

# The Old Train Station News

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Newsletter #9

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Letter writing is a lost art. This becomes clear when you spend an afternoon browsing through a collection of old family letters. In no time, you grasp the story value of the correspondence and the fact that this bundle of aged paper is, in fact, a treasure. Once creating a connection between reader and writer, these letters are now a link with the past, essentially a family history. While occasionally you feel like an intruder, observing the hopes, dreams, cares and personal lives of folks long gone, the sentimental and historical value of these tattered and faded bits and pieces of paper is quite clear.

The Antigonish Heritage Museum is home to an extensive collection of old letters belonging to a MacPhee family of North Lochaber. The letters are valuable in and of themselves because there is such a bundle of them – most of them dating back to the time of the First World War or even earlier. The fact that one of the letter writers was a soldier writing from the front makes them absolutely invaluable. History books give facts and figures but letters from the battlefield to the home front make history come alive.

Archibald Edward MacPhee was twenty-seven years old when he enlisted on January 10, 1916. His attestation papers tell us just a little bit about him. Archie was a young Presbyterian bachelor farmer. His next of kin was his mother, Mrs. Alex MacPhee. At just five feet, six inches, he was not a tall man. He had brown hair flecked with grey and his eyes were blue. On January 17, 1916, Archie was deemed fit for the Canadian Overseas Expeditionary Force. He had been recruited by the 106<sup>th</sup> Battalion, The Nova Scotia Rifles. They sailed to England on July 16, 1916 and started training at Lower Dibgate in Shorncliffe.

Archie began to write home almost immediately. Most of the letters in the collection are addressed to his mother or his sister, Winnie, at the old homestead in North Lochaber but he makes mention of writing to his sisters Ada, Bertha, and Nettie as well as a few neighbours and friends. Archie's letters paint a picture of military camp life. In his letter dated October 28, 1916, he speaks of camp routine and waiting to be shipped to France. "It is terribly muddy here now [;] it is nearly up to our boot tops. The rain never seems to stop." Life in the English camp has quickly become monotonous. On February 2, 1917, we note that he is still in England. He tells his mother, "I've written so often about being on the point of going that I'm getting rather disgusted with it all and will never mention going again." In his letter dated February 18, he is in quarantine. The mumps are making their rounds at Camp Bramshott. He will be in quarantine for some time. On March 11, he confesses to his mother, "As spring is coming around again I feel like putting in the crop instead of wasting my time in England." By April 5, 1917, he has concluded that "there isn't much to write about in this camp for it is a pretty dead place at the best of times. We never see anything here" – but the army needed trained men in reserve and so he waited.

While obviously restless and waiting for action, Archie's letters show that his thoughts are not far from home and the running of the farm which has been left to his mother and his sister. He worries

about his mother being sick and about her working too hard on the farm. "Sell the animals and cut down the work," he advises his sister. He is concerned about the women managing the horse, Jewel. He makes many inquiries. Did they get a door on the well house to keep the water from freezing? Are the potatoes holding out? Did they get the hay cut and stored in the barn? Was there enough hay? To buy more hay would cost an enormous price. "I hope you got the wood in," he mentions. On another occasion, he says, "I hope you are not out of wood for I hate to think of you being cold at home." "I'm glad the threshing went well and that the potato crop was good." "I hope the heifer is getting reconciled to being milked." "Don't worry about the ice house getting shingled," he assures them. Sometimes he gives advice; other times he makes suggestions. His concern is obvious as we can see when he writes Winnie shortly before he is sent to France. "I hope that Ma is getting stronger again. When none of you ever mention it [,] I'm afraid that she is not getting on as well as she should." While the letters from home no longer exist, we can almost piece them together from the fact that Archie always comments on the news and then answers their inquiries. "Keep me posted with the Lochaber news," he writes on one occasion and clearly they do. Details of home spill out, thus painting a vivid picture of rural life in Antigonish at the time of The Great War.

Archie is most anxious to see action yet it is obvious that he understands the dangers of war when he so frequently says, "If I live through the war. . ." He regularly assures them that he is fine. "Don't worry about me." On December 16, 1916, he writes to Winnie, "I do know that Mother is saying ["I hope that peace will come before Archie gets to France.["] Well Archie would be very much disappointed if he did not get a chance to get even with Fritz (the Germans). . . But I'm not worrying for I know that there will be enough fighting next spring and summer and I'll get my nuff of it aye, will I."

