

The Gillises

The involvement of the Gillis family in Nova Scotia's construction industry dates back to the turn of the century when Frank A. Gillis established a building supply company bearing his own name. By the 1930s the company had grown beyond supplying others and, with the arrival of Frank's son Ernest J. as president at the tender age of 24, became directly involved in the construction process under the name The Gillis Co. Ltd.

In those early days, Ernest and his partner Benjamin Russell worked to grow the company, also forming the HB Russell Company to supply larger components to the construction industry.

Eventually Ernest bought out Russell's interest in the operation and it truly became a family business again with his brother Basil and eventually his son Don joining the firm.

The Gillis Co. is perhaps best known for one of its operating divisions, Gillis Fence, which was involved with many high profile construction projects throughout the province, such as Nova Scotia's only heavy water plant, the Nova Scotia Pulp Mill and the province's original Michelin plant. Over the years other projects of note included fencing in the microwave towers that stretched across eastern North America as part of the Cold War 'hotline'

established between the U.S. White House and the Russian Kremlin; and the 25 miles of chain link erected on the north commons in Halifax as part of the Pope's visit to the city in 1984.

The company also worked extensively with Nova Scotia Power and all of the major contractors in the area. It worked on many military properties in Halifax, erected the first fence around the moat on Citadel Hill, provided acres of fencing to farmers in the Annapolis Valley, designed and constructed 50 ft. wide gates to accommodate airplanes when fencing in the Debert airport and produced literally miles of wrought iron fencing for many sites throughout the province. The company also constructed the first wolf pens for the Shubenacadie Wildlife Park, which had to be designed with round corners and extend down and out six feet into the earth to prevent the wolves from burrowing their way out.

"One of the great things about the fencing business is that you're usually the first one on site while they're still clearing the lot," says Don Gillis, Ernest's son and a former president of the family business in his own right. "You get to see the whole project from start to finish."



ERNIE GILLIS



DONALD GILLIS



PRESENTATION OF HONORARY LIFE MEMBERSHIP TO ERNIE GILLIS:
LEFT TO RIGHT: EDGAR GOGUEN, HON. JOEL MATHENSON,
ERNIE GILLIS, ROD KERR.

Unfortunately though, Don admits it's often the more disturbing jobs that remain with you – even years later.

"One of the most difficult projects I remember us working on was for the Children's Unit at the Nova Scotia Hospital. A young girl was killed when she fell from a rooftop recreation area, so we were called in to construct a safety barrier – essentially a 35 ft. long by 35 ft. wide by 9 ft. high 'cage' on the roof. I still remember that one quite vividly."

Despite all its success, the fencing operation came perilously close to shutting down operations at one point when its biggest competitor at the time, NB Wire Fence, bought up the assets of DOSCO Fence, Gillis' primary supplier. A letter from NB Wire Fence informed the Gillis family of the purchase and instructed them that all future purchases would have to be through them.

The idea of buying from his competitor was anathema to Ernest, so later that same day young Don was on a plane to Montreal where he eventually met with

Mr. George Reid of the Steel Company of Canada and struck a bargain to become their new representatives in the Maritimes.

"So there we were that morning, effectively out of the fencing business," Don recalls, "and by that evening we were back in with chain link from the Steel Company of Canada."

However, the one lesson this incident drove home was the vulnerability of relying too heavily on any single type of work. As Don puts it, "There are only so many fences you can build. We needed to diversify."

That diversification took the form of G&M Steel Buildings Ltd. and D&B Gillis Holdings Ltd., both of which carried the business into areas of the construction industry it had previously not been involved with, but which provided the company with the resiliency it needed to carry on into the 1980s.

By 1971, Ernest had decided it was also time for a change on a more personal level. He went into semi-

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retirement and sold the company to Don. The prefix 'semi' is particularly appropriate in this case, as Ernest continued to come into the office almost every day and remained at least partially involved with the company's operations until 1978.

