

The Old Train Station News

Newsletter #23

January 2011

The Christmas tree is back in the woods, the holiday decorations are neatly packed away, the last of my delicious fruitcake is gone – and the New Year is here. We had a wonderful Christmas holiday and I hope you did too. *Bliadhna mhath ùr*. Happy New Year!

Shortly before the holidays, I came across an article that necessitates mention – the demise of the big elm tree along St. Andrew’s Street back in December of 1914. This old tree, obviously a significant landmark in town, can still be found on the 1879 A. F. Church Map of Antigonish County. Even then, it was known as “The Big Elm.” In 1914, the December 17th edition of *The Casket* reported the following notice.

“The Big Elm on the South River Road, Antigonish, has succumbed to the elements, falling before the heavy winds of last Tuesday. It was a notable land mark of the Town, its immense size and great age having won it distinction among the many stately elms that rise from our low-lying fields. To the athletic grounds over which it stood sentinel it gave its name, for they are most popularly designated as “The Elm Grounds.” The oldest resident of our town does not recall much change in the appearance of this tree from the time he first saw it until its fall, in respect to size. To them it was ever immense and old. Just how old, it cannot be told with any attempt at exactness. Most people think it had attained the century mark. Plainly it showed its years, for besides its size, it bore much other evidence of great age, being scarred and weather beaten. Large limbs had been torn from it by the ruthless storms of the past, leaving big holes in its sturdy trunk, into which the rains of years had entered, and contributed to its decay. The rot thus created without a doubt hastened its fall. Had any attempt been made to preserve this ancient landmark – and more sentiment in this regard should be shown by our townspeople – had its many deep wounds been filled; its exposed roots been protected by sentimental natives, it surely would have continued to defy nature’s blasts for many years to come. Lying on the ground, a big mass of wood covering (the highway?), its massiveness was surprisingly apparent. Its circumference was 17 feet 10 inches.”

Where exactly this tree grew, we’re not entirely certain but, according to the *Church Map*, in 1879 this elm stood on the edge of the large “entervale”, across the street from W. R. Cunningham’s

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Tannery. Close examination of the map indicates that the big elm probably stood in the vicinity of the old Natural Resources building on St. Andrews Street. With a circumference of 17 feet, 10 inches, this tree would have had a diameter of 5.7 feet.

A chat with my son, Paul, a student at the Maritime College of Forest Technology in Fredericton, taught me that *ulmus Americana*, or the American elm, is a species that is native to all of Eastern North America. Before the arrival of Dutch elm disease, these impressive trees could be found scattered along the many river flats and lowlands of Nova Scotia. Extremely hardy, they thrive in floodplains but also flourish in well-drained soil. A deciduous tree, the American elm (or White elm) commonly grows to be 100 feet tall with a trunk diameter of 4 feet. Because of its graceful, arching form, its hardiness and its strength, this elm was regularly used as a shade tree or a street tree.



Old photos of the town reveal that the elm was a favourite street tree here in Antigonish too – thanks to the efforts of a certain Alexander MacDonald. A carpenter by trade, “Sandy the Carpenter” settled into married life in the town of Antigonish in 1837. Responsible for building some significant structures about town (the imposing Court House on Main Street in 1855, the impressive old post office building that once stood where our present day town hall stands, and some of the college buildings), Alexander was certainly well known in the local community for his expertise as an architect and a builder; yet it is equally important to remember that Sandy made great efforts to beautify the town by planting elm trees along the Main Street and perhaps other streets as well.

One can almost imagine Sandy at work on the Court House, looking across at the majestic elms down in the intervale at the east end of town. Their graceful appearance, their strength, and their shade capacity would make them the perfect ornamental specimen to complement the Greek Revival architectural style of the Court House building. While Sandy would not live to see the impact of these trees in maturity, he certainly had great foresight, planning an impressive Main Street for future generations of Antigonishers.

The Elm Grounds, to which the old elm tree on St. Andrews Street gave its name, no longer

exist. In the late 1930s, the Wrights River was diverted through the grounds to try to deal with the extensive flooding that was a yearly concern down at the East End of town. The *A. F. Church Map* clearly shows the expansive intervalle (between St. Andrews Street and an arm of the Wrights River) that was known as the Elm Grounds. Leased in May of 1897 by the Antigonish Amateur Athletic Association, improvements were quickly made to the grounds. A fence was constructed and a bicycle track was built. In 1899, *The Casket* reported on the big athletic meet at the “spacious” track where “no less than four records of the Maritime Provinces were broken in a single afternoon.” Contestants competed in track and field and bicycle races. Bicycles were all the rage in the 1890s and athletes came from all parts of the province and Prince Edward Island to compete on “the speediest track that can be vaunted by any club in the province.”



