

# The Old Train Station News

Newsletter #37

March 2012

The history of Antigonish town and county is sprinkled with an interesting cast of characters, much like a play. Over the years, folks made their exits and their entrances. Some acted out leading roles and left a considerable impact while others were just minor players on the local stage – but all played a part.

As the operator of a floral business in the 1930s and 40s, Gladys Whidden -Jones played a novel part in our local community. Business was in her blood but then, of course, she had grown up with that entrepreneurial spirit. Her grandfather, Charles B. Whidden started a flour and feed business in Antigonish in 1863. In time, his son joined him in the business which grew into a successful grocery store and feed shop known as *C. B. Whidden and Son*. In 1864, Whidden purchased a schooner that was to be the first of a fleet of ships that would travel regularly to Newfoundland and the West Indies conducting large-scale trade. Newfoundland was the market for all sorts of farm animals and local produce while the West Indies was the destination for much lumber. Return cargo helped to stock the shelves of the local general stores. Gladys' father, C. E. Whidden, worked in the family business but he also operated a large farm and, for some years, an extensive livery business. Little wonder that Gladys had an aptitude for business.

A note in the Whidden family history indicates that Gladys was rather free-spirited and ahead of her times. Born in 1885 and the oldest of nine children, she was said to be very capable around horses, wagons and sleighs. As a young woman, she would ride about “the countryside on horseback to post notices of the sailing dates of her father’s ships” so that farmers could bring their sheep, cattle, pigs, chickens and farm produce for export. Remembered for her “quick wit and spunky spirit”, in later years she would on occasion take some of the nuns from St. Martha’s Convent on Sunday tours.



Few young local young ladies could boast of a wooden schooner christened in their name but Gladys could. After the *Congo*, one of the twenty-three Whidden ships, was wrecked in 1899, it underwent an extensive refit. When renovations were completed in 1903, the vessel was renamed the *Gladys E. Whidden*. Imagine her disappointment when it was wrecked off Parrsboro in the early 1920s while on route to Boston, Massachusetts.

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Gladys studied music at Acadia University in Wolfville, met and married a fellow student and then moved on to New York where her husband, Ralph Jones, would further his theology degree and become a Baptist minister. After a few years



in Vermont (and four children later), Gladys returned to Antigonish to the impressive Whidden home (pictured here) at the top of Acadia Street, right next to the Baptist Church, where she established her florist business.

During the 1940s, she advertised in various editions of *The Casket*, the St. Martha's School of Nursing yearbook and the Xavarian yearbook. Students from the college would purchase corsages for their dates for the dances and proms. Flowers were brought in from *Suckling and Chase* in New Brunswick by bus. They were packed in long green boxes with wax paper liners. Gladys insisted on quality flowers that would stay fresh in an arrangement. A good many customers came from the Lochaber and Country Harbour areas. Funeral tributes would be sent down on the bus to these locations.

P. O. Box 405	Telephone 71
<i>Mrs. G. W. Jones</i>	
FLORIST	
Cut Flowers — Corsages and Baskets	
ANTIGONISH, NOVA SCOTIA	



Gladys had a great interest in gardening and was great friends with Fred Killam and his wife who operated the *Nova Scotia Nurseries* in Halifax. On visits to the city, Gladys would bring her daughter, Jean (Moeller), to the Public Gardens. There they would sit on the benches and watch the English gardeners at work. She so admired the "English" garden style of that day. King George V and Queen Mary had donated swans to the garden and these, of course, were quite an attraction for young Jean.

At Acadia University, Gladys had enrolled in a Fanny Farmer course which taught young women how to run an efficient and attractive household. Gladys was known to be a great cook and would often host wonderful bridge parties at 21 Acadia Street. Several tables would fill the stylish living room (pictured below). Young girls from Pomquet would come to learn how to serve during the entertaining.



Small silver bells were used at these events. Training took from three to five years. By that time, the young ladies had often moved on to Boston where they were hired on by some of the finest households in the city.

The Whidden history reveals that Gladys was well known but also “something of the small-town character”. When relatives would phone her from Boston, and there was no answer at the house, the operator would say, “I think this is her day to have her hair done; shall I ring her at the beauty parlor?” and did!

While Gladys didn’t leave a huge impact on the local landscape, she is an example of a woman who was gutsy enough to carve out a life for herself in a world that was still entirely dominated by men. Her adventurous and independent spirit served her well. One family story notes that she rented out rooms in the Whidden house but refused to wait on the men and provide room service. She was, certainly, a woman before her time.

