



# The Old Train Station News

Newsletter #72

February 2015

## Story Of A Sleigh Drive To Port Hood

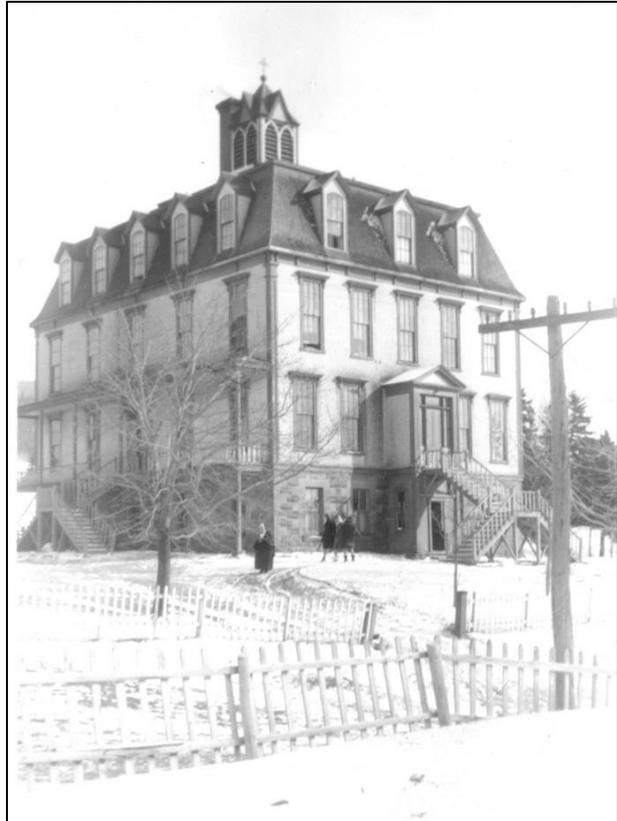
A story to warm the hearts of all who love—or ever loved—a sleigh-drive arrived at The Halifax Chronicle office last night. It tells the story of 75 boys and girls who rode ten miles by sleigh from Mabou to Port Hood, and back again.

Here is the story, written by an enthusiastic contributor:

Merrily did sleigh bells jingle in the frosty morning air and gleefully did youthful voices sing as the happy group of boarders from St. Joseph's Convent went "dashing through the snow in two-horse open sleighs" on a straw drive to Port Hood last Saturday.

A sleigh drive at any time is a most enjoyable outing but a sleigh drive with 75 on a ten-mile road is surely a never-to-be-forgotten event. Some of the girls had never before been in a sleigh while many had never tasted the joy of a straw drive, and like the Cratchits kept declaring, each in turn, there never was such a drive.

The good-neighbor spirit doesn't have to be restored in Mabou in the postwar period. It has always been here and is still buoyant and vigorous from constant practise.



A newspaper clipping from 1945 sends Lila Corbett on a stroll down memory lane, back to her days at St. Joseph's Convent School in Mabou. Lila remembers it as if it were only yesterday.

Having mastered Grade 10, Lila Wilkie (as she was known back then) had completed all the formal education offered at the one room schoolhouse in Tracadie. Not entirely satisfied, Lila's Aunt Stella encouraged her to further her schooling and to take Grade 11 at the convent school in Mabou.

Not only were seven large sleighs with excellent spans of dappled greys and chestnut browns gratuitously offered for the occasion but the owners of the teams themselves came along, joining in the holiday spirit.

Rev. Father MacPherson greeted the crowd on their arrival at Port Hood and provided an ample treat of apples for the entire group. The Mother Superior and the nuns of the Convent excelled themselves in their hospitality. Luncheon was generously prepared and taken from Mabou and served in three spacious rooms.

To carry lunch for 75 hungry mouths was no small item but all were copiously served. Last but not least on the menu came a large box of candy, a treat from Phonse MacIntyre of Antigonish. The good horses were not forgotten either. Through the courtesy of Smith MacDonnell, proprietor of Ocean View Hotel, shelter was provided for the 12 horses.

