



The Old Train Station News

Newsletter #36

February 2012

I'm thrilled to announce that I'm a new aunt – once again. My youngest brother and his wife had a beautiful, brand new, baby girl earlier this month. Elsie Tyla is the caboose of a busy little family of four. The progress of this pregnancy and the excitement brought on by the impending birth made me think about how different their experience was from that of a typical family one hundred, or even seventy-five, years ago.

Young women today proudly display their protruding tummies and freely discuss the progress of their pregnancy and the details of the delivery. Children are well aware of the coming baby long before its arrival. Prospective dads take part in prenatal classes, some gladly and others reluctantly. Pregnant moms are monitored and supported by their partners, families, physicians, midwives and doulas. This is a far cry from our grandparents' and even our parents' experience with pregnancy and childbirth.

Back in Grandma's day, pregnancy was a hidden woman's issue and childbirth was hardly discussed in public. Most rural children were born at home, usually with the help of the local midwife. Women depended on the skills of this woman and looked to female friends and relatives for comfort and help. The midwife's presence must have been ever so reassuring, especially knowing that she had witnessed so many births.

Who were these strong, brave women who helped their expectant daughters, sisters, cousins, neighbours, friends and strangers in their hour of need? The most renowned of these women was, undoubtedly, Jane Pushee. The mother of a large family, she actively ministered to the first settlers of this new county. Celebrated for her kindness and generosity in all matters, she is said to have delivered over a thousand babies. Back then there were no roads and winters were harsh but that did not deter Jane. She simply went about the countryside on snowshoes. During the spring freshet, she is reported to have travelled in a large clothes basket transported by a couple of men. When not delivering babies, Jane devoted her time to helping the poor, the sick and the suffering. Her obituary in 1853 notes that "her memory will long be deeply and gratefully cherished" by those whose births she attended.

For much of our history, birthing was controlled by women and central to this process was the midwife. She supported the expectant mothers, attended the births and then stayed on to cook, clean and do the laundry. Men had little knowledge of the birthing process or of the female anatomy but, with a midwife in almost every community, women were in good hands.

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In the latter part of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century, Katie (MacEachern) MacDonald looked after the needs of the women on Brown's Mountain. Small but mighty, she fearlessly travelled the countryside as far as Marshy Hope and even Pictou Landing to take care of pregnant women. Her means of transportation were horse and wagon, sleigh and, sometimes, train. After the birth, Katie would stay on for a spell to help the new mother back onto her feet. It should be noted that her services in the community were not limited to birthing; she also provided herbal remedies, prepared bodies for burial and assisted with animal care.



At about the same time period, Alma MacLean's grandmother was the midwife here in Maryvale. Alma assures me that Flora brought many of my husband's aunts and uncles into the world. Ron's uncle Aubrey, in California, still remembers his mother sending him and his brother, Ray, to spend the night with Flora when she was an elderly widow living alone "down the Old Road". Of course the young fellows would much rather have been up to some mischief than spend the night with the old lady but that was not to be. The midwife was respected and admired in the community and the boys dutifully went. *(Photo courtesy of Alma MacLean)*

Flora was a MacEachern from Cape George. She moved to the Old Maryvale Road soon after she married Hector MacDonald in January of 1882. Alma, who lives in her grandmother's house, insists that Flora had no special training. She was simply available. When a woman was nearing her due date, Flora would set off to spend some time with the expectant mother. Not only did she help the women in Maryvale but she travelled up to Arisaig and the surrounding areas as well. "She'd go a couple of days early and then stay on afterwards to look after the mother and baby. I recall my mother telling me that she was very particular and clean. That wasn't easy back in those days when there was no heat and no running water." Flora was especially particular about keeping the baby warm and the mother clean. "My mother praised her important work."

Alma's parents were married in 1915. For the first few years the young couple lived with her father's parents, right there in Alma's historic house on the Old Maryvale Road so, of course, Flora helped to bring a couple of her own grandchildren into the world. "My grandmother helped to deliver my older brother, Francis. The doctor came out but she was already busy at work. When he was born, Francis wasn't breathing so Hector took the baby over to the stove where it was nice and warm and there he breathed into the baby's mouth and got him breathing." Flora may not have had training but, as Alma says, "They knew what they were doing. Experience pays off."