Hope you’ve wintered well. Spring is just around the corner.

Catherine



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Thanks to all of you who responded to last month’s article on local midwives, especially **Father James O’Neal** who wrote from Korea to inform us that his mother was brought into the world by Mrs. Alex Hugh (Ellen) MacIsaac, midwife in the Caledonia Mills area.

**Joan Gillis** wrote to say that the article *“brought back memories of my Mom talking about how things were done in the old days. . . . I wish I could recall her telling me about the preparations . . . warming things in the oven, putting layers of newspaper together, etc.”* Maybe someone can fill us in on some of those details.



## Recent Acquisitions



Thank you to **Eleanor Belland** for some interesting photographs from the collection of Ernest McNaughton – all labeled. Over the years, the museum has received a number of items from the McNaughton collection.

Ernest, a long-time resident of Antigonish, was an active participant and promoter of sports. Pictured is first prize for a relay race at Pictou in September of 1926. Members of the winning team included: A. MacDonald (New Glasgow), J. Fobes (Trenton), E. McNaughton (Antigonish), H. Smith (New Glasgow) and B. Crocket (Westville).

For many years, Ernest was the manager of Wilkie and Cunningham. Pictured in this 1908 photograph of the Main Street store are: May MacIsaac, Clary Beck, Edna Cunningham, Mr. R. M. Gray, Mrs. W. P. Cunningham, Ora Cunningham, Mrs. Seaman and C. N. Wilkie.



McNaughton, who operated a Scottish tartan and memorabilia shop in his retirement, was committed to the Highland Society and served as president for more than one term. Here he is shown (on the far right) at what appears to be a banquet. Can anyone identify the occasion and/or the others pictured?

- Thanks to **Garry Fidler** for some material from the Judge Hughie MacPherson collection. Included among his papers was a Boer War era portrait of Matron Margaret Macdonald of Bailey's Brook in her nursing uniform. Margaret, matron-in-chief of Canada's overseas nursing service during World War I, was the first woman to hold the rank of major in the British Empire. Also included in this material was a lovely photograph by the notable Colin Chisholm (The Chief) of rural Antigonish school children dating to about 1900.
- **Hugh Webb** donated a copy of the *Morrisonian*. This 1947 edition of the school newspaper features a tribute to the soldiers, graduates of Morrison School, who had been killed in the war.
- **Ronnie Dunn** brought in a Nova Scotia promotional booklet from the late 1950s. The Canso Causeway had just been opened.
- **Leo "Boots" Chisholm** brought in a 1933 edition of the *By-Laws and Regulations for the Town of Antigonish*.
- A special thank-you to **Joan Gillis** for the lovely red and white woven coverlet. The overshot weave, orange peel pattern, was completed by Catherine Campbell of Lanark, grandmother of Joan's husband, Bill.

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## *The Ships of 1801*

At the next meeting of the Heritage Association of Antigonish, there will be a draw for a ticket to ***The Ships of 1801***, a stage production depicting Scottish immigration through original music, song and verse. This concert will be held at the Keating Centre on the St. F. X. campus during the week of the Highland Games. For more information, check <http://www.antigonishhighlandgames.ca/theshipsof1801/>

## The Mary Ellen Spook Story

The Mary Ellen Spook story continues to be an all-time favourite. Dan Stewart of Halifax is interested in speaking with anyone who has a connection to (or knowledge of) the Fire Spook story. You can reach Dan at 902-406-8733 or 902-877-8100.

## Sites of Interest

Local historians and researchers may be interested in the following sites:

[http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/databases/canadiandirectories/001075-119.01-e.php?d\\_id\\_nbr=7264&type=1&brws=&total=1020&page\\_sequence\\_nbr=414&page\\_id\\_nbr=15824&P\\_HPSESSID=37h976m6102m5i93m81r8j4ic5](http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/databases/canadiandirectories/001075-119.01-e.php?d_id_nbr=7264&type=1&brws=&total=1020&page_sequence_nbr=414&page_id_nbr=15824&P_HPSESSID=37h976m6102m5i93m81r8j4ic5)

<http://gaelstream.stfx.ca/>

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<p><b>RON MacGILLIVRAY</b> CHEV. BUICK GMC</p>    <p>75 St. Andrews Street, Antigonish 863-2803 www.ronmacgillivraychev.com</p>	<p>Please patronize our supporters.</p>
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“Piobaireachd:  
The Classical  
Music of the  
Bagpipes”

As part of the Learning Lunches program here in Antigonish, Scott Williams will be giving a presentation at the People’s Place Library on April 18, from noon until 1:00 p.m. Admission is free. Bring your lunch.

