



The Old Train Station News

Newsletter # 16

June 2010

For the past few months there has been a buzz of activity down at the east end of Main Street. The canal bridge over the Wright's River, dating back to 1938, is going to be replaced by a new three-lane arched bridge but, before that becomes a reality, we'll use a temporary bridge to cross the river. While folks at the East End are thrilled to be getting a nice modern new bridge, this end of town will buzz with activity and congestion for some time yet.

Before any construction could begin, the old house near the river had to be bulldozed. With the demolition of the MacGillivray house went a huge chunk of local history. The original owner, John, was one of the MacGillivrays from Maryvale. A carpenter by trade, he probably built the house shortly after he purchased the land in 1880. John had a workshop where he built windows, doors and mantels. At the same time, he operated a small general store out of one of the front rooms of his house. His brother, Dougald, a bachelor, lived in the house with the family and he sold shoes. In time, John's son, Wilfred, took over the family home. Wilfred was a veteran of the First World War and a member of the St. F. X. Hospital Unit. He will be remembered as the postmaster of Antigonish, serving from 1930 to 1961. His sister, Sister Mary Joseph, CSM, was the first administrator of the R.K. MacDonald Nursing Home. So much history came out of that old brown house down at the East End!

This end of town has always been a distinct community and the name "East End" was commonly used. Scott Williams, who grew up on Adam Street, portrays this quite clearly in his delightful little book, *Sandy Chisholm's Chanter Lesson*. Even though this is a children's novel, it is an absolute "must-read" for anyone with ties to our town. Set in Antigonish in the late 1950's, this is the story of a young boy who falls in love with the bagpipes. Aside from his classes at the St. Ninian Street School and his chanter lessons at the Celtic Hall, Sandy lives his life down on the East End – that neighbourhood which includes the area from the bridges to the hospital, Adam Street, Bay Street, the road to the Landing, the train station and the trestle bridge just beyond. Sandy's father works at the CN Express Office and his mother is a nurse at St. Martha's Hospital. Sandy plays with his East End friends down at the Landing, the train station and the hospital hill. Of course, the Wrights River plays a significant role in the lives of the local children. When flooding begins, there is no school because the children can't get past the flood. On those days, they head over to the flooded Columbus Field to play on the monkey bars or down to the river to try out their homemade raft. Sometimes a bit of rivalry takes place between the East End kids and the West End kids. Scott Williams has made every effort to ensure that the details of his novel are historically and geographically accurate. In doing so, he has created a wonderful trip down memory lane for those of us who are old enough to remember the east end of town "way back then".

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

In the very early days of our history, this end of Main Street was the industrial area. Long before the advent of the railway, this section was selected for development because of its proximity to the harbour but it was limited in its potential because of the fact that it was a floodplain. As early as 1810, the area was already recognized as a mill site. In 1822, Daniel Harrington was granted a government bounty for establishing the first oatmeal mill in the county. Harrington ran a successful business and it appears that subsequent owners David Thomson and William Grant did too. Expansion obviously took place for in 1882 Grant is listed among the Antigonish merchants as owning a grist, saw, and carding mill. In fact, it was part of William Grant's lands that were used for the railway station when it came to town in the late 1870s.

An 1896 advertisement announces the Falt Brothers as the operators of the East End Grist and Carding Mills. Cloth and yarn were kept in stock and wool was taken in exchange. Fresh lime was always in stock. The ad indicates that the Falt Brothers were carriage manufacturers and so the business continued to grow.

Mary Helen Falt wrote about the mills and her grandfather, James William Falt, in her memoirs, *A Star in the Apple*. In her younger days, farmers brought their grains to the grist mill to be ground into flour. The mill had a carding machine so that farmers could bring in the fleece from their sheep and have it spun into yarn. Her grandfather had a couple of kilns nearby where he provided lime for which he also made the barrels for holding and transporting. It appears that the Falts may have made some furniture too. Upstairs in the mill was the loom that her grandmother used for weaving the blankets for the family beds. Mary Helen recalled the mill still standing when her youngest brother was born in 1913 but it was torn down some time later.

In his 1960s column, *Down Memory Lane*, the late H. M. MacDonald reminds us that this section of Antigonish was once called "Milltown" and so, of course, the residents were dubbed "milltowners." In the early years, many businesses flourished down on the East End. Because of *Lovell's Directory* and the 1871 Census, we know that John Haley operated a tannery near what is today Haley's Road. In his column, H. M. MacDonald suggests that Haley also operated a barking mill. At the same time, Joseph Dexter was a cabinetmaker and William Dexter was a farmer.



The arrival of the railway in 1879 opened up a whole new world for folks down at East Main Street. The station was the community's main link with the outside world, making this area one of the busiest, nosiest, and most interesting places in town.

While the trains and the station created a great deal of activity, the river triggered much anxiety and

frustration. Forking just as it approached Main Street, the main branch coursed under what was called the First Bridge (or the Creamery Bridge) and rushed through what is today Columbus Field. A smaller branch of this river, and the overflow in flood season, passed under the Second Bridge, the site of our existing bridge just past St. Andrews Street. There was also a mill-race there at one time – a diversion from the river that supplied the power for the mill. Even with two bridges at the east end of town, the river still managed to create havoc.