After lunch the students entertained the pastor and nuns with songs and recitations. The seven sleighs, filled with happy hearts, then drove homeward, reaching Mabou at six o'clock—the end of one perfect day.

Pictured (center) is Lila being delivered to the convent school in 1944 by her beloved Aunt Stella and her brother Elwood. The next year would prove to be an unforgettable experience. *(Clipping and photos: compliments of Lila.)*

Lila's recollections of her year in Mabou reveal that the Sisters provided a general education for Grades 10, 11 and 12. The nuns also taught French, Latin, Art, Music and Secretarial. "Home Ec. and sewing were taught on Friday afternoons." Did the sisters teach Religion? "Yes! And lots of it."

Can Lila remember any of her teachers? She sure can! "Mother St. Thomas was the Science teacher – and she didn't stand for any shenanigans!" Mother St. Anthony was the Music teacher. "She didn't want Yvonne MacIntyre playing the 'Boogie Woogie' on the piano." All of

St. Joseph's Convent, run by the Sisters of the Congregation of Notre Dame of Montreal, opened its doors in the late 1880s to receive girls from the Mabou community as day-students and girls from rural Cape Breton and eastern Nova Scotia as boarders. Lila recalls how some of her fellow students came from Stellarton, Mulgrave, Sydney Mines, New Waterford, Glace Bay, Afton, Bayfield, Heatherton and Antigonish. All would benefit from a quality convent education.

The Sisters of Notre Dame were, for the most part, a teaching order. In the early years of our history, this order of nuns provided young women in the area with access to a high school education which would otherwise not have been available to them. Schools were established throughout eastern Nova Scotia and Cape Breton where girls were taught academic courses as well as religion, fine arts, and home-making.



the Sisters were referred to as 'Mother Saint.' "That was a stipulation!" Mother St. Calista was from Antigonish. Lila remembers that she was very pretty and especially nice. Mother St. Michael was strict. "As long as you didn't upset her, she was good." Mother St. Calista and Mother St. Michael supervised the girls during study hours in the evening. (Study period lasted from 6:00 until 9:00 at night.) "Mother St. Calista and Mother St. Michael would sit at the desk and chat back and forth while we worked. They were great friends." As to be expected, the students were well chaperoned. "After study, we were rushed off to bed."

The convent housed the Sisters, the boarders and the school. The girls lived on the top floor of the convent in a large dormitory where about fifteen cots were lined up, all in a row. Four girls had private alcoves. "They were special – but then, they did pay extra for their alcoves." [*A brief history provided by the Sisters at St. Joseph's Renewal Centre explains that tuition was not required of students. "During their early years of teaching at St. Joseph's, parents supported the Sisters, as well as the school, by donating produce from their farms as payment for room and board and/or by paying cash as they could afford."*] Some of the Sisters had rooms on the dorm floor too.

The girls' trunks were stored in the attic. Lila laughs when she recounts the time she tried to sneak up to the attic to get something out of her trunk. "The door kept squeaking." Clearly, the attic was out of bounds.

The ground floor of the convent included the chapel, a large dining hall, the recreation room and laundry facilities. The second floor contained the classrooms. Lila believes that a couple of the Sisters' rooms were located on that floor too.

There was a definite routine to the students' days. "We had to be up at 6:00 in the morning. Mass was at 7:00. After that, we had breakfast and then it was time for classes." [*The Sisters at the Renewal Centre note that "the curriculum offered to the students was rich and extensive. A wide range of subjects was taught and students of Grades 11 and 12 were diligently prepared for Provincial Exams resulting in a notable rate of success."*]

Four or five boys attended the school that year. "They sat in one corner at the back of the class. They couldn't mix with the girls and they weren't allowed in the rec room." Lila suspects that "they went outside during our breaks." Two or three of these boys lived in the Science building under the watchful eye of Mother St. Thomas.

