

Chapter 1

Jubilee Days

“Somewhere in our souls is a spiritual Canada...and if we were to penetrate it a little deeper, chances are we would find a game”

--Dryden and MacGregor, *Home Game*



Northern Classic: Hockey on the harbor in Bay Roberts, NL

It was Brett Hull. He got me in trouble on the Toronto subway.

Hull, the rampaging right-winger with the St. Louis Blues at the time, was on his way to score 86 goals that season of 1990-1991.

Streaming out of graduate school at the University of Toronto I was melded with two high-schoolers ardently discussing the “Golden Brett’s” prowess as we rattled along the Bloor-Yonge Street subway line. I couldn’t help but innocently join in:

“Brett Hull—is that Bobby Hull’s brother?”

“That’s his son,” they eyed me with that fish-eyed stare teens must practice in the mirror.

“Oh, wow, sorry,” I expostulated, “grad school is so demanding. But Bobby did have a brother Dennis who played.”

“Come on, Teeder!”

No response.

They weren't letting me off the hook.

I tried again: “See, I came from the old Keon, Duff and Armstrong, the Punch Imlach generation, the last guys to win the Cup in 1967.” Nothing registered until I mentioned 1967 when the Maple Leafs last won the Stanley Cup. They seemed interested.

“Toronto had great players back then,” I remonstrated, clearly gaining the upper hand as the subway whizzed along past Yonge Street. “There was Kelly... and Mahovlich, Johnny Bower and...”

“*Don't forget Teeder Kennedy,*” a clear voice cut in from the usually stolid Toronto crowd.

I looked behind me and there was a man well-dressed in the formal Toronto way with a suave fedora and overcoat and a generation ahead of me, old enough to be my father. He certainly fit the profile of those devout Leaf fans who thrived just before my time, my father's day.

So...he remembered “Teeder” or Ted Kennedy, Toronto's stalwart in the years just after World War II when the Leafs—English Canada's team—won three cups in a row, 1947, 1948 and 1949. During those years a bellowing voice cupped through hands could be heard way back in the darkened recesses of the Gardens—“Come onnnn, Teederrr!”

Would even Ripley believe it? This was just like Czechoslovakia except now three generations were conjoined on the Toronto subway by the strange alchemy of hockey—a trinity of fandom, the “membrane of belonging,” someone called it. Little did I know that in about four years my wife, Susan, and I would be watching Brett Hull and Wayne Gretzky play as teammates against the Los Angeles Kings in Inglewood, California. Hockey as a connecting thread. Hockey as both remembrance... and prophecy.

There were Giants

My father had enchanted me with stories of Teeder Kennedy's teammate, the great Syl Apps, 1936 Olympic athlete in his own right and captain of the Maple Leafs just before Ted Kennedy. Apps was a boy scout turned athlete, it seemed. The year he broke his leg (1942-43) he tried to return part of his salary: he felt he hadn't earned it. Soon he was off with the Canadian forces for service in World War Two, then returned to the NHL to attempt to reach the 200 goal mark, which he did.

Chris McDonnell rounds out the story in his *Hockey's Greatest Stars*. Apps won election as a member of the Canadian parliament in 1963 and chaired the Select Committee on Youth, tackling the emerging problem of drug abuse. Apps later served as Minister of Corrections convinced that “the way to keep any boy out of trouble was to get him into a hockey league, preferably one sponsored by a church.”

“This,” as Indian chief Tecumseh said of General Sir Isaac Brock in the War of 1812, “was a man.”

So though my interest has sometimes ebbed and I've never had season tickets, I am usually “up” for the Stanley Cup playoffs.* It's bred in the bone. While as a journalist I am a fan

with a pen, I am also a bit more. Though I was never a great player or a statistic-quoting expert, the genes have it. Hockey seems firmly implanted in my DNA. Let me explain.

The CBNHL



My first memories of serious hockey in a regular league and in an indoor rink go back to rural Newfoundland, Canada's easternmost province. I fondly remember the CBNHL, the Conception Bay North Hockey League, once a fine old local institution.

