



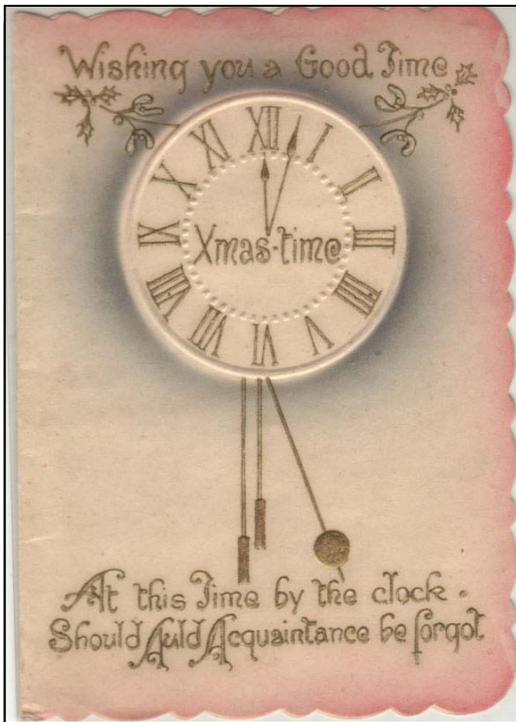
The Old Train Station News

Newsletter 11

January 2010

Warm wishes for a New Year filled with good health, peace and contentment!

With the approach of another new year, I started to wonder about the tradition of New Year's celebrations in and around the town and county of Antigonish. To get a little insight into the history of



this happy holiday, I stopped by to see Jocelyn Gillis at the Heritage Museum. How fortunate we are to have a curator who is so passionate about our local history! When asked for a little assistance, she quickly scans her shelves, browses her files, searches her computer, and skims the far recesses of her mind for that scrap of information that is sure to send her visitor off on a journey of discovery. To my query about New Year's greeting cards, she promptly turned up a lovely little old card dating back to about 1910. While the inside of the card was disappointingly blank, it is still valuable in that it is representative of the New Year's cards and postcards that were in vogue in the early 1900s.

Some of the museum's local history books shed a bit of light on this topic of New Year's. Father D. J. Rankin wrote [A History of the County of Antigonish, Nova Scotia](#) in the 1920s. Discussing local customs and social conditions, he wrote that Christmas was the "grand season for social gatherings and celebrations" in the town and county. As was customary in those days, the holiday was observed from December 25th through to January 6th. New Year's falls right in the middle of this season but it had an agenda of its own. Among the Scottish settlers, this night was called "*Oidche Ch'oinnie*" or "*Oidche Challain*" – Gaelic for "New Year's Eve". "Every window in the house was lit with candles till after midnight, likely to lead the New Year in. On this night every house in the district was visited. The doors were supposed to be locked. The men in the company carried clubs ... and made known their presence by vigourously beating the outside walls." Guests were not invited in immediately. The owner of the house first demanded a verse or two of a New Year's poem. This being done, the door was opened and folks were invited in for refreshments. Visits were short, for all of the homes in the area must be visited that night. "It would be considered an insult to omit one."

Contact information: Antigonish Heritage Museum @parl.ns.ca or 902-863-6160

In The Highland Settler, Charles W. Dunn makes reference to New Year's Eve as an occasion "on which the Highland settlers cheered their hearts with verse and song." The life of the early settlers was not an easy one so celebrations like these were a welcome diversion from the monotony of their daily lives. On this night, more than any other night of the year, "the laws of Highland hospitality demanded that the host should treat the guests to the best of his means" – but first the guest must recite a "suitable" rhyme or "*duan*". Recited poetry could be "long and elaborate" or "blunt and playful". Some were traditional poems brought over from the old country; others were spontaneous and created on the spot. Dunn gives us the translation of a delightful little Gaelic rhyme that would allow the guest entry into a home to become the happy recipient of warm hospitality.

"For the love of Fortune, let us in from behind the door; give us a drink of barley liquor; you yourself know that we like it well."

One can just imagine the outcome of a night of visiting – each house in the community, mind you – with that rhyme on their lips!

