

# The Old Train Station News

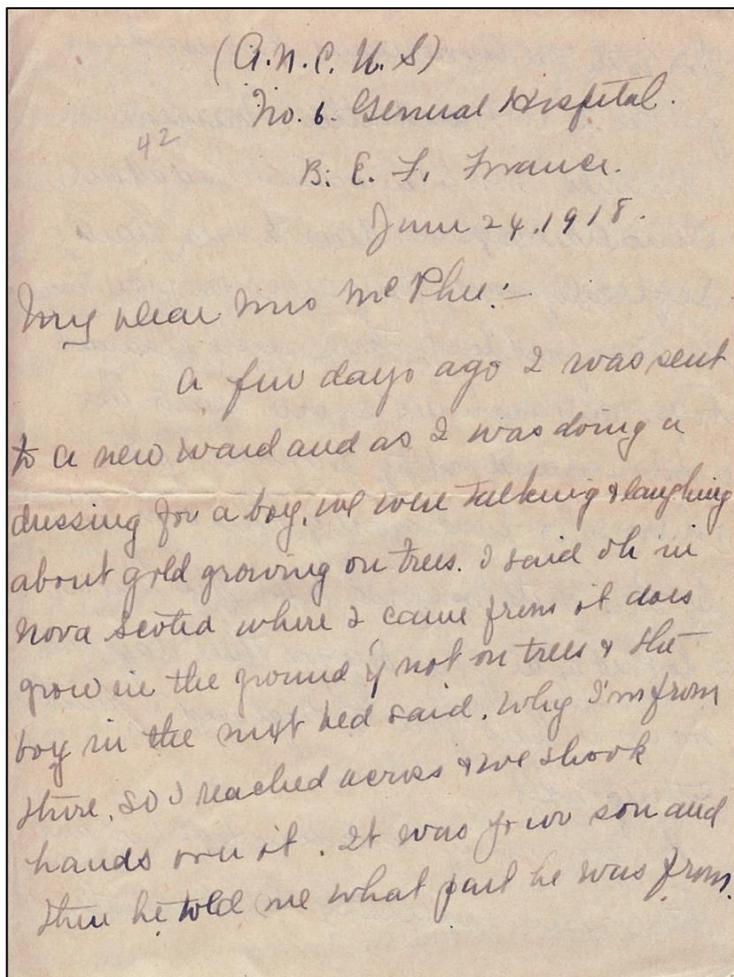
Newsletter #81

November 2015

A century's old letter in the Museum archives reveals the compassion and love Canadian nurses felt for the boys from home. "I'm a Canadian and all our Canadian boys are dear to our hearts," wrote Nurse Grace Oswald Parker to Archie MacPhee's mother back in June of 1918. Archie had been wounded in battle and taken to the British Expeditionary Force's No. 6 Hospital in France. Knowing that Archie's mother, like all other soldiers' mothers, would be uneasy with her son at the front, Grace put pen to paper and wrote Mrs. MacPhee a letter with the comforting assurance of his safety.

Grace's letter is part of an extensive collection of letters amassed by the MacPhee family of North Lochaber whose son and brother served with the 106<sup>th</sup> Overseas Battalion, the Nova Scotia Rifles, and eventually with the 25<sup>th</sup>. The "MacPhee Collection" includes valuable correspondence from Archie while stationed in England and waiting to be sent to France, letters from the front and the trenches, notes scribbled while convalescing in England after a gunshot wound to his right arm, and then this remarkable letter from Nurse Grace Oswald Parker.

Only snippets of information remain to tell the story of Nurse Parker's life. Born on July 25, 1875, Grace was one of at least eleven children born to farmer Thomas Alexander Parker and his wife, Nancy, of Upper Musquodoboit, Halifax County. Grace left for "the Boston States" shortly after the turn of the century. By 1910, she had completed her nurse training and was living in Cambridge, Massachusetts.



(A.N.P. U.S.)  
42 No. 6 General Hospital.  
B. E. F. France.  
June 24, 1918.  
My dear Mrs MacPhee:-  
A few days ago I was sent to a new ward and as I was doing a dressing for a boy, we were talking & laughing about gold growing on trees. I said oh in Nova Scotia where I came from it does grow in the ground if not on trees & the boy in the next bed said, why I'm from there, so I reached across & we shook hands over it. It was your son and then he told me what part he was from.

The United States entered the war in April of 1917. Immediately, a cry went out for medical personnel to serve with the British Expeditionary Force in France. Grace was in her early forties when she enlisted with the Army Nurse Corps and sailed overseas to do her part. It was there, while working at No. 6 General Hospital, that Grace Parker stumbled upon Archie MacPhee. Her transcribed letter tells the story of their chance encounter.

