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## **BY THEIR OWN HANDS: 200 YEARS OF BUILDING COMMUNITY IN ST. ANDREWS, NOVA SCOTIA**

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## **Abstract**

Building on the legacy of pioneering Scottish and, later, Dutch immigrants, a rural agricultural community in Canada has been able to muster active and enthusiastic volunteers for a series of ambitious community initiatives - the building of a community centre, a curling rink and a senior's housing complex - and has maintained a thriving community into the 21st century. This case explores some of the reasons why this has been possible. At its base is a set of values that puts a premium on self sufficiency, community spirit, and care for others. By pooling resources, ideas, and talents, it has been able to build tangible community services. Success has not only motivated community members to continue with new projects, but has inspired confidence in local partners and investors, both in government and the private sector.

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IN ST. ANDREWS, NOVA SCOTIA**

*Introduction*

This is the story of St. Andrews, a small rural community of 1,100 people in northeast Nova Scotia that has been driving its own development for more than 200 years. What makes St. Andrews unusual is that it continues to swim against the tide of government-led community development in the region. Since its early days as a French – and subsequently a British – colony, Nova Scotia has been shaped by waves of immigration layered on top of an existing indigenous culture. For the past 120 years the province's population and economy have failed to grow at the rate of some of Canada's bigger and richer provinces. In the 1970s the federal government began transferring annual equalization funds to so called "have not" provinces, including Nova Scotia. While these funds have been important in building and maintaining the province's public sector programs and infrastructure they have also created a dependency on the federal government. One of the consequences of this dependency is that many Nova Scotian communities now look to governments to initiate and fund activities that they once would have undertaken on their own. St. Andrews, though, represents one of the exceptions. This case study will look closely at three specific projects undertaken by the people of St. Andrews in the last two decades in order to better understand how and why this community has been able to create and sustain the capacity of citizens to act for their own development.

*The Community of St. Andrews: Early History*

As local historians recount, in 1801, a ship set sail from Fort William in Scotland carrying 500 economic and political migrants bound for Pictou, Nova Scotia. Among the passengers were many Catholic "Highlanders," descendants of the Scottish clans that had been engaged in an armed rebellion against the English in the mid-1700s. The rebellion was squashed and laws were subsequently enacted to prevent the expression of Highland culture, such as the gathering of the clans or the teaching of the Gaelic language. Even before this period of repression, few Scots had legal rights to land, relying instead on the clan leader's protection. The result was a migration of Highland Scots to various parts of the world in search of a better life and land they could own. The ship's passengers dispersed in all directions looking for land, and eight Highlanders, five of them brothers, found what they were looking for in what would later become known as the community of St. Andrews.

The early settlers of St. Andrews had to work extremely hard just to survive. Upon arriving, their most pressing need was to provide shelter for their families, which at first consisted of no more than a lean-to of poles and brush until more permanent lodging could be constructed. (MacDonald, 2000). The first settlers created a beachhead in the new world that, within a decade, had attracted dozens of families to relocate from the Scottish Highlands to rural Nova Scotia. These new families set about clearing the land and building barns, houses, roads, and bridges. They also built a chapel, and later a large church, and as many as nine schools, one for each district of the community. The largest of these schools, the St. Andrews Grammar School, built in 1838, is considered by many to be the foundation

for what is now St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish (MacDonald, personal communication, 2007).

All of these accomplishments were achieved in St. Andrews without any local government support. Municipal government was not established in Nova Scotia until 1879, three quarters of a century after the first Scots arrived in St. Andrews. The British refused to allow any form of local “town hall” democracy because they “attributed some of the unrest in the American colonies to their unfortunate habit of meeting together and airing their grievances” (Service Nova Scotia, n.d.). Instead, the church became the focal point of community life and in addition to satisfying the spiritual aspects of peoples’ lives, it was also the place where consensus was reached and people mobilized to undertake community initiatives.

The period between 1801 and Confederation in 1867 was a boom time for the local economy of St. Andrews. The population was steadily increasing due to migration from Europe, and local demand for agriculture and forest products was high. The rapidly expanding market of the north-eastern United States absorbed any surplus production. In St. Andrews, the water of the South River was used to power sawmills (lumber), grist mills (flour), and carding mills (wool). A cheese factory, tannery, and a shingle mill were established and several shops supplied general merchandise as well as blacksmithing and shoemaking services (J. MacDonald & Dunn, personal communication, 2007).

The second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a reversal of fortune for rural Nova Scotia communities including St. Andrews. The “long depression” between 1873 and 1896, the end of free trade with the US, in 1866, at the time of Confederation, and a new national railway that brought with it freight policies that favoured central Canada at the expense of the Maritime provinces all led to the decline in demand for Nova Scotia’s main export products. This had an immediate effect on those in the primary industries of farming, forestry, fishing, and mining, and a long-term effect on the province’s manufacturing base. In St. Andrews, the practical effect was that one son or daughter would stay home to look after the farm and his or her parents, while other grown children left to find work in the northeast United States or western Canada (J. MacDonald and Dunn, personal communication, 2007).

In the first half of the 20th century, those who remained in St. Andrews found innovative ways to continue building their community in spite of a depressed economy. Led by Dr. Hugh MacPherson, who was born in the St. Andrews area, the community established a wool co-operative in 1914, and the first co-operative store in eastern Canada in 1917. The co-op store was a centre of innovation, allowing cash, credit and barter (one of the oldest community members, Mary “Tommy” Chisholm, remembers seeing people trading butter for kerosene there). The store also developed a hospitalization scheme for members<sup>1</sup>. Later, it initiated a mobile co-op store, in the form of a truck that was driven from one farm to another. MacPherson, the first recognized soil scientist east of Ontario, helped introduce the use of marl from local deposits to lower the natural acidity in the soil, and he encouraged the use of both organic and chemical fertilizers (which were new to Nova Scotia farmers).

