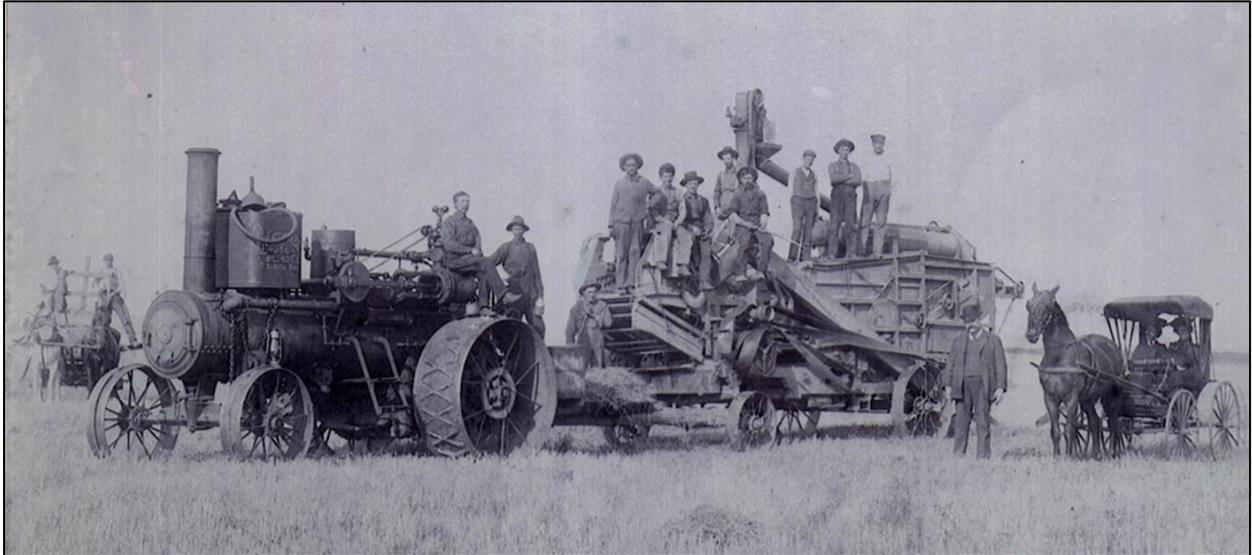




The Old Train Station News



From the mid 1890s to 1928, countless Maritime men travelled the harvest trains each August and September to work on the ever-expanding grain farms in the Canadian Prairie Provinces. Local photographer Betty Cameron's grandfather, Jack Cameron, was one of those men. He is shown here on a wheat thresher in Winnipeg with other local Fairmont men – Billie MacDonald, Willie Cashen and Sandy MacMillan. *(Photo credits: Betty Cameron)*

Recognized for their great work ethic, Maritimers were also remembered for their shenanigans along the way. Local Antigonisher Vincent J. MacDonald wrote about that mayhem and mischief in an article that appeared in *The Scotia Sun* back in 1969.

The Old Harvest Train

Vincent J. MacDonald

"All aboard that's going aboard!" So shouted the conductor of a fifteen-car passenger train at the railroad station in Antigonish at 2:00 p.m. on August 6, 1920. The train was a special headed for Winnipeg and carrying young men from eastern Canada to help the farmers of the prairie provinces harvest their grain crops – and this was quite a task as there were no tractors or combines in those days.

The return fare from Antigonish to Winnipeg was \$12, and for anyone going further west than Winnipeg, it was one cent per mile extra – hardly enough to pay for the damages done to railroad property by the potential harvester.

In order to encourage men to travel westward to the prairie advertisements appeared in many local papers stating that cheap meals would be provided enroute but it turned out that the only thing that was cheap about the meals was the quality. Although the quality was low, the price was high thus causing much dissension among the would-be harvesters who, at times, resorted to many unorthodox means of securing food. In one town in New Brunswick, a food peddler who approached the standing train with a carriage load of edibles and who, no doubt, had visions of making a handsome profit on the sale of his products was quickly relieved of a large portion of his cargo by the hungry harvesters who told him that they would pay him when they were on their way back home as they were short of ready cash at the time.

At Riviere du Loup in Quebec the harvesters were not content with attempting to secure food in an unscrupulous manner; they also added beer to their list of requirements. But when they raided an establishment which illegally dispensed beer, they were met by a hail of bullets fired over their heads which had the effect of causing them to retreat to the safety of their railroad cars. Later, after having crossed the river at Levis and while their train was changing engines, the harvesters under the cover of darkness and without the discouraging sound of gunfire broke open the door of a boxcar which contained many barrels packed with beer bottles. They quickly rolled the barrels out of the car onto the ground and those bottles which did not break were readily transferred to the safety of the upper bunks of the harvest train. Needless to say, there was no problem in obtaining the necessary help to carry out this all important chore.

