

The Guardian, Charlottetown, Thurs., May 2, 1968

ACROSS THE ISLAND

Incidents Recalled As Cars Came Here

By NEIL A. MATHESON

“DURING MY years in the provincial parliament there were two questions that gave us some concern. One was the allowing of automobiles on our public highways.”

The interesting paragraph was written some 20 years ago, I believe, by the man many knew as Mr. Justice A.E. Arsenault who died on the weekend.

“A statute had been passed during the Haszard regime which prohibited automobiles from running on the streets and public highways of the Province. That was in the year 1909. So far as I remember, only three members in the House voted against the Bill: late Chief Justice Matheson, A.J. MacDonald, Georgetown and myself.”

So did the man who as premier of this province removed the legislation which prohibited automobiles from running on Island roads.

Frank Walker, Guardian chief editorial writer, has kindly loaned me his copy of “Memoirs of The Hon. A.E. Arsenault” and it is crammed with many stories that reek of the past in most interesting fashion.

Mr. Arsenault noted that at the session of the legislature in 1913 a bill was passed which restricted – indeed it banned automobile travel on Island roads.

Plebiscite Strongly Against

A PLEBISCITE WAS called and the Island people “went strongly against opening up the highways”.

But those who wanted automobiles maintained their effort to get the horseless carriages here and sometime later the government decided that cars would be allowed to run on roads where 75 per cent of the people living along the road requested it. Even then there was a qualification. The cars would be allowed to run only on certain days of the week.

There were pockets of unusually strong resistance to the automobile, and the Fourth district of Prince was one of them, Mr. Arsenault recalled. A delegation of twenty of the more prominent men in the district waited on the government with a demand that no roads in that district be opened to automobiles.

Within a few years of the cars being allowed to run, though “practically every member of that delegation owned a motor car”, Mr. Arsenault’s book states.

“IN SEPTEMBER, 1919, I as Premier, had an Order-in-Council passed by the members of my Government which opened all the roads in the Province to motor traffic every day subject only to the restrictions imposed by the Motor Vehicle Act.

“Opposition to motor cars has been fostered by the Liberal members of the House who found it good election material. I remember attending a political meeting at Covehead in 1915 at which a prominent Charlottetown citizen was present. After the candidate had spoken, this man was called upon and he made a vicious attack on the Government for having opened the road. The man was loudly cheered.

“Among the roads which were open for certain days in the week was one which ran through one part of my electoral district. According to the law of those days, I had to stand for re-election when I became Premier.”

Ministers Had To ‘Run’ Again

TEN DAYS before the election an accident happened in the district in which a wagon was broken as the result of the horse being frightened by an automobile.

Immediately following the accident Mr. Arsenault had a strong delegation visit him – this followed “indignation meetings” - and threatened that unless the road where the accident occurred was not closed to motor cars before the election, every Conservative in that district would vote against him – and he was a Conservative.

Two days before the election they delivered their ultimatum in Mr. Arsenault’s office.

Accident Stirs Trouble

“I was very indignant, especially because these polls were French. For the first time in Acadian history, I told them, they had an opportunity to elect one of their own as Premier of a Province. I told them that I was heartily ashamed of them for their lack of patriotism for one of their own, I said that if they had done their duty as they had heretofore done, and waited until after the election and then brought their complaint, that I would have given it all the consideration in my power. But no, they thought they could come just before the election and by holding a big stick over my head, force me to do their will. I told them the road would not be closed and that they could go home and defeat me if they wished.” The polls gave him a big majority.

But enemies of the automobile did more than shout at political meetings. They set traps to cut the tires, and in some cases used pitchforks to threaten motorists who tried to pass through the district. That happened in many areas. But there was always some humor if one looked deep enough.

In the autumn of 1917 there was a function at St. Peter’s which a large number of Charlottetown people attended in motor cars. One road leading to that village was open to cars, the other, a much shorter route, which passed through Covehead was closed.

Coming back later at night the Charlottetown people took the shorter route, thinking it would be safe to do so that late at night.

The Trap Is Sprung

THE COVEHEAD lads had been anticipating that very thing and had taken hay-mower knives, lashed them to planks and buried them in the sand in the wheel tracks – there were wheel tracks in those days on many roads.

The first two automobiles in the party had their tires shredded and among the victims of the Covehead boys’ strategy, Mr. Arsenault’s Memoirs notes “was the Charlottetown citizen who had been so vociferous against cars at the Covehead meeting”.

“I was then Premier,” the Memoirs recall, “the day after the tire-cutting episode. I was waited on by a delegation of auto owners headed by the vociferous Charlottetown man who had received such cheers at the Covehead meeting. He was the speaker for

the delegation and lost no time in telling me that the delegation wanted me to have the culprits discovered and punished. I told them I was sorry for their misfortune and would endeavor to find who the guilty persons were. But I could not resist the temptation of telling the chairman of the delegation that I had not forgotten his Covehead speech and that Nemesis had apparently caught up with him.

“I engaged a detective who was not long in finding out who most of the guilty persons were. But by this time the indignation had pretty well subsided and I decided to let the whole matter drop.”

Many stories were told about the days when irate citizens took every means at their disposal to fight the hated motor car. Long since the horse, which was the main stay for transportation, as well as draught power on the farms, has become almost a rarity. He is a rarity so far as being used regularly on the farm is concerned.

Premier Arsenault deserved credit which he possibly never received in full measure, for opening the Island's roads to motor traffic.