

An empire turns 100

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Stellarton - One day, John William Sobey decided 10 cents a day in danger pay wasn't enough incentive to keep working as a carpenter far below the earth's surface in a coal mine shaft.

J.W., as he was called, went back to the family farm and decided to open up a butcher shop instead.

The rest, as they say, is history - one hundred years' worth.

A century later, J.W. Sobey's descendants are still part of the empire which began humbly with a single store opened in 1907 and door-to-door meat deliveries made with a horse-drawn wagon.

It was his son, Frank H., who convinced his father to add produce and, in 1924, to expand to a full line of groceries.

School wasn't Frank H.'s forte; he was more interested in reading financial reports than history texts, and left school after Grade 8. An aunt who acted as a mentor encouraged him to pursue his passion and he enrolled in business college at the age of 16.

Grandson Frank C. Sobey recalls Christmas dinners spent at his grandparents' house. Inevitably, Frank H. would turn the conversation to business with "his boys" - sons William (Bill), David and Donald.

"His focus, his love, his passion was the business," says Frank C., president of Empire Company's real estate division and chairman of Crombie REIT.

He describes his grandfather as "very much the patriarch of his family," a man who had the ability to understand both the theoretical and the practical, and who knew how to push a common-sense approach to business.

By 1939, one store had become six in Stellarton and surrounding areas. The first modern Sobeys supermarket opened in 1947.

In 1971, Frank H. handed over control of the company to his sons.

Frank C. recalls the business kept his father, Bill, away from home a lot. But being part of the family behind the growing retail food business wasn't a big deal as a child.

"Back then, it wasn't that big. It wasn't anything like it is today. When you grow up with something, it's normal," he says.

"My mother did a very good job of making sure we understood that we were ordinary people, that you have to work for what you get."

Frank C. and the other grandchildren were encouraged to work in the stores part-time while in high school. He started out in the West Side store doing carry-out and later stocked shelves.

He says the youngest generation is still urged to get a hands-on, thorough understanding of the business, whether it's working in the grocery stores or the theatres, or some other capacity. It's important, he says, in order to be a knowledgeable owner.

Frank C. says there was also emphasis growing up on volunteer and community work.

"The community has been very loyal to us and we owe some loyalty back."

His father is deceased and his uncles are actively retired from the business now, but members of his generation - including Paul D. Sobey, Robert G.C. Sobey, Christopher Sobey and Jana Sobey - are making their careers within the business.

"There's a certain onus that we're aware of in that this business has survived 100 years and it has become our watch. Many family businesses don't survive one generation. We're the fourth generation."

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