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ACROSS THE ISLAND

Old 'Food Balance' Is Historical Item

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I've seen so many unusual things in my travels for "Across the Island" that it takes something really unusual to surprise me now after five years of research. But I saw an article at Dan McLean's home in De Gros Marsh recently that really ranks among the top historical items in this province.

I don't know exactly what people called it, but it is a balance that was used by the immigrants many years ago, to weigh out the food allotments they received each day in the ships that brought them across the Atlantic from the old land. In this case the immigrants came from Scotland, for it was Dan's forefathers who brought it.

Most of you are familiar with the cheap type of wooden coat hanger. It's a small piece of wood, curved to fit a coat or some other garment, and it has a wire hook in the center on which it hangs.

THE WOODEN frame of the 'food balance', Dan McLean showed me, is almost exactly similar to that kind of wooden coat hanger frame.. On top of the wood, at either end, there is carved a niche on which a cord can be hung. Instead of a wire hook, there is a wooden attachment in the centre which can be grasped easily by a human hand, so that it is suspended in the air. A weight of exactly two pounds is hung on one end of the balance. On the other end food was meted out, until it balanced the two-pound weight.

The two-pound weight was a crude stone wrapped in a bit of tough cloth, with a string to suspend it from the end of the balance.

Dan's mother, Mrs. Jerome McLean, told him that once the food portion for the day was allotted, the travelling family had to get along with it. There were no seconds, there was no second chance. Some of the older people had told her that sometimes people, especially children, died on the ocean because there was not enough food and water to sustain them properly.

Horrible Thought – But Difficult Times

THAT STORY is passed down from early settlers and there's no way of checking into it. But isn't it a horrible thought? Critics should remember, though, that those were difficult times, and perilous journeys. Those were sailing vessels and they could make the trip in two months – Rev. Donald Nicholson's people came over in exactly two months – but the trip could actually take much longer. So the food supply had to be rationed strictly. Otherwise it was possible – though it wasn't probable that the lives of all would be endangered by breaking the strict food rationing regime.

Getting back to that old 'food balance' – that's the name I've given it for lack of a better one – there's a place for it in the Provincial Museum, if the McLeans are willing to part with it. I saw Dan a few days ago when he dropped in for a chat, but I forgot to tell him.

I was talking to Moncrieff Williamson, curator of the Art Gallery and the Museum, Dan, and he told me he would welcome such an historical item, if it is available.

Old Store Had School Upstairs

GEORGE MACDONALD, St. Georges gave me an old stone inkwell that would date back to approximately 1830, his people have told him. George also gave me a piece of an old clay pipe stem. It was found when he was cultivating a roadside field, that had been used for a winter road in days gone by. Mr. MacDonald picked it up this year in cropping time.

An old building on the MacDonald place – the father is Augustus MacDonald – is interesting. It was a country store in the old days, and one year school for the pupils of the district was held upstairs. It was after the regular school had been burned, and the upstairs over the store had been used until a new school was built.

The building had been owned by Ronald McCormac, father of Wilfred McCormac in Albany, and the late Pic McCormac whom many remember here, was another son. Land for the school had been given by Ronald McCormac, I was told.

THE BUILDING – It's used as a granary now, I believe – had the steepest pitched roof I have ever seen. We picked up an old cork in the loft where the school had been held. It was made of metal of some type, that would screw into the bottle.

A narrow window, with colored glass, was over the door of the old St. Michael's Church in Launching. The church had closed in 1860, and it was built, perhaps, around 1800, it was estimated by Mr. MacDonald, and by Dan McLean who was with me at the time.

The old church had been a successor to the original log church that had stood opposite the Launching cemetery, or the present Launching school, they told me. The present church was built in 1952 when the one built in 1860 was burned.

Anson Bomber Story Is Interesting

The wreck of an old Anson bomber back of the MacDonald barn brought another story. These bombers were on sale at the local airport sometime after the end of World War Two, and the MacDonalds wanted the big wheels to make a farm trailer. But they found they had to take the entire plane fuselage – the engines had been stripped out previously.

THE MACDONALDS had no desire for a plane, they only wanted the wheels. That meant they had to tow the plane across the old Hillsboro Bridge. And it was too narrow to handle the width of the plane. They trimmed it down as narrow as possible and headed for the bridge, but the RCMP stopped them. Highway traffic was moving at the time, and the Mounties told them they would have to wait until 9 o'clock next morning to get across.

But after waiting until four o'clock in the morning they decided to chance a crossing. They took an hour to get across and they give a lot of credit to an unknown man who followed them closely with his car, so that his headlights showed the way, and they were able to steer the awkward trailing plane across even though they did get caught at times and had to spend time getting free and start in all over again.

George took me down to the site of an old saw pit that was used in the years when a shipyard was in operation on the opposite bank of the river known as Narrows Creek in those days.

The contours of the pit have long since faded out, but there was a sort of natural elevation on one side, where the upper sawyer stood, and you still could see the lower level where the man below stood. This was before the days of rotary saws for ripping boards, planks, etc. from logs. So the job had to be done the hard way, by manual labor.