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<sup>1</sup> Decades before universal Medicare was introduced in Canada, the St. Andrew’s Co-op was one of a number of organizations (several mining organizations in Cape Breton and Pictou county were others) to pioneer an early medical insurance scheme, whereby members would make regular contributions to a fund that could be drawn upon in medical emergencies

Under his leadership, St. Andrews established a creamery and organized a grading and marketing system for lambs. When the electric power grid reached Antigonish in 1931, the people of St. Andrews provided volunteer labour and local poles to run a 20-mile extension line to their community. Like many other rural communities in Canada, St. Andrews set up a mutual telephone system whereby each household wanting a phone contributed money and volunteered labour to help string wires. The community built a house for a switchboard operator in lieu of having to charge each caller for this service. As well, a decade later, they dug, by hand, a mile-long trench and laid a wooden pipeline to bring drinking water from the South River to the heart of the community. In 1933, the people of St. Andrews established their own credit union. The first loans of the St. Andrews Credit Union rarely exceeded \$100, but these loans were crucial for the purchasing of farm equipment and livestock, and the building of barns and houses<sup>2</sup>. This early experience with cooperative activity in St. Andrews formed a laboratory for a group of professor priests at nearby St. Francis Xavier University, who, under the banner of the "Antigonish Movement," helped spread the development of producer, consumer and savings and credit cooperatives throughout northeast Nova Scotia in the 1930s and 40s (Boyd, 1949).

### *Recent History*

One hundred and fifty years after the arrival of the first Highland Scots, St. Andrews began to attract another group of industrious immigrants in search of land they could own and a better future for their children. In the aftermath of the Second World War, Holland was trying to rebuild its infrastructure and economy. Famous for their system of dikes holding back the North Sea to allow the reclamation of land, and well-known also for the social organization created to build and maintain them, the Dutch lost more than 16% of reclaimed land to the North Sea during the war years. Thousands of Dutch farming families were looking for opportunities to farm in other countries, and Canada was an attractive destination. Canadian churches were encouraged by the federal government to find sponsors for immigrants and search for suitable properties in their areas. Between 1950 and 1956, 110 Dutch families came to the Antigonish Diocese, and through loans from the Catholic Church and the government's Land Resettlement Program, roughly one quarter of these families purchased vacant farms in the area of St. Andrews.

For the first generation of Dutch immigrants, life wasn't much easier than it was for the early Scots. The Dutch were able to use their intensive farming techniques to make long abandoned land productive again, but it took years and many Dutch families had to rely on money borrowed from the parish priest and a helping hand from their Scottish-Canadian neighbours. While they were not universally accepted, the Dutch were embraced by the majority of the St. Andrews community, their shared Catholicism making this easier. It was not uncommon in the 1950s and 60s for long-time residents of St. Andrews to volunteer days of labour to help a Dutch family build a barn or replace a roof (MacDonald, 2000,).

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<sup>2</sup> In 1960, a school credit union was established to introduce the credit union concept to young people. In 1987, the St. Andrews Credit Union amalgamated with the Bergengren Credit Union in Antigonish, leading to the building of a new full-service branch in St. Andrews in 1992.

Within a generation, the Dutch had contributed to reshaping the dairy industry in the region. Until the 1950s, dairy production in north-eastern Nova Scotia had been very small scale with most households owning their own cow. The Dutch experience in dairy farming helped develop the dairy industry into one of the main engines of the St. Andrews economy.

Today, the economy of St. Andrews is relatively strong, at least when compared with neighbouring rural communities. While the number of family dairy farms has decreased over the last 30 years, those that remain are highly capitalized and somewhat protected by a sophisticated supply-management system. The dairy sector is complemented by the presence of several small construction firms, a reforestation company, a poultry and egg business, and a hardwood flooring mill. In addition, a new subdivision in the community now holds approximately 30 families who work outside the community, many in professional employment fields. This diversity of livelihood activities has produced a wider range of skills and a higher average income than in most rural communities in the region.

In the modern era, the people of St. Andrews have continued to build their community from a solid base of cooperation and volunteerism within. During the last 30 years they have set up their own baseball field on land donated by a community member, upgraded their church and school (including a computer lab), and built their own volunteer fire hall (see Box 2). Not restricting themselves to local projects, they have also raised money to dig several wells for villages in India (see Box 6.1). In the last decade and a half, the community also built their own curling rink and community centre. In 2006, St Andrews opened the first phase of a community-owned and community-managed housing project for seniors. Although each of these initiatives are worthy of more in-depth description and analysis, this case study will focus on the three latter initiatives.

*Box 1: Wishing Wells*

In the mid-1970s, St. Andrews resident Mary van den Heuvel and her family, hosted a Catholic priest from India who had come to Canada as a participant in the Coady Institute's five-month community development diploma program. During his short stay, Father Boniface Mendes, fondly known as "Bonnie," became a loved and trusted friend to many in St Andrews.

Following his return to India, Fr. Bonnie and the van den Heuvel family remained in close contact through the exchange of many letters. Several years later, Mary received an unexpected letter from a brother of the Missionaries of St Francis de Sales (MSFS) informing her of Fr. Bonnie's sudden death. When Mary offered to support a development project in memory of his colleague, a well for a rural parish in Karivde, Maharashtra, was proposed. Mary was intrigued by the idea, but upon learning that the project would require \$3,400 to complete, she was hesitant to accept. It was ultimately Mary's husband who urged her to take on the challenge, telling her, simply: "if you want to, you can do it!"

In 2000, several community members decided to organize a "Wishing Wells" concert in the St. Andrew's Catholic Church. Although donations were never solicited, news of the event began to spread, and Mary began to receive spontaneous offers of support from across the

country. As an unexpected bonus, several well-known artists and musicians, such as Men of the Deeps (a choir of coal miners from Cape Breton) and Mary Jane Lamond (a well-known Nova Scotian singer in the Gaelic tradition), offered to participate in the concert. Their participation was significant, given that they are highly regarded in the region for their efforts to revitalize and promote respect for traditional ways of life, culture, and language through music.

Nearly 300 people, including young children and international students from the Coady Institute, attended the first concert. Many were “filled with emotion,” Mary recalls, and “everyone was so cooperative... almost like they were just waiting to take part” (personal communication, 2007). The concert raised over \$4,000, prompting a community commitment to support a second well in India and another concert the following year. Seven years later, a total of seven wells have been completed in two districts of India.

“Wishing Wells” is now a registered society, which enables it to operate as an independent body under a local board of directors. Its aim is to provide financial assistance where needed for sustainable water systems to improve the quality of life for rural communities.

