

## DAVID FRANK SOBEY

BUSINESSMAN, 92

## THIRD-GENERATION GROCER GREW SOBEYS INTO A NATIONAL CHAIN

Under his leadership the company expanded dramatically and today operates more than 1,500 stores across Canada, earning \$31.5-billion in annual sales and employing 131,000 people, with headquarters in Stellarton, N.S., where it all began

LINDSAY JONES

David Sobeys was still a boy when he began parking himself on a stool beside the phone at the original Sobeys store, in the town of Stellarton, N.S., in 1940. When the phone rang, he would pick it up and jot down grocery orders with a pen and paper. He and his mother, Irene, would gather the provisions from the aisles and bins around the store, later delivering the groceries by truck to customers' doorsteps all over Pictou County.

The grocery business, in Mr. Sobeys' blood from an early age, became a lifelong passion as he helped grow Sobeys into a national company that today remains the second-largest supermarket chain in the country.

Mr. Sobeys died Sept. 18 at the age of 92. At the time of Mr. Sobeys' death, the grocery chain had grown to operate over 1,500 stores across Canada earning about \$31.5-billion in annual sales and employing 131,000 people, with corporate headquarters in the rural Nova Scotia town where it all began — a legacy of which he was immensely proud, according to his friends and colleagues.

"He'd always shake his head and say, 'It's amazing what this company has become,'" said Andrew Walker, vice-president of communication for Empire Company Limited and Sobeys.

Mr. Sobeys was born into the third generation of grocers who at the time had a few stores in rural Nova Scotia near the family's hometown in northern Nova Scotia. His grandfather, John William Sobeys, started the Sobeys brand in 1907, purchasing livestock from local farmers and delivering meat by horse-drawn wagon to the townspeople of Stellarton. Soon he built a storefront in the heart of the town with broad glass windows that sold meat and other provisions. By 1924 his son Frank was in full partnership, opening other stores throughout the county and eventually the region.

David Frank Sobeys, born to Frank and Irene Sobeys on March 22, 1931, came of age watching his father grow the business in Atlantic Canada. With his brothers, Bill and Donald, he swept the floor, haggled potatoes, filled orders and delivered groceries — a job that Mr. Sobeys joked later in his life was the harbinger of online grocery shopping.

While attending Dalhousie University in 1950, he met Faye Naugle, described in his death notice as "the love of his life." The next year, he began his formal career with Sobeys, working in stores in Pictou County before managing a small store in the town of Westville. In 1953, his father sent him to Boston to get some experience with First National Stores supermarket brand. He



Friends describe David Sobeys, who had a long career with Sobeys that culminated in a position as chair emeritus, as an egotless gentleman who could talk to anyone, and he often did on his frequent excursions to visit grocery stores. PETER POWER/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

returned to Nova Scotia the following year and began managing the Göttingen Street Sobeys' location in Halifax's north end. Eventually he moved up to become director of merchandising and advertising and vice-president. Over the years he took on increasingly senior leadership roles, including serving as chairman and chief executive officer of Sobeys from 1986 to 1995 and chairman from 1995 to 2001, when he was appointed chair emeritus.

In 1998, with Mr. Sobeys at the helm, the grocery chain tripled its size and became a national company when it acquired the Oshawa Group, a Toronto-based supplier to Canada's IGA stores.

"David just always wanted to grow the business," said his long-time friend and lawyer Rob Dexter, who was chairman of

Empire Company Ltd. and Sobeys from 2004 to 2016. "He was the driving force that grew Sobeys into the national company that it is."

Mr. Sobeys' friends describe him an egotless, down-to-earth gentleman who could talk to anyone, and he often did on his frequent and enthusiastic excursions to visit grocery stores — any grocery stores — no matter where he was in the world.

Mr. Dexter recalled how in the mid-1980s, while he was acting as a lawyer for Sobeys in Portland, Me., he noticed Mr. Sobeys' eagerness to check out grocery stores. En route to go skiing at Maine's Sugarloaf Mountain after business meetings, Mr. Sobeys insisted on stopping at all the food stores along the way. "I thought at first David wanted to go in and buy something,"

Mr. Dexter said, adding that the future grocery magnate just wanted to go in and have a look around. "He did that his whole life."

Mr. Dexter laughed when he relayed an encounter at the Sobeys on Queen Street in south end Halifax about a decade ago when Mr. Sobeys was visiting the store. A staff member, unaware of Mr. Sobeys' identity, told the manager "some nut out there's got a concern about the doors." When the manager realized the worker was referring to Mr. Sobeys, he came roaring over to smooth over the interaction.

Over the years, word spread among the staff about Mr. Sobeys' penchant for visiting stores. James Dickson, a long-time friend, lawyer and chair of Empire Company Ltd., said it was almost as if there was a poster of him in the employee lounge that said, "Watch for this man."

"When he walked through the door you could almost feel the whispers going through the store," he said, adding that employees wanted to take selfies with him and shake his hand. "He was a celebrity when he arrived at the stores."

According to Mr. Dickson, Mr. Sobeys really hit his stride when he retired from being directly involved in the day-to-day operations of the business and moved to a higher level of strategic direction and took on the mantle of owner.

Although he was officially retired, he still lived and breathed the grocery business. He spoke often to his son, Paul Sobeys, a director, and maintained his office at the company headquarters in Stellarton.

Mr. Sobeys enabled the creation of the David Sobeys Centre for Innovation in Retailing and Services, opening at the Sobeys School of Business at Saint Mary's University in 2015. And he was active on the Sobeys Foundation, helped preserve his beloved St. Mary's River through the Nature Trust of Nova Scotia, and was on the board for the Royal Nova Scotia International Tattoo, a military music show.

Mr. Sobeys, strong and sharp and active until his last day, lived within walking distance of the Westside Sobeys store, near his home in the town of New Glasgow. When he wasn't wading into the St. Mary's River to fish for salmon, or spending time with his grandchildren and great-grandchildren who would drop in unannounced to say hello, this store was his regular destination, where he kept up his lifelong passion, inspecting products, checking store conditions, and chatting with the staff until the last weeks of his life.

"That's the kind of guy he was," Mr. Walker said. "He was a grocer and he loved being in grocery stores."

Mr. Sobeys leaves Faye Sobeys, his wife of seven decades; daughter, Janis Sobeys-Hames; son, Paul Sobeys; seven grandchildren; three step-grandchildren; 18 great-grandchildren; and his sister, Dianne Sobeys.