A generation on, Sadie Gillis was responsible for many of the births in the Georgeville area. When word came that a baby was coming, Sadie would head out to the home of the expectant mother and assist with the delivery and then the post natal care. She would often be gone for a few days. Family folklore suggests that she delivered one particular baby at a local sawmill where the woman had been working, perhaps as a cook. *(Photo courtesy of*

Irene Brown)

Sadie was a MacKinnon from Lismore. Born in 1899, she is remembered by her family as a “jolly, hard working woman who would never complain.” Typical of the times, she had a large family but she always found time to help others. She, too, prepared bodies for burial and lined the coffins that were made by her husband, Alex.

Folks at Ballantyne’s Cove and Cape George depended on Margaret (Smith) Ballantyne for not only her midwifery services but her medical expertise as well. Born in Skye Glen, Cape Breton, she came to Ballantyne’s Cove to teach but, as fate would have it, she met the man of her dreams and settled down to raise a family. “Tired of having no income, she wrote away for a book on midwifery,” her grand-daughter, Betty Webber, told me – and that was the start of “Namie’s” practice. Doctors were scarce and travel was difficult but Margaret provided medical care to all who were in need.



Dedicated to the health of her community, Margaret is believed to have delivered about two hundred babies between 1875 and 1927. Undaunted by harsh winter conditions, she made every effort to attend to the women in her care. One story is told of her wrapping herself up in a buffalo robe coat and rolling down a hill after a winter storm had made roads impassible. Another story tells of her being called to an emergency delivery when both doctor and nurse were delayed. When the medical team finally arrived, eighty-seven year old Margaret had already delivered the ten pound baby. “Allan Roberts was her last baby,” Betty Webber informed me. *(Photo courtesy of Betty Webber)*

It wasn’t long after that the doctors started coming and then the midwives would simply assist the doctor. The family would often call the midwife first but when the doctor arrived, she would act as his nurse. Did the midwife have any training? “No”, says May Bouchard of Pomquet, “this was just a small village.” Still, May notes that the midwives were “quite good”. After all, “they were used to doing it on their own.”

The doctor had to come from Antigonish. “Those were the horse and buggy days. In the wintertime, the doctor would take the train to Pomquet.” Someone would meet him at the station and then take him to the home of the expectant mother. Sometimes the baby wasn’t ready to come when the doctor arrived. Rather than go back to Antigonish, “the doctor would lie in a bed and wait for the baby to come. He simply couldn’t go home and then come back again.”

May recalls the secrecy associated with pregnancy and childbirth. Eighty or ninety years ago, the doctor would come to the house to assist a delivery but, as far as the children were concerned, “the doctor brought the baby” in the black bag that he carried with him. Childbirth was a hidden thing; even though birthing took place in the home, children were not exposed to labour and delivery. When a woman was expecting, the children were sent to spend some time with an aunt or a relative. May, whose brother was seven years her junior, recalls the three older girls setting off to their grandparents’ house for a visit. “When we came home, there was a beautiful new baby brother!”

Midwives carried out their trade until the first doctor came to town; however, their practice continued for many more years in the small communities across the countryside. Edna Boudreau of East Tracadie recalls “Tory” Pettipas coming to help her with one of her deliveries back in 1950. Dr. Breen had been called from Mulgrave but a snowstorm had kept him away. As late as 1960, Florence Teasdale of Maryvale was assisted by an elderly neighbour with some midwifery experience when she unexpectedly went into labour. Imagine their shock (and excitement) when the old lady delivered not one but two baby boys.

Each of these women played an indispensable role in the life of their community yet, years later, there is little record of their efforts or their expertise. Only Jane Pushee’s obituary makes mention of the fact that she attended births. Margaret Ballantyne had a career that spanned three generations and still her obituary says nothing of the fact that she was a midwife. The same is true for Sadie Gillis. Flora MacDonald’s obituary concludes by acknowledging that she was “a charitable neighbor . . . appreciated so many times by neighbors of the whole countryside . . . remembered [for] her kindness and efficiency . . . [and that] she never refused help where she could give.” There is no mention of the years that she devoted to the health and welfare of the women and babies of her community.

