

Highland *heart*





SANDOR FIZLI

Antigonish is one of Canada's best-known university towns. Around it thrives a business-savvy community with strong cultural traditions

by TOM MASON

In 1997, Yolande DeGruchy started Indigo Brook Designs, her Antigonish clothing-design company, making casual outerwear from polar fleece and microlamb. But her other product line seems like a contradiction in styles: lacy, unbleached cotton dresses adorned with fine embroidery work—styles that would have been more familiar to her great-grandmother. DeGruchy loved the dresses, and she quickly realized other people did too.

“I would take a few of the dresses to shows and I found there was a lot of interest in them,” she says. Suddenly, instead of competing



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with huge clothing companies such as Patagonia and Columbia Sportswear, Indigo Brook was in a category all on its own. Today, DeGruchy's line of retro cotton designs is selling in stores in the Atlantic provinces, New England, Ontario, and Quebec—her biggest market.

DeGruchy's business style is no accident. In fact, Indigo Brook resembles the place that spawned it—comfortable with the present but with a firm grip on its rich past. Antigonish, N.S., is a charming sophisticated town whose strange-sounding Mi'kmaq name is well known in far-flung corners of the world. Eighty years ago, a social movement was founded there that became known as the Antigonish Movement. And at its heart is one of Canada's most highly respected universities: St. Francis Xavier (StFX).

The town also revels in its Scottish heritage, made manifest each year during the annual Highland Games, the oldest games held outside of Scotland. Thousands come to Antigonish to watch anachronistic contests such as the caber toss (where giant men heave huge logs end over end) and the sword dance. It's a place where ubiquitous bagpipes are played at weddings and concerts and where kilts are commonly worn for daily dress.

Antigonish is small as far as Nova Scotian urban centres go; there are close to 5,000 permanent residents, and when university is in session the population swells to 9,000. The county that surrounds it is one of the smallest in the province. But what Antigonish lacks in size, it makes up in geographic assets. One of the finest ice-free harbours in North America,

at the Strait of Canso, is just a short drive away. Excellent rail and road links connect the area to the rest of the province and beyond. And StFX offers a virtual link to the business world. Antigonish is also a well-educated town, with twice the number of university graduates than the provincial average. Its residents make their living in careers as diverse as university teaching, business services, crafts, medicine, administration, and numerous trades.

CATALYST

A century ago, Antigonish was one of the poorest counties in Canada, with most of its inhabitants eking out a marginal living by farming and fishing. In the 1920s, inspired by community leaders such as StFX vice-president Father James J. Tompkins, county residents embarked on a program of self-help unlike any seen before. They established one of North America's first credit unions and launched farming and fishing co-operatives to diversify their meagre economy. Under the leadership of the StFX Extension Department, this movement was the origin of most of Atlantic Canada's credit unions and co-operatives. The university even stepped in with free educational programs. Economists called the phenomenon the Antigonish Movement; it is still studied by community developers and has become a blueprint for Third World development.

Today, StFX keeps the spirit of the movement alive through the Coady International Institute, which attracts community-development leaders from developing countries around the world. To date, more



Millennium man: StFX president Sean Riley sees the university as a catalyst for community growth.



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line of work. John Walsh Bagpipes Ltd. consists of six people who manufacture a smaller version of the familiar instrument—perfect for anyone who wants a quieter bagpipe to play indoors. Walsh exports his bagpipes around the world to Germany, Australia, New Zealand, France, and the Middle East—and to Scotland, Ireland, and England.

Lawrence Campbell's bagpipe operation is a more humble affair. Campbell is an innovator in the great tradition of Antigonish craftsmanship; a machinist by trade, he makes his pipes out of black nylon rods with an engine lathe—a better system, he

claims, than traditional wooden pipes. "My son was playing the pipes and he was having a hard time keeping them in tune," he says. "I was afraid he was going to get tired of it and give up

playing, so I made him the set out of nylon." Today, many bagpipers appreciate the quality of Campbell's custom-made handcrafted nylon pipes.

As one of Antigonish's largest employers, Levy's Leathers Ltd. is at the other end of the craft scale. Started in 1973 by founder Dennis Levy as a cottage industry, the plant currently produces leather guitar straps and gig bags for 5,000 retailers in North America and sells in 30 other countries worldwide. The company has succeeded by doing for the guitar strap what Gucci did for the purse, carefully building a brand that is recognized around the world. Musicians who use the strap include Britney Spears's band, the Barenaked Ladies, NSYNC's band,

and U2.

