



The Old Train Station News

Newsletter #29

July 2011

The museum community was saddened by the death of a long-time volunteer last month. On June 27, 2011, Florence Helm passed away after a brief illness. With her death, the museum has lost a great supporter, a generous contributor, a wonderful storyteller and a dear friend. We will all miss her.

Florence worked with the Heritage Association for about nine years until the Antigonish Heritage Museum became a reality in 1991. "After that, Florence was a fixture at the museum," our curator said recently. "She'd come in for Tuesday afternoon tea and then I would ask her questions." Florence had a sharp mind, a wonderful wit and a wealth of information – even at ninety-two years of age. "We'd sit around and she'd talk about traditions, culture and things that went on in and around the town and county when she was growing up. She'd have stories about so many subjects and she could always tell you just a little bit more about any topic." Florence was every historian's dream come true; she loved the local history, she understood the importance of preserving our heritage and she was more than willing to share her stories and her experiences.



Florence spent her early years at Rear Port Hastings on Cape Breton Island. Her father moved the family to Antigonish in 1922 so that Florence and her siblings could go to school. A stonemason by trade, Hugh MacDougall was employed with the railways doing bridge work – a job that forced him to be away from his young family all week. The schoolhouse was five miles away, their mother had more babies to tend and the children were too young to walk by themselves; as a result, the children had no formal education. In Antigonish, the family settled on a small, fourteen acre, farm at the top of Hawthorne Street. The three oldest MacDougall girls all started school at the same time, even though Florence's oldest sister was now nine years of age. In Antigonish, the girls could safely walk to Mount Saint Bernard School. This move and the daily walks to school left Florence with a cache of stories for her later years.

Life on Hawthorne Street wasn't always easy. Florence's father was an avid horseman but he continued to work away all week and so it was up to Ellen and the children to run the farm. "We all had our chores," I remember Florence saying on one occasion. At the same time, Ellen was a strong woman, quite capable of running the farm and the household while raising her growing family.

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Florence was greatly influenced by her mother; this was clearly evident from the stories that she loved to tell. Ellen, a Fraser from Lower South River, travelled to Boston around the turn of the century to study nursing. "All of the young people were going to the Boston States at that time." Ellen worked there for a number of years until she came home to marry Hugh MacDougall. Like many women of her day, Ellen could turn her hand to all kinds of tasks – gardening, cooking, quilting, sewing, embroidery, rug hooking and knitting – talents that she readily handed on to her many daughters.

Like her mother, Florence left home to study nursing but she did her training in Montreal. There she worked at private duty nursing and there she met her husband, Herman Helm. In time, they came back to Antigonish where they settled at Lower North Grant to raise their family. Florence and Herman had six children.

They say that life is like a deck of cards. We're all dealt a hand and it's up to us to decide what we keep and how we play. The hand that Florence was dealt wasn't an easy one; she lost three young children to cystic fibrosis and then a grown daughter to cancer. In life, as in cards, it's how well you play that counts – and Florence played her cards well. With her positive, but realistic, outlook on life, her caring and generous spirit and her ever-ready smile, she proved to be a wonderful mother, a great nurse, a special neighbour and a valuable member of our community.

Busy raising her own family and nursing at the R. K. MacDonald Nursing Home, Florence still found time to collect for various charity organizations. It was while she was collecting for one cause or another that Florence would stop to visit with her neighbors. Her Scottish upbringing had taught her the importance of hospitality and friendliness.

Proud of her Scottish heritage, Florence joined the Clan MacDougall Society of Antigonish. Gaelic had been her father's first language. A woman with a wonderful memory, Florence could recall relatives coming from Cape Breton to enjoy the Highland Games way back when she was a little girl – back when the games were held at the old Elm Grounds. These relatives would come by train and then, in keeping with the old Highland spirit of hospitality, room would be made available and they would settle in to speak the Gaelic for a few days. At least on one occasion, Florence remembered them playing the bagpipes in the yard of their home on Hawthorne Street.

It was shortly after Florence retired from nursing that she started working with the Heritage Association of Antigonish. Both she and Herman had enjoyed collecting antiques. Apparently they had an extensive bottle collection that specialized in ginger beer bottles. Travelling to auctions and looking for items to add to their various collections had been one of their recreational pastimes. At the same time, Florence had a fine collection of paraphernalia that had been in her family for years. With her appreciation for antiques, it was inevitable that Florence would be interested in helping to establish a museum here in town.

Florence clearly enjoyed her volunteer work at the museum. "It was a labor of love," Jocelyn said while reminiscing about her friend. "She enjoyed coming." She participated in the various projects and events featured at the museum. Sometimes Florence would put her sewing skills to use and simply sew tags onto items. Other times she would utilize her great memory and comb through old



Florence assisting young Katie Gillis with a craft activity in 1997.

photographs and identify buildings, people and events in the community. After some visits, according to fellow volunteer Bernadette Gillis, Florence would return with objects relating to a particular conversation that the ladies had had over tea. “She’d bring in little gems,” said Jocelyn – like the antique Christmas cards and the little Gaelic catechism that had belonged to her father. (Published in the 1870s, this rare little catechism was a question and answer book written by Norman MacDonald, teacher at the Beaver Meadow School in James River.) Many of the items that Florence graciously donated to the museum were sentimental items that she had kept as keepsakes over the years – like the lovely nightdress and the child’s christening gown, both intricately pieced and stitched by her own mother’s hands. Each object had a story to go with it, subsequently increasing the item’s historical value.