The people of St Andrews have developed a deep connection to the project and take pride in supporting rural community development in India.

#### *The St. Andrews District Community Centre*

In 1989, the citizens of St. Andrews decided it was time for a new community centre. The old parish hall, built by the community in 1912, was considered too small and too structurally deficient to be worth repairing. The volunteer church members, who made up the parish council – which oversaw the operation of the building – began to discuss whether the new structure should be a “parish” or “community” centre. After some debate, a vote was held and it was agreed that a hall built and managed by, and for, the broader community, was preferable. The parish priest at the time supported the decision as he felt the running of the old hall was taking parishioners’ time away from more church-related activities. A committee was created that included representatives from every geographic area of the community and several important local associations.

The first two priorities of the committee were to determine the possible uses and location of the new building. A former committee member, Patricia MacDonald, pointed out that “from day one, the priority was not the funding, but the land and the structure: we felt that if we had these two items settled the funding would follow” (personal communication, 2007). The Diocese of Antigonish agreed to donate 5.6 acres of land next to the fire hall. To come up with an appropriate structure, the committee members polled the various associations in the community (i.e., the Seniors’ Association, the 4-H Club (rural youth association), the St. Andrews Parish Council, the Volunteer Fire Department, etc.). Committee members also travelled to see other community centres in the province asking questions about the advantages and disadvantages of each structure.

Once the land and building design issues were settled, the committee set about raising money. In order to also raise the profile of the new community centre campaign, the committee began with the organization of public dances and concerts. The first big event was an open-air concert in a local farmer's field featuring the Rankin Family (a very popular musical act in north-eastern Nova Scotia at the time). Local carpenters and electricians donated their time in setting up the stage, other community members donated materials and several "baby barns" (small storage sheds) to be used as places to sell food and goods at the concert. A car dealership in a nearby town was approached and the owners agreed to donate the use of a travel trailer for the band. A second open-air concert was held one month later, during "St. Andrews Come Home Days" (an occasional celebration that draws former residents back to the community) and the proceeds were split between three local associations, including the community centre. One of the more unique fundraising ideas was to produce and sell a calendar featuring the historical buildings of St. Andrews. Community members searched their collections for old photographs that were turned into pen and ink sketches by a local artist who donated her time. So many local and area businesses were willing to advertise in the calendar that there wasn't enough space to accommodate them all.

The two most successful fundraising schemes were a lottery and a pledge campaign. The lottery involved selling tickets for cash prizes that would be awarded each week. Over a one year period, 930 tickets were sold for \$100 each, which amounted to a profit of \$60,000 for the building project. Representatives from each part of the community sold tickets to their neighbours and former community members were solicited through the mail. Even though some community members did not want to support what they saw as a form of gambling, most found a way to give cash donations instead of purchasing lottery tickets. The lottery was followed up with a very successful pledge campaign that raised \$55,000 from the 300 families targeted. If families could not afford a cash pledge, they offered their labour or food for volunteers during the building phase. In total, the committee raised \$260,000 in cash through all of its fundraising activities.

When the old parish hall was closed for safety reasons, the committee decided to start construction of the new building in the spring of 1993, even though their fundraising targets had not yet been reached. One of the committee members was hired to supervise the construction effort. Thirty-five volunteers, mostly local firemen, cleared the land. Other community members used borrowed equipment – a bulldozer and an excavator – to level the ground and dig the base for the foundation. More than 15 local truckers hauled donated gravel from three private pits, accepting no payment except money for fuel. A local contractor donated the use of a boom truck to help the men installing and welding steel beams for the floor. The underground plumbing was carried out by a local union plumber and two helpers charging nothing for their time. Several local volunteers installed the floor joists and more than 20 community members helped assemble the walls and put in the roof trusses. The roof was shingled in one day, and at one point, volunteers counted 54 people working on the roof at one time. Each day a group of community members cooked food donated by local businesses and households for those working on the building. Whenever specialty work needed to be contracted from outside, volunteers offered their time in order to lower the cost.

By November of 1993, approximately two-thirds of the way through the construction phase, the committee began to run out of funds. A decision was made to take a loan from the local

credit union for \$100,000 in order to finish the building. The continued use of community volunteers and local materials kept down costs enough to ensure that the building could be completed with the additional loan. The electrical work was carried out by local volunteers over a one-month period. Community members cut ash trees on their lands and delivered them to a local sawmill owner, who cut, planed and dried the wood for the interior lower walls. The firemen volunteered to do all the drywall work and offered, as well, to build new tables for the centre. The head of the local plumbers and pipefitters' union designed the hot water heating system and 22 union members donated their time to install it, even though only two of the union members were actually from St. Andrews. Several union bricklayers also donated their time to complete the masonry work. The hardwood floors were laid by 26 community members over a two-day period. Most of the landscaping work was done by 4-H leaders and youth members who donated hundreds of hours to the task. To get an idea of the value of all the volunteer labour and donated materials, an insurance estimate after construction placed the building's value at over \$800,000. The cash cost to the community was only one third of this amount.

After community members had spent five years designing, fundraising, and constructing, the St. Andrews District Community Centre opened its doors in September, 1994. The new 7,800 square foot centre was a multi-purpose building with something to offer most groups in the community. It included a large room with a kitchen, bar and stage that was used for weddings, funeral teas, dances, concerts and both meetings and fundraising events for a variety of community associations. A second kitchen and meeting room were reserved for senior citizens. Seniors and the 4-H Club were not charged for their use of the building. Funeral teas as well as first communion and confirmation receptions were also held in the building without any charge. The parish was allowed to use the building five times a year at no cost. Five years after the building opened, a mortgage-burning party was held to celebrate the fact that the St. Andrews District Community Centre was now debt-free.

