

# Honourary Life Members

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## Bill Reid

CANS Honourary Life Member 2006



### Wandering youth led Reid to construction

By Ken Partridge

Opera stars, prima ballerinas, jazz musicians, perhaps the world's most famous exotic dancer and Nova Scotia construction. What do they all have in common? Bill Reid.

Reid has been a member of Nova Scotia's construction industry since 1979, when he convinced M. Sullivan and Son Limited to open a local office in Cape Breton. Since then he was involved in many significant construction projects and played a leading role in a number of construction-related organizations. But a life in construction was just about the furthest thing from Reid's mind when he was a young lad growing up in Montreal during the 1930s and '40s.

Born in 1927 in St. John's, Newfoundland, Reid was the son of Reverend William Reid, a United Church minister who moved from parish to parish all over Newfoundland. Then, in 1938, the family pulled up stakes and moved to Montreal.

Talk about culture shock, try going from the small fishing outpost of Wesleyville – the unofficial sealing capital of Newfoundland – to Montreal in the 'Dirty Thirties.'

Montreal was then Canada's largest city and easily its most cosmopolitan. This was quite a revelation for a young man about to enter puberty. During those formative years, Reid was fortunate enough to encounter a number of famous people from various walks of life. He counts among the highlights an opportunity to dance with Margot Fonteyn, generally considered the world's greatest ballerina. By 20 years of age she had already danced many of the greatest roles in ballet. She went on to form a famous on-stage partnership with Soviet-born dancer Rudolf Nureyev during his tenure with the Royal Ballet. In 1979 the Royal Ballet granted her the rare title prima ballerina assoluta.

He also got to see performances by another famous dancer, Lili St. Cyr. Cyr first rose to fame performing at the Gayety Theater in Montreal in 1944. Her performance was notable for such acts as taking a bath on stage and the reverse strip. Her trademark dance was "The Flying G," which involved a stagehand pulling a fishing rod attached to her G-string, sending it flying into the balcony as the lights were dimmed.

On the other end of the cultural spectrum, Reid says he can still remember hearing the great operatic tenor Jussi Bjoerling perform in Montreal.

"I remember he had a voice that nearly shook the walls," Reid says.

"Many said he was even better than (Enrico) Caruso."

However, perhaps a more lasting impact came from his friendship with Maynard Ferguson, the famous jazz trumpet player and bandleader. Ferguson was noted for being able to play accurately in a remarkably high register, and for his bands, which acted as stepping-stones for up-and-coming talent.

"We went to the same high school and were in the same class," Reid recalls. "I used to go over to his house and he used to come over to mine. I believe he was still performing up until a few years ago."

Another schoolmate was Oscar Peterson, but he was a year behind the other two and Reid says the three of them didn't spend much time together outside of school.

Even with all this enticing him to stay, the almost constant moving around of his youth gave Reid a wanderlust he indulged as a young man. He did enroll at Sir George Williams College, which latter became Concordia University, but didn't stay long before hitting the road.

"I would work somewhere to make enough money to go somewhere else," Reid says of those years. "I was looking for fun and got to see a good part of Canada and the United States that way. I worked for Canada Packers, crewed on a fishing boat on Lake Erie, ran a hot dog stand on the beach in Port Dover and worked the rail line from North Bay to Quebec."

Reid eventually made his way to Goose Bay, Labrador and it was here he learned to be a surveyor.

"I had never lived so well in all my life as I did up there," he says. "I was working for an American company that was building one of the old DEW Line radar detection bases and I was based on this little island right at the northern tip of Canada. It was so small it was practically a bald rock and its only name was N-30. It was only a mile long and on a clear day you could see Baffin Island."

"But the company looked after us very well. They brought in all kinds of movies for us to see and plenty of Budweiser."

After leaving Labrador, Reid moved to Murdochville, a small town on Quebec's Gaspé, to work on the copper mines. It was there he met Irene Michaud of St. Quentin, New Brunswick. She had come to Murdochville

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to work as a secretary, but agreed to go with Reid to Petawawa in 1953 when he was hired by C.C. Parker and Associates to work on the construction of the military base there.

The couple married in 1955 in Petawawa, but Reid was on the move again later that same year when he joined M. Sullivan and Son and they moved to Arnprior. Though he didn't know it at the time, this was to be Reid's last move for almost 25 years.

"I had found my home," Reid says of his years with M. Sullivan and Son. "I started off as a surveyor and worked my way up to estimator, then chief estimator and finally vice president. You were on your own then, you did the estimating, the managing, everything. It kind of scares me now when I think of working for the same company from 1955 to 1995. The company is now run by the fourth generation of the founding family and each one has made the company a little better than the previous one. Sullivan is still one of the top 50 best managed construction companies in Canada and is bigger than ever."

