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ACROSS THE ISLAND

Historic 1864 Talks Press Story Is Found

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MY THANKS go this week to Glen MacLaren, New Perth who has kindly loaned me a copy of a Charlottetown newspaper dated September 3, 1864 with the story of the original Confederation conference, the Centennial of which we are celebrating here this year.

There are several interesting things about the story. First of all it confirms a suspicion I have long held that the newspapers of that day would know little about what was going on in the conference. The newspaper Mr. MacLaren loaned me "The Protestant and Evangelical Witness" was owned and edited by David Laird who later edited The Patriot, and it states the sessions were being held behind closed doors and little was known of what was being discussed. Though one of the first paragraphs mentioned that "a legislative or federal union of the provinces" was to be discussed, the story which followed gave no inkling of what progress, if any, was being made.

The story didn't make the front page, but was carried on page three, but W.H. Kesterton, assistant professor of journalism at Carleton University in Ottawa told me this week that it was not unusual for newspapers to carry important stories on inside pages at the time.

STORIES OF the great victories at Trafalgar and Waterloo were carried on inside pages in the London Times, he told me. Apparently everyone read every line of a newspaper in those days, and important news would be read just as surely on page three, for example, as it would on the front page.

The Times did not headline the item, and the story was told with a "long and leisurely preamble" before it got around to telling what happened, Mr. Kesterton said. Modern journalism demands that the punch of a story be carried in the first paragraph. How times have changed.

I'm reproducing the text of the newspaper story of September 1864, and you'll note the charge that nobody in authority greeted the visiting delegates when they arrived at the wharf. But after pouring through several years of old editions, 1883 to 1888, and noting their extreme, almost unlimited political bias, I'm inclined to soft pedal those accusations.

The paper from which I am quoting here was Liberal and a Conservative government was in power - Col. John Hamilton Grey was premier - so nothing but ill could be said about the government, or any of its members. If you had the opportunity of reading as many of these old papers as I have, I am sure you would agree.

Hospitality Developed Later

IF THERE was any basis for the charge of a lack of hospitality, it could probably be charged to the fact that Prince Edward Island was a reluctant party at the conference. The suggestion is that the other Maritime provinces had to come here to get the Islanders to attend, - the original idea was for Maritime union - and of course John A. MacDonald and his Canada delegates came here on their own.

But stories of the conference itself indicated that there was plenty of hospitality, conviviality and gaiety before the delegates departed. Incidentally I have an interesting column to do on the aftermath of the conference, just as soon as I gather one or two additional details.

THE OLD story of September 3, 1864 was as follows:

“The Steamer Heather Belle proceeded to Brule, N.S. on Wednesday morning last and brought over to this city the following gentlemen, delegates from the province of Nova Scotia, to attend the convention to be held in this city forthwith, on the subject of a legislative or Federal union of the provinces: - Hon. Charles Tupper, Hon. W.A. Henry, Adams G. Archibald, Esq, MPP; Hon. James McCully, - Hon. R. B. Dickie, having arrived previously.

“On Wednesday night the following gentlemen, delegates from the province of New Brunswick, arrived in the steamer Prince of Wales, from Shediac: Hon. Messrs Tilley, Johnson, Steeves, Gray and Chandler.

“On Thursday morning the steamer Victoria arrived in this harbour from Canada, having on board the following gentlemen delegates from Canada: - Hon. J. A. McDonald, Attorney-General, Upper Canada; Hon. G. E. Cartier, ditto, Lower Canada; Hon. George Brown, President of the Council; Hon. J. A. Galt, Finance Minister; Hon D’Arcy McGee, Minister of Agriculture; Hon Mr. McDougall, Provincial Secretary; Hon H. Langevin, Solicitor General, Lower Canada; Hon. W. Campbell, Commissioner Crown Lands; Mr. W. H. Lea, Clerk of Executive Council; Mr. H. Bernard, Secretary to Attorney General, Mr. Charles Drinkwater.

“Public Knows Nothing”

“IT WILL be seen that there is the full complement of delegates from the other provinces and we are happy to observe that other distinguished gentlemen from Canada have seized the opportunity of the steamer Victoria’s trip to Charlottetown, to visit our Island.

“We understand that the delegates met in conference for the first time yesterday, their sittings being held in the Council chamber (The old Legislative Council chamber is what we know as the “Confederation chamber” in the Province Building) of the Colonial Building.

“As they sit with closed doors the public knows nothing as regards the order of their proceedings, nor the progress which they have made.

“The delegates move around not a little and appear determined to know something of our city and country, though we have no opportunity of knowing or hearing them. We are proud to learn that they are much pleased with the appearance of our Island and we hope, if a Union of the Colonies is agreed on, the representatives of the whole will meet here annually.

“WE FEAR, however, that the Delegates will leave our shores with no very high idea of the public spirit of the government, or our citizens. The steamers bearing the delegates, were allowed to come to our wharves with just about as much demonstration as if they had been schooners loaded with lumber; in one case, at least, if not more, not a member of the government being on the spot to receive the strangers, or tell them where all the great hotels (the reference here is apparently a slap at a previous government statement as it was on the opposite side of politics to the Protestant and Evangelical Witness, and that was bad in those far off days) are of which we have lately heard so much.

“Surely some of our own delegates at least,” the castigating reference continues, “might have made the effort to meet their brother delegates at the landing place.”

Federal Union Idea Denounced

THERE WAS no editorial comment in the paper from which I have quoted but there was a lengthy letter denouncing solidly the idea of a federal union.

“Our taxes are less than any of the other colonies . . . our public debt is only one-fourth . . . I cannot conceive how we should be in any way advantaged.”

And how about this paragraph:

“I can see how we could be considerable losers. An elected governor; our representatives to the federal parliament; our share of keeping up a vice-regal establishment; the payment of our member or members belonging to the Governor General’s cabinet, who would have to reside at the capital, most likely Montreal, the whole of which would, without any corresponding advantages, entail on the colony an enormous expenditure.”

I am only using a paragraph or so here and there, for the letter is lengthy, but he asks further on:

“The question is can we afford so very expensive a change in our circumstances, can we afford to have our taxation doubled or more probably trebled, and that without the ghost of a chance of being better governed than we are now?

“With the editor of the Examiner (and that was a Conservative paper) I fully believe that as far as P.E. Island is concerned, a ‘Federal Union’ would be to us ‘an expensive absurdity’.

“BUT OUR people are slow and the government slower; the former do, indeed, sometimes wake up to such trifles as a monkey show, or a horse-dance, and allow themselves to be fleeced in four days of 700 pounds, or 1,000 pounds; and the latter very seldom show any activity except on the eve of a general election.”

This, apparently, is a reference to the circus which had been in town a few days previously. Incidentally several newspapers of the time took a dim view of allowing those outfits to come to the province and take away so much of the citizens’ hard earned money, “without leaving anything of value”.

IN RESPONSE to numerous requests, I shall try to write next week’s column on some of the many ghost stories, and other unusual tales of the past which I have gathered from many parts of the province.