



# The Old Train Station News



Every now and again we need to address the importance of provenance. When an article comes in to the museum, we want to know the history of its ownership because that story gives the object its historical value, especially in its relationship to the local community. A yard sale or a flea market find may be a good example of a hand crafted item or whatnot but without documentation that piece remains deficient. It's the story that makes the artifact come alive.

A recent donation of some orange kitchen enamelware is a perfect example of an artifact with provenance. Thanks to Mien Bekkers of Clydesdale, the museum now exhibits some kitchenware that is easily recognized by members of the local Dutch community. (Coincidentally, orange is the national color of the Netherlands.) But it's more than pots and pans that are on display here – this is the story of Dutch immigration following World War II.

Brought over from Holland in January of 1952, this particular set belonged to Mien's mother-in-law, Fredrieka Bekkers of Lanark, but Mien's mother, Petronella van de Wiel, had a set too (one that was green in color). Clearly popular, enamelware came in many shades and most of the original Dutch women in the area brought some over when they came to Canada. (The rims of these pieces were often trimmed in a solid band of color.) Some of these cooking sets included a tea pot, a coffee pot, a bread box, a soap dish, cooking utensils with an accompanying rack, and buckets in various sizes. Enamelware was fairly inexpensive, lightweight, and easy to clean but it was also prone to damage. A nick would quickly expose the metal underneath and cause it to rust.

The Bekkers set has some of these nicks too but, interestingly, it has no markings to indicate

The Antigonish Heritage Museum [antiheritage@parl.ns.ca](mailto:antiheritage@parl.ns.ca) or 902-863-6160

where it was made. Apparently, enamelware was produced throughout Europe. Research reveals that from 1890 to the mid-1900s, European kitchens were well equipped with sets or individual pieces.

One particularly popular piece was the *zand, zeep and soda* set (sand, soap and soda). This tray with its removable cups was meant to be nailed to the wall. Soap was used for everything from dishes to laundry to floors. If a task required extra attention, a little soda was added to the soap. Stubborn stains were scoured with a fine sand that, in Holland, was purchased for that very purpose.



World War II took a heavy toll on Holland. In an attempt to solve its overpopulation and its economic difficulties, the government started to encourage emigration. Families and young couples looking to farm were urged to go to Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Mien's own family's story is typical of the mid-twentieth century Dutch immigrant experience. Her father had made great efforts to purchase a farm in Holland (because he had six sons who *should* farm) but to no avail and so they had no choice but to look elsewhere. "Dad mentioned France but Mom wouldn't go there." She had a brother (as well as a friend from school) in Ontario and so Canada didn't seem so bad.

Emigrants could only take a set amount of money out of the country (one hundred dollars per adult and fifty dollars per child) but they could take as many household goods as they pleased. The van de Wiels took clothing, furniture, beds, a kitchen cupboard and their new pots and pans. They didn't bring the washing machine; instead, they took a galvanized tub, board and brush. Other new things were purchased for the trip as there was no limit to what they could take. "Mother brought some woolen blankets." (Some of these were later sold for extra money.) All was carefully packed in a large wooden crate called a *kist*. That *kist* must have been considerable in size for the family used it as a garage in Beaulieu for a couple of years. "It stood by the water pump," Mien tells me.

When Mien and her siblings first learned that they were going to Canada, it was all very exciting for them. "We were the only ones in the area going to Canada." On the morning of their departure, relatives came to see them off. It was only then that the children realized that they were never coming back – and that was a sad moment.

Mien was eleven years old when she left Holland in April of 1950; in fact, she turned twelve while on the boat. Old enough to remember life in Holland, she reminisces about walking to school with the neighbourhood children and the fun times they had. All the children wore wooden shoes back then. "Sometimes the boys would kick their shoes to a tree and sometimes those shoes would break. Then they would not be too welcome at home." There were ditches everywhere. "Sometimes boys would pole vault over the ditches but they didn't always make it." She had a fun childhood but, really, "Holland wasn't so great after the war."