Baseball, already popular in the latter part of the nineteenth century, was played here too. In May of 1897, the Queen’s birthday was celebrated with a base-ball match on the diamond at the Elm Grounds with teams from the college and the town competing. Admission was 15 cents for adults and 10 cents for children. Proceeds went towards the improvement of the grounds. In May of 1899, the Antigonish Amateur Athletics Association meeting reported that the ball players had won the championship of Eastern Nova Scotia the previous year.

Tug-of-war, probably as popular then as it is today, was sometimes included in the field sports down at the grounds. Students from the college often competed with boys from town. In June of 1900, *The Casket* reported that the tug-of-war competition held at the A.A.A.A. grounds, or the Elm Grounds, was won by the town.

Also known as the Exhibition Grounds or The Elms, this is where the Highland Games and the Fall Fair took place. It’s not entirely clear exactly when the Highland Games started taking place on these grounds but *The Casket* does report, in 1897, that the Antigonish Highland Society was considering “the holding of a series of Highland games” on the Athletic Grounds. The games of 1898 were held at the grounds as well but this time *The Casket* informed the reading public that only six

hundred people had attended – when a dozen or more years before, the crowd had numbered into thousands. Clearly, folks were losing interest in the games.

The Highland Games were not always held at the Exhibition Grounds or, for that matter, in the town of Antigonish. Records indicate that they were also held at Arisaig, St. Paul's in Havre Boucher and at the Strait of Canso. In 1899, a concerted effort was made to make this a “red letter day in the history of the society” with “handsome Gold and Silver Medals, . . . temperate drinks, refreshments and amusements” on the grounds. Excursions from Halifax, Sydney and points in between were organized as well. Surely, all this would make the Elm Grounds an attractive spot for the games.

In the fall of 1907, *The Casket* reported that the County had purchased the Athletic Grounds, “consisting of about five acres, paying for it \$600.” It was to be used for the purpose of “County Fairs, etc.” The article went on to say that “the sale of the old exhibition grounds some years ago by the County has been deemed a grievous mistake” for “suitable premises near or within the Town for fairs are not readily obtainable.” From that time onward, the annual fall fair drew large crowds to the Elm Grounds each September or October. Improvements were obviously made for the 1934 Fire Insurance Map shows an extensive property with a large oval track, a grand stand and an assortment of buildings.



For years, the Elm Grounds were the gathering place for locals and visitors alike. The grounds are long gone and so too are most of the elms about town. They died of the Dutch Elm disease in the 1970s and 80s. Still, a few reminders live on. Elm Street is a constant reminder and so, too, is Elm Gardens down on the east end of town. But that's not all. In 1999, the Town of Antigonish initiated a project to turn some of the dead elms into delightful tree sculptures depicting historical figures from the local community. The Highland dancer dances on West Street, rain or shine; the Scotsman proudly poses with his claymore in front of the Claymore Inn; two police officers stand at attention at our local RCMP station; the train conductor checks his watch every day down at the old train station which today houses our museum; the Irish farmer pauses for a moment on James Street; a Sister of St. Martha greets both patients and visitors alike at the hospital entrance; and a WW1 soldier awaits his orders in front of the Royal Canadian Legion. Dr. A. G. MacDonald, Professor of Mathematics, sets out from his home on West Street each day to teach at the college. The lamb continues to snuggle up with the lion in front of Saint James United Church but our famous caber-tossler in front of Columbus Field is now, sadly, gone. Gone too are the two curlers on St. Mary's Street. These sculptures will never replace our graceful elm trees but they are certainly a beautiful reminder of our rich heritage right here in Antigonish.

Slàinte. Good health.

Catherine MacGillivray



Recent Acquisitions



From **Sister Faustina Grant of the Congregation of Notre Dame** we received a lovely *demitasse* display set. This collection of Limoges porcelain originally came from France to a convent in Quebec. At some point, it came into the possession of the Sisters in Antigonish. Limoges porcelain was

produced by several factories in the Limoges region in France from the late 1700s to about 1930. Blanks were often produced which were then decorated by hobbyists.

The CND Sisters have been involved in local education for over a hundred years. In 1883 they opened a convent school for girls in town. In 1894, Mount St. Bernard affiliated with St. Francis Xavier University and became a college for women.