Clearly, mail placed high on the soldier's priority list. Almost every letter refers to mail that Archie has already received, mail that is late, mail that he has sent out, parcels that have arrived, and parcels that are waiting for him at the post office. Most of his letters begin with, "Your most welcome letter ..." as on February 2, 1917, when he writes to his mother, "Your most welcome letter came this afternoon and it was so very newsy and interesting. Those long letters are the kind I like to get." Shortly after arriving in England, he writes to Winnie, "I get all my mail [;] regular letters come in from fourteen to seventeen days and parcels take about thirty days." Obviously, letters came quite frequently. In a letter dated December 16, 1916, he notes, "I'm kept pretty busy acknowledging parcels for none of my old friends forget me." In the spring of 1917, there was a spell when no Canadian mail came for four weeks and Archie's disappointment reads loud and clear.

His first Christmas overseas was spent at camp in England. While few Nova Scotia families boasted an overabundance of wealth, they made sure that their soldiers had a bountiful Christmas. Shortly before the holidays, Archie writes, "It keeps a crowd busy sorting the Christmas mail for the last two weeks and the boys are just as eager to get their parcels as they used to be when they waited to see Santa Claus come down the chimney." His own gifts were plentiful and we can see his almost-childlike eagerness when he says, "I took a peep into that long tin box and saw all those Christmas stockings." In a later letter he says, "I'm going to open my Christmas stocking tomorrow just like I used to years ago." He acknowledges the boxes of cake and the candy that have come his way as well as the homemade socks and mitts. Archie clearly loved fudge. Shortly after Christmas, he writes to Winnie, "Most of the boys here have been well supplied with Xmas boxes. I got more than I ever expected and you can picture me digging into the candy."

While family and friends tried to provide a good Christmas for the boys overseas, the Canadian Red Cross played a big part in supplying the troops with necessities, not just for Christmas, but all year round. "If the good ladies could see the difference that dry sox makes [make] they would feel amply repaid. There is no scarcity of sox and I believe that those societies furnish the entire supply." The

Canadian military also made every effort to ensure a good holiday. The day started with a church service and a talk about peace. Following this, the soldiers were ushered into the dining room that was "all decorated with holly" and served "a big plate of turkey and dressing [,] cranberry sauce and mashed potatoes ... and a quart of beer. . . We all fell to and for a while there was nothing to be seen but a conglomeration of brass buttons, turkey and beer. . . Our supper consisted of bread, tea, oleo and cheese [,] quite a come down." While the dinner was indeed a treat, "the boys take the letter from home before their dinner."

That first Christmas overseas, the soldiers were confident that they would be home by the following Christmas. In his Christmas Eve letter, Archie writes, "the soldiers who survive will be home for Christmas 1917." A few days later he writes to Winnie, saying, "We had a pretty good time here under the circumstances but the boys all look forward to spending next Christmas in Canada." It was not to be.

On April 16, 1917, Archie finally wrote to his mother from France and the front. "I'm feeling fine and glad to get into the scrap so don't worry about me." Mail was even more important now but it was often much slower coming. A couple of months later, he wrote to Winnie saying, "I saw a chap getting a letter the other day that was written August 1916 and he was just as much interested in it as though it had been written the day before." While the mail may arrive late, arrive it did. On July 12, 1917, Archie wrote, "Your most welcome letter arrived some days, or rather some night ago. We were in the front line at the time and Fritz was making the night anything but pleasant for us when a scout came and dropped a mail bag into the trench and disappeared in the darkness. The night finally wore away and at daylight I was the proud possessor of three letters." Letters were a welcome sight and long awaited as we see in one letter to his mother: "Anything is worth putting in a letter when it goes to the front. ... I always wish they were longer." A couple of months later he wrote to Winnie, "Your letters from home are so interesting I could read a whole book of them. ... It is just alike being home for a while to get a good letter from home. Well if I have good luck for the next year I expect to be home to see all those things."

Archie's letters from the front contain a sprinkling of the horrific details that one would expect from the battlefields of the First World War. On occasion he refers to the mass destruction. On August 17, 1917, he thinks that they are finally leaving Flanders. "I had the pleasure a few days ago of standing in what was once the town of Paschendale and looking over the crest of the ridge of the same name down on the plain of Flanders below. It was a commanding position and it was no picnic taking it. . . It wasn't a healthy place to stand." He continues, "I was in Ypres this morning and talk about destruction. . . Good bye Belgium. I have only seen you for ten days but I never want to see you again." His letters are carefully scripted and less frequent. Just before Christmas of 1917, he explains himself to Winnie: "I was very lazy about writing when we were in the line. Somehow or other I never could settle my mind to writing but now we are out and I will try to do better in the future."