Mien can still recall a few wartime experiences. On one occasion, two little friends came over to ask if she would like to see three German soldiers who lay dying by the side of the road. "One fellow was asking for water." She also remembers the excitement of planes flying over the house and parachutes raining down on the village. "It was like a bunch of balloons. They were all different colors." The parachutes were, of course, dropping provisions for the soldiers. Some of the neighbours collected stuff with their wheelbarrows but later soldiers came by to collect it. "That was the first time we had gum," Mien chuckles.

“Living on a farm, you always had food,” (even during wartime) but that wasn’t the case for folks in the bigger centers. “In the city, people were hungry.” Often they couldn’t buy food so they would come to the farmers for something to eat. She recalls one man who would come for eggs. He’d take newspaper, tear it into squares, roll the eggs in the paper and tuck them into his hat which would then go back on his head. “He would hide a dozen eggs in his hat and take them back home to the city.” Mien relates how one time her father found a side of bacon in a ditch. “We didn’t know who lost it. The poor person who lost it.” Looking back, wartime was a difficult period.

The children’s time on the boat was great fun. “In Holland we never really went anywhere. Oh, we went to school and to church. Maybe two or three times a year, we went to Mother’s childhood home that was three-quarters of an hour away, but that’s all.” On the boat (it was an English ship) there was a movie theatre, a dining room with tablecloths and lots of food and fruit, and a library. “Life was very nice. We had a good time.”

From a child’s perspective, it would certainly have been quite an adventure but Mien acknowledges that their immigration was a “big undertaking” for her parents. Jan and Petronella van de Wiel had ten children; the oldest was thirteen and the youngest was just six months. At the time, Petronella was still recovering from complications following the birth of her last child so Jan had to oversee the packing and purchase everything for the trip to Canada.

The van de Wiels were sponsored by a family in Ontario. Immigrants had to spend a year on a Canadian farm before they were able to acquire their own farm. Jan was paid \$75 per month for his chores. “We had a separate house and a little bit of land to plant a garden in the summer.” Mien remembers that the children were expected to work too. She helped her mother in the house while her sister, Sisca (who was a year older), worked in the farmer’s house.

Children are fairly adaptable but language was a “huge barrier for our parents, especially Mother.” On top of that, her mother found the Canadian winters extremely long. On the first day of May, her mother discovered a dandelion growing and she was “so happy.” As far as she was concerned, winter was over.

Finally, much to her father’s relief, their year in Ontario was up. They boarded a train and set off for Antigonish. Mien can’t remember how they travelled from the train station out to the St. Andrews area but she does recall how the whole family was put up at the Westenenk’s home for a number of days. “While we were there, Fr. Frank MacIsaac took Father to look at farms.” After a bit, her father decided on a farm at Beauvy. “Mother never did see the farm that they were going to buy. Everything was just loaded onto a truck and we went to Beauvy. It was a long driveway and then the truck stopped in the back yard.” Her mother took one look at the place and said, “I don’t want to live here!”

Mien’s father had settled on an operating farm that already included cows, pigs and chickens. He had paid less than \$3000 for the farm and “he could see that he could work this farm with his family.” Now, if only Mother could be happy with his decision.

The following day, their neighbour, Johnny Alex Chisholm, took Dad to pick up the *kist*, the large wooden crate containing all of their belongings. On the way home, the *kist* would not go under the telephone wires and so Dad decided to climb up on top of the *kist* to hold up the wires so that they could drive underneath.” Somehow, in all the fuss, Dad was knocked off the *kist* and into the ditch where he lay bleeding. He was rushed in to town to the hospital where they tried to keep him for observation – but he simply couldn’t leave his wife and kids alone. Promising to take it easy, he was

released from hospital and returned home to his family and a farm where a bunch of cows, pigs and chickens were waiting to be fed.

What happened next? “I remember it so clearly,” says Mien. The neighbours came and did the barn work for a couple of days while her father recuperated. “What would have happened otherwise?” Mien wonders. “The neighbours were so good. In Holland you didn’t have that hardship. . . . After that, Mom *had* to stay and, slowly, she seemed to settle in.”