The people of St. Andrews are justifiably proud of their community centre and how it was built. Patricia MacDonald, one of the original committee members and the first part-time administrator of the community centre, boasted "this centre was financed by the people and built by the people" (personal communication, 2007). Community members are also proud that they have provided inspiration to other communities. Shortly after the centre was completed, a delegation from Judique – a community situated 100 km to the northeast – came to St. Andrews to learn how to plan and build a new community centre. In 1995, the St. Andrews District Community Centre won a provincial achievement award.<sup>3</sup>

Just as impressive as the funding and construction of the building is the way in which the community manages and maintains the structure. A volunteer runs the bar and makes arrangements to pick up the bar supplies for dances each Friday. Other volunteers, who help at the dances and events, often do not get home until the early hours of the morning, after everything is put away and that evening's revenues and expenses are balanced. It is not uncommon to see the part-time administrator and a few volunteers decorating the hall late at night for a wedding the following day. Commenting on the learning experience of running a busy centre, one key volunteer, John B. MacIsaac observed, "it's one thing to build it; it is

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<sup>3</sup> Bluenose Achievement Award from the Recreation Association of Nova Scotia.

another thing to run it" (P. MacDonald, personal communication, 2007). Yet the ongoing commitment of volunteers to operate and maintain the community centre has not flagged, demonstrating that the spirit of cooperation that was drawn on so heavily in the building of the community centre has been replenished through the collective pride and sense of accomplishment the community centre has generated.

### *The Highlander Curling Club*

In the early nineties, when volunteers were busy planning, designing and raising money for the community centre, another community-driven project was conceived, funded and built.

The idea for a curling club<sup>4</sup> in St. Andrews came about as the result of a confluence of several factors. The only curling rink in the area, in nearby Antigonish, had burned down several years earlier, and people in that community had not been able to build a replacement. At the same time a group of more than 20 people from St. Andrews had organized a social outing to a curling rink in a neighbouring county. The success of this trip inspired several more such trips – often initiated by the fire department – to other curling rinks in the region and the resulting bus rides generated some discussion about what it would be like for St. Andrews to have its own curling rink. After one of these trips, a local community member started calling those in charge of curling rinks across the province asking them how they built their rinks and how much these had cost.

Some time later, at a Big Top Dance during "St. Andrews Come Home Days" at the old parish hall, two community members, John Juurlink and Leroy MacEachern, began talking in earnest about the idea, and together they agreed to call a meeting and invite a few other people whom they thought might be interested. In September 1990, a group of five people met at the fire hall and at the end of the meeting they all agreed to recruit one community member each and start meeting each Sunday night to develop a business plan. By early January, group members began going door-to-door to talk about the idea with their neighbours. At the end of the month, they called a community meeting during which they unveiled their plan.

A series of meetings were held in the neighbouring community of Antigonish, to see if there would be support from curlers there for a rink in St. Andrews. The planning group met quietly with members of a number of service clubs and associations before calling a big meeting at the Antigonish high school auditorium. Most people in Antigonish were impressed with the business plan but one man stood up and suggested the rink should be built in Antigonish. A member of the St. Andrews delegation replied that this business plan was for a building in St. Andrews, but that if for any reason the rink in St. Andrews did not get built, his group would be happy to give all their research and the business plan to the people of Antigonish. From that point on, curlers in Antigonish began to see the rink in St. Andrews as a viable possibility.

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<sup>4</sup> Highly popular in St Andrews, as in many parts of Canada, curling is played by two teams of four players on an indoors sheet of carefully maintained ice. Curling teams take turns sliding heavy, polished granite stones along the ice towards a target known as the *house*. The complex nature of stone placement and shot selection has led some to refer to curling as "chess on ice."

The part of the business plan that impressed everyone was an innovative scheme to raise the capital needed to build the rink. Leroy had seen a prospectus from a golf course in another part of the province for which shares were sold to members to raise funds to build the course. Since the development of a legal prospectus would cost tens of thousands of dollars, and involve specialized legal help, the group in St. Andrews designed its own system of preferred and common shares. For every \$500 unit of investment, an investor member would receive a \$400 preferred share and a \$100 common share. The preferred shares would be treated as loans from the investor members to the curling club. If and when the curling rink became a financial success, the preferred shares would be paid back to the bearer at the curling club's discretion with no tax implications, since the investor would be reimbursed with his or her own money.

The scheme was a huge success. Within four months the curling club had raised \$232,000 in pledges to purchase shares. The planning group simply asked for a percentage of each pledge as the money was needed during the construction of the rink. By the time the rink was built the group had raised \$302,000. To date, the curling club has paid back two thirds of the preferred shares to members and has still been able to finance improvements to the building. And as one member proudly stated, "we have done this without grants or loans from the government or financial institutions – all our money was borrowed from our members" (MacEachern, personal communication, 2007).

There was one point, however, at which the share scheme seemed in jeopardy. In the mid-nineties, the very public collapse of a mining scheme in Nova Scotia, through which shares had been sold to the public, triggered a review of all share schemes by the provincial Securities and Exchange Commission. When the Commission discovered that the group in St. Andrews had not developed a legal prospectus they summoned the Board of Directors to a meeting in Halifax. Upon realizing that the project was not a business venture but a community-owned curling rink, they agreed to allow the group's original business plan to be treated as a prospectus. They allowed this provided that every investor member was informed, in writing, of the error and was offered his or her money back. Not one member asked to have his or her share redeemed.

The share scheme was not the only risk taken by members of the planning group during the creation of the curling rink. Leroy MacEachern and John Juurlink each invested substantial sums of their own money to purchase used equipment, resulting in huge savings for the curling club. Before construction of the building began, Leroy wrote a personal cheque for \$5,500 to buy used kitchen equipment from a seafood restaurant that had gone out of business. Around the same time, John Juurlink discovered a used ice plant (machinery that freezes the ice on the floor of the rink) for sale at a hockey arena in another part of the province. On the spot, he paid \$3,500 for the equipment that arrived in St. Andrews on two large trucks the next day. As he recalls, "from that point on we all knew it was really going to happen – it was...real" (personal communication, 2007).

As with the community centre, the curling rink was largely built by volunteers. The land was cleared and levelled by volunteers with borrowed equipment. The framing, wiring, plumbing, and roofing of the building were carried out by volunteers under the direction of two paid carpenters. Other than the work of these two carpenters, the only other contracted tasks were those of pouring the concrete floor and hooking up the ice plant to the pipes, which

had been laid by volunteers. Leroy was amazed at the range of skills of people in St. Andrews: "You can be living next door to someone and have no idea what skills they have" (personal communication, 2007).

