



# RALPH ENGELSTAD HISTORICAL REVIEW

*Three articles written by Curt Eriksmoen for Forum Communications in 2022.*

## **UND hockey player went on to donate \$104 million to build a new hockey arena for his alma mater\***

One of the top 10 American higher education donors was a former hockey player at the University of North Dakota. Ralph Engelstad was a backup goalie for the UND hockey team for two years (1948 to 1950) and the minimal scholarship he received has reaped dividends several thousands of times greater because of donations he has made to that institution. He, and the Engelstad Foundation, donated \$104 million for the construction of a UND hockey arena and over \$30 million for other college purposes. The Engelstad Foundation, created in 2002 by Ralph and Betty Engelstad, "has provided more than \$300 million in grants to organizations focused on animal compassion, at-risk individuals, education, historical preservation, medical research and support, people with disabilities, and veterans," press materials from the foundation state.

Ralph Engelstad is best known for the fortune he made as the owner of the Imperial Palace casino and hotels in Las Vegas and Biloxi, Mississippi. He was one of a small handful of independent casino/hotel owners in Las Vegas. Engelstad had a very strong work ethic and he liked to say, "The harder I work, the luckier I get." He also was very committed to rewarding those institutions that helped him along the way.

Ralph Louis Engelstad was born on January 28, 1930, in Thief River Falls, Minnesota to Christian "Chris" and Madeline (Thill) Engelstad. Chris worked as a long-distance truck driver. He was a Norwegian Lutheran and Ralph was baptized in a Lutheran Church. Madeline was German Catholic and Ralph was raised as a Catholic, attending St. Bernard's parochial elementary grade school.

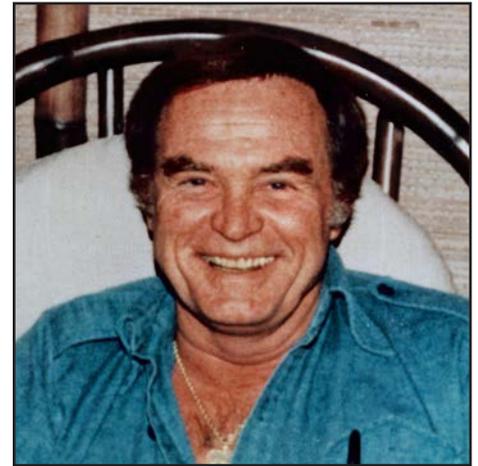
Ralph was a gifted athlete and, while attending Lincoln High School in Thief River Falls, he lettered in hockey all four years, as well as three years in track, and two years in football. Ralph also participated in intramural basketball for three years and was the co-captain of the hockey team.

Although he enjoyed participating in all sports, hockey was Ralph's passion. The Thief River Falls Prowlers were one of the best high school hockey teams in western Minnesota during Ralph's first three years on the team, but most of the players had graduated in 1947. Ralph, as co-captain and goalie needed to provide leadership on the ice for the young players. He succeeded at that, as the Prowlers ended the season winning ten games, losing five games, and reaching a tie in the other two games.

By the late 1940s, the Engelstad family had moved to Grand Forks because Chris had been promoted to a sales position for AGSCO, a farm supply company that received the contract to distribute large quantities of Quonset huts that were popular buildings for storing grain and other farm purposes. These cylindrical huts were composed of corrugated metal and could easily be attached to a concrete base. After World War II, the military had nearly 150,000 of them that they no longer needed.

During the summer of 1948, following graduation from high school, Ralph was hired by his father to help unload the heavy metal siding slabs used for building the huts from railroad cars. He would then transport the siding to farms where he would help construct the huts.

While working for AGSCO that summer, Engelstad made the acquaintance of Ben Gustafson, a chemistry professor at UND who was also president of an athletic board at the university. When Engelstad told the professor that he had lettered in hockey for four years at Thief River Falls, Gustafson inquired if he was planning on attending UND in the fall. When



Engelstad told him he could not afford to attend, Gustafson helped him obtain a sports scholarship and assisted him with enrollment. Later in life, Engelstad commented "I most likely would not have gotten an education," if not for the encouragement and assistance of Gustafson.

Engelstad's tryout for the hockey team was successful and he and Rudolph Lindbeck, another freshman, were named backup goalies to Bob Murray. Coach Donald Norman was pleased with Engelstad's goaltending as he stopped over 87% of the shots on goal that season. Since UND finished the season with a record of 9-12-1, Norman was replaced by Fido Purpur for the 1949-1950 season. Purpur named Lindbeck as his starting goalie and Engelstad dropped out of college after his sophomore year.

