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ACROSS THE ISLAND

Stories Recall 1917 Explosion

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Provincial - Farm Editor

A. H. Mutch of Cherry Valley has some unusual souvenirs and stories from the explosion which shattered Halifax on December 6, 1917, back in the days of the First Great War, 1914-1918.

Then in the army, stationed in Halifax, the genial farmer and beef cattle breeder recalls "I was one and one-half miles away from the scene of the actual explosion, but I thought a shell had dropped right behind me. The concussion was so heavy, you would wonder why you weren't killed."

The munitions ship Mont Blanc was loaded with high explosives and she blew up with devastating effect on the city, when she collided with another ship, the Imo, in the harbor.

Mr. Mutch has a piece of the Mont Blanc he picked up on the street several miles away. He also has a piece of a Halifax fire engine - it was new at the time - that was blown to bits and scattered all over the city.

He remembers, after 47 years, the orders of an excited officer who shouted "Get under cover boys, look out for flying stones."

"Windows came in, doors came down and a stove pipe fell" but the gun crew "was ready for action not two minutes later."

Security Scare Yarn Is Unusual

Mr. Mutch has a fund of stories of the event, but I picked this. Jimmy Bayer was a captain in the heavy artillery, but he was also a professional photographer - he operated a studio in the building now owned and operated by Cleve Craswell on Great George Street.

There was a grave suspicion that the enemy somehow had a hand in the explosion which shattered the city, then as now one of the key ports of the British Empire, as it was known at the time. So security was tightened to an unusual degree. To make the problem more difficult, many of the top security people had been killed or otherwise put out of action by the blast.

People arriving at the port were subjected to a thorough examination and it developed that one lady coming in was found to have printing on the part of her anatomy on which she sat down. This stirred a flurry of excitement lest some secret information, or code was being smuggled in by this most unusual method.

So Capt. Jimmy Bayer of the artillery was called in to photograph the printing on the most unusual base. But the false alarm was nothing more than that. The lady was from Poland and on the way across the Atlantic she took every possible precaution against

contracting disease. One precaution included the lining of the toilet seat with paper, before she sat on it. In her case she used a sheet of newspaper she had in her possession, and the printing came off on her skin.

But there was little humor in the terrible explosion aftermath. "The Richmond printing company had employed 38 girls, but only five got out alive", he told me. And that story was repeated right across the city. The devastation was indescribable in many places.

Grandfather Clock 200 Years Old

MR. MUTCH also has a Grandfather's clock he believes must be more than 200 years old. "It's the same type", he told me, "as the one you wrote about in your column that you saw at the home of William Johnstone, Kensington RR."

The clock was brought to this province by the first Irving man who came out from Scotland. He settled first in Murray Harbor, then came to Cherry Valley and is an ancestor of the Irvings who live there now, I was told.

Mr. Mutch bought the old clock at a sale about 100 years ago. He thinks it was somewhere about 1750 that the clock was brought to the Island. "It's so old", he quipped, "that the shadow of the pendulum has long since worn a hole in the back of the case." The Mutch family are Scots, but there must be a vein of Irish with their wit somewhere in his background.

The old clock is still keeping perfect time. It has the days of the month and the phases of the moon on it, though the moon has faded so much that it is no longer visible.

"It has a beautifully polished mahogany case, the best case I've ever seen on an old clock", Mr. Mutch told me.

Rural Mail In Pioneer Days

SOME INTERESTING stories of the pioneer days of looking after rural mail came my way during my recent visit to West Prince. Mrs. Alvie Mountain of Alma who is bright and cheerful at the age of 87 had an interesting story for me, that is particularly timely, now that the mail train has been removed - the last run was made in July.

The Alma post office was operated in 1876 in the home of John Mountain and it remained in the family through the years. Later it was in charge of a brother, James Mountain. In 1903 it was taken over by Mr. And Mrs. Alvie Mountain who kept it until it was closed - Mr. Mountain died some time ago.

Recalling some of the more interesting events of the older days, Mrs. Mountain, who reads without glasses, said her husband carried the mail from the train to the post office which was about one-half mile away. For this he received \$18 every three months, or six dollars per month. They were paid \$45 a year for keeping the post office which works out to \$3.75 per month.

THE RAILROAD station at Alma was a small shed, closed on three sides, and there in the icily cold dead of winter nights Mr. Mountain often waited for hours for the arrival of the mail train. Due at 10 p.m., the snorting monster of the steam engine days often was one to two hours late, or even later which put it past the midnight hour.

Mr. Mountain never deserted his lonely and chilly waiting post before the train arrived.

Mrs. Mountain recalls some unusual experiences. Some of them caused her more than a little worry. There was the time the school teacher came to mail two letters. They were left temporarily on the kitchen table while Mrs. Mountain looked at the bread she had in the oven.

WHEN SHE returned to the table she found one of the children had grabbed the letters and cut them in pieces with a scissors the child had grabbed. "So", she said, she "put them in an envelope and sent them back to the teacher with my regrets, but the teacher fixed them up and told me not to worry", the Alma lady told me.

"The teacher, Eliza McKelvie, was a lady she recalled with appreciation."

Dodd's Almanacs Disappear

BUT THE most unusual disaster was the disappearance of the bundle of Dodd's Almanacs.

"Some time later the almanacs were found hidden in an old trunk where one of the youngsters had hidden them among his treasures.."

For the benefit of the younger readers, the Dodd's almanacs were a part of the kitchen literature in most every farm home in those days. Many a farmer turned to his almanac in winter months to see what the predicted weather was, and they put just as much faith in those long-range forecasts as many modern people do in the daily weather bulletins they receive based on the best knowledge of meteorologists of today.

I cannot recall for sure whether the Dodd's almanacs carried the weather forecast, but Dr. Chases surely did.

Mention of those two patent remedy suppliers reminds me of student days at Mount Allison University where our Biological professor often came into class with large sheets covered with pictures of several dozen men and women. And he would tell us with bitter sarcasm, "these are not the founders of the nation, these are the people who were cured by a certain kind of kidney liver pills."

Mrs. Annie I. Donald, whose husband is a grandson of James Mountain, has the Alma post office now. So it is still in the Mountain family.