

The Old Train Station News

Newsletter #64

June 2014



Hello, my name is Matthew Howard—I am a second year education student studying at Saint Francis Xavier here in Antigonish. I consider myself privileged to have been given the opportunity to work these next few weeks for the Heritage Association of Antigonish as their summer research and fundraising coordinator. As part of my job I will be responsible for continuing the work of past position holders Marie Hanifen and Nicole Halloran. This means maintaining and working to build the Antigonish Memory Project.

Beginning in the spring of 2012, the Heritage Association created an innovative community outreach project designed to preserve the memories and experiences of elders living in and around Antigonish. The project was the brainchild of association and museum board member, Fraser Dunn. Mr. Dunn, along with other members of the association, had been interviewing seniors across the town and county for years. The Memory Project is, simply, a streamlined, focused approach to capturing these stories.

All interviews that have been conducted for the Antigonish Memory Project are available at the Museum in visual, audio or transcribed form. We believe these interviews will provide a valuable resource to a variety of community members, from a student conducting research for a paper to a descendant looking to hear a firsthand account from an ancestor. We hope that this program will help to foster a historical understanding of the area and the people who have shaped it. So far I have had the pleasure of sitting down with Grace Cotie (pictured above), a 92 year old resident of West Arm Tracadie and with Leo "Boots" Chisholm, who ran J.A. Chisholm's Shoes, a local business in Antigonish for many years.

While I myself did not grow up in the town or county, I was born here, and one could say so was my fascination with history and with storytelling. Most every second weekend, my family would make the excursion up to Antigonish from Halifax to see the relatives. Although I was a city kid by circumstance I had always considered myself to be a "townie" at heart. I can vividly remember early morning drives through Brierly Brook and around Cape George with my grandfather. Along our way he would recount his early memories of life in Antigonish and the experiences he had gathered over the years. You could say that these stories instilled in me an early curiosity of the past, an interest that later motivated my

decision to pursue History at Saint Francis Xavier.

Thinking about storytelling and ways in which I could introduce myself, I thought that I might share with you a story that was relayed to me by my grandfather. This particular story goes way back to my great grandfather, Michael Howard, a stocky little Irishman from Saint John, New Brunswick. My father often told me that Howards were built wide and low to the ground, "a natural defense" he said "against unpredictable hurricane winds". "Mickey" Howard was just that, a stump of a man, a real blue collar type of guy who made his living as a train engineer working for CNR. Despite being this sort of gritty chap, I've been told that my great grandfather possessed an impressive singing voice and above else he loved to bellow out Italian Opera. He didn't of course speak a word of Italian and not being a very educated man, wouldn't have the slightest clue as to what he was singing about, none the less, Mickey was able to memorize and recite the music word for word from the records he had collected over the years. During long workdays on the line, my great grandfather would sit in the cab and serenade his fire stoker, a local man by the name of Billy Fudge.



One summer Mickey decided to take a week of vacation to go and stay with his sister who at the time was a nun living in a Massachusetts convent. Each night after dinner he would graciously repay his hostess' hospitality by singing slow Sicilian ballads to the sisters. After hearing Mickey sing, one of the nuns contacted her brother who happened to manage an independent recording label out of Boston. This gentleman asked if my great grandfather would ever be interested in making a record. Thinking that it would make a fine souvenir for his family back home, Mickey agreed to an afternoon session at the studio. Once the recording was finished the manager, who was thoroughly impressed with what he had just heard, said that he believed he could get my great grandfather an audition at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York. Sure enough within a few days a gentlemen from the Met got in touch with Mickey at the convent, requesting a performance. It had seemed that the stocky Irishman from Saint John had made good and was on his way to finding some success as a vocalist. However, this isn't your typical rags to riches story. For, you see, as is the case with most traveling Maritimers, Mickey felt overwhelmed by homesickness.

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With only just three days before his big audition he packed his bags, threw his record under one arm and headed back to Saint John.

Mickey Howard would happily grow old in his native city, and for 35 years he continued to ride the rails as a CNR employee while he helped to raise four children with his wife Florence.

To watch or listen to any of the interviews conducted thus far for The Antigonish Memory Project please visit: <https://www.youtube.com/user/AntigonishHeriMuseum/videos>

Rededication ceremony showcases renovations

On Monday afternoon, the museum briefly shed its humble persona to welcome proudly the full attention of the community at a lively rededication ceremony. Members of the public joined a handful of dignitaries and a team of tireless volunteers to celebrate the completion of a renovation program that has transformed the beloved old train station into a smart, modern facility.

