

Honoured for a lifetime of hard work

By Jennifer Vardy Little

The News

GLASGOW - When Jim MacConnell was a kid growing up in Scotsburn and doing odd jobs around Scotsburn Dairy, he never dreamed that one day, he'd end up as president and Chief Executive Officer of the dairy giant.

Relaxing in his New Glasgow home Thursday afternoon, MacConnell grins as he remembers his first jobs at Scotsburn.

"I worked a little as a kid with them - I was born and brought up in Scotsburn, and I was doing little things and at the plant when I was about 10," he recalled.

Working at Scotsburn was something of a family affair. His father, Thomas Cumming MacConnell, had started off at Scotsburn at 19, washing the milk cans, and eventually became the president and C.E.O. of the company himself - footsteps his son would one day follow.

After graduating from Pictou Academy, MacConnell went on to earn a degree in economics from Dalhousie University.

"It's funny - I never worked for Scotsburn in the summers or anything," he said.

It wasn't until December 1964, while he was working for an oil company in Halifax, that MacConnell got the call that changed the course of his business career.

Scotsburn Dairy was poised for a period of major growth. With just 20 employees at the moment, concentrating mostly on the butter business, the Board of Directors offered MacConnell the position of sales manager.

"It was pretty sudden - the economy changed, the company started growing," he said. "Scotsburn had just bought a company in Stellarton, and things mushroomed from there."

MacConnell and his wife, Dorothy, packed up their home and moved back to Scotsburn, where they raised their four daughters.

And that's where the family stayed, until the past few years when MacConnell and his wife moved to New Glasgow. Several of their children still reside there and MacConnell still praises the community - and his dedication came in the form of his insistence that the company's head offices remain in Scotsburn.

"The company grew from the village of Scotsburn to having plants all over eastern Canada and marketing our products all over the world," MacConnell recalls. In fact, Scotsburn now sells ice cream along the eastern seaboard of the United States, in Mexico and the Middle East - although his own favourite flavour, the popular grape nut, is a secret kept well hidden here in Atlantic

Canada. In fact, the majority of the company's business comes from ice cream - their milk sales are pretty much centred in Nova Scotia.

"Through it all, we remained true to our roots. It was suggested that maybe our head offices should be moved, but we wanted to stay true to our roots. We wanted to attract people to come and work for us here, in Scotsburn. Our head offices have all of the technology that they have in Toronto."

That community loyalty can also be seen in his involvement in local organizations. MacConnell served as either the first or second president of longtime groups like the Chamber of Commerce, the Pictou Regional Development Corporation and the Pictou County YMCA.

When his father retired in December 1971, MacConnell stepped in to fill his shoes.

In his 36 years at Scotsburn, MacConnell was largely involved with the many of the expansions the company went through over the years. By the time he retired five years ago, more than 800 people were employed.

"Not all of that growth was organic - we bought a lot of companies," he added. Now retired, MacConnell was the recipient of the Lifetime Achievement award Thursday evening at the Chamber of Commerce Awards Gala.

"I was very, very surprised - I didn't know it was coming," MacConnell said.

In fact, when a chamber member congratulated him on his award while MacConnell was having supper at a local restaurant, he didn't know what he was talking about.

"I thought I'd gotten a golf award or something," he added with a chuckle.

Although MacConnell retired several years back, he's far from a man of leisure. He sits on the advisory board for the company once a year and is a member of the Board of Directors for Co-Op Insurance and Knox College in Toronto. He is the current chair of the Aberdeen Hospital Foundation and an elder at Kirk Church.

"I'm not slowing down - I have a little more time to do travelling now," he said.

Although he remains proud of his work in the community and at the company, MacConnell's biggest pride comes from his family.

"My biggest and most lasting achievement is my family - my wife and I have nothing but pride in our four children and 11 grandchildren," he said. "Unless you have the strength at home, you can't do what I've done. Today, two parents work most of the time - then the mothers typically stayed home and raised the children, and dad was around on the weekends or to do sports."

His job meant sacrifices with his family, he admits. "I was away a lot," he said. "But I did have a

great family life in spite of my career at times. We always made sure to take a family vacation every year and I think my girls have a lot of good memories from growing up."

He does, however, offer some advice to young people just starting out in the business world - in the words of the great bard himself, William Shakespeare, to thine own self be true.

"You have to have integrity," he advised. "Your word is your bond. When dealing with your staff or anyone else, you have to have that integrity."

Head of the class

Business of the Year (Over 25):
MacGregor Custom Machinery

Business of the Year (Under 25):
The Bistro - Heather and Robert Vinton

Business Person of the Year:
John Guest - Michelin

Employee of the Year:
Donnie Graham - Herron GM

Employer of the Year:
Stonehame Chalets - Don and Jeff Gunn

Volunteer of the Year:
Anne Emmett - Pictou Lobster Carnival

Export Achievement Award:
I Matheson Co.Ltd.

Life Time Achievement Award:
Jim MacConnell

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