



The True CAPTAIN NEWFOUNDLAND

BY KEVIN KELLY

Sara
Rostowski
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As the edgy tabloid he created turns 65, *The Newfoundland Herald* speaks with publisher Geoffrey W. Stirling, who, at 90, is as vibrant and forward thinking as he was when *The Herald* began in 1946.

(above) Sara Rostowski Photo

The legend of our magazine's founder, Geoffrey W. Stirling, is one that is truly larger than life. Now 90, Stirling, truly the last of the media mavericks in Canada, has lived 'a movie' that could only be described as an epic blockbuster, filled with more twists and turns than a Hitchcockian thriller.

A member of the Order of Newfoundland and Labrador, the Royal St. John's Regatta Hall of Fame and the Canadian Association of Broadcasters Hall of Fame, Stirling, from his early days, was a visionary figure. Even now, when you talk to him, that vision hasn't dimmed. In an era where Canadian media conglomerates in this country are the norm, Stirling is truly the last of the independents.

"THE MOVIE" CONTINUES

When you look back at what he has done for the Newfoundland media landscape alone, he has been an innovator, a pioneer, and there's no denying that he did it his own way. That's the business side of Geoff Stirling. But there's another side. Perhaps no bigger event of Stirling's life, from an outsider's perspective, could have been when he sat down with a Beatle, on his own terms.

In October of 1969, Stirling and son Scott contacted John Lennon while vacationing in London. The telex note to Lennon,

one of the biggest, most influential rock stars of the day, and possibly of all time, simply said: "I've heard your *Come Together*. So here I am. Geoff Stirling."



"I've heard your *Come Together*. So here I am. Geoff Stirling."

A few hours later, they are seated together at Apple headquarters in London discussing how Stirling's group of Canadian radio stations, and CKGM-FM in particular, could help John and Yoko spread their peace message. In return, Lennon agreed to an in-depth interview for the Stirling stations.

It wasn't the last rock star he met, whether it was Tina Turner or Rod Stewart. He's also interviewed a who's-who of people over the years, from political leaders to influential thinkers.



"To thine own self be true"

Yes, Geoff Stirling has seemingly done it all.

But the mysteries of Geoff Stirling are as intriguing as the legend itself. He's a darn fine ping pong player for example. I made the mistake of playing him once at his house in Motion, when he was 88, and it wasn't long before I found out who relished in the competition. He made me sweat, deriding me at first for my lack of pingpong skill and, as I got better, he gave me credit. But he wasn't letting me win. Not Geoff Stirling.

One can only comprehend the hours and hours, perhaps even days, of video of Stirling out there somewhere, the numerous interviews, the life as a movie, compelling, intriguing, waiting to be viewed. He's lived a life that many would envy, and he's done it all on his own terms.

A couple of years ago, I spoke to Moses Znaimer, a fellow media titan, the founder of Much Music and Bravo, and current owner of Vision TV and *Zoomer* magazine. After telling him where I worked, he lit up, instantly asking how Geoff was. With a bright smile, he wondered: "Is he still buying up all that gold?"

NO LIMITATIONS... JUST VIBRATIONS

Stirling, to many Newfoundlanders, has an air of mystery about him. It's a mystery that epitomizes that larger-than-life persona that he so carries. When you do speak to him, you never truly know where the conversation is headed, and I think he likes it that way. For Stirling, it's all about expanding the limitations that society has imposed.

In his own book, *In Search of A New Age*, Stirling wrote, "There had been nothing in my education thus far that had even hinted at man expanding his limitations, which I began to see were self-imposed. It was a further revelation to me to learn that man is so structured that he has to first create the tools within himself in order to unleash the power to think, and that a man simply cannot comprehend new information or new knowledge until a corresponding vibratory brain cell has been willingly prepared to absorb it."



For Stirling, there was, and still is, no limitations. His relationship with our first premier, Joseph R. Smallwood, was one that was most unique. It was Smallwood who sold him that first bit of newsprint that became the inaugural issue of *The Sunday Herald* in May of



**"STILL STRONG,
STILL RELEVANT"**

Stirling Communications International (SCI) President Scott Stirling says this week's 65th anniversary edition of *The Newfoundland Herald* is a remarkable achievement. "It's remarkable because Newfoundlanders have supported it all these years," says Stirling, who's been guiding the magazine for almost two decades. "There's a demand for it, and we have the largest (magazine) circulation east of Quebec. Sixty-five years later, we're still strong, still relevant, still reflecting our province to its people. When you look at the big magazine publications that have gone out of business, the fact that we're still around and are successful is quite a feat," he says.

