

The 'cosmopolitanization' of St. John's

The city is attracting a new breed of innovators to work in the energy sector. For many, it's a return home

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From Thursday's Globe and Mail

ST JOHN'S — For centuries, the rugged landscape and rich history of St. John's have inspired artists, writers and adventurers.

And in what might be the city's first substantial role in technological innovation, Guglielmo Marconi, atop Signal Hill in 1901, received the first transatlantic radio transmission from Cornwall, England, by attaching a receiver to a kite.

More than a century later, St. John's is attracting a new breed of innovators drawn to opportunities in the oil and gas industry.

For the first time in decades, young university and college graduates, especially engineers, scientists and skilled trades people, are finding jobs in their home city.

"Newfoundland is cool," says newspaper editor Ryan Cleary. "It's a place where young people want to be right now."

They're buying homes in suburbs like the King William Estates, where million-dollar homes back onto a lake. They're also buying boats and kayaks and snowmobiles, and enjoying them here in Newfoundland and Labrador.

Consultant Mark Shrimpton calls it the "cosmopolitanization" of St. John's. "It's a much more buzzy place than it was five years ago," he adds, pointing to a busy St. John's Harbour, where vessels are loaded with supplies en route to one of the three offshore oil projects on Newfoundland's Grand Banks.

Entrepreneurs in communications and ocean sciences have settled here as well, initially to serve the needs of the oil industry. Many are now finding customers outside the oil and gas industry.

Mr. Shrimpton wrote a report for Petroleum Research Atlantic Canada last December outlining the economic benefits of Newfoundland and Labrador's offshore oil industry. He said the most profound change has been an across-the-board improvement in skills among professionals and technicians due to the demands of the oil industry.

Another development is the return home of professionals and entrepreneurs who left the province due to a lack of opportunities.

Jerry Byrne, president of one of Newfoundland and Labrador's fastest-growing companies, spent nearly a decade in the United States before returning to St. John's to revamp the small family-run business that specialized in metal fabrication and marine services.

"Five years ago, we were basically a mom-and-pop operation down on the waterfront," says Mr. Byrne, who restructured and expanded the company to go after the growing number of contracts from the oil and gas industry, which now account for 50 per cent of his business.

Today, D.F. Barnes Group employs 120 people. Last year, Mr. Byrne received the Ernst and Young Turnaround Entrepreneur of the Year award. Sales have doubled every year since 2001, when revenue was just over \$1-million. Revenue for 2006 is projected at about \$16-million, Mr. Byrne says.

This year, the company developed a launch and recovery rig for subsea vehicles. The 30-tonne hydraulically operated steel assembly lowers and retrieves the vehicles (about the size of a minivan), which operate where it's too deep or unsafe for human operators.

Mr. Byrne says the launch and recovery rig was designed with future manufacturing opportunities in mind, such as the Hebron-Ben Nevis project and liquefied and compressed natural gas projects.

"I've waited my whole life for this," says Mr. Byrne, who didn't lose a trace of his Newfoundland accent while in Virginia. "Finally, we're starting to take control of our own resources."

The arrival of the offshore oil industry has prompted a spike in engineering research, most of it conducted at Memorial University's St. John's campus.

Engineers at C-Core (Centre for Cold Ocean Resources Engineering), a company with close ties to the university, have developed a method for tracking the movement of icebergs by using satellite images. It's crucial technology for the offshore oil industry because an iceberg can damage an underwater well if it scours the sea bottom.

C-Core's scientists use the same technology to track ground movement for oil companies because shifts can damage a pipeline.

C-Core's iceberg tracking methodology has found applications outside the oil industry, CEO Charles Randell says. Last month, the Volvo Ocean yacht race from Wellington, New Zealand, to Rio de Janeiro used C-Core technology to track icebergs in the Antarctic for its racers.

Not far from C-Core headquarters, in another building at Memorial University, Trans Oceans Gas chief executive officer Steve Campbell has patented a method for transporting natural gas using fibre-reinforced pressurized plastic containers. Mr. Campbell, an engineer who spent years working in the Alberta oil fields, says he got the idea from seeing buses fuelled by natural gas. Their tanks were also made from fibre-reinforced plastic. Mr. Campbell's plan was to use the same material to patent on a grander scale.

Trans Ocean Gas is a private company, but Mr. Campbell says he hopes to take it public within a year.

Right now, natural gas is transported by pipeline or liquefied natural gas tanker, which is

expensive. Mr. Campbell says his method of transporting gas in pressurized containers would cut costs by two-thirds.

A native of the province, Mr. Campbell says he is glad to be back home, conducting research that might one day provide jobs in his province.