Father R. V. Bannon, native of Antigonish and professor of English at St. Francis Xavier University from the mid 1920s to the early 1970s, wrote a wonderful little poem about the local New Year's celebrations and called it "Oidhche Challuinn." Found in his little collection of verse, Eastland Echoes, this poem clearly reveals his love for the area, his appreciation of the local people, and his understanding of their need to hold onto their ancient customs.

If we read the poem with care, we can almost picture the "merry throng" setting off to "beat" or usher the New Year in. In fact, the poem itself has a rhythm or a beat that adds to the almost frenzied mood of the poem. Note the reference to the candles in the windows, the striking on the walls, the ancient rhyme that allows entry, the warm reception and, ultimately, the refreshments. Bannon also makes reference to the ancient superstitions of the Scottish folk which, of course, were not in keeping with their strong Catholic faith; nevertheless, he concludes that they must hold onto their old customs.

O leave the quern behind the churn,
And close the shed and bin,
A merry throng with shout and song
Must beat the New Year in!

Now let no window fail its light,
But shine from but and ben;
No bochdan-sprite may lurk tonight –
Then beat your New Year in.

Smite strong the walls as evening falls;
Wish luck to all within.
With carol shrill to banish ill,
We sing the new year in.

To hearth and happy festive board
With welcome none may win,
Unless he chime the ancient rhyme
That rings the New Year in.

The priest in snow-bound glebe might groan
Of superstition's sin,
But we must hold our custom old,
And beat the New Year In.

Loch Kartine's wave was hushed in frost,
And skates could swerve and spin
To take us down to Dunmore town
To beat the New Year in.

An echo out of Dunmaglass
To Keppoch kept its din,
What time we beat the old year out
And beat the New Year in.

Undoubtedly, Father Bannon understood the importance of recording the ancient Scottish traditions when he wrote this poem. The title, itself, is a gentle reminder of the old Gaelic language that was already fast disappearing. Did he fear that their traditions would follow suit?

Clary Croft has been studying Nova Scotia folklore for many years. He writes about the New Year's tradition of "first footing" in his book, [Celebrate! The History and Folklore of Holidays in Nova Scotia](#). This practice, carried out in parts of the town and county, came from the Scottish tradition of "ensuring good luck in the new year by not allowing anyone but a dark-complexioned or dark-haired male to cross the threshold first on January 1." Research explains that a dark-haired young man was recognized as a fellow Scot while a fair-haired male might prove to be an unwelcome stranger. In some communities, young men with the right qualifications were recruited to go from door to door to make sure that all the local inhabitants would have good luck throughout the coming year.

In her "*Study of the Remnant Gaelic Culture along the North-Eastern Shore of Nova Scotia*," one time St. F. X. student, Juanita MacLean, wrote that children in some parts of the county hung their new Christmas mitts, like their stocking at Christmastime, in hopes of receiving a few New Year's treats. This tiny mention suggests that this particular holiday wasn't entirely an adult celebration as often seems the case today.

Unfortunately, all that really remains of these delightful New Year's traditions is the "ceilidh" and the "refreshments" that were part and parcel of the holiday celebration. Yet, all is not lost. Like Father Bannon and his fellow keepers of our local history, we can keep the memory of our traditions alive by sharing and recording them. Perhaps you have local traditions or customs that you would like to share with us. We'd love to hear from you!

Best wishes,

Catherine MacGillivray



Quoits – an Old, Old Game...



The Heritage Museum recently became the proud owner of a full set of quoits – thanks to Duncan MacIntosh of Brierly Brook. The quoits once belonged to his grandfather, H. M. MacDonald, Inspector of Schools for Antigonish. According to family tradition, these quoits were used during the Highland Games. They are cast brass, and weigh about four-and-a-half pounds each.

For those of you who have never heard of quoits, it is a very old game, similar to horseshoes, that can be traced back to fourteenth century England. Ronnie Dunn of Harbour Center informed us that his grandfather, James. W. Dunn of Trenton, was an avid quoits player. In fact, he was a member of a team that frequently travelled to Halifax to play against rival teams. During the latter part of the nineteenth century, quoits were produced by the Herbert Johnson Foundry in Truro. The Museum welcomes any information or stories concerning quoits.

