



# The Old Train Station News



The Nor'easter that blew across Atlantic Canada earlier this month brought to mind the old-fashioned winter storms that are now part and parcel of our local legends. We've all heard an old-timer say, "Ah, but you should've seen the storms we had years ago." Our storm certainly dumped a pile of snow but it wasn't long before the plows were out and about and we were back to travelling the roads as if nothing had happened. It wasn't like that in the good old days.

For years, the streets in town were not plowed. Old photos show sidewalks cleared in front of homes and businesses but the streets piled high with snow. The memoirs of Mary Helen Falt (1906-2001) speak of a primitive snow plow that was made of "three planks in the form of a triangle with the pointed end fastened to a horse's harness and a seat on the cross pieces for the driver." Snow couldn't be plowed too deep because there had to be plenty for sleighs and sleds with flatbeds. This fabulous photo of Main Street, dated late 1930s-1940, clearly illustrates the transportation problems brought on by a severe winter storm but Mary Falt acknowledges that kids could always see the advantages of a good snowstorm. "It was dangerous, but we kids sometimes tied our sleds to the back of the flat beds and hooked a ride." Times have changed but kids haven't.

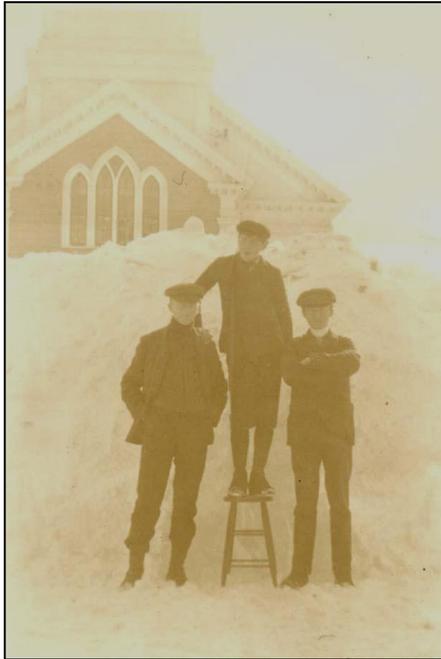
In an article written for *The Casket* many years ago, the late H. M. MacDonald related the once legendary story of a certain Rev. John Campbell, a Presbyterian minister, who attempted to cross Brown's Mountain in the winter of 1844 to serve at Merigomish. Campbell left Antigonish on horseback and thus proceeded towards Pictou County via the Brown's Mountain road rather than the longer route along the shore. It had been a stormy winter and lots of snow covered the ground. The good minister hadn't gone far when the snow began to fall. The winds picked up and soon he found himself in the midst of a blistering snow storm. Before long he was forced to dismount and lead his horse, all the while trampling down the snow as he went. In this manner he proceeded all the rest of that day. Night fell and he was still only half-way to Merigomish but by then so much snow had accumulated that the horse was plunging through the heavy drifts. Completely exhausted, the poor beast got trapped in an enormous drift from which, try as he might, he could not free himself. Leaving his horse buried up to his neck in snow, Rev. Campbell set off in hopes of finding a dwelling up ahead. He plodded on but soon realized the hopelessness of his situation; in desperation, he cried out for help – only to be answered by the bark of a dog. He rushed onward in amazement and then spotted a light that led him to a small hut by the side of the road. He was ushered indoors and provided with food and shelter while a couple of neighbours rushed out to rescue his horse who, by now, was buried up to his head in snow. The following morning, knowing that to proceed on horseback would be utterly impossible, Rev. Campbell borrowed some snowshoes and continued on his way to Merigomish, no worse for the wear.

The old folks were right. There *were* some memorable storms back then. For that matter, there were some unforgettable *winters* back then. The January 5, 1922 edition of *The Casket* describes a particular winter storm as one of the worst storms since 1905. That year (1905) was “the year of the big snow”. In her brief history of Pleasant Valley, Marie MacLellan refers to that same winter as “the year of the heavy snow”. She recalls one resident telling her that the snow hadn't stopped falling for seven days and seven nights. “After the snow had ceased, the men went back to the woods to cut logs. The following spring they returned to the location where they had been cutting the logs to find the stumps of the trees over seven feet high.” Now, that was one pile of snow!