There certainly was little financial reward for the work that these capable women performed. Five dollars was the most that Namie would get for a delivery down at Ballantyne’s Cove and Cape George. In many cases, folks couldn’t afford to pay her at all and that was fine too. It is said that Katie MacEachern was happy with gifts of food and other household items when she delivered babies at Brown’s Mountain, Marshy Hope and Pictou Landing. We know nothing about how the other women were compensated but we do know that most folks had little or no money back then. Still, family stories indicate that these women were always ready to lend a helping hand.

Doctors, hospitals and changing attitudes sounded the death knell for the traditional midwife who was once the only professional hand guiding women through childbirth and babies into the world. These women are gone and soon to be forgotten but only if we neglect to make that special effort to record their footprints on our local landscape. Tell us, who was the midwife in your community?

Catherine MacGillivray

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We had many responses to the article on Lame Angus. It was clearly a favourite. Adrian Van Berkel tells the story of his father heading out to Lame Angus’ looking for a horse shortly after immigrating to Antigonish. His father and a friend set out on bicycles one Sunday afternoon. Angus wasn’t home so they looked the animals over and decided on a particular horse. “You couldn’t catch the horses” so the men concocted a plan. Adrian’s father would climb a spruce tree, his friend would run

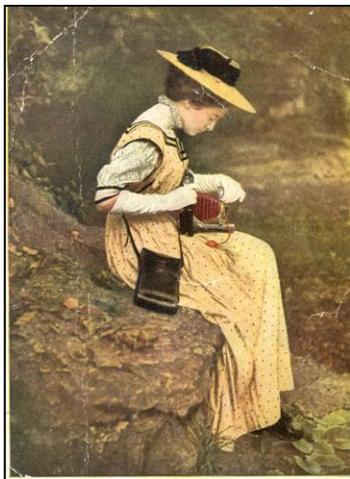
the horses through and his dad would jump down onto the back of the chosen horse. Sure enough, it worked. Imagine the horse's surprise! Off he went with Adrian's dad on his back. Eventually they got a bridle on the horse, left their money in a boot and then set off back to Glen Road – Adrian's father on the horse and his friend on one bike while maneuvering the other all the way home.

Recent Acquisitions



Sandy Chisholm of Dartmouth brought in this neat little piece of local history. This medal, approximately four centimeters by four centimeters, was an award presented to his great grandfather John Charles Chisholm of Beaulieu when, at the age of nineteen, he won the heavy hammer event – probably at a community picnic or “highland” gathering prior to the onset of the Highland Games in 1863. The medal reads, “For Throwing the Heavy Hammer – Sept 1860”.

Sandy also brought in a hockey photo of the Antigonish hockey team along with an invitation and menu from an awards dinner to honor the members of the hockey team in 1982.



Thank you to **Eileen Power** for this decorative promotional card from Copelands Drug Store. This postcard-size card would have been given out to patrons to solicit return business and to promote new business. Copelands Drug Store offered a range of services between the 1880s and the 1930s – including film processing. This picture of the lady adjusting her camera was simply a reminder for patrons to get their film processed at Copelands.

Copelands Drug Store began its operation on Sydney Street in the 1870s. By 1880, a modern store had been built on the site of the recently vacated Jim's Shirt Locker.

- A special thank you to **Ronnie D. D. MacDonald** for donating a binder of notes on the history of the Town of Antigonish.
- **Hugh Webb** brought in a calendar from 1940-41 and a 1952 program for a musical concert at the Parish Centre. A 1950 anniversary brochure from the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Martha showing all of the houses, orphanages, hospitals, nursing and social care programs as well as the many locations of the order.

