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ACROSS THE ISLAND

Always Room For Improvement

By NEIL A. MATHESON

Never again am I going on a trip without taking my portable tape recorder with me. I purposely left it behind when I flew to Virginia last month to visit my family. But I hadn't even left the Charlottetown airport until the stories started to roll in.

There I met Dr. Chester Stewart, dean of medicine at Dalhousie University. He had grown up at Norboro and he recalled for me a couple of stories which I'm going to tell you right now.

One concerned his great grandfather whose name I've forgotten, but I'm going to call him Mr. McKay, to make the story telling easier to follow.

The man was a farmer and a Presbyterian, like myself. Indeed I think you would have to be raised Presbyterian to get the most out of this story.

Mr. McKay had been injured seriously by a bull that attacked him in the pasture. Only for the appearance of a husky young son, the bull might well have killed the man.

'Bull Is Still In Pasture'

VISITING HIM one day, sometime after the incident, was Rev. Hugh Dunbar and this man was a member of the first class to graduate from the Presbyterian Theological College at Pictou, N.S., the first institution of its kind in North America, as my friend Dr. Chester Stewart tells the story.

When he was about to leave, Mr. Dunbar told Mr. McKay "This incident will make a better man out of you, Mr. McKay. You're a good man now, but there's always room for improvement."

One did not normally talk back to a minister, as I recall it in my own boyhood days. The minister had a touch of the divine in him; indeed he was close to the Almighty, as our parents told us.

But this time Mr. McKay apparently deemed a reply was necessary. And this is what he said:

"You are a good man yourself, Mr. Dunbar. But there's always room for improvement.

"And the bull is right out there in the pasture field".

Story Involves Horse Radish

I REALLY liked that one. I liked this one too, mainly because once I had the misfortune to place almost a half fork full of horse radish in my mouth at one time. Where the stuff gets its heat I do not know, but the effect is almost beyond description.

To those of you who are considerably younger than I am I should explain that the ministers of my young day preached fire and brimstone most of the time, to their congregation. I think that sets the stage for the second story from Dr. Stewart.

A veteran Presbyterian elder had business at the Manse one day, and he was prevailed upon to stay for dinner.

The elder knew as little, apparently, about horse radish as I did before I took that fiery portion. So he dipped his fork too readily into the stuff.

As Dr. Stewart tells it:

Hell Fire And Brimstone

“WHEN THE elder finally got the tears stopped from running down his cheeks, he looked the minister squarely in the eye and said “Mr. Dunbar, I know you always preach Hell, fire and brimstone, but I didn’t know you served it.”

If you ever took more than a tiny bit of the stuff at one time you’ll know exactly what the elder meant.

I want to give an extra punch to this, my first column in 1969 so I’ll tell you several tales that rank in the Ghostly, or unexplainable category.

Forerunner Stories Told

MY FRIEND Rev. Donald Nicholson recalled for me a story that concerns his father, John D. Nicholson, and his two cousins George and Donald MacLeod. All of them came from the Hartsville area which is close to my birthplace in Rose Valley.

The time was 1895 and many Island men had gone to Colorado to work in the mines. I’m told that 200 Islanders were there at one time.

John D. Nicholson worked the day shift, the two MacLeod boys worked at night, so they used the same room.

One night Mr. Nicholson heard his nephew George MacLeod calling to him. He could hear the words distinctly. They were “Uncle Johnny, Uncle Johnny”.

The call from George was loud and distinct. He called back, then stuck his head out the bedroom window and asked his nephew “What do you want, George? What do you want?”

THERE WAS no reply so Nicholson went back to bed. Later that night he heard the same voice calling “Uncle Johnny, Uncle Johnny”. It was so loud and clear, and so expressive of deep worry and concern, Mr. Nicholson dressed hurriedly, went downstairs and outside to see if his nephew was in trouble of any kind.

But he saw nothing, nor did he hear the call again. Next morning the two nephews laughed over the story and the three of them had all but forgotten the incident.

But a year afterward, to the day, Mr. Nicholson heard the plaintive call “Uncle Johnny, Uncle Johnny” again. But this time George was there calling for his uncle.

There had been an accident and his brother, Donald had been killed. This happened at Crippler Creek, Colorado in 1895, the year the first world’s fair was held in Chicago.

Bird Hitting Window

ONE OF the forerunners of death, or sometimes of misfortune, is a bird flying against a window, or alighting and pecking on the window with his beak. I had never heard of that kind of story when I was a boy in Rose Valley, nor did Rev. Donald Nicholson,

either, he told me. First time I heard it was from Norman Matheson, Forest Hill in a story I used here several years ago.

But this week I learned from a friend who is a Charlottetown businessman that three times a bird has flown against one of his store windows, and each time it has been an omen of misfortune.

The first time his niece was injured so badly she never did recover completely, that was almost 20 years ago.

Next time – it was 13 or 14 years ago – the bird hitting the window was an omen of his sister's death.

Only last year a bird hit the window a third time and the man could not relax all day. That night he could not sleep, for he was sure it boded ill for him. Next day he heard that a member of the family had been taken seriously ill in another city. When he got word my friend found that the person had been taken to the hospital in an ambulance at the time the bird had struck his window.

Interesting Stories

I SAW and heard many interesting things on my trip to Virginia. I worshipped with my family on Christmas Eve in the National Cathedral in Washington, which has the most splendid acoustics of any building I have ever visited. There's a story to this Cathedral that I'll tell you later.

Many of you have heard or read of the battle of Bull Run. I visited the spot and found the battlefield has been preserved, and there are signs to tell the visitor something of what happened before the South finally won it. Indeed, two battles were fought on that site. The South won both.

They have an old store in Fredericksburg, Virginia, that is exactly as it was back in those early days. They even have the place where George Washington cut down the cherry tree. Only few now believe he ever did cut down that tree.