

**roots & folks:** family business

# Trust in Forbes

Top-notch quality and customer service keep people coming back to this family-run furniture store in rural Nova Scotia

by Sandra Phinney

Cousins Glenn and Reg Forbes in front of their family's 106-year-old store, which now sits across from its original location, opened in 1908.

**DRIVING ALONG** on the upper end of Route 326 in Colchester County, NS, a spread of candy-coloured outdoor furniture in front of Forbes Bros store catches my eye. Bold letters on the building's awnings state: "Quality Furniture" in both English and Gaelic (a nod to the family's Scottish roots).

Forbes Bros is an enormous furniture store in Denmark, NS, a community of less than 50 people on the Northumberland Shore. Yet the company has successfully sold goods here since 1908, and generations of customers have come back again and again.

It all started with their grandfather Gardner Forbes, a lumberman who managed several crews and owned a sawmill. Seeing an opportunity to sell everything from quality meats to hardware and horseshoes (and a way to keep his crews supplied), Gardner



opened a general store. Eventually, sons John and Robert took over. After the war, the inventory continued to grow and included farm machinery, tractors and building supplies. Bursting at the seams in 1952, they moved the whole shebang into a new and larger building across the road.

On Oct 16 of the same year, the *Pictou Advocate* celebrated the event by publishing a feature written by

Ethel MacConnell. She was impressed by the quality, prices and scope of Forbes' products, which ranged from hardware to clothing. (Current co-owner, Reg recalls a time when someone bought a grand piano, and staff had to remove horse collars from the top of it before loading it for delivery.)

MacConnell devoted a lot of ink to the meat case, which she described as a work of art.

After a colourful description of the beef, she wrote, "When you buy a steak at Forbes, you know it's a steak and not stew meat." An apt analogy for the quality people continue to count on today. Though Forbes' Bros has drastically changed the type of merchandise it sells, one key thing about the family business remains constant: impeccable customer service. Forbes' customers trust the name, and because of that they keep coming back.



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Left and above: Fireplace and Royal Doulton mug in the Forbes store. Right: Valerie Creighton shows off her Waterford crystal chandelier.

## Forbes family values

Third-generation owners Reg and Glenn Forbes remember spending time at the store as youngsters. “Thursdays was delivery day and I’d go with my father and uncle. Someone always offered us cookies, milk or tea,” Reg says. He could drive a Massey-Harris Pony tractor by the time he was seven, or so he thought until the time he ran into another tractor in the lot. “I was really popular that day.”

Glenn made his first sale at the ripe age of seven. “It was a chrome headlight for a bicycle—the kind you strapped on with a generator. It cost 90 cents. What a thrill. I was on my way to big business!”

During the 1950s and ‘60s, cottage country mushroomed, and people bought furniture to outfit their summer homes. Word also spread about the Forbes Bros store, and people started coming to Denmark from further afield. Eventually, the owners replaced every department with furniture, along with appliances and some electronics. Later, by the time Reg and Glenn were managing the business, they decided that selling items such as stoves and

stereos, which required having a technician and repair staff, just wasn’t cost-effective.

The main lesson they’ve learned over the years is the importance of being debt-free in order to tough out recessions. Ongoing challenges they face include rising costs of freight and delays in delivery—not exactly unique for a store that relies on shipping, but a real problem for a rural-based business. Forbes may have six chairs in transit sitting in Moncton while the trucking company is waiting to fill the truck with other goods destined for New Glasgow, which also has to be delivered before the chairs can be dropped off in Denmark. “We also used to have too much inventory,” says Reg. “With styles changing, if you have too much inventory, you can be stuck with it.”

Occasionally Forbes has been cut off by suppliers. “We get into trouble because our prices are lower. When a customer tells a competitor they can get something at Forbes for less, the competitor sees a lost sale and complains. It’s the politics of business,” says Glenn.

It’s never a welcome blow, but they have enough suppliers of high-end furniture like Durham, West Bros and Canadel, that customers don’t notice when a line occasionally goes AWOL.



furniture from Forbes. They've been buying from them for years—as did Ron's parents and grandparents.

The Creighton's home is also adorned with several Royal Doulton and Hummel figurines, fine pieces of pink glass, a Fenton lamp and a Waterford crystal chandelier—all from Forbes.

Valerie recounts how on one occasion, she happened to mention to the delivery men that the fabric on the corner of a deacon's bench she had bought from Forbes 15 years previously was coming apart. The next thing she knew, the guys picked it up, said not to worry, they'd take care of it. Before long it was repaired and returned no charge.

"I still have an old Bates sofa set. It's the first piece of furniture we ever bought at Forbes," she says. "It's been peed on and spit on, but I didn't have the heart to throw it out as it's still a wonderful piece of furniture. It's now in our basement."

Back at Forbes, Reg and Glenn look over their stock of outdoor furniture, made by C. R. Plastic Products, a Canadian company specializing in recycled plastic lumber. These products are almost indestructible, and the cousins have been pleasantly surprised by sales. And visitors love getting their photo taken with the giant 685-pound chair stationed out front.

Bottom line, Reg says: "It's not many businesses where you can be successful in a rural setting. So it's nice that we can live a rural life, make a decent living, and have customers coming back."

## Fine dining

In the late 1970s, Bates Furniture Co. (located in Canada at the time) embarked on a special promotion. They made 10 special dining room suites—one for each province. Handmade from mahogany with intricate inlays, the sets included a table with four leaves, 10 chairs, and a buffet/hutch with glass doors made of crystal. Forbes Bros. was selected to showcase the set for Nova Scotia. Price tag: \$20,000. And it sold.

## Quality matters

Forbes specializes in quality Canadian-made furniture. It's probably the reason the business is still going so strong. They give good value for money. "Everything—including the frames—is made of solid hardwood," says Glenn. "And you'll only see screws and dowels used as opposed to the work of hot glue guns and staples in furniture made in the US or offshore."

Reg concurs: "We offer quality products at good prices. We deliver for free, and we have good delivery guys who are willing to go the extra mile."

Their merchandise is so high-quality, in fact, that when plans were in the works to build Fox Harb'r Golf Resort & Spa, Ron Joyce (owner of Fox Harb'r, co-founder of Tim Hortons and native of nearby Tatamagouche, NS) approached Forbes; the company ended up furnishing 72 condo units and parts of the clubhouse back in 2000.

Forbes Bros quality is something Valerie and Ron Creighton can also attest to. Their home in Tatamagouche is outfitted from top to bottom with

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