The prospect of a large-scale renovation had been entertained since opening in 1991, but the museum's modest purse would not permit a major overhaul. The project remained conceptual until the Town of Antigonish offered support with the first monetary contribution, which was followed soon after by another from the Municipality of the County. Warden Russell Boucher and Counselor Donnie MacDonald, who is also a museum board member, represented the County on Monday, and Mayor Carl Chisholm represented the town.



(L-R) Mayor Carl Chisholm, MLA Randy Delorey, Museum Chair Allan Armsworthy, Heritage Assoc. Chair Angus MacGillivray, and board member/town councillor Donnie MacDonald

Fraser Dunn and A.H. Roy & Associates were instrumental in making a preliminary assessment of the museum building and identifying specific areas for improvement. As the project progressed, governmental support was invaluable. The provincial government, represented locally by MLA Maurice Smith worked to increase our budget early on, and Randy Delorey, the present MLA, ensured that provincial support would continue through to the project's completion. The Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency (ACOA), another major supporter, was represented by Mark van de Wiel. Through ACOA, the federal government contributed very generously to the renovations.



Fiddler Donald MacLennan



Mark van de Wiel and Fraser Dunn

As guests milled about, admiring the handiwork of Archibald Construction (interior), Tate Construction (exterior), and C.A. Smith (mechanical), and enjoying the variety of hors d'oeuvres prepared by Bernadine Benoit, the sound of Donald MacLennan's fiddle resonated in the grand old space. The afternoon was an amiable ceilidh announcing the arrival of the summertime at the museum and a new era for its historic building.

The Museum wishes to sincerely thank all donors, volunteers, workers, and other supporters who helped to realize this ambitious and important project.

Museum Announcement

We are pleased to announce that Antigonish Heritage Museum Board Chair, Allan Armsworthy, has been appointed to the Nova Scotia Museum Board of Directors. Congratulations, Allan!

Message from the Chair – Heritage Association of Antigonish (Working today to preserve yesterday for tomorrow.)

As many of you are aware I am active with the Antigonish Highland Society. The Highland Games will start on July 6 and end on July 13, 2014. The Games budget is large and the Games future depends on your support. I would encourage anyone reading this message to attend some or all the events.

Recently, I attended a portion of a day-long workshop called R.I.P. (Research - Innovation - Preservation in Nova Scotia's Historic Cemeteries. The event was hosted the Broch Research Collective, St. Francis Xavier University. This workshop provided a wealth of information. It also enlightened the undersigned on the fact that our heritage can be experienced in all facets of our lives. Little things like the use of different designs on tombstone, the type of stone used and where it came from, to use of wood for markers by the Acadians. One important piece of information taken away was the fact we should never attempt to clean a tombstone. There is now 3D photogrammetry that allows us to read tombstone that are covered with lichen and damaged with the passage of time.

The Antigonish Heritage Museum hosted the official re-dedication on June 23, 2014. This event included the official ceremony where the Association awarded two life memberships. Mag Lowe and Ron McConnell were honoured for their many years of dedicated service. Mag and Ron, congratulations on a well earned honour.

I would like to thank Jocelyn Gillis, Sam Gillis and Matthew Howard for all their efforts in making the official re-dedication the success it was. Also, a special thanks you to all those that took time to attend this event.

Until next, take care and God bless.

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Happenings

Sunday, July 20

Lochaber Strawberry Festival – Everyone is welcome!

- 1:00 - 5:00 pm, Lochaber Centre, 1587 Hwy. 7
- Live entertainment, including Campbell Carter & Martha Palmer, John Hanlon, Former Ordinary House (Andrew Stalker, Dave Tellum, Brian Melanson), Donald MacLennan & Mary Beth Carty
- Homemade strawberry shortcake, 50/50 draw, face painting
- Adults - \$6 / Children - \$3

September 8

Bruce MacDonald: “Nova Scotia Infantry Units in the Great War”

- Particular emphasis on the 25th and 85th

October 20

Bruce MacDonald: “Nova Scotia Non-Combat Units in the Great War”

- Forestry Unit, Construction Unit, Hospital Units (St. F.X. No. 9 and Dal.)

November 10

Fraser Dunn: “A Tribute to the Sisters of St. Martha”

Recent Acquisitions

- Photo of Sam Facey Convenience, Tracadie, Courtesy Audrey Facey
- Six postcards and a CN pass in the name of R J MacDonald grandfather of our donor--Bonnie Musial
- Variety of books of local history and interest from Don Fay

New Members

- Vic & Sandy MacLellan, Big Marsh

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- Don Fay, Little River, South Carolina Silver
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