Company vice-president Harvey Levy says Levy's tapped into an important factor early on—that a guitar strap is one of the few chances most guitar players get to make a fashion statement. Before Levy's existed, guitar straps were often seen as simply necessities, but Levy's has turned them into chic accessories. ■



Levy's leather guitar straps are used by musicians around the world.

Cultural surplus

A close look at Antigonish County's history reveals a variety of founders. The Mi'kmaq have a strong presence here; so do the Dutch. The village of Pomquet, just a few kilometres beyond Antigonish's town limits, is an Acadian settlement. But the culture of the Scottish highlands permeates the county most completely.

Wedged firmly between Nova Scotia's other predominately Scottish counties—Pictou to the west and Inverness and Victoria to the northeast on Cape Breton Island—Antigonish is known as the Highland Heart of Nova Scotia, and Scottish traditions are fiercely guarded. The annual Antigonish Highland Games is the oldest event of its kind outside of Scotland. The local meat-processing plant includes the Scottish delicacy haggis on its product list. And at least two bagpipe manufacturers ply their trade here.

One is John Walsh, an expatriate Yorkshireman who played in pipe bands for over three decades before moving back to Nova Scotia from Toronto 10 years ago, leading him to his new



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Bagpipes are big business.



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than 4,000 development professionals have received specialized training in fields such as micro-finance, community-based resource management, and management of development organizations. The focus is on self-sufficiency. The institute has put Antigonish on the international map, according to StFX president Sean Riley. According to him, you could easily fly into developing countries around the world and more quickly find someone who knows about the Coady Institute than you would find someone familiar with Nova Scotia.

As at home in business as in the academic world, Riley isn't a typical university president. A graduate of StFX himself (class of 1974), he went on to receive a Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford University, where he completed a doctorate in international relations. His first career was in the public sector as a ministerial policy advisor for the federal Departments of Finance and External Affairs and the Privy Council. He later moved to the private sector with the National Bank of Canada in corporate finance and treasury. From 1989 to 1996, he became an entrepreneur in his own right as president and CEO of Belanger Laminates Inc., a manufacturing company based in Montreal.

The university is one of the main employers in Antigonish County, but Riley says the process of developing new jobs is slow and painstaking. "I ran a manufacturing business through the recession of the early '90s, so I have a tremendous respect for the energy it takes to create 100 or 200 sustainable jobs," he says. "You have to work for years trying to establish a beachhead."

The new Charles V. Keating Millennium

Centre is a key part of Antigonish's beachhead. Named in honour of Dartmouth-based entrepreneur and cable-television pioneer Charles Keating, a former StFX student who donated the original seed money for the project, the Millennium Centre was first conceived as a multipurpose rink and recreation facility for the university and the community. It has evolved into much more than that; when it opens later this year, the centre will also serve as a state-of-the-art meeting and convention spot catering to the business community in Antigonish and beyond.

In fact, the Millennium Centre could become the basis for a whole new industry in Antigonish, one Riley calls retreat training. With the centre and other university facilities, Antigonish can offer a unique destination for groups of a few hundred people who need to spend a few intensive weeks upgrading their skills. It's a new twist on a product StFX has been selling

for a long time: an unspoiled, low-distraction environment that's ideal for learning. The business model is carefully designed to play off the university's strengths. The town can't offer the kind of hotel infrastructure that Halifax or other regional centres have, making 1,000-person conventions out of the question. But it can offer IT support wrapped up in an offbeat cultural package, which is perfect for companies who need to train small groups of people over long periods of time.

"Our information technology infrastructure is much more sophisticated than any hotel could hope to offer," says Riley. "You can present audiovisual material in a hotel, but you can't have the sophisticated kind of technological interaction that is necessary for most advanced training. For example, it's now common to be interacting with systems and corporate data from multiple locations around the world. People may be in Nova Scotia but they



Held every July since 1861, the Antigonish Highland Games is the oldest held outside of Scotland.