Engelstad decided to join some of his teammates playing hockey for the San Bernadino Shamrocks in California while working in construction. He then realized the importance of finishing his education, prompting him to return to UND. With the assistance of Tom Clifford, dean of the school of business at UND, Engelstad was able to graduate in 1954 with a bachelor's degree in commerce.

Prior to graduation, Engelstad married Elizabeth "Betty" Stocker on May 18, 1954. Betty was a teller for the First National Bank in Grand Forks and her bookkeeping skills would prove to be

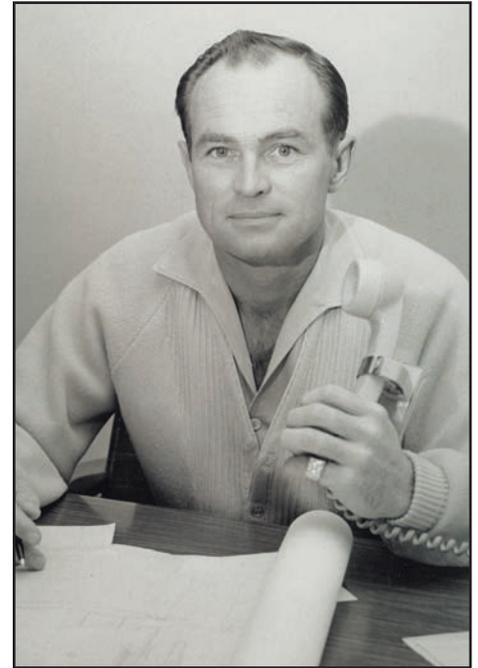
an asset to her husband in his future business ventures. It was reported in the Grand Forks Herald that "upon graduation, Engelstad was offered a contract to play professional hockey with the Chicago Blackhawks." Instead, he went to work for AGSCO full-time as their steel foreman. In that capacity, he oversaw and managed construction crews.

Having worked part-time on construction crews for four years while in college and full-time during the summers and then managing construction crews, Engelstad decided it was time to start his own construction company. After being turned down by two banks in his request for a loan, Al Holmquist, president of Valley Bank of Gilby and Grand Forks gave Engelstad a loan of \$2,500. With that money, Engelstad Construction of Grand Forks was established. Through his own contacts as well as those given to him through AGSCO, he soon developed a thriving company. By the late 1950s, he had become a millionaire but was dissatisfied because of the cold, snowy winters when his crews were not able to work.

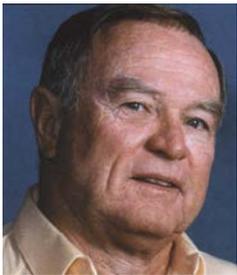
In 1959, Engelstad Construction relocated to Nevada, where the company secured Federal Housing Administration government contracts

to build homes in Las Vegas, a rapidly growing city in southwestern Nevada. In 1965, Engelstad purchased the Thunderbird Field Airport, now the North Las Vegas Air Terminal, and later acquired vacant land nearby. In 1967, he sold 145 acres, including the airport, for \$2 million to billionaire Howard Hughes.

Engelstad used part of that money to purchase the Kona Kai Motel on the Las Vegas strip. In 1971, he purchased the Flamingo Capri Motel, a 180-room motel also along the strip. It was located across the street from Caesar's Palace and Engelstad added a casino in 1972. His construction company greatly expanded and remodeled it and, in 1979, renamed it the Imperial Palace Hotel and Casino. At that time, it had 650 rooms, but Engelstad envisioned something much bigger and grander in the future.



## Years after playing hockey at UND, Engelstad donated \$104M to build 'the finest hockey arena of its kind'\*



North Dakota's largest monetary donation by any single individual towards an institutional project was for the construction of a hockey arena at the University of North Dakota. In 1998, Ralph Engelstad, a wealthy Las Vegas hotel and casino owner, donated

\$100 million to UND to build the arena. When the construction of the arena was completed, Engelstad increased the amount of the gift to \$104 million. It was called "the finest hockey arena of its kind in the world."

Engelstad was a hockey player for UND and a 1954 graduate. After establishing a profitable construction company in Grand Forks, he relocated to Las Vegas in 1959 where he made a fortune owning and operating the Imperial Palace Hotel and Casino. In later life, he donated hundreds of millions of dollars to many different institutions and causes. He made his first million dollars in 1959 at the age of 29 and, by 1989, his worth was estimated to be \$300 million.