From 1934 to 1958, the league gave birth to some sparkling moments of community spirit for folks on the Avalon Peninsula and beyond. It was that last year, 1958, when as a young boy, my parents took me to a playoff game at the new Silas Moores Stadium in Harbour Grace between my hometown of Carbonear (the Caribous) and the Shearstown Tigers. This was the beginning of my lifelong immersion as a hockey fan, though as you know my buddies and I had been playing on the frozen marsh near home for years earlier.

It is also hard to believe that a town as small and as tucked away as Coley's Point, up the shore from Shearstown, could field a full-fledged hockey team, but they did. The honor role of those CBNHLers included the Bay Roberts Rovers, the Carbonear Caribous, the Harbour Grace Seniors, the Coley's Point Pointers, the Shearstown Tigers, the Brigus Bruins and the Bell Island Miners.

*Playoff tickets ranging from about \$400 to \$2500 the spring of 2014 definitely limited my access, but in that way I can speak for the average fan.

Stellar Hockey Folk



Builder William F. Howell (top right) with wife Fanny and two of his daughters

Though never a great player, I descend from stellar hockey folk.

I boast a good-natured and good-hearted grandfather, William “Billy” Howell (1881-1949), carpenter for an important and respected lumber and construction business in Depression-ravaged Newfoundland and Labrador. Hockey fever had hit the Avalon Peninsula with gale force in the 1930s. But Grandfather Howell had caught the disease earlier. He built his first covered ice hockey rink in 1927, up where the road now winds south of St. James Church in Carbonear. In 1930, however, a fierce windstorm blew the roof off the rink.

But this didn’t stop Billy Howell. He came home with his spirit vision intact and radiating a quiet but fierce determination worthy of his staunch Methodist roots. He simply declared: “We’ll build another one. The young people must have something to do.”

Two of Billy and Fannie Howell’s nine children—Jean Taylor and Emma (“Em”) Wells—had fond memories of their dad’s first rink, as they told the Newfoundland and Labrador Sports Hall of Fame in 2003 upon seeing the Howell Family inducted as “Builders.”



Aunts Jean and Emma telling the Jubilee Rink story

“There was more hockey played on our kitchen floor than was ever played on Maple Leaf Gardens!” the sisters told the Newfoundland and Labrador Sports Hall of Fame.

Building the Jubilee

But how did Billy Howell pay for the new rink in Depression-racked Newfoundland? Like everywhere else in North America, there were few bank loans or government grants to be had anywhere. People on both sides of the Canadian-American divide were struggling just to survive.

“There was a hutch in the dining room of our house on Bond Street,” Aunt Jean once told me. “Dad would leave his pay there and Mom would collect the grocery money from there, except when she would say: ‘No money. Your father has gone to buy more lumber’.”

This was how the enclosed Jubilee Rink was built in 1935, the same year the Herder Memorial Trophy was donated at St. John’s for senior hockey across the island. And this latest Howell family creation did not blow down. Perched solidly along the bluff overlooking Water Street in Carbonear, northwest of where the remnants of the Bond Theatre once stood, the Jubilee Rink (named in honor of King George V’s Jubilee) looked like Conception Bay’s biggest quonset hut. For more than two decades its distinctive black felt paper roof loomed large on the north side of Carbonear. It was one of the first completely covered hockey rinks outside St. John’s during those hard years.

Both Jean and Em remembered that “hockey fever was spreading all over Conception Bay North and... it was out of control in Carbonear.” The sisters were referring to the pre-Confederation years before Newfoundland and Labrador became the tenth Canadian province in 1949. These were the days when the legendary Toronto broadcaster Foster Hewitt would open his hockey broadcasts from Toronto with his shrill pronouncement: “Hello Canada and hockey fans across the United States and Newfoundland!” And woe betide Foster if he forgot the last signifier.

The Jubilee Rink was a true Howell family project that was accomplished with a lot of help from their friends. As many have testified, community mattered in those darker days. Luckily, sons Roy and Fred were ace carpenters along with contractor Mark Badcock, who was lured from the rival Bay Roberts squad through courting my grandfather’s oldest daughter, Alma (“Al”).



