



The Old Train Station News

Newsletter #4

June 2009

Early this month, Ron and I took our walk up the Highfield Road. Anyone undaunted by the steep incline or a possible bear encounter would certainly enjoy this hike. As you start the walk, a little brook gurgles along on one side of the road while the remains of an old orchard accompany you on the other – but not for long. The road quickly climbs up hill, leaving behind a lovely panoramic view of Pleasant Valley, North Grant and the town of Antigonish. At one time, farms lined both sides of the road; today the unknowing traveller would hardly realize that this was once a thriving farming community. We walked for a mile or more before turning into an old road that leads to the former “Piper” property. Each time we walk the road, I insist on paying a visit to the old foundation that still remains intact, even to this day. The farmland has grown up in maples, spruce and fir but, on careful inspection, one can still find the old rock fence-rows that bordered the cultivated fields and the huge rock piles scattered here and there on the property. Picking my way through the brambles around the age-old foundation, I actually discovered several gooseberry plants and a single currant bush – and so a little of the past remains.

The neglected orchard at the bottom of the hill, the berry bushes, the old foundation, and the rock piles always remind me of the countless hours that our forefathers invested in developing their lands. Agriculture today is a far cry from what it was at one time — but what about gardening? Needless to say, the produce from the gardens and the orchards played an important part in the diet of the early settlers and the garden was absolutely essential. Today we run to the supermarket for our foodstuffs, yet many of us continue to garden and landscape our properties but usually more as a hobby. Nurseries and garden centers abound and so a quick trip to town can supply us with whatever we need – but it wasn't always like that.

The Casket, one of our major sources of local history, testified in 1863 that the houses in the village of Antigonish were “neat and surrounded by ornamental trees and shrubbery” – but where did folks get their plants back then? Clearly, the early European settlers brought many of their plants with them from the old country: plants that provided them with fruit, vegetables, flavouring and, of course, medicine. Some native plant life proved to be desirable; these were transplanted closer to their dwellings, simply for easier access. Undoubtedly, the early pioneers traded plants with neighbours, friends and relatives, just as we do today.

It was simply a matter of time before the seed and nursery trade developed into a thriving business. As early as 1857, **The Casket** advertised “fresh garden seeds” from G.R. Morton and Co. on

Granville Street in Halifax. The following year, our local paper indicated that “an assortment of fresh garden seeds” had just

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been received by T. M. King and Co. in Antigonish. In 1861, **The Casket** ran an advertisement for “a choice selection of flower seeds,” including some imported from England. Catalogues were ready for use. In 1871, J. D. Copeland, druggist in Antigonish, advertised “a large assortment of fresh garden seeds consisting of beans, beet, cabbage, carrot, cauliflower, cucumber, lettuce, onion, parsnip, peas and clover seed.” In 1873, John McMillan was selling “turnip, carrot, cabbage and a variety of other garden seeds of superior quality, for sale low for cash” at St. Andrews and Antigonish.

By now, folks in the town and county had access to a wide selection of garden and flower seeds as the following 1875 ad in our local paper aptly indicates: “Kitchen Garden Seeds in all leading varieties. 260 sorts Flower Seeds, comprising all the standard kinds and many new varieties. *Gladolus Bulbs* [*gladiolus*], &c. We will send Flower Seeds, at retail prices, to all parts of the Dominion, free of postage.” This advertisement from Brown Bros. & Co. in Halifax even promised “illustrated descriptive catalogues free on application.” Think of the excitement that these catalogues must have provided the local women!

While plant seeds could now be ordered from catalogues, no doubt, most seeds were purchased locally. In the 1880s and 1890s, C. B. Whidden and Sons were the main advertisers of seed in **The Casket** each spring, publicizing: “a large and choice assortment of field and garden seeds,” “a full stock of vegetable and flower seeds,” “a large assortment of standard and novel varieties of garden seeds,” “a full line of garden sorts,” “orders by mail or telegraph,” “write for prices, etc., before purchasing elsewhere,” “one carload of seeds” and “10 tons seeds” – the latter, of course, including field seeds. In the 1890s, D. G. Kirk began to advertise agricultural, flower and vegetable seeds. By 1906, he was selling seeds “in bulk and packages.” In the early 1900s, Trotters began to sell agricultural seeds locally. At the same time, Thomas Somers was selling field and garden seeds. In 1909 D.R. Graham was posting his telephone number (Tel. 78) so that folks could call in an order for seeds. By 1917, Sears and MacIntosh had gotten into the seed business too.

Fruit trees were readily available now. Riverside Nursery of Berwick was advertising apple and plum trees in **The Casket** in 1876. In 1878, a gentleman by the name of Archie J. McDougald of Aylesford, formerly of Malignant Brook, was recommending the locals of his “native county” to purchase fruit trees from Cornwallis Valley Nurseries as they were “of the best quality.” Both nurseries had agents in the local area collecting orders for them. In May of 1908, **The Casket** advertised apple trees for sale at a public auction in front of the Post Office in Antigonish. Four hundred apple trees of standard varieties, grown in a Nova Scotia nursery and “free from diseases,” were to be sold for cash only. A number of rhubarb roots would also be for sale. At the same time, we must acknowledge the travelling peddler who also played a significant role in the distribution of seedlings and flowering plants.

