

[MAIN STORY]

91 years and counting

Petty Harbour staffers closing in on a centenary of service

By Dawn Chafe

Jack Ershler (68) and Edward Maher (67) say they've been working together for so long that they're like an old married couple. Co-workers for 43 years, Jackie and Eddie certainly know each other almost as well as their respective spouses.

Jackie was the community's first municipal employee, hired 48 years ago on July 1, 1967.

"It was a Local Improvement District back then," he says. "I was working on another job, installing the town's water line, running PVC pipe down from First Pond. When the job was finishing up, Cyril Whitten came after me. He was the chairman of the District. He wanted me to stay on and look after the water line."

Jackie declined the job — repeatedly. He says that on his last day of work on the water line, Cyril came to see him five times. "Poor Cyril, he passed away earlier this year, he bugged me and bugged me. He said to me, 'Jackie, how much will you make on unemployment?' I told him, \$49 a week. 'Very good,' he said, 'we'll pay you \$49 a week.' And that's what I started with. It was less than I made laying the water line, but it was convenient because it was close to home."

To put that \$49 in perspective, Jackie says he had \$38 in his pocket when he married Dolly Clements in 1967 (yes, the same year he started working for the town). "That \$38 bought us enough groceries for three weeks," he says.

If they wanted a night out at the Crystal Palace nightclub in the Goulds, he says they could get three beer for a dollar or two beer and a package of cigarettes.

So, while the wages were reasonable for the time, the equipment Jackie had to work with was considerably less adequate. "I had a pick, a shovel and a wheelbarrow," he says. "That, a few rags in my back pocket, and my two hands was all I had to fix and repair the water line."

The upside to having so little equipment? "Cyril would be waiting with a drop of Screech for me when I got off work, and I could never get picked up for impaired because the only thing I was driving was a wheelbarrow," says Jackie with a laugh.

The town upgraded in both municipal standing and equipment around the same time that Eddie Maher joined Jackie on the job. It was 1972 and the Town of Petty Harbour-Maddox Cove had just been incorporated.

Eddie, who previously worked as a baker in St. John's, moved to Petty Harbour when he married Anna Doyle. "We got a truck so we could collect garbage," Eddie recalls of his early days with the town.

Still, even with garbage collection twice a week, it was the water line that took up the bulk of their time. Laid on top of the ground, or buried no more than a foot or two, the pipe busted with predictable regularity.

“As soon as something heavy hauled in on the shoulder of the road, an oil truck or anything like that, boom — up the water would go. As soon as the radio said there would be frost on the ground, boom — a pipe busted,” says Eddie. “Many a time we walked up the hill behind the flume, two o’clock in the morning. We’d go up with flashlights and whatever equipment we could carry. Just the two of us. Occupational health and safety wasn’t a big concern back then.”

“We often worked 36 hours straight fixing the line. Walking up the Harbour in the middle of the night, soaking wet and froze to death, minus 10 or minus 15 degrees, stringing three-quarter inch hose up a pole and across the road so people would have their water,” says Eddie.

“We didn’t have cold weather suits or anything like that,” adds Jackie. “You wrapped up in whatever clothes you had. That’s why we used to be so cold.”

Hypothermia wasn’t the only danger they had to contend with. Eddie recalls the time he saved Jackie’s life. They were digging up a water line that ran underneath a concrete slab. The slab, Jackie estimates, weighed several tonnes.

Jackie was under the slab when Eddie noticed it started to shift. “Only for I reached down and grabbed hold of Jackie...”

“Yes,” agrees Jackie, “I would have been dead that day. It collapsed just like that (snapping his fingers).”

The job has gotten safer and easier over the years, but also more complex. A new, more reliable water line was installed back in the ‘70s. Generators and backhoes have replaced the flashlights and shovels. And there’s a union now, so wages are more attractive than they were back in the ‘70s. Plus, there’s another full-time and one part-time outside worker (Paul Doyle and Cyril Whitten), as well as two inside staff (Stephanie Stack and Mandy Dinn) to share the load.

But the load itself is much heavier too. In addition to their original duties, Jackie and Eddie are now also responsible for road maintenance and repair, water testing, chlorine treatment, water and sewer system maintenance, property inspections and upkeep of community property, among other things.

“That’s why we do so much driving around,” explains Eddie, referencing a common criticism that all they do is drive around all day. “It’s all time consuming.”

Asked if they ever get offended by the comments, Eddie laughs. “It’s like I said to one fella one time, ‘B’y, you can’t call us anything or say anything to us that we haven’t already been called. That’s only a joke to us now, calling us this and calling us that.’”

“Besides,” says Eddie, “it’s not like people are going to call us when everything is working properly. We’re the ones you call when you turn your tap on and there’s no water. Who are you going to blame? You’re going to complain to the fellas who are working on it. And the longer they’re working on it, the more you’re going to complain.”

Jackie thinks the issue is also one of misunderstanding. “People see us driving around in the pickup truck, but they don’t see the work that goes into them having safe drinking water. They don’t see how long we’re down in some hole, or out in the rain. They just don’t understand the job.”

Nat Hutchings, Petty Harbour-Maddox Cove’s current and longest-serving mayor, agrees. “I wish people could see them heading out on nights when it’s so stormy you wouldn’t put a dog out, because — Murphy’s Law — that’s always when something breaks down ... or the work they do to help seniors who can’t get around as well as they used to, sometimes going to their door to pick up their garbage ... and when they’re salting the steep, narrow road up Big Hill in the winter. Jackie and Eddie are invaluable assets to this community, and they know everything there is to know about the Town’s infrastructure. It’s very important that we try to capture that knowledge so that it’s available for future councils.”

With 91 years of service between them, are they ready to retire? Both Jackie and Eddie admit that while they wouldn’t mind parking their wheelbarrows for good, they say it’s a luxury they can’t afford.

“We don’t have a pension,” explains Jackie. “We were always living paycheque to paycheque. We never had any extra money to put aside for retirement.”

Eddie says he needs to keep working because of the health insurance. “I’m a diabetic. My drugs alone are \$1,400 a month.”

“I guess I’ll have to work until I has a stroke,” says Jackie.

“If you get so feeble that you can’t move, I’ll just pick you up and haul you along,” adds Eddie.

Spoken like an old married couple.

SIDEBAR:

Through the years

Mayors of Petty Harbour-Maddox Cove

Pre-1972: Cyril Whitten Sr., Chairman, Local Improvement District

1972-‘77: Ron Walsh

1977-‘81: Bernard Madden

1981-‘85: Philip Stack

1985-‘89: Ron Walsh

April-June, 1989: Vicky Silk

June-November, 1989: Reg Carter

1989-'97: David Doyle

1997-2001: Dawn Chafe

2001-'11: Nat Hutchings

2011-'13: Ron Doyle

2013-present: Nat Hutchings