Goldfinger

It was one of the strangest calls the StFX alumni affairs office ever received. An RCMP officer, a native of Cape Breton stationed in Western Canada, called the university to trace the ownership of an X-Ring he had found in a pawn shop. Nobody told him the ring was stolen. Nobody had to; the officer just knew that no rightful owner would ever pawn an X-Ring.

Claimed to be the third most recognizable ring in the world—after the Super Bowl ring and the papal ring—the X-Ring has long been considered the most valuable item a StFX graduate can receive after a degree. The ring has been copyrighted by the university, and tradition says it must be earned to be worn—only a senior student or a StFX graduate is allowed to buy one. The annual X-Ring ceremony has become one of the highlights of the school year.

So what about the ring in the West Coast pawn shop? It was eventually traced back to a judge who had reported it missing eight years earlier; he was delighted to get it back. —TOM MASON

may need to set up a back-and-forth interaction with an oil rig in the North Sea.”

The other piece of the marketing puzzle is more intangible, according to Riley. “Along with a tremendous set of technologies, we can offer all the attractions of beaches, golf courses, music, and culture. We’re well positioned as a jumping-off point for trips around the Cabot Trail,” he says. “These are things that we here in northern Nova Scotia tend to take for granted, but they are also an attractive hook for people coming from out of province.”

To become more competitive, the university faculty is looking for ways to enhance its appeal to the international retreat-training market. One example is the Gerald Schwartz School of Business and Information Systems, which has carefully aligned itself with SAP—a leading producer of e-business software. With more than 15,000 businesses around the world using SAP e-business solutions, the university’s experience with that company’s protocol is a powerful drawing card for businesses who need to bring their people up to speed on the software.

StFX is also studying ways to become a

training centre for the burgeoning offshore industry, including setting up a petroleum institute. It’s a natural match; on the map, Antigonish appears removed from Nova Scotia’s oil and gas industry, but the town is actually poised to become a centre for the industry, according to John Parker, the executive director of the Antigonish Regional Development Authority.

With a large hospital, a shopping centre, and a good supply of commercial real estate, Antigonish has long served as the retail and administrative hub for nearby Guysborough County, a fact that offshore companies have noticed. Several petroleum firms have already set up shop in Antigonish. Devon Energy Corp. is currently analysing data from onshore seismic exploration in the town, and Newpark Environmental Services—a Louisiana-based provider of drilling fluids, site access, and environmental services—has opened an office. Antigonish is even talking about setting up a petrochemical-development industry. “When Sable [Sable Offshore Energy Inc.] and Maritimes & Northeast Pipeline were developing their Guysborough oper-

ations, almost all of the executives involved chose Antigonish as their home,” says Parker. “With all of the amenities, the lifestyle, the opportunities with things such as organized sports we have here, it’s a natural choice.”

The area boasts some impressive tourism appeal. Spectacular beaches, including the sandy dune beach at Pomquet, have some of the most unspoiled and warmest waters in the province. The road that circles the Cape George peninsula from Antigonish to Arisaig has been nicknamed the mini trail. Arisaig is a fishing village with ocean vistas, a view of distant Prince Edward Island, and a picturesque quality to rival Peggys Cove. The county also bustles with industry. Arisaig Fisheries is another large employer in Antigonish County, and the community is full of small family-owned businesses.

Jim MacDonald runs North Shore Boats Ltd., a fibreglass boat-building operation in Arisaig. MacDonald steers clear of the familiar Cape Island design, concentrating on Nova Scotia’s other great boat-building style: the Northumberland Strait. A true aficionado of the design, he swears the Northumberland style is a little faster and flashier than the Cape Islander. His company sells six to 10 Northumberland boats to fishermen and pleasure boaters annually, mainly in Canada and the United States. Word of mouth, strategically placed advertising, and the Internet all help.

“We’re quite a ways away from the American market, but technology has brought us much closer over the years,” says MacDonald. “The big reason for this is the exchange rate. The 60-something-cent dollar is a great incentive for Americans to come up here to buy boats from us.” Business has been so good that MacDonald’s cousin and former employee, David MacDonald, set up a competing business of his own.

With infrastructure and IT systems in place, Antigonish is ready for the 21st century—ready to provide businesses with a secure and stable home. “We’ve got everything a business needs here to set up operations,” says Parker. “At the same time, this is the perfect place to bring up a family. What more could anyone want?” ■