The construction phase went so smoothly that the building was completed before the deed for the land had been registered. A well-known local resident, Judge Hugh MacPherson, had donated the land for the curling rink. It had only taken 10 months from the sale of the first shares to the first game of curling in the new building. And it had happened at the same time that many in the community were preoccupied with the planning and fundraising stage of the community centre. As a measure of the success of the project, Pugwash, another village in the region, was inspired by the experience of St. Andrews and has since replicated both the design and process of building the curling rink.

The level of cooperation between those involved in the building of the community centre and the curling rink was exceptional. Several community members credit both committees for meeting before any shares in the curling rink were sold and agreeing to support each project. Along with the fire hall, the curling rink and community centre now created the physical "heart" of the community. Once the curling rink had been built, most of the volunteers who had helped during the construction phase also helped build the community centre. Some community members had developed skills while working on the curling rink which they could apply to their work on the community centre, particularly the coordination, supervision, and feeding of large numbers of volunteers. Because the curling rink went so well, it raised the confidence of the community centre committee members. They realized that the centre could be completed largely by volunteers. Once the curling rink was complete, the new Highlander Curling Club donated 100 chairs and a propane stove to the community centre. In the words of one St. Andrews resident referring to the two, almost simultaneous, projects, "we say around here that one built the other" (personal communication, 2007).

#### *The Seniors' Apartments*

The idea for affordable housing for elderly people in St Andrews first emerged in parish level discussions in the mid-seventies. There was concern that there was nowhere in St. Andrews for elderly people to live independently once they could no longer look after themselves in their own homes. A number of efforts were made to convince the various levels of government to build some apartments for seniors in St. Andrews, but it never happened. In the early nineties, the federal and provincial government had budgeted for 10 units in St. Andrews but this money ended up being combined with money set aside for 15 units in Antigonish instead, where an enriched, converted seniors' complex of apartments would be attached to an existing nursing home allowing tenants to acquire housekeeping and meals on a fee-for-service basis.

In 2000, the idea of housing for seniors was revived, but this time people in St. Andrews began thinking about how they could do it without depending entirely on the government. Joe van de Wiel recalls a conversation he had with John Juurlink at the curling rink one night. John had looked around at the bustling curling rink and said to Joe, "What do you think – is it time to take on another community project?" Joe thought of the apartments for senior citizens that had been discussed for some time. Ron MacIsaac, one of the committee

members for the community centre, remembers Joe approaching him around that time and saying, “I think we’ve been going about this the wrong way. If we’re going to build seniors’ apartments we’re going to have to do it like we did the community centre” (personal communication, 2007). When Joe took this idea back to the parish council he was asked if he would head up a seniors’ housing committee, which would later become the St. Andrews Seniors’ Housing Association (SASHA).

The first thing Joe did was to engage leaders from the curling rink and community centre projects. He recalls looking for people who “weren’t afraid to handle something” (personal communication, 2007). Then he made a list of people he felt wouldn’t give up easily if things didn’t work out initially. The easiest way to find these types of volunteers, he felt, was to look for the busiest people in the community: “I’ve learned that if you want to get something done around here you ask a busy person” (personal communication, 2007). One of the people Joe recruited was Leroy MacEachern.

The committee members felt it was critical for the seniors’ apartments to be self-financing once they were built. Committee members thought it was unrealistic to expect people to permanently subsidize something that only benefited a relatively small number of citizens. Leroy had a finance background, and after costing out the building of the apartments, he convinced the committee that they would need the government as a partner. Even with donated land, discounted building materials, and volunteer labour, there was no way to reduce the unit cost, and thus the necessary monthly rent, to an affordable amount for a senior citizen. However, Leroy had seen an article in a provincial newspaper about a new government affordable housing program and he offered to investigate it.

Tom Moore, Regional Director for Housing Services for the Nova Scotia Department of Community Services, recalls that his initial, major concern was the capacity of a small non-profit group to build, manage and sustain a multi-unit housing project. “And then,” he recalls, “we got the tour...we saw the curling rink [that had been] funded by selling of shares, [and] the community centre. We were amazed at how well maintained everything was” (personal communication, 2007). Martha Dunnett, Tom’s colleague in Halifax, also recalls the trip to St. Andrews being the tipping point in the decision to provide a \$25,000 per unit subsidy for an eight-unit building: “We gave them conditional approval based on all the other things they had done...You need to know you are dealing with folks who know how to manage and maintain infrastructure. These people had a great history” (personal communication, 2007).

The committee was also successful in leveraging money from the municipal government. Leroy MacEachern remembers local government officials also being concerned with the capacity of the community to manage the apartments on an ongoing basis: “We [SASHA] told them, OK, we will build the building ourselves and then turn the keys over to you, but on the condition that you run it up to our standards” (personal communication, 2007). Shortly thereafter, the Municipality of Antigonish<sup>5</sup> granted \$50,000 to the housing project.

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<sup>5</sup> St. Andrews is part of the Municipality (or County) of Antigonish, one of 77 local governments in the province. The municipal government is headed by a Warden (similar to a Mayor) and nine councilors. St. Andrews is represented on council by the councilor for District 6, who also represents the adjacent community of Lower South River. The Municipality of Antigonish provides a range of local government services such as

Several local businesses also assisted the project. The St. Andrews Credit Union agreed to donate land next to its building and provide a line of credit so that construction could begin. A local engineering firm agreed to do the initial drawings that were needed for the application to government without charge. A cement company came back to the committee with a price that was one-half that of their main competitor. When asked how they could supply the cement so cheaply the company representative replied that an anonymous citizen of St. Andrews had given the cement company \$6,000 to lower the price.

Two local building supply companies agreed to supply materials at very favourable prices. Both companies further agreed to approach their suppliers for special pricing on such items as flooring, windows and trusses. The owner of one of those companies, Steve Smith, gave three reasons for why his firm agreed to support the project “We did it because many of our customers live in St. Andrews and this is a way of giving something back to them; some of our employees also live in St. Andrews; and what these people are doing is very important for the survival of rural communities and we want to be involved in that” (personal communication, 2007).

