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## ACROSS THE ISLAND

### Rural Medicine Over 30 Years

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I HAD BEEN trying for almost a year to find column material on a country doctor, and his work in the days when travel conditions were really difficult.

For my story I went to Dr. A.A. (Gus) MacDonald, Souris who next June will look back on 60 years of medical service in what must be one of the province's largest rural practices. "It runs 18 miles to East Point, about the same distance to Annandale and 12 miles north," he told me. And he served it alone for many years.

Born in 1874, he graduated from McGill University at 23 and today at 87 the genial "Dr. Gus" - that's what everyone calls him - seems as full of life and vigor as most men half his age.

THERE HAVE been many highlights in the career of this beloved doctor who once had a successful whirl in provincial politics. He was kind enough to recall a few for "Across the Island" readers.

Realizing that he was looking after his people's health long before cars and highway snow plows took much of the misery out of bad-weather travel, I asked him to tell me one or two unusual travel incidents.

#### Storm Experience Recalled

"DR. GUS" recalled "a terrible storm" he ran into about five o'clock one wintry evening. He had been up all night, had had little sleep in the previous 24-hour period and "had been seeing patients that day all along the North Side."

Paul MacEachern was driving him and the storm struck in devastating fury when they were driving through the Glen Road which was lined with woods. Paul wanted to stay in the woods "but I said no - I was scared of nothing in those days, and besides there was danger of treetops that were breaking off, killing or injuring us as they hurtled to the ground", the doctor recalled.

There were two heavy men in the sleigh, but the wind was so strong it was throwing it up from behind and "we were in danger of being thrown at the horses feet", Dr. MacDonald told me.

Emerging from the bush, they were quickly lost in a field, "finally found a fence and crawled to it on hands and knees - it was the only way we could make any progress against the wind which blew down 100 barns in Kings County that night," he recalled.

REACHING A barn they took shelter on the lee side "but feared to stay there lest it blow down. And sure enough, it was as flat as a pancake next morning."

Finally they spied a light and crawled to the home of Joe McAulay on the Souris Line Road. He and his mother were sitting in the cold, as they feared to start a fire because of the wind peril.

"We spent the rest of the night there" recalled "Dr. Gus" who thought it may have been back around 1908, although Bill Ledwell tells me his father Tom Ledwell, St. Peter's recalls a February 16, 1930 storm that demolished eight barns on the Souris Line Road, overturned two box cars at St Peter's and blew two freight cars off the track at Dingwell.

### Story Of A Wonderful Horse

A GOOD horse was indispensable to a doctor in those days and the Souris medical man had a little mare that "that was almost human". Only about 950 pounds, she was as friendly as she was hardy and efficient.

"She became hopelessly stuck in a deep snowdrift one warm February night that was so dark I couldn't see my hand before me. I tried it and actually couldn't", Dr. MacDonald emphasized.

He managed to get the sleigh pulled off her, got the harness stripped, got his friend back on the road - her only fault was that she couldn't stay on the road - gave her a few slaps and told her to make for home, he told me and "tipped the sleigh on its side and went to sleep".

He was comfortable and warm as he had two Arctic Wolf robes "that were as soft as silk" and plenty of cushions. Sleep came quickly to the tired, unworried traveler who was sure someone would find him when day broke.

But he had been sleeping only an hour when he was awakened by a warm nose nuzzling softly against his face. His faithful friend had come back to find him. As he had said earlier "the mare was almost human".

ON ANOTHER occasion he plunged for six weary miles through heavy drifts that were impassible for a horse after his wonderful mare had gotten him as far as Rollo Bay.

It was another terribly blustery night, and he was lost on the ice as soon as he hit the beach just outside Souris. Twice the knowing mare had stopped at the edge of holes, with up to 15 feet of water in them.

Two young men volunteered to walk with him the six miles to his destination. One of them was George Keefe who was later a wholesale druggist here and a one-time City councillor. They had to lock hands to keep from getting lost, as they plodded slowly along in the furious weather.

The doctor who had thrust his stethoscope and a few other essentials in his pocket when he found he had to walk, sent his companions back as morning broke, went the rest of the way alone "and arrived just in time to save a life".

### Story Of A Medical Miracle

I DIDN'T pry into his medical practice but he told me about one unforgettable experience.

Among his prize possessions - and he has many of them - is a Lustre pitcher, 150 years old, that came from a Naufrage house where he performed "a miracle of healing" in the early years of his practice. The quotes are mine. The modest doctor agreed it was a miracle, but modestly disclaimed any credit. "My hands were guided by a higher power. It was the only miracle I ever saw," he said seriously.

A young McCormack boy had his feet cut off above the ankles by a hay mower. Only bits of flesh and skin were holding them. "They were loose" Dr. Gus recalled, as he sloshed them around in a basin of water before putting them back where they belonged, and preparing them for healing.

A SKILLED, experienced surgeon later expressed complete amazement that a doctor could have performed the task in a country home without even a nurse to assist him. Dr. Gus asked me particularly not to mention this part of it, but I'm sure he'll forgive me, for the tribute is so richly merited I just had to get it in here.

The boy was A.J. McCormack who is known in many Kings County school districts as he taught from 1926 to 1940. He was four times in St. Margaret's and also taught at Monticello, Armadale, New Acadia, Clear Springs and Souris.

NIGHT LONG vigils were common to the genial doctor who can usually find something to smile about. "For thirty years", he told me, "I never averaged more than three nights a week in my own bed. I often got home at midnight to find four or five sleighs in the yard waiting for me."

But, "it's been a wonderful life," he told me, and it's easy to understand how this warm-hearted, lovable man with the smiling eyes could enjoy such a life of service to his fellow humans, no matter how strenuous.

### Antibiotics Seen Greatest Boon

ASKED WHAT in his opinion has been the greatest single development in medicine in his time, he replied quickly, "the introduction of antibiotics."

Dr. MacDonald was first elected for 1<sup>st</sup> Kings in 1915. He was defeated in 1919 but was successful in 1923, 1927 and 1931 and was speaker of the legislature during the Stewart-MacMillan administration 1931-35. My friend Charles MacDonald, Wood Island, tells me Dr. MacDonald was the wit of the Legislature.

Mr. Speaker John R. MacLean told me, as I walked down the street, that Dr. MacDonald is an accomplished musician and has directed the St. Mary's church choir for many years. There are many sides to this accomplished man.

Among his many souvenirs are several which should be displayed prominently when we finally get our provincial museum. But I'll talk about them in a future column. I've reached the end of this one.