

Honourary Life Members

Laurie B. Stevens

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There aren't too many people to whom the word "pioneer" can be properly applied, but in the case of Laurie B. Stevens it's certainly justified.

Stevens and his firm L.B. Stevens Construction was the first, and for a few years the only, company in the region to specialize in concrete tilt-up construction. At a time when metal buildings were king, it was a hard sell to convince clients that concrete was the better choice.

"Yes, I guess you could say our work was pioneering," Stevens admits. "The only help we got came from tilt-up companies in California and Dayton, Ohio. All we had was the conviction that it was a sounder building and cheaper to heat, but it was hard to convince clients who were already spending millions to add an extra seven to eight per cent to their costs up front to try tilt-up."

"And in those days we couldn't even compete for government buildings. The regulations called for at least two or three bids for similar construction methods for comparison purposes, and there was no one but us doing tilt-up."

That situation has certainly changed. Tilt-up construction is now commonplace across the region, and has spread from just commercial applications into apartment buildings and multi-storey projects. Perhaps as a result of the early work done in the field by L.B. Stevens Construction, Atlantic Canada leads the country in terms of tilt-up's market penetration.

As is usual with individuals who leave a lasting mark on their chosen profession, Stevens never started out to be a construction pioneer. It was probably the last thing on his mind as a young man just graduating from the then Technical University of Nova Scotia in 1957 with his Bachelor of Civil Engineering.

"I first started out working for the Nova Scotia Power Commission, which was in the process of planning Wreck Cove. When that project fell through, I returned home to look after my father's homebuilding business, due to his development of cataracts, while I planned my next move. I remember back then Nova Scotia looked awfully small to me, and the pull to move on was strong.

"But my father convinced me to speak with a gentleman he knew, Gordon Cowan – who later went on to become a chief justice – and it was his counsel that convinced me to start my own company. Besides, all my family was here and that ultimately was a stronger pull than anything else."

So L.B. Stevens Construction was founded in 1959 with Stevens following his father's lead into homebuilding. Until 1975 the company built dozens of homes across metro Halifax, many of them on speculation. It also ventured into land development through Penhorn Realty, Woodlawn Realty and Bridgeview Realty.

"You have to remember that back then we were selling houses for about \$10,000 to \$12,000. We even offered a five-year warranty for our work, which was pretty good at the time until the Home Ownership Warranty came out for only \$100. It offered the same sort of coverage we did, but ours cost us a lot more than \$100, so I knew it was time to get out."

The turning point came when the company purchased the former Dartmouth Ready Mix from owner Cyril Hubley. That was when the homebuilding side was left behind and the push into tilt-up construction began.

"I was fortunate to have some excellent people with me including Murray Parker, who came to us straight from TUNS (Technical University of Nova Scotia). Together we built well over 100 tilt-up buildings across the region,

mostly using the Design-Build approach that was also just emerging at that time.

"In fact, at one point Murray went to the U.S. to accept an award we won from the Tilt-up Concrete Association of North America for being the biggest tilt-up contractor on the continent. It was quite something for a small company from Nova Scotia down there among all the big American operations."

By this point, Stevens admits his interests had wandered somewhat. With Parker in charge of the construction side of things, Stevens began to explore other business opportunities. Eventually, the company grew into the Stevens Group of companies that included Stevens Group Management, BD Stevens Ltd. (his father's original company), Dartmouth Ready Mix, Quality Concrete of Moncton, Mobile Ready Mix Ltd. of Bedford, Scotia Nursing Homes Ltd., Gateway Materials Ltd., L & M Enterprises Ltd., Concrete Services Ltd. and Citadel Contractors Inc. of Raleigh, North Carolina.

"At one time, we were involved in part ownership in the company that held the Canadian distribution rights for Cross pens," Stevens recalls. "We were into a little bit of everything."

The last name on that list, Citadel Contractors Inc. of Raleigh, North Carolina, was started in 1993 after the American market expressed a lot of interest in the Design-Build approach the company promoted. Stevens remembers North Carolina as a very busy spot for construction back then and the time seemed right to start a U.S. branch operation.

"Glenn Doncaster was our on-site man in charge down there, and our tilt-up efforts really took off. He and his people have won five awards for their designs over the past few years."

Through all the various phases of the company one thing remained constant: a dedication to contributing to the health and growth of the industry as a whole. During the 1960s Stevens was a valuable member of the Nova Scotia Home Builders Association, playing an active role in the development of the housing portions on the National Building Code. He was also instrumental in convincing the Canadian Home Builders Association to hold its national convention in Halifax for the first time in 1963.

"We brought Premier Stanfield and the Mayor of Halifax John Lloyd in to speak to the Association, and we guaranteed them we would sign up more than 100 delegates for the event, which was a big number at the time. I think we ended up with 1,200 delegates registered for the convention, which was an unheard of number. We didn't even have enough hotel rooms in the city to hold

them all. After that, they began to move the convention around the country and 1,200 became the norm.

"I remember we had delegates here from out west who had never seen the ocean and they were amazed when we took them to Peggy's Cove. Poor Mr. Zwicker of Zwicker's Gallery was overrun with these homebuilders wanting to buy every picture he had of the ocean. I believe we sold him out that day."

In the 1970s, Stevens carried that commitment on to the Construction Association of Nova Scotia, acting as a representative for the homebuilding side of the industry on both the Board of Directors and the Labour Relations Committee.

Even Parker carried on this tradition of giving back to the industry, serving for a number of years as president of the Tilt-up Concrete Association of North America.

Stevens' strong business sense in his own dealings also led to him serving on the boards of several other companies over the years. Such companies as PEGA Capital, Atlantic Trust, Atcan Capital Ltd., Novatron, ITI Education Corp. and the Great Eastern Corp. have all sought out his participation. He was also honoured by his alma mater with an Honourary Degree, Doctor of Civil Laws, from Acadia University in 2002, and was chosen as a member of the Junior Achievement Nova Scotia Business Hall of Fame in 2001.

Stevens remained active in all of the company's various operations until 1999, when medical problems led to him slowly winding down his involvement and turning things over to his sons. But he admits the fire to be active in the industry continues to burn.

"My approach was always to find the best possible people, put them in charge and let them do their job. And that's what I miss the most: the people. If the doctor said I could go back, I'd be there tomorrow."

Stevens and his wife, Marilyn, recently moved into a new home in Windsor where they're enjoying the role of grandparents to 14 young members of the Stevens family.