Recent Acquisitions – Thanks!

** Hugh Webb recently donated a Boy Scouts hat that once belonged to himself or his brother, Tom. The hat dates back to about 1950. The Boy Scouts movement was started in England in 1907 and came to Canada in 1910. Does anyone know when it arrived in Antigonish?

** Berkley Cameron brought in a Boy Scouts uniform with Queen Scout badges.

** Mary Beaton donated a photo of the Lower South River softball team, 1939 to 1942.

** Joanne DeCoste has added two more St. Andrew Rural High School yearbooks to the museum collection – 1963 and 1964. The museum now owns “Andean” copies from 1963 to 1967.

** An interesting collection of articles was left anonymously on the museum’s doorstep. Among the contents was a small aluminum tin with a few old matches, once part of a soldier’s kitbag dating WW2.

What can the museum do with your pennies?

Your pennies can actually help to pay for the conservation of articles that are donated to the museum. Loose change is collected and used to frame and preserve old prints and photos to ensure a long life.

Trains in Antigonish...

Local artist, Andrew Murray, is seeking photos that show trains in Antigonish County – either in motion or at rest and preferably ones that shows a length of train.

A Walk for Haiti...

There will be a walk around The Landing or “around The Horn” – as the old folks used to say – on Saturday. Folks will be leaving the Museum at 2:00 p.m. until 4:00 p.m. Donations are welcome.

A note from the Magdalen Islands...

The Antigonish Heritage Museum received an interesting letter shortly after New Year’s. Anyone with any information is asked to contact the museum.

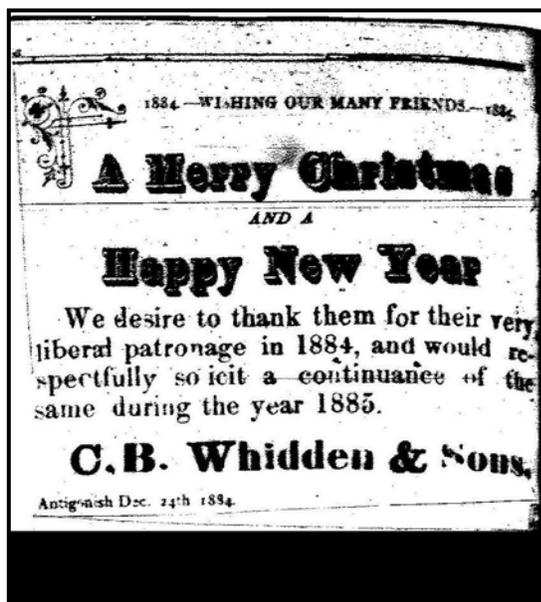
The Ponchon

In January 1910, the people of Iles de la Madeleine found themselves isolated from the rest of the country when the submarine cable which allowed them to communicate by telegraph broke. Determined to make their situation better in the continent, the islanders fabricated an ingenious "Ponchon" with an old molasses barrel they put a sail and a rudder. The barrel was then filled with mail in sealed cans and launched from Havre-Aubert. The small "Ponchon" was found two weeks later at Port Hastings in Cape Breton and the person who recovered it undertook to put the letters in the mail. The whole country was soon aware of the isolation of the Islanders and the situation was soon remedied.

The Islanders are celebrating 100 years since this happened in February of this year. It has come to the attention of one of the organizers that the original Ponchon(barrel) may be housed in a museum in or around Antigonish. Can you let me know if this artifact is part of your collection? If so are there any photographs available?

*Thank you for your information
Sincerely Louise Turbide*

New Year’s Advertisements in *The Casket*...



By the end of 1884, C. B. Whidden & Sons started using the New Year as an opportunity to thank their many customers and friends for their loyal support and to solicit their patronage in the coming year. Of course, this advertisement came with warm greetings for the holiday season. Early years of *The Casket* collection are incomplete but we do note that *McCurdy's* used the turn of the century for that same purpose when they advertised their “long range of Winter Goods” with the following greeting: “1900. To our many customers and friends we extend our best wishes for a happy and prosperous New Year.” This practice of advertising in the local paper at Christmas and New Year’s to thank customers and solicit business became quite popular and even commonplace in the business community.