

THEN AND NOW

ACE CONCRETE GRAVEL PIT

By Jesse Tinsley
THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

Ice-age floods left the Inland Northwest with vast deposits of clean gravel and sand that have been used to build highways and roads, buildings and bridges for more than a century. The Spokane area has several large gravel pits emptied by mining.

The pit bounded by Park and Thierman roads and Sprague and Broadway avenues in Spokane Valley is one of the largest. It was mined by Ace Concrete and Acme Concrete over several decades.

Swedish immigrant Fred E. Backlund, a building contractor, founded Ace Sand and Gravel in the 1920s at 303 N. Park Road. He began selling ready-mixed concrete and changed the name. In 1946, he sold Ace Concrete to John Cowan and George Krause, who sold it to Lloyd Borjesson in 1951. Each of the new owners ramped up activity at the Park Road pit. Hecla Mining bought Ace in 1959.

Fred Drollinger was a Nebraska native who arrived in Spokane in 1912. He founded Acme Sand and Gravel in 1927.

In the late 1930s, Drollinger also turned to pre-mixed concrete.

Fred Drollinger's son, Warren, was Acme's general manager who also operated Spokane Sand and Gravel. In 1957, Warren was killed when the bulldozer he was driving rolled down a steep bank in a gravel pit.

Fred Drollinger left the business a few months later. He died in 1974.

Acme's new manager was a 1945 Gonzaga University graduate in civil engineer-



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Present day: A 44-acre "lake" remains after decades of sand and gravel mining at the former Ace Concrete and Acme Concrete pit mine, bordered by Park Road, Thierman Road, Union Pacific railroad tracks on the south side and Broadway Avenue on the north in Spokane Valley. Acme Concrete bought out Ace Concrete in 1976, eventually controlling the whole site. Because the water is actually the surface of the regional aquifer, the area can't be filled in or used for recreational purposes in order to prevent contamination of the source of the region's drinking water.

ing, Donald Herak. He would run the business for more than 40 years, eventually as president of the company, and a partner. In 1976, Herak bought Ace Concrete from Hecla Mining.

Herak was a devout Catholic who donated millions to Gonzaga, where he served on the board of trustees for three decades, and Catholic Charities. He died



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1956: At the bottom of this photo, sand and gravel operations, likely by Ace Concrete, have already begun on a parcel near Park Road and Sprague Avenue in Spokane Valley. Materials were in demand by the new interstate highway system and general construction. Ace Concrete, later Acme Concrete, mined this area for decades until it became a 44-acre pool, part of the region's aquifer. Though refilling the giant pits was once required by state law, large gravel pits that have penetrated the aquifer water table are now fenced off and left for wildlife habitat, in order to protect the region's source of drinking water.

in 2018 at the age of 94.

In 1999, Acme Concrete was purchased by Central Pre-Mix, which is now part of CRH, an international conglomerate that owns dozens of construction-related businesses across the Northwest.

Until the 1970s, Washington state law required that old gravel pits be refilled with clean material, such as broken con-

crete. But rules have changed to protect the region's aquifer, the source of the water filling the largest pits. While they seem like man-made lakes, the water is part of the region's water supply, which must be fenced off and left only for wildlife.

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