

# Honourary Life Members

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## John W. Lindsay

CANS Honourary Life Member 2003



The Lindsay name is almost synonymous with construction and development in Nova Scotia, especially in the Halifax area, yet it might never have achieved such status if not for the words of a stranger whose influence is still felt to this very day.

"I don't even know his name," admits John W. Lindsay, "but I remember him so well. He was a mining engineer who was in South Africa when the war broke out and was frozen in his job. He finally got them to let him come home by joining the army. I had joined the army in 1943 but was underage, so they had me in learning courses while I was stationed at Petawawa. That's where I met him.

"He was fascinating to me, where he had been and what he had done, so he had a great deal of influence on me. He told me not to stay in the army, to get out and go to university. I was only at Petawawa a short time before being transferred to Sussex and I never saw him again. But shortly thereafter I left the army and enrolled at the Nova Scotia Technical College. Of course, mine engineering was the first thing on my mind so I signed up for that."

The desire to follow his mentor into the mines didn't last though, and Lindsay later switched his focus to the civil program.

"The more I thought about it, I just didn't want to go underground," he explains.

The switch to civil engineering was a logical one given Lindsay's early influences. He was born in Brooklyn, New York, where his father was a steel worker. Originally from Woodstock, N.B., the family often spent time there as he was growing up, and permanently moved back home when Lindsay was eight years old. He returned to New York in later years, working summer jobs erecting high steel with the famous Mohawk steel men.

"What most people don't know is that there were three times as many Newfoundlanders down there working the steel as there were Mohawks, and they were just as good," Lindsay recalls.

Although he didn't know it at the time, Lindsay's involvement with Newfoundland was to become much more intimate in just a few years. After graduating in 1951, he went to work for a short time in Northern Quebec, but soon left for a larger opportunity in the U.S.

"I was working on a dam and power house for Alcan at Devil's Falls, just north of Lac St. Jean, but my wife was really unhappy there. She couldn't speak French and no one there could speak English, and with a baby it was hard for her. I had become friends with one of the engineers for the U.S. company doing the excavation and this led to me joining Walsh Perini Groves & Slatthey in the U.S." Lindsay says.

This move later brought him to the attention of Rhode Island-based Ayers Hogan Booth, which approached him about going to Greenland to work on U.S. Air Force bases.

"I never made it to Greenland," Lindsay says. "I got as far as Newfoundland and was working on some bases there. Before I could go on to Greenland there was a change in company management and, within just three months of my arrival, I was made manager of the company's Newfoundland subsidiary, Allied Construction Company in St. John's."

Lindsay's association with Ayers Hogan Booth helped shape his future endeavours to a great extent. After serving in St. John's for a number of years, he went on to manage the parent company in Rhode Island. Even after leaving there to strike out on his own in 1959, his first thought was to return to the types of projects he first worked on in Newfoundland.

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"I knew I wanted to work with the U.S. Air Force again," Lindsay says, "so I got in contact with Jack Bryant of Bryant Electric, who I knew from my former days up there. I got my first job through him in Goose Bay, Labrador, and Jack actually became my partner in J.W. Lindsay Construction Ltd. And that's how I ended up with an office in Goose Bay for about 14 years."

John Lindsay was able to buy out Bryant after two years, by which time he was already looking farther afield for future projects. His first job in Halifax came in 1960 when he built a new car dealership for Cole Motors on Columbus Street.

"It's a good building. In fact, it's still there. It was the home of W.A. Moirs for many years," Lindsay points out.

From that small start, John Lindsay's efforts in Halifax expanded rapidly. The company became a dealer for Armco steel buildings – a field it's still in today – and was one of the first companies to adopt the concrete tilt-up construction method, helping to pioneer the Design-Build approach that is today a staple of the industry.

"Eventually the Halifax and Labrador operations became almost like two different companies," Lindsay says. "So, after 14 years there, I sold the Labrador operation to the fellow who was running it for me, Larry Fahey."

With the focus now solely on Nova Scotia and Halifax in particular, Lindsay also decided it was time for a change in his own personal interests.

"Around the same time I was wrapping up operations in Labrador, Larry Wilson was appointed president of the company and I became Chair and CEO. That was when I began my new career as a real estate developer. It wasn't long before my development business became the construction company's biggest customer."

Development efforts started with new buildings along Halifax's Strawberry Hill, including a new home for Williams Stairs Son & Morrow, and expanded to include hundreds of buildings in the Burnside Industrial Park and such well-known waterfront landmarks as the Purdy's Wharf towers and Casino Nova Scotia.

"Burnside is a big area for us," Lindsay says. "There was little land left to develop in Halifax back then and I was looking for a new opportunity. We ended up building the first two buildings to open in Burnside, even before the new bridge was completed. We also built quite a few in Burnside's predecessor, Commodore Estates. In fact, our company headquarters here on Fielding Avenue marks the dividing line between the old Commodore Estates and what's now Burnside."

Lindsay's eye for a good business deal was never limited to the construction industry. Over the years he was involved with a variety of ventures, including Atlantic Industries, Major Foods, Nova Scotia Armature Works and Halifax Shipyards, and a director of Canada Trust, Maritime Life, MTT, Corporate Communications Ltd., Math Resources Ltd. and various real estate and environmental operations.

"I don't want a lot of spare time; I like doing things and coming to work, so I still keep looking for business opportunities. I'm still active as Chair of J.W. Lindsay Enterprises and in the leasing of a few buildings, plus I serve on the boards of several companies."

In addition to his work-related endeavours, Lindsay also maintains a hectic volunteer schedule. After sitting on the board of the YMCA for many years he is still an active trustee; he's a long time member of the Board of the IWK Children's Hospital and the founding Chair of the IWK Foundation; and a former director of Dalhousie University.

This willingness to give back to the community finds its corporate expression in the fact that J.W. Lindsay Construction has been a member of the Construction Association of Nova Scotia almost from day one. The company has a long tradition of its presidents being active members of the Association, including Larry Wilson, Bob Todd and Ernie Porter.

"I've often pushed them to get involved with the Association because I think it's important to be involved and give something back," Lindsay says.

However, Lindsay does admit there's one down side to his longevity in the business.

"Almost all of the large companies I knew when I started up are now gone," he laments.