The Wrights River has always been a bone of contention for the residents of the East End. Freshets and floods were commonplace and often created considerable damage as we see in a 1935 article in *The Casket* when several days of spring-like weather and a rainstorm brought one of the biggest floods in the history of Nova Scotia. Water poured across lower Main Street and rose above

ground level in many of the houses in the neighbourhood. To ensure safety, the Willis family left their home and spent the night at the railway station.

Year in and year out, folks had to contend with the shenanigans of the river and, of course, many stories evolved out of those occurrences. One newspaper article in 1935 tells the age-old tale of the elderly chap who, disgruntled with his wife's housekeeping (or lack there of), simply opened up his front door and his back door and let the water run through. That same year, there was the story of the ladies whose car got stuck in the flooded street. The car belonged to cousins of the late U. S. President Coolidge. Now, what took them down to the East End? In the early hours of the morning, Mansfield Falt came by with his truck, rescued the vehicle, and sent the American ladies on their way. There's also the story of the native man from down at the Landing who carried people on his back, across the flooded streets, so that they could catch the train.

At some point in time, it was decided that something must be done to try to correct the flooding problem. Information has always been sketchy but, thanks to Ronnie D. D. MacDonald, we have been able to piece together a bit of the puzzle. In 1937 and 1938, considerable dredging took place on the drainage canal above Main Street. Attempts were made to narrow the course of the river and to fill in the stream that ran under the First Bridge. A rainstorm in late 1937 caused an undercut section of the street to collapse and a construction worker actually drowned. While extensive work was able to lessen the water in the resulting gully, heavy rains and spring thaws continued to cause problems. Finally around 1960, they were able to dry up that branch of the river but it wasn't until 1968 that the First Bridge was finally removed.

A *Fire Insurance Map*, located at the heritage museum, paints an interesting picture of the east end of town in 1934. The mill-race is obviously gone. Just across the Second Bridge stand a Farm Implements Shop, a Carriage Shop and a Blacksmith Shop. Down in the intervale, between St. Andrews



Street and the river, is the site of the old Elm Grounds with a grandstand and a track. These exhibition grounds were where the Highland Games and the Fall Fair took place. The Antigonish Athletic Association had their meets there too. Florence Helm clearly remembers the excitement created by the fall fair at the Elm Grounds. Her mother, like many women of the day, participated by entering cheese, butter and garden produce. The rooster and some of the hens often made the trip too. "Lots of stuff was dragged down there."

The old Elm field was replaced in 1937 when work on the drainage canal "rendered" the grounds "useless." At the time, *The Casket* stated, "Going down to the east end to the games has become a tradition here." At the same time, they were pretty confident that "when the track is once put in shape, it will likely be found in the same place every spring, instead of down the harbor."

The Old Antigonish Dairy Limited stood on the corner where our new Prissy Pig stands today. In her memoirs, Mary Helen Falt speaks of the dairy where her father was manager for some time. "It was a sort of co-op for most of the farmers for miles around." Some years later, the name was changed to Antigonish Creamery. Mary Helen recalls getting orders, in French of course, from the Islands of St. Pierre and Miquelon, Martinique Island and Guadeloupe.

So many interesting tidbits of local history are connected to the East End. Ida MacDonald, who ran the MacDonald Music Store, lived at this end of town. Ida will be remembered for her wide range of Celtic goods and her love of all things Scottish. Lloyd MacDonald was our first casualty of World War Two. Annie "Peter" MacDonald operated the first beauty parlor in town. Some of her "tools" can be found at the heritage museum. In the 1930s, the Hadley MacDonalds ran a pop factory called The Antigonish Aerated Water Company. Pop was sold in glass bottles. John Falt, Mary Helen's father, was the mayor of Antigonish from 1926-27. The East End actually had a girls basketball team around 1905. The bold letters EE (East End) graced the front of their vests.



But that's not all. In 1937, it was decided that the big water tank at the railway crossing must be moved further to the north to prevent accidents that occasionally happened. The new 15,000 gallon steel tank was located 100 feet up the track. Norman Kirk Cunningham was the dealer in Royal Feeds, Flour, Seed, Etc. down at the tracks in the 1940s. Mansfield Falt operated a concrete business in the 1950s. Advertising that "Concrete is Best",

he manufactured concrete blocks, flag stones, field tile and drain pipes. Elm Gardens had their start down at East Main Street too when they operated their greenhouses there in the 1950s. It's great to have them back.

The East End has such a rich history. While the train station, the river and the bridges created much excitement over the years, let's not forget the hospital just over the hill, Columbus Field and the Highland Games next door, and the car dealerships nearby. Why, this end of town must have been the hub of the community! Think of the stories and the tidbits of history that must be out there – just waiting to be collected. Why not share your stories with us so that we can preserve the history of this little neighbourhood down on the east end of Main Street.