Florence with fellow volunteers, Dorothy Thompson and Kathleen MacDonald, at a Black History exhibit in 2001.

Florence understood the need to preserve our local history and our heritage here in Antigonish. Local historian and museum board member, Fraser Dunn, recalls the time when they restored the old graveyard at Lower South River where many of Florence’s ancestors lie buried. Florence was ever so grateful and so proud of the restoration of the Pioneer Cemetery. Fraser chuckles remembering the day that Florence arrived with a relative from California, a great big man in a kilt. Florence was so pleased to show off the newly restored graveyard.

Fraser speaks fondly of Florence who just happened to be his second cousin. “She was quite a lady.” She was also a wonderful storyteller. Fraser remembers how Florence loved to tell the tale of the father of Bishop James MacDonald of Ottawa. The bishop’s father, a piper, always landed at the

MacDougall home on Hawthorne Street during the Highland Games. One particular visit was heralded by a dreadful thunder and lightening storm. While Florence's mother was running around sprinkling everything with holy water to ward off a lightening strike, the piper took a chair, set it out in the yard and sat down to enjoy the show. Then he picked up young Florence and sat her on his lap so that she could enjoy it with him! Interesting, Florence was never afraid of thunder and lightening after that.

In keeping with our efforts to gather the reflections of some of the older members of our community, we have documented a number of Florence's recollections: her memories of going to the fair when it was still at the Elm Grounds, her mother's contribution to the exhibits and her great successes winning the prize for best butter – a barrel of salt from the Windsor Salt Company. Florence was very proud of her mother's accomplishments with needle and thread as well. Not only did she sew the children's clothing, the curtains and the bedding but many of the patterns were her own designs. The same held true for her rug hooking. Florence loved to tell the tale of her father teaching her mother how to turn the heel on a sock. After that, she knit many a pair of socks for the war effort. Of course, women were talented simply out of necessity back then.

The museum is making greater efforts to preserve the oral traditions of storytelling. One only had to listen to Florence to realize the wealth of information that she possessed and the history that we have lost with her passing. A memory that might be appropriate to mention here was the practice of mourning and the tradition of placing a wreath on the door of the home of a deceased member in the community. Even as children, Florence and her sisters would stop after school to pay their respects if a member of a particular household had passed away. According to Florence, you never passed by a house with a memorial wreath on the door.

We are grateful to Florence for her dedication and her contribution to the museum but, more so, we are thankful for the years of friendship. Florence will be sadly missed. "She was part of our lives here at the museum," Jocelyn told me recently. "This was her second home." Florence's association with the museum dates back more than twenty-five years, back to the days when the notion of a museum was still only a dream. "She was a very nice lady," Bernadette added – but I already knew that. I grew up in Florence's neighborhood and I have witnessed, first hand, her hospitality and her graciousness. I always admired her strong, independent spirit, her realistic approach to life and her cheery disposition – and, of course, I loved her stories. We have lost a great lady.

Good bye, Florence.

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Teddy Bear Contest and Picnic

Please note! We are delaying the deadline for submissions to the Teddy Bear Story and the Naming of the Teddy Bear until August 6, 2011. The Teddy Bear Picnic is scheduled for August 27 at 2:00 p.m.

Recent Acquisitions



We'd like to thank **Meaghan Reddy of Montreal** for this wonderful old photograph of her great, great, great grandfather, Captain Dan MacDonald. Captain Dan, pictured here in full Highland regalia, was involved in the Highland Society from its earliest days. In November of 1862, he made his first "notice of motion" to elect a certain W. John McDonald as a member. Determined to extend the society's membership, Captain Dan put other names forward at subsequent meetings. Voted to the "Committee of Management" for the year 1862, he continued in this position for several years – helping to arrange social activities including St. Andrew's Night, the Highland Ball and the Highland Games. Captain Dan played a prominent role during the formative years of the Highland Society: he held the position of Vice President from 1866 – 1869, Treasurer from 1869 – 1870, and Vice President from 1870 until his untimely death in 1872. Captain Dan was an active participant in the Society and his dues appear to have been paid in a timely fashion.

A capable seafarer and a successful businessman, Captain Dan was involved in the shipping trade between Antigonish and Newfoundland. For most of the 19th century, Antigonish County was involved in a profitable business connection with Newfoundland called "the cattle trade" – but it wasn't just cattle that were being shipped. Newfoundland was a market for all kinds of farm animals and produce.

Captain Dan had another significant connection with Newfoundland: on November 23, 1852, he married Margaret Tynan of St. John's. The couple settled on Main Street in Antigonish in the house that is today known as Lee's House. Captain Dan and Margaret had seven children, all of whom moved away from the area.