As with both the community centre and curling rink, the construction of the seniors’ building depended heavily on volunteers. Nothing was put up for tender. The preparation of the ground, along with the work on the foundation, was done by two local contractors for their cost. Following the example of the curling rink, two skilled carpenters were hired to provide the expertise and to direct the work of volunteers. Seven farmers agreed to give a day of their labour to put in the roof trusses, but they stayed an entire week to finish the roof. At one point, Joe recalls being struck by the sight of a 15 year-old girl and an 83 year-old man working together.

The parish youth group, which had previously been engaged in social activities, was looking for something more community-oriented and asked if its members could help in the project. Even after the success of the curling rink and the community centre, Ron and June MacIsaac were taken aback at the spirit of volunteerism in their community: “Some of us thought that getting volunteers to work on housing for seniors would be difficult as it is sort of a business in that it pays for itself. But it wasn’t that way at all. In fact, people would say to us, ‘thank you for asking me – if you need more help just call’” (personal communication, 2007).

The seniors’ complex was full of tenants one month after construction and the committee is already planning to build another eight units. The provincial government officials involved in the project clearly see it as a success story. Tom Moore has called the St. Andrews seniors’ building the “poster child” of such projects in Atlantic Canada. Martha Dunnett said that what most impressed her was the strength of the entire committee rather than just one or two strong members. “Another thing that struck me,” she said, “was that they made sure that nobody spent more time than they needed to on site. They didn’t burn anybody out. They had the experience from the other projects. If you start to burn out you don’t feel ownership any more, and it becomes a job.” (Dunnett, personal communication, 2007)

*Community-led Development in St. Andrews*

It is clear that the people of St. Andrews have a long history of being the “agents” of their own development. What is less clear are the reasons why this community has been able to create and sustain such a strong level of internal agency. The following section will explore possible explanations in the history, culture, associational life, and leadership of St. Andrews.

The St. Andrews of today is a product of 200 years of community evolution. The latest generation of community projects have been built on the skills, traditions of cooperativism and motivating memories of previous initiatives. It also seems likely that the resilient, independent and self-reliant nature of the community comes from a history of both risk-taking and cooperation. The community is still largely made up of the descendants of Scottish (and later Dutch) settlers who carved homes and enterprises out of the bush. They risked everything by coming to Nova Scotia, but they also had to cooperate to survive, even though many were in economic competition with each other. The cooperative spirit that the Scots had developed in the New World was reinforced by the influx of Dutch who had spent generations helping each other build communal dykes to hold back the sea.

Both the Scots and the Dutch were able to respond to negative economic shocks with innovation. In the late 1800s and early 1900s the Scots were able to change the way they practiced agriculture – the Dutch helped revolutionize the dairy industry several generations later.. In the early part of the twentieth century, the community’s primary producers helped survive the Great Depression through the development of producer, consumer, and financial cooperatives. Today the people of St. Andrews continue to innovate in creating new ways to structure and finance non-profit organizations.

Many St. Andrews’ residents credit the importance of resilience, industriousness, and the value placed on education in the Scottish and Dutch cultures. Even when times were hard, people retained a strong sense of integrity. Long-time resident Mary McCarron recounts an old family saying, “you can be poor, but you don’t have to be dirty,” meaning you should never lose your pride despite your material circumstances (personal communication, 2007).

Mary McCarron and many others also credit their Catholicism, and time spent together at church, for creating a strong feeling of unity in the community. Some feel that this shared faith allowed the Dutch immigrants to integrate so well with the Scots. Loyola MacDonald thinks faith was at least partly behind the principles passed on to her generation by parents: “We were taught to share with others, to place other people ahead of ourselves. There is a willingness here to ‘pay it forward’ [to repay kindness shown to you by helping others]” (personal communication, 2007).

The pride people show in the accomplishments of their ancestors seems to drive present day community members to succeed. This sense of pride is evident in both the number of amateur historians in the community and the number of immaculately maintained cemeteries. There is an obvious respect for elders in St. Andrews, and this may have something to do with the choice of seniors’ housing as a community priority. Leroy MacEachern speaks with pride about his late grandfather’s role as one of the first members of the board of directors at the St. Andrews Credit Union. He also recalls his feelings when he, too, was asked to join the board: “You don’t want to let your ancestors down. I

remember saying to myself, 'there is no way this place will close while I am on the board'" (personal communication, 2007). One community resident suggested there was a particular feeling of pride that St. Andrews could build a curling rink when the much bigger community of Antigonish couldn't seem to get people organized to do it. The pride shown by local residents in the creation of the first cooperative in Atlantic Canada a century ago, or illustrated by the successful fight to keep the school in operation a generation ago, is the same as that demonstrated by current residents in the development of a new share model for financing their curling club or the establishment of the only rural community-owned seniors' apartments in the region.

### *Associational Life*

As in many other communities in rural Nova Scotia, there are dozens of vibrant voluntary associations in St. Andrews. Associational life in St. Andrews, however, is particularly well-coordinated. The homogeneity of religion has allowed the parish council to act as an unofficial umbrella association to reach community consensus and give legitimacy to new initiatives. Both the community centre and seniors' housing initiatives emerged from discussions at the parish council. The other associations in the community tend to have some of the same key members, which led to a tremendous level of cooperation between associations. For example, the parish council helped the volunteer fire department convince the Diocese of Antigonish to donate land for both the fire hall and the community centre.

#### *Box 2: St. Andrews Fire Hall*

When a local home in St Andrews was destroyed by fire in the seventies, community members began an intensive lobbying effort to build a local fire hall. When a meeting was called to determine community interest and feasibility, over 60 community members attended and immediately created investigative and finance committees in order to explore the next steps of moving the idea into reality. At the time, the fire hall in the nearby town of Antigonish was responsible for serving a wide geographical area which, due to limited resources and large distances, was cause for concern among residents.

In the "can do" spirit of St Andrews, the fire hall was incorporated just 13 months later. Unlike other fire departments in the province, it was decided that a volunteer board of directors would be formed. According to long-time fire fighters in St Andrews, this system is a good model in terms of accountability due to a tradition of careful monitoring and fiscal responsibility. Given that board members are *not* fire fighters, volunteers report that the model of decision-making further serves to "take the heat off the chief" (personal communication, 2007).

Well before acquiring a building permit and beginning construction, members of the investigative committee purchased a used tanker truck for \$1,960 from a regional oil company, and collectively installed a pumping system. A functional fire fighting system was in place shortly thereafter, despite the fact that there was no permanent "home" for it.