As early as October of 1863, folks in the town and county were exhibiting and judging their best garden produce as well as their prized animals and finest handiwork. **The Casket** reported that “the

exhibition of Agricultural Products and Domestic Industry of Eastern Counties of the Province was held at the Antigonish Village... and a very large concourse of spectators was present to witness the display of natural and artificial products of Pictou, Guysboro and Antigonish congregated there." On display were 108 specimens of root crops "comprising potatoes, turnips, carrots, beets, onions, parsnips, cabbage, cauliflowers, celery, pumpkins, squashes, and tomatoes." There was a small display of fruit whose quality was described as "fair." On hand were summer and winter apples, pears, plums, and melons. The article reported that "the cultivation of fruit is not so far advanced in the eastern as it is in the western counties."

The Third Annual Fall Fair, held in October of 1908, was, according to **The Casket** "probably the most successful exhibition ever seen in this County." Of the potatoes it was said that "it is doubtful if potatoes of better quality can be grown anywhere in Canada." The turnip crop had failed that year but apples proved to be of superior quality. The next year, turnips were being praised for their quality and their appearance. Pumpkins and squash of several varieties were on display as well. By 1914, plums, pears, and apples of many varieties were being judged for excellence. Finally, in 1916, pickles and cut flowers, the pride and joy of many a housewife, were being judged alongside of all the other categories in the "domestic department." Gardening had finally evolved to a new level and women were starting to enjoy the fruits of their hard work.

Gardening, for me, is a pastime, an artistic expression, and a great work-out. I toil all spring and summer – weeding and digging, dividing and transplanting, watering and mulching, as I attempt to perfect my beds. Years ago, with the help of my husband and my brother, John, I bordered some of my gardens with old foundation stones that we collected from our property. I love the sheer size of each and every chiseled boulder that frames my gardens; I love the visual impact that they create; and I love the connection with the past – but, every now and again, I wonder what their former owners would think of what I have done.

Until the next time,

Catherine MacGillivray



The Genealogy Nook...

Father Angus MacLeod is looking for information concerning the relationship between Antigonish and Dunvegan MacLeods. Anyone with information can contact the museum.

Pat MacDonald of Menlo Park, California, is looking for information on her grandfather, John Byron MacDonald. John Byron, the son of Mary MacDonald and Unknown MacDonald, was born in Dunmore on December 17, 1862 and died on January 16, 1947 in Vancouver. John Byron moved around a lot during his lifetime, spending time in Boston, South River, Red Deer, Vancouver, and California. John Byron's mother was born on August 23, 1837 at Antigonish and is said to have died on June 18, 1918 at

South River. There are no details with regards to the identity of his father. Any information on this family would be greatly appreciated.

Local Tidbit...

Great Expectations, by Charles Dickens, was published in England in 1861. By July of 1863, it was already being advertised on the front page of **The Casket**.



Introducing Marjoire...

We are very happy to introduce our new summer student, Marjorie Smeenk-McNamara. Marjorie, who has a Bachelor of Arts with a Major in French from St. F. X., is quite interested in our local Acadian history as well as the history of education in Antigonish. At the moment, she is familiarizing herself with the museum collections as well as the local history. Marjorie and her husband, David, have a beautiful little daughter, Yvonne.

Notices...

Celebrate Canada Day with a guided walk around the Antigonish Landing with Allison MacDonald and Beth Murray. Kindly meet at the museum at 8:30 a.m. for a power point. Walk begins at 9:00. Enjoy!

On Wednesday, July 15, at 7 p.m., Monica Graham will be presenting her book, **The Great Maritime Detective**, at the museum. Folks who are familiar with the Caledonia Spook Farm story will remember that Peachie Carroll was the famous policeman/detective who studied this particular case. Peachie was a man of many talents and may also be remembered for his athletic achievements.

A Step Back in Time...

This beautiful old photograph, dated pre 1910, is of one of the gardens of Clara Cunningham Seaman of Court Street in Antigonish. Clara was widely known for her lush beds of roses, peonies, and hollyhocks as well as her lovely window boxes. Her gardening expertise was second to none. The old Seaman house still stands today but, sadly, Clara's gardens are no more.



As part of the museum collection...

Browsing through one of the bookshelves at the museum, I came across a lovely little old volume entitled **The Rural Wreath; or Life Among the Flowers**. Inside was the following inscription: "to Miss Sarah S. Graham from J. A. S. Pitts, 12th June 1865." This was, in fact, a courting gift. It was the age of shipping and Mr. Pitts was in the coastal trade between Newfoundland and Antigonish. Miss Graham was the daughter of Captain David Graham from Antigonish Harbour. Love was not meant to be for, in time, Sarah married a gentleman from Pictou County. Yet, tucked in among the pages, I discovered a tiny dried flower. Upon opening the book to its ribbon marker, I read, "Life is Sweet."