A little research proves that 1905 was, indeed, a severe winter. Plagued by intense cold and fierce gales, folks hunkered down and waited and waited for the inclement weather to subside. Roads were impassable and railway traffic was suspended for days on end. Even the stage lines found it impossible to proceed with their trips. In many places the snow was piled as high as eight feet. Fuel and household provisions were quickly becoming scarce and farmers were running short on hay. A brief lull in the storm sent locals scurrying into town to pick up a few necessities before the storm resumed with a vengeance. The local paper feared that those living far from town would “undergo much hardship”. On February 2, *The Casket* reported: “The storm is certainly the worst of its kind experienced in many years. It will be some days ere travel can be generally resumed.” On February 23, *The Casket* announced that conditions had still not improved. “The Intercolonial Railway has been utterly unable to cope with the storms this winter.” East Tracadie, it seemed, was “the chief point for accidents” in this county. One particular run from town to New Glasgow had taken nearly nineteen hours! The Electric Light Company was out of coal and so the town of Antigonish was without electricity. “The absence of street lights gives the Town a decidedly lonesome appearance in the evenings and emphasizes the difficulties occasioned by the unusual winter.”

Apparently, 1918 was a brutal winter too. An old register at Maryvale includes the following inscription: *1918 – Big Storm: 11, 12, 13, 14 March*. Back then, the local paper reported that it was a record year for “intense cold and fierce storms”. The violent snowstorms wreaked havoc with the trains travelling from Sydney and Halifax and, once again, there was a hay shortage. *The Casket* indicated that

only a small minority of farmers had sufficient hay to tide them over until the next season. Increased transportation charges were adding to the already high cost of hay.



This old photo, taken in front of St. James United Church, is proof that 1922 was a harsh winter as well. Heavy snowfall in late December followed by rain, a blizzard and then another storm brought everything to a halt in early January of that year. *The Casket* reported that snow plows were sent out from Mulgrave and Stellarton to clear the train tracks – but they failed to meet. One got snowed in near Tracadie and the other near “Harbor Bouchie”. Country roads were reported to be impassible. In town, there was little traffic due to the large banks



that filled the streets. “Getting about was a difficult matter, and those who had snowshoes and the skill to use them were much envied by their less fortunate fellow citizens.”

That was the week that a fire broke out in the telephone central in town. The high banks of snow made travel almost impossible but the firemen responded as quickly as possible, bringing the hose to the scene on a toboggan. The blaze was soon extinguished, thanks to “street superintendent MacDonald” who, just hours before, had dug out the snow-covered hydrant at the corner of Main and College Streets.

Mother Nature was exceptionally cruel that month. Twice in early January, *The Casket* reported on a sixteen-year-old girl who had gotten lost on the barrens near her home at Port Felix for two nights and a day while trying to get home for Christmas. Her feet were severely frozen and one hand was frostbitten. She was brought into St. Martha’s Hospital where, a few days later, both of her feet were amputated above the ankles when gangrene set in. These severe winters were part and parcel of our early recorded history. Ray MacLean’s *History of Antigonish* notes that the road over Brown’s Mountain was often covered with six feet of snow in winter. “More than one person has been lost in the snow. And many have had a narrow escape from death in crawling through the snow across the mountain.”

Speaking of terrible winter storms, the museum has a copy of *The Spirit of Service*, a book by a certain Angus Macdonald (1864-1958) from Boston and New York but who was born and raised in Cloverville. (Angus was the brother of “Holy Kate” who ran a little shop in town that specialized in religious items and knick knacks.) In 1884, young Angus left Antigonish County and headed off to the United States in search of employment. He quickly found work with a telephone and telegraph

company in Boston. Those were the early days of telephone communication. Remember, Alexander Graham Bell had only invented the telephone in 1876.



In March of 1888, Angus Macdonald was a twenty-three year old lineman when a severe snowstorm threatened the newly installed long-distance telephone line between Boston and New York City. The storm was said to have been the worst to hit the nation in one hundred years. "It paralyzed the Northeast, piling drifts as high as houses, blocking every highway, knocking out all telegraph and train service, and almost, but not quite, eliminating telephone service." Macdonald's crew and other crews patrolled the lines on snowshoes, repairing downed and broken lines and maintained service throughout the blizzard.

The company recognized the dedication of these men and commissioned an artist to commemorate the occurrence with a painting of a lineman patrolling the lines and it just so happened that Angus Macdonald of Cloverville was chosen as the model for the telephone logo of AT&T. In the early years of long-distance communication, "The Spirit of Service", as this painting came to be known, was used extensively to advertise telephone service. Angus worked with the telephone company for fifty years.