30 community members initially volunteered to become fire fighters and trainings were held every second Wednesday by Alan Young, who had previous experience and a willingness to

support the initiative. Volunteers were sent to a more intensive training at a fire fighting school in another region of the province as time and finances allowed.

At a time before "911," the fire hall created an emergency number for community members to dial in case of fire. When this number was dialled, five separate homes in St Andrews received the call and a rotating calling system would continue until a fire crew was assembled.

The issue of access to land for the building was solved when the local parish and Department of Highways collectively agreed to donate land. The question of access to a water supply was resolved when the nearby community centre donated an area of land which was dammed and converted from a swamp into a pond.

With these solutions in place, start-up funds and pledges began to flow in from the community. All initial funds were raised by the community and, using borrowed equipment from a fire department in another small community, activities such as bingos, dances, auctions, raffles and bottle collections were organized as fundraisers by dozens of dedicated volunteers. When enough start-up funds were finally in place, construction of the building that stands today was underway.

Three decades later, St Andrews has developed an innovative means of securing sustainable resources for the fire hall. While its system still relies on volunteer fire fighters and board members, the community now funds the provision of fire fighting services through a property taxation system. A small municipal grant of \$5,000 per year (compared with a structure now valued at an estimated \$750,000) remains the only source of external funding for this community-driven and managed service.

Later, the fire department was also given access to a pond for filling the tanker truck by the community centre. As has been noted, the firemen played key roles in the construction of both the curling rink and community centre.

The fire department also provides an example of the way in which local associations have been organized to minimize conflicts of interest and maximize efficiency. When the fire department was established, volunteers were selected for two separate functions. A board of directors was selected and charged with raising money for construction of the fire hall, and the purchase of equipment, and providing oversight on the department's finances. The firemen who were recruited were free to focus their time and attention on training, maintaining equipment, and fire fighting.

The cooperation between the parish council and the fire department illustrates the bridging that takes place informally between one association and another. The fact that one association can overlap another, with members working towards mutual goals, is part of what gives this small community its strength of purpose.

*Leadership*

St. Andrews has a legacy of progressive community leaders. Until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most of these people were priests. Today, the community has a cadre of informal leaders from many different backgrounds: some are farmers, others have businesses in the community, while still others are professionals working outside the community. Kevin Bekkers, the local representative of the Nova Scotia Department of Agriculture, declared, “the thing about St. Andrews is the number of leaders they have. They have people who not only talk about things; they do them” (personal communication, 2007). Steve Smith agrees: “they have some real movers and shakers, and real community-minded people” (personal communication, 2007).

One of those leaders, Leroy MacEachern, described four important characteristics of leaders in the recent community-driven projects in St. Andrews. First, he says, “leaders are more involved than anyone else. This means they are there earlier than everyone else and they are there at the end of the day after everyone leaves.” And, he adds, “they put in their own money before anyone else.” Second, leaders in St. Andrews have learned how to generate a feeling of ownership among the volunteers involved in the various projects:

You find whatever ways you can to get other people involved in decision-making. I remember saying, “Why don’t you take a look at those samples and figure out what colour of siding we need?” ... When they drive up to that rink ten years later, they will tell people, “I picked out that siding” – that’s what I mean by ownership. (personal communication, 2007)

Third, Leroy suggests that local leaders are inclusive, since “they are good at identifying people’s skills and are able to find a place for everyone who wants to help. They recognize that everyone wants to make a positive contribution to the community. Some people may not think they can do something, but it is up to the person organizing the work to make sure that they can... to train them” (personal communication, 2007). Finally, he says that local leaders have been good at knowing when to mobilize the community, and points out that timing is everything. As well, he observes that a plan is needed before leaders go out to the community to enlist support.

His strong, yet self-effacing, commitment to his community illustrates a salient point. Good leadership demonstrates that a leader can offer direction while simultaneously standing back to invite direction from others, without ever losing sight of the communal goal. In this way, leaders like Leroy MacEachern or Joe van de Wiel can inspire people so that initiative can come from the community as a whole.

*The Ability to Sustain Internal Agency*

What is so impressive about internal agency in St. Andrews is that the community has been able to sustain such a high level of it for such a long period of time. Several community members volunteered their thoughts on why this was possible. A newcomer to the community, Paul MacLean, suggested that the various community associations are not insular but reach out to, and draw in, new members. He also lauds the way in which each association holds “volunteer appreciation” events to recognize the dedication and work of

their members. Other residents felt that the community had developed mechanisms to pass on the “community spirit” from one generation to the next. The most important of these mechanisms was seen to be the role modelling of parents. Some people also saw community sporting events as instrumental. Many farming families pointed to the local 4-H Association as an important vehicle for developing the next generation of community leaders. In addition, it was pointed out by many that St. Andrews is also able to draw on its former residents, particularly for raising funds. A community newsletter called “The Causerie,” and reunions such as “Come Home Days,” were thought to contribute to the connections between former residents and the community of St. Andrews.

Another reason for the scale and scope of initiatives undertaken by this community is that many of the livelihood activities developed by the residents of St. Andrews have generated the skills and equipment necessary for building and maintaining community infrastructure. A former St. Andrews Consolidated School principal exclaimed that whenever any community improvements needed to be made “it seemed like everyone in that community owns a bulldozer” (personal communication, 2007).

Yet the overriding reason that internal agency has been sustained over time is that community members are determined to preserve their ability to drive their own development. According to Joe van de Wiel, “What really drives people around here is a common faith in doing good for others” (personal communication, 2007). This non-traditional concept of faith has been attributed as a source of unity and sense of pride. Joe recounts his reaction to a priest who once referred to St. Andrews as a highly self-interested community: “That really hurt me... and I tried to do something about it” (personal communication, 2007).

People in St. Andrews see a correlation between the level of internal agency and their quality of life, and thus make it a priority to engage in reciprocal and volunteer activities that build both social capital and community spirit. As Joe MacDonald declared in *St. Andrews Then and Now*, “One of the greatest assets of the community of St. Andrews is an apparently unlimited supply of volunteers, for whatever worthy cause” (2000, p. 109).