Now with Mother back on board, the family settled into a routine on their own farm. As with many of these Dutch immigrants, this new life wasn’t easy at first. Rather than continue their schooling, Mien and her sister, Sisca, (young as they were) went to work in the laundry department at St. F. X. University. “There we lived above the laundry.” When they could, they returned home to the farm on weekends but drives were often hard to come by. “Even as busy as she was, Mother would write us letters.”

Over the years, a connection was maintained with family and friends “back home” through those lightweight sheets of blue stationary airmail letters that neatly folded into an envelope. “I would love to have some of those letters that Mom wrote,” Mein says. “What did she really write? Did she tell them as it was or did she put a positive slant to it?”

In 1960, Mien’s parents took their first trip back to Holland. Much to their surprise, someone offered her father a farm. You can only imagine their reaction. “Why couldn’t this have happened ten years before?” Of course, they were torn between moving and staying put. “In the end, they decided that Canada was okay.” By their second visit, Mien’s parents could see that things were changing too rapidly for them in the old country. “In Canada people lived by their faith. In Holland they didn’t care anymore. But you needed faith here.” Now, “Holland was just a beautiful place to visit.”

Well, we appear to have come full circle but we still want to know how Mien came to own the orange enamelware that was brought over to Canada by Fredrieka Bekkers of Lanark. “Well, we knew the Bekkers family in Holland,” she tells me. “In fact, we went to school together but they were a little older. When the Bekkers decided to emigrate, they wrote back and forth with our family.” Initially, they were destined for St. Josephs but that plan fell through. For six weeks the family was stranded at Pier 21 but then they found a sponsor in Lake Echo and there they stayed for four years. In 1956, the Bekkers bought the farm at Lanark.

Mien and her sister, Sisca, obviously married into the Bekkers family. Mien and Henry lived in Lake Echo for many years but they had a little cottage at Lanark. One day, she spotted the old orange enamelware being carted off to the dump. (That it survived at all is a miracle!) Recognizing the important story that these pieces represented, Mien rescued the lot and put them on display in her own kitchen. Time passed. Recently she decided that the collection really belongs in the museum because that story of Dutch immigration and the contribution of the Dutch to the local agricultural community is a noteworthy chapter in our local history – and so it is.

“*Oma* (Grandmother) Bekkers always said that Canada has been nothing but good to us.” Mien can only agree.

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Catherine MacGillivray



## Recent Acquisitions



We're happy to report that a Mi'kmaq bow has been added to the museum collection. Examining this rare find is Matthew King, a volunteer with the museum over the Christmas holidays.

The bow was generously donated by **Jamie Grant of Guysborough**. Jamie, who is on the Board of Directors of the Court House Museum in Guysborough, is committed to the preservation of heritage in that area.

Jamie reveals that the bow was purchased from a Mi'kmaq man at James River by Hector Grant (1828-1916) for his son, Norman (1870-1952), back in 1876. (It should be noted that the natives had a seasonal encampment in the James River area at that time.)

Norman Grant, who was about six years old when he received the bow, was Jamie Grant's grandfather. At one time, the bow was used as a poker in a fire. It was slightly scorched but, fortunately, it survived.

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The Halifax detachment of the RCMP was left holding many unclaimed artifacts even after a thorough investigation of the infamous Tillman case back in 2012. These items were recently dispersed to museums in the area. We're happy to report our acquisitions from this case.

- A book of the province's laws from 1827-1835. This volume includes legislative business and public works with issues pertaining to Antigonish County.
- *Story of the Great Disaster at Springhill Mines, Nova Scotia, February 21, 1891*
- An old handmade horse bridle
- A 1927 publication on insects of Nova Scotia
- A piece of soapstone illustrated with a puffin
- *Away to Cape Breton*, a travel essay by Gordon Brinely

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Thank you to **Kenny Gallant of Dorchesters Antiques** for his donation of a souvenir milk pitcher in the shape of a dog. It reads "West River, Antigonish, Nova Scotia."