With such a large quantity of beer secretly stored away, the harvesters were ready to proceed along their way. They did not arise early the next morning but when they did, their appetites seemed to be keener than ever so that at the first train stop where there was a restaurant, the proprietor thereof was quickly introduced to the self service method of dispensing food and other necessities such as cigars, cigarettes, apples, oranges – for that matter, anything that the ambitious harvesters thought they could use. The turnover of those goods was fast but the profit on the transactions was less than nil.

This self-service method of securing food was repeated on many occasions but it was not the only method employed by the now experienced harvesters to relieve their hunger. On the barrens of northern Quebec, there were at this time many acres of land which produced an abundance of blueberries; and when some of the scouts appointed by the harvesters observed an exceptionally good area of blueberries, another appointee would arrange to stop the train by applying the emergency brakes. Then all the harvesters would take off to the blueberry fields and would not return to their train, despite the urging of many whistle blows, until their beer-incited stomachs were well satisfied.

In order to stop the many raids on the places of business, the railroad authorities arranged to have the harvest train disconnected from the engine about a mile from any point where the train was scheduled to stop. This procedure worked successfully for a short time. But the harvesters, responding to their hunger pangs, soon found a solution to this problem by loading the cars with rocks and timber that would be thrown at the windows of the station. Obviously this had only to occur a few times when normal travelling procedure was again followed.

Having solved the food problems and no doubt encouraged by the superb quality of the beer obtained at Levis, Quebec, the harvesters undertook the finding of ways and means of providing

enjoyable pastimes. At one train stop this enjoyment took the form of unhitching a team of horses from a farmer's mowing machine and tying the machine behind the last car of the train. When the train started to move, sparks began to fly from the old Buckeye machine, but after travelling about one hundred yards the sparks died out – all but the spark in the farmer's eyes.

At Kapuskasing, Ontario, which was at the time of the First World War the location of a German prisoner-of-war camp, the harvesters did not have things all their own way. After having looted a restaurant and set fire to several haystacks, a number of natives appeared, well armed with rifles and shotguns. Needless to say, the unarmed harvesters scurried to the shelter of the railroad cars – but not before two men were caught in the hail of fire from the rifles and shotguns which also sprayed the rail road cars with bullets. Luckily, the two men were not severely injured. One had a bullet wound in the calf of his leg and he was dropped off at the first town in which a hospital was located. The other man had been sprayed with duck shot in a part of his anatomy which was not too vulnerable.

Some volunteers carried this man back to the caboose of the train, and after an examination it was decided that the pellets could be removed. But in order to proceed with this delicate operation, it was necessary to have a strong disinfectant and also a sedative to calm the patient. After several consultations, it was agreed that a quantity of moonshine which had been acquired in one of the numerous raids on business establishments would serve both purposes. The patient was informed that he would have to consume about eight ounces of the moonshine before the painstaking task of removing the pellets began. This he did willingly. Then after the elapse of about ten minutes more moonshine was applied to the affected area. Toothpicks dipped in iodine were the only "surgical" instruments available to the volunteers. Even so, after several minutes many pellets had been removed despite the fact that many of the toothpicks broke and despite the fact that the patient was beginning to recover from the effects of the sedative available. This having been done, the volunteers again proceeded to remove the remaining pellets. This was accomplished in about one-half hour, and it was never decided who was more exhausted – the patient or the volunteers. At any rate, after the elapse of about three days the patient was able to sit down as he should. As for the volunteers, the remainder of the moonshine soon solved the problem of their exhaustion.

In many of the towns of northern Ontario, particularly in the towns of O'Brien and Hearst, the windows of stores and restaurants were boarded up by the time the harvest train arrived; and in some places men armed with rifles stood inside those establishments in order to prevent looting.

On the last day of the journey, the harvesters thought that things should look somewhat respectful when the train arrived at Winnipeg. With this goal in mind, several volunteers secured a large number of spruce trees, each about ten feet in length. Those trees were firmly attached to the four corners of each car, which were fifteen in number, so that when the train reached Winnipeg it caused much consternation among the natives who doubtless were not aware of the decorative powers of the wild men from the east.

