

## C. F. Evans Lumber Co. Ltd.

Story by Janet Davies

Can a lumber company and building supplies store really be called Made in the County? Yes, yes and yes.

When Carey Franklin Evans started his lumber business here in 1933, he

made something that would not only last but grow bigger and stronger through three generations. C.F.'s son Walter (Wally) has been helping County people make things for more than 60 years, from fences to houses.

Now his sons, Tom and Bob Evans are taking care of business, and Bob's daughter, Kirsten Stever, is the fourth generation in the family firm.

It's a no-nonsense kind of place, with genuinely helpful staff. Despite dealing mostly with contractors and professional tradespeople, they don't roll their eyes if you don't know the difference between a drywall screw and a finishing nail. Trust me on this one.

"We're a builder's hardware," says Wally. "We leave selling housewares and things to the other kind of hardware stores." He reckons their customers are 60% professionals and 40% DIYers.

How does a family business compete with the advertising dollars of big box stores?

"Reputation," says Tom. "Word of mouth is always the best advertising. You know that old thing 'when somebody likes you, they tell a couple of people; when they don't like you, they tell everybody?'"

He laughs. "We make sure we make people happy."

Wally says, "You can go buy your gyprock from the big store if you like, but chances are you'll find it just dumped on your front garden." He grins. "In the snow."

"We deliver and we put your supplies where you need them. We deliver fast, too."

Customers tend to be loyal, and the Evans crew have allegiances, too.

"We still buy pine from W. C. Edwards in Pembroke," says Tom. "Edwards was the first supplier to give my grandfather credit."

The company celebrates its 75th birthday this year. The original location was 68 Main Street, where Belsey's Automotive Supplies is now, but in the 1970s C.F. Evans moved to

The Evans crew fields your questions and helps bring your projects to life. Left to right: Andy Cronkwright, Ryan Thurston and Tom Evans.



Picton's decommissioned old railway station, just a few doors west. The shopfront gives no clue to the property's history, but a walk around the back shows the long low lines of the Victorian railway station.

Kirsten's office is the old telegrapher's office overlooking the space where the tracks once ran.

The tracks are gone, but the big railway storage shed remains. The space where tons of corn, coal and crates were stored is now filled to the rafters with lumber.

And what rafters they are. The building was constructed about 1909 and the massive wooden trusses and great hefty bolts proudly show their age. "It's the original roof," says Tom. "Still in great shape."

Train buffs visit regularly to admire features like the floor of the loft in the big shed, made from reclaimed railway car siding complete with stencilled CN numbers. There's a huge steel safe in the offices, too, a walk-in stronghold with a heavy iron door and worn combination lock.

"We had to get a safe cracker in to open it," says Tom with a chuckle. "And yes we use it. Nobody's gonna get in there, I tell you."

Tom's grandfather C.F. Evans came to the County from Alberta, by way of California.

"It was the Depression," says Wally. "I guess my dad went there to try and make some money." The family had owned a lumber yard in Alberta, and C.F. returned to the business when he came back to Canada. "He dealt

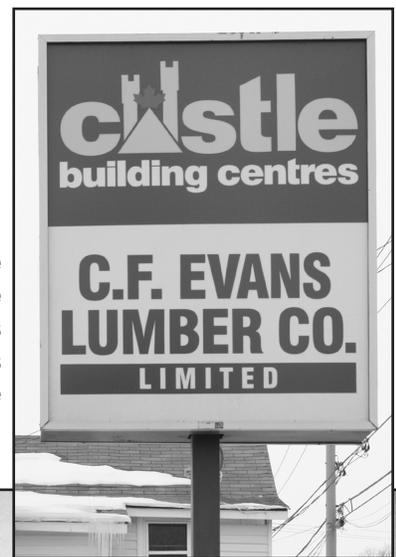
with a lumber guy in Picton," Wally remembers, "and that's how he came to know Prince Edward County."