Bruce Gjovig, in his book "Innovative Entrepreneurs from North Dakota," described Engelstad as a man of contrasts. "A private man who led a public life. An uncomplicated man whose days were complicated. A generous man who wouldn't give an inch on certain issues. A man whose actions attracted a spotlight he despised. And, a rich man who pinched pennies."

After restoring and expanding "a seedy motel" in Las Vegas, the Flamingo Capri Motel, Engelstad renamed it the Imperial Palace Hotel and Casino in 1979. The Capri opened in 1959 as a 180-room motel with some gambling in a small casino. This complex was purchased by Engelstad in 1971, to which he added a larger casino in 1972. In 1974, he added a three-story wing to the east end of the motel and built additions on the north side. To make room for those motel additions, Engelstad moved four motel buildings of the original Capri to his other property, the Kone Kai Motel. The next year, he sold the Kone Kai for \$1.2 million, which was later renamed the Klondike Hotel and Casino.

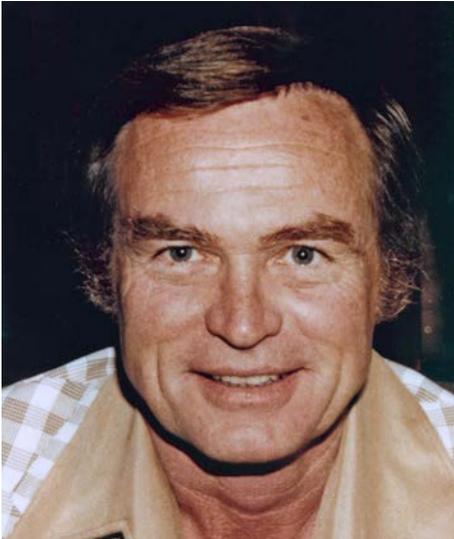
In 1977, Engelstad added a 19-story Imperial Palace Tower and, on Nov. 1, 1979, opened a new casino and renamed the entire property the Imperial Palace, which now had 650 rooms. It also had 10 restaurants, nightly entertainment, a sports book (a drive-through betting booth), a wedding chapel, and an auto museum. To make room for the Palace's entrance, Engelstad demolished the Flamingo Capri's casino. "The Imperial Palace was the only Asian-themed resort on the (Las Vegas) Strip, and was popular among middle-class and value-conscious guests."

In 1982 and again in 1987, Engelstad added hotel towers, increasing the room count to 2,637, which made it the second-largest sole proprietorship hotel in the world. Running this large enterprise required 2,600 employees, and having good, competent, and hard-working employees was an important part of what Engelstad believed to be a key to his success. He considered his employees as his extended family and treated them well. He instituted a 32-hour work week, and at the Imperial opened the first medical facility in a casino for employees and guests.

Engelstad was an inveterate collector of things that held a historical significance. He had obtained the personal papers of General George S. Patton from 1918 to 1944, which were valued "at nearly \$1.5 million" when he donated them to the Chester Fritz Library at UND in 1997.

Engelstad's biggest obsession as a collector was automobiles, especially those that were personally owned by celebrities or other notable people in the world. Engelstad had in his collection automobiles owned by Franklin D. Roosevelt, Al Capone, Cecil B. DeMille, General Douglas MacArthur, and Benito Mussolini. He also owned 52 Duesenbergs, the largest collection in the world. Engelstad collected more than 500 rare and antique automobiles and 200 of them were put on display from 1981 to 2017 in a showroom/museum on the fifth floor of the parking garage of his casino.

In 1996, Engelstad and Bill Bennett, the owner of the Sahara Hotel and Casino, built the Las Vegas Motor Speedway for \$72 million. It has



become one of the most popular racetracks on the NASCAR circuit. In 1998, they sold the racetrack for over \$200 million. In 1997, Engelstad opened a second Imperial Palace resort in Biloxi, Mississippi. This facility with over 1,000 rooms also includes ten restaurants, six movie theaters, and other amenities, including a large casino and nightly entertainment. The Imperial Palace in Biloxi made national news in 2005 when it opened its doors for free to FEMA workers and homeless employee families for months following Hurricane Katrina.

Engelstad's renewal of a close association with UND became apparent in 1988 when the name of the Winter Sports Center was renamed the Ralph Engelstad Arena. In 1997, he made his first major contribution to UND by donating General Patton's papers along with portraits of the U.S. Supreme Court justices. Engelstad had a close relationship with UND President Tom Clifford, dating back to the early 1950s when Clifford was

dean of the school of business and Engelstad was one of his students. This close friendship undoubtedly helped to facilitate Engelstad's donations to the university.