Where he found the time to do so is something of a mystery. Even before retiring, in addition to running the family business, Ernest was heavily involved in a great variety of volunteer and charitable endeavours. He was one of the first chairs of the Halifax-Dartmouth Construction Association, predecessor to the Construction Association of Nova Scotia (CANS), a role that carried on from his chairing of the Mechanical Trades Exchange Committee of the Halifax Board of Trade. It was this committee that laid the foundations for formation of the Association.

In recognition of his contribution in this area, Ernest was chosen as the first Honourary Life Member of CANS. He was similarly honoured by the Canadian National Institute for the Blind, Knights of Columbus, Mayflower Curling Club, RCMP Veteran's Association and Gyro International. Other organizations in which he was heavily involved include the Boy Scouts of Canada, the former Victoria General Hospital, the United Way, the Halifax Board of Trade and the Victoria Order of Nurses.

"Dad was always involved in the community in a big way," Don recalls. "I hardly remember him being home in the evenings."

It seemed a forgone conclusion that Don would take over the family business from his father. As he points out himself, "It (working for the company) was the only job I had ever had outside of serving in the Naval Reserves."

After buying out his father in 1971, Don preceded to put his own stamp on the company. He aggressively pursued new markets with the diversified divisions. "There's always a bit of a gambler in a construction man, albeit an extremely cautious one," he says.

Don even changed the methodology used in the fencing operation. "For example," Don says, "previously it was largely a seasonal business – we hardly ever worked in the winter. That soon changed and we started putting fence in the ground year-round."

The one thing Don didn't change was his father's commitment to the community. He fully embraced this aspect of his professional life, even serving on the boards of many of the same organizations as his father before him. He was chair of CANS in 1978, an executive member of the Canadian Construction Association, chair of the Design and Construction Institute, president of the Halifax

Board of Trade, chair of the Halifax Visitors and Convention Bureau and president of the Halifax Metro Centre's Board of Directors.

In the years between his father's involvement with the Construction Association and his own, Don says membership shifted dramatically – from consisting mostly of general contractors to consisting mostly of suppliers. However, the nature of the people themselves remained the same.

"There are a lot of really good people in the construction industry," Don says.

But the organization closest to his heart, and that he continues to be involved with after all these years, is Gyro International, of which his father was international president between 1958 and 1959.

"It's an international organization where, most simply described, friendship is offered," Don says. "I've served in all of the local offices. We simply try to give to one another and help each other out. It's like having a close group of friends only they're spread all over the world."

Somewhere in there he also found the time to meet and marry his wife Brenda, and help raise a family of four sons: Christopher, Andrew, John and Gregor. Although none of his sons followed him into the family business, two of them – Christopher and John – caught enough of the construction industry bug that they have become mechanical engineers.

Professionally, as Don observed earlier, there are only so many fences you can put in the ground. So by the early 1980s he admits his interest in the family business was waning and other opportunities were calling.

The company was eventually purchased by the employees and Don moved on to a variety of different positions, such as tenant coordinator for the Park Lane Mall, overseeing construction and marketing of the Halifax World Trade and Convention Centre; buying and selling of small businesses for Pat King Realty; business consulting, marketing for Galvatech Inc. and the development of condominiums in the Paper Mill Lake subdivision.

However, perhaps his most unusual career move also proved to be his last.