The trip from Antigonish to Winnipeg took six full days but probably if it were not for the beer and the blueberries, five days would have been sufficient.

Having arrived in Winnipeg, the potential harvesters dispersed. Some stayed to work in Manitoba, others proceeded to Saskatchewan and Alberta. Many were destined to never return to their "native land."

The work in the harvest fields was very difficult, especially for those men not accustomed to that type of work. But the wages paid were good. The hours of labor were long, particularly at threshing

time – generally from 4:30 A.M. to 8:00 P.M., sometimes even later than that if a big snowstorm was threatening. But even though the work was hard and the hours long, as a general rule the men were treated well. The food was the very best, and during the long hours at threshing the men were fed four or five times per day.

After the harvesting and threshing was over, it was a case of every man for himself. Some returned to their homes in the east. Others proceeded to British Columbia and still others to Butte, Montana, which at one time was a second home to the young men of Antigonish County. The writer of this article kept on the move and eventually after eight years landed back at the starting point – the Antigonish railroad station.

Recent Acquisitions

- **Jean MacNeil of Antigonish** brought in a photo album showing Kennedy & McDonald Railway photos from 1910 to 1914.
- **Ralph Kelly, Addington Forks**, donated a scrapbook compiled by his grandmother, Lydia McKenna of Briery Brook. Included in the collection: family information, obituaries from *The Casket*, clippings concerning veterans, and a piece of heather from Scotland sent to Lydia in 1942 by her brother who served overseas.
- **Gerry Whitehead of Antigonish** came in with a photograph of the 1954 Primary School Class taken in front of the Parish Center.
- **Mike Redden of Lakevale** donated a model train that was part of his collection.
- **Elaine Rankin, Antigonish**, donated several items including cups and saucers from the St. Martha's School of Nursing. When Sister Barbara Muldoon invited someone to tea in her private quarters, she always brought out the good dishes.
- **Leo "Boots" Chisholm of Antigonish** brought in an 8mm tape of the Queen Mother's visit to Antigonish in 1967.

Museum Fundraising Raffle

Thanks to the efforts and the generosity of a good Friend of the Museum, we will now be selling tickets on a beautiful homemade quilt. Meticulously pieced and stitched, this "single size" quilt is perfect for snuggling up with on the couch or as a cozy addition to your spare bed.

Tickets are \$2.00 each or 3 for \$5.00.

Tickets go on sale on June 1.





Sprucing Up With the Garden Club

The Antigonish Garden Club, under the leadership of Yvonne Maas of Pleasant Valley, has taken on the task of re-doing our front planters. We can now anticipate seeing some heritage plantings brighten the entrance to the Museum.

Thanks to the generosity and efforts of community groups and individuals for making these significant contributions to our organization.

150th Anniversary of Immaculate Conception Parish, Heatherton

Immaculate Conception Parish, Heatherton, is celebrating its 150th Anniversary in 2017. In preparation for this event, their planning committee is seeking photographs and information concerning the parish. If you can provide either, please contact Jolene Chisholm of the Parish Office at 902-386-2810.

VON Walkathon & Fundraiser

Each year the VON holds a walkathon and fundraiser in support of the sick and elderly. This year's event is scheduled for Saturday, May 28, at 10:00 a.m.

Thank You

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Heritage Association of Antigonish

Patrons Program

- **Jim MacIsaac, Dillon, Montana** – Silver Patron

Memorial Donation

- A donation in memory of **Mary Duffus Hamilton** was made by Angus MacGillivray.

It's Membership Renewal Time!

http://www.heritageantigonish.ca/images/pdf/Membership_application_renewal.pdf

Message from the Chair – Heritage Association of Antigonish

(Working today to preserve yesterday for tomorrow.)

With the assistance of funding from the province's Student Career Skills Development Program, we are pleased to announce that our work will continue on the Memories Project. The hiring committee is in the process of interviewing candidates for this position.

We have also received funding from the federal government's Canada Summer Job program. This assistance will be used to fund a special project relating to St. Anne's Church in Summerside, Antigonish County.

These cost sharing programs provide the additional resources we need to hire students. The work assignments allow students to develop workplace skills and to earn funds to assist with their ongoing education.

I would like to acknowledge and thank the Governments of Nova Scotia and Canada for making financial resources available to support these important programs.

On April 30, 2016 we held the dedication for our new display case at the Museum. At this event, much to my surprise, I was awarded the highest accolade our Association can bestow upon a member. This Life Membership Award is a great honour and I graciously accepted.

Until next, Take Care and God Bless.

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