An interesting postscript to this story: Captain Dan's widow remarried. On April 1, 1876, Margaret married Captain James Forrestall of Auld's Cove. (Who marries on April Fools' Day?) Captain Forrestall died *the following day* when his ship, the schooner *Katie*, went down somewhere between Mulgrave and Halifax while en route to Boston. All sixty-three passengers were lost.

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- **Helen Brown of Bailey's Brook** brought in a framed magazine cover of a photo taken at the Highland Games in the mid to late 1940s.
 - Thank you to **Yvonne Myette of North Grant** for donating a projector screen.

- **Christine Bulmer of Massachusetts** brought in some family information on her grandfather, Duncan Hugh MacKenzie of Malignant Cove.
- **Hugh Webb of Antigonish** donated an assortment of photos featuring the Highland Games and other student parades. The photos dated back to the early 1950s.
- **Laurie Stanley-Blackwell** contributed a helpful book to the teddy bear collection at the museum – *The Teddy Bear Catalog* by Peggy and Alan Bialosky. The book deals with the value, care, repair and lore of old stuffed bears.



Ron McConnell's sisters, Andre and Mary Elizabeth provided this photo of the graduation class of Mount Saint Bernard School, 1948. Posing with the students at the Gilmora Gym are Sister St. Stephen Marie on the left and Mother St. Agatha on the right.

Mary Elizabeth, pictured front center in a white dress made by her aunt, is posing for Grade One graduation. For this occasion, she had been selected, in conjunction with another child, to read off the names of the graduates and to present the diplomas. The boys pictured for the photo are students from Morrison School. These students would come for graduation exercises because they had no facilities to host their own graduation.

The CND sisters, who came to Antigonish in 1883, were instrumental in organizing and supporting education and the arts from their earliest days. The few remaining sisters are leaving the area.

The Genealogy Nook

Siobhan Stout of Michigan is looking for a link between the MacDonnell family from the Frasers Mills area and Frank MacDonnell, sports writer for *The Detroit Times*, 1919 – 1937. Frank was chairman of the Michigan State Athletic Board from 1937 – 1939. Frank (1898 – 1941) was married to Catherine McKeague, a school teacher, and they had a number of children. Anyone with any information can contact the museum.



Other Museums in the Area

Stephanie Ferdinand from the Pomquet Museum stopped by recently to do some research for a project that their organization is working on – an expose of the priests who served and died at Pomquet. The Pomquet Museum is located next to the Sainte Croix Church in the community of Pomquet. They are open Monday to Friday (9:00 to 5:00). The museum can be reached by telephone: 386-2679 or 318-0844.

Antigonish Highland Society Pioneer Caravan

The Antigonish Highland Society is sponsoring a day-long cultural event on August 20, 2011 in the form of a tour of local communities that were founded by Scottish pioneers in the 18th and 19th centuries. At each stop along the way, there will be historical and cultural presentations. Two coach busses will be provided to transport participants in this “pioneer caravan”. Check the following link for more details. <http://www.antigonishhighlandgames.ca/highlandsociety/index-pioneer caravan.htm>

1861 Census

The 1861 Census will be available for your perusal here at the museum by August 1, 2011.

Fabric Sale This Fall

Quilters and crafters will be happy to hear that we are once again the beneficiary of a large quantity of fabric – cottons, blends and what not. To host our fabric sale this fall, we will be looking for volunteers.

Heritage Association of Antigonish

A fact finding survey will be sent out to Heritage Association members in the near future. We value your input and hope that you will co-operate in filling out this survey.

New Members

We'd like to welcome the following new members: **Mary Elizabeth McConnell**, New Hampshire, **Andre McConnell**, Halifax and **Debi Helm**, Antigonish.

Upcoming Guest Speaker

Paul Bennett is our guest speaker for September. Topic: *The Antigonish Consolidators and Their Impact on Nova Scotia Education*. When? September 12, 2011, 7:00 p.m. at the museum.

Message from the Chair – Heritage Association of Antigonish

“Working today to preserve yesterday for tomorrow.”

The Board of Directors for the Heritage Association of Antigonish recently approved several fundraising ideas.

I would like to comment on a one of these ideas and reiterate why fundraising is so importance.

We have adopted a Benefactor Program for the Heritage Association of Antigonish. The Heritage Association of Antigonish will use a sponsorship program with three different levels of support. The levels of support will be as follows:

Silver \$ 100
Gold \$ 250
Platinum \$ 500

Benefactors will become “Friends of the Association”.

The Association will place a Friendship Board in the Antigonish Heritage Museum. The names of all Benefactors and their level of support will be acknowledged yearly.

Since the Heritage Association of Antigonish is a registered charity, an income tax receipt will be provided to all those who become Benefactors.

In accordance with the Heritage Association of Antigonish Bylaws, all Benefactors will be provided with a membership in the Association.

Your financial support through participation in the Benefactor Program or participation in our other fundraising activities is important. Your financial support allows your Association to expand our regular learning events and even undertake larger projects like preserving the reflections of older residents of our community.

In closing, I hope you are enjoying our beautiful summer.

Angus MacGillivray, BBA FCGA

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