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ACROSS THE ISLAND

Ice Boat Days Are Recalled

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MY MIND went back to the hardy men who braved the elements and took wintry storms in their strides, even on exposed ice-filled Northumberland Strait, as I read a story suggesting some 50 soldiers had completed "a gruelling trip" by air to Nicosia from Valcartier, Quebec. The young newsman who wrote that yarn certainly cannot have any sense of history. I can imagine some old timers snorting in derision at the idea of a trip in an aeroplane being gruelling when all the men had to do was to look after themselves while skilled technicians piloted and serviced the plane.

So it's natural that I should recall an interesting chat a few months ago with Ed MacWilliams, Cape Traverse who worked on the ice boats that crossed the Northumberland Strait before the ice-breaker Prince Edward Island took over the service in 1917.

If you think of "a gruelling experience" that should be a good example, but I was completely unable to get the spry and unusually active veteran of the ice-boat days to even admit that there had been anything unusually difficult about the job.

Now 78, Ed started the cross-Strait ice treks at 19 in 1905 and made his last crossing in 1916. Coldest day he recalls was 19 degrees below zero and the wind would have a terrific sweep across the vast ice spaces. But "we used a sort of stocking cap and got so we didn't mind the cold", I was told.

They were warmly clad, but they didn't wear abnormally heavy underwear. "When we got on the ice and started to work, there was no problem staying warm".

Started Under Captain Campbell

THERE WERE five boats, six men to a boat, with an over all captain in charge of the operation. There was also a coxswain in charge of each boat. Mr. MacWilliams started his service under Captain William Campbell, father of Norman Campbell, Charlottetown.

The coxswain got \$85 a month, the bowmen - they were at the front and their experience and judgement in following leads and selecting the best route were of some value - got \$75. The waistmen got \$65 each.

Ladies paid \$3 per crossing and rode in the boats. The men paid \$2 and helped pull the boats over the ice. They paid \$4 if they rode, but that was discouraged. "We didn't have to take them at all if we had more than 600 pounds of mail", he replied.

The boats weighed 800 pounds each and the mail ran to 600 pounds or more. After one had experience when a crew were out overnight - one man lost a foot and another the fingers off one hand from frost bite - each boat had to carry a large box of hard tack.

They also had to carry a supply of water in each boat. "But it was of little use," Ed told me, "because it would freeze solid".

Disaster Occurred In 1883

"THE DISASTER" as it was called, occurred back in 1883, I find after checking with Helen Herring whose father, Montague Campbell and her two uncles, Hector and Will, were in the boat crews that spent a wild, stormy night in mid-Strait after losing their way in a blinding snow storm.

The mercury plunged to 28 degrees below zero, Mrs. Herring told me, and the crews burned all their boats except one which they retained as a shelter against the full force of the wind. They also burned the mail in the raw, bitter battle for survival.

Captained by Muncey Irving, the crews did not find their location until late-afternoon of the following day. Then they returned to the nearest land which was in the Desable area. Told by the captain to "go on your own", one-half of the crews made for a nearby farm house owned by MacPhails, and the rest made for one close by. Later when the first crew group visited the other, they found that one man, Sandy Muttart, was missing.

They found Sandy in a nearby orchard where, apparently too weak to stand up any longer, he had grasped the lower limb of a tree and his hands were frozen in the grip that he was unable to release. Mr. Muttart lost the fingers off one of his hands.

Nobody died, and many of the men including the Campbells, were none the worse for their mishap, but one other man, James Howatt, lost the major portion of one foot, leaving little but the stump of the heel. He became a blacksmith and worked at the trade for the rest of his life, I was told.

THE ONLY man lost, I was told, was Lem Dawson and that was several years before the service ended. As I recall the story, the ice boat was caught in two fields of ice that were rapidly closing in on it. Dawson apparently got caught between the side of the boat and the crush of the ice field on that side.

Two strong men had a firm grip on each of his wrists, but he was literally torn from their grasp, several Cape Traverse people recalled. He was lost on February 13 and his body was not found until the following spring.