The fact that Engelstad, a wealthy casino/hotel owner would be making another contribution to UND in 1998 was not a surprise, but the monetary size of the donation was jaw-dropping – Engelstad pledged \$100 million to construct a new hockey arena. This was the largest amount of money ever donated by one person for a single institutional project in North Dakota. However, it was only the beginning of donations by Engelstad and his foundation for facilities and causes at UND, Grand Forks, and other places in the Red River Valley. Engelstad also pledged large amounts of money for facilities and causes in Nevada.

## Ralph Engelstad was the central figure in the battle to retain the Fighting Sioux nickname at UND

By 1998, Ralph Engelstad, a 1954 graduate of the University of North Dakota and a former hockey player for the Sioux, was one of the wealthiest people ever to graduate from a college in North Dakota. Engelstad was the owner of the Imperial Palace Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas and the Imperial Palace Resort in Biloxi, Mississippi. His 2,637-room hotel in Las Vegas was the second largest privately owned hotel in the world.

For 30 years, Engelstad remained a prominent Sioux hockey booster and, on Dec. 17, 1998, he announced that he was donating a \$100 million gift for a new hockey arena at UND. At the time it was considered the largest monetary donation by any single individual towards an institutional project in North Dakota.

After the groundbreaking in November of 1999, Engelstad is said to have overseen every detail of the construction project, which included 2,500 workers. However, midway into its construction Engelstad threatened to withdraw funding if the university dropped the longstanding Fighting Sioux nickname.

The push to change the nickname came about in 2000 because 21 Native American-related programs, departments, and organizations at UND signed a statement opposing the continued use of the nickname and logo, saying that it did not honor them (the Sioux Indians) or their culture.



Engelstad took great pride in being a former Fighting Sioux member at UND. It was a part of his identity. He wrote, "Tradition is the gentle fabric woven through time and experience which generates meaning, character, and identity to one and all. The Fighting Sioux logo, the Fighting Sioux uniforms, the aura of the Fighting Sioux tradition, and the spirit of being a Fighting Sioux are of lasting value and immeasurable significance to our past, presence, and future." As a result, Engelstad announced that he would cease construction on the arena if UND discontinued the Fighting Sioux nickname. If the nickname was so objectionable, how did UND come about using it in the first place?

UND first became active in intercollegiate sports in the 1890s and they chose Flickertails as their mascot/nickname. Flickertails are cute ground squirrels that are abundant in western North Dakota. There was no problem with this until after 1922 when Stan Borleske, the head football coach of the North Dakota Agricultural College, now North Dakota State University, changed the nickname of his team from the Aggies to the Bison. UND had a major sports rivalry with NDAC and when the press announced the match-up between the Bison and the Flickertails, UND supporters often found themselves in a defensive position. Bison were the king animals of the Dakota plains, and the flickertails, although cute,

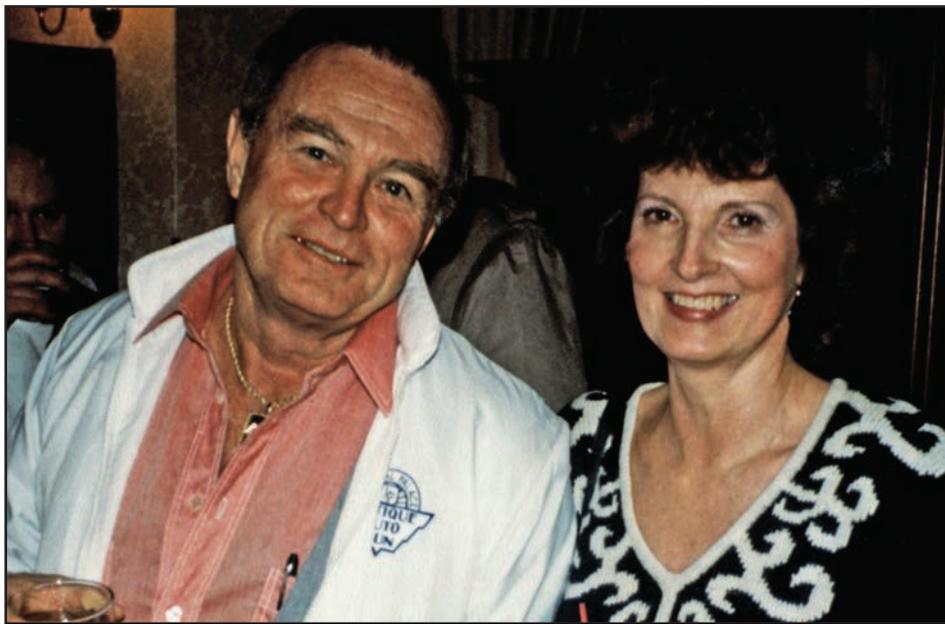
always fled from confrontations and burrowed themselves in the ground. Symbolically, the flickertails were no match for the fearsome bison.

