

# FEATURE

# ARTICLES

## OF MEN AND MICE

Now that the fall is upon us, the annual migration is in full swing. I am not referring to the migration of birds but rather the "migration" of mice. Having spent the summer months in a field or forest, many mice are now seeking food and shelter for the winter months in our houses and barns. Living in an old farm house, I have cohabited with mice of various descriptions. But the experience I have had and am having with mice is nothing compared with the confrontation Islanders in the fall of 1738 experienced.

An insight to what occurred in the fall of 1738 can be gained from excerpts of John Caven's article "A Plague of Mice". This article appeared in The Prince Edward Island Magazine volume 6, No.1, August 1899.

"For ten years the mice had confined themselves to their forest haunts, multiplying in their abodes with their wonted prolificacy. In the summer of 1738, however, the enormously increased population had exhausted in all their vicinities the means of subsistence. The manner in which these famished creatures swarmed from the woods and rushed upon the cultivated lands resembled more the action of some savage tribe carrying out some preconcerted scheme of vengeance, than the doings of irrational animals. Every field of grain from Three Rivers (Georgetown) to Malpeque, was made desolate by their ravages, and the settlers all of a sudden found themselves face to face with starvation. Animated with a spirit of destruction keener than they had ever been known to exhibit in former inroads, these invaders when the cultivated fields were laid waste swarmed down upon the grassy flats that lay along the estuaries and after devouring the

food of the cattle, as they had devoured the food of man, hurried onward, as was their wont over the protecting dykes in search of further spoliation and so found a watery grave. So numerous were these destroyers, that vessels sailing along the Island shores, encountered, more especially off the mouths of large inlets, huge masses of drowned mice."

The actual assault of these "four-footed reapers" must have been awesome indeed. ".... the march in quest for food was conducted in a long narrow column which, turning aside for no obstacle, went onward in a direct line, until the cultivated field was reached. The column of march then became a line of attack, and in an incredibly short time energetic voracity converted rich harvest fields into barren wastes. This accomplished, the marauders resumed their route in quest of fresh pastures. Should a river, or the sea itself, cross the line of march, the intrepid leaders plunged confidently in, followed by their devoted adherents who fought to the death with the waves and currents. This in the early days of settlement was the usual termination of such incursions."

The settlers used many devices to reduce the mice population. The most effective device involved destruction of their habitat by ploughing fields and clearing woodlands. The descendants of the mice in the 1738 invasion are with us today "but the damage they cause is trifling compared with the havoc inflicted by their ancestors."

The conflict between men and mice has been on-going since early times. Not only has it been a long fight, but it has been one of the few fights in which man has not been able to wipe out his opponent before the third round.