

Ernest Edwards; Nova Scotia restaurateur built his empire with help from a Kentucky colonel

ERNEST EDWARDS, 90: BUSINESSMAN

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HALIFAX -- During the height of the Depression, Ernest (Ernie) Edwards arrived as a young man in Kansas City, dirt-poor and hungry. He had gone so long without food that he literally collapsed in the street from hunger. A restaurant owner brought him to his establishment, where he gave him a meal and a job in the dish pit. The stranger's act of kindness led to two personal revelations that would shape Mr. Edwards's life. One, that he would never go hungry again if he got into the restaurant business, and two, that once he made some money, he would repay the kindness by helping others in need.

After serving overseas during the Second World War as a sergeant in the Canadian Army Corps of Engineers, Mr. Edwards returned to his hometown of Saint John, where he took a job at a lunch counter. Recognizing his ambition, discipline and smarts, his employers offered him a position running the lunch counter at the Vogue Theatre in Halifax, in 1948. With a growing family to feed, Mr. Edwards jumped at the opportunity.

Before long, he opened his own business - Edwards Fine Food, on Halifax's busy Barrington Street. With his reputation for making a great hamburger, milkshake and homemade apple pie, he soon had eight lunch counters around town, along with his flagship family restaurant on Quinpool Road, called the Town and Country.

His wife Delia, whom he had met while stationed in England during the war, joined him in the business as a hostess, while raising their seven children.

"He was kind of a simple guy. He understood the value of a buck," son Gary Edwards said. "He admired a hard worker above all else."

Edwards Fine Food eventually grew to employ more than 600 people in 26 Nova Scotia operations, including 14 Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurants.

"He was very, very respected," said Alan Johnston, owner and chef of MacAskill's restaurant in Dartmouth, and the former executive chef at Edwards Fine Foods. "They had the premier restaurants in Halifax and Dartmouth."

"He ran a pretty tight ship," Mr. Johnston added. "He had the personal touch. He took a real hands-on approach."

Mr. Edwards wasn't scared of hard work. In the years he spent building his business, he was known to put in 16-hour days. He'd be into the kitchen by 6 a.m. to bake pies and home at 10 p.m. after closing. Believing strongly in high standards, he got involved in what is now the Canadian Restaurant and Foodservices Association, acting as the organization's president in 1961.

Through his involvement in the association, he met Harland Sanders, the founder of Kentucky Fried Chicken, at a food show in Toronto in the late 1950s. Mr. Edwards liked the chicken product and they agreed that he would become the Nova Scotia face of the growing Kentucky-based fast-food chain. He was just the third franchisee in Canada.

Mr. Edwards returned to Halifax from Toronto and added the fried chicken to the menu at his Town and Country restaurant. His customers loved it and before long, he had dedicated part of the restaurant to takeout. By the early 1960s, the restaurant was selling more Kentucky Fried Chicken than any other outlet in North America.

Mr. Edwards, who wore the trademark string bow tie like Mr. Sanders, soon became known as Colonel Ernie. In the early 1960s, Mr. Sanders inducted him into the Honorary Order of Kentucky Colonels in recognition of his business success.

A master of promotion, Mr. Edwards loved playing the part of Colonel Ernie. Salmon pink was the colour of Kentucky Fried Chicken in the early days, and Mr. Edwards had the family

boat (the Lady Colonel), the family Lincoln and a fleet of delivery cars all painted in the same hue. Even the family poodle, named Colonel, was regularly groomed with Mr. Sanders's trademark mustache and goatee.

Later in life, asked to name his greatest culinary achievement, Mr. Edwards replied, "Makin' money." He gave the same response when asked which of his business ventures gave him the most pleasure.

While he certainly made enough money to live very comfortably, he never lost his frugality. He loved to clip 2-for-1 coupons and take them to the supermarket, and was known to collect the remnants of soap bars, then compress them into larger lumps to use in his bath.

"He never took his success for granted," said Jon Denman, former president of the Rotary Club of Halifax Northwest, where Mr. Edwards was a founding member. "Both feet were firmly planted on the ground."

As a caustic, hard-nosed businessman who smoked two packs a day of Export A cigarettes for 40 years, Mr. Edwards's strength wasn't his people skills. But despite his gruffness, many of his employees showed great loyalty and referred to Delia and him as Mom and Dad.

"They treated their employees like family," and demanded a lot in return, Mr. Denman said.

Born in Saint John in 1917, Mr. Edwards was one of 12 children. After his father died when he was just 2, his widowed mother packed him up and headed west in search of work. She found it as a cook in various logging camps. By Grade 6, Mr. Edwards had left school; he worked odd jobs before settling in the restaurant business.

Having grown up in poverty and relying on the help of others to launch his business, which the family sold in the early 1990s, Mr. Edwards later became determined to give back to the community. He organized fundraising events for the Rotary Club and became active in the Colonel Harland Sanders Charitable Organization, which made a \$1-million donation last year to the IWK Health Centre Foundation in Halifax.

In the early 1980s, the family created the Edwards Family Charitable Foundation and Mr. Edwards focused on giving to charities involved in health care, education and children. By 1989, he was giving away \$40,000 a year, said Bill Frank, who worked for Edwards Fine Food for 30 years, eventually becoming its president.

The foundation now has more than \$3-million and by the end of 2008 will have donated close to \$2-million, Mr. Frank said - and even after Mr. Edwards had long since retired, he was still keenly interested in the foundation's activities.

"I don't want you pissing away the principal," he told a June meeting of the foundation's investment committee. "You have to be careful."

ERNEST EDWARDS

Ernest Edwards was born Aug. 12, 1917, in Saint John, and died June 25, 2008, of heart failure in a Halifax hospital. He was 90. He is survived by children Murray, Rozanne, Judith, Sylvia, David and Gary; 27 grandchildren; 51 great-grandchildren; and close friend Lillian Rodgers. He was predeceased by all 11 of his siblings, son Paul and wife Bridget Roseleen, known as Delia, who died in 2002.