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ACROSS THE ISLAND

Travelling By Car Different In 1918

By NEIL A. MATHESON

A FLASH back to the days of slow cars, slower roads and a lack of the kind of motoring and catering service we know now, comes in a letter from, and a later chat with Athol D. MacLeod, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

A reference to the time when motorists had to drive their cars up a ramp and then on to flatcars, then be loaded on to the Prince Edward Island car ferry by shunting engines, started the train of thought in Mr. MacLeod's mind.

The automobile-carrying flatcars were shunted into the car ferry, with their passengers still sitting inside them.

Ladders were furnished to the automobile occupants to climb down onto the lower deck level. From there they went to the cafeteria and lounge level. On arrival on the other side of the Strait, the procedure was reversed, as the flatcars were shunted to the siding, then the autos were driven off the flat cars and down the ramps to ground level.

Long, Difficult Journey

IT REQUIRED many hours with over-night stops, bad roads, detours and cars that would not travel fast, to come from Cambridge to Prince Edward Island in those far-off days. It would be perhaps 1918.

"WE would leave Cambridge at one o'clock in the morning and make the first stop at the New Eastern Hotel at Machias, Maine next evening at 5 p.m. "Next day, with an early start the travelers would make St. John and the Dufferin Hotel – the Admiral Beatty stands there now. "Next day, if we made it to Sussex, it was a good day of travelling," Athol wrote. There they stayed at the Depot Hotel. Next day we would try to make it to Cape Tormentine and the Seaside Hotel for the overnight stay. Next day they would cross to P.E.I.

During a chat with Mr. MacLeod in late summer, he told me sometimes they would actually cross the strait that evening, instead of laying up at Tormentine over night.

Narrow roads, sharp turns, hills that were sharp, with no grading up at the bottom or cutting down at the top, combined with low-power automobile engines to make the trip slow in comparison with today's high-speed traffic.

The drive-to-the-left rule of the road on Prince Edward Island was another handicap to visitors from other parts.

"We'd be driving along on the right side of the road, then suddenly pull sharply to the left" as the approaching car snapped the visitor out of his long established habit of driving on the right side of the road at home.

'Drive To Right' Came In 1924

IT WAS in the summer of 1924 that we changed the rule-of-the-road here to drive to the right. "I remember having a near collision," Mr. MacLeod recalls, the first time he landed on P.E.I. with an automobile.

Once at least he drove from Cambridge to P.E.I. with a Model T Ford that had the "planetary transmission" – that was the one with the three foot pedals. One was reverse, one pedal was a brake and the other pedal shifted the gears.

You pushed the pedal to the floor to put the car in low gear, then you let it snap up when you judged the vehicle was moving fast enough to travel in high gear. There was no second or intermediate gear, as it was sometimes called.

Back in those days drivers boasted if their cars could take steep hills in second gear, and I'm talking now about the other automobiles that had the three forward gears.

Gordon MacDonald dropped in as I was writing this and he recalls hearing his dad, S. A. MacDonald, and his cronies say that car owners used to boast if they could make the grade from the old Drill Shed to where the Charlottetown Hotel stands now, in high gear. "If they could, they 'were made' for a month," Gordon observed. And that is only a slight grade, compared to the hills that existed in the country at that time.

Gordon recalled also that his father's first car, a Cadillac, had the levers on the outside of the car, though the pedals would have to be inside for the feet to operate them.

Getting back to Mr. McLeod, he recalled that the automobile would start to vibrate at 35 to 40 miles per hour, so they usually drove under that. He was referring then, I understood, to the old Model T Fords.

But the roads would not have accommodated speed, even though there had been powerful and speedy cars, he observed.

John Fraser At Summerside

ATHOL RECALLS that his grandfather, John Fraser, was the lighthouse tender on the Railway Wharf at Summerside for many years. The three lights from the breakwater outside Summerside harbor, the lights on Railway Wharf, and the light on Glover's Shore were called Range lights, which guided ships to the wharves by following the straight line of lights. Athol recalls the old icebreakers like the Minto, the Stanley and the Earl Grey, but I had a lot on them early this year.

Shipping Island produce to other parts of Canada, and elsewhere must have been a slow, laborious and costly operation in those days before the Prince Edward Island went into service as a freight carrier in the late summer of 1917.

Athol recalls that the Halls threshers, Island potatoes and turnips and other commerce was transported to the Summerside railway wharf, for example, by narrow gauge trains, loaded into the holds of the Empress, taken across the Strait to Cape Tormentine and unloaded and then re-loaded on standard railway cars there.

I talked before in this column of the time when narrow gauge and standard gauge cars were used on our railroad, and Mr. MacLeod suggests ours was the only railroad in the world featuring two widths of carrying tracks.

'Charles A. Dunning' Aground

MR. MACLEOD also told me of an experience on the Wood Islands-Caribou ferry crossing, and this would be much later, when they loaded their automobile on the Charles A. Dunning, which grounded in heavy fog some distance on this side of Caribou.

It was in the area of Gull Rock, he believes, and the ship hit with such force "it almost threw us to the deck", Mr. MacLeod recalled.

They signaled the Prince Nova – this was one of the first ships, not the one now in use – and she made an unsuccessful attempt to pull the Dunning off.

The passengers were taken off in a Scallop dragger and taken to Caribou, where they were transported to Pictou by bus.

The Dunning went aground on the early morning trip from Wood Islands and it was four o'clock next afternoon before they got word to come down to Caribou and get their automobiles. The Dunning had arrived after getting mobile again.

Herb MacKenzie and Mrs. MacKenzie who live on Prince Street here, were with Mr. MacLeod at that time.

Athol MacLeod is a son of the late Alex MacLeod who was born in Rose Valley in this province. He is vice-president of A.E. Long and Company that operates undertaking parlors in Cambridge, Mass.