

Building new series of Halifax harbour ferries has special meaning for A.F. Theriault and Son

TINA COMEAU TRICOUNTY VANGUARD

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A.F. Theriault and Son Ltd. in Meteghan River, Digby County, is moving ahead with a \$6.65 million expansion project. TINA COMEAU

Underneath Vincent Coleman's name on Halifax harbour's newest ferry his name appears a second time, in Morse code.

Coleman, a dispatcher for the Canadian Government Railways, is considered a hero of the Halifax Explosion for saving the lives of hundreds of people onboard incoming trains. He sent out a warning, via Morse code, of the imminent danger of explosion posed by the collision of two ships in Halifax harbour and warned the trains to stay back. Coleman, a father of four, was one of the 2,000 people killed in the explosion.

On March 14, just over 100 years later, a ferry bearing his name was dedicated in Halifax harbour. It was built at the A.F. Theriault and Son Ltd. shipyard in Meteghan River, Digby County.

"The men and women working on these ferries have really put a lot of effort into making them world class. They came up with the idea of doing Vincent Coleman's name in Morse code right under his name," says Graham Oakley, vice-president of new construction at A.F. Theriault and Son Ltd. "That's how he's known, for typing the message in Morse code."

This is the fourth Halifax harbour ferry the shipyard has built and construction continues on a fifth ferry. Oakley says they're hoping to launch that last ferry by the middle of August and deliver it to Halifax around Labour Day.

These ferry contracts have been good for this boatbuilding company.

"We average around 40 employees on one vessel and this has been going on since 2013, so it'll be five strong years of steady construction for us, it's been great," Oakley says. "The vessels run anywhere from \$4.2 to \$4.7 million, times five, so it's been well over a \$20-million contract for us, spread over three contracts."

And it's not the only work happening here. The shipyard has been busier than it's ever been with its product line that has diversified over the decades to include not only fishing vessels, but also pleasure boats, fire boats, ferries, pilot boats, work boats and barges. Several years ago the company even started making Hammerhead Unmanned Surface Vehicle target drone vessels that can simulate threats at sea and are used by many countries in self-defence military training exercises.

"We've made well over 500 units now," says Oakley. "We just shipped out another batch last week."

And on top of the new construction happening, Oakley says repair work for vessels also keeps them very busy.

It begs the question: How do they get it all done?

“We’ve been expanding,” says Oakley. “We’ve been hiring new employees every day. I think we’re almost at 240 employees now.”

Because it’s hard sometimes to find young tradespeople, he says they have also established a working relationship with the Nova Scotia Community College at the Yarmouth and Shelburne campuses.

“I think I’ve got five welding students for March break. We’ve had carpentry students and electricians, pipefitters. We have a close relationship with the community college, that’s for sure. They supply a lot of our up-and-coming tradespeople.”

Oakley says all of their employees take pride in their work and says there has also been a lot of pride in constructing vessels that are named after people who have made significant contributions to their communities and to society.

Aside from the Margaret’s Justice ferry they constructed for Brier Island — named after Margaret Davis, a 63-year-old widow who spent weeks walking to Halifax and back seeking justice in 1828 when a neighbour tried to claim her land as his own — Oakley says it’s been meaningful to build the new fleet of Halifax harbour ferries.

“We’ve had a chance to meet the families of all of the people the boats have been named after,” he says, referring to the latest ceremony held in Halifax for the Vincent Coleman.