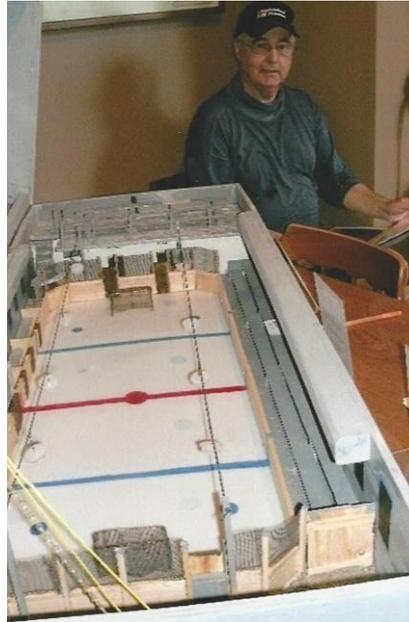
Carbonear's Jubilee Rink, built 1935

Making the Ice

Aunt Al was a constant live wire who was the unofficial leader of the family. She would later turn out to be a force in her own right in 1960s and 1970s provincial politics as a staunch defender of the controversial premier, Joseph R. (“Joey”) Smallwood. In 1935, she was put in charge of knitting sweaters for the Caribous. And Aunt Em remembered making the ice.

“We waited for the first big snowfall,” she recalled. “We all took our shovels and started packing snow on the Jubilee floor. Then came the flooding. On frosty nights, the boys would stay up all night flooding the ice. It was a lovely sheet for skating.”

It was, at that. People came from Bay Roberts, Shearstown and Brigus for the hockey and the skating and the lively winter carnivals.



Neil Earle beside model of Jubilee Rink

The rink also gave one of Carbonear’s jack-of-all trades and master-of-many, Heber McGurk, a chance to shine. At age 86 Heber is still active and living in Carbonear and a writer in his own right. Heber was typical of people of the Newfoundland of his day who made do with what he had and compiled a lively inventory of trades including fisherman, sealer, cook and ambulance driver. In 2008, he published a book entitled *Memories of a Former Era, from Carbonear to Battle Harbour to Frenchman’s Island*. Heber has fond memories of working at the Jubilee Rink.

He tells his story of working with Jubilee’s rink rats in an article entitled “Memories of a Carbonear Rink Rat” in the January 11, 2011, edition of *The Compass*, a newspaper in Carbonear:

In the early 1950s..., I worked at the old Jubilee Rink in Carbonear as a rink rat. We would start in October getting things ready to make ice on the rink.

At the north end of the rink there was a well [that] was five feet by five feet by two feet deep. At the first snowfall, we would haul in boxes of snow on a sled through a four-foot door on the east side of the rink. The snow was then packed down with shovels. Water was then poured on the snow and leveled off.

The rink shutters were opened all night as the nights were very cold and frosty. Many times we would get cold. Our hands would be frostbitten and our feet wet. Making the ice was only one stage. The next was after each hockey game and between the periods the ice was cleared with wooden scrapers and then swept with birch brooms...

Other rink rats were Clyde and Wilson Howell, Gordon McGurk, Graham Butt, Les Moores and others. The head rink rats were Ben Snow, Cyril Pike, John C. Butt and William Penney. We would work all day and all night until we got a good ice surface...

Artificial ice would be one of the technical factors assuring the success of hockey in Canada, but the Jubilee and countless other small-town rinks made up in ingenuity and devotion what they lacked in technical sophistication.

Heber continues:

The Jubilee was the only closed-in rink in Conception Bay at the time. When the ice was ready, the games would start. [The] team [members] at that time were: Brigus Bruins, Coley's Point Pointers, Shearstown Tigers, Bay Roberts Rovers, Harbour Grace Seniors, and the Carbonear Seniors. There would be hockey every night. In addition to the senior teams, there were intermediate, junior and air cadet teams...

When hockey was over, general skating would start. *The Blue Skirt Waltz* was played over and over on the loud speakers. Then, when the weather got warmer, water built up on the ice. Sometimes up to four inches deep in some areas. Many times we would get wet playing in the water...

Rink Rats Remember

Even into his nineties, my own dad, former Carbonear Mayor George Earle, had his own warm memories of the Jubilee Rink.

