

# Honourary Life Members

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## John Fiske

CANS Honourary Life Member 2007



John R. Fiske's name has become synonymous with Halifax's Historic Properties, one of the most successful historic restoration projects in Canada. However, Fiske is the first to admit that back when the project first got started, he knew little about restoring heritage properties. Then again, taking a risk was certainly something Fiske was used to doing by then.

His willingness to take on a challenge is a thread that can be traced all the way back to his childhood in Clarence, Nova Scotia, where he was born on April 6, 1926. His family owned a mixed dairy farm and his father ran a small sawmill, so there was no lack of work to do around home. However, Fiske had set his sights on obtaining his education no matter what obstacles might be in the way.

"In grade 10 I had to ride a horse four miles to and from school in Lawrencetown, but I knew I wanted to get an education if I could," Fiske says. "When I finished grade 10 I had a choice: to finish my education or go to work at the mill. I had an Aunt and Uncle in Annapolis Royal who asked me to come stay with them while I finished school and help them with the Queen Hotel in return. So I struck a deal with my father – if I put in a good summer working in the woods hauling logs, then I could go stay with my Aunt and Uncle and finish school.

"I slept in the lumber camp all that summer and it was tough work, but that gave me all the more reason to work even harder on my education."

So, knowing next to nothing about the hotel business, he was off to Annapolis Royal the next fall to complete grade 11.

Another career about which he knew little beckoned after completing grade 11, and instead of returning to the farm he became a surveyor's assistant at the Canadian Forces Base Cornwallis. He eventually became a surveyor himself, and says he recalls this period as being a great influence on his future career.

"That experience gave me great insight into the construction industry. It helped me a lot when I went to university. I got to see a lot of engineering being done, a lot of earth being moved and how surveying played a role in all of it. It was a huge factor in my later joining the provincial Department of Highways."

University and the Department of Highways had to wait, though.

By this time it was 1943 and Canada was at war. The Army was looking to recruit young men like Fiske and was offering a free university education to those who enlisted. So, at the age of 17, Fiske took what could've been the biggest risk of his life and went down to the Kentville Armoury to sign up.

For the next 20 months he trained to be a soldier, even becoming an instructor at his training camp in Yarmouth. However, the real action was overseas and Fiske says he clearly remembers relinquishing the rank he had earned in the camps in order to get to Europe. He was actually on his way to board the ship in Halifax when he and his fellow soldiers were taken off the train and shipped to Debert instead. The war in Europe ended two weeks later.

Fiske wasn't about to let a little thing like the end of the war stop him, though. On May 25 he volunteered for the war in the Pacific and left for training in Edmunston.

"To this day, I still don't know why I did that," Fiske laughs, "but I guess it wasn't meant to be. The war in the Pacific ended while I was still in training in New Brunswick."

In September 1945 Fiske was discharged from the Army and enrolled at Acadia University, where he earned his engineering diploma two years later. While at Acadia, he met Miss Lynn MacNearney, to whom he took an immediate fancy. She asked him to the Sadie Hawkins dance, but before the romance could truly begin, it was nipped in the bud by Fiske's athletic pursuits.

He was a member of the varsity hockey team and, while playing against Kentville for the Valley Championship in the last game of the year, broke his leg. Between the time missed due to his leg and the flu and strep throat that followed right behind, he never got around to asking Lynn out for a second date.

All the missed time meant Fiske had to return to Acadia during the summer to catch up on his studies. Lucky for him, Lynn was there too, trying to shorten her degree in fine arts from four years to three. This time he didn't waste the opportunity and immediately asked her out to dinner – an impressive affair he remembers costing the grand total of \$4.

The two married soon afterward and Lynn accompanied him to Halifax when he attended the Nova Scotia Technical College to earn

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his degree as a Civil Engineer, working as a dietician and the Victoria General Hospital while he went to school.

Fiske joined the Nova Scotia Department of Highways upon graduation as a resident engineer of construction.

"I was really a tramp engineering," Fiske recalls. "We moved from job to job. In the first seven years of our marriage, we moved 14 times."

With a young family on the way, Fiske was looking for a little more stability. He left the Department for a consulting position on what he thought was going to be the DEW line (Distant Early Warning system), but instead ended up in the requisitioning department.