On May 16, Laurie Stanley Blackwell and Brenda Appleby will be presenting. Details to follow.

Recollections

Last year, **Ambrose Bowles of Springfield** donated a few stories from a collection of articles written by his late wife, Theresa, a local school teacher. Many of these articles are reflections of the 1940s and 50s. To promote our local heritage, we must continue to collect these old stories. We welcome contributions.

*Schools 1946-*

*Some of us are well acquainted with one-room schools, as many of us taught for seven to ten years in nearby country classrooms. The school was the centre of the community; twenty or thirty students would be enrolled in each school. The teacher generally boarded with a family in the community. His or her salary was very small – about two hundred*

dollars monthly, and out of that they had to pay for board at the home they stayed in. Money did not matter. The teacher's aim was to educate every child under his or her care in knowledge of math., English grammar, French, history and health. Besides they learned spiritual values. The students loved their teachers – the doctors, lawyers, priests, and politicians of today.

In some cases teachers walked from their homes to their boarding families on Sunday afternoons to be ready for school on Monday. The walking in winter was generally tough – three feet of snow to hike through for a distance of five or six miles – as a snow plow seldom came. One teacher is known to have equipped herself with make-believe snow-shoes by cutting fir branches, then tying them together, then onto her shoes to keep her from sinking in the drifts. This worked pretty well for about a mile. Then they would fall apart, so she would have to do it all over again. Can you imagine a teacher today doing this or going through this hardship? But that's the way it was.

They loved their work. Teachers put on beautiful concerts in the schools at Christmas time with maybe thirty numbers. All the children took part; some were in plays, others had recitations. The little ones had welcoming verses, and always a nativity scene. The men of the community would build a stage, and this made the pupils feel very proud. Parents looked forward to this and appreciated how well teachers did with their pupils. The little ones met Santa, and all were happy. Santa would come in a big red suit covered with snow. He had gifts for everyone.

Teachers generally made the fire in the morning in the old school stove, and one of the pupils hauled fresh water for the day's supply. Children walked three or four miles to school, and ate a sandwich for lunch. Today they have fancy schools, buses to transport them to and from, and school lunches. There are conveniences and good salaries for teachers. We wonder if people are any better off.

*This is one example of the way things were a few years past. Want to go back?*

*Life is much faster today. I guess that's why we don't have time for anything.*

## Heritage Association of Antigonish

### Upcoming Guest Speakers

- On April 16 at 7:00 p.m., **Simon Aucoin** of Antigonish Landing will do a presentation on *Map Makers and their Maps*. Aucoin will cover a variety of old maps including Fletcher's maps and the Church maps.



- In May, for Gaelic Awareness Month, **Dr. Michael Linkletter** of the Celtic Studies Department at St. F. X. University will be guest presenter. Topic and details to follow.

## Antigonish Heritage Association Membership

We'd like to welcome our new member:

**Simon Aucoin** of Antigonish Landing

### **Message from the Chair – Heritage Association of Antigonish**

**(Working today to preserve yesterday for tomorrow.)**

It is hard to believe that we are finishing up March and that we can now look forward to the beauty and warmth of the months that will follow. March is also the last month in our fiscal year. It is time to take stock and cherish our success and, more importantly, recognize our challenges.

I think it is safe to state that this past year has been a real success with excellent growth in the number of members joining the Association. Our financial position is very good. We delivered a number of quality learning events and elevated the profile of the Association and the Museum within the community

These successes are the result of the work of a few dedicated volunteers and, without mentioning any names, I would like to thank them, one and all, for their support.

Recently, I was advised that we received a generous donation from the Estate of Florence Helm. On behalf of the Association, I would like to acknowledge and say thank you. This money will assist us greatly.

Just a reminder that on March 30, 2012, the Antigonish Highland Society and St. F.X.U. will honour the works of Alasdair Ailein Mhóir, Bard na Ceapaich (Alexander MacDonald, the Keppoch Bard). I would encourage everyone to attend this event.

Until next, take care and God bless.

Angus MacGillivray, BBA FCGA

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*"History never looks like history when you are living through it". -- John W. Gardner*