



# The Old Train Station News

Newsletter #21

November 2010

Just before Halloween, I made my Christmas fruitcake. Making fruitcake was never a tradition practiced in my family but it played a significant part in the Christmas preparations of the women in my husband's family. When marriage is the union of two cultures, what is a woman to do? Why, combine cultures, of course! And so, for twenty-some years, I've been making a scrumptious Light Orange Almond Fruitcake which launches my preparations for the Christmas holidays.



Those who uphold this wonderful baking tradition clearly understand the value of an old family recipe. I never knew Ron's mother but his oldest sister, Aileen, was only too happy to share the old family recipes with me – and the stories that made them special. I recall one day, several years ago, when Aileen invited me over for tea. "While we wait for the fruitcakes to bake," she told me on the phone. It was the middle of October and Aileen and her sister, Karen, were whiling away the afternoon while their fruitcakes baked in the oven and steamed in

pots on top of the stove. They had used their great grandmother's fruitcake recipe. This recipe makes a substantial cake and their grandmother, Alice McCarron of North Grant, had always made it as one large rectangular cake but, over the years, it had been divided into several smaller ones. According to family lore, this recipe had been used by their great grandmother, Jessie (Floyd) Grant, and maybe even *her* mother, Janet (MacDonald) Floyd of Springfield. The recipe has clearly withstood the test of time and the fruitcake my sisters-in-law make today is as delicious as it, no doubt, was when Jessie made it in the early 1900s.

That afternoon back in October, I first heard the story of the time when Ron's grandmother had baked this fruitcake for their Aunt Tootsie MacGillivray's wedding cake. Fruitcakes are a traditional Christmas cake but they have often been baked as wedding cakes too, probably because they keep for extended periods of time. Back in the early fifties, Mrs. McCarron was well recognized in the community for her culinary skills and so she had been approached to make the wedding cake. "I remember the women all coming up to Mamma's to taste the fruitcake," Aileen told me recently. The

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cake was approved by the gathering of women and it went on to become the wedding cake that was to be the talk of the community for some years to come.

In Mrs. McCarron's and Mrs. Grant's day, fruitcakes were wrapped in brandy-soaked cheesecloth and placed in a covered crock in a cool dark place – often the cellar. Cut apples and oranges were placed in the crock with the cake to add moisture. Every week or so, the fruit had to be replaced. Women took great care to ensure that their cakes and other baked goods were well preserved *and* well hidden from their sugar-starved children. I don't have that worry. My fruitcake sits, completely undisturbed, in an airtight can in our cold storage room, ripening and waiting for Christmas to come.

I love this time of the year. As the season of Advent dictates, this is a time of waiting, but even more so, it is a time of preparation. The Church dictates spiritual preparation but mothers have always known that just a tad more is expected of them. Happy Christmases don't just miraculously happen; they are the culmination of considerable planning, some secrecy and a quite a bit of hard work. Imagine, then, how difficult it must have been for women in days gone by!

Bernadette Gillis is a woman who experienced Christmases back in a time when things were quite different from what they are today. Those of you who frequent the Antigonish Heritage Museum obviously know this capable little lady. A long-time volunteer at the museum, Bernadette has worn many hats: treasurer, artefact preservation, support, collections and whatnot. From the very beginnings, Bernadette was one of the key people instrumental in getting the museum off the ground. Since that time, she has done considerable work to build the existing collection. Bernadette has a wonderful appreciation of our local history but she also has a keen eye and a special sense for recognizing something special. With her wealth of knowledge, her experience and her creative mind, Bernadette is a valuable asset to the museum. Recently Bernadette agreed to share a few of her childhood Christmas memories with us.

