

'Our survival and success is our willingness to change'

G.E. Barbour CEO reminisces on 150 years of history

SARAH SEELEY TELEGRAPH-JOURNAL



Sylvia MacVey, the president and CEO of G.E. Barbour's PHOTO: SUBMITTED



G.E. Barbour General Store PHOTO: SUBMITTED

This is the second in a series of features on three businesses in the Saint John area celebrating its 150th anniversary.

SUSSEX • Sylvia MacVey grew up with business sense in her blood.

She remembers visiting her father, Ralph Brenan, Jr., in his office on the Saint John waterfront when he was the president of G.E. Barbour Inc., a well-known wholesale spice and tea retailer.

When the company moved to Sussex, she and her siblings used to play near the pickle tanks. G.E. Barbour used to sell pickles and there were large tanks on the property.

"It was probably dangerous, but it was fun."

Now, MacVey is the president and CEO of G.E. Barbour. She grew up hearing stories of the company and befriending the longtime employees.

"If you look at our history, we have touched thousands of New Brunswickers."

G.E. Barbour was founded in 1867, the year Canada became a nation. George L. Barbour and his brother, William Barbour, established a wholesale grocery business on South Wharf called Barbour Brothers. It burned in the Great Fire of 1877.

After the loss of his store, George L. Barbour rebuilt it. During the 1890s, he was helped by his son George E. Barbour, who eventually took ownership of the company and renamed it G.E. Barbour Co., Ltd.

Over the years, the organization has added other companies to the business, including Martime Spice and Tea Company, McCreedy Foods, Tracy Syrups, Morses Tea, and Dickason and Armstrong, which is a tea company known for its trademark, King Cole.

The business also added branch locations during its history in Fredericton, Woodstock, Edmundston and St. Stephen after acquiring grocery wholesale companies like A.I. Teed Co. Ltd. and Reed Co. Ltd.

Ralph Brenan Sr. started working for G.E. Barbour in 1949. He rose through the ranks and bought the company from the Barbour family. During Brenan's time, the business grew and in 1962, moved its head office to a five-acre facility in Sussex

A remnant of the old G.E. Barbour business remains in Saint John with the Barbour's General Store at the foot of King Street. It was restored in 1967 and serves as a museum, gift shop and information centre.

Brenan's son, Ralph Jr., joined the company and in 1971, he became the president. His children, Christine, Grant, Fred and Sylvia joined the business in the 1970s and 1980s. The family faced a hardship in 1985 when he suffered an accidental disability and died of his injuries.

His son, Grant, took the helm and steered the company into a period of investment of strengthening the King Cole brand in Atlantic Canada and moving it onto Quebec shelves.

In 2011, MacVey, Grant's sister, consolidated the ownership of G.E. Barbour and gave it a new direction for the future.

The toughest struggle of a family-owned business is overcoming the generational gap, said MacVey.

"When a family looks at the future of the company and they're having conversations about what the future looks like, there are only a couple of choices. Either you move on and leave the company for someone else to run, or you continue to take it on."

She said there were many factors that influenced her decision to take the lead.

"The biggest reason is I thought there were opportunities we hadn't concentrated on and I wanted to explore those."

She is striving to continue King Cole's expansion outside the Atlantic region and break into the nut butter market with a line of products.

MacVey said the company was able to thrive for 150 years because of its flexibility.

"I think our survival and success is our willingness to change," she said.

"It is about constantly looking ahead for the right opportunities that will take us through the next generation."

Colleen Piers, the supervisor of the tea and spice department, has been working for G.E. Barbour for 30 years. She started as a tea packer working night shifts at the facility. Now, she is responsible for the products being made in both the spice and tea departments.

Piers said during her time with the company, she has made many close friends. She calls the crew she is working with her "girls."

"It's almost like a family here," she said. "Everyone is just watching out for everybody."

Sometimes New Brunswickers do not recognize G.E. Barbour, but they know the products like King Cole, said Piers.

"They don't realize it's right there in their backyard."

MacVey said the company is more personal than the bottom line.

"We weren't just a paycheque for these people. We have an influence on people's jobs and we have to be aware of that all the time."