairie, and later opened a machine shop with a friend. In 1978, Isley started his own small business, Fluidic Power Ltd., designing, repairing and servicing hydraulic equipment and systems.

When economic collapse hit the province's oil sector in the early 1980s, service industry businesses like Fluidic suffered. Jobs became scarce. But unwilling to submit to the pervasive pessimism of a stagnant marketplace, Isley stepped back and looked at the big picture. With advice from friends in the forestry industry who speculated about future trends, he saw a niche. "If we're going to do this," he thought at the time, "we'll do it differently."

In 1984, after investing about \$ 750,000, Risley Equipment unveiled the RotoSaw, a mechanical harvesting head that cuts trees faster and with less fibre damage than other logging mechanisms. Isley's RotoSaw revolutionized the forestry industry. With 32 other patented products in its arsenal- such as the Limmit de-limber and the Timber King feller buncher, eventually sold to Caterpillar the Risley Group was generating \$30 million in annual sales by 1996. "Thanks to the industrial revolution," Isley says, "everything we have today, and everything we dream of having, can be built with a good design and some skills in welding and machining."

Employing 180 workers today, the Risley Group remains firmly rooted in Grande Prairie. Its diverse range of products, mostly for niche markets in the forestry industry, have been sold throughout Canada and the United States as well as Europe, Australia, New Zealand and Japan. "But we would not have this success elsewhere," says Isley. "Mine was the right vision in the right place at the right time."

Despite all of his accomplishments, however, past dreams have never waned for Isley. In the Risley boardroom hangs a large colour photograph of the Voyager aircraft, the first plane to fly around the world, non-stop, without refueling. Isley's eyes go saucer-round and his voice fills with a marvelous child-like energy. "You see that?" he asks. "Now that's amazing." Even more amazing, the boy who dreamed of flight in his father's workshop is today building a helicopter in his own garage. *