



The Old Train Station News

Newsletter #57

November 2013

The shorter, darker and colder days of November are great for cozying up with a book or a project and perfect for delving into some research. Last month the museum was the recipient of a fine collection of new material, compliments of David MacDonald of Bayfield. This treasure trove of memorabilia sheds some light on the life and times of David's granduncle, Father Leo B. Sears – student, soldier, educator and priest. Photos and papers document his service overseas, his years at Oxford, his seminary training and ordination in Rome, his subsequent return to Antigonish and a teaching career at St. F. X., and, finally, his twenty-five year vocation as parish priest in industrial Cape Breton. A collection of correspondence indicates that Leo had many great friends and that he was well regarded – but one particular piece of communication piqued my curiosity. A letter dated 1984 and written by a certain J. F. Bates of Glace Bay reads: *“Was surprised to hear that someone had contacted you re: a possible reunion of the St. F. X. Unit. How ridiculous I say.”* Apparently, J. F. Bates and Leo Sears had both served with the St. F. X. Hospital Unit during World War I – but why would a reunion be so absurd? This calls for a bit of an investigation.



First of all, who was this outspoken J. F. Bates? Assuming that he and Leo Sears were university classmates, we searched old editions of *The Xaverian* for a bit of information and, sure enough, the May 1921 edition reveals a graduation photo and some notes that indicate that “Fabe” or “Fapie”, as he was known on campus, came to St. F. X. in the fall of 1913. Famous for his entertaining “orations”, this Sydney native was proficient in many student activities, especially hockey and football. In 1916, he joined the St. F. X. Hospital Unit. Later, “he served overseas in the Artillery in France and then in Russia. He returned to Alma Mater after Peace was signed with a splendid military record. Altho he was severely gassed he was still fit and has been a brilliant star in all sporting activities since his return; being captain of the foot-ball team and an invaluable pillar to the hockey team.” *The Xaverian* acknowledged John Fabian's “good showing in his classes” and predicted “a great career” for him. Further research proved them correct. Bates went on to graduate from Dalhousie Medical School in 1926 and then to practice medicine in Glace Bay. In 1936, he wrote an article for *The Nova Scotia Medical Bulletin* describing the practice of medicine in Cape Breton and emphasizing the importance of medical journals being “practical” resources for doctors. “Let's not go Hollywood,” he concluded his “Notes from Glace Bay”.



Now, what about this St. F. X. Hospital Unit? Well, shortly after the start of the war, universities began setting up stationary hospital units as part of the Canadian Army Medical Corps. If colleges or universities could supply the recruits, the Canadian government would train and equip the units. After McGill, Toronto, Queen's and Dalhousie had established their units, St. F. X. officials decided to follow

suit. News that St. F. X. had been granted the authority to organize a unit was met with great enthusiasm. Many students jumped at this opportunity for action and adventure. A newspaper interview with Kingsley Brown (*The Casket*, March 30, 1988), quotes Leo Sears saying, "We were to be ambulance drivers, or orderlies, or do whatever was needed to take care of the wounded at the front. Angus L. and I were quick to join. They had graduation exercises early that year so that our unit could get away as soon as possible." Drills were held on campus. Students, alumni and university officials were terribly proud of St. F. X.'s contribution to the war effort. Why, the unit even had its own marching band!

Initially it was expected that the unit would consist of twelve doctors, thirty-five nurses, and one hundred and twenty-five men. Many offered their services but, in the end, only about sixty members of the unit were St. F. X. students or alumni. *"The band leader acquired most of his personnel from the Truro district,"* the eighty-eight year old J. F. Bates wrote in his letter to Father Sears. *"Most of them became NCO's of various ranks. What they did I never knew. I thought it strange that a bank clerk became quartermaster with the rank of Capt. while so many of the St. F. X. students had much better qualifications. I could never understand how that fellow from Acadia became Sgt. Major."* St. F. X had no medical school so recruiting medical staff proved to be a bit of a problem at first. In the end, the unit that left for England consisted of twelve medical officers, twenty-six nurses and one hundred and eighteen men from all professions and trades.