As Leroy MacEachern puts it, “We are really lucky in St. Andrews that when people decide to take on a project other people are ready to support them” (personal communication, 2007). Part of the reason for this is that St. Andrews is not factionalized. Owen McCarron, who represents St. Andrews at the municipal county council, points out “People here don’t try to tear down someone who is successful. They just do not get jealous of success. And, if anyone needs assistance, people will drop whatever they are doing to help” (personal communication, 2007). John Juurlink, one of the informal leaders behind the curling rink, suggests that part of the spirit of community in St. Andrews is the “spirit of compromise.” This may explain why the decision to replace the parish hall with a “community” centre did not divide St. Andrews the way it might have done in other communities in northern Nova Scotia.

#### *Striking the Right Balance between Internal and External Agency*

Running through the story of St. Andrews are the undercurrents of both community and government in the community development process. What is different from the early days in

the development of St. Andrews is that today there are certain entitlements that all residents in northeast Nova Scotia can expect from the state by virtue of their citizenship and in exchange for their taxes, such as health care, public education for their children, and the maintenance of roads. In many communities, the evolution of governments into service providers has led to the atrophying of individual or associational initiative for even simple improvements in community life. Leroy MacEachern points to the seventies as the time when "society's expectations were that the government should be doing everything in communities" (personal communication, 2007). There were even small grants given to pay people to undertake activities that had, until that time, always been done by volunteers.

The citizens of St. Andrews have found a way to maintain their role as initiators of community development activities. Part of the challenge in claiming this space is being able to differentiate between when support from the state is helpful and when it undermines or overwhelms community initiative. For example, the people of St. Andrews did not see a role for government in building either their community centre or curling rink. They did, however, see a role and a responsibility for government in reducing the cost of the building the seniors apartments, so elderly people on fixed pensions could afford the monthly rent. The people of St. Andrews do not see this government funding as a subsidy; rather, they see it as a public investment, a way for a small amount of public funds to make possible a larger community and societal impact. Similarly, the fire hall was, initially, built and equipped with community money. But rather than have to keep fundraising for a service that most residents now see as an entitlement, community members agreed to a levy on property taxes to fund the fire department on an ongoing basis. In this case, the community agreed to finance a community association as though it were a public institution. The people of St. Andrews have become pioneers once again, but this time, instead of creating homesteads and farms, they are experimenting with new types of relationships between the community and the state.

### *Conclusion*

Despite its successful history, the citizens of St. Andrews face several important challenges as they move forward. The majority of the community's young people now migrate to the province's largest city and to other parts of Canada for employment after they graduate from secondary school, much as they did in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Those who remain have begun to place as much importance on virtual communities as the one in which they live; they could become less committed to their real community in the future. Many members of St. Andrews' voluntary associations are "greying," and a number of the current generation of community leaders are at, or near, retirement age. Due to a number of factors, several farmers may not encourage their children to continue in the business.<sup>6</sup> As well, St. Andrews is becoming a "bedroom community," meaning that people live there, but work elsewhere.

While these challenges are formidable, St. Andrews is in an enviable position compared to most rural communities in the region. All of the challenges mentioned above are also being

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<sup>6</sup> High real estate values of land and high value of milk quota combined with the potential challenges to the supply management system through trade agreements make selling their farms and quota a more attractive option than staying in business

faced by other communities. But unlike most rural communities in Nova Scotia, St. Andrews is now attracting new residents. These newcomers report they are drawn by the quality of life in the community and its close proximity to Antigonish, which has schools, shopping facilities, a University, a hospital and a golf course. In addition, many of the community's sons and daughters who have moved away to find work indicate that they would like to return and raise their families in St. Andrews. And technology is starting to make it possible for people to be based in a small, rural community and "telecommute" to work in urban areas thousands of miles and several time zones away. Optimistic about the future, local resident Owen McCarron sums it up: "As one type of community identity fades, another flourishes. The cornerstones of the community that we have built over the years will help us weather any changes" (personal communication, 2007). While McCarron is referring mainly to the physical infrastructure built by the community, one can't help thinking that it is the social infrastructure that is the real foundation upon which this community has been built and will continue to thrive. Perhaps that is why the actual cornerstone embedded in the wall of the community centre does not bear the name of a local, provincial or federal politician, but instead bears the simple, yet profound, motto: "Community Spirit."

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### **Author's Note**

I first heard about the community of St. Andrews on an early morning regional radio broadcast in which a regular contributor from our area spoke of this amazing local community that had built their community centre and curling rink without any government help. Several months later my wife and I had a chance to try curling at a "learn to curl" evening organized by her employer. At that event I met Leroy MacEachern who filled me in on the history of the curling rink. A few months, and several visits to St. Andrews later, Alison Mathie, Kate Fiander and I were convinced that we had found a story of community-driven development not more than 10 km from the Coady International Institute.

In June 2007 Kate Fiander sent copies of the draft case to twenty five citizens of St. Andrews who had been interviewed the previous month as part of the research for the case. Most of the feedback we received was very positive but one comment stood out for us. Several people commented that the case played up the role of only a couple of key leaders, in spite of the fact that in St. Andrews there were many leaders working behind the scenes. However, when we tried to interview a person who several people put forward as a behind-the-scenes leader, she told us she didn't want to be interviewed (in keeping, obviously, with her *modus operandi*).

Kate and I would like to thank the people of St. Andrews, former residents and others who have supported or worked with the community on its various projects including officials with the provincial government for giving so generously of their time. This included finding and providing archival material, being interviewed and agreeing to read the draft case to check for accuracy. In particular we would like to thank (in alphabetical order): Kevin Bekkers, Fr. Vern Boutlier, Archie Boyd, Mary (Tommy) Chisholm, Benny Ten Brinke, Fraser Dunn, Martha Dunnett, Marie Feltmate, Marianne Forbes, John Juurlink, Joe MacDonald, Loyola MacDonald, Patricia MacDonald, Alistair MacDonald, Leroy MacEachern, June MacIsaac, Ron MacIsaac, Paul MacLean, Mary McCarron, Owen McCarron, Tom Moore, Cathy Sears, Steve Smith, Mary van den Heuvel, and Joe van de Wiel. We hope that this case does justice to the efforts of more than eight generations of St. Andrews residents who have built their community from the ground up.