



# The Old Train Station News

Newsletter # 99

December 2017

My Dear Friends,

Here at the Museum we are preparing for the Christmas festivities and we decorate with a simple but traditional theme. In Antigonish, our historic Christmas traditions were inherited from the mixture of immigrant ancestors from France and the British Isles. Among our most notable decorating traditions are the Christmas tree, the Nativity Scene or crèche, and the Christmas or Advent wreath. I began to muse about the meaning of those traditions and how they are expressed in the lives of our families. We all have memories of Christmas' past and, while they can be happy or sad, they help shape the ways we celebrate today.

Christmas, as a celebration, appears to have begun around 200 AD and coincided with the celebration of the winter solstice – a time to bring light into the world to dispel the darkness. This meaning was easily transposed to the birth of Jesus. One Roman solar feast, *natalis invicti* was celebrated on December 25<sup>th</sup>.



The Evergreen Tree was chosen by the monk, Boniface, for its triangular shape, as a reminder of the trinity, and its changeless colour and long-lasting needles as a symbol of life. However, Martin Luther is credited with having the first Evergreen Christmas Tree. He cut down a small evergreen and set it up in the dining room of his home as a symbol of Christ and decorated the branches with small candles – Christ as the light of the world. In later years, candies, cookies, berries, bread, trinkets and glass ornaments were added. (Remember stringing popcorn and cranberries?) The evergreen tree is a tradition that comes to us from Northern

Europe. The first known Christmas tree in Canada was in Sorel, Quebec in 1781 and was a balsam fir decorated with fruit and white candles. The Christmas Tree was popularized by Queen Victoria in the 1840s and lights did not replace candles until the 1890s.

*Harriet McChesney of Lochaber recalled that the lights came to Afton about 1946 – 48 and she remembered the excitement of seeing the single glowing light in her own home. At Christmas time, candles would be lit on the tree boughs and a bucket of water was kept very close in the event of a fire. Their tree was always kept in the dining room.*

The Casket, in the 1890s reported a Christmas Tree fundraiser by the sisters of St. Bernard's Convent. A large crowd of people took advantage of the festivities. The little children, entertained in the afternoon, were delighted with the pretty things and the good things which the Sisters had procured for them. Over two hundred persons sat down in the course of the evening to the excellent table provided by the ladies of

the town. By the time the doors were closed, the two Christmas trees, one for the boys and another for the girls, had been stripped of their fruit and quite a lot of fancy and useful articles.



The use of evergreen branches has been used, for a very long time, to mark the beginning of Advent. Called the “hanging of the greens”, it is the symbol of everlasting life. In preparation for Advent, a variety of evergreen boughs are collected in Antigonish and made into wreaths, hung on the door or wall, arranged on window boxes or sills, tied to banisters or mantles, and is only limited by the decorator’s imagination. Here, at the Museum, a variety of evergreen boughs are collected, and arrangements are made adding wild rose hips and other natural decorative twigs. The Advent wreath is usually placed on a table and is distinguished by its use of 5 candles, lit to mark the 4 weeks before Christmas when the final candle is lit.



*When I was a child of about three, I accompanied my mother and God-mother to Christmas Mass in Lismore. After Mass, I was brought over to the Crèche and told the story about the Nativity scene that was displayed. That scene stayed with me all my life. After I had my first child, I started looking for a small nativity set but . . . in the end, I made one of Bristol board cut out with an x-acto knife. It served us for several years until I made a set in ceramic class in the mid-seventies. My youngest was three at the time and she made it her job to set it up every year – making sure Jesus was hidden away until Christmas morning. After the birth of her daughter, I wrapped it up and placed it under her tree. There were silent tears that Christmas morning as she unwrapped every piece and set it up on the side table and told her daughter that Jesus doesn’t appear until Christmas morning.*

St. Francis of Assisi is credited with staging the first Nativity Scene in Greccio, Italy in 1223. With the permission of the Pope, he erected a manger with hay and two live animals – an ox and an ass, in a cave. While not mentioned, Joseph, Mary and Jesus were likely a local family used for the play. Over the years, other figures were added from the Gospels or from other cultures. This is a tradition brought to us from Southern Europe.

Christmas is a Christian tradition that is celebrated in many countries and cultures. My oldest daughter and I took a Christmas River Cruise, a few years ago, which allowed us to experience Christian traditions in the Netherlands, Germany, Belgium and France. We saw Christmas trees, Nativity scenes and the use of evergreens in many decorations but each culture used them in markedly different ways. There is no right or wrong way to celebrate the season, but it is our memory experience that adds meaning to how we celebrate, who we celebrate with, where we go, what we do and why it is important to us. We invite you to share your memory experience of Christmas.