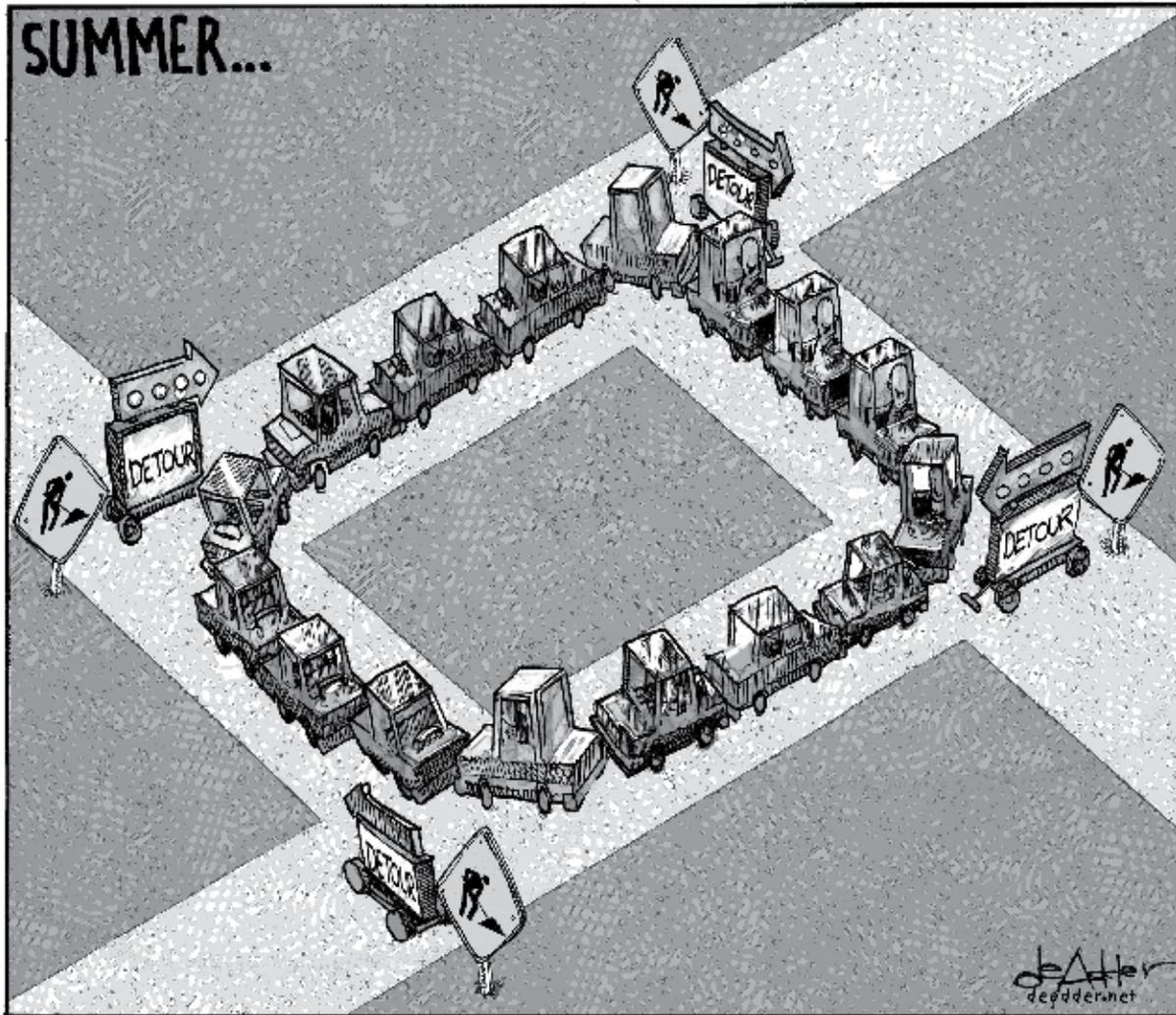
"My wife Brenda always wanted to run a Bed and Breakfast, but it never really came together. Then one day a friend called to draw her attention to a small, one-inch ad in the paper looking for a caretaker for Crombie House, the original home of Frank H. Sobeys in Pictou County. That was 11 years ago," Don says.

The Crombie House is home to the Sobeys Art Foundation and features about one-third of the total

Sobey family art collection, including masterpieces by the various members of Canada's famous Group of Seven. It's also host to everything from annual meetings of Empire Inc. to private dinners for members of the Sobey Family; from private and executive meetings for the Sobey group of companies to public art tours in the summer months. It was originally built when Frank H. Sobey was the chief of Industrial Development for the Stanfield government, and was the site of meetings that brought some of the biggest names in Nova Scotia's economy to the province, including Michelin.

"It's a job I came to hesitantly," Don admits, "but we love it here. I can't imagine doing anything else."

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