

# Honourary Life Members

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## Jim Wilkie

CANS Honourary Life Member 2008



The island needed a voice.

That was the main reason behind Jim Wilkie's desire to be involved with the Construction Association of Nova Scotia (CANS). He still strongly believes 'til this day that Cape Breton needs a seat at the association's board table to ensure its needs and concerns are heard when efforts are underway to shape the future of the province's construction industry.

"I've always had a keen interest in what was going on in the industry," Wilkie says, "and always heavily involved in apprenticeship, too. I believe you have to be involved in order to keep things moving toward being the best."

As the past president of AB Mechanical, Wilkie has passed this sense of responsibility along to his successor – Chris Brace. He says you might call it his legacy to the firm.

"I impressed upon them the need for a presence there and to be involved. You have to get your voice out there and be heard," Wilkie says.

Being heard is something Wilkie learned the importance of early in life. Growing up in a small community where everyone knew everyone else, it could have been easy to simply accept what everyone else was saying and do what everyone else was doing. In fact, that's almost the path he traveled when at the age of seventeen he embarked on his first career: the fisheries.

Wilkie was born in Cape St. Lawrence, home to a solitary lighthouse in the farthest reaches of Northern Cape Breton. He attended school in Sugarloaf after his family moved away from the lighthouse, but decided early on his future didn't lie in the academic arena. At the age of 17 he left school to go fish lobster and cod.

For awhile it looked like he might be a fisherman permanently. He caught the eye and eventually the hand of a young lady named Viola from the nearby community of Neil's Harbour – as Wilkie tells it, "everyone North of Smokey knows everyone else," – and settled down to raise a family. Their first son Kenneth was born shortly thereafter.

However, Wilkie's days of hauling traps and lines were numbered. He eventually decided his future had more to do with potable water than salt water and he was off to Halifax to become a plumber. He recalls Mother Nature having a lot to do with his choice.

"A couple of storms at sea and getting wiped out made the decision easy," Wilkie says. "I knew some plumbers back then and it seemed at the time to be a field I would like to pursue."

So, leaving the family back home, Wilkie enrolled at the former Institute of Technology in Halifax and emerged six months later ready to be a plumber. Some of his early work while still in Halifax included the Scotia Square Trade Mart building and the Victoria General Hospital, where he worked on both new construction and renovations. After returning to Cape Breton, he worked on the White Birch Inn at Keltic Lodge.

In 1968 he joined the largest mechanical contracting firm in Cape Breton at that time, J.W. Rudderham. He stayed with the firm right up to its closing in 1992. It was there that he received his red seal as a steamfitter and after a year on the job became a superintendent. A few years later, in 1974, he took over responsibility for the entire construction department, adding estimating, pricing and personnel management to his list of skills.

He also faced increased responsibilities at home, thanks to the latest addition to the Wilkie family, his younger son David.

Wilkie looks back on this period as a time of great change – not just for himself, but also for the industry as a whole.

"We went from using 15 inch cast iron pipe – that had to be cut using a hammer and chisel – when I worked on the Trade Mart project to using plastic piping for almost everything," he recalls. "The entire industry was becoming more technical and structured. Take estimating, for example: the company encouraged a lot of training on estimating and it evolved from basically throwing a dart at some figures to a much more scientific system."

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“There were a lot of changes on the job sites too,” he continues. “There were significant technical advances and the building codes were changing to reflect this. In the early days, there wasn’t a lot of organization on the jobs in terms of how and when the different trades were working. Then slowly it became more scheduled.”

Perhaps the biggest change for Wilkie in terms of his career came in the 1990s when J.W. Rudderham closed its doors for the last time. He quickly realized his best opportunity for staying employed was to create his own job.

“When it closed in 1992, I put together a group of six former employees to create a partnership and carry on the kind of work we were doing previously. The only other option was to go on unemployment. Now, AB Mechanical has grown to become one of the largest contractors in the province, but back then the goal was to simply get through the next year,” Wilkie says.

That original group of six included Wilkie as president, Don Musgrave as secretary, Terry Kelly from the industrial side of the business, Brian MacLeod, Ian MacSween and Don Gillis as job foreman.

“I had known all of them for years,” Wilkie says. “They had all worked under my direction for a long time.”

Although he witnessed J.W. Rudderham’s demise despite having good people who were aggressive in the marketplace, Wilkie says he was always convinced the new firm would succeed.

“We had a good nucleus of people; they were top notch in the previous company. Plus, we were given a lot of help and support from the industry – they all knew us. As our reputation for good, honest, high value work became established, it got easier and easier to get work. There was no question, barring disaster, we could make a go of it.”

The company certainly did make a go of it, expanding from that early beginning of just six to include a complete sheet metal shop in Sydney and a full-fledged fabrication shop in Louisdale. The Louisdale shop really came into its own during the major expansion project at Stora several years ago and has continued to grow. It now occupies 15,000 square feet spread over two buildings.

In addition to the Stora project, AB Mechanical has also worked on the new science centre at St. Francis Xavier University, the Keata pharmaceutical plant in Sydney, nine different public-private partnership (P3) schools across Cape Breton and a long list of hospitals, including Antigonish, Glace Bay and Northside.

Wilkie says the single largest project the company has worked on to date is the gas fractionation plant that was built in Port Hawkesbury.

“We had more than 200 men on that job at one point,” he recalls.

Whatever parts of the job Wilkie brought home with him each day, they must have been positive ones. Both sons followed in their dad’s footsteps in terms of career choices. Kenneth, the oldest, is a steamfitter who is currently working maintenance at the local correctional centre. David is also a steamfitter and refrigeration mechanic specializing in hvac. He spent many years working for his father at AB Mechanical and just recently returned from a stint out west in Fort McMurray.

Wilkie says his involvement with CANS can be traced back to the start of AB Mechanical. He served on the board and spent three years as Chair of the Construction Management Bureau.

“The important thing at that time was that there was a presence from the island there,” he says. “It was this sense of responsibility that spurred me since there wasn’t much direct benefit in a business sense from it.

“There weren’t that many Cape Breton companies involved back then because it was difficult for people from here to participate. It was expensive to drive to Halifax for all the meetings, both from a cost point of view and in terms of lost time. That’s not easy when you’re always busy. Usually when I went to Halifax for a meeting, it meant two days to catch up once I got back.”

Still, somewhere in amongst all those meetings and days catching up, Wilkie managed to find time to give even more back to his community. He spent 15 years as a scout leader, starting with his own sons and carrying on even after their departure. He was also heavily involved in Junior Achievement.

That interest in working with the next generation also found expression in his work life through his career-long interest in the apprenticeship system. In fact, when asked what he is the most proud of in his career, Wilkie says it’s his efforts to improve the province’s apprenticeship system.

April of this year saw Wilkie wind down his involvement with AB Mechanical. Officially he’s retired, although he can still be found around the company’s offices on a fairly regular basis. However, he has no concerns about the company’s future.

“Except for me, everyone from that first group of six is still there,” he says. “The age range was an important part of the selection process so that it would lead to a gradual turnover among the original partners.”

Wilkie is cognizant of the fact that the industry, as a whole, needs to plan for succession. He is excited about the expansion of the Youth Apprenticeship Program into Cape Breton and is eager to help guide CANS through the hurdles that program will face. And, although he is now retired, he continues to believe in the importance of having the voice of Cape Breton heard on the board of the Construction Association of Nova Scotia. And CANS is as determined as Wilkie to ensure that the island will continue to be well represented, in the honour, spirit and integrity that Jim Wilkie has set forth.