When the weatherman forecasts our next winter storm, remember that today we get fair warning to batten down the hatches. Our ancestors weren't quite so lucky. They had to look to nature and traditional weather lore for clues as to what conditions Mother Nature had in store for them. *Little flakes, big snow; big flakes, little snow. When the chimney smoke descends, our nice weather ends.* But that's a topic for another day. In the meantime, keep warm and keep well.

Catherine MacGillivray

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## A Word from Our Readers

- In response to our winter wedding stories last month, **Cordis MacDonald of Antigonish** tells a delightful tale of a wedding at Giants Lake. While the bride and groom were celebrating their newly minted union with family and friends, some mischievous young fellows in the neighbourhood unbolted all of the screws in the marriage bed of the new couple. Need I say more?

- Regarding the Taylor painting and money pouch featured in our Recent Acquisitions last month, **Hattie Farrell of Windsor, Nova Scotia**, wrote: *James Taylor (1791 – 1869) moved from Guysboro to Taylors Road and married Dorcus Williams (1800 – 1888). He started a grist mill, saw mill and furniture factory. The painting and purse were left in the estate of Howard Cameron, Purl Brook, (Hattie’s father) grandson of Thomas Wentworth Taylor and Margaret. I thought they should remain with some of the family, so I sent them to Jamie Grant.*

## Recent Acquisitions



**Hugh Webb of Antigonish** recently donated a step stool (1880 – 1910) that once belonged to the Intercolonial Railway here in Antigonish. The purpose of this portable stool was so that passengers could step up and onto the train – or, of course, down from the train. This is certainly an interesting piece of our local history!

- **Leo “Boots” Chisholm of Antigonish** donated an assortment of books.
- St. F. X. student **Martin Halle of Ottawa** brought in some papers from a MacDonald family that once lived at Court Street.

## 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Highland Games

To mark the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Antigonish Highland Games, we’d like to share another delightful tidbit of local history this month. **Yvonne Maas of Pleasant Valley** recently brought in a newspaper clipping from *The Casket* that gives us an interesting perspective on the Highland Games. Former Antigonish Chief of Police “Red” Archie MacGillivray was being interviewed at the time of his retirement. He reminisced on the highlights and the lowlights of his position and classed a trip to New Glasgow to help safeguard the visit of the King and Queen in the late 1930s as a real pleasure. As for those most trying days, well, “the Highland Games are without a doubt the worst that could ever be encountered.”



We’d like to thank **Paula Smith of Maryvale** for stripping, cleaning and re-varnishing an old chair that will now be used in the museum resource room. Volunteers are a valuable part of our organization.

## Request

**John Rogers of Heatherton** is looking for information on Rural League hockey here in Antigonish. Anyone with any information (re: founding, teams, players and awards) can contact the museum.

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## Heritage Association of Antigonish

### Bill Wong: *The Chinese Diaspora to Antigonish*



New Glasgow dentist Bill Wong packed a full house on February 11<sup>th</sup> for his presentation on the Chinese diaspora to Canada and ultimately to Antigonish. Not even the inclement weather could keep folks away.

In 1983 a relative gave Dr. Wong a copy of *From China to Canada* – a book that would inspire him to study genealogy, dig up countless records and eventually document his family tree. With a limited grasp of the Chinese language, Bill started researching but this search would prove to be quite challenging what with the Chinese naming system that includes family names, generational names, “milk names” given to infants and courtesy names given to young adults. Wong’s perseverance has left him with a fascinating collection of old documents, wonderful photos and a valuable story to share.

Most of the Chinese who came to Canada were from the Guangdong province in the south of China where turmoil, famine and opium wars were par for the course. Most were starving peasants. Drawn by the gold rush in California and British Columbia in the mid-1800s and the building of the Canadian railway in the 1880s, the Chinese came in search of opportunity despite Canada’s unfriendly reception towards Asians. At the same time, many thousands of workers were brought in for cheap

labour to assist with the building of the railway in British Columbia. Asians were hard workers and willing to work for just a dollar a day – one third the wage of other workers. (Back home they would be working for just ten cents a day.) This practice of hiring Asians spread to the canneries, the logging camps, the lumber mills and the mines. The Chinese would gladly take on jobs that others refused to carry out; however, when the economy improved, Asian workers were no longer wanted. Sometimes the government even shipped them back to China.