"It was a paper job – I didn't like it all," Fiske says. "I always enjoyed being outdoors. So when our daughter became ill and we needed the specialists in Halifax, I wrote to the Department to see if they would take me back"

In 1956 he was back in Nova Scotia, serving as the Assistant Registrar of Motor Vehicles. It was under the auspices of the Traffic division that he was able to graduate in Traffic Engineering from the Bureau of Highway Traffic at Yale University. He went on to become Provincial Traffic Engineer.

By this time, the Fiske family had grown to include five children and a newly built home. Fiske says it was a little more than his meagre annual salary of \$10,000 could support. It was time for him to take another risk.

He was a member of the Kiwanis at the time and fellow member Bill Stevens had watched with interest while Fiske built his new home. Stevens was struggling with health issues at the time and invited the young Fiske to assist him in his home building business. Fiske agreed and the new firm of Stevens and Fiske was formed in 1960.

"I had to be the least experienced guy in the industry in the country at that time," Fiske says. "I could tick off material costs no problem, but I didn't know a thing about labour costs. So, of course, I was the one who wrote up the quotes. I used to do them up and then ask Bill to look them over. He would look at them for maybe 10 to 15 minutes and then hand them back to me and say, 'I think you're right on.'"

"When the first few tenders I bid on came back, we won them all so it looked like I knew what I was doing, but I kept records and we were low on labour on every one of them. I had to adjust our future bids for that and, what do you know, we got fewer jobs after that."

Home building was a tough market in the early 1960s. It was almost impossible to borrow money and the return was small. So Stevens and Fiske shifted into land development and that's where the company found its niche.

"We got into land development in a big way," Fiske recalls. "Our company wasn't considered very large, but we were active – we kept our pencils sharp."

All that activity also included a stint as president of the Construction Association of Nova Scotia (CANS) in 1969. Fiske

remembers it as a tumultuous time, bridging the introduction of the bid plans depository as well as significant labour unrest with the unions. Wildcat strikes were not unheard of, thanks in large part to high settlements in Ontario receiving significant publicity. It was during this time that CANS hired a labour relations officer and formed a labour relations branch to work with contractors and the unions to achieve smoother negotiations.

Still, Fiske says the over-riding impression he is left with of that time is one of cooperation.

"When I look back, I remember the great, solid people who worked hard at good relations to cause the construction industry to be trusted," Fiske says. "I think both sides had great faith in us [CANS] and trusted us. That made things much easier."

It around this time that Fiske's involvement with Historic Properties began. At first, his involvement was just supposed to be in a consulting capacity. He worked with Allan Duffus, the architect, to draw up plans for the redevelopment and heritage restoration of Halifax's historic waterfront district. The goal was to produce an estimate of what the project would cost so it could be shopped to potential developers.

However, when no one stepped forward to take on the project, Fiske was asked if he would consider putting in a proposal. Soon afterward, Historic Properties Limited was born and Fiske embarked on the \$9 million restoration project.

The project was considered a tremendous success almost right from the start, attracting both national and international attention for its efforts to restore the waterfront buildings as closely as possible to their original condition, while at the same time dramatically increasing property values, tax revenues for the city, attracting increased tourism and providing high quality commercial space that produced significant rental and lease revenues.

"It turned out to be a great thing for the city," Fiske says, "and I was fortunate enough to become involved with organizations such as the Heritage Canada Foundation, where I learned a lot about heritage restoration work – a subject I knew next to nothing about when the project started."

The success of Historic Properties led to similar work restoring the historic Keith's Brewery, as well as involvement in the redevelopment of a significant section of Quinpool Road into a major commercial and apartment complex. There was also the construction of the Central Trust Tower in downtown Halifax.

Along the way, Fiske branched out into other endeavours, becoming one of the founding partners in the styrofoam insulation manufacturer, Truefoam, as well as purchasing and running one of Halifax's best known building suppliers – Piercey's.

But it was for his work on Historic Properties and other heritage properties that Fiske garnered the most renown, eventually leading to his being awarded the Order of Canada by Governor General Jeanne Sauv .

At present John continues with his interest in land development but leaves much of the day to day work to his engineer son Jock. John is concentrating his attention on looking after his beloved Lynn who suffered a debilitating stroke a year ago. They divide their time between Halifax and their Chester summer home.