

Chronicle Herald publisher dies at 84

By DAN LEGER Director of News Content

Published December 1, 2011 - 8:50pm

Dennis never lost faith in daily newspapers as a force for positive change

Graham W. Dennis, publisher of The Chronicle Herald for more than 57 years and a legend in Canadian journalism, died Thursday after a brief illness. Mr. Dennis, 84, died at home in Halifax, surrounded by family.

Born in Halifax in 1927 and a fiercely proud Nova Scotian, Graham Dennis became publisher in the days of typewriters and telegraphs and presided over one of Canada's few independent newspapers into the Internet age.

Mr. Dennis, as he was known to all on his staff, was still proprietor of The Halifax Herald Ltd. and publisher of The Chronicle Herald well past his 80th birthday.

His tenure at the paper extended into the digital age, when newspapers are as well-known for websites as for newsprint. It is an era that would have seemed utterly foreign to him in 1954 when, at age 26, he became publisher after the death of his revered father. Never during that time did he lose faith in the idea that a daily newspaper should be a force for positive change in the community, as well as a business.

Graham Dennis was the third generation Dennis to run the newspaper.

His father, Sen. William Henry Dennis, and his great-uncle, Sen. William Dennis, preceded him.

The role of chief executive officer for The Halifax Herald Ltd. is now held by Sarah Dennis, Graham Dennis's daughter. She, along with her sister Heather and his wife Gay, were with the publisher in his final hours.

His cherished son William died in August 2002 at age 30.

Famed within the company for his determination to stay involved with the newspaper he loved, Mr. Dennis still regularly came into his office very late into his life. He had been in failing health for some time but had recently taken a turn for the worse.

Ian Thompson, associate publisher of The Chronicle Herald, spoke on behalf of the family Thursday night.

"He was a great Nova Scotian, loyal most of all to his family, his province, his newspaper and his employees," Mr. Thompson said.

"Notably, he died on Dec. 1, the anniversary of what he often said was his proudest moment: the 1950 start of the pension plan for Herald employees."

A true gentleman in the old-fashioned sense of the word, the publisher delighted in the successes of his employees and their families. He was deeply concerned for their welfare and for the well-being of all Nova Scotians.

Mr. Dennis believed that the best remedy for the province's ills was a strong economy and good jobs for working people. To his last days, he remained deeply interested in how business was faring across Nova Scotia.

He privately laughed at what many people perceived to be his political leanings.

Those who knew him were well aware that while he might have been conservative in economic matters, he was very liberal in his social views. One of his personal heroes was Moses Coady, founder of the Antigonish Movement for social responsibility and community development. A boy during the Great Depression, Mr. Dennis never forgot how hard life was for his fellow citizens during that terrible period. He often remarked that every effort of society was needed to make sure nothing like that ever happened again.

Because of that experience, Mr. Dennis contributed generously to charities and to the disadvantaged, often anonymously. Charities as diverse as medical research institutes, the Salvation Army and even the Nova Scotia public land bank benefited from his largesse.

Yet he always remained humble, quick to praise others for their achievements while minimizing his own.

In 1984, he was named to the Order of Canada. He rarely spoke of the honour but proudly wore the distinctive snowflake pin on his suit jacket's lapel.

Mr. Dennis was proud of the Herald's independence, telling visitors about the many offers that had been made to buy it. All were rebuffed, politely but firmly. Today, The Chronicle Herald is one of the last true independent dailies in Canada.

And it is still delivered to every town and village in this province. Mr. Dennis believed The Herald should be available everywhere people wanted it. Today, about half the paper's subscribers live in the metropolitan Halifax area and about half beyond its borders.

Readership surveys suggest the paper is read by almost 300,000 Nova Scotians daily.

As news spread of his passing, accolades and condolences streamed into the newspaper and to family members.

Among the first to speak was Premier Darrell Dexter, who issued a statement expressing condolences to the family and praising the publisher's dedication to Nova Scotia and its people.

"Graham Dennis leaves behind a long and important legacy in this province," the premier said. "He loved his newspaper and he loved Nova Scotia."

“He will be remembered as a fine businessman and a great Canadian. On behalf of all Nova Scotians, (I extend) my condolences to the Dennis family and The Chronicle Herald family. Nova Scotia has lost a dear friend and a great champion.”

Mr. Dexter is the latest in a long line of premiers from all three major parties to serve during Mr. Dennis’s tenure. Mr. Dennis had famous battles with some and got along famously with others. And party affiliation didn’t matter. What mattered was their degree of dedication to Nova Scotia.

Source: Chronicle Herald <http://thechronicleherald.ca/novascotia/38519-chronicle-herald-publisher-dies-at-84>