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ACROSS THE ISLAND

Nicholsons Asked To Give Information

By NEIL A. MATHESON

CALLING ALL NICHOLSONS, Calling all Nicholsons, I need your help in locating the Island birthplace of Neil Nicholson who was an engineer in Seattle, before he was called by a Mission above the Arctic Circle in Alaska to do a job many American engineers said just could not be done.

Neil Nicholson moved a mission hospital built of logs, and did it "without a log displaced, or even a broken window."

This unusual story is found in a book "Dr. Hap" by his widow Clara Heintz Burke, as told to one Adele Commandini. The book insists Neil Nicholson came from Prince Edward Island, though there is no clue to the part of the Island where he was born.

If anyone is interested "Dr. Hap" was Dr. Grafton Burke who completed his internship in New York and dedicated his life to the work of a Medical Missionary.

The log building which was the mission hospital was dangerously exposed near the shore where it was taking a cruel pounding from spring freshets and floods.

'Look Up Neil Nicholson'

THE MISSION showed plans of the building to numerous engineers in the United States – they included the best men from Princeton and Harvard. The Mission group was almost in despair, when a wire from Bishop Rowe in Vancouver said tersely "Look up Neil Nicholson in Seattle about moving hospital".

Nicholson apparently was not a professionally trained engineer as the following paragraphs indicate.

"The Seattle engineer came to our hotel and we steeled ourselves for another disappointment. As Mr. Nicholson studied the blueprints, we studied the man. The other engineers we had interviewed had been distinguished looking men, well-spoken, well-dressed.

"The man who sat at the desk in our hotel room was a big, horny-handed, roughly dressed man in his middle forties. (The book, "Dr. Hap" was published in 1961) who spoke the jargon of the sand hogs. Yet we had heard that this untutored man had solved what had been thought to be impossible engineering problems for the City of Seattle.

He Was 'Kindly, Reassuring'

"HIS HOMELY PRESENCE did not overawe us as had the rather supercilious authority of other experts. There was a kindly, reassuring quality about him that renewed our hopes. But the long, slow minutes he spent poring over the blueprints seemed like centuries to mission personnel.

"He turned now and then to ask a question and then went back to the blueprints. He took a handful of small blocks from his pocket and began to manipulate them on the

desk.” Neil Nicholson, we later learned, knew nothing of formal mathematics. It was by means of these little blocks which he had contrived himself that he was able to calculate the most complicated engineering problems and reach an accurate solution.

“At last Mr. Nicholson turned to us and said quietly that he could move our hospital, and do it at our price. I almost burst into tears and I saw Hap’s blue eyes fill, as we looked at each other, overcome by the shock of belief.”

The woman speaking above was Clara Burke and “Dr. Hap” was her husband, Dr. Grafton Burke, in charge of the mission.

Nicholson would move the hospital that summer. It would take five weeks in all. When Clara and Hap returned with the happy news that the hospital could be moved and thus saved from threatened destruction by inroads from the sea, there was “general rejoicing” as the community awaited the arrival of “the wizard who could accomplish the impossible” – well, the best engineers in the country has said it couldn’t be done.

Nicholson told the Burkes “If you can arrange to deposit one-half the amount (agreed on) to cover initial costs, you can pay the balance when the job is done.”

A Wild Desire

MRS. BURKE said: “I had a wild impulse to fling my arms around Neil Nicholson’s neck and kiss him. When I told this to Hap in the elated hours that followed, her husband told her “You should have done it.”

You can readily understand that interest in the project of saving the Mission hospital building, by moving it safely from the ravages of the sea, was widespread.

Awaiting the return of Neil Nicholson with the men and equipment he would need to move the building, the over-elated people at the settlement, the Burkes among them, “to keep ourselves from being overly optimistic, would remind each other that the building might still collapse as the ‘experts’ had feared”.

Huge Crowd Cheers Loudly

ALL THIS had taken place in winter but the community was agog with enthusiastic expectation when Neil Nicholson arrived in July, with two key men he brought with him. The arrivals were loudly cheered by a huge crowd at the boat landing.

After carefully surveying the possible sites, Nicholson selected an elevated site on the shore of the lake 500 yards north of the hospital’s present location.

“The moving operation consisted of an elaborate system of jacks, pulleys, logs, cribbing and rollers, with a small but powerful Fordson engine to pull the building along its carefully prepared track.”

Large crowds gathered each day to watch the progress of the work and what amazed most of them was that the hospital itself “was able to function with a minimum of inconvenience to the staff and no discomfort to the patients, thanks to Neil Nicholson’s ingenuity and consideration”.

THE MOVE took five weeks and the suspense was all but unbearable. Old Crookedshanks – an Indian personage – shook his head and predicted daily that the building would collapse the following day. But he was thoroughly discredited as a prophet when, at the end of the sixth week, not only the building, but the glass solarium

that had been built as a memorial, stood on the new foundation without a log displaced or a window broken.

“What was more, the hospital had now a concrete reservoir which held 100,000 gallons of water, an electric pump to fill it, and septic tanks to disinfect the sewage – all of it included in the cost of moving.”

Angels In Many Guises

Continuing, Mrs. Burke writes:

“Hap and I agree that angels come in various guises and sizes when they are most needed. Their wings may be hidden by the bulky muscle of a Neil Nicholson, or by the schoolmarm exterior of a Winifred Dalziel (another mission personality), but they are angels without a doubt and miracles are their specialty.”

Neil Nicholson decided to remain at Fort Yukon, and the book “Dr. Hap” notes “This extraordinary man had been an orphan child who had struggled up from the potato fields of Prince Edward Island to the top of the engineering profession, without family guidance and with no formal education.”

I hope some reader will be able to identify this unusual man as a native of some of the Island’s Scottish community. I would appreciate hearing from you.