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ACROSS THE ISLAND

Past Recalled At Wood Islands

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I had an interesting journey into the past last Friday, courtesy of the retentive memory of Wood Islands' Charlie MacDonald who was a child when Canada was born in 1867, who remembers 22 P.E.I. premiers, starting with Louis Davies, 1876-79, and who was a young lad of seven when this province entered Confederation in 1873.

There are many reasons why I had looked forward to meeting this unusual man whose memory at 95 is clear as a bell, and who heard me easily as I sat across his kitchen from him and plied him with questions for several hours on a quiet, rainy afternoon. I only hope Mrs. MacDonald, the former Clara Anderson of St. Peters, was not completely bored with our marathon conversation.

MR. MacDONALD taught in my home school district of Rose Valley before I was born, and I had often heard my older brother and sister - both are now dead - talk about the man who was their first teacher.

My father, who died when I was five, was one of his trustees and Mr. MacDonald had written me the most interesting letter I received from a constituent, during the four years I spent on Parliament Hill.

There were three teachers in Prince of Wales College when he attended. They were Alexander Anderson, John Caven and Thomas Lepage. There are 39 now, Malcolm MacKenzie, deputy minister of education, told me this week.

EUSTON STREET "was virtually the northern border of Charlottetown" when he first saw the city and "the fine folk" kept cattle which they pastured on the farm of Jim McGill, in the area where McGill Avenue is now.

Mr. MacDonald taught school from 1884-1927. He started in Warren Grove, in the North River area, and ended up in Mount Vernon, formerly Rona, close to his present home. I had not known previously that he was born in Stanchel, on the farm now owned by Edward White who has been living in Charlottetown these past five years.

He qualified for his second class license and accepted a teaching job at Kelly's Cross in midterm next year, when he was studying for his first class papers. "I was the second protestant teacher there", he told me. His father had been the first.

Salary Was \$225, Supplement Zero

THE SALARY at the time was \$225 and "the supplement ran from nothing up." And "it didn't run very high". A supplement of \$25 was big in those days, he told me. He was principal of Kelly's Cross for two years and got no supplement.

His father, James MacDonald, was federal customs inspector and later water commissioner for Charlottetown, before he died in 1911 at the age of 93. That was a

most unusual age for a man at that time. Generally “when a man got to be 65 he sat around waiting for the end.” But 90 is common now, Mr. MacDonald agreed.

Louis Davies, 1876-79, is the first premier he recalls as “a distinguished looking man and a gifted speaker.” Davies later was knighted as he was successively member of parliament, minister of marine and fisheries and chief justice of Canada. An Island historian says he was acting Governor General for two years, although it is hard to understand why he would fill that post for such a long time

Mr. MacDonald recalled “a wild night” at a political meeting in Rustico where Davies taunted Tories Donald Ferguson and William Welsh “to build the tunnel or stop kidding the people of the province.” The tunnel was a real football in those days, my host recalled.

John A. Matheson, 1911-17, “was perhaps the ablest premier and the most determined”, although W.W.Sullivan, 1879-89 “stood as high as any as a statesman.”

“Most amiable premier, and he was a Grit, was John H. Bell, 1919-23, and he was perhaps the most honest”. He was just as fluent as Davies but not so powerful a speaker, Mr. MacDonald recalled.

Walter Jones Is Warmly Praised

WHEN I asked him about Walter Jones, 1943-53, the Wood Islands man said “he was the best man of them all when it came to working for the benefit of P.E.I.” Jones “was an honest man who never got the credit he deserved for getting the Wood Islands-Caribou ferry service”. But Mr. MacDonald thought it had been a mistake to locate the Island terminal at Wood Islands, where sand problems are ever present. White Sands would have been a better location, he suggested.

Incidentally Mr. Jones, who was Senator when he died in 1954, fought for years to have the N.S. terminal placed directly across the Strait. The theory was sound - it would have eliminated that narrow, twisting channel on the approach to Pictou - but Ottawa wouldn't buy the idea. It would cost too much money, they insisted, to blast a harbor out of the solid rock on the Nova Scotia side at the place Jones suggested.

I had the privilege of knowing Senator Jones well during the short time we had together at Ottawa, and I never knew a man so devoted to the idea of doing something useful for his province. He talked to me many times about it and was always planning some useful effort. His sudden death less than a year after his appointment, was a big loss to this province.

A lifelong Conservative - he voted Liberal only once - Mr. MacDonald offered as a Tory Candidate for 4th Queens back in the 1920's. He headed the first ballot but did not have an overall majority, and lost out in the final battle for nomination.

“Brightest Pupil” Is Recalled

LOOKING BACK over a teaching career of more than 40 years, he recalls A.D. MacKenzie of Hartsville as “my brightest pupil”. The young boy came to him at nearby Springton where he taught for five years.

I recall Rev. Dr. A.D. MacKenzie - he became a Presbyterian minister - as the best loved clergyman of my boyhood days. He always stood close to the top. I believe Montague's United Church was his last charge, before ill health forced him into idleness.

Dr. MacKenzie's widow who lives in Charlottetown, is a daughter of the late Hon. W.R. Motherwell, who farmed at Abernethy, Saskatchewan, just outside Regina, and was a minister of agriculture of Saskatchewan and later of Canada.

I questioned Mr. MacDonald closely about my father, for it was good to talk to a man who had known so well the parent who died before I could get to know him. "Was he kind?" I asked seriously, for I know that Presbyterians of that day could sometimes get religious zeal confused with a relentless feeling that was close to cruelty.

"YOUR FATHER was kind", he assured me; and when I still seemed unconvinced, Mr. MacDonald told a personal story of how John A Matheson had treated the young teacher of that day, that left me completely satisfied. The stories I had heard as a boy about my father were true, I felt as I drove away. My old Rose Valley neighbours weren't just trying to be kind.

There's much more to my visit to Wood Islands. There is, for example, the delightful experience I had when I dropped in at a neighbour's house to ask where Mr. MacDonald lived, and stayed two hours for one of the most interesting chats I've had in these hunts for Island tales for "Across the Island" readers. But that story is for a future column, along with other tales and fables, yes and the odd ghost story, I've picked up the past few weeks in trips that have taken me pretty well from one end of the Island to the other.

My thanks go to the many people who have been kind enough to suggest stories, and unusual happenings. I've explored some of them already, and you'll read about them in future weeks. Others I shall look into as the opportunity offers.

Several Errors Are Corrected

I FORGOT it last week, but several errors crept into this column two weeks ago.

Volume of a potential egg market in Newfoundland should have read 27,000 cases weekly, not 127,000 as stated.

And a reference to a young Charlottetown man who was chosen national president of the Young Progressive Conservatives several years ago, should have read Bennett Carr, instead of the way it appeared at the time.

I first saw Mr. Carr perform in a difficult role of "a condemned man" in a provincial drama festival competition some 10 years ago. I believe this will come as a surprise to him, but I was so impressed with the fine performance he gave, that I've been watching his career with interest ever since.