On fine evenings, the Sisters would sometimes take the girls for a walk down the harbour road. "We were on parade," Lila laughs, remembering how they were closely supervised. "They made sure we all came back together."

Weekends brought another kind of routine for then there were chores to be done. "We had our laundry and our ironing to do." Needless to say, the girls were expected to make their beds and to keep their areas clean. But the weekends also brought some fun. "We would gather in the rec room for music and singing." Some girls went home on the weekends; others didn't. Most of the girls (Lila included) went home for Christmas and Easter.

"On Sundays and special occasions we had to wear our black and white uniforms – a black dress, white cuffs and collar, no short sleeves, and black stockings." Sundays brought quiet time and time for prayer.

One Sister prepared all the meals for the nuns and the girls who boarded there. Lila assures us that they were well fed and confesses to having gained a pound or two during her stay at Mabou.

Amidst the structure and discipline of the convent school, Lila admits that “we had our share of fun” – like the time one of the Sisters threw a bottle of water over the shower curtain on top of one of the girls taking a shower. Pranks were played by both the nuns and the girls.

Most of the girls came from Catholic homes where vocations to the priesthood and religious life were readily encouraged. At the same time, the Sisters would have had considerable influence on their charges. “They tried hard to get recruits,” Lila remembers. Still, the Sisters were greatly respected for their efforts in improving the lives of those in the community and vocations were welcomed on all sides.

Some of the girls did join one or another of the three religious orders that were stationed in eastern Nova Scotia at that time – the Sisters of Notre Dame, the Sisters of Charity and the Sisters of St. Martha. Others went on to careers in nursing, teaching and secretarial. Lila took a course in hair dressing.



Over the years, Lila lost track of most of her former classmates. Seventy years have come and gone but she still likes to reminisce about about those old friends. Her good friend Marie Lambert, from Stellarton, joined the Sisters of Charity. Yvonne MacIntyre was a great piano player. (Her father, Phonse MacIntyre, ran the Wholesalers in Antigonish. It was he who provided the big box of candy as noted in the newspaper clipping.) There was a MacMaster girl who was “a great little singer.” A Grant girl from Afton or Bayfield had an aunt who was an elderly Sister at the convent. Mary Keating, Sarah Chisholm and Eileen Perro were classmates too. Bernadine MacIntosh became a Sister of St. Martha. Marion Campbell from Inverness County is now Marion Oicle and she lives in Antigonish. Of course, she and Lila are in touch. *(Photo shows Marion (Campbell) Oicle, front row, second from left and Bernadine MacIntosh, front and center.)*

Lila speaks fondly of her days at the convent school in Mabou. “It was an interesting time in my life,” she admits. It was also her first time away from home. “That year certainly helped me grow up,” Lila confesses.

The old convent school is long gone. It was replaced in 1952 by a new structure that would receive upwards to ninety girls as boarders for the new high school in Mabou. That building continued to board girls until 1978. The following year, the convent was converted into St. Joseph’s Renewal Centre.

What about the grotto? Yes, it was built in Lila's time. "We had to help out too. We all dug and hauled stones but it was finished after I left."

Lila never forgot that marvelous sleigh ride to Port Hood, the account of which was posted in *The Halifax Chronicle* back in 1945. All of the girls had climbed onto the hay-filled sleighs. Lila remembers the benches that lined both sides of the sleigh and she remembers sitting in the hay. "You could hear the bells ringing on the horses." When they reached Port Hood, "the Sisters treated us royally."

By the way, did the boys in their class join in on all the fun? Well, yes, they did. "But the Sisters rode with the boys." Yes, all the way to Port Hood and back. "And there were no girls on that sleigh with the boys," Lila chuckles. Evidently, the boys would have remembered that excursion too.

A special thank-you to Lila for her delightful memories.

