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ACROSS THE ISLAND

Snow Fighting Tales Interesting, Exciting

By NEIL A. MATHESON

THE BAD SNOW year the old timers talk about is 1904-05 and it really was a bad winter, I am told by a number of people. Jack Cameron, born December 25, 1891, tells me it really was the bad winter. And he remembered 1922-23 as well. It was also a bad snow winter, Mr. Cameron tells me, but it was not as bad as 1904-05.

Norman Nicholson, Charlottetown tells me he remembers his parents telling him that "mother came home from the hospital the night before the big January storm started, and that was the last train to pass Elliot's station for 21 days."

Mr. Cameron told me on Friday that his brother, Angus Cameron, was on a snow train that took five weeks to come from Tignish to Fredericton.

Jack Cameron was a fireman on an engine that was part of a three-engine train that left Charlottetown for Fredericton and took three weeks to get there.

The worst fighting the Charlottetown train encountered was in the Watt's cutting area, just east of Wiltshire.

Telegraph Poles Were Buried

THERE WASN'T a telegraph pole to be seen at all, he recalls. There were six men shovelling snow from the track level, to the man on top of the cutting who threw the snow back; one of the men shovelling the snow to the other one.

The storm started January 10 and it snowed every day until April. At least there was some snow falling every day, Mr. Cameron explained.

Once the snow train crews did get through, and got the road opened between Charlottetown and Summerside, they didn't have much trouble keeping it open the rest of the winter.

But, he explained, take six weeks from January 10 and you are getting close to spring. The worst part of the winter was over.

Back to 1905 long enough to recall that Jack Cameron (John E. Cameron to give his right name) is the only member now alive of the train crews that fought their way through the terrible snow banks of 1905. Manning the three engines from Charlottetown were engineers Herb Love, Anthony Flynn, and Dan MacDonald. Mr. Cameron was fireman with Dan MacDonald, Tom Clark was with Flynn and Walter Craswell was firing for Love.

No Bed In Three Weeks

NEVER IN ALL those three weeks did the train crews ever sleep in a bed. The section men along the track would bring them something to eat.

The snow was shoveled into the engine where it was turned to water and later into steam for power. We drank the snow water and also used it for our tea, Mr. Cameron

recalls as he added that the melted snow water was sometimes “flavored a bit” in the process of the snow being shovelled into the engine and all the rest.

Mr. Cameron told me that once, though, a man named Keefe brought the train crews a hot dinner of corned beef and cabbage. I have never forgotten that meal, nor the kind-hearted man who brought it, Mr. Cameron told me.

Frank Tinney – H.E. Moore

FRANK TINNEY has kindly offered to tell me something more about the snow winters. And Friday night – I wrote this column Friday afternoon – I had a letter from H.E. Moore, Weymouth Street with some interesting news and comments from the old snow winters.

I hope to talk with Mr. Tinney and with Mr. Moore this week and tell you about it next week.

Back to the 1922-23 winter, an unusual story is that Stanhope MacLeod walked from Charlottetown to Montague when the trains were snow bound.

Mr. MacLeod was a Prince of Wales College student at the time. I remember this powerfully built young man; indeed I went to Prince of Wales with him at one time.

For those in other parts of the country, Montague is 30 miles from Charlottetown. Mr. MacLeod left Charlottetown at four o'clock in the afternoon and reached Montague at two in the morning, a sister, Mrs. David Schurman, Charlottetown tells me. Another sister, Mrs. E.H. Stewart, Montague also told me about Stanhope's long walk.

Back to Norman Nicholson and his story, Mr. Nicholson lived on the Junction Road as it was called back in those days. The name now is “Glen Valley” and that is close to Fredericton.

I have talked, Norman, to both John (Sugar) Gordon and to Fred Moore about that hockey special in which you were snow bound at Emerald for more than a week.

Sugar told me the “Special” might have made it to Charlottetown that night, except for the fact the passengers had scattered after the hockey game and could not be rounded up early enough to start for town earlier.

No. 39 Got Through

“NO 39” got to Charlottetown that night, he told me, and that was the regular passenger train on the Borden – Charlottetown run.

To new readers or newcomers to the Island, the special was a hockey special to Summerside carrying the Abegweit hockey team and their fans for a game against the Crystals. Gordon was a star left winger and Moore was a staunch defenceman.

A snow-bound victim himself, Norman says “we ate everything edible in Emerald including some of the toughest meat that was ever cooked.”

For Emerald readers, though, this little village made a remarkably good job of caring for the needs of more than 100 guests that were dumped on them by the storm. Everyone to whom I have talked tells me you Emerald people were kind to them.

Talking of snow fighting and this is the 1923 winter, Norman says in part:

“During that winter we shoveled snow that was drifted so deep in the cuttings between Fredericton and Elliots that each cube cut from the hard-packed snow had to

be handled by three men, the second man on a ledge half-way up the cutting who threw it over the top to be carried away by a third.

“Cuttings were so deep that the whole train would be out of sight for more than a quarter of a mile, just a plume of black smoke showing.

Two Men Were Killed

“SEVERAL PEOPLE lost their lives that winter, when they became trapped in cuttings too high to climb when caught by a train. I was a Telegraph student with John F. MacMillan at Hunter River when we had to remove the body of a man from under the train; he had been trapped in a cutting near North Wiltshire, Mr. Nicholson recalls.

“It was Billy MacKinnon, brother of our then Chief Despatcher, Ewen MacKinnon.

“Another section man was trapped and killed at Colville; it was extremely dangerous to walk on the track, but the depth of the snow left no choice.”

Mr. Nicholson has an optimistic prediction for us so far as the rest of this winter is concerned. “It has been my observation”, he says, “that a great deal of snow in December will make a long winter, but not necessarily a bad one; it is continual storms and drifting every day during the blustery months of February and March that cause the real trouble, when every time a cutting is plowed out it refills.”

HE DRAWS an interesting comparison between steam engines as used in 1923 and the Diesel engines in use now. The steam engines had little power when stalled, or moving slowly so it was necessary to couple two or three together behind a wedge plow, then back up a half mile and go into a cutting as fast as they turn a wheel. Thus they depended on the force of five hundred, or more, tons of steel to punch a hole through the drift.

If the engines did not make it they were in trouble as it would take an army of men with shovels to remove the snow packed around them and release them one at a time.

Method Was ‘Also Dangerous’

THIS METHOD was also dangerous as the plow might ride up on the hard packed snow, turn crosswise in the cutting and be smashed into kindling wood.

It was thrilling to see, but the cold, the constant steam and smoke from the big coal burners and the contest danger made snow fighting in those days a real man’s job, he adds.