*A.N.C.U.S.  
No. 6 General Hospital  
B.E.F. France  
June 24, 1918*

*My dear Mrs MacPhee:*

*A few days ago I was sent to a new ward and as I was doing a dressing for a boy, we were talking + laughing about gold growing on trees. I said Oh in Nova Scotia where I come from it does grow in the ground if not on trees + the boy in the next bed said. Why I'm from there. So I reached across and we shook hands over it. It was your son and then he told me what part he was from.*

*I'm with the Americans but working for the B.E.F. and altho I trained in America I'm a Canadian and all our Canadian boys are dear to our hearts. Especially since they are all so far from home. We have just lost three, such splendid boys, (my nephews) so our hearts are a bit sore and we try to make up to others who have none of their own here.*

*So this note is just to let you know I looked after your boy for three days and now he has gone to England to finish getting well.*

*We get many Canadian boys here and there is [they?] are especially kind + gentle. He was getting on nicely and feeling fine so was ready for England. He went in two days so you see I lost him. He laughed over the fact that he would just as soon have staid here, for everyone thinks England the best place in the world when wounded. He was such a nice boy and we talked Nova Scotia several times. When I came on duty the morning he left for England I found a letter he had written you. So I just took the address + said to myself I'll send you a note also. If you are like my sisters whose boys are here, you would be pleased to have a line from someone who has seen your boy and knew he was well on the road to recovery. hand laid on them. We are good to all, but to our own boys, we just want to pick them up and rock them to sleep.*

*Don't bother answering this for it is not meant for that. It is just for one of the many mothers at home.*

*Very sincerely yours*

*Grace O. Parker*

A few details are a tad ambiguous but, on the whole, Grace's letter reads loud and clear. The Canadian boys were in good hands. Nurses were doing their very best to tend to the soldiers "who [had] none of their own" in their hour of need. While healing and comforting those in their care was their primary concern, some nurses, like Grace Parker, were going the extra mile and reaching out to families back home with words of reassurance.

The military nurse's life was certainly not a glorious one. All the training in the world could not have prepared them for what they would encounter while overseas. Working in field hospitals, mobile units, evacuation camps or convalescent hospitals, they treated shrapnel wounds, infections, burns, influenza, emotional trauma, infectious diseases and whatnot. Disinfectants were crude. There were no antibiotics. Exposed to the horrors and dangers of the front, these amazing women operated in working conditions that were both primitive and extreme. Their workload was exhausting and unpleasant but they carried on bravely, looking after waves of men fighting a war that left horrible marks on their bodies, minds and souls.

Archie MacPhee was eventually invalided home to Canada in November of 1918. Gradually, he resumed civilian life on the farm at North Lochaber. In time, he married Edith MacGregor of Upper South River. For some time, he served as postmaster for the area. For years, he participated in community and church affairs. He passed away in 1967. After his death, Edith generously donated a piece of the MacPhee property (located adjacent to the Sylvan Hall grounds) to the local community – a fine example of Edith and Archie's devotion and commitment to the community of Lochaber.

(A brief review of Archie's wartime letters can be found in an earlier edition of the newsletter. [http://www.heritageantigonish.ca/images/pdf/museum/Newsletter/2009/2009\\_11\\_newsletter.pdf](http://www.heritageantigonish.ca/images/pdf/museum/Newsletter/2009/2009_11_newsletter.pdf))

After the war, Grace Parker returned to the United States and became an American citizen. Somewhere between 1930 and 1940, she married attorney Herman Frederick Wells of Massachusetts. In 1940, Grace and Herman were living in Newton, Massachusetts. Herman died in 1966; it's uncertain as to when Grace passed away. Unfortunately, little more is known about Nurse Grace Oswald Parker.

And yet, that letter, tucked away in the Museum archives, tells us so much more about Grace and her fellow nursing sisters. In just four short pages, she reveals her love for Nova Scotia and the boys from home and all those Canadian soldiers fighting overseas. She speaks of losing three boys. It's not clear as to whether she's referring to her own nephews or three other "splendid boys" in the hospital ward; regardless, that loss has made "our hearts a bit sore" and the women seem to have bolstered their efforts to "make it up to" the many boys and men passing through their care.

She concludes her letter with a powerful image of maternal devotion. "We are good to all, but to our own boys, we just want to pick them up and rock them to sleep." The Canadian boys may have been far removed from family and relations but they were, without a doubt, in very good hands.

Best wishes from all of us here at the Museum,

Catherine MacGillivray

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Old editions of our newsletter can be found online at the Antigonish Heritage Museum website. <http://www.heritageantigonish.c>

## Recent Acquisitions



**Hugh Webb** of Antigonish donated an interesting piece to the Museum collection.

The legs and the supports of this small table were the work of Antigonish blacksmith, David Somers (1853-1931) of Somers Road. The table surface is an old sign to which the legs were attached. The sign is quite faded but appears to read something like this: “Ask for . . . elco.” Does it refer to “Delco Oil?” We’re still not certain.

