

The Old Train Station News

Newsletter #7

September 2009

Fall is here and Mother Nature is, once again, transforming our local landscape into a blaze of color. The hills of Highfield, viewed from my window, are already decorated with smudges of gold, orange, and rust. I never tire of gazing out at this spectacular vista. While fall is, without a doubt, my favourite time of the year, it also brings with it the scattering of our kids. This summer our two oldest, Michael and Helen, left for work in Calgary. Early September saw our two younger boys, Paul and David, returning back to university. While I certainly don't object to the enormous cutback in dirty laundry, housework and meal planning, the quiet takes a little getting used to. After twenty-five years of kids coming and going, we're left just a tad bewildered by our newfound freedom and so Ron and I look for new ways to enjoy our evenings and weekends. We are already avid walkers but now we've added hiking to our list of "things to do". Tuesday evenings we have dubbed "*Casket Night*"; if we have no other plans, we drive in to town and pick up the local paper – just to see what's going on.

While all Antigonishers are familiar with *The Casket*, some may not realize that other newspapers made great efforts to enlighten the local reading public as well. One of these was *Christmas Greetings*, a year-end review, published "in the interest of Antigonish town and county." The first edition of *Christmas Greetings* came out in 1898. The review was, unfortunately, short-lived and it ceased publication in 1901. This delightful little newspaper, published by J. and A. McNeil (we don't even know their real names), highlighted the activities of the town and county during that particular year – including social and cultural events, deaths, sports, building construction, business advertisements and, of course, the "locals" and the "personals".

While little is known about J. and A. McNeil, we do know that they were young men "not yet being of a votable age" as they confess in their first edition when they promise to "act the neutral's part so far as party politics is concerned", certain that their "humble efforts in that line can neither make nor unmake governments." Interesting, they announce, "We do not propose for the present to remain any great length of time, but if our reception be, as we anticipate, a cordial one, we shall, at some future day, appear on the scene clothed in richer garments, and prepared to breast



the storms incidental to a journalistic career.” Unfortunately, this lively little annual ceased after but four reviews and nothing more was heard of J. and A. McNeil.

On the front page of the first edition of *Christmas Greetings* (found in Jocelyn’s treasure trove at the museum, of course), the young publishers confide that “in the quiet and unpretentious Town and County of Antigonish startling events are rare”. While earth-shattering news is still rare in this quiet little neck of the province, the authors’ spirited style is so captivating that they could easily grab the interest of our local readers today.

The state of the economy is always a great topic of conversation and the publishers address it quite readily in their first edition. “Antigonish is undoubtedly a fine agricultural county containing, as it does, stretches of magnificent intervals and uplands. But despite these advantages there is a certain something wanting, viz., the ability on the part of the farmer to manage his farm on a systematic basis.” They continue with a sound piece of advice. “If our farmers would but lay aside the antiquated theory that because it so happens they are born the sons of farmers that necessarily the science of farming must come ... intuitively to them, and if they would but confine themselves to one branch of farming, as, for instance, dairying – a branch capable of being successfully followed in our county – then unquestionably beneficial results would follow.” Their first report on agriculture is quite remarkable and, unbeknownst to them, quite prophetic as dairy farming is now one of the main industries of this county.

The first edition of *Christmas Greetings* contains a column concerning Boston. Many folks in the area would have close ties to the Boston States at the time and so this article would be of great interest to them. “Business is not good,” they report. Many in the great city are unemployed and desperate for work. It was “a rather sad sight, the day following the storm, to see thousands of men, who evidently had seen better days, glad to get a few hours’ work at shovelling snow off the streets.” Nova Scotians were, of course, among the unemployed. Many had gone south of the border in hopes of ringing in on the building trades but these, they inform, were now “particularly dull”. Again, J. and A. McNeil are quick to caution their reading public. “I cannot advise any great exodus from Antigonish to Boston just now, nor at any other time for the matter of that. There are entirely too many deluded people coming among us. Stay home, attend to your cattle and sheep, and do all in your power to develop your own Canadian home. Her prospects are as good ... and her future as bright as that of any young nation on earth.” Again, time proved them quite right. Today, Antigonish is a wonderful place to live!

A year-end review must, of course, report some local happenings and J. and A. do just that. The new “substantial and commodious” St. Paul’s Anglican Church kept local builders fairly busy all that year. Construction of the new convent would probably be completed by the New Year. The old Mount St. Bernard’s Convent “was almost entirely consumed” by fire in July of that year but work had gotten underway immediately to replace the old building. Improvements to the St. F. X. College and to the railway station kept many local men employed. A brick structure for an electric plant was put up on the West End. “The street lights are but few in number, nevertheless they shed a brilliant light.” McNeil and McNeil praise town council for “having acted so well and wisely in introducing this much needed reform” but encourage council to look into “procuring a watering cart for our streets during the summer months.” The dust is most “disagreeable” so why not water the streets? They are quite sure that there

is plenty water for this purpose; they know, for certain, that there are numerous hydrants; and, of course, there is lots of dust.

The publishers were quite willing to report on the “notables” who had visited the “fair Cathedral City” during the year. They were eager to boast any sporting victories – including those secured at the Highland Games. They were even quite happy to brag a little. “That Antigonish has the brawn and muscle necessary in sports has been shown from the fact that whenever our boys have competed, under favourable conditions, they have been eminently successful.” They were more than happy to report some of the Grim Reaper’s takings – but the young publishers of this yearly simply refused to comment on any wedding announcements. Why? Their response is quite amusing. “To those of them that have found marriage a success we are fearful that such action on our part would fill to overflowing their cup of happiness; and in the case of those who have found it a failure a reminder of the day they were trapped would only result in plunging them into a fit of the blues.”