In keeping with our topic of Christmas preparations, Bernadette assured me that, like many women of the day, her mother made a Christmas fruitcake too but, in the McPhee household, this wasn't a big deal because her mother was *always* baking. Bernadette, who grew up in New Glasgow during the Depression, remembers how difficult it was to obtain fruit for the cake back then because no one had money. During the war there was more money, but then it was very difficult to get the fruit. When word got out that a particular store had gotten a shipment of raisins, all the women would head over to get some for their cake. "If you knew someone who worked at the store – well, that was a plus."

Christmases were much, much simpler back then. Folks who had jobs in the city could afford to buy the new decorations that came from Japan. In the country, things were always homemade. For Bernadette's family there wasn't an overabundance of money either but she had a single aunt who worked as a tailoress in a shop in New Glasgow and it was she who bought them new things. In fact, she purchased the first set of lights for their Christmas tree. "I imagine she bought the ornaments as well."

Unlike today, the tree went up on Christmas Eve. One of Bernadette's earliest memories is when the tree still had candles. In those days, it was lit only once. Everyone stood around and admired the tree for a few magical moments and then her father would blow out the candles -- and that was it

until the next year. Still, she fondly remembers the little baskets that her aunt used to make to decorate the tree. Made just a few inches tall, "Auntie" would decorate them with Christmas rope and colored tissue paper. Then filled with hard candy, she would hang them on the Christmas tree for her nieces and nephews. "In my mind, I can still see that little pink basket hanging from a branch."

Decorating the outdoors was unheard of as far as Bernadette can recall. Fir boughs and berries came much later. Inside decorations consisted of the red and green rope that was strung across the ceiling of a room and joined in the center with a red paper bell. In some parts of the county of Antigonish, electricity didn't arrive until the late forties and early fifties and so, of course, there would be no lights on the tree. Back then, Bernadette's husband, Gerry, worked at Sears and MacIntosh where they still sold oil lamps to some of their customers from out in the countryside. Without electric lights for the tree, folks had to be a tad more creative. Strings of popcorn and cranberries were used and so, too, were decorations made from cigarette paper. As long as something glittered, it could go on the tree.

When Bernadette was growing up in New Glasgow, the big excitement was midnight mass and going to see the Baby Jesus in the manger afterwards. Folks travelled to church by horse and sleigh back then. "Sometimes there wasn't room for everyone." Bernadette's family lived near the church and so they always walked. She only remembers one sleigh ride but that wasn't at Christmastime.

Midnight mass was followed by their Christmas meal. What they ate, she simply can't remember but folks in the country often had pork. Bernadette's aunt lived nearby and so she always joined them for dinner. The Christmas Eve meal was a grand affair. Her mother was a wonderful cook and there were always lots of biscuits, bannock and pies. Sometimes they had red and green jello for dessert. Topped with a dot of whipped cream, this sweet dish was very pretty and easy on the children's tummies too. "There were no refrigerators back then so they must have put the dessert outside to gel." After dinner, they sometimes played cards.

Children didn't open their stockings until Christmas day. "Not much was in it but folks did try to get an orange," Bernadette told me. Oranges came only once a year and so they *were* a big deal. Ribbon candy was another special treat and so was the barley candy that came in various shapes. "I don't know if we got all three at one time." There was always something new to wear – a pair of socks or some pajamas. Usually there was a small gift or a book to complete the Christmas gifts.

When Bernadette was about ten years old, she received her first snowsuit. This was a huge deal because she played outside a lot. Now she could go out and tumble and play and build tunnels in the snow without getting wet. The snowsuit consisted of pants and a jacket with a hood. Snow stuck to the suit in little balls and so Bernadette had to be swept off in the porch before she could go back inside.

One year her father made a box for a set of dishes that she owned. She had probably gotten them for Christmas at one time too. Soon after that, the magic of Christmas gradually came to an end. Bernadette was the oldest in the family and it wasn't long before she was expected to help to prepare Christmas for her younger brothers and sisters. What a disappointment it was when she realized that there was no Santa Claus – but then, "there was still Santa for the others in the family."

