



The Old Train Station News

Newsletter #14

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Old letters are valuable to historians and local researchers because of what they reveal about a particular time period. A collection of letters is invaluable for the reason that it presents continuity. The "Carroll Letters" are one such compilation. Tucked away in the archives of the Antigonish Heritage Museum, this collected work is made up of fifteen letters addressed to William and Jennie Carroll of Michigan, U.S.A., by members of the Carroll family back home in Antigonish and New Glasgow. The correspondence, which took place between August of 1904 and November of 1910, provides the reader a glimpse into the life of a typical working class family in early twentieth century Antigonish.

The first letter indicates that a significant period of time has elapsed since John Carroll and his youngest son, William, have been in contact. *"I am glad you wrote so we will get a start again,"* John writes. In our world of sophisticated technology and instant communication, this is quite unusual but, back then, this loss of contact was not uncommon. Young men went away to work and sometimes simply lost touch with home. *"There is none of the family home but mother and myself."* The letters do not indicate how long William has been away but obviously considerable time has elapsed. William's siblings have all started lives of their own in the meantime. *"Alfred came home three years ago and then went to Sydney, Cape Breton and is working there since he married 2 years ago to Lillie Grant. ... They live in Sydney but they have a nice home here. ... Walter is living in New York. He is married, they have 4 children. He was home 4 years ago. ... Anney and her two girls came from Boston with them. ... Will is in Brookline, New York. Walter and Will are steamfitters."* John is filling his son in on years of family history!

Much has happened in and about the town of Antigonish too as we see when John says, *"Well, my dear son, if you were to come home you would be surprised to see the improvement since you left; the big church, the big brick college with 190 students, large convent and the Bishop's Palace, all on one road."* It is when John speaks of himself that we begin to wonder how much time has actually gone by. *"Well, Will, I have been pretty well all along; ... I have a horse I bought 12 years ago, 20 years now, French stock, Oh, but he is a dandy. Yet, nothing changed anything but old age about home."* The tone of John's letter is matter of fact and quite accepting. John is grateful for the letter that has been so long in coming but he, too, takes his time responding. *"I received your welcome letter some time ago and was glad to hear from you once more."* After this, they stay in touch.

The second and third letters indicate that William did finally return home for a visit -- but not until two years later. Written to his wife, Jenny, these letters prove that his return home certainly created quite a stir. *"I arrived here all OK at noon Saturday and the first one I met to know was Father. I had quite a job to make him believe who I was and there was no body home but him. So we went down Town and met Uncle Mark Doran on the street. I had a job to convince him who I was. Alfred was across the street and he recognized me at once."* William is about thirty-four years old yet he sounds like a schoolboy. His happiness spills over when he writes, *"I am enjoying myself splendid. I*

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have not felt so well in years and I would not for a good lot have missed this trip and I want to stay the full two weeks if nothing hinders." William tries to make up for lost time with visits, day trips and teas but he has missed so much. The grandson, "*my namesake*", whom John refers to in the first letter is never mentioned again but now William meets his brother Alfred's wife and four-month old Harold instead.

To fully appreciate and understand the Carroll letters, one must realize that John writes from his home on Hawthorne Street in Antigonish but he and the folks he writes about, the Connors, the Dorans, and the Carrolls, all once lived "on the mountain" in Clydesdale. A quick look at the *1878 Church Map of Antigonish County* reveals all three families living side by side in that little rural community. More research indicates that the three families were actually connected through blood or marriage and so we understand the importance of telling their stories. Other persons who play a part in the Carroll family letters are the Purcells and the Delaneys who lived across the way in neighbouring Pleasant Valley. While John moved his family into town, his world continues to revolve around the folks from "home".

Interestingly, the tie to the old home up on "the mountain" is quite strong with his sons as well, even though "*the old place looks pretty bad now*" as William laments on his visit home in 1906. In a letter to William, Alfred speaks of his trip up to the old property with some of his buddies to get "*a good lot of firewood home*" for his father. It is January of 1907. "*I had it all cut and piled in the woods and intended to haul it myself but it was so hard to depend on the roads. So I went down to Copelands and got a few bottles of Oh, be Joyful, got ten teams to go and bring in a load and got a nice pile home and the next day the roads were gone. Jim Doran did not get here with his load yet he broke down on the road. He got home with a load but it was not wood. We had a great time of it.*" The farm was still important to all of them -- for both sentimental and economic reasons.

The Carroll letters allow us to piece together, much like a patchwork quilt, a period of time that is quite different from the one we know today. John states that his brother-in-law, Mark Doran, has done very well. "*The old man and woman is well done; got about eight thousand in bank.*" John, himself, is faring out all right too. "*I get work enough to keep me out of debt so far.*" He is seventy-six years of age but he still works every day. Two years later he still shingles his own roof. In fact, according to one of his sons, "*he still goes up on the highest buildings in town.*" William assures his wife, "*He is very smart for his age.*" At seventy-nine years of age, John is "*busy sawing his wood*" and piling it "*up snug*" in the yard while his wife, Margaret, passes the time "*mat making*". John is getting to be an old man but he must continue to work to support himself and his wife. The Old Age Pension is still a few years off.

In 1909, John complains about the scarcity of work. "*I never believed that Antigonish would become this flat. I haven't done ten days work out this summer. I don't know how I am going to come out the fall.*" In John's final letter we see that William is trying to help his parents in their old age. "*I am very thankful to you for that nice present you sent me at Christmas. It helped me a lot as this is a tough winter.*" John is obviously grateful for the help because he thanks William a second time. "*I must thank you for five dollars for it helps me out a lot this winter.*" Many seniors ended up living out their days in poverty or depending on their children for financial support.

