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ACROSS THE ISLAND

Alton Burke Recalls Big Halifax Explosion

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AN INTERESTING letter from a former Southport man, Alton H. Burke, has some interesting stories about the Halifax explosion which I want to pass on to readers of this column. The story carried here several months ago from A. H. Mutch, Earnscliffe, caused Mr. Burke to go back in memory and he was good enough to put some of his recollections on paper for me.

As Mr. Mutch told me, Captain James Bayer of Charlottetown was in charge of Fort Ives on McNabb's Island but Alton Burke was a lieutenant in the Prince Edward Island heavy battery, Canadian Artillery, which manned the fort guns.

On December 5, 1917 – the explosion was on December 6 – Captain Bayer and Lieutenant Ken Richards went to Halifax on leave. They were due back on the morning of December 6, but the explosion – it happened at 9:00 a.m. – evidently knocked all notion of coming back out of their heads and they didn't show up until the 4:00 p.m. trip of the ferry."

AND HERE'S an interesting sidelight. The ferry was operated by the father and brother of the Bill Lynch who owns the midway that is familiar to exhibition visitors here.

Capt. Bayer brought back orders that nobody was to leave the fort that day and Lieut. Burke was terribly worried about his wife – they had an apartment in Dartmouth – as he had not heard from her all day. To make matters worse none of the officers, NCO's and men in the fort had any idea just what had caused the explosion and it would be natural that many weird ideas were conjured up, some of them most fearsome.

However Capt. Bayer dispelled Lieut. Burke's fears when he told him that Mrs. Burke had come over to Halifax and looked them up. Also her sister-in law Mrs. Jack Hubley. Mrs. Hubley's baby was cut on the cheek by flying glass while lying in its crib and Mrs. Bayer got some glass in her eye, which a surgeon later removed without it causing serious damage.

Nobody Knew What Happened

MR. BURKE recalls that uncertainty was general in the area:

"All that day those of us on duty wondered what happened as all communications were down and even Col. C. L. MacKay who was in charge of fire control on the opposite side of the harbor could not find out. It wasn't until evening that the truth was learned."

But through the day, Mr. Burke writes, "we could see fires springing up all over the city. . . the great cloud of gas thrown up by the explosion was especially noticeable . . . some estimates said that it reached a height of two miles. (See picture of the cloud on page 2).

The Mrs. Hubley referred to was the wife of Capt. J. H. Hubley who was then operating a mine sweeper out of Halifax and later rose to be Master of one of the Lady Boats for the Canadian National Steamships. He is now living in Shediac, is 81 years of age and is healthy, active and alert. Mrs. Burke who died some years ago was Capt. Hubley's sister.

IN CASE younger readers do not know the explosion story, the munitions ship Mont Blanc, loaded with TNT, collided with the Imo in the entrance to Bedford Basin on December 6, 1917, and the explosion shattered the city. There were grave fears at the time that the Germans were somehow responsible, for it was during the First Great War.

An estimated 1,672 people were killed instantly and many thousands were injured, some of them fatally. Damage was estimated at "many millions of dollars". Indeed it is still difficult to imagine how the two ships could collide in broad daylight.

One of the Mont Blanc's guns – it was somewhat larger than a 12-pounder - was found in a swamp back of Dartmouth, and a large anchor was found in the North West Arm. All that remained of the gun was the barrel. "Another chap and I went out to see it where it was wedged between a couple of big rocks, with the breech end down, and it had been twisted by the explosion. Next day a Halifax newspaper story said 'a couple of hoodlums' had tried to steal it. The authorities took it out of there and then left it lying in a gangway where anybody could steal it". But who would want to steal a twisted, useless gun barrel?

The whole city was ordered evacuated at one stage as it was feared the huge ammunition and explosives magazine might blow up as fires crept ever closer to it. Some people did actually leave, Mr. Burke recalls.

To make matters worse the following day a blizzard covered everything with several inches of snow, making rescue operations most difficult.

Large Beef Animals Recalled

LEO BLAKE dropped in recently to tell me something about the tremendously large beef animals Blake Brothers used to handle here. The brothers were Maurice who was Leo's father, and Patrick who was his uncle.

Old newspaper clippings tell the story in convincing terms "It is a pleasure to see the magnificent beef and lamb produced by this firm" said one story. "Cattle have been fed on the Blake farm weighing as much as 2600 pounds, and it is not an uncommon thing to kill beef animals weighing 2,000 pounds," one note added.

Another item said Blake Brothers weighed on the city scales a pure bred polled Angus cow that weighed 2,000 pounds.

"This animal was purchased from Hon. John Richards at the exhibition in September and she was one of his great herd and won wherever she was shown."

"Her triumphs included champion Angus cow at the Canadian National Exhibition, Toronto, also at Ottawa, Saint John and Halifax". "Undoubtedly", the press of that day observed, "this is the fattest animal ever seen in Charlottetown and is probably the fattest in Canada today." She had weighed 1665 pounds when the brothers purchased her and they put the extra 335 pounds on her, apparently, by stall feeding. Fat was desirable in those days, the fatter the better.

The really big animals fed by the Blakes – one of their farms was the property now known as the Experimental Farm – were Shorthorns and these animals were big, roomy animals then with lots of scale.

The smaller Shorthorns were developed later and a veteran beef cattle man, Harry Carter, Aulac, N. B. told me the trend was started when ice boxes and refrigerators came into general use. The larger cuts were too big for the refrigeration space and the housewife wanted small cuts, it was said. Now the trend is away from the small beefers to larger animals. How far this trend will go remains to be seen.

BLAKE BROTHERS produced and fed good beef cattle. They also bought them in other provinces. A Toronto paper said at the time that “the best load of beef animals that has left Toronto in several months went to Blake Brothers in Charlottetown. There were 10 steers and 10 cows with the steers weighing 1400 pounds each.”

Steers were fed for four to five years then. Now they are often sold as baby beef, often under one year, rarely more than two.

By-Line Was In Error

A STORY on page 12 of Monday's Guardian carried my by-line in error. It told of people who went from my old home country of Rose Valley, and the neighboring district of Hartsville, to the mines in Leadville, among other things. That's probably what made some of my colleagues on the paper think I had written it, and caused them to put my name over the top of the story. I found a few days later that it was written by Frank MacArthur whose uncle by marriage, Hector MacDonald, was one of those mentioned.

Hector, incidentally, was a son of the man I always knew as “The Tanner” when I was a boy. He and Mrs. MacDonald kept the last post office in Rose Valley before the rural route – it is Bradalbane RR4 – went through the area, and that must be close to 50 years ago.

I have room, I hope, to extend best wishes to everyone for a Happy New Year, or at least as happy a year as is humanly possible. And thanks again to the countless number of people who have given me tips on where I could go for good column items. It is your unfailing interest and your splendid cooperation that enables me to keep “Across the Island” interesting.