



HAIL TO THE CHIEF

Old time capitalist
continues to conquer
brave new worlds

It's an unassuming office. Of modest size with plain walls mostly devoid of pictures, it boasts neither plush leather chairs nor an expansive mahogany desk. Admittedly it's a corner office, with a two-sided view of the St. John's port just below, but it could easily belong to any mid-level functionary in a mid-level company. Such an impression couldn't be farther from the truth.

Seated behind the workaday desk is Melvin Woodward, the multi-millionaire founder and president of the Woodward Group of Companies, a man whose dynamic presence is utterly incongruent with such bland surroundings.

The reason for the nondescript background is simple. Though more than one ship in the harbour just outside the window has Woodward Group proudly emblazoned across its pristine hull, this isn't the home of the Woodward Group of Companies. Nor is it home to Mel, who has made a practise of keeping a low profile in the capital city. With his corporate headquarters in Happy Valley-Goose Bay, Woodward has made Labrador and the Canadian Arctic his own personal stomping ground.

It all started back in the middle of the last century. After spending two years working in St. John's, Woodward (who is originally from Boat Harbour on the Great Northern Peninsula of Newfoundland) went to work in Goose Bay. It wasn't an uncommon practice for people from the Northern Peninsula at the time. Getting to Labrador was in some ways easier than getting to St. John's and the American Air Force Base in Goose Bay meant jobs and prosperity for those willing to make the trip.

"I went up to get enough money for a ring and a cheap suit to get married in," Woodward recalls of that 1957 trek. He only planned to stay four or five months, but instead his future wife, Sybil, joined him there. The two were married that November and have made Happy Valley-Goose Bay their home ever since.

Though Woodward started out working on the base, he always wanted to go into business for himself. It was just a question of deciding what that business would be. "I recognized what was happening in Labrador right from the start," he says proudly. "Opportunities presented themselves and I took advantage of them."

The first opportunity that presented itself was an oil delivery service. Mel and Sybil used their savings to purchase a truck to deliver heating oil to people who previously had to go to the base and collect oil in 40-gallon drums. The success of that venture led to the purchase of a small 600-tonne tanker to



(Top to bottom): Joey Smallwood's cabinet during the days when Mel Woodward was Minister of Labrador Affairs; One of the early fuel trucks used to service clients who previously had to go to the airforce base to collect their heating oil; The proud entrepreneur in 1975.

deliver fuel up and down the Labrador coast.

Today, the Woodward Group is the largest ship owner by tonnage in the province. Among its fleet is the Tuvaq, a double-hulled ice breaking tanker, which at 16,000 tonnes is almost as far a cry from that first vessel as Mel's recently acquired private jet is from that first delivery truck. But success doesn't stop there.

The Woodward Group of Companies includes Labrador Marine Inc., which operates a fleet of ferries and passenger and freight service ships; Woodward Aviation, which provides refuelling and ground services for civilian and military aircraft; Woodward Motors, which operates several GM dealer-

ships in Newfoundland and Labrador; and, Woodward Rent-a-Car, with offices across the province. An eclectic collection of smaller holdings includes a fishing lodge, a realty service and a trucking company. Altogether, the Woodward Group employs around 800 people. Though it's come a long way from that first fuel truck, or even that first oil tanker, the business has continued on the same footing upon which it began.

"I came from a simple family and we (Mel and Sybil) felt we should make some effort to be independent," explains Woodward. "When we started, we didn't do the easy thing and go to the Hudson's Bay Company for credit. Now we do our own banking and



(Top to bottom): The Dorsch, one of the tankers which the Woodward Group of Companies uses to service the Canadian Arctic; Woodward Aviation provides fueling, oxygen and nitrogen servicing, de-icing and passenger stairs for all types of aircraft; Labrador Marine Inc. was formed in 2000 to provide passenger and freight service along the coast of Newfoundland and Labrador.

we own our own ships and that's very important to me. Why should we owe someone else money? When we make \$300 million, it's our money."

Under a new contract with the Canadian government, the Woodward Group is responsible for delivering fuel to 27 isolated communities stretched across the entire Canadian Arctic. With a brazen glare, Mel Woodward brags that they don't get it cheap. He's a man who's proud of making money and sees no reason for false modesty about his ability to do so. Now with global warming allowing them to get into Iqaluit earlier and earlier each year, the Woodward Group is positioning itself to take full advantage of open Arctic waters, a natural next step after servicing the coast of Labrador for so many years.