The St. F. X. No. 9 Stationary Hospital Unit didn't get to the front as quickly as had been expected. In this museum photo we see an eager group of young men, including Leo Sears (second from left), leaving for Halifax. After their training in the city, the unit was deployed to England on June 19, 1916 and then stationed in Shorncliffe for further training. (The nurses were sent to London for the same purpose.) Before long, the unit was broken up and dispersed to military hospitals across England.



Other hospital units who had arrived before them were still unassigned to missions on the front so later units had to wait their turn. This museum photo shows Sears relaxing with friends at Shorncliffe.

Some of the men soon grew restless. *"While at Shorncliffe,"* Bates

wrote in his letter to Leo Sears, "I was sort of janitor or something of that sort. I had to mop the halls and stairways each morning, starting early, and recall that my efforts were never satisfactory." In Bates' opinion, Leo Sears merely "masqueraded" as cook in the kitchen at Shorncliffe. "It was about this time I decided I would try for a transfer, hoping I could make a better contribution to the war effort." Many others were of the same opinion. "I could recall about 20 to 25 who transferred to combat units and had service in France." Still, "it took many months for most of us to achieve our wishes."

After three months, the unit was transferred to Bramshott where it was responsible for the care of all Canadian troops who took ill in England and all the sick and wounded evacuated from France. That fall and winter were somewhat trying what with the running of an under-staffed hospital and an outbreak of influenza. By now, Leo Sears was getting restless too. "We wanted to get overseas and see the action. But it wasn't easy getting a transfer to a front-line unit." It took time but eventually Leo was sent to an artillery outfit with the 3rd Division of the Canadian Corps.

By the time the St. F. X. Unit was called to France in December of 1917, it was an entirely different unit. Less than half of the personnel were members of the original unit that had left Antigonish. Even its commanding officer was new, the original one having died of an anthrax infection early in 1917.

In Longuenesse, France, the unit opened a hut and tent hospital and was kept fairly busy until it became too dangerous to continue. Shell fire and nightly bombings in the spring of 1918 sent them packing to Etaples where they were told to open up another tent hospital. Not long after, they were the target of an air raid that killed two men and left twelve others wounded. Thankfully, no patients were present at the time but much of the unit's equipment was destroyed or damaged. The unit's War Diary, found online at http://regimentalrogue.com/misc/researching_first_world_war_soldiers_part13.htm, reveals that the unit was all but forgotten during the summer of 1918 – except for sporadic German bombing. Ordered to prepare to evacuate, members of the unit bided their time with trivial pursuits (playing tennis and baseball, growing potatoes, and physical training) while awaiting further orders.

Finally, in February of 1919, after about ten months of inactivity, the unit was moved to Camiers to open what has gone down in history (*Nova Scotia's Part in The Great War* by M. Stuart Hunt, 1920) as a "special hospital" for Canadian soldiers but what was, in fact, a venereal disease hospital. An unpublished manuscript on the St. F. X. Hospital Unit (part of the Fr. Leo Sears Collection) is an eye-opening revelation. Dr. Hogan, the author of this manuscript, is a St. F. X. graduate (1973) and now a professor of medicine at the University of Calgary. In his *History of the No. 9 Stationary Hospital*, Hogan discusses what he calls "the secret plague" which he claims was a "massive" problem for all nations involved in the war but especially for the Canadian Army. He gives statistics, discusses possible reasons for the high rate, describes early twentieth century treatments, and explains how Canadian authorities dealt with this predicament. Written from a physician's point of view, Hogan makes every effort to see the unit in the context of the era and its social mores.

February, March and April of 1919 were busy months and the unit did everything to exterminate "this awful disease", as one "relapsed" patient wrote in a letter to his doctor (as found in the War Diary). The March 8, 1919 entry notes that the hospital had as many as 1121 patients that day (patient census ranged from 973 to 1121) and the March 11th entry indicates that each medical officer was treating about 190 patients. Dr. Hogan writes: "In spite of the seriousness of the problem there was little public knowledge of it – venereal disease was truly a silent plague and given scant recognition in histories of the war."

