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ACROSS THE ISLAND

Pamphlet Tells Of Pioneer Days

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A PAMPHLET describing the Strathalbyn Jubilee at Hartsville in 1895 - it looked back on the previous 50 years - provides a description of the days of the early settlers here that had evaded my most persistent hunt for the story of real pioneer days, until my friend Rev. Donald Nicholson made it available.

The minister of St. John's Presbyterian church, Belfast is a native of Strathalbyn which comprised his district of Hartsville, my own Rose Valley, and Breadalbane as I knew it as a boy. I admit partiality to the place of my childhood but I'm using the Strathalbyn story here to pass on to you some of the colorful description given 67 years ago by Hon. A. B. MacKenzie - he was an uncle of Roddie MacKenzie, Hartsville and a grand uncle of Dr. J. Wendall MacKenzie, Charlottetown.

If readers compare the conditions which he described with what they know today, I don't think any comment of mine is necessary.

"EARLY IN the summer of 1831 a band of stalwart young Highlanders chiefly from the Isle of Skye, emigrated to P.E.I. which had then 32,000 people and Charlottetown was "a mere village of 2500 people"

Twenty families settled in Lot 67 - it included the Rose Valley portion - then "an uninhabited wilderness, covered with a dense growth of heavy hardwood, spruce and pine, unmolested save by the paw of the wild animals". The settlers' only approach to their new home was by a bridle path from Alexander Johnston's on the Princetown Road, seven miles from Springtown - it would be three to four miles further to Rose Valley.

The few effects were packed on their backs - there was no other way - and their first task on arrival was to clear tiny patches of ground for their first cabins, small log structures 12 by 16 feet, covered with bark and the spaces between the logs stogged with moss or clay.

First Homes Are Described

THE CELLAR was a small hole in the ground and a large chimney was built of stones at the bottom, with a wooden mantelpiece, and the top made of "cats" which were "pots of clay mixed with straw fastened in round "sticks", placed horizontally tier upon tier until it reached about two feet from the roof." He didn't say how the smoke was carried the rest of the way through the roof, but the straw and clay mixture became highly inflammable and required the greatest care to prevent it catching fire.

But there were bright spots. There was plenty of hardwood fuel right at the door.

In the early spring men and boys worked “from early morn until dewy eve” chopping trees and clearing the land to plant potatoes “ - and likely some grain for flour, small querns of grinding stones were used to grind the grain though I wonder how they got them in those early days - “while the brave women and young lassies were equally busy making maple sugar”.

MR MACKENZIE added “the productive land gave abundant returns and soon many of them were proud possessors of square log homes covered with boards or good split shingles”.

Some of the log frame homes are still standing. Edwin Reid, Rollo Bay told me recently that the main portion of his fine home is built of logs. Carpenters discovered that when they cut space for a new window. Frank Costello, Parkdale School principal who operates an attractive summer resort spot on the beautiful Brudenell River, told me recently that he found hand-hewn boards in an old building he remodeled this year.

The actual date is missing but it appears to have been 1832 that they built the first schoolhouse at Springton. It was “crude and primitive . . . a round log house 12 feet by 16 covered with bark or turf. It had one window of six panes, each eight by ten inches.

Man Born In Old Schoolhouse

MR. MACKENZIE said in 1895 “at least one prominent man was born in the old schoolhouse” and I learned only this week from my friend, Colonel Allan MacLeod, Hartsville that it was his father, Duncan MacLeod. Allan was at the jubilee and recalls it clearly.

The first teacher was Alexander MacLeod (Allister Beag. which means Little Alex). But there was only one school in the entire area and pupils trudged many miles from the far corners of the district. This would be a real chore particularly in winter.

A larger school house was built in 1837. It had two windows and was also used as a meeting house.

The first teacher James Douglas, Stanhope couldn't speak “the language of Eden” (Gaelic) and few of his pupils could speak anything else, so he had more than usual trouble. In contrast was the next teacher, Malcolm MacDonald “just arrived from Scotland who spoke Gaelic, English and Latin.”

BUT HE was a small man, who often ran into trouble as he pulled down the breeches to administer punishment in the old-fashioned way, and sometimes had to beat a retreat as some of the bigger boys ganged up on him.

I like the part about the teacher's method of telling the time. Having no watch, he went by the sun normally “but on dark days he sent one of the boys for an armful of dry ferns which he would burn in the chimney, and then he would turn to look at the window, and if he could see the reflection of the blaze on the window glass, he would dismiss them at once, assured that it was near sundown. But on very dark and cloudy days the experiment very often turned to the advantage of the boys, who sometimes got home hours before sundown.”

If you don't understand that method of telling time, I don't either. I use it here merely as a sample of some of the difficulties pioneer settlers had to contend with.

Road Built Through Forest

IT WAS in 1833-34 that the Bedeque Road - it was named the Anderson road then for Hon. John Anderson who surveyed it - was built from North River through North Wiltshire "which was then an unbroken forest", thence to the Scotch settlement and through to Bedeque.

Some people were able to earn money working on the road. Some who had a horse and a cart, or a wood sleigh in winter, acted as freighters and would take a load of lumber or other goods from Charlottetown, 15 to 20 miles, for 5 shillings or 20 cents. The freighter was also allowed three drinks of whiskey or rum, the old tale relates. He was to have one drink on the way to town, one before leaving, and a third on the way home. But sometimes, Mr. MacKenzie said, "the man had more drinks and became so gloriously happy over the proceeds of the load - 20 cents would buy a lot of liquor then - that he would arrive home "as empty handed as he had left".

Tools Were Few In Those Days

They had a narrow axe, a grubbing hoe, flail for threshing grain, a frow and a spokeshave, the old story tells us. The frow was a wedge shaped instrument used to split stakes and other things and the spokeshave was an instrument that could be used something like a plane. I recall seeing people use it to make axe handles.

A few years later the farmer might have a horse, a straw collar and wooden hames, a pair of cart wheels for a cart, a wood sleigh, a V-shaped harrows with wooden teeth, a hand rake and a big pot to make soap and boil maple syrup.

THE FIRST church had been built in 1845 and the people sat on planks or boards set up on blocks at first, though they had held services in homes, in the open air and in the school house before that.

James MacDonald, father of Charles MacDonald, Wood Islands, gave a talk at the jubilee on the history of the congregation, but the pamphlet has little detail. There was just one item that said a Daniel MacKenzie of Strathalbyn had been the first to fall in the Riel Northwest Rebellion scrap about 25 years previously.

Lobster "Excellent" After 20 Years

HERE'S AN unusual food story. S. H. Burhoe, Maritime manager for the J. W. Windsor Company, Ltd., Montreal gave me a photostatic copy of a letter from Einar Erdresen, Bergen, Norway who had just eaten a can of Beaver pack lobsters - they were packed here prior to 1939 for the Windsor people - and found them "excellent". Bought prior to the outbreak of World War Two, Erdresen's mother had "kept them in reserve during the war" and then decided in 1945 they would be too old to eat. But the son found the can recently, opened it and enjoyed the delicious seafood which was as tasty as though it had just been packed.