



Colin Hughes, of G&C Hughes Enterprises Ltd., was primarily a diesel mechanic when he took over the company in 1991. He still takes pride in that side of the business, but he has diversified, notably through increased land holdings. (AFR photos)

## Shifting on the fly

Colin Hughes had a lot to learn when he took over the family business

by Gayle Wilson

Colin Hughes admits he was not very well prepared to become a business owner when his father, Gilbert, succumbed to cancer in 1991 and left him to run the family trucking and logging company in New Ross, N.S. Just five years out of Kingstec, the Nova Scotia Community College campus in Kentville where he trained as a heavy-duty truck mechanic, Colin had spent most of his working life in the diesel repair shop on

the New Russell Road.

"There wasn't a component on the truck that I couldn't rebuild," he recalls. But suddenly his strong technical abilities were no longer sufficient; he had to acquire management skills, and this was a bit overwhelming. "I'm a 28-year-old kid and I've got no brothers and sisters," he says, looking back at this difficult time. "Dad had always run the trucking business. I didn't know anything about it."

However, 27 years later, and despite

some rough stretches of road, G&C Hughes Enterprises Ltd. is going strong – fueled by a strong work ethic that has flowed through the generations, and Colin's determination to push through with his own business model.

The senior Hughes started off in 1968 with a Ford 700 dump truck, working on contract for the provincial department of highways. In the fall, he would take off the dump box and replace it with a rack to haul Christmas trees to New York for



his uncle, Ernest Veinott, also of New Ross. A year or so later he bought a Massey Ferguson 265 tractor with a pulp loader and power trailer; he hired cutters, and started logging for Bowater Mersey Paper Company.

In 1973 Gilbert replaced the F700 with his first new truck, a C65 Chev that he geared up for hauling pulp wood to Bowater – refitting it for Christmas trees in the fall.

“Dad hauled a lot of Christmas trees over the years,” says Colin. “It was a good burst of money, quick money, before Christmas.”

As with all his purchases, the truck was financed through a loan. “Our family has started from scratch – less than scratch,” he says. “We work hard, and we borrow, and we work hard to pay it off.”

Colin remembers his father’s C65 in particular. “The first year I ever went to the States with him, I was small enough that I could sleep between Dad and the door, and stretch right out,” he says. “Every year when I went down with Dad, I used to sleep through a different part of the road, so I can remember the whole trip.”

In time, Gilbert made connections with Christmas tree buyers in the U.S., and started securing his own supplies of trees from local growers, for the export market. In the late 1970s he bought his first tractor-trailer, a long-in-the-tooth International TranStar with a 318 Detroit engine, “which you could hear all across Lunenburg County,” according to his son. “It was an ugly, old truck – and noisy.”

And it wasn’t a keeper. After only about a year, it was replaced by a spritely

cab-over Freightliner, “which was a super truck in those days,” says Colin, adding that the vehicle lasted through three separate engines. “He thought the world of that.”

win arrangement; the young entrepreneur had the security of backing from his father, while Gilbert had someone on site to maintain his vehicles and equipment.

Colin obtained his tractor-trailer licence around this time, and soon afterward his skill was put to the test when the family got a call from one of their drivers who was at the border and was not allowed to cross into the U.S. Though Colin had never made the trip alone, he got down there quickly and took the load the rest of the way. “What are you going to do? It’s perishable goods,” he says. “The customer was waiting for it.”

Gilbert later bought two cab-over Freightliners and a Kenworth cab-over, but Colin found them difficult to work on, and soon began steering his father away from this design. “Since I was the one doing the repairs, I was going to be the one to pick the truck,” he says, adding that the cab-overs were eventually replaced by conventional Freightliners and a Ford Louisville 9000.

By 1990, when Gilbert was diagnosed

with cancer, he had three trucks on the road, a bulldozer and a backhoe, as well as his woods equipment. Colin describes it as a time “when our world kind of went upside down a little bit.”

However, he proudly recalls how his father was still hauling Christmas trees while he was taking chemotherapy – which would be remarkable enough now, but was even more so back then.

“I kind of laugh,” he says, “because in today’s world, with all these nice new highways and all these powerful trucks and all the luxuries to hauling in these



**Rustin Hughes, Colin’s eldest son, backs one of the company’s Freightliners into the garage for servicing.**

But Gilbert was determined not to be overly reliant on the logging industry or the Christmas tree industry. As the years went on, he bought a bulldozer and a backhoe, and continued to earn construction contracts.

#### WIN-WIN

Colin moved back home in 1985. He bought the diesel repair shop where he had been working, and relocated all the equipment to the family homestead, launching Hughes Diesel Repair, a name the business retains today. It was a win-





Colin Hughes says having excellent in-house mechanical expertise has allowed him to get a lot of mileage from his trucks, but he recognizes he will have to update the fleet sometime soon.



A recent expansion on the back of the garage allows plenty of space to service customers' vehicles as well as the company's trucks and forestry equipment.

things, for somebody to haul five loads of trees a year, that would be a big year. My Dad, I kid you not – and anybody will tell you – he used to haul 10, 11 loads on those old roads. And back then there were no bypasses. You had to go through pretty well every city going down through the Eastern Seaboard, right through to New York.”