Speaking with *The Herald* about the anniversary, Stirling credits the vision of his father, Geoffrey W. Stirling, in ensuring the magazine's success over the years. "The vision of Geoff as a businessman and entrepreneur was recognizing the special status that the *Herald* has, its mandate to reflect Newfoundland and Labrador back to its readers," he says.

"We have changed with the times, evolved from a tabloid to a magazine with a glossy cover. But that mass appeal instinct has been a big part of *The Herald's* success, no question. It has become a brand people can relate to and people want to read it every week. It has become a big part of people's lives here and 90 percent of Newfoundlanders are aware of the magazine and what it looks like. We're proud of the fact that



▶ *Geoff Stirling and son Scott*

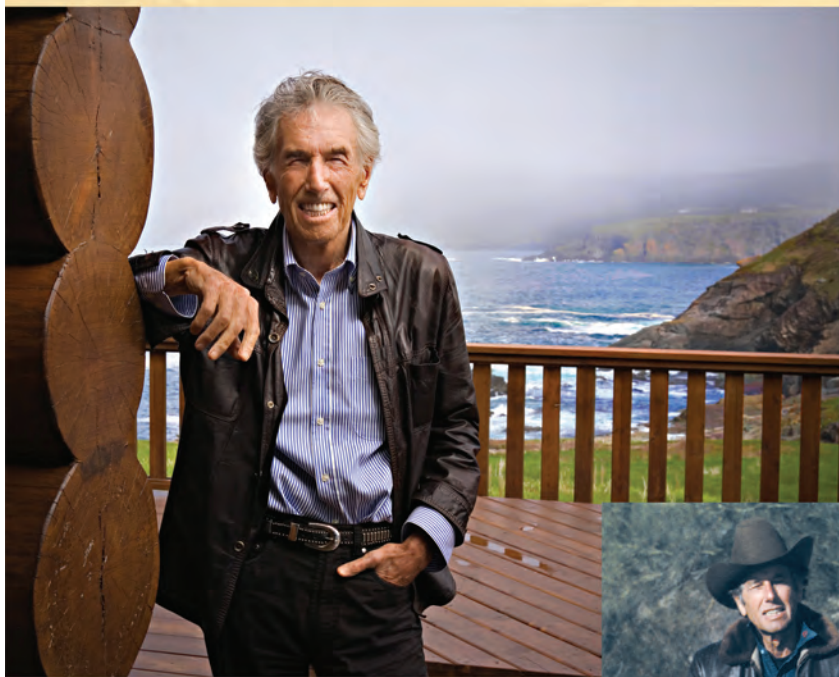
it's a provincial magazine, part of the same conglomerate that NTV is a provincial TV station and OZ FM is provincial radio," he says. "It's something we've worked hard to maintain. It's touched a chord with people."

Stirling endorses the fact that people love local content, and believes that's one particular reason why *The Newfoundland Herald* has been so successful for

over six decades. "We're happy to reflect Newfoundland and Labrador to Newfoundlanders and Labradorians," he says.

"The magazine showcases Newfoundland talent, especially in the arts, sports, politics and business. That localization is what has made us successful. It's touched a chord with people."





(left) Sara Rostotski Photo

precursor to *The Newfoundland Herald* you are now holding, to life.

With a start-up fund of \$1,000 that he'd saved from working at his father's restaurant, Stirling purchased 60 tonnes of newsprint from Smallwood's then defunct paper and launched *The St. John's Sunday Herald*, a scrappy tabloid that played an important role in the pre-Confederation era.

"When I was 15, I wrote a column for *The Daily News*, once a week," Stirling says of his beginnings in media. "It got me into journalism, and I found I liked it. In college and university, I was involved in journalism in various ways. It seemed like a natural fit, being involved in things, and influencing things by giving it publicity, and helping get people involved. It's still a wonderful career, never a dull moment. It gives you an awareness."



'46. It was Smallwood who co-starred with him in the NFB documentary, *Waiting For Fidel* — two different visions of what they wanted to achieve by meeting Fidel Castro. They didn't meet him, but the story, they say, is all about the journey.

A MAN OF FIRSTS

Stirling is very much his own man, never believing in the word can't. And to quote a lyric from rock icons, The Grateful Dead, what a long, strange trip it's been.

Interviewing "The Chairman of the Board" is always a little imposing, because while you may be the one to question him originally, he also has no shortage of questions and opinion to throw right back at you.

