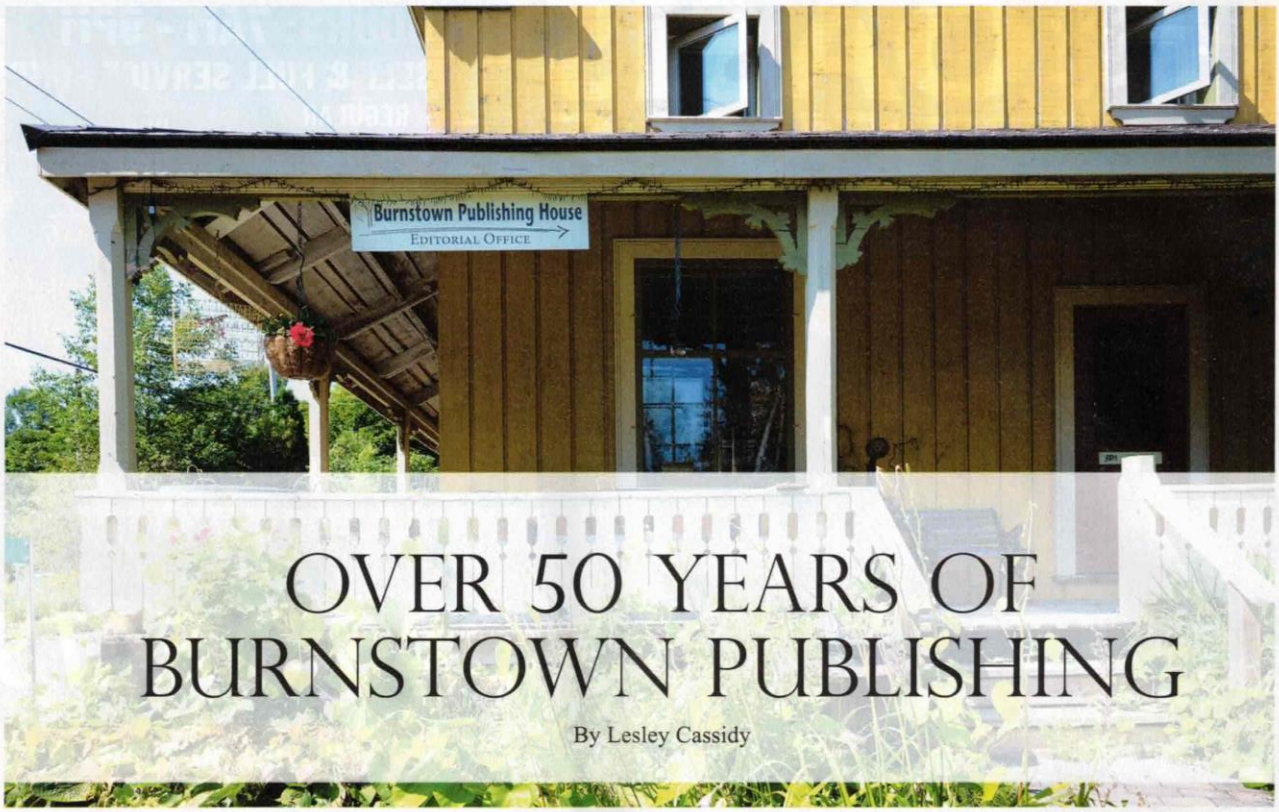


OVER 50 YEARS OF BURNSTOWN PUBLISHING

By Lesley Cassidy

If the rough-hewn log walls of the yellow-clad house on Leckie Lane, beside the meandering creek in Burnstown, could talk, oh, the stories they would tell. Once the Leckie Hotel and tavern, a historic stopping place along the Madawaska River that accommodated loggers and lumbermen during the mid-1800s log drives, it's now a beautifully restored building by sculptor Richard Gill and painter Cheryl Babineau.

It is fitting that a large sunlit room on the main floor of this old tavern is now home to Tim Gordon's publishing office. Tim has been breathing the world of stories for over 50 years as the owner and founder of the Burnstown Publishing House (BPH), formerly the General Store Publishing House.

Tim's first job in the industry, after leaving college, was as a book distributor.

"I got a job covering Eastern Ontario and Western Quebec as a rep for Cannonbooks. Tom Main, the owner, set me up with a vehicle, and I went around the Valley putting racks of Canadian books at gas stations and campgrounds and off-the-beaten-path outlets," he recalled. "I ended up with over 500 outlets in Eastern Ontario and Western Quebec."

While visiting friends in Quebec, he, his wife, and their young children drove home through Renfrew and stopped at a gas station where they heard a place was for rent in nearby Burnstown. They soon moved to the four-corner town, bought the historic red-brick store, renovated it, and began running the Burnstown General Store. Not long after, he launched the General Store Publishing House, inspired by the name of the General Store he and his wife opened in Burnstown.

In the early years of the distribution system, friends and people he met asked him why there weren't many books on the Ottawa Valley, its history, and its tall tales. After the late Joan Finnigan, one of the Valley's favourite storytellers, approached him, he published his first book (Joan's 16th), *"Giants of Canada's Ottawa Valley."*

"Five thousand copies sold by the end of summer," Tim explained. "I put 10 copies in most of my retail outlets; that's how it all started."

Tim's world is filled with manuscripts, phone calls and marketing ideas.

"I am an orchestrator," explained Tim. "The first step in the process when we are approached with a manuscript is to send it out to one of my four senior editors for evaluation, which takes about 30 days. When the evaluation comes back, the editors discuss the writing skills, while I look at it from a marketing point of view – where, outside of the standard bookstores, can we sell this title? To me it's all about understanding the connections between the book's content and the need in the market."

In the publishing world of the 1970s and 80s, the Chicago Trade Fair was a massive gathering of authors, publishers, and independent booksellers. While wandering around the fair, he picked up a bookmark with five free gas grilling recipes for the new gas grilling barbeques, a cooking method quickly gaining popularity.

When he got back to Canada, he emptied his goody bag from the fair.

"I looked at the bookmark with the BBQ recipes, and my gut got excited – so, I called up our standard discount letter on my computer, re-jigged the costs and quantities to reflect an exclusive deal for the BBQ manufacturers, and sent it to three gas barbeque manufacturers in Canada. Two days later, I received a phone call from *BroilMaster Grills* in Oakville. Ontario."

The CEO said he had a national sales meeting and would send Tim the money to come and cater the meal for his reps. Then Tim could speak for five minutes about the book idea. Tim laughed as he recounted the story because he didn't have a printed book to sell.

He quickly called his neighbour, Jo-Anne Bennett, and her husband George (who worked as a sales rep with BPH.) Jo-Anne was

a fantastic cook; she quickly brought wonderful barbecue recipes to life. The trio brought those recipes to Oakville and grilled them for the sales team. After much food and drink, the CEO invited Tim to present the book idea to the reps – they loved the meal and the book idea, jumping up with orders for books they could use in their territories.

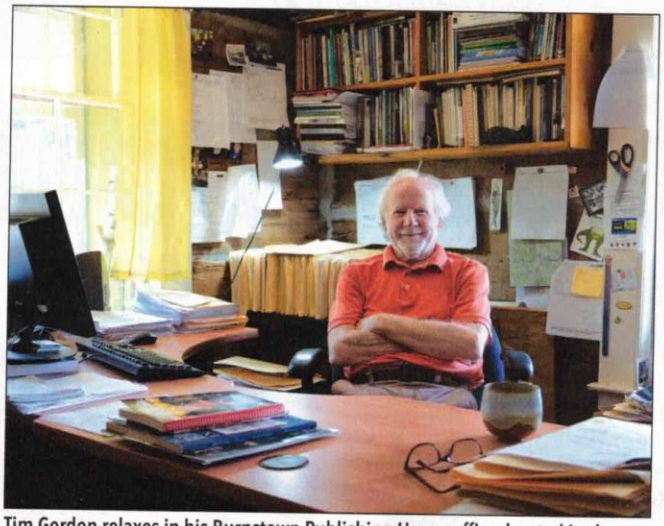
"We then went back to the CEO's office - my legs were shaking as the CEO ordered 50,000 copies right there and gave me a purchase order worth over $200,000. We went back to the hotel and got drunk and almost got thrown out. Incredibly, when we got back to the office in Burnstown on Monday morning, there was a fax from Tennessee, the head office of BroilMaster, for an additional 70,000 copies. 120,000 copies ordered – no book yet!"

Tim continued: "We got right on the book production, setting up sections for meat, fish, and veggies. It was printed in Pembroke at Runge Press over the next nine years, and we sold over 1.3 million copies, which made us the talk of the book trade for some time."

Today, this small-town-based publishing house has released over 2,600 book titles with a crew of four senior editors, two graphic designers, a part-time publicist/office manager, an illustrator, and a colourist. Over the past 18 months, and following trends, BPH has produced 11 books on grieving, death, and dying for adults and children.

On the standard-size books, titles like *The Healing Trees*, *The History of Calabogie*, and *The Story of MJ O'Brien* are well into their 10th and 12th printing. Larger titles include *Stories from the Life of Thomas Cavanagh*, *A Hundred Years on a Handshake: M. Sullivan & Son Limited* and *Pinecrest Remembrance Services Ltd 1924-2024: One Hundred Years of Service*. Up next, *The History of Kanata*, an incredibly beautiful "fairy trail" book, *The History of Running in Ottawa*, and the 50th anniversary of the Bernadette McCann house in Pembroke.

Born and raised in Montreal, he spent his teenage years in Dundas, Ontario, where he was the youngest of six children and excelled in sports. He was also the class clown.



Tim Gordon relaxes in his Burnstown Publishing House office, located in the former Leckie Hotel in Burnstown. Mr. Gordon is marking his 50th year in the publishing business this year.

"After I scratched my way through a standardized SATO test, a few weeks later, the principal (and football coach) of my high school pulled me out of class," Tim explained.

The principal threw me against the lockers and said: 'Look at this! You've been screwing around; you've got the brains, now get out of here and get on with your future.' "That changed my life," said Tim. "The principal told me I wasn't just a jock; I needed to finish high school, and I'd go places. He knew what I needed was tough love – I never looked back."

At one point in his career, Tim became the Book Publisher for *Harrowsmith Magazine*, overseeing book production and managing their huge mail-order book pages. After leaving Harrowsmith, he continued publishing books while dabbling in magazine publishing, including *"Home and Gardens for Eastern Ontario,"* and later launched *"Valley: The Magazine for Eastern Ontario"*. Then he moved away from that genre as the publishing landscape was changing in the late 1990s.

"Fred Runge made me an offer I couldn't refuse. I became part of the Runge Press group, with me running the book publishing division. When we signed the agreement, Fred pulled out a bottle of champagne and a key to a brand new (very ugly) plum coloured Toyota as part of the deal," said Tim. "I told Fred I couldn't see myself in it; we laughed, and I immediately traded it in for a used BMW."

With Tim's blessing, Fred Runge (after selling his print division) sold the publishing house to Andrew Dickson at Custom Printers in Renfrew. Years later, Mr. Dickson moved into the radio business and sold the printing company to a Toronto firm, who later sold off all the assets and closed it down. Tim moved back to Burnstown, started *Burnstown Publishing House*, and settled into the Leckie Hotel office.

"At 79, people ask me when I'm going to retire? – from what? I've never worked a day in my life, imagine; every day a new character walks into my office with a book, an invention, or an idea they want my opinion on. Twenty years ago, people told me to get out of the books business – but last week I took my 11-year-old granddaughter Ruby into the Arnprior bookstore and let her do her thing while I got a coffee next door. When I came back, I heard her having a very detailed conversation about books and favourite authors with the woman at the cash – sheesh! Yet another generation of book lovers."

Despite people telling him it's time to get out of the book trade, he shared: "People still love books, the tactile experience of handling a book, and they love gifting titles to friends they know well."

Nowadays, you'll find Tim swimming in the Madawaska River twice a day. He gets his *NEAT* iced coffee from his favourite baristas, then walks to his office at the hotel, checks in with his real boss, Julie Hartwick, a publicist, works on emails, then manages manuscripts, marketing, phone calls, and visitors dropping by.

Tim has three daughters: Marion, who owns her own company - MJ's Communication Systems; Evelyn, a delivery nurse at Queensway Carleton, and Ruth, a former world-champion kayaker now Head of Sales for Patagonia for North America. He's a proud dad.

"We try to celebrate Christmas in the summer, so we get together to have our Christmas family gathering in August."

He mentioned this as his family had just left to return home.

In his spare time, he sings and plays guitar.

"I have several guitars; a few need strings. I plan to do more of that. I was in a band once (weren't we all *lol*); it's in my blood, as my dad was a musician in the big band era in Montreal."

Near the end of the conversation, Tim recalled wisdom shared by his good friend Tom Main, the friend and owner of Cannonbooks who helped him become a book distributor decades ago: "Everywhere you go, there's always opportunities to make money, you just have to pay attention and see the signs – the bookmark!"

Words Tim has embraced and lived by.

Burnstown Publishing House