At 84 years old, Wally has been part of the business all his life. He helped his dad when he was just a boy, and his sons helped him, when they were growing up.

"My first job here was bagging up the nails and putting them neatly on the shelf when I was about nine," says Tom.

The old-fashioned weigh-scales are still in use every day. "Sure we could buy nails and screws and everything already packaged up," says Tom. "But why bother? This works just fine, especially for people who only need a handful of nails to fix a

The lines of the old Picton train station are still recognizable in the main part of the lumber building. This collection of carpenter's aprons covers Evans' 75-year history. Tools of the trade from the old days decorate the walls of Evans' offices.



piece of baseboard."

Well praise the Lord and don't pass the bubble-pack! Ask for what you need and they'll get it for you, and it probably won't be encased in plastic.

There's a lot of things that make C.F. Evans different, and, dare we say, special. As well as every possible permutation of pine for construction, they keep several lines of hardwood in stock.

"We have oak, maple, birch, beech, mahogany and teak," says Tom. "We get a fair bit of business from guys who build and restore boats. My brother's into antique boats, so he tells his friends what we have."



That old word-of-mouth works wonders, and actually having what people are looking for works well, too.

Wally Evans is responsible for more than a thriving County business and service. His efforts have helped small building supplies stores all over Canada to stay in business.

In 1963, he and three other lumber

dealers got together to hammer out how they could get a better deal from suppliers. The result was Castle Building Centres, Canada's leading lumber and building materials buying group.

"What prompted me was receiving the wrong receipt from a supplier," says Wally. "I mean it was somebody else's receipt. I saw they were getting a 20% discount, and I

Larry Marshall, of Newmarket Cash and Carry Plywood and Lumber; Jim Lind of Lind Lumber in Dorchester; Jay Shaver of Hamilton Lumber and Wally Evans met in the spring of 1963 to talk about how they could have more purchasing clout.

By December of that year they had signed up 14 shareholder businesses and created a buying group to negotiate better deals for small operators. They called the group BOLD: Buying Organization of Lumber Dealers. And it *was* a bold move for small town guys to demand and get the same deals as big operators.

One year later, member purchases topped a million and a half dollars. By 1967 it was six and a half million. Today, Bold Lumber is called Castle Building Centres Group Ltd., and handles half a billion dollars worth of business a year.

"Castle Building Centres is not a store," says Tom. "It exists to handle negotiations, ordering, billing and payments for hundreds of individually-owned small businesses. So we don't have to do all that stuff ourselves." There are 220 members today, and Wally feels pretty proud.

"A lot of people want to support their local stores," says Tom. "The guys who work here are responsible for our success. The guys out front and out in the yard know the people who come in, they know where their building sites are. I mean, Bob and I don't know the customers like they do."

Andy Cronkwright works out front, a smile on his face and a pencil permanently stuck behind his ear. He's been with Evans since 1987.

"Andy's got a phenomenal memory," says Tom. "A customer will come in looking for the colour paint he bought two years ago, and Andy will go 'oh yes, that was Lavender Mist,' or some damned thing!" He shakes his head and laughs. "He's amazing."

"Chris McMahon who works out back, looks after the yard and the lumber. He's been with us since 1985, pretty much straight from school. He knows all there is to know about the lumber," Tom says. "These guys really are the backbone of the company."

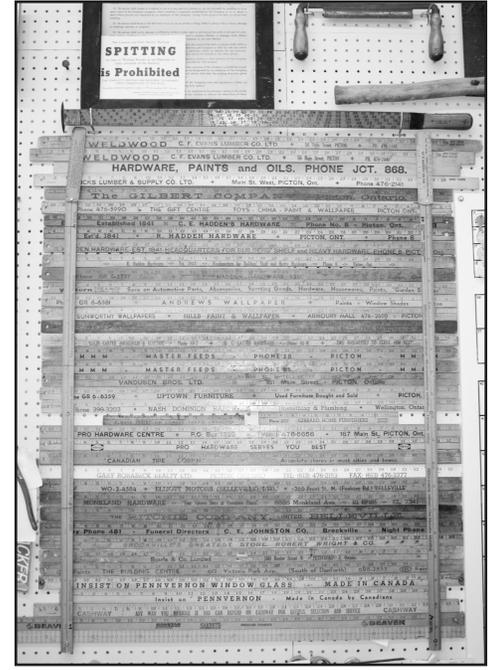
A supplier that's been on Main Street for 75 years, run by the same



wasn't."