He challenges you to think, wants your opinion, and if he doesn't agree with it, you'll know. He's lived a life of questioning, often defying the odds. People, like Smallwood, told him *The Herald* wouldn't survive.

He brought television to Newfoundland in 1955, overcoming no shortage of odds along the way and many believed it wouldn't work. He was the first to broadcast TV 24 hours a day, now the norm. He brought FM radio to Newfoundland in 1977, another first in a lifetime of firsts.

And in '46, it was he that brought *The Sunday Herald*, the



65 YEARS LATER

In 1946, Newfoundland was being run by a Commission of Government. We had lost our responsible government, and the Commission consisted of seven persons appointed by the British government. No elections took place, and no legislature was convened, for the next 15 years.

"It was run by four English governors, and three Newfoundlanders," he recalls. "They had the advantage and always had the majority vote."

There was no political opposition and it was a changing time in Newfoundland. It was the time of the National Convention, and there was important discussion underway about Newfoundland's future. "In 1946, the (Second World) war was over, and the Americans here were demobilizing in Argentia and Stephenville. It was an exciting time to be here and doing what you enjoy," he says.

On May 12, 1946, that first issue of the *St. John's Sunday Herald* was released, and he chuckles at the thought of it hitting 65 years.

"65 years. It's real," he says proudly of the accomplishment. "I did it week by week. You don't think 65 years ahead because you'd probably would have laughed about it. Joey had told me it wouldn't work but it's a question of attitude about everything."

It was not an easy endeavour for the young Stirling.

"I did everything," he says of those first few years of *The Herald's* existence. "I delivered it around Conception Bay, and wrote



everything except the columns, and they dropped out after the third or fourth week because it became too hot for them. We started taking on the Commission of Government, and they passed an edict in council for no advertising. So I didn't get any advertising. I had to make it work through circulation, and that's just what we did."

At one point, circulation reached 75,000 copies. "You gotta remember this was before television," he says. "It was outside St. John's, and there was no road across Newfoundland until '66. We forget that, and we were 20 years into existence by then. Hard to think, isn't it?" he questions.

Looking back over the past 65 years, Stirling pauses. "You can see that we were pointing out things that weren't being pointed out."

THE BATTLE WITH FRANK

The Herald has certainly done that in its 65 years. Whether it was UFOs, crop circles, Atlantis, Eastern mysticism, the mysteries of Stonehenge, the importance of buying gold, or the Shroud of Turin, *The Herald* brought those ideas to the people of Newfoundland. "This is the kind of thing we've always done at *The Herald*," he says. "You were heralding in news, it's up to you to not be afraid. Most people don't want to be shaken. They want things nice and simple. When do you consider what's happening on the planet right now is normal?"

He points out one of his own experiences, going on a diving expedition in Bimini in the Bahamas and he says you could see roads underneath the sand, perhaps from another time, another city, another era. It's all about the possible.

"Basically it proves that the planet is much older, trillions of years older than the scientists up to now have stated. To think otherwise is nonsense. Darwin's theory of evolution put everybody off the trail, in my opinion."

Stirling's media power, surprisingly, didn't translate into the political world. He tried politics once, in 1975, as one of 28 candidates of the Liberal Reform Party (which Smallwood led after losing the 1974 Liberal leadership to Ed Roberts). Stirling admits that he didn't use the Liberal word in his campaign, preferring the word



reformer. "I ran, but didn't run under his colours," says Stirling.

He called that political run "an interesting experiment." "I said to Joe, I'll run only if I can run in Corner Brook (Humber West) against Frank Moores (who was premier at the time.)"

"It was worth the effort," he says. "Joey didn't have enough candidates, he was out of power. But it was a fascinating experience. I went in 14 days before the election had a meeting, and about 1,400 people showed up, and that's how many votes I got."

In the end, he lost to Moores 2,419-1,380.

HE'S A BELIEVER

Politically astute as ever, he still, on occasion, gets his opinions out about issues affecting not only Newfoundland, but world affairs. His knowledge and depth of understanding is quite remarkable, and he isn't afraid to use it. But one thing always comes to mind when you think of him.

He, like his hero, Captain Newfoundland, has lived by a code. "To Thine Own Self Be True."

Geoff Stirling has more than lived up to that code in his 90 years. As we celebrate *The Herald's* 65th anniversary, we salute our founder for living a life and belief that there are no limits to what you can do when you believe in yourself. ♠

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