

Honourary Life Members

Earle Bowman

CANS Honourary Life Member 1996



In August 1940, Earle Bowman was sitting at his desk in a Montreal insurance agency when he came to one, crystal clear realization: he had absolutely no aptitude for selling insurance.

Bowman admits he wasn't sure exactly what he did have an aptitude for at the time, but he knew his future didn't involve insurance. That's why an ad by No. 4 Elementary Flying Training School, a unit of the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan, looking for a male stenographer caught his eye.

"I was raised during the Depression in Winnipeg and I always thought of those early days as wasted years. When I look back now, though, I realize that the hardships endured during those years had conditioned me to make the most of whatever opportunities came my way in the future," Bowman says.

The British Commonwealth Air Training Plan is one of Canada's largest military success stories, producing 40 per cent of the Commonwealth aircrews that flew during World War II. The role of a stenographer in this important program wasn't the only contribution Bowman wanted to make, which led directly to his meeting with someone who would play a large role in his future career.

"The No. 17 Elementary Flying Training School was opening in Stanley, Nova Scotia in March 1941 and W.H. (Bill) Stuart, the man who would be running things there, was visiting No. 4 Training School where I worked to see how things operated," Bowman recalls. "I accidentally—but not really accidentally—ran into him in the hallway. After a brief conversation he looked at me and said, 'I like you. We need someone like you.' Sure enough, a few days later,

I got a telegram and I was off to Stanley to take over as quartermaster and purchasing agent."

Bowman stayed at No. 17 Training School until it closed in 1944. Even after he moved on to help shut down another training school and eventually volunteered for the Navy, he kept in touch with Stuart. This association would eventually bring him back to Nova Scotia for good.

"By the time I was ready to leave the Navy in 1946," Bowman says, "Bill had convinced Alexander Stirling MacMillan, who was looking for an office manager, that he could do no better than to hire his protégé, Earle Bowman. So with that kind of billing I returned to Nova Scotia and started work for Fundy Construction, where I remained for 37 years."

Fundy Construction was incorporated in 1937, but its origins date back to 1902, when MacMillan started his construction company under his own name. Subsequently, in 1956, his son Allen E. MacMillan assumed the office of president. The younger MacMillan recognized the efforts of the key personnel and made it possible for a mutually beneficial take-over plan to be worked out in 1966. This resulted in Bowman and his partners, Wilfred L. Giffin and Leslie R. White, gradually taking over the stewardship and ownership of the company. Bowman stresses the importance of the team effort of this partnership in the firm's continued success, as well as the superb performance of a sizeable corps of experienced superintendents.

"Fundy was remarkable in that it had 10 superintendents on staff that had an average of 26 years seniority on the job. I had the greatest respect for our

superintendents—you could send them anywhere and be sure the job would be done right. In my 37 years there, we never had a failure on a job," Bowman says.

Fundy's founder, A.S. MacMillan, served as Minister of Highways for many years prior to the war. So it comes as no surprise he brought some of this expertise to the company, which specialized in highway and railway construction for many years. When Bowman and his partners took over, they switched the company's focus from heavy construction to general contracting and construction management.

Over the years Fundy participated in a number of high profile projects throughout the province, including early work on the Cabot Trail, Keltic Lodge, the World Trade and Convention Centre, the Law Courts in Halifax, the Nova Scotia Rehabilitation Centre, Halifax Police Headquarters and the Saraguay Club. The Saraguay has a particular significance to Bowman since it was there that he and his wife Evette celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary in 1999.

"When I first came to Fundy I was a bachelor," Bowman says. "I had no car so I walked or took a bus to work each day. On rainy days my pants would get badly wrinkled and, always being very conscious of that sort of thing, I found a little shop on Hollis Street where I could get them pressed while I waited before going into work. Don Schelew owned the shop. It was Don who arranged my first blind date with Evette."

Bowman retired as chair of Fundy in 1983 but remained active in both the construction industry and the community, carrying on a tradition of volunteerism that he attributes to his mother. He served as president of the then Halifax-Dartmouth Construction Association (later to become the Construction Association of Nova Scotia) in 1965/66 and played a key role in the establishment of the Construction Centre on Cornwallis Street in Halifax—CANS' first permanent home.

"That was an important initiative," Bowman says. "Giving the Association its own site was an objective many members worked hard to achieve."

Of course, Bowman says he had little choice in becoming president of CANS since the position practically came with his job at Fundy. "The company had the singular distinction of providing six different presidents—including myself—to CANS and its predecessor,

the Halifax-Dartmouth Construction Association. There was A.S. MacMillan, G.W. Miller, A.E. MacMillan, myself, Wilf Giffin and Les White. I don't think any other company can match that record."

Other construction-related positions held by Bowman include: Nova Scotia Vice President for the Canadian Construction Association; Secretary-Treasurer of the Nova Scotia Road Builders Association; charter member and Honourary Life Member of the Design and Construction Institute of Nova Scotia; Trustee and Founding Member of the Carpenters' Welfare Trust Fund; and a member of the Council of Governors for the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety.

He served for 13 years as a member of the Board of Governors of the Technical University of Nova Scotia, eight of those as volunteer Secretary to the Board and as a member of the Executive Committee.

"One of my personal heroes, Frank Covert, got me involved with TUNS when he served as chair. He believed that TUNS' Board should reflect a cross section of the engineering and design professions and society at large. I enjoyed every minute I was there," Bowman says.

Two other prominent volunteer activities for Bowman are his involvement with the Isaac Walton Killam Children's Hospital and the local chapter of the Canadian Paralegic Association (CPA), both of which made him an Honourary Life Member. He was involved in many important construction projects at the IWK as chair of the Property and Facilities Committee, and is most proud of his work to establish a Scholarship Program named in honour of Donald E. Curren, founder of the Nova Scotia Division of the CPA, which has enabled many Atlantic Canadians with disabilities to attend university.

Bowman tends to be a little more bashful about another honour he collected during his active retirement. When he was informed that CANS intended to name a special membership award after him, Bowman admits he was of two minds about it.

"I had two immediate thoughts; the first was that it was a tremendous honour, and the second was 'I wonder if there's anyone out there that thinks I'm a terrible person to name an award after?' But my appreciation goes beyond just a 'feel good' thing. Not many awards are named for a living person and I'm aware of that."