In time, Bernadette went on to raise a large family of her own, right here in Antigonish. Homemade pies and molasses cookies were big favourites among her children. They never acquired a taste for fruitcake so Bernadette started making a pound cake instead. She continued to put up the tree on Christmas Eve as her own parents had done years before. Yet, can you imagine trying to curtail the excitement generated by nine kids – all waiting for Santa to come? To rein them in a tad, sometimes Bernadette simply had to hide the Christmas catalogue.

Christmas preparations have always created a high level of excitement for children. While mothers were busy squirreling away treats for the holidays, some youngsters were equally intent on raiding that precious stash. Often have I heard my husband tell the story of when he was a youngster and he'd sneak into the cellar through the coal window, climb over the pile of dirty black coal and raid the five-gallon bucket that his mother, Sadie, kept hidden down there. First he'd slice a thin sliver of fruitcake, then he'd pocket a couple of fruitgems and a donut or two, and then he'd climb back up over the pile of coal and back out through the cellar window. This went on all through the holiday season – and he claims he never got caught. Still, he wonders why he got a lump of coal in his stocking for Christmas one year!

Catherine MacGillivray



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## Guest Speaker, Doug Hunter, talks about collecting tools.



There was a wonderful turnout at the Museum on Monday evening for Doug Hunter's talk, Collecting Tools. Dr. Hunter entertained the crowd with stories of how he got into this interesting hobby of collecting old carpenter tools, tales of how he found some of his favourite tools, and a short history of the development of tools. The discussion was followed by a "show and tell" of a large number of planes, levels and rulers that came from Hunter's extensive collection. Here we see Doug as he shares a laugh with Leo MacDonald of Brierly Brook. The plane that Leo is examining is unique in that it has an unusual handle. Interesting, it was once crafted somewhere in Antigonish County.



## Jocelyn's travels to the Netherlands



In November, Jocelyn Gillis took a little time from her busy schedule at the museum to travel to Holland. It was the opportunity of a lifetime. Her niece, Louise, and her husband live in Ede Wageningen where Dave studies at the Life Sciences University. While a visit with Louise was the main reason for her trip overseas, Jocelyn also wanted to visit the Groesbeek Canadian War Cemetery near Nijmegen where her Uncle Jimmy and his cousin, Roddie, lie buried. Both men died during the last weeks of World War Two – within three weeks of each other. With a few prayers and a little Gaelic verse, the girls sprinkled on both graves a little sand from the Gillis family beach at Jamesville, Cape Breton. They toured the grounds and viewed the headstones and their carvings, marvelling at all the Canadian soldiers who lie buried there. (Note the Remembrance Day wreaths still on display.)

It didn't take long for her to realize that the transportation systems in Holland are particularly impressive. Trains and busses were on time, accessible, and fast; but what impressed Jocelyn most were all the bicycles and the folks of all ages riding them. Parking lots were filled with bicycles rather than cars. "You can't help but be impressed!" In Amsterdam they toured the Anne Frank house, a canal and other historic sites and then got swept up in the Sinterklaas (Saint Nicholas) festivities. They travelled the countryside and stopped in the historic cities of Arnhem and Utrecht. In the Noord (North) Brabant district, Jocelyn was struck by the familiar names on business signs – names like van den Heuvel and Overmars. Some of the Dutch who settled in Antigonish came from this area. "There was something familiar about this territory."



While the weather was somewhat disappointing, Jocelyn noted that the Dutch were oblivious of the rain. "I was impressed by how they took the weather in stride." Wrapped in scarves and high boots,

the locals went about their business. Under the awnings in the outdoor markets there were heatlamps and folks would stop to warm themselves and then continue on their way.