"If you stood on Water Street, it stretched south to north just northwest of where the old Bond Theatre stood," he remembered. "You walked up there through a little path called Rink Lane and entered through a door on the southeast side. You walked in, bought your ticket, turned left and there was a dressing room of sorts. Or you walked up the steps, which were all banked in the southern part of the building called the gallery.

"The playing surface glistened as if to meet you. We would ice her down with fire hoses. Even the players would help scrape the ice with four foot-long wooden scrapers."

"Below the stands was a room for the microphone and hooking up the record players that guided skaters through the waltzes and minuets during general skating," George continued. "It was rough and ready, but it got the job done."

Yes. Billy Howell's vision did not disappoint. "The young people must have something to do," a remark he repeated as somewhat of a mantra. One of Aunt Jean's fond memories is of post-hockey game youth imploring her father to play just one more skater's waltz at the end of the evening. "Oh, Mr. Howell, just one more song." They usually got their wish.

Mishaps and Other Events

But hockey was epidemic across the island. When the Carbonear Caribous went on the road to Buchans, a hard-rock mining town in the interior of the province, a dubious new record was set. The fiery Guy Earle, a later master mariner dubbed Newfoundland's "greatest navigator" by Premier Frank Moores at his death in 1968, broke 13 hockey sticks in one game!

But, then, Cousin Guy went hell-for-leather in everything he did. Even the NHL professionals couldn't touch that statistic!

During one of our last visits before his death in 2001, Billy Howell's son and one of the builders, my uncle Roy Howell, regaled me with a 1930s story of how the coach of the Caribous thought he was too young to take to the ice against the hard-checking Buchans Miners. Until the last period, that is. When the coach finally relented, 16-year old Roy plopped in six goals in 20 minutes in what was still a losing effort. No wonder. Growing up in the Howell household, he was born to the game and later coached the Caribous to victory in the CBNHA playoffs of 1958.

Being a hockey rink, the old Jubilee also saw its fair share of mishaps. My father collided with Uncle Roy during a practice and broke a rib. This prompted local hockey fans to declare that "everybody who went up against Roy Howell fell!" In this case, however, they were on the same team. But this was not an unusual occurrence. The Richard brothers of Montreal once knocked each other out at the mighty Forum. No wonder the Yanks quip that the "H" in hockey stands for "*hitting*."

Nor was it all idyllic back in those days of community bonding. Town historian Bert Parsons reports that the minutes of the Carbonear Hockey Association during the 1950s mention protests against players getting too drunk to play.

When Community is King



Historic, peaceful Carbonear

Nevertheless, opined the University of Toronto's renowned literary critic, Northrop Frye, there is something "vegetable" about a culture. He meant family and neighborly backgrounds and experiences coming together to form tightly-knit bonds of connection over time. Folkways and community activities that grow from the ground up may not be noteworthy for elegance and finesse, but they endure. Sometimes endurance is everything and those "mystic chords of memory" nurture sturdy roots and earthy charms. Such a ganglia of interconnectedness makes a culture possible and the Herder Trophy (still battled for) testifies to the lasting strength of Newfoundland's sports culture.

Rural roots matter. The community aspect of the Jubilee Rink is better expressed in a more tender Spanish word, "*comunidad*," which I have learned down here in Southern California. In typical Hispanic style it conveys warm-hearted notions of everybody pitching in to do their share—*unidad, comunidad, familia!* The phrase hardly needs translation.

In small-town Canada and the United States, tight-knit communal values of the kind demonstrated in the TV show “Friday Night Lights,” is part of a myth that is not all myth, what a poet described as “thoughts that lie too deep for tears.”

Amateur Fever

Obviously, then, hockey is not just for the professionals. We will explore this thought in more detail later with even paid professionals telling us the same thing. The CBNHA showed how sport can keep a cruel Depression at bay. With little money and tons of good will and community spirit, the rink rats created a folk story that can still be told with relish and honor for in the 21st century. It was the inevitable Heber McGurk who created a model of the Jubilee Rink out of a steamer’s trunk. There it sits in Carbonear’s fine Going Foreign Museum to this day.

