

## **‘A humble pedlar of papers’**

By BOB HOWSE Editor-In-Chief  
Published December 2, 2011

Graham Dennis devoted his life to Nova Scotia, its people and their well-being

He described himself, invariably, as “a humble pedlar of papers.”

But Graham W. Dennis was much more than that in the life of Nova Scotia, a place he loved and knew so well.

For starters, he was the dean of Canadian newspaper publishers, by a Maritime country mile.

He was the proprietor of The Halifax Herald Limited and the publisher of The Chronicle Herald for a remarkable 57 years.

In that long publishing lifetime, he never wavered from an insistence that his newspaper be an independent voice, owned and grounded in Nova Scotia. And a champion of its people’s interests.

As a businessman, he demonstrated, time and again, that a family-operated, locally owned news organization could survive and thrive through the waves of change that swept the newspaper industry.

Those waves were a constant swell in his lifetime: consolidation and chain ownership, convergence with other media and a technology hopscotch from lead-type printing to computerized production to digital delivery of the news.

As a philanthropist, he leaves a legacy that has improved the well-being of Nova Scotians in innumerable ways.

When you receive medical care, chances are you are reaping the benefit of Graham Dennis’s creation of a fund for cancer research and preventive medicine at the Dalhousie Medical School, the Dennis Pediatric Fund at the IWK Health Centre, or his ongoing support for the Victorian Order of Nurses, the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation, the Red Cross, the United Way, Salvation Army and various hospital foundations.

If you attend university in this province, you can thank Graham Dennis for substantial gifts over the years to improve the facilities and the scholarships that are available to enrich your life and education.

He supported programs to provide summer camping vacations for underprivileged children, sheltered workshops and group homes for those with developmental disabilities, and Christmas dinners for low-income families.

He donated land and funds for Dennis Park in Stewiacke and Laurie Park in Waverley.

When you and your family are enjoying a summer's day splash at Bayswater Beach, it's again courtesy of a thoughtful land gift to the public by the publicityshunning publisher with the big social conscience.

Born Aug. 17, 1927, in Halifax, he was the third generation of his family to publish the Nova Scotia dailies, succeeding his great-uncle, Senator William Dennis, and his father, Senator William Henry Dennis.

Some of his earliest memories were learning to spot a good news story and how to play it.

As a small boy, he'd get up early to fetch the paper for his publisher father, he recalled. Then "I'd climb into bed with father to go over the headlines."

The thrill of digging for a scoop never left him. As publisher, he was frequently on the road, wearing out a mountain of tires crisscrossing the province. He'd check out housing starts or new businesses, or just to talk with people about what was happening in their communities.

It was a rare trip that didn't produce some story ideas. And if he wasn't at liberty to elaborate on his sources, an editor might be told it was "a tip from my pet snake Beulah." She usually turned out to be a well-informed serpent.

By age five, he was permitted to try his hand as a newspaper carrier. And by age 13, he began learning the ropes in various departments of the newspaper.

His father's household was a good place for a budding future publisher to observe fascinating and influential public figures.

Those who came to the house included giants like Father Moses Coady, founder of the Antigonish Movement, Lord Beaverbrook, the New Brunswick-born British press baron and cabinet minister, and I.W. Killam, the Yarmouth-born industrialist and financier whose fortune helped fund the Canada Council and IWK Children's Hospital.

Father Coady was a lifelong friend of W.H. Dennis. Graham Dennis vividly remembered the great social reformer "coming to the house on Saturday nights for baked beans."

The conversation at the supper-table in those Depression-era years reflected the shared interest of W.H. Dennis and Moses Coady in lifting the Maritimes' economy, alleviating poverty and helping the unemployed. They talked about ways to deliver adult education, training in practical skills and support for co-operative enterprises in farming, fishing, marketing, crafts and housing.

Those radical ideas, and the human faces of Depression-era hardship in Nova Scotia, had a profound and lasting impact on Graham Dennis.

“Dad would take me for a drive and there would be men sleeping on the street,” he’d recall in later years. “There, but for the grace of God, go I.”

“People would knock on the door, looking for help, their next meal. I never want to see people go through the 1930s again.” Like his father, he became a lifelong supporter of the “co-operative action” vision of Father Coady and his cousin, Father Jimmy Tompkins.

That vision took practical form in the adult education and community development work of the St. Francis Xavier Extension Department, later the Coady International Centre.