But Woodward has been active in more than business circles; he's even ventured south from his beloved Goose Bay to show the rest of us how it's done. He served two terms as an MHA (from 1972 to 1976) and was appointed to the provincial cabinet as Minister of Labrador Affairs. He sat on the

Board of Regents for Memorial University for seven years where he oversaw what he viewed as their small budget (compared to his own). And, from 1994 to 2004, he served on the board of the St. John's Port Authority.

Sean Hanrahan, the current president and CEO of the St. John's Port Authority, remembers when Woodward chaired the organisation's board during its government-mandated switch to a commercial operation.

"He created a new culture by bringing a business person's perspective to port authority operations and really provided a turn-around in attitude and culture. In 1999 we embarked on a capital spending program second only to the early 60s because he knew what had to be done and he got it done."

That spending program worked out to \$30 million, or ten times the normal annual budget. Pier 17 and the marginal wharf were among the projects undertaken, and Hanrahan credits Woodward with the drive to push it through.

"He's incredibly goal-oriented," Hanrahan says with an admiring laugh. "If his goal lies on the other side of a brick wall, then heaven help the wall."

Growing up in Boat Harbour, a town of about 70 which, according to Woodward, afforded people absolutely no opportunities, made him both tough and self-reliant. However, Woodward credits his aggressive style to the mentorship he received from the Americans he did business with back in the early days, and his description of how he's always operated sounds positively Runyonesque.

"We've never had a set-back in business, welched on a loan or owed a bank money,"

he says simply.

So it comes as no surprise that, when asked about giving back to the community, Woodward's pugnacious chin lifts. "My greatest contribution to the community is the jobs I provide," he says bluntly. When pushed to elaborate, he boasts that the Woodward Group's payroll was \$37 million last year. Woodward seems determined to plant himself firmly amongst the captains of industry from another era - a self-made man both ruthless and hard-hearted, with little time for acts of benevolence.

But others tell a different story. Leo Abbass is the Mayor of Happy Valley-Goose Bay. He's taught Woodward's grandchildren at the local school and is a friend of the family. "You could never count the amount of money and service the Woodwards have given to the community," he says. "They don't toot their own horn enough. They're major contributors and sponsors to all kinds of things from hockey and soccer to the winter games. I don't know too many people who have approached the Woodwards for something and received a no."

And they don't just contribute money. Mel and Sybil regularly host receptions and other formal affairs in the luxurious house they've built in the community. Though they have houses in Florida, Goose Bay is inarguably home for the Woodward family.

And, even though the Woodward Group is an expansive, multi-million-dollar operation, it's still very much a family business. Mel's two sons, Peter and Mel Jr, are both vice-presidents and the Woodward name is scattered throughout a list of corporate officers. Still, this is very much Mel Sr's show. He personally signs almost every cheque and reviews every invoice. He'll celebrate his 75th birthday this August and he still goes to work every day. Even though he doesn't put in the hours he once did, he says he has no intention of ever retiring.

Mel Woodward calls himself a greedy man and wonders aloud just what it would take to satisfy him. Last year the Woodward Group made \$100 million more than the year before. Current contracts assure them \$300 million to \$400 million in revenue per year for the next few years and though Woodward freely admits he never imagined he'd do even that much business, in the next breath he talks about his dreams of doing business in the billions.

"If I'm aggressive enough to do a job, I'm doing it. If there's a firm in Toronto that can do a job, why not a firm in Newfoundland? Why not Mel?" he asks. Why not indeed? ABM



Dawn Says: For another story about a great leader, see our Leader's Insight conversation with Catherine Woodman, president and CEO of United Way of Halifax (page 78).



AVIATION



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Congratulations to Woodward Group for their great achievements! We are pleased to have been associated with them. We wish them continued success.



MSV Golf Classic 2008

Thursday, August 14, 2008
Granite Springs Golf Club

Registration: 11.30 am - 12.30 pm
Dinner and Prize Presentations: 6.00 pm

Fee: \$170.00

Includes: golf cart, dinner, prizes,
18-hole scramble format and lots of fun!

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