However, Reid's days in Arnprior became numbered in 1975 while he was working on a school Sullivan was building for the Department of Indian Affairs.

"One of the principals on the job asked me if we would like to bid on an expansion to the Alexander Graham Bell Museum in Baddeck and I thought to myself, 'Why not?'"

Both of the Reids had spoken many times of moving back to the Maritimes and the Bell project seemed to offer that possibility. After convincing Sullivan to try for the job, the couple travelled together to Cape Breton to investigate the project.

"Once we got here, we thought we were in heaven," Reid says. "We enjoyed ourselves a lot. We went around the Cabot Trail before returning home to bid the job."

That bid turned out to be the lowest one tendered and Reid embarked on a period in which he was commuting each week between Cape Breton and Ontario.

"I would fly down to Cape Breton every Sunday and then fly back on Fridays," Reid says.

The Bell project was a success, although it didn't come without its challenges. Reid remembers one day while working on the roof – a concrete clear span of 110 feet by 110 feet – when a freak storm blew in just as they were about two hours into the project.

"We had to stop everything and try to cover things up as much as possible. When we were able to get back to work, parts of the roof had to be chiselled out of the ice and snow. That cost us about \$100,000 in delays," Reid says.

However, the project was completed successfully and quickly led to other opportunities in Cape Breton. Reid seized the opportunity to end his long weekly commute.

"I talked them (Sullivan) into opening a Cape Breton office so we could pursue these other jobs. The Bell Museum led to work on a school in Eskasoni and we went on to work on the Cape Breton Post building, the Glace Bay hospital, renovations on the North Sydney hospital, various jobs for Devco, two office buildings in Sydney, the renovation and expansion of the Holiday Inn, construction of a Comfort Inn, the RCMP headquarters, St. Anne's Church in Glace Bay... I could go on for pages."

By 1981 the workload was enough to warrant Reid being on site full-time, so he and Irene built their second home and moved to Point Edward, where they have lived ever since. It was hard to leave Arnprior, where both their children – Robert and Jennifer – were born and grew up, but Reid says they've never regretted the decision. The home, which overlooks the ocean, is surrounded now by roses and other perennials and is described as a "veritable Eden" by family members.

Throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s Reid became deeply involved in several construction-related associations. He served as president of the Cape Breton Builders Exchange and was a director of the Canadian Construction Association, the Construction Association of Nova Scotia and the Nova Scotia Workers Compensation Board.

"I got an awful lot out of the construction industry, so I felt a certain obligation to the people I worked with to give something back," Reid says about his involvement. "If I had it to do again I wouldn't change a thing."

By the early 1990s job opportunities were starting to become fewer. Eventually Sullivan decided to shut down the Cape Breton office and Reid chose to retire rather than return to Ontario. By this time their son Robert, the eldest, was wrapping up a career at Nortel and now does contract work for the federal government. Jennifer is a professor at the University of Maine. Irene is an acclaimed potter whose work is still very much in demand. And as for Reid, based on his description of it, 'retired' maybe an overly optimistic term for what he's doing.

"I think I was off for only about a month before someone was coming to me asking for help on a project and they haven't stopped since," Reid says with a chuckle. "But it's good. There comes a time when if you don't do something, you lose everything."

Reid says he has played a small role in a number of local projects and describes his most recent endeavour as "the most interesting project I have ever been involved in."

That project involves the restoration and an addition to St. Patrick's Church, the oldest Roman Catholic church on Cape Breton Island. Erected in 1828, the church was constructed in the Pioneer Gothic style of architecture and features hand hewed stone, hand chiselled beams and a 100-year-old wood shingle roof. The church's stone walls are three feet thick, with some stone coming from the ruins of the Fortress of Louisbourg.

"The tower has to be replaced and washrooms and office space has to be added," Reid says, "and everything has to match what is already there. We have to join into the original building without disturbing anything, so we can't make a mistake. If a single stone falls out it could be a disaster."

St. Patrick's has a varied history, having started out serving the Irish communities in North Sydney and beyond and then became home to the Lebanese Maronite congregation until 1950. Now owned and operated by the Old Sydney Society, the church serves as a museum housing artifacts depicting the history of Sydney from the Mi'kmaq to the industrial boom of 1900.

The site also features a cemetery with gravestones that date back to Sydney's earliest settlers. This means any excavation has to be handled with great care.

"We had to have an archeologist sieve through all the ground outside," Reid says, "and I'm happy to report no skeletons yet."