"Normally we'd leave the shore around 7 o'clock in the morning and arrive on the other side about 1 or 2 p.m., but once we left Tormentine at 7 a.m. and did not make Bell's Point, in the Cape Traverse area, until 5:30 to 6 p.m." Ed told me.

Once, Mr. MacWilliams recalled, they had crossed the Strait in two hours and 40 minutes. The going was almost perfect most of the way and they could walk at a brisk pace. When there was heavy snow on the ice, we took turns breaking the way", he told me.

Two Stories Are Interesting

THERE ARE many stories in the mind of this friendly Island man covering his wintry treks. Here are two of them:

One Island man was returning from the lumber woods with his winter's earnings in his purse. But the pocket that held the purse was empty when they reached the Cape Traverse shore.

Naturally the man felt terrible about the loss, and the hard-working ice-boat crews felt almost as bad. Imagine their satisfaction when one of the crew found the purse on the ice in mid-strait several days later.

"Another time we noticed blood in the tracks" made by one of the male "passengers" as he trod along the ice, Mr. MacWilliams recalled. On investigating they found that the man had worn through the soles of his shoes, then the soles of his socks, as he had tramped many miles to the New Brunswick shore before starting across the Strait with the ice-boat crews.

The boat crews dug up a pair of boots for the man to wear the rest of the way across the Strait, then collected enough money for him to buy a new pair when he reached the Island.

Looking back on the generous and kindly acts of his fellow crewmen, Mr. MacWilliams told me "people live more within themselves now, they're not nearly so happy as they were in those earlier days."

Canoes At Wood Islands in 1755

THE ICE boat crossings were inaugurated back in 1775 at the urging of Walter Patterson, the first Governor of the Island. Birch bark canoes were used at first but the route from Wood Islands to Pictou, N.S. was so long and hazardous - it was 23 miles at best - that service was most uncertain.

It was in 1827, I find in an old Guardian, that the people of Cape Traverse conceived the idea of making much shorter crossings from there, and after a few trial runs, some mail was contracted to them the following year and the regular service started there in 1829.

The early canoes were followed by flat-bottomed dories operated by two men, an old Guardian story reports, and they were followed by the sometimes-called Norwegian "pram" or "ice-boat" as Islanders knew them until they crossed for the last times in 1916.

There are none of those boats left on the Island, so far as I could learn. But there is one in the museum at Fort Beausejour not far from Sackville in New Brunswick, Mr. MacWilliams told me.

Old accounts told of three accidents before the one of 1883. Back in 1831 four men, one a passenger, were out all night but were rescued the following day by people from Cape Egmont.

Ten persons were involved in the experience of 1843 when they spent more than 36 hours on the ice before being rescued.

The other came in 1855 when a Mr. Haszard of Charlottetown and another student returning from Philadelphia "reached Tormentine Friday, March 9 and left early next morning for the Island with an elderly man named Weir, with one boat's crew of four men. They were within one-half mile of the Island in mid-afternoon and were rowing the boat in lolly (ice and water) when a blinding snowstorm struck suddenly and forced them to return to solid ice where they turned their boat over for a shelter against the storm.

They suffered terribly from cold and hunger and finally killed and ate a dog belonging to Weir. Then they started back to Nova Scotia. Hazzard died on Sunday and the others reached the Nova Scotia shore near Wallace, Monday in bad physical condition and finally staggered to a farm house two miles distance. Weir lost all his fingers and both of his feet and died sometime later, the old story relates.

The contrast between this storied and difficult past and the present was emphasized as I was thanking Mr. MacWilliams and bidding him au revoir. Now, he observed, there are three big boats crossing regularly - four if you count the old Scotia.

The contrast was emphasized even more as we looked toward a corner of the MacWilliams farm fronting the shore, where a 48 to 50-foot tower has been erected as a part of the equipment to survey the Strait for the new Causeway of the future.

Time marches on.