Colin recalls “some tough times” after Gilbert’s death, and some “hard learning,” because his father had been the businessman in the equation. “I can fix the damn things, but they’ve got to have something to do.”

Part of Gilbert’s legacy was the company’s lineup of good drivers – employees who were “practically like family,” says Colin.

Colin decided to purchase some woods equipment, such as a skidder and a porter, and found jobs for all the trucks, including working for Scott Paper, with whom his father had started to make some inroads. Meanwhile, the diesel repair shop was getting lots of business.

“I had a real good customer base, because I was young and ambitious and fast,” he says, recalling that he would often work in the shop all day, then jump into a truck and haul logs at night. “I was burning the candle at both ends for quite some time there. When you’re young you can do that.”

### NEW TRUCKS

In 1999, when maintaining the company’s aging vehicles became a struggle, Colin bought his first new trucks – two Freightliner FLD120s. Another one followed in 2000, and another two years after that, all financed through Mercedes. By 2006, there were seven trucks in the fleet. This, despite the fact Colin had stopped hauling Christmas trees with his own trucks – “because I could hire it done cheaper than I could do it myself,” he explains.

Moreover, he has changed the focus of the business. “My dad had a huge interest in equipment. Myself, I buy equipment out of necessity, because I have an interest in land.”

Since he took over, the company has been making major land purchases, and its total holdings now exceed 4,000



acres. The company employs about 35 full-time workers, with foreign workers coming in to tend the Christmas trees.

"We're managing upwards of a couple thousand acres of Christmas trees," says Colin.

"We're probably one of the biggest Christmas tree shippers, if not the biggest, in the province."

Still, there have been potholes in the road. After the Nova Scotia government allocated the Crown timber in the southwestern region of the province – including the land previously owned by Bowater Mersey – to the WestFor consortium of 13 mills, many private landowners and contractors felt the pinch, and Colin's company had to park three of its trucks. He accuses WestFor of going "hog wild" and flooding the wood market.

He sees things improving since the province took steps to address the problem. "People are getting back into the industry," he says. "I look at competition as an asset – because every time I see a new truck come out onto the road, that's another truck that I'm going to get to work on and sell parts to."

An ongoing challenge is finding people to drive his trucks. There simply are not enough capable drivers moving up the ranks to replace the experienced ones who are retiring. Colin blames it on a culture that no longer fosters mechanical ability among the young. He says things were different in his father's day. "As soon as they could get out and run around the yard, they were on wagons, on bicycles, and whatever they could get a motor in, and they were driving it."

Nor does he see truck driving courses as providing the solution. "Let's face it," he says, "what are you going to learn in five to six weeks?"

#### CHANGING TECHNOLOGY

One change on the horizon for this company is a fleet update. Colin says he hasn't bought a new truck since 2005. He has been able to keep these vehicles running because the older technology is relatively simple to maintain, but they are "getting tired," he says. "I am going to have to invest in new equipment in the next year or so."

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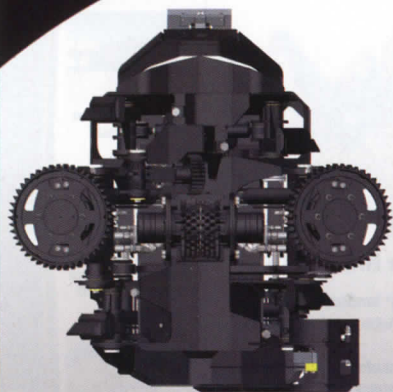
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He recognizes that the company needs to keep up with trends, especially in relation to components such as automatic transmissions, disc brakes, and emission control systems. But servicing the newer vehicles presents challenges. "When it comes to the mechanics and stuff, I put my guys up against anybody," he says. "What we can't do is not due to lack of knowledge – it's due to lack of testing equipment, which is very expensive."

Nonetheless, Colin is moving ahead and planning for the future. He has steered the company back into road construction and excavation, to supplement its extensive operations in forestry,

**"My dad had a huge interest in equipment. Myself, I buy equipment out of necessity, because I have an interest in land."**

– Colin Hughes

trucking, Christmas trees, and diesel parts and service. The pieces fit together seamlessly. "We buy the land, we cut the wood, we truck the wood, and we have the diesel repair shop to do all the work on the vehicles along the way," he says. "So we are pretty self-sufficient."

It's not lost on Colin how far he has come since he was a 28-year-old trying to get up to speed in a business dominated by 50- and 60-year-olds with much more experience. "I really had to fight for the crumbs that were left behind from those guys," he says.

But now, he adds, those people are out of the picture. "And, quite frankly, business is quite easy for me right now."

His two sons, Rustin and Matthew, are helping out now. Recently Colin received an offer to buy the business, but the family's intention is to keep driving G&C Hughes to new heights.

(Gayle Wilson lives in Blockhouse, N.S.)