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**Ceilidh at the Museum:** Sunday, February 15, at 2:00 p.m.

**Black History Month:** The launch of Black Heritage Month will take place at the People's Place Library on Friday, January 30, at 11:45 a.m.

**Dowsing Speaker:** Simon Aucoin will speak at the People's Place Library on February 10 at 7:30 p.m.



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## Winter Snow Storms of Long Ago

This clipping from the January 13, 1941 edition of *The Casket* reveals the true grit of some of our local women – but who was Mrs. Alfred MacKinnon of Cross Roads Ohio? We should know more about her!

<p><b>Pioneer Work After the Storm</b></p> <p>From many parts of the country comes word of very bad travelling conditions because of unbroken back roads following the heavy snow of last week. On some routes the rural mails have not been able to run, and off the well-travelled roads traffic has been mostly by foot.</p> <p>Mrs. Alfred MacKinnon, Cross Roads Ohio, was in Antigonish Tuesday, with some produce which she had to ship, to fill an urgent order, and she got in only after carrying out a strenuous road-building plan of her own. To break a trail to the trunk highway at James River looked like too heavy a program, so last Friday she started with her three sons to make a way through the woods to the eastward, aiming at the Ashdale road about three miles away. The snow in the woods was chest high, but the boys shovelled manfully,</p>	<p>and with a good horse to help make trail they had made considerable progress by evening. Rain Saturday held up work, but they went out Sunday afternoon to finish up. By evening they had cut across a sniggine road used by John Dan Cameron in getting out firewood, and after that the going was easier. From Cameron's there was a well-broken road out to the plow-cleared Sherbrooke highway.</p> <p>Mrs. Anita MacDonald at Ohio sent a team to James River station Saturday to bring in mail for the community, but it was a killing trip on the horse. Apart from that venture Mrs. MacKinnon's road seemed to be the only connecting link between Cross Roads and Antigonish the first of this week anyway. Throughout the county there are similar districts where there would be great delay in getting a doctor in, or in bringing a patient to hospital should an emergency arise.</p>
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## 100th Anniversary of World War I

Various projects are taking shape to commemorate this important milestone. For those soldiers from Antigonish Town and County that died during WWI, we are compiling brief biographical sketches. It is hoped that family members may have photos or information on these soldiers that they would be willing to share with the Museum. [antheitage@parl.ns.ca](mailto:antheitage@parl.ns.ca)

Bruce MacDonald has been working on a project to document the stories of Guysborough Veterans, including 131 soldiers who died while serving with the Canadian forces during or shortly after the Great War. If you have photos or information to share, please contact Bruce:

[brucefrancismacdonald@gmail.com](mailto:brucefrancismacdonald@gmail.com)

Blogpost can be reached here: <http://guysboroughgreatwarveterans.blogspot.ca/>

## Heritage Association of Antigonish

### Learning Events

- The Museum will be hosting a **Heritage Day Storytelling** session on February 16 at 2:00 p.m.
- In the spring of 2015, **Zane deNoncourt** will talk about the Latvian immigrants to Antigonish and their contribution to agriculture in this area.
- In June, **Allan Marble** will give a biographical sketch of Dr. J. W. MacDonald.

### Patrons Program

- Gold Patron - Bell Employee Giving Program (Museum volunteer **Irene Brown**)
- Gold Patron – **Bob and Andrea Lynch, Beaverton, Oregon**

## Message from the Chair – Heritage Association of Antigonish

(Working today to preserve yesterday for tomorrow.)

The levee that the Association co-hosted with the Antigonish Highland Society and the Antigonish Heritage Museum Board on the 1st of the month was another huge success with a great turnout.

The Association has made a grant request to help subsidize the salary for a summer student. Once we are advised that we were successful with our request, the job will be posted.

We are currently working on our plans for our learning events for 2015. If you have a subject matter you would like to see covered, please contact Jocelyn at 863-6160.

We look forward to an interesting and productive year.

Until next, Take Care and God Bless.

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