St. F. X University and St. Ninian's Knights of Columbus produced a book about two years after the war called *Catholics of the Diocese of Antigonish, Nova Scotia, And The War, 1914 – 1919, with Nominal Enlistment Rolls by Parishes*. This publication includes a brief article that is lavish in praise of the St. F. X. Hospital Unit. "Theirs was a task involving days and nights of ceaseless toil, hours spent in carrying stretchers, with their human burdens, from ambulances, trains and barges, and then more and longer hours spent in nerve-wearing efforts to ameliorate the sufferings of broken and distorted humanity that came in ever-increasing numbers as the death struggle in France drew near its close." This description is a far cry from the real nature of their work at the end of the war. At the same time, Hogan concludes his research noting that the unit wasn't really a university unit or a working stationary hospital for most of its existence. "During its 36 months overseas, the Unit functioned as a Stationary hospital in the field for only approximately three months. (January 2, 1918 – April 16, 1918)" When it finally did get another significant assignment, the war was over and the task was anything but pleasant or glorious.

Running a venereal disease hospital was hardly the distinction that this small Catholic college had hoped to gain with the establishment of a stationary hospital unit, but sexually transmitted diseases are a reality of war and someone had to deal with the unpleasant task. It is not surprising then that the nature of their work in France had always remained "hush hush" – until Hogan's manuscript, of course, and now the unit's War Diaries online.

As far as Dr. Hogan could determine, no reunions of the St. F. X. Unit were ever held. In 1984, Dr. John Fabian Bates gave a few reasons why a reunion was hardly feasible then. "*I glanced over the unit picture and come to a not very firm conclusion that if there are 20 survivors that would be a generous guess. I could only name about 4 on my own knowledge. . . . Some members of the unit I never really knew. . . . I never developed any feeling of loyalty towards the unit as such so I don't think I could offer any real information. . . .*" Only thirty-some members of the returning unit were part of the original unit so little wonder that Bates had limited recall of members. Don't forget, J. F. Bates had transferred to another unit not long after landing in England. He had moved on – but what about those who had stayed with the unit? One wonders if they were just happy to put the past behind them.

In the hustle and bustle of your holiday preparations, take a little time to enjoy the season.

Catherine MacGillivray

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Recent Acquisitions

We received a copy of *Fire Spook* from Monica Graham – in memory of Archie Mills, Heatherton. We were also given the author's research notes on this subject.



A toonie-sized medallion, affixed next to the key-hole, contains a four quadrant shield with a banner below. It reads "Rocks Patent".



Hugh Webb of Antigonish has been collecting old objects for the past fifty or sixty years and, during this time, he's come across some rather interesting finds – like this lockset that came from the old Sears and MacIntosh property many, many years ago. "Back in the 1950s, they were taking down a couple of old sheds out behind the store to make room for a new warehouse. In one of those sheds, I found an old door that had been used as the floor for a loft. This lock was part of that door."

Hugh also had the rim latch key set with its privacy bolt that fits into the back carved-out portion of the door and an old 5 ½ inch key that was found on the property and is thought to be the key that opened this door. Hugh believes that this could be the oldest lockset to have been used in Antigonish.



In the 1830s, most folks in the town of Antigonish would not have had a lock on their door. Back then, there were only one or two streets in the town. Main Street would have been both residential and commercial. This door most likely belonged to a merchant's place or some other place of business. Even so, the lock would only have been a deterrent to access.

As a point of interest, Hugh's father, Hilus Webb, bought out T. J. Sears in 1943 and then Lewis MacIntosh in 1962. The Home Hardware business closed its doors about twenty years ago.

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Local Books Available

The following books are available at the museum.

- History of Antigonish*, edited by Ray MacLean (\$25)
- The Casket: From Gutenberg to Internet*, by Ray MacLean (\$5)
- Drummer on Foot*, edited by D. MacFarlane and Ray MacLean (\$25)
- The Highland Games*, by Danny Gillis (\$30)
- Cape Breton Railways*, by Herb MacDonald (\$25)
- Tokens of Grace*, by Laurie Stanley-Blackwell

Please note: Mailing costs apply.

