

The Guardian, Charlottetown, Thurs., Jan. 11, 1968

ACROSS THE ISLAND

Winter Trip in 1883 Described By Priest

By NEIL A. MATHESON

I'VE BEEN SAVING this story for a period of wintry weather and the present period should do.

It's one of the many interesting old stories I found in Alf Egan's scrapbook and it's the story written by Father Osborne on his trip to Prince Edward Island in 1883. The dates were Jan. 17-20

The priest had left Saint John at 7:55 on the morning of January 17 and the train was nearing Amherst when he asked the conductor if passengers change there for P.E.I.

"Oh yes" the conductor replied, then explained, "the mail goes from there. It's 40 miles to the Strait (Northumberland) and the trip is by sleigh. You must wrap yourself up well for the trip."

The conductor added "You pay \$2.50 and work your passage, you have a strap around you, and you help pull the ice boat when that is necessary."

They had dinner at Lamy's hotel in Amherst, then set out by sleigh for the Strait. By seven o'clock they were in Port Elgin; they had travelled 21 miles in three hours.

Four Bullocks, One Horse

THE AMHERST – PORT Elgin leg had been made in an ordinary wood sleigh, the story indicates. One note of particular interest in Father Osborne's observation is that they had passed "a load of hay as big as a stack, pulled by four bullocks and one horse".

They left Port Elgin in a passenger sleigh – it had two seats. About one-half way the driver stopped to water his horses. The single lady passenger said she was cold and the driver reacted by "wrapping her in his fur cloak". The story does not say what the driver wore in place of his fur garment.

"It was a cold, dull drive. We reached Cape Tormentine about 11:15 p.m. in a snowstorm which did not promise good weather for crossing on the morrow," the priest observed.

They arose at 7:30 a.m. to find "a blinding snowstorm and no chance of crossing today".

That was 85 years ago and Father Osborne wrote, "It's not a cheerful prospect, the thought of staying at this house for two, or possibly three days, until the crossing is safe."

"There should be a better place for passengers to stay who are awaiting crossing to the Island", he observed.

The landlord had greeted the priest sullenly on his arrival Thursday night, apparently, though the story said there had been profuse apologies on Friday morning.

Describing the location, he said:

### Description Is Not Favorable

“The house stands at the point of land nearest to the lighthouse. The sea is frozen right up to the shore. It reminds me of pictures of glaciers I have seen. The shape of the waves seems to have been preserved, and there are great drifts of snow. We cannot see more than one half mile.

“All is barren marsh and the whole scene is wild and desolate beyond description. We are 40 miles from a station, and there is no town near, only the village of Bayfield two miles away,” the travelling clergyman observed.

“Unless the boats (for the Island) left before eight o’clock in the morning, it would have been better to have spent the night at Port Elgin, start from there at five in the morning and drive the eighteen miles to the Cape”, he observed, then added, “that is for anyone who is particular about quietness and company.”

His story does not give the details on why the stay at Cape Tormentine was so unpleasant.

But the priest and his companions had another day and night to remain on the New Brunswick side. Friday noon a Mr. Archibald, Island railway superintendent, who was in the party promised if they crossed tomorrow (Saturday) he would order a special train from Charlottetown to run them down.

It is now Saturday, January 20 and Father Osborne wrote, “Woke at 6:30, beautiful morning, clear and cold. It was a most beautiful sight”. But appearances can be most deceiving, as a few more lines will show.

Condensing his remarks – they are much too lengthy for the space available – they breakfasted, piled into waiting sleighs and were taken down to the edge of the ice where the men with the boats were waiting, about a mile from land.

### Infinite Disappointment

“TO OUR INFINITE disappointment”, the priest wrote, “we were told that we could not go. It seemed so strange with such a brilliant sky overhead. It seems that the wind is in the wrong quarter. Though the captain had started, hoping to cross, on coming to the edge of the ice he saw the tide, and other matters he understood, made it impossible.

“We should be out the whole day, and it was almost certain we could not land, on account of the ‘lolly’. Returning sadly we learned by telegraph that the boats that started on the other side, from the Island, had been compelled to put back. That decided it, though we cherish a vague hope that we may start later, in the middle of the day,” Father Osborne wrote.

The priest and his fellow travelers got away from the New Brunswick shore at 8:30 the following day and they reached the Island shore eight hours later to find a satisfactory hotel to accommodate guests, “far different from that on the other side”.

After a hot meal, they left by sleigh for the County-line station”, apparently Emerald, where Superintendent Archibald had the special train waiting.

That drive – it took about three hours because of heavy snow – “was the coldest thing I ever felt in my life”, the priest wrote. “The thermometer was about eight below zero, and I had been hot and excited all day, so that the reaction of sitting in the sleigh made me feel the cold the more.” The man was warmly clad in a fur coat, he had explained previously.

I have omitted Father Osborne’s description of the actual trip in the ice boats, for there’s no space to tell it, but it told of the passengers and crewmen, pulling the boats on the ice, then hopping on to the boats when they struck slushy ice, or open water. It told of the skilful captains of the ice boat crews selecting the best leads, and the direction the passage could best be affected.

### Difficult And Hazardous

IT WAS A DIFFICULT and sometimes hazardous trip. But the travelling priest had the ability to see some beauty and enjoyment in the experience. How about this, for example:

“No words could do justice to the experience. The brilliant blue sky and sunshine, the spotless purity of the snow, the deep, deep blue of the water, the grace and quaintness of the ice-slopes all around, made a picture that must be seen, to be known at all.

“The utter loneliness of our little band, seeing nothing but heaps of ice around, and the sky overhead, was very striking. The thrill of excitement as the ice crashes beneath you, and the shout of the men as the boat is dragged up from the water on to the ice field again, are beyond all words.”

### Sleigh Ride Was Enjoyed

REGARDING THE DRIVE to Emerald he wrote:

“The glory of the cold night ride under a brilliant moon and diamond stars was wonderful. The long train of sleighs bearing mails, or passengers, winding over the moonlight snow, looked like an army on the march, the bells tinkling sweetly on the still air.”

They arrived in Charlottetown at 9:30 p.m. “just three days later than I had hoped,” Father Osborne noted.

Despite the hardships the travelling priest wrote he was glad to have had the experience. “It is hardly to be had anywhere else in the world. It will always be a pleasant memory to me. There are also many other pleasant memories of my visit to Prince Edward Island which remain with me, and I have to thank the Islanders for much kindness.”

Looking back on his stay at Tormentine, he noted that “except for a somewhat rough greeting on arrival, I was treated with perfect courtesy by all during the whole of my three days stay there”.

AS I EXPECT to be in hospital for several weeks I do not expect this column will appear for a few weeks, possibly not until some time next month.