Have a great summer!

Catherine MacGillivray



Comments from our Readers

- It's so good to see young people interested in our local history. James Chisholm from Cloverville was interested in the story of the MacNeil brothers who wrote "The Greetings" and so he ventured off to see his neighbor, Donnie MacNeil, who is a direct descendant of John, one of the noted MacNeil brothers. Apparently, Eddie, son of John, had a brother, Huntley, who left home at a young age for the greener pastures of British Columbia. He was never heard from again until he died at the ripe old age of ninety-six. James also informs us that, according to Donnie, his parents were Eddie and Marge (Margaret) — not Rose. His sister, Rose, died in the early 1950s leaving two young children – Bill and a twin sister.
- Allan Armsworthy wrote to inform us that "Bradshaw's canned beans (pictured in our last newsletter) were put out by Mike and Danny Bradshaw's dad during the 40s. The factory was behind the new Royal Bank building on Main Street."

A Quoits Club Did Exist in Antigonish!

In our January edition of the newsletter, we thanked Duncan MacIntosh, of Brierly Brook, for his donation of a full set of quoits. According to family tradition, these quoits had once belonged to his grandfather, H. M. MacDonald, and had been used in the Highland Games. We now know that a quoits club actually did exist in Antigonish. The May 12, 1910 edition of *The Casket* states: "A Quoits Club was organized in Town a few evenings ago, with a membership of forty. The beds, of which there will be four sets, will be on the Curlers' Rink grounds."

Visitors to the Museum



We recently had visitors from the Highland Crest. Summer staff member, Mary Anne MacDonald, helped guide the group through the museum.

- Christina and Justin Clark, newlyweds from Ontario, visited the museum on June 3rd. Justin's grandfather was William Clark who operated the Cape George Lighthouse from 1952 – 1968. The Clarks had a large family of eleven children who lived in a house adjacent to the lighthouse. Many of the older residents of the area are sure to remember this family. In 2007, the family placed a plaque at the lighthouse. They intend to have a family reunion sometime in 2013.

A Special Thank you

We would like to express our sincere thanks to Roy Cameron, longtime auditor for the Antigonish Heritage Museum, for the many hours that he volunteers to keep us on the right financial path. His efforts are greatly appreciated.

Notice

The Stanley Cup is coming to town in August. In conjunction with this visit, the Museum will have an exhibit of Antigonish hockey history and memorabilia.

Genealogy

Ernest Cameron of Country Harbour is looking for information on Colin Grant, a merchant in Antigonish in the 1901 Census. Mr. Grant eventually moved to Country Harbour where he operated a boarding house, serving the Forest Hills Gold Mine. Would anyone know about his early roots in Canada?

Correction: In last month's newsletter, I wrote that Ellen Fraser- MacDougall's "last child, her only son" was born after they moved to Hawthorne Street. In fact, John was not her youngest child.

Recent Acquisitions



Dwight Stewart, of Court Street, donated two very interesting bottle caps. The caps came from pop bottles that were produced by C & T Beverages right here in Antigonish. To appreciate the caps, a little crash course in local history is necessary.

In the 1920s, 30s, and 40s, a pop factory operated at the East End of Main Street. In August of 1920, the following article appeared in *The Casket*: “*The Antigonish*

Aerated Waters has received the manufacturing and sales rights for the counties of Antigonish, Guysboro, and Inverness, of the temperate drinks produced by the Dr. Swelt Company of New York. These beverages, though on the local market only a short time, have already become very popular. The A. A. W. Co. is an industry this is progressing rapidly. A new washer was installed recently and another bottling machine is being put in operation. The plant has a capacity now of 200 cases a day, and is unable to keep up with orders.”

According to family lore, the Hadley MacDonald family operated a pop factory at the East End in the 1930s; however, Hadley’s mother, Mrs. Mary A. MacDonald, founded the business as a small bottle factory or a pop store at a much earlier date. Pop was sold in glass bottles. Flavors produced were Lemon Lime, Red Rock Cola, Orange and Iron Brew. The beverage was sold to local business and pop was sold “on keg”. Hadley also distributed the pop to small stores around the county. In later years, Ronald “Bun” Crawford and Terry Thompson continued the pop-making tradition under the name C&T Beverages. Eventually, they moved the operation to James Street where they operated until the late 50s or early 60s.

- **Michael “P. D.” MacDonald** of Hillcrest Street donated a print of the Royal Bank of Canada, Champions of the Halifax Bankers League, which included a couple of folks from Antigonish. Members of the Fraser and Gillis clans are represented on the team.
- **Bob Sullivan** came in with a manuscript on the Sullivans of Cape Breton. This includes MacLeans from the St. Joseph district.
- **Gerald MacDonald** of Lower South River donated a trophy awarded to Frank McGibbon for his bowling prowess, 1949 - 41.
- **Bernadette Gillis** donated a deck of cards from the Wheel Restaurant, dated early 1960.
- **Leona Williams** brought in certificates from the Highland Housing Co-op, dated 1940s. More information is to follow.