Heritage Association of Antigonish

Earlier this month, we were treated to an interesting talk by local historian, Ronnie D. D. MacDonald, on *John Kennedy the Railway Man*. Mr. MacDonald is no stranger to the museum; over the years, he's given numerous presentations on various aspects of our local history. On this particular occasion, his topic was one of a personal interest as John Kennedy was his mother's godfather and granduncle.

Ronnie D. D. is a meticulous researcher and one can't even begin to include the extensive Kennedy family connections that were part of his presentation. Merely a brief summary follows.



John Kennedy was born into a Gaelic speaking family at Ohio in 1844, the youngest of nine children. The family had first lived at Glen Road but then, in 1838, they moved to Cross Roads Ohio.

Kennedy was exposed to railway work at a very early age. Shortly after their father passed away in 1852, an older brother found employment on the construction of the line between Halifax and Truro. At the time, John was only thirteen years of age but his brother found him employment anyway. Young John continued to follow construction work for many years and then branched out as a contractor. He pursued railway building in British Columbia, Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. In 1900, while working on the Inverness Railway, *The Casket* noted that "Boss Kennedy" would certainly complete the job at hand.

Hoping to grow bigger, Kennedy went into partnership with his nephew, A. K. MacDonald, to form the Kennedy and MacDonald Company. They picked up some big jobs across the country but eventually gave up railway construction to pursue highway construction. (One of their projects was a twenty mile stretch of road near St. Peter's in Cape Breton.) The partnership was clearly successful. By 1919, Kennedy and MacDonald were probably the two most prosperous men in Antigonish County.

Around 1912, Kennedy left Cross Roads Ohio and moved into the Trotter residence on Hawthorne Street (the Dale Archibald home). This was one of the "nicest" homes in the town of Antigonish at the time. Not long after, he invested in the Royal George, bought two-thirds of the Kirk Place building, and purchased the finest farm in the county, Crystal Cliffs. For his daughter's wedding, he leased a railway car to transport his family and guests to a hotel in Halifax. Money was clearly no object.

Many men from around the town and county worked for Kennedy and MacDonald. Some ventured on to pursue railway or highway contracting as well. When he passed away in 1927, Kennedy had already earned himself a nation-wide reputation as a successful contractor. Now that's a noteworthy branch on the family tree!

Heritage Association Membership

- **Dr. Ian Cameron**, Sherbrooke
- The **Davies** sisters from Port Hawkesbury, Lower Sackville and River Denys

Donation

Thank you to **Dr. Ian Cameron, Sherbrooke**, for his donation to the Heritage Association.

Message from the Chair – Heritage Association of Antigonish

(Working today to preserve yesterday for tomorrow.)

The Heritage Association of Antigonish with the Antigonish Highland Society and the Antigonish Highland Society Foundation presented the Saint Andrews Evening Gala on November 28, 2013. This year the Antigonish Highland Society awarded five honorary member awards. These awards were presented to individuals who have kept (and who continue to keep) the Scottish Music and Gaelic language alive. The evening included a meal and entertainment. Thanks to those who supported this event.

The renovation project at the Museum continues with the plans for the final phase being made. The contract was awarded and it is hoped that work will start shortly.

Recently, I was watching Canada AM and our Governor General David Johnston was being interviewed. He was speaking about getting Canadians to volunteer, especially young Canadians. There was one line in the interview that stuck with me. It was as follows:

"People from all walks of life can volunteer — not just by opening their wallets, but by giving their time and talents...."

I have a great respect for this Governor General and his comments could not come at a more opportune time. Everyone can help to make a difference and it is hoped that you will consider volunteering some time at the Museum or the Association.

As we approach the end of 2013, it is hoped that you will include the Heritage Association of Antigonish in your giving plans for this year. Our financial support for the renovation work at the Museum and our annual operating costs have depleted our limited financial resources. The Heritage Association of Antigonish is a registered charity and tax receipts will be provided. Please call Jocelyn Gillis at 863-6160.

Until next, Take Care and God Bless.

Angus MacGillivray, BBA FCGA angus.macgillivray@ns.sympatico.ca

That Was Then

The December 1915 edition of *The Casket* notes six carloads of young trees, "for use as Christmas trees", passing through Antigonish (from Cape Breton) enroute to Boston.