Joe MacDonald recently donated a beautiful Aladdin Lantern to the Museum. Commonly known as the Aladdin lamp, it was popular for the brighter, whiter light it produced. It employed a round wick which produced an even, non-flickering flame. These lamps were advertised extensively in newspapers and on radio spots. This model was manufactured by the Aladdin Mantle Lamp Company of Chicago between 1914 and 1917. Many children of Joe's generation would have done their homework by the light of the Aladdin lantern.

(The Museum is looking for the mantle to complete the lantern.)

Good Health to Joe! Joe is up and about again after a short stay in hospital in Halifax. Joe has been volunteering on the genealogy database over the past few years and has dedicated countless hours to this project. We wish him a speedy recovery.

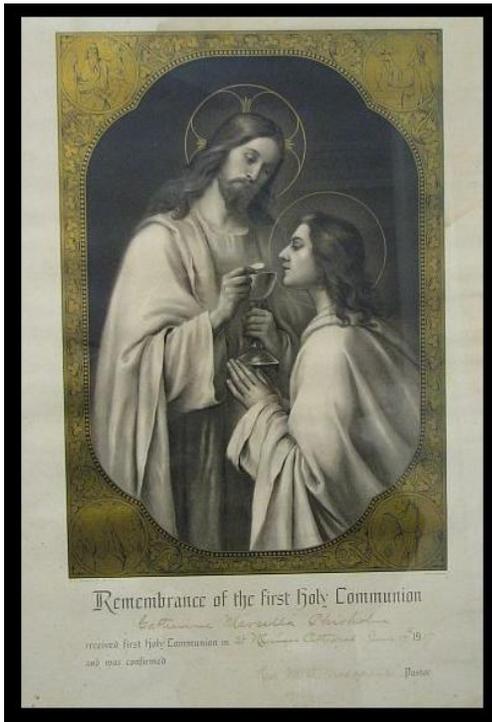
Ross Fraser of Duncan, B. C., donated a collection of genealogical material, including photos. The focus of this nice little collection is Robertson, Pushie, Bannerman and related families.

Marlene Cheng of Victoria, B. C., found the attached note, handwritten by her father, Robbie MacDonald (son of Jack the Piper of Hawthorne Street), and thought that she'd like to share it with our readers. (Many of you will remember Robbie, the Industrial Arts teacher.) It is snippets like this that make our local history come alive. Thanks Marlene!

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We'd like to repatriate...

Margie Perro, daughter of Hughie "Hedges" MacDonald, found this large framed First Communion certificate while cleaning out the family home. The certificate, issued from St. Ninian's Cathedral, was made out to "Catherine Marcella Chisholm" and dated 1917. The Museum has made several attempts to determine the identity of the young lady but to no avail. She doesn't even appear on the Census. The certificate is nicely framed and in excellent condition.

Who was Catherine Marcella Chisholm? We're hoping that someone in our reading public may be able to help us. While we can't return it to its rightful owner, we'd certainly like to give it to a family member or relative.

The Antigonish Highland Society

This year marks the 150th Anniversary of the Antigonish Highland Society. Unfortunately, some gaps exist in our early records and so we are asking the public for assistance. We're collecting material from early Highland Games: pictures, stories and ephemera.

Looking for a Volunteer

The Museum is looking for a volunteer to come in and incorporate obituary information into the existing database. This position will necessitate but a couple of hours/week.

Genealogy

Don MacFarlane from New Hampshire is seeking help with his research on some of the early Camerons from the South River area – specifically the children of Ewan and Margaret Cameron.

Lois MacElroy Wells of Lexington, Massachusetts, is looking for help with her ongoing research into “the history and descent of my Lauchlin McLean = Elizabeth Campbell 2nd great grandparents, and great-grandparents Archibald McLean = Nancy Grant.”

HERITAGE ASSOCIATION

- We are grateful to Bell Canada for their generous donation. Irene Brown, former Bell employee, works as a museum volunteer and, in that capacity, has allowed our organization to qualify for funding.
- A donation to the Heritage Association was received from Gilbert Landry. Thank you!

Donations made to the Heritage Association qualify for a Tax Receipt.

Guest Speakers

Fraser Dunn will give a presentation on “The Intercolonial Cloverdale Creamery” sometime in March. The exact date is yet to be announced.

Mikael Haller of the St F. X. Anthropology Department will be speaking on April 4th at 7:00 p. m. His topic will be the "Town Point Dig".

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