

The marigold man

He may not work miracles per se, but Barry Ogden has spearheaded projects like building a *Marco Polo* replica, and involving kids to plant marigolds on main street, helping to highlight Saint John on the map

by David Goss

AMONG THE collectibles found in the basement of Barry Ogden's home, in Quispamsis, NB, is a model of an unknown three-masted ship. Ogden remembers the day his grandfather brought the model to the West Saint John motel his father ran. He was 12.

"I would lay on the lawn by that ship with its tin sails rattling in the wind," he says, "and dream of the great sailing ship days of Saint John."

Many boys might have done the same for a time—perhaps until they were called to dinner. But Barry's passion for tall ships has stayed with him to this day, and his desire to embrace Saint John's past and chart its future course has influenced his career as a historian, teacher and activist.

Ogden was inducted early on into a fast-paced, full lifestyle. Besides the motel, his father owned six businesses; his parents insisted he and his two sisters help out. "My mom and dad instilled a work ethic," he says. "That meant rising early and working hard, as well as doing whatever school assignments you had."

As a university student, Barry was able to turn his fascination with sea-faring into a part-time job, working nights on the *Princess of Acadia* ferry. He'd sail overnight to Digby, NS, return to Saint John early the next morning,



More than two-million marigolds have been grown and planted by thousands of children from Greater Saint John in the past 12 years. "The marigolds make people feel good about themselves."

and then have a full day of classes at the University of New Brunswick. When he began teaching half days at Saint John High School in 1982, he would arrive back in the city at 7:30 am, and be at the school an hour later, ready for work.

Barry has now coached athletics at Saint John High for 36 years, and taught history there for 28. Students taking his classes or playing on his football, hockey, or soccer teams have to make a pledge, which he refers to as the "BMW oath."



Barry Ogden with his Sheltie, Casper.



MIKE FOSTER

Ogden founded the UNB Saint John Seawolves football team, shown above, as well as the Atlantic Football League—which will help kids who want to play competitive football at that level stay closer to home. “That was the selling point,” he says.

“When I worked in the tourism industry, I realized that many of our guests were on their way somewhere else,” Ogden says

“No one ever refused,” he says with a chuckle, explaining the initials mean no bitching, no moaning and no whining.

He tells students, “If you have a problem, offer a solution.”

Offering a solution is exactly what Ogden did after a conversation he had with Bernie Morrison, Saint John’s parks and rec manager, in which they both expressed a desire to beautify the traffic median on Main Street. Ogden suggested planting marigolds; to overcome Morrison’s cost concerns, he then suggested the students at nearby schools grow and plant the flowers.

In typical Ogden fashion, he went from the meeting to immediately seek sponsors. Today, Ogden oversees the “Marigolds on Main Street” project. It involves 100 sponsoring businesses and 32 schools, with students planting at about 50 sites in the Greater Saint John area. Main Street is still the most dramatic of the marigold sites, with 40,000 plants alone. As of this year, two-million marigolds will have been planted.

For 25 years Ogden’s also been volunteering with the city’s South End food bank, involving approximately 2,000 students in the process. “It is more than just raising funds—yes, we do that—or bringing in food, which



BRIAN GOODWIN

Posing in front of the hull of the *Marco Polo* replica—“the fastest ship in the world,” built in Saint John.

we do, too. It’s about educating the students, teaching them that there is a poverty problem in the city, and there are ways it can be solved.”

Few may know that side of Ogden. But ask any Saint Johner who is behind the drive to build a replica of the *Marco Polo*, and they will likely tell you: Barry Ogden.

“When I worked in the tourism industry, I realized that many of our guests were on their way somewhere else,” Ogden says.

He taught them the story of the *Marco Polo*, which was built in Saint John in 1851. It claimed to be the world’s fastest sailing ship, and had connections with England, Australia, Quebec and Cavendish, PEI, where it sank in 1883. “I knew people were fascinated by tall ships, and would go miles out of their way to see one. The *Marco Polo* brought fame and fortune to the city once, and it could do it again, I thought.”

As originally conceived in 1986, it was to be a full-size replica whose masts would tower over the nine-storey downtown Hilton Hotel, and completed by 1992. The plan has been scaled back due to costs, however: the replica will now be one-third the original’s size—90 feet long and 65 feet tall—but Ogden’s enthusiasm is in tact.

“The hull is now complete, constructed [with] 225-year old pine,” he says. It’s in a shed on the city’s west side, and could be moved across the harbour to the city centre any time a spot is made available. He admits he is anxious for the project to be completed, but despite the delays and obstacles, he says building the *Marco Polo* replica has

Ogden's bite-size advice

What's the secret to Barry Ogden's success? "Get people to envision the idea, break the idea into small parts, show people how they can help even if it is in a small way, and stay focused. Someone has to have the dream—the big vision, the overall picture—and keep it before those who can help."

put the city on the map.

"There have been stamps issued, coins struck, the NFB created a film, and five books have been published. There have been dozens of stories in newspapers and magazines nationally and internationally," he says. The project's website (new-brunswick.net/marcopolo) has had half-a-million hits.

"The *Marco Polo* project isn't just about building a ship, it's about telling a story," he says. "The most successful tall ships have great stories and we believe we have one of the best stories in the world."

Ogden's ability to tell a story and lead by example have inspired others to take action alongside him. And like his parents did before him, he's often involving his family in his causes.

He is quick to say that his wife, Debbie, has been his biggest supporter, and he's incredibly proud of his sons, Chris, 21, and Josh, 20, who excel in school and sports.

"The *Marco Polo* replica is older than both my sons. They now know why there's no money for college," he jokingly told a *Telegraph-Journal* reporter last year.

With his sons and other young Atlantic Canadian athletes in mind, Ogden recently established the Atlantic Football League for college-level players. Five post-secondary schools in the Maritimes now have AFL teams, which Ogden says help local kids who want to play competitive football at that level stay closer to home. "That was the selling point," he

says, estimating it costs about \$18,000 annually in tuition and living expenses for someone to go to university outside the province, compared with about \$6,100 to enroll at a school at home, such as the University of New Brunswick, Saint John.

Ogden has also secured about \$7 million in fundraising for the Saint John Canada Games Stadium refurbishment project.

On his 54th birthday, Barry Ogden reflected on what he would focus on next. "I have seven or eight years of teaching ahead of me, and so long as I continue to be blessed with lots of energy, with the ability to pull people together, to get them to believe in themselves, to solve problems, lots of projects will come to mind." 🐼