

Erskine had big dreams in N.S.

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Sawmill giant, 83, founded MacTara Ltd.



Hugh Erskine, centre, is shown with Ken Streach, left, and John Leefe during a tour of a kiln-dry facility in Upper Musquodoboit.

Sawmill giant Hugh Erskine liked to garden. But the founder and owner of MacTara Ltd. wasn't content to just putter away on his Upper Musquodoboit property when he retired eight years ago.

"He added peonies, blueberries and Swiss chard," his daughter, Tara Erskine, a Halifax lawyer, recalled.

"It was a country garden, so it was already pretty big. But soon it was massive, enough to feed an army."

The hard-driving businessman, who passed away Aug. 18 at 83, always dreamt big.

A farmer's son, he left school at 16 to work in the woods as a lumberjack. Four years later, Erskine, whose people had been in the Musquodoboit Valley since the late 1800s, had set up as an independent lumber contracting business.

Before long, he was supplying logs to Scott Maritimes Ltd.

Erskine opened sawmills in Guysborough County that he visited via his own float plane that he piloted.

In 1978, he returned to Upper Musquodoboit, establishing MacTara which, at one point, employed 300 in his hometown.

“I think he would most want to be remembered as a hard worker and someone who contributed to the Musquodoboit Valley,” his daughter said in an interview.

In Nova Scotia’s forestry industry, though, Erskine’s legacy was large. MacTara, at its peak, was the largest sawmill in Nova Scotia.

In the 1980s, Erskine computerized the province’s first sawmill. Decades before people started talking about sustainability, Erskine was burning biomass to create electricity to run his mill.

In 1998, Erskine built a multimillion-dollar pellet mill, the largest in North America and only the second mill of its kind in the world.

Erskine’s penchant for innovation didn’t end there. Throughout his career, he travelled around the world to see innovative lumbering practices and technologies, many of which he then imported to his own operations here.

“Over his 50-plus years in the sawmill business, Hugh Erskine has revolutionized the industry in Nova Scotia,” said the citation upon his 2003 induction into the Junior Achievement Nova Scotia Business Hall of Fame.

Despite a legendary work ethic, Erskine had other dimensions. His daughter estimates that some 60 Musquodoboit Valley students went to university on scholarships he funded.

Erskine helped build the local funeral co-operative and donated the wood for everything from churches to school playgrounds.

“Anyone who built anything anywhere got the lumber free from him,” said his daughter.

Even in retirement, the married father of two kept busy. He followed his beloved Toronto Blue Jays on television, and then on the radio when his vision began to fail.

Erskine gardened. And his daughter said he kept up with his trademark practical jokes, even though Erskine had to forgo one of them. He could no longer get behind the wheel of the float plane with which he liked to give unsuspecting passengers a bit of a scare by banking steeply.

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