

The Guardian, Charlottetown, Fri., Nov. 29, 1963

## ACROSS THE ISLAND

### Spell In Death Chair Recalled By Islander

By NEIL A. MATHESON  
Provincial - Farm Editor

WALTER O'BRIEN of Charlottetown told me this story which is one of the most unusual I have ever heard. It goes back to a day in 1928 when Mr. O'Brien and two companions, the late Will Hogan, and Thomas Decoursey - both were from the Morell area though Decoursey lives now in Boston - were invited by the state prison chaplain to visit the building. They met the warden who greeted them warmly and assigned a veteran prison official, a huge man, to show them through the big prison.

The three men were getting special attention as they were shown various points of interest, for they were getting the full treatment reserved for special visitors, though Walter had no idea of just how special, or unusual, the treatment was to be for him. Finally the group reached the fearsome death row, which they inspected casually and then they walked the last grim steps to the death house, and through "the green door" which had been a one-way passage to eternity for so many condemned persons.

THE PLACE itself was eerie enough but the huge escort said "this is the electric chair", as he walked to an arm chair in the center of a large room, and noted "I have seen scores of men die during the 40 years I have been here." But the young Island-born man blanched when the escort invited him to sit in the chair, while he showed Walter's companions how the thing worked.

The huge escort strapped Walter's arms to his body, fitted his forearms to the contact spots on the chair arms, moved his legs to the proper spots on the official instrument of death, then slid his fingernails sharply along Walter's trouser leg on one side as he observed "this is how we slit the pants, so proper contact can be made with the current.

### Death Chair Switch Causes Terror

THE ENTIRE procedure was fearsome and Mr. O'Brien blanched a bit more when the escort explained that the current goes from the leg and from the arm at the same time and it "meets in the middle". Walter wasn't sure how much was completely true, but by that time, strapped into the chair where so many died, he was all but past wondering.

There was an explanation of how the head is strapped back to the chair, and "here's where we shave the victim", said the escort as he rubbed Walter's head vigorously in the designated spot.

There were additional explanations, all of them grim, particularly to the young man who was still strapped into the chair. But the O'Brien blood virtually froze in his veins, and his hair lifted in cold terror as the big man stepped quietly to the wall several feet

away, grabbed a big handle and observed “this is where the sheriff throws the switch to complete the execution.”

NOTHING HAPPENED but I’m sure that Mr. O’Brien must have tasted the torture of the really condemned, in the split second before the big escort observed smilingly “you needn’t be afraid young man, the power is not turned on in this room. You can tell your friends you sat in the electric chair, where I have seen scores of men die.”

Walter was congratulated on his brave act but by that time the Island man wasn’t sure whether he had been brave or not during the horrible, nightmarish ordeal, and I’m sure he wouldn’t go through the same thing again for all the money in Boston, if he had to wonder, as he did then, if something might slip and send him into eternity at any moment.

Walter’s story is unique, which proves once more that if there is an unusual experience to relate, there’s a good chance that an Islander can tell you about it.

### Himmelman’s Success - Breed Rivalry

RESULTS OF the Hereford bull classes at the Royal Winter Fair, Toronto makes the calibre of the Atlantic Winter Fair Hereford show look good by comparison. E. H. (Ernie) Himmelman called from LaHave, N. S. a few days ago to tell me his “Nova National Sparky” bull had placed second in his class, and taken the reserve senior and reserve grand championships at Toronto. Sparky was third in the senior bull class at Halifax.

The winner and grand champion at Halifax was Mr. Himmelman’s sire, Whittern National Velvet, a former Royal Winter Fair grand champion who is ineligible for the Toronto show now because they do not accept Hereford bulls over three years of age. The Whittern bull is the nearest thing to Hereford perfection I have ever seen.

ERNIE SOLD Sparky to J. L. McLanahan who lives near Calgary. He sold another to a British Columbia man. Both are sons of the “National Velvet” animal and “his sons are spread pretty well across Canada now” observed the LaHave breeder who has sold at least two of them to Islanders. One of them, Nova National Romeo, was grand champion at Charlottetown for Gordon Matheson, Hunter River. He was fourth at Halifax, right behind Sparky that was the second-best Hereford sire at Toronto.

One of the most likeable men I have ever met at these livestock shows, Ernie Himmelman is also a great competitor. There isn’t a more eager cattle owner at the fair than he is when his animals are showing. The Hereford breed hasn’t got a better booster anywhere.

### Rival Beef Breed Claims Confuse Me

AND THAT reminds me that I heard Fred Bell, national Angus breeder’s secretary tell us at a Halifax dinner the Angus are the fastest growing breed in Canada, and he gave us some figures to prove it.

But Charlie Leitch, national Hereford secretary, told us last summer the Hereford cattlemen have the fastest growing beef breed in Canada. Indeed my friend Ernie Himmelman to whom I have been referring, sent me recently a tabulated statement indicating the Herefords are the fastest growing breed. It traced the development from

1907 when the Herefords reportedly had 683 animals registered in Canada and the Angus had 1,105, to 1962 - the most recent year listed - when the Herefords had 53,842 and the Angus 14,098.

In my position I have to be neutral - I do not have official Angus figures or I would list them - and I have warm friends in both breeds, but I wish someone would finally put me straight on which breed is growing the fastest, or is each breed listing figures which make it appear to excel? Or what is the Angus breeder's answer to the Hereford tabulation which certainly indicates that they are on top?

### Belfast Named For Spot In Ireland

THE HISTORICAL district of Belfast which prides itself on the fact it is basically Scotch traces its name back to Ireland, and here's the explanation. The name was conferred, apparently, by an unnamed captain of a British man-of-war, "Mermaid". Though his name is not known, we have in the Guardian library a reprint in part of a letter he wrote to the Gentleman's magazine, London in 1870.

Apparently urging colonization of the district - the French had left in 1758 - he described the visit to the Island and thought it "would excel in corn, fish and pork." It must produce hemp and flax, he said.

"Fruits, gooseberries, currants and strawberries seem to be native to the Island", the captain wrote.

IT WAS a query from Mrs. Rod Martin, Montague that started this investigation and I find that the distinguished Belfast lawyer Malcolm MacQueen accepted the story as authentic, and I understand he did considerable research on the question during a trip he made to the Old Country. Mr. MacQueen gave full credit and warm praise, incidentally, to Guardian editor Frank Walker for uncovering and publishing the information.

Previously Mr. MacQueen had leaned to the theory that the name had derived from the French "La Belle Face" which in English is "the beautiful face". The scrap book from which I have quoted parts of the navy captain's letter was compiled by Mr. Walker, through many hours of diligent research from all of the old newspaper files he could find in the provincial library, as well as from other available sources. This column owes a great deal to Mr. Walker for this information that is so often available on stories I research in many parts of the province.

### One Unusual, One Very Tall Tale

SOME MONTHS ago I had a story about a horse that would walk up on an old horse-power treat mill attached to a pump when the animal wanted water. Some time later John A. MacKinnon, Churchill, dropped into the office to tell me the late Allan Ferguson, Hampton - Lorne is a son - had a big Shorthorn bull that used to do the same thing.

If you want a "tall tale", here's one from the same Mr. MacKinnon who told me "Jerome Collins" - he lived at New Haven where Lorne Frizzel lives now - "told my grandfather he had fenced all day on a rampike (a fallen tree) and at the end of the day,

when he struck his axe into the tree he found it was a snake that had been chased out of Ireland.”