While details about life in the trenches are few and far between, we do gather a few tidbits in passing. In Flanders, he reflects on the great efforts of the Lochaber Red Cross ladies and he says, "I changed my sox five times in one trip in the line in Flanders. Those big thick pairs from home are a great preventive of trench feet." Conditions are obviously extreme when he says, "The mud is terrible. . ." but that is not the worst thing that the soldiers have to endure. Early in 1918, he writes Winnie, "I got that louse killer when I was in London but nothing seems to do the buggars any good. That is one of the biggest plagues of the war. They are worse than the mud for the lice we have with us always and the mud we have not always." In one letter he addresses Winnie's concerns about some soldier who was gassed. "I hope it is not a bad case for gas is not pleasant at all [,] at all. I have sometimes felt rather

sick from it myself for a fellow is always lazy to put on his helmet unless it is absolutely necessary for the helmet is nearly as bad as the gas.”

Letter writing from the front could be quite a feat as we see in his December 23, 1917 letter to Winnie. “I was writing by candlelight and the first bomb dropped not too far away. I waited for no “lights out” but smothered the candle pronto and as each bomb dropped apparently (sic) nearer and nearer. I cursed that German airman in volumes but finally he got out of bombs and flew away and I relit my candle and gathered up my scattered sheets.” In February, he paints an interesting picture when he says, “This is a most beautiful afternoon for this season. Warm enough for me to sit on the doorstep of an old shell-shocked house and finish this letter.” Two months later, he complains to his mother about the long night watches. “Am sitting on my heels in my ‘junk hole’ so that partly accounts for this awful scrawl. Hope you can make it out.”

When Archie refers to the enemy, he speaks of “Fritz” or “Billy the Kaiser.” There is no love for the enemy. On December 27, 1917, he speaks of the bombs that they use to drive the Germans out of their dugouts. “They have their choice of coming up to air or staying down and getting choked.” With each letter, he is more confident that the war will be won. “We are gaining on every point on the line and the Germans are ready to give up if the Kaiser would let them.”

In June of 1918, Archie MacPhee was wounded by a gunshot to his right arm – yet he continued to write. In his left-handed scrawl, he wrote to Winnie: “Shrapnel just missed bone but tore muscles and nerves in upper arm.” Archie’s career with the Infantry was over. “Won’t see the war again this year for which I am lucky. Hell in France and desperate fighting all rest of the year. Wound is blessing in disguise. Don’t worry about it.” In his next letter to his sister, he wrote about the “inferno of shell and machine gun fire” on the night he was wounded. “It gives one an idea of what France has suffered during the past four years [;]hundreds of towns and villages leveled to powder and thousands of farms so torn and destroyed with shells that it seems a hopeless task to cultivate them again.” Archie had indeed gotten his “nuff” of war.

While convalescing in England, letter writing was still imperative. “Write often,” he orders Winnie. “Send cake and candy.” Self preservation is no longer an issue. Now he focuses on home. When mail slows to a snail’s pace, he frets, “I was so afraid you all had gripe or something. . .” He knows that his mother continues to worry about him but he, in turn, worries about her. “You never mention how you feel,” he writes. To Winnie he says, “I know Mother will worry.” Archie’s concerns about his mother and sister at the old homestead are most sincere and we appreciate his concerns but, even more so, we welcome the fact that he understands the part that women played in the war effort when he writes to his mother, “I think there is altogether too much said about what the men are doing on the field and too little about what the women are doing at home. I often think that the women who keep the home fires burning are the better warriors of the two.” It seems that Archie learned a great deal. In one of his letters to his mother he wrote, “Experience is a great teacher.” And so it is.

Best wishes,

Catherine MacGillivray



## Come and see Ruthie's Christmas dollhouse.

Furnished with period pieces collected by Mom, Laurie Stanley-Blackwell, this exhibit is a wonder to see.



## A Special Thank-you...

Joan Gillis recently donated some woodworking tools and a wooden hook to the museum collection. The items were part of the Mike Gillis property in Lanark.

## Another Thank-you...



### The Wonder of Toys at Christmastime!

This photo is one of several sent in by Ninette Atwood of Ottawa. Taken back in the 1950s, this photograph is an inside shot of the Green and White Store that once graced our local Main Street. Located where Marie's Flowers is today, this establishment was run by Ninette's parents, Ninian and Marie MacDonald. As many of you may remember, the old Green and White closed in the late 1960s. The young girl in the photo is Ninette's sister, Bonnie.

## A New Addition to the Museum Collection...

The museum has purchased Joan Dawson's book, *Early Highways of Nova Scotia*.

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