In 2007, Graham Dennis made a million-dollar contribution toward building the new Coady International Centre in Antigonish. He hoped the centre’s Dennis Hall would “forever serve as a reminder of the bond that existed between my family and Moses Coady and as a symbol for the prosperity that follows if we work together for the common good.”

Working with Father Coady for the common good was something that both Graham Dennis and his father took to heart.

Although W.H. Dennis was active in the national Conservative party, and a friend of Conservative Prime Minister R.B. Bennett, he had no time for conservatives who were shy about intervening to improve the terrible social conditions of the Depression.

“Dad got interested in Jimmy Tompkins,” Graham Dennis recalled, “because Father Tompkins did not put up with the foolishness of the ultra-ultra-conservatives of Nova Scotia.”

The Herald did stories on Father Tompkins’ work with farmers and fishermen and Tompkins introduced the senior Dennis to Father Coady. Inspired by Coady’s ideas, W.H. Dennis helped the Sisters of Charity establish a clinic and adult education centre at the Star of the Sea Convent in the fishing community of Terence Bay.

A Herald truck would regularly arrive there with food assistance and young Graham Dennis “went down many a time” to help distribute it.

The experience “left many things settled in my mind,” he remembered years later, particularly the feeling that politics should not get in the way of helping lessfortunate people. After earning a degree at McGill in 1949, which implanted a lasting affection for Quebec, he joined The Halifax Herald full-time and became managing director in 1951.

When his father died in 1954, Graham Dennis became publisher. He was 26.

By that time, the company’s publications were the morning Chronicle-Herald and the afternoon Mail-Star, the result of the 1948 merger of the Dennis family’s Herald and Mail papers with the Chronicle and Star titles published by F.B. McCurdy.

The merger ended a long era when newspapers, in Nova Scotia and elsewhere in Canada, were, and were expected to be, politically affiliated and partisan. The Herald for the Conservatives and

The Chronicle for the Liberals. That battle line was ingrained in every reader's mind. But the merger opened a new era, Graham Dennis recalled. "We took it from a Tory paper to an independent paper."

The change suited his philosophy perfectly. For if you pressed him for his own affiliation, his favourite response was, "I'm a troublemaker."

He turned down three offers of a Senate seat over the years. Why? "I just thought that when you took a senatorship, you had a moral obligation to a party. And I wanted the paper to be independent."

One of his proudest achievements was helping his father create a company pension plan with equal treatment for all employees.

"The greatest thing I ever did was the pension fund because of the security and the assurance people would have something for their families."

His idea of being a good employer included knowing all of his employees by name and being there for them when they were dealing with illness or death in their families.

That understanding came from the depths of his own experience. He lost his first wife, Ann, to cancer. He and wife Gay endured the heartache of losing their son William, who died of a seizure at age 30.

With the help of daughters Sarah and Heather, the Dennises chose to honour William in a way that would help others diagnosed with epilepsy. They made a \$2.3-million commitment to endow the William Dennis Chair in Pediatric Epilepsy Research at Dalhousie University.

The aim was to make the IWK Health Centre the foremost pediatric neurology research institution in the world.

Whatever his personal burdens, there were very few days when Graham Dennis wasn't at the Argyle Street (or later, Joseph Howe Drive) office or visiting one of his news bureaus.

Staffers were regularly greeted with a genuinely interested "What's new?" The question was meant to connect with their own lives, not just with the news.

Night news editors could count on a "What's going on tonight?" call, too, because he didn't stop being interested when he went home from the office.

And although he knew your name, you might be "sir" or "madam," too. Or "my dear sir" or "dear madam."

That was his gentlemanly way. It was a mark, as well, of an ingrained respectfulness toward everyone.

It sounded strangely formal at first, but you quickly understood it was his friendly way of saying we're all sirs and madams here together.

There were many offers by media conglomerates to buy him out. He always politely responded, "I'll put you on the list."

But if the list existed, it led a long and uneventful life in his filing cabinet.

It just wasn't in him to sell what he regarded as "a sacred trust" to be operated in "the best interests of the people of Nova Scotia."

That was the spirit in which he took on the newspapers as a young man.

It was the spirit in which he operated them for nearly six decades.

It was the spirit that carried him happily to the office, and kept him intensely interested in Nova Scotia, as long as his health permitted, and well into his 80s.

And it was the spirit in which he proudly passed his legacy on to daughter Sarah and a new generation.

Source: Herald News <http://thechronicleherald.ca/novascotia/38745-%E2%80%98-humble-pedlar-papers%E2%80%99>