Top: An interior view of the jam-packed store. Above: The man who started it all, C.F. Evans, hauling lumber the hard way in Alberta.

Left: A glimpse of the lumberyard's past as a railway station. The second floor loft was floored with the sideboards from the now-dunct freight cars.



The 'boys in the yard' stand ready to serve, left to right: Tyson Gadd, Adam Peterson and Geo Davila-Moffatt. The old yardstick collection - the top third of it originated in County businesses, you'll see near the top, Hadden Hardware boasts the Picton phone number '8' ... just Ph: 8! Those were the days!

family, inevitably holds its place in a town's history.

Many of the carpenters, contractors, builders and electricians that Wally served for years have retired. But they've passed their skills, and sometimes their businesses, on to the next generation. Now Wally's sons serve his old customers' sons and daughters.

What about all the changes over the years, the highs and lows of the County economy? Have they experienced highs and lows?

"Not really," says Wally. "People always need building supplies. Some of the things we sell change from one decade to the next, but the demand is pretty steady."

Tom ponders the kinds of things that were once in demand but are not now. "Panelling," he says. "Jeez, the place used to be half-filled with all kinds of panelling. Now nobody wants it." It's true. The panelling that was put up to cover "ugly" features 20 and 30 years ago is the first stuff we rip out today when we renovate an old house. We rip it out to reveal those "beautiful" original features.

Even those of us who claim not to follow fashions actually do.

"Carpets," says Tom. "I can see carpets going the same way as panelling. It's all wood floors, laminate and ceramic these days."

And drywall screws and nine-inch

nails, roofing shingles, two-by-fours, paint and varnish, hinges and counter-tops, garden trellis, deck braces and all those good things. There's a building boom going on in the County and all over North America, from new houses to DIY garden projects.

"It's a pretty good time to be in this business," Tom concedes.

The guys at C.F. Evans get a kick out of old stuff, and the store has collections and displays of antique carpenter's aprons, old drill bits and awls and a great rack of old wooden yardsticks bearing the names of Picton businesses from long ago. The phone number of one store's yardstick is 8. Just 8. Times were simpler then.

But just because it hangs on to some of the old ways, like weighing nails and putting them in brown paper bags, or sorting through stacks of maple to find the very best piece for a hand-made frame (trust me on that one, too) doesn't mean C.F. Evans is not looking forward.

The family has quietly purchased properties on either side of their shop and yard. "We've got quite the in-town acreage now," says Tom, "with access on three different roads."

The story behind their last purchase is a County colourful one.

"We tried over the years to buy that property, but the owner didn't like us," says Tom. "So he just wasn't going to sell to us, even if he had no other offers. You

see, when the railway station came up for sale, he wanted it, too. A lot of people did. We had to tender sealed bids and they accepted ours. We won. He wasn't happy, and he stayed mad at us."

The disgruntled neighbour never did get over it. Two years ago they bought the property from his son through a third party. Even so, the seller stipulated that no buyer could use it for the lumber business for seven years.

Tom shrugs. "My dad just said, 'Son, we've waited 30 years for it, what's seven more?'" At 84, Wally is philosophical - and healthy.

When C.F. Evans started his business at number 68, the railway tracks ran right through the yard.

"It was perfect for business," says Tom. "Our lumber came straight off the train into our yard. Well the train's gone, but we're still here!"

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