Bill Wong spoke of the hefty head tax of \$50 imposed on Chinese immigrants by the Canadian government after the completion of the railway in 1885, in hopes of discouraging more from coming. In 1901, this head tax was increased to \$100. By 1903, a head tax paper cost \$500 – about a two year salary. In order to immigrate, Chinese peasants were often forced to borrow money from family members or look for sponsorship by local merchants. In time they would pay back the borrowed money plus interest. Immigrants had to be prepared to pay the head tax *and* their boat fees for the voyage across.

Bill Wong's father, Gordon, came to Canada in 1919. It took him three years to raise the money to immigrate – and *he* wasn't a peasant. An old photo of Bill's grandmother reveals that she had bound feet, a Chinese symbol of beauty, sexuality, refinement and status. Only female peasants and women of the lower classes did not have their feet bound.

Like most Chinese immigrants, Bill's father came to Canada through British Columbia. From there, the Chinese slowly moved eastward to Ontario and then Atlantic Canada. The steel mill and the coal mines in Cape Breton drew them further eastward. Here it took little money for them to set up a laundry business and they didn't need to speak the language to do this type of work. Lots of work was available; even the miners didn't want to wash their own clothes. Restaurants were another easy business for these Chinese immigrants. When one man established himself, others (usually family members) were summoned to help with the work and gradually small communities were built.

The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1923 put a stop to Chinese immigration for about a quarter of a century. Families were separated for years. Many men had families in China whom they couldn't bring over and so sometimes they might have another family here in Canada. Still, money always had to go back to support their families (and sometimes neighbours) back home.

Chinese immigrants faced many challenges here in Canada but they were a resilient, hard-working lot. Dr. Wong spoke of one uncle who packed up his family and returned back to China in 1932 – with \$30,000. That was a lot of money back then!

Bill Wong's research provided him with bit and pieces of information that tell an interesting story. He found his father listed in a 1923 phonebook as a waiter in a restaurant in Sydney. Gordon's cousin, George, came to Antigonish in 1928 in hopes of establishing a restaurant here. In 1930, Gordon and George went west to marry. Chinese women were scarce but there was a woman available in Chinatown and one in Victoria. Bill's father married one of the women; his cousin, George, married the other. George's new wife, Molly, was the first Chinese woman in Antigonish. Both men raised large families. Gordon's family lived in Antigonish from 1938 to 1943. During this time, Gordon worked for his cousin, George, for a spell but he worked in Sydney for some time too. It wasn't until 1947 that they finally got the right to vote. Gordon became a Canadian citizen in 1952. Bill noted that his parents had differing views on raising their children: one believed that they should assimilate, the other felt that they should hold onto the old ways. Education played a big part in the lives of the children.

It is interesting to note that twenty-seven years before George Wong came to Antigonish, John Charlie Wong and his cousin Kwoon Let Wong were operating a laundry on Sydney Street. That was 1901. John Charlie was a relative of sorts to George and Gordon Wong because, as Dr. Bill Wong noted, all of the Wongs in Nova Scotia are related. A little more than a century later, Chinese people are a familiar and a respected presence in our community.

## Upcoming Guest Speakers

On Monday, April 8, 2013, at 7:00 p.m., **Fraser Dunn** will give a presentation on A. S. MacMillan, the wartime premier who replaced Angus L. MacDonald.

## New Members

**Cindy and Donald Chisholm**, Cloverville and Antigonish

**Leo "Boots" Chisholm**, Antigonish

## Message from the Chair – Heritage Association of Antigonish

(Working today to preserve yesterday for tomorrow.)

February is nearing an end and we're well into the first phase of the renovation project at the Museum. It is looking really sharp. The Old Train Station promises to be a beautiful community asset that we all can be proud of and a place where we can showcase and store our shared heritage.

I was over to my brother's house the other evening. It was his birthday and Regan had just completed a beautiful wooden unit to showcase the names of all the Patrons of the Heritage Association of Antigonish and Museum.

As advised in prior newsletters, there are three levels of financial support: Silver - \$100, Gold - \$200 and Platinum - \$500. We hope to have the unit mounted in the Museum shortly.

The reason for mentioning this is that I wanted to thank Regan publicly for the beautiful final product that is the result of many hours of labour.

The other reason for mentioning this item is that the costs to complete the planned renovations are higher than what we planned. We can overcome this problem by cutting back on our planned work or by attempting to raise some additional dollars. Our preferred choice would be to raise some additional dollars so that we can complete all of the planned work. To that end, if you could make a tax-deductible donation, it would be very much appreciated. Please make your check out to the Heritage Association of Antigonish.

Until next, Take Care and God Bless.

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