Catherine MacGillivray

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## Recent Acquisitions



Thank you to **Shelia Redden** for this little brown jug that she discovered on top the panty cupboard just off the kitchen in the Old Bishop's Palace in 1964 when she was with the Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of Africa (the White Sisters). The jug that had once played the tune "How Dry I Am" was then being used to pour juice to celebrate feast days. When Shelia returned to Antigonish in December of 1967, she stayed with the Sisters who were living in what is now Highcrest Home. When she left, the jug went with her. (The White Sisters left the area in the mid 1980s.)

The jug then took on a new role. Shelia took over as leader of the singing group called the "Bonnie Blends". A skiffle group was formed and the jug became an instrument blown into by Sister Caroline Lahey, a Sister of St. Martha. For a few years, the group held practices at the museum. They discontinued in the early 2000 years.

- **Bill Landry** brought in a collection of Fire Department photos of fires from around the town and county.
- **Betty Cameron** brought in more photos from the Gulf Shore area including some from the First World War era.



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## Black History Month

**Darlene Rushton**, shown here with Jocelyn Gillis at the launch of Black History Month at the People's Place Library last month, has been a great promoter of Black History in this area.



To help us understand their history here in Antigonish town and county, we invite members of the black community to share their history with the museum.

## Ceilidh at the Museum

Last month's ceilidh was cancelled due to inclement weather. It's been rescheduled for March 1<sup>st</sup> at 2:00 p.m. Entertainment for this free event will be brought to you by Karen Beaton, Leona Williams and Mary Beth Carty. (This ceilidh is being co-sponsored by the Antigonish Highland Society and the Heritage Association of Antigonish. We'd also like to thank Farmer's Mutual for their support of this month's ceilidh.)

## Pub Night in Lochaber

There will be a variety of local talent at the Lochaber Centre on Saturday, March 7, at 8:00 p.m. Admission: \$5:00 (19 and over).

## Workshop at the Museum

*MUSEUMS 101* to be held at the Antigonish Heritage Museum. Course details can be found at the following link <http://ansm.ns.ca/> or phone the Museum for further information 902-863-6160.

## 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of WWI

The Museum is working to compile brief biographical sketches on soldiers from Antigonish town and county who died during WWI. We're hoping that family members will help us by contributing photos and information on these soldiers. [antheritage@parl.ns.ca](mailto:antheritage@parl.ns.ca)

### First World War Veterans of Guysborough County

Bruce MacDonald has been working on a project to document the stories of Guysborough Veterans, including 131 soldiers who died while serving with the Canadian forces during or shortly after the Great War. If you have photos or information to share, please contact Bruce:

[brucefrancismacdonald@gmail.com](mailto:brucefrancismacdonald@gmail.com)

Blogpost can be reached here: <http://guysboroughgreatwarveterans.blogspot.ca/>

## Heritage Association of Antigonish

### Learning Events

"Talk About History" on Monday, March 9 at 7:00 p.m. Remember sitting around the kitchen and telling stories? We'll discuss topics of local historical interest. All are welcome!

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

We've just finished the dog days of winter (mid-January to mid-February) and I must advise that I will be happy to see spring arrive.

We've been working with the Museum to bring you a number of events; unfortunately, the weather forced a cancellation of these events. It's hoped that we can reschedule them at a later date and that you'll plan to attend.

We continue to partner with like-minded organizations in the area to work on heritage projects that should be of interest to everyone. As we progress, we will provide updates in the newsletter.

At a recent Board of Directors meeting for our Association, two reserve funds were established. The first fund is a Building Fund. It is our hope that when this fund becomes fully funded that the interest can be used to assist with repairs to the building that houses our local Museum. The second fund is an Artefact Fund. It is our hope that when this fund become fully funded that the interest can be used to assist with acquiring artefacts for our Museum. The Association welcomes tax deductible donations that are earmarked for the growth of these funds.

Until next, Take Care and God Bless.

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