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Once-thriving Victoria Machinery Depot had deep roots along shore

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Victoria Machinery Depot will slip into history in the next few weeks.

But there once was a time when it made it.

Shortly before its shipbuilding division closed at the end of 1967, VMD built the 17,000-ton SEDCO 135F — then the world's largest oil-drilling rig.

During the Second World War, payroll rose to 3,200 workers working around the clock to build twenty 10,000-ton freighters and tankers as well as five corvettes and other vessels.

The war demand was so great that Yarrows shipyard in Esquimalt was employing 3,500 workers.

For more than 20 years, VMD was headed by a woman, Margaret Spratt.

The company can trace its lineage to 1863, longer probably than any other business in Victoria.

The company was famous for heavy engineering and shipbuilding. It went into shipbuilding in a major way in 1941 when the old Rithet piers at the Outer Wharf were rebuilt as Yard No. 2. The site now houses the Coast Guard base.

Capt. Joseph Spratt started Albion

Iron Works on Discovery Street in 1863, building railway cars, marine engines, marine boilers and other industrial machinery.

Spratt sold Albion Iron Works and retired but re-entered the business world with Victoria Machinery Depot as his new machine shop and foundry on Bay Street, site of today's VMD. Old accounts put the date at 1875 or 1882. One of his partners was coal baron Robert Dunsmuir. VMD was formally incorporated in 1898.

By 1888, Spratt's son Charles succeeded him as head of the company.

Charles retired from active business in 1921 and his wife, Margaret, was president and managing director from then until her death in 1946.

Victoria businessman Harold Husband bought VMD from her estate and ran it until 1981 when he sold it to Bruce Campbell of Vancouver.

The company built 12 ferries for the provincial government's new fleet in the early 1960s. But Husband shifted the emphasis from shipbuilding toward the booming oil and chemical industries for which VMD built high-pressure vessels at its Plant No. 1 Industrial Division,

setting a number of technical records.

The last ship to slip down the ways at No. 2 yard was the 3,000-ton car-trailer ferry Doris Yorke, in November 1967.

The ill-fated International Electronics Corp., which boomed with business from the federal government's Scientific Research Tax Credits, bought the company in 1984. VMD fell into receivership the next year.

With liquidation looming, employee ownership brought VMD back to life in 1986 for its last eight years.