Perhaps Shakespeare had it wrong after all. Perhaps it is the good that men and women do that lives after them. It is somewhat a proud family boast that Billy Howell’s wife, my grandmother, died while brewing a cup of tea between periods of a hockey game. Though she was in her 80s, I remember how the speed and dexterity of a Bobby Rousseau or a Bobby Orr thrilled her.

“Those Frenchmen are the devils to play hockey,” she expostulated the night Bobby Rousseau plopped in five goals during a televised game we watched together.

No wonder she bred a family of sturdy hockey players. I discovered at a family gathering that Aunt Al was violently incensed at Don Cherry when he coached the Boston Bruins for what she considered the dumbest of mistakes: placing too many men on the ice in the 1979 Stanley Cup playoffs. The resultant penalty cost Boston the playoffs and Aunt Al was rewarded with her first mild stroke.

“What could have gotten this woman so agitated this late in the evening?” the doctor asked my cousin Winn.

But my aunt lived to fight and cheer and boo another day. It’s a proud family boast that her husband Mark coached Carbonear juniors to a Conception Bay championship in the 1930s.

* * *

Every Canadian and Northeastern American of a certain age has his or her own hockey stories. So many of them revolve around school days as well as family.

In 1961-1962, I helped lobby our high school principal to rebuild our defunct hockey team, the St. James Blue Bombers. While this hardly looms large in Canadian sports, we still won the trophy! I even remember the name of the prize after all these years—the Velvet Horn, named after a local drinking establishment.

Later in life, I enjoyed playing old-timer’s hockey in organized leagues at the Keystone Centre in Brandon, Manitoba, the Art Ross Arena in Calgary, the Chesswood Arena in Toronto, the Surrey Arena in Vancouver and finally ending my career with a grab-bag stint at the Pasadena (California) Ice Skating Center. I have enjoyed seeing most of the megastars of my childhood—including Bobby Hull, Gordie Howe, Frank Mahovlich and Maurice Richard—on the ice as players or officials.

I have also savored taking a widow’s son to the laid-back good times of Calgary’s Saddle Dome in 1982. I’m pleased to say that he remembers it too. I’ve experienced the pleasant formality of old Maple Leaf Gardens, both from the press box and the stands. I have fought back

mild acrophobia escorting teens and their parents to the terraced heights of the Arrowhead Duck Pond in Anaheim, California (now Honda Center), and have rocked and rolled with the boisterous fans at the old Inglewood Arena—Gretzky's last stomping ground.

I have enjoyed hockey at the top, seeing the Los Angeles Kings play at Staples Center while the TV in back of our box relayed the 2003 World Series simultaneously. Moments of zen.

The Dream Stream

And, *sacre bleu*, I surprised my friends and myself by making an unplanned pilgrimage to Montreal from Los Angeles for the last Saturday night game at that intimate oval called the Forum. That was in March 1996 and one of the first people I met was a fellow traveler from Los Angeles. In 1999, I was lucky enough to scrape up a ticket for the next-to-last game at Maple Leaf Gardens, the house that Smythe built. There we sat, up against the west wall as far from the action as one could get... and no one complained. Acolytes all.

For me, Maple Leaf Garden was a long way from the Jubilee Rink, but...in the dream stream of the imagination, perhaps not so far, not so far at all.

As powerful as the ponds and marshes and rare stints on artificial ice, as important as all that was, it took electronic technology to work its mystifying wonders on us boys of winter. That, and a code of manliness and heroism that elevated a game of sticks and blades to a higher level.

It's time to turn to that story.

References Cited:

1. Ken Dryden and Roy MacGregor, *Home Game: Hockey and Life in Canada* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1998)
2. Chris McDonell, *Hockeys Greatest Stars: Legends and Young Lions* (Willowdale: Firefly Books Ltd., 1999).
3. Bill Abbott, *Herder Memorial Trophy: A History of Senior Hockey in Newfoundland and Labrador* (St. John's: Breakwater, 2000).
4. Jean Howell-Taylor and Emma Howell-Wells quoted in *Women in Sport: Pre-Confederation Newfoundland*
(www.therooms.ca/archives/wis/acceptance-speech.asp)