Work wasn't always plentiful for younger men either. Alfred, who makes his living as a stonemason, can't always find work locally so he goes off in search of work. In 1904 he is working in Sydney. In January of 1907, he is back in Antigonish hoping to get work for the summer at the newly proposed hospital. In April, Alfred's wife writes that he has gone to New York. Work is plentiful there. In January of 1908, Alfred has started working in Massachusetts. In March of 1909, "*Alfred is home. He has no prospects of work for the summer as yet. Times are very dull at present.*" In September, John writes, "*Alfred is home all summer here working most all the time between here, Guysboro and Mulgrave.*" By the spring of 1910, Alfred's job prospects have improved considerably. "*Alfred...*

is working now since a week and expects to have work for a month after that. He expects to have plenty of work for the summer at home. The College intend putting up a large brick building and the Sister expect to have a brick Hospital built and there is talk of the Convent having to build a large brick Science School building.” There is a bit of a building boom in town. From New Glasgow, Uncle Zephaniah Williams reports, *“There are over one hundred and fifty houses gone up in New Glasgow and Stellarton this summer.”* Things are looking up for the moment.

Tough economic times prevailed in Nova Scotia just prior to the First World War. In 1910, Alfred's wife writes, *“This town is getting to be a very expensive place to live now and very little doing to make money. Rents are high. The house a person could rent five year ago for five dollars a person could not get it a cent less now than ten or twelve dollars and all kinds of country produce is big; butter 25clb., eggs 28 c doz., potatoes 60 c bus. and everything else according.”* At the same time, Aunt Sarah complains about the price of eggs in New Glasgow. She is relieved that her hens have finally started laying. Folks are obviously feeling the pinch. In Antigonish, *“there was ten of our town folks left for out West today. They intend settling in some of the small town out West to make their fortune.”* Several months earlier, John complained about the poor harvest – *“wet hay, half crop, potatoes black, oats rusty – not all out yet.”* No wonder prices have gone up. John clearly understands that the old farm in Clydesdale is no longer of much value when he says shortly before his death, *“I am afraid that I can't sell the farm. No one wants to buy land here now. The young are all gone out west.”* Just when the money would have come in handy, John's little nest egg has diminished in value. He passed away six months later.

The letter was the sole carrier of news back then. Folks like Aunt Sarah and Uncle Zeph anxiously awaited news from family at home and away. *“Dear Will, it is a long time since we heard from you. We are looking every week for a letter.”* William and Jenny must have delighted and despaired in the written scraps and details relating to the weather, the roads, sleighing and the muddy streets; the flu, the sore throats and the measles epidemic; babies, engaged couples and upcoming marriages; who was feeble and who had passed away during the winter; the poor harvest and the fact that they were sending to Quebec for hay; the auction sale of cattle, horses, and other things; Seed Fair Day; spring goods in the local shops; who was going out of business; trips to mass and Benediction; visits and teas; a fine dinner of herring; who wrote the last letter; who had departed for Boston and who had just returned; an upcoming election and the folks who couldn't vote because they couldn't pay their taxes; the fact that Jim *“is talking away as much as ever”* and, of course, the long awaited letter from Aunt Millie -- for no one knew if she was still alive. *“The first letter for over fifty years we was [happy] to hear from her.”* It is easy to see why these letters were cherished and tucked away for rereading and safekeeping. They were often the only connection with home.

Maybe you, too, have some old letters hidden away in your closets, cupboards and attics. Look out for them while you're doing your spring cleaning this month -- but, for heaven's sake, don't toss them out! Share them, or bits and pieces of them, with us. I bet that they, too, can shed a little light on this local history of ours.

Spring is just around the corner! Cheers.

Catherine MacGillivray



The Museum Needs Your Help...



This object was donated by Tony DeCoste of Tracadie but we have no idea what it is. The unidentified article is handmade from what appears to be two different kinds of wood. Can anyone help us?

Recent Acquisitions – Thanks!

- Pam Cunningham donated a scrapbook that was compiled by her granduncle, H. B. Whidden. He served overseas during World War I with the No. 8 Seige Battery and wrote a series of articles on the activities of the Battery for the “Island Patriot”. Those articles are included in this scrapbook.
- Pat MacPherson donated land papers related to property at Black River belonging to the “Barber MacPhersons”.

Reminder...

- Anyone who has perennials, shrubs or bulbs for the plant sale can drop them off at the museum on Friday, May 14, before 7:30 p.m. The sale begins on Saturday morning, May 15, at 10:00 a.m.
- The VON annual fundraiser will be held on Saturday, May 29, at 10:00 a.m. The walk around the Landing will be followed by a barbecue and cake on the deck at the museum. Hope to see you there.

Thanks to Some Local Students ...



Mike Stewart’s Grade 10 Community Based Learning class spent a productive morning cleaning up around the museum this month -- raking, pruning and whippersnipping. They tackled a little indoor spring cleaning and organized some books as well. Twenty students participated on that perfect, cool and overcast, workday. In a short period of time, a great deal was accomplished. Needless to say, the museum has extended an invitation for the class to return at another time. The energy and enthusiasm of the students was greatly appreciated and we sincerely thank them for their help.