- **Leslie Chisholm of Markham, Ontario**, brought in documents related to the John MacMillan (merchant) business at St. Andrews.
- **Ron McConnell, Antigonish**, donated postcards and photos.
- **Brenda Swinkels of Afton** brought in a series of high school yearbooks and miscellaneous documents.
- **Iain Boyd of Antigonish** brought in some awards presented to Fr. Neil MacKenna of Antigonish by the Antigonish Highland Society Foundation.
- Thank you to **Rita (Hallett) MacGillivray of Antigonish** for a collection of bottles and a sash once worn by staff of the Moonlight Restaurant. Thank you to her sister, **Eleanor Hallett**, for photos of the telephone company staff.
- Thank you to **Bruce MacDonald** for donating a copy of his new book, ***First World War Honour Roll of Guysborough County, Nova Scotia, Volume I: 1915 – 1917***. Copies can be ordered online at Bantry Publishing, <https://www.facebook.com/bantrypublishing>, or purchased at the Museum.

## New Cabinets for the Museum



The Board of Directors recently approved a motion to construct three base cabinet units for exhibits. (*Photo shows one of those cabinets under construction.*) Two of the cases which we currently use will be incorporated into the new display units. One well-worn unit will be used elsewhere in the museum. These units will provide much needed additional display room for collections.

The cost of the three units is expected to be around \$10,000. We have secured a grant from the Province of Nova Scotia in the amount of \$3750. The balance will be funded by the Heritage Association of Antigonish.

The Association has decided that some of our readers may wish to make a donation of \$2000 to cover the cost of each unit in memory of, or in honour of, a family member. The Heritage Association of Antigonish is a registered charity and tax receipts will be provided. Further, a plaque will be placed on the unit acknowledging the donor and to whom it is in memory of. If interested, please call Jocelyn Gillis at 863-6160.

## St. Andrew's Night

St. Andrew's Night celebrations will be held on Sunday, November 29, at 6:00 p.m. at St. Ninian Place. Entertainment will be by Brian MacDonald and Family; Mary Grace will be catering. Tickets are \$25.00 and available at the Antigonish Heritage Museum or from members of the Highland Society executive.

Thank You

**James C. MacIntosh**  
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## Heritage Association of Antigonish

### Christmas Ceilidh

On Sunday, December 6, we're hosting a Christmas Ceilidh featuring musicians Karen Beaton (on the fiddle), Margaret MacDonald (piano and vocals) and Thea Huard (on the harp). This event is scheduled for 2:00 p.m. at the Museum. Admission: \$8.00

### Patrons Program

- **Leo and Cathy MacDonald**, Brierly Brook – Gold Patrons
- **Colin MacLean, Bedford** – Gold Patron

## Memorial Donations

- **In Memory of Martin Anstey (Edmonton and Antigonish)** by Angus MacGillivray.
- **In Memory of Colin MacGillivray (Lower Sackville)** by Angus MacGillivray

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

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

The Association continues to work to make our Museum one of the premiere Museums in Northern Nova Scotia. To that end, the Board for the Association recently approved the cost associated with the construction of three new display units. The newsletter this month has more details on this expenditure.

Recently, as Chair of the Association, I attended a meeting exploring the possibility of constructing a "Ceilidh House" annex to the existing Museum. The Ceilidh House would provide a home for the Antigonish Highland Society, storage place for the Antigonish Highland Games, space for a Gaelic kindergarten, space for the local Highland Dance Association, and space for a number of other organizations such as the Antigonish Highland Society Pipe Band. As Chair of the Heritage Association, I believe that the construction of this annex would have huge benefits for the Museum and the development of the East End. To support this project, the Heritage Association of Antigonish has taken steps to establish a reserve fund to support the construction of this annex.

As we approach the end of 2015, it is hoped that you will include the Heritage Association of Antigonish in your giving plans for this year. Your financial support allows us to do the important work relating to promoting and preserving our shared history.

Please note that financial supporters can earmark their financial support for one of three reserve funds that the Association has established. The Associations three reserve funds are the *Antigonish Heritage Museum Repair Fund*, the *Artefact Acquisition Fund*, and the *Ceilidh House Annex Fund*. The Heritage Association of Antigonish is a registered charity and income 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](mailto:angus.macgillivray@ns.sympatico.ca)

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## **The Clan's Corner**

We're pleased to report that we're reserving a portion of the Museum's newsletter for news from the various clans. Clans are encouraged to take advantage of this space and to submit relevant material.