If the number of advertisements in this paper is any indication of public support, *Christmas Greetings* should still be in print today. Local businesses of all sorts advertised – the grocers, the general store keepers, the barristers, the contractors and builders, the jewellers, the druggists and the shop owners. J. H. McDougall, the marble cutter advertised, “If you want to rest easy in your grave don’t forget to mention in your will that you want a monument or tombstone from McDougall.” Palace Clothing Co. insisted that “Nothing becomes a man, at least in outward appearance, as to be will (well) dressed. Go to Simpson if you want to look nobby.” T. J. Bonner announced, “If you can’t get it at Bonners, then it can’t be got in Antigonish.” All seemed eager for McNeil and McNeil to succeed. Their reception was indeed “a cordial one” but three years later, their publications ended.

What happened to McNeil and McNeil? Did they go on to pursue a great journalistic career, “clothed in richer garments”, as they had hoped in their first publication? Did they move on to greener pastures with their journalistic hopes and dreams? Sadly, the museum has but one edition of the few that were ever published – and so we are left wondering. Would the other publications have offered us any further clues? While we may never know, we can still hold onto hope that someday one of us may discover another piece to the puzzle of the very talented duo who published that single copy of *Christmas Greetings* that is housed in the archives of the Antigonish Heritage Museum.

Take care,

Catherine MacGillivray





A Step Back in Time...

Before modern transportation and the consolidation of community schools, the county of Antigonish was divided into small school sections thus allowing students to walk to school. In his book, *Memorable Years*, H. M. MacDonald lists the eighty-six sections that once made up the county.

This wonderful old photo, dated about 1930, is of the East Tracadie Schoolhouse. Built around 1920,

it stayed in operation until the construction of Tracadie Consolidated School. The old outhouse, pictured on the left, was a typical structure in the schoolyard.

The Genealogy Nook...

A couple visiting from Cape Cod had difficulty linking their family to the museum's data base. Annie Chisholm from South Side Harbour Road married an Alexander O'Hanley from River Denys or Sydney Mines. Annie was a close relative to the late Steve MacNeil of Pleasant Street. Anyone with any information on Annie (or which Chisholm she might be) is asked to contact Jocelyn at the museum.

Four delightful ladies from Kinkora, P.E.I., were in visiting the museum recently, looking for any information on their Walter Shea ancestor from Church Street in Antigonish. If anyone is able to help them with their Shea/Thompson connections, please contact Jocelyn at the museum.

Notices...

The museum is looking for a volunteer with some financial training/skills to handle the duties of treasurer for the Heritage Association of Antigonish. Duties involve preparing financial reports for the organization. Estimated time commitment is approximately twelve to fifteen hours per year. Interested persons can contact Jocelyn.

The Heritage Association had another successful fabric sale. Thanks to all the volunteers, the donors, and those who supported the sale. Profits will go to the museum collection.

Local Tidbits from *Christmas Greetings*, 1898...

"Miss Mary McInnis, of Greendale, Ant. Co. has recently donated two very handsome statues of the Sacred Heart and Blessed Virgin to Georgeville Church."

"A lighthouse has recently been erected at Arisaig. Mr. John McDonald, of Antigonish, was the contractor. Mr. Hugh McAdam, Councillor for the district of Arisaig, is the keeper."



A Special “Thank You” ...

A very special “thank you” to Mrs. Mary MacDougall of the Heights for sharing memorabilia, photos, guide books and newspaper clippings of Girl Guides in Antigonish from 1933 to about 1937. Mrs. MacDougall was one of thirty-two girls who belonged to the first local Girl Guides troop. This organization was sponsored by St. Ninian’s C.W.L. Included in her collection are photos of the 50th and 60th anniversary of Girl Guides in Antigonish.

Thanks to her donation, we are able to share this photo of adult leaders Mary Agnes Gillis (East End) and Mary Agnes MacDonald (D.D.) preparing to go on parade to celebrate the Coronation of King George VI on May 12, 1937.

We’d like to thank Margaret Kempt of Malignant Cove for her recent donation of a hooked rug to the museum collection. The rug, hooked at Lochaber, depicts our provincial flower, the Mayflower.

One more thank-you goes to Josephine Monkman of Victoria Street who donated a dog tag dated 1936. It’s amazing the things one can find while out digging in the garden!

Autumn on the mountain...

This is the perfect time of year to take a tour up over Maple Ridge. Because of the heavy growth of hardwood on the hills, the changing leaves create a dramatic display of color each fall. The gradual climb up Eigg Mountain provides an occasional view of the Northumberland Strait and Prince Edward Island. The heavy growth of forest is amazing and the deep ravines are breath-taking. Wildlife flourishes in this deep forest setting. Keep your eyes open and your camera ready.

Travelling the old road today, it is hard to believe that folks once farmed this very dense mountain forest. The first settlers, from the Isle of Eigg in Scotland, settled the area in the early 1820s. The 1879 Church Map indicates residents by the name of Fraser, McIsaac, McLellan, McMillan, McDonald, Power and Dalton. Research shows that the Eigg Mountain area was School Section No. 16. and that the schoolhouse was situated in the center of the settlement. In time, the area became known as Maple Ridge but the old name continues to be used today.