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ACROSS THE ISLAND

Friday Trip Recalls Historical Ice Boats

By NEIL A. MATHESON

TOMORROW MORNING the pages of history will be turned back 100 years or more when a half-dozen Prince County men leave the Borden, or Cape Traverse area with a replica of one of the ice-boats that once served as the winter link with the mainland.

Art Clark of Summerside dreamed up the idea as his Asphalt Products Limited company's contribution to the Centennial celebrations. I think it's one of the most interesting, and newsworthy Centennial stunt of which I have heard thus far.

Seeking a touch of realism this man who once was a university football team mate, will have the boat carrying a packet of mail – ice boats carried mail in the days that are gone – and his only concern now is will the chaps really get across the Strait?

Joining in the spirit of the event Premier Alex Campbell is mailing letters to each of the other Atlantic Province premiers – they'll be carried in the boat – and I believe Agriculture Minister Daniel MacDonald will be sending a bag of Island spuds along as well.

The crew for the occasion, Art tells me, will be Alfred Groom, Summerside; Captain Ken Merriam of the Borden-Tormentine car ferries; Bob Waugh, Wilmot; Edward Arsenault, Wellington and Ken Judson and Richard Allen, Summerside.

A column on March 20, 1964 had the story told me by Ed MacWilliams, Cape Traverse who was a member of the ice-boat crew from 1909 until the Prince Edward Island's arrival on the route wiped out the service.

Old Ice-Boats Were Heavy

TOMORROW'S BOAT will be reasonably light, I understand, but Mr. McWilliams and his pals handled boats that weighed 800 pounds and carried up to 600 pounds of mail. In addition there were lady passengers who paid \$3.00 for the ride. Men paid \$2.00 and helped pull the boat when it was being hauled across stretches of ice. The price of \$4.00 was set for men who wished to ride as passengers but this was discharged as much as possible, the Cape Traverse man told me.

The ice-boat communication with the mainland was started back in 1755 one old document tells me. Birch bark canoes were used and the man urging the service was Governor Walter Patterson, the old clipping said.

An old Guardian tells me that about 1827 the people in the Cape Traverse area conceived the idea of making a crossing from there – the distance would be shorter for one thing. Old stories I found are not consistent but one set of yarns said the regular crossings from Cape Traverse started in 1829.

Wood Islands Vs Cape Traverse

THE REGISTER of February 13, 1827 said that a sort of test was being run to see if the Wood Islands route was the best, or whether the Cape Traverse crossing would be better.

The paper said that a messenger (no name was given) was dispatched by the Cape Traverse route on Saturday for the purpose of crossing to Cape Tormentine and thence to Amherst with a letter to the postmaster there. He was to carry back an answer.

The regular courier by the Wood Islands route, a Mr. Smith was to proceed with the mails on his usual route, leaving on Sunday morning.

The times of their return, the Register said, would determine the disputed point as to which is the better route.

The Register of February 27 said that Mr. Smith had arrived with the English and Colonial mails on the previous Sunday, but nothing was said about the man who went by the Capes route.

Mr. Smith, apparently, made his trips alone, and on foot, which drew from the Register the comment "The energy, strength and daring of the man was wonderful."

The Weekly Examiner of 1885 quoted a Capt. Irving of Cape Traverse as saying mail carrying by the Capes had begun prior to 1827, which is not in accord with other notes I found. Irving said that the mails had been carried by a wiry Scot named MacRae, who started from Charlottetown with dispatches from the Governor, and a few English letters. When he reached Cape Traverse he waited for favorable weather, then crossed the Strait and proceeded on foot to Amherst, and delivered the mail into the hands of the regular courier there who took them to Halifax.

Later, Irving said, a courier named Campbell took the mails and carried them personally as far as Halifax.

Capt. Irving also told the Weekly Examiner that a man named Campbell inaugurated the ice-boat system – presumably at Cape Traverse. He had a boat's crew to cross the Strait and remain at Tormentine until his return from Halifax. The man "made monthly trips", Capt. Irving said.

Weekly Trips About 1830

WEEKLY TRIPS were started about 1830, Irving told the Weekly Examiner, and his brothers, Montague and Phillip Irving, were the contractors. They landed mails weekly at Cape Tormentine and they were taken from there by couriers to Amherst, and distributed from that point.

The weekly service was continued until 1861, Irving stated, when Hon. William Pope, then Provincial Secretary, changed them to semi-weekly and afterwards to tri-weekly. They remained that way until 1873 when the Dominion Government took over the service and ordered mails to be carried daily across the Strait.

Some interesting comment has been received on the recent ice-breaker stories by letter, telephone and personal talks. Father Lawrence Landrigan, St. Dunstan's University told me that Dan Hector MacKinnon of Burnt Point used to tell of his hauling a load of bread to the Northern Light once when she was stuck in the ice somewhere off Boughton Island.

Garfield Roberts, High Bank told me sometime ago that they used to watch the ice-breakers stuck in the ice out in the Straits, when he was a youngster.

The First Passengers

MRS. ALFRED MacLeod, Charlottetown tells me that she and her husband, Capt. Alfred MacLeod were the first passengers to arrive in Charlottetown on the Prince Edward Island. Here's how that happened.

Captain John Murchison was in command – he had taken the ship from the Tyne where she had been built – and had asked Captain MacLeod, a warm friend, and Mrs. MacLeod to make the trip to Charlottetown. They arrived in Charlottetown on January 31, 1916, Mrs. MacLeod tells me.

Captain MacLeod and Mrs. MacLeod had made the crossing from Georgetown on the Stanley. Returning they found that the Prince Edward Island was loading coal at Pictou, met the captain and got the trip in the new car ferry.

ULRIC DAWSON writes an interesting letter from Yarmouth. "I was at Wellington Barracks, Halifax in the spring of 1915 and the new car ferry "Prince Edward Island" arrived there unannounced. The four smokestacks, because of the angle of approach, appeared as though they were in line and the guns of the shore batteries were trained on her, suspecting her of being a German battleship", Col. Dawson writes.

"The order to fire was withheld and she has undoubtedly proven herself to be the outstanding ice breaker of all time as far as P.E.I. is concerned", the Yarmouth man observes.

Carried P.E.I. Highlanders

THE CARFERRY was brought to Charlottetown in June of 1915 and transported the P.E.I. Highlanders to the mainland, enroute to Valcartier and subsequently overseas, he adds.

Mr. Dawson was born and brought up within three miles of Cape Traverse, his brother, Elmer, was a member of the ice-boat crews and his uncle, the late Gordon Dawson, had the contract for many years for hauling mails from the edge of the board ice – where the ice-boats would land – to Summerside by sleigh. He hopes to live to see the completion of the causeway-bridge-tunnel crossing now being built.

Incidentally, Alex Scott, Charlottetown tells me that the Earl Grey was sold to Russia in 1914. The note in Jane's Fighting Ships says she was transferred to Russia in 1915, but presumably the actual official transfer was delayed. I don't think anyone would question the accuracy of this official publication.

MY THANKS to Mr. White for a most interesting letter. I hope to visit you soon, sir, to get more of your story. It was Captain John Murchison who took the Earl Grey to Russia in 1914, Mr. White tells me.