In response, UND unofficially changed their team nickname to the Sioux in 1930. The Sioux were mighty hunters of northern Dakota Territory and the primary game animals on their hunts were the bison. Later, the word "fighting" was attached to Sioux as the UND sports' nickname and this changed the concept from hunter to warrior. It was common for sports teams at all levels to use feared warriors as their nicknames (i.e., Spartans, Trojans, Vikings, and even Warriors).

Beginning in 1969, many Native Americans began to publicly, and in an organized manner, express several of their grievances, one of which was by what names they were called. First off, many objected to being called Indians. That was the name attributed to them by Christopher Columbus because he thought he had landed in India. Collectively, they preferred to be called Native Americans or Indigenous Americans. The consensus is that, whenever possible, Native people prefer to be called by their specific tribal name or the name of their clan. That meant they wanted to be known by the name they had for their tribe, not the name given to them by someone else. The name Sioux is derived from a Chippewa word which means snake or enemy. Members of the tribe generally called themselves Lakota or Dakota, meaning friends, allies, or to be friendly. What is ironic is that also in 1969, the Lakota at the Standing Rock Reservation gave UND President George Starcher authorization to use the Sioux name.

In 2001 the North Dakota State Board of Higher Education voted 8 to 0 to keep the nickname and Indian logo. Construction of the Ralph Engelstad Arena was completed later that year. It was considered "the Taj Mahal of hockey," the best college hockey arena in the world. To many people, the battle over UND's sports nickname appeared to be over, but that all changed in 2005 when the National Collegiate Athletic Association ruled that UND and 11 other schools could be sanctioned if they used American Indian nicknames and images that were deemed hostile or abusive.

The NCAA ruled that UND could avoid the sanctions and retain the Sioux nickname and logo if the majority of the Lakota reservations in North Dakota approved of UND's request to retain the



nickname and logo. In 2009, the Spirit Lake Tribal Council voted to continue allowing the use of the Sioux nickname, but in 2010, the Standing Rock Tribal Council voted 10-4 in opposition. On June 11, 2012, "North Dakota voters chose to retire the Fighting Sioux name and the American Indian logo. Ralph Engelstad did not live to see all this happen. He died of lung cancer at his home in Las Vegas Nov. 26, 2002.

However, the Engelstad legacy remains very evident at UND. Besides the Ralph Engelstad arena there is the Betty Engelstad Sioux Center for basketball, volleyball, and soccer, which was constructed in 2004 and financed by an \$8 million donation from the Engelstad Foundation. The foundation also provided \$20 million in 2007 for student scholarships and departmental chairs at UND in the names of Ralph and Betty Engelstad.

Ralph Engelstad and his foundation also donated millions of dollars for at-risk individuals, education, historical preservation, animal compassion, medical research and support, people with disabilities, veterans, high school hockey facilities, the Boy Scouts, the Boys and Girls Clubs, and the performing arts.

Few people have been recognized for their contributions and accomplishments in as many different areas as Engelstad. He has received numerous awards including the Sioux Award from the UND Alumni Association in 1981, the highest honor granted by UND. In 1987, he was inducted into the Fighting Sioux Hall of Fame. In 1987 and again in 1989 Engelstad and the Imperial Palace were named Employer of the Year by the Nevada Governor's Committee on the Employment of People with Disabilities. In 1991, Engelstad and the Imperial Palace were named National Employer of the Year by President George H.W. Bush's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities. Also in 1991, he received the Humanitarian of the Year Award from the International Gaming and Business Exposition. In 2002 Engelstad was inducted into the North Dakota Entrepreneur Hall of Fame for his contributions to the construction of casino and entertainment industries. Also, in that year, the UND hockey team retired uniform #23, his former UND jersey number.

Ralph Engelstad was truly unique. One of his qualities was to generously reward those institutions that helped him become successful. UND is grateful that he considered the university to be one of those institutions.



**\* Article has been abridged for promotional purposes.**

**About the author:** Curt Eriksmoen has been writing a weekly history column for *The Forum* since 2004. He has taught at both the high school and college level and served as social studies coordinator for the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction for 13 years. He is the author of nine books.