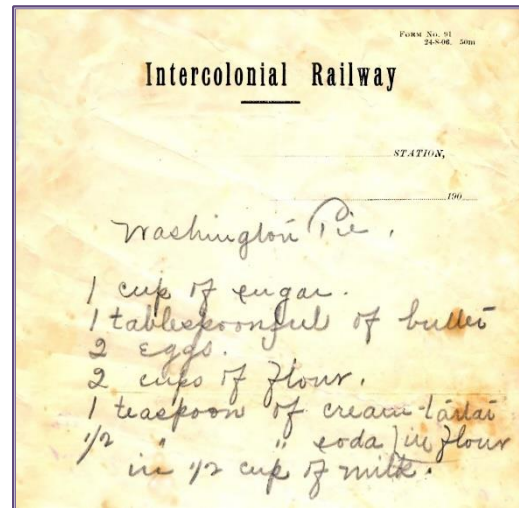


“The Epistolarian”

Christmas Open House – Seasonal Entertainment/Light Refreshments

Do you remember what you found in your Christmas stocking as a child? Treats were often homemade from mother's family recipes, like this Washington Pie recipe from the Tramble family, and gifts were often necessities – pajamas or a book. *Leo Boots Chisholm says a favourite treat at Christmas time was his mother's plum pudding served with lots of sauce!*

An orange was considered a very special treat and who can forget the candy? The pail of hard candy, the ribbon candy, fudge, or perhaps chicken bones. *Hugh Haley tells of a short-lived candy company that was operated by his father. Hugh H. Haley (1908-1987) & Frank Askyou operated the Askme Candy Company for about three years during the 1950s. The business was operated out of the original Haley home, located at Haley Road and Main Street (current site of Tim Hortons). A variety of hard candies were produced including the ever-popular*



*Christmas favourite ribbon candy and sponge toffee.*

Maybe, your local community store brought in some Christmas goodies and gifts and opened at special times for wide-eyed youngsters to dream.



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**Antigonish Response to the Halifax Explosion**

With Marleen Hubley

December 19<sup>th</sup>

12:00 – 1:00pm

People's Place Library



Jean (Chisholm) MacPherson (1914-2007), daughter of John F. and Mary E. (MacGillivray) Chisholm, was born in Marydale. Trained as a nurse, she served in the Navy during WWII. There she met and married Hugh MacPherson and when they returned home to Nova Scotia, they attended Dalhousie University and were the 1<sup>st</sup> married couple to graduate from Law in Canada. They practiced law in Antigonish and Jean was the solicitor for the Antigonish Municipality. Among her many interests, Jean was a long-time friend of the Antigonish Heritage Museum. She is shown here as a child with her favourite doll, made in Germany.

On December 28, 1919, Emma Whidden (b. 1886) wrote home to her family in Antigonish. She and her brother, Albert, were staying at the Laurentide Inn, Grand Mere, Quebec while visiting there over the Christmas holidays. Emma describes their Christmas and wrote that the following days were spent enjoying dancing, tobogganing and other activities. *“It has been a very jolly Christmas here and I think Albert is sort of enjoying it. I’d sort of like to know the way he sizes the place and the people up. He is not a chatterbox, but occasionally, when he does talk you can see that he’s not asleep at all. We were invited to Christmas dinner but as we thought he’d have a jollier time with the young people at the 5am, we left him to have his dinner here. There was a Christmas tree in the morning with a Santa Clause, and gifts for all, then the rest of the day was one of discomfort from so many good things to eat, everyone complaining of “no appetite”, would sit down to the next meal and eat on and on. Albert seemed to enjoy that part of it.”*

**The Heritage Association of Antigonish operates through the generosity of our supporter. As we approach the end of 2017 we hope that you will consider us in your giving plans for 2017. All donations received before December 31, 2017 will be provided with an income tax receipt that you can claim on your 2017 income tax return. Please drop your donation off to the Museum or mail your cheque to the Heritage Association of Antigonish at 20 East Main Street, Antigonish, Nova Scotia, B2G 2E9.**

**We want to know . . . Where was the best sledding hill in Antigonish County?**



**We wish all our friends and supporters all the best wishes for the New Year. May you have health happiness and much joy!**

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