Her travels showed that “the land is all agricultural, in some form or other.” Jocelyn saw traditional windmills (including one that was still functioning) and many modern ones too. In Amsterdam, she was fascinated by how the city dwellers left their curtains and drapes wide open. “Folks have nothing to hide.” At night, passersby could look in and observe the goings on inside. “We don’t see that here.” It was in Amsterdam, too, that she saw a most unusual building along one of the canals. When Louise stretched her arms out wide, she could almost touch each side of the building; still, it was four stories tall. The photo on the left was taken in Zwolle, a walled city with a moat and a drawbridge.

“In the markets there was an incredible variety of goods.” In fact, they never ventured near the supermarkets. The local bars had good wine, great cheese, lots of bread and good company. While she simply couldn’t

bring herself to trying the famous raw herring, the chocolate covered cream balls called “Bossche bol” were to die for. What about the little pepernoten associated with the Sinterklaas festivities? Oh, she enjoyed them too.

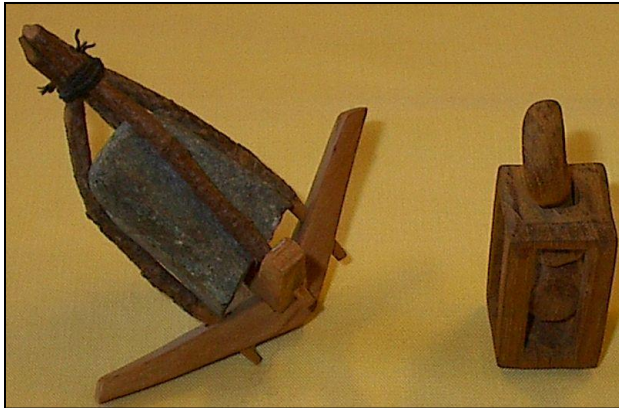
## The Archived Newsletters

The archived newsletters are now available, just in time for Christmas. The March 2009 – July 2010 editions are spiral bound and on sale at the Museum for \$15.00. These bindings will make excellent Christmas gifts. They are easy to wrap, tuck nicely into a Christmas stocking, and are the perfect gift for family and friends who live away.

## Comments from our Readers

- Sister Christy Maria S. H. sent a lovely note to the museum this month: *“Thank you very much for the newsletter . . . I will come to know much about Canada.”* Sister Christy Maria, from India, was a student at the Coady International Institute this year.

## Recent Acquisitions



Barbara MacNeil recently donated a couple of Albert Livingston's handcrafts. Many of you will remember Albert Livingston of Cape George for his wonderful woodcarvings. The object on the left is a miniature model of a killock (killick). What is a killock? It is a small anchor, especially one weighted with a stone. The object on the right is an interlocking three-piece trinket carved out of one piece of wood.

Ron McConnell donated a couple of woodworking tools that many of you will, no doubt, recognize. The object on top is a wooden spokeshave for making staves for barrels. The object on the bottom is a rabbet (rebate) plane. This hand plane was used to cut rebates (grooves) into the edge of a piece of wood.



- Thank you to John David MacIsaac for the 1947 yearbook from St. Martha's School of Nursing.
- In response to the October article on Paddy's Hollow, Mary Beaton brought in some "before and after" photos of the renovations completed by the 4-H Club back in 1982. Thanks!
- The museum received a book, courtesy of Bernard Leingme, entitled *A Journey Just Begun – A History of the Diocese of Nova Scotia and P.E.I., 1710 – 2010*. It was written by Brian Cuthbertson to commemorate the 300<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the first Anglican Service in Nova Scotia at Annapolis Royal, October 10, 1710.
- Thank you to Dr. John B. Stewart for the cruet stand.
- Betty Cameron brought in a photo of Willie Smith who once operated the store at McArras Brook. (The museum has a display case from this store.)

## Reminder

The Antigonish Heritage Museum is hosting a Christmas party on Sunday, November 28<sup>th</sup>, from 2:00 until 4:00 p.m. for all volunteers, donors, and folks interested in the museum and its work. The afternoon will include storytelling, Acadian music and a lovely Christmas tea.

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