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The Keppoch Bard

Some of the most celebrated Scottish Gaelic poetry of the nineteenth century was composed, not in Scotland, but right here in Nova Scotia. Next month, The Antigonish Highland Society and St. F. X. would like to celebrate the work of Alexander MacDonald, the Keppoch Bard. Born in Scotland in 1820, he migrated to the Keppoch, in Antigonish County, in 1830. There he

lived and there he became one of the outstanding poets of his generation. Trueman and Laurinda Matheson, who have carefully studied his works, will discuss his legacy. A selection of his songs will be sung. You are invited to the Hall of the Clans, Angus L. Macdonald Library, St. F. X. University, on Friday, March 30, 2012 from 7:00 to 9:00 p.m. This event is free and open to the public. A luncheon will be served.

February Book Draw

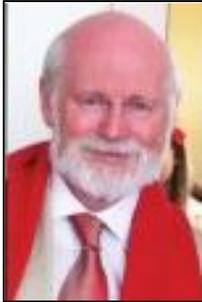
The winner of the February book draw was Kay Chisholm.

Antigonish Heritage Museum Clip Now Available on YouTube

Check it out at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NZMP4faUrl>

Heritage Association of Antigonish

Dr. John Hamilton: Dr. Alexander MacDonald, Pioneer Physician and First President of the Antigonish Highland Society



The evening of February 13th was brutally cold but that didn't deter those who had been looking forward to Dr. John Hamilton's presentation on Dr. Alexander MacDonald, pioneer physician in Antigonish. Dr. Hamilton, our local ophthalmologist, is quite well known in these parts for his love of the local music, culture and history, his fascination with nicknames and his entertaining stories. Little wonder that so many folks braved the elements to attend this Heritage Association event. Dr. Alexander MacDonald was our first medical doctor *and* the first President of the Antigonish Highland Society. Who better to inform us about the old fellow than our local eye doctor who is also the historian for the Antigonish Highland Society?

Dr. Alexander MacDonald was born into a prominent family in Scotland, the youngest son of a youngest son (no money there) and so he went off to university to study for a medical career. He participated in the Napoleonic Wars but a leg injury quickly ended his military career. Hired on as a ship's physician, he set sail for Prince Edward Island. When it became apparent that these new immigrants would never be anything more than just land tenants, the young Presbyterian doctor set sail for Pictou from where he was encouraged to settle in the Arisaig district by a local clergyman. While he stayed in the area little more than a year, it is said that the settlement of Doctor's Brook was named after him.

Hardly able to make a living and still dreaming of a successful career in medicine, he set out for Jamaica where he did, finally, enjoy a successful practice – until he caught yellow fever. This left him so seriously impaired that he actually ate his medical degree! (Can you see why we wouldn't miss Dr. Hamilton's talk?)

In time he recovered and returned to Antigonish, enticed by a piece of property that actually belonged to the Catholic Diocese of Antigonish. (It was years before the diocese finally gave this Presbyterian doctor a clear deed to the property.) He married Charlotte Harrington, one of the Grist Mill Harringtons from down at the East End of Main Street. Dr. Alexander and his wife built a house on what is today Mount Cameron but what was then appropriately called Doctor's Hill. He had an office in the vicinity of today's *5c to \$1.00 Store*. The first and only medical physician in Nova Scotia from about 1820 to the early 1850s, his practice extended from Merigomish to Guysborough.

What services was the doctor able to provide back in those pioneer days? Well, he could set fractures – but not always perfectly – and he could lance abscesses and boils. He would readily amputate but it had to be done quickly because there was no medicine available. If there was something

internally wrong with you, well, too bad. There was nothing that could be done. The local Acadians, because of their friendly relationship with the Mi'kmaq people, learned how to use certain plants for medicinal purposes, like foxglove (digitalis); however, they were not aware of proper dosages and so that could be deadly. It would be some time before the advent of modern medicine.

Dr. Alexander was highly regarded and very well liked but a tad eccentric and notoriously absent minded – possibly because of the yellow fever. The locals enjoyed playing tricks on him, like the time when someone put his saddle on backwards – only to have Dr. Alexander jump on and ride away, totally oblivious to his plight. It seems that he was the butt of a few good pranks.

The MacDonalds were a prominent early family here in Antigonish. The doctor's daughter, Sophia Caroline, was married to one of the Fathers of Confederation – William Alexander Henry. (The Post Office is named after him.) Another daughter, Charlotte Lenora, was married to John Geddy, a Presbyterian minister who was recognized for his missionary work in Samoa. Son Daniel was a lawyer. He served as Attorney General for Nova Scotia. And then there was Dr. Bill – the famous doctor who had studied at Harvard and who eventually became known as “Old Dr. Bill”. Upon his death, his family became known as “the Dead Doctors” while his wife was referred to as “Mrs. Dead Doctor”.

Dr. Bill was instrumental in the founding of the Highland Society in 1861 and Dr. Alexander was given the title of President. Dr. Alexander had always been active in the community picnics which were really, according to Dr. Hamilton, the forerunners of our Highland Games. Each community had a picnic or a ceilidh that would go on for several days. A dance floor would be constructed and there would be games, poetry recitations, fiddling and piping. Fond of all things Scottish, Dr. Alexander and his family were very much a part of this group of Highlanders who wanted to preserve the traditions and language of the Gaels. When the Highland Society was formed in 1861, Dr. Alexander was asked to lead the new society. There is a window in St. James United Church here on Main Street that is dedicated to his memory.

A very special “thank-you” to Dr. Hamilton. Truth be told, I think most of us came out, not so much to learn about Dr. Alexander MacDonald, but to hear Dr. Hamilton speak. He is, after all, a bit of a legend in this area. While he describes himself as a “simple country doctor”, Dr. Hamilton is, in fact, a wealth of local history and an expert on nicknames. Not to disappoint us, he regaled us with the story of John Allan the Trapper who, because of an unfortunate incident, became known as John Allan the Bear – but, of course, that's a story for another day.

Antigonish Heritage Association

We'd like to welcome the following new members:

Yvonne and Francis Maas, Pleasant Valley

Anne Jamieson, Antigonish

Adrian Van Berkel, Ohio, Antigonish County

Upcoming Guest Speaker

On March 12 at 7:00 p.m., **Fraser Dunn** will be speaking about A. S. MacMillan, the war time premier who replaced Angus L. MacDonald. Fraser's talk will focus on all aspects of his business and political life.

Message from the Chair – Heritage Association of Antigonish

(Working today to preserve yesterday for tomorrow.)

In earlier newsletters I wrote about one of our key initiatives for 2012. This initiative includes reaching out to the schools in Antigonish Town and County with the view to getting younger residents involved with our Association. We have written all the principals for the seven schools located in Antigonish County. We are hoping that they will recognize the importance of preserving and sharing our shared heritage and meet with the Association to scope out an action plan that meets everyone needs.

On January 28, 2012, I attended the Antigonish Highland Society's Robert Burns Night. It was an enjoyable evening with music, poetry and an opportunity to meet members of the Antigonish Highland Society.

On March 30, 2012, the Antigonish Highland Society and St. FXU will honour the works of Alasdair Ailein Mhóir, Bard na Ceapaich (Alexander MacDonald, the Keppoch Bard). I would encourage everyone to attend this event.

I was speaking with my father the other evening and he advised me that we have just completed the last day for the "Dog Days of Winter". I have never heard that expression before except as it relates to the Dog Days of Summer. My father advised that it was the coldest part of winter from January 15 to February 15. The next day I completed a search on the Internet using the search engine Google. To my surprise there was no reference to the "Dog Days of Winter".

This brings the undersigned to one of our other initiatives for 2012, one that relates to the preservation of the oral history and tradition of our County. The Project Committee has identified around seventy-five older individuals whom are residents of Antigonish Town and County. The Committee has stratified these names by area of expertise and past experiences. The next steps will include conducting interviews with these individuals and preserving their recollections of history and traditions for our County. This effort will be complimented with the hire of a summer student. Your Association has applied for a grant to assist us financially with this project. Hopefully, our grant request will be successful!

Relating to this project, if any reader knows of a good candidate to interview, please contact Jocelyn Gillis at 863-6160.

Until next, Take Care and God Bless.

Angus MacGillivray, BBA FCGA

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