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ACROSS THE ISLAND

Diphtheria Epidemic Is Foretold By Lights

By NEIL A. MATHESON

“IT WAS in the year 1878 in the month of February”, writes Morley M. Bell, QC, Summerside, “when an epidemic of Diphtheria struck Carleton (near what is now Borden) and carried away about one-half of the young people of the district.

“At that time, Miscouche and Lot 16 were almost wholly in forest and most of the lumbering was done in that area for ship-building at Summerside. As money was usually scarce, many farmers would go there for a few weeks in the Fall and Winter.

“My grandfather (on my mother’s side) Thomas Myers, who resided at Carleton, was working in the lumber woods at Miscouche when the epidemic struck. Several of his children were down with it, and one of his neighbors drove to Miscouche for him.

“When returning that night, as they were nearing his home, they plainly saw three lights on the top of the tallest spruce trees, and both spoke on the strangeness of the lights and as they approached the house the lights took a sharp dip and appeared to disappear through the window into the living-room, where shortly three of the children would be laid out in death.

“Upon arriving at the house, he spoke of the lights and asked his wife about them and she explained that they had no lights that would show and certainly none that would appear on the trees. The epidemic raged through the district and usually carried off every second one in the families. Before a month was out, three of my grandfather’s children, one boy and two girls, every second child, were dead.

Told By His Mother

“MY MOTHER told me of the three lights as told to her by her parents, as she was very young when it happened and had no personal remembrance. Her parents believed it explicitly and many other neighbors who know of it, and especially as the neighbor who brought my grandfather home was a personal eye-witness, and many amazing forerunners of distress and of death were related over the years, and in this case, and in many others, the persons relating them were sincere and honest in their beliefs.

“Although some may find it hard to believe, it is equally hard, if not harder, to disbelieve”, Mr. Bell concludes.

A LETTER this week from Muriel A. MacInnis (Mrs. Kenneth) of Hunter River has some interesting references to Islanders at Queens University – there have been many – and in particular to Mrs. MacInnis’s brother, Rev. O.R. Lavers, M.A., B.D. who is now retired in Lethbridge, Alberta after a long period of service with the church – he was ordained in 1916.

Rev. Mr. Lavers was born and brought up in Georgetown and for more than 20 years, he relates, attended St. David’s Presbyterian Church there. “As a boy I sat on Sundays in front of a memorial tablet to Dr. Snodgras and as Georgetown is only a few miles from Lower Montague, I knew Everett MacNeill’s old home”, Mr. Lavers recalls.

Distinguished Careers

SNODGRAS and MacNeill had distinguished careers at Queens, and both had Island connections. William Snodgras was born in Scotland but acted as supply minister in St. James Church, Charlottetown from 1852 to 1855.

Snodgras was later ordained and inducted into this pastoral charge, Mr. Lavers relates.

In 1856 Snodgras was called to St. Paul's Church in Montreal, Lavers adds. Snodgras was later principal of Queens.

(William Snodgras, a son of Auld Scotland, came to P.E.I. as a missionary of the Presbyterian Church and preached for some years in St. James in Charlottetown, though the actual building has been replaced by the present structure. Snodgras was principal of Queens 1827-1905. (?))

(George Munroe Grant was born near Pictou, N.S. in 1835 but came to Prince Edward Island in the early 1860's, and had charge of three congregations, the largest of them Georgetown. He was Queens Principal 1877 until his death in 1902.

(William Everett MacNeill, 1876 to 1959 was a son of the Island. He was born at Lower Montague, was appointed assistant professor of English at Queens in 1909 and rose to head of the University after a period of distinguished service there.)

(These are the men to whom Mr. Lavers refers at times in his letter to his old Alma Mater.)

This column had a detailed reference to Dr. MacNeill some time ago, thanks to an ardent fan of Queens, and a graduate who modestly refuses to let me use his name.

Possibly I may review later the Island connections, including that of William Everett MacNeill, the son of this province, who served Queens so long and so well. A recent Queens' publication notes that MacNeill "served Queens so long and so well".

So much for the men to whom Mr. Lavers refers in his recent letter to Queens, a copy of which Mrs. MacInnis has enclosed.

"I knew William Everett MacNeill's former home, including the school where he taught", Lavers writes.

"Then", Mr. Lavers adds, "I followed 'Everett' and the Lairds to Prince of Wