

Jim Irvine liked to be ahead of the futuristic curve

By Brock Weir

Technology changing at a rapid pace is nothing new.

It has moved along at a good clip since the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, kicking into high gear about 50 years ago as communications evolved at a breakneck speed.

This was something that excited Jim Irvine, co-founder of Aurora Cable (later Aurora Cable Internet, or ACI) in his over 40 years at the helm of the uniquely Aurora company before it was sold to Rogers Communications.

But Mr. Irvine, who lost his battle with cancer at the age of 87 this spring, also knew the value of being a big fish in a small pond.

If you are an Auroran of a certain age, chances are you remember Mr. Irvine coming to your door with a live cable wire trailing behind him. According to his daughter, Linda, he would drag this along with him to make his well-known sales pitch to Aurora residents who were still enjoying their three channels via their TV antenna.

Before he hooked it up to their television sets, potential customers were skeptical, she says.

'The classic thing was, 'Why would I pay for something that I can get from my antenna for free?'' Linda recalls with a laugh. 'Then he would attach the cable to their television and show seven whole channels! The he would say, 'That's why you would pay for it.''

Linda, who worked alongside her dad at ACI until they sold the company to Rogers, says he bought into the company in 1965 when a friend said they had the infrastructure for the company in place but were at a loss at how to sell their product. He bought in for a third of the company and the family moved to Aurora in 1967.

'We were independent because he wanted to be his own boss, I am convinced of that,' says Linda. 'We were independent because he could provide a better product than anyone else who was trying to buy him. We were independent because it was his baby. He helped build it up from the ground up of nobody having cable in Aurora to 95 per cent of people in Town having cable and I think that was very important.'

Before the Irvines sold up to Rogers, technology was changing every six months. That is something Linda says 'excited' her father as there were so many potential products and services that could be rolled out.

'He knew these things were coming and he was visionary in that kind of way,' she says. 'He just got technology even though he didn't know how it was going to evolve. He just knew that something could happen with whatever the cable was bringing into the house.'

'When you have a smaller infrastructure, it is far easier to upgrade all of your equipment to a faster unit. When you become a Rogers, you can deploy it in certain markets. He wanted it always to be a manageable thing. We had many instances where we could have expanded out to King City, and we had the Oak Ridges portion of Richmond Hill, but Dad said, 'That's too much. Let's just stay where we are' and he concentrated on being the best he could be in a smaller venue.'

Eventually, however, the time came to sell. After resisting multiple overtures, he relented when his wife Shirley, who rarely waded into the business realm said it was time. That, says Linda, made him sit up and take notice.

'He toyed with the idea in the last 10 to 15 years and he really tried to understand why [he should sell, arguing], 'I'm getting all this money, and then I would have to invest money into something I believe in and, oh, that would be cable TV.' But, he just grabbed onto retirement and we had a blast.'

At the end of the day, Jim Irvine was all about people, she says. Every Sunday the family would gather for a large-scale family dinner that rivaled Christmas and Thanksgiving spreads, and the honorary family extended well into the community.

In retirement, their shared passion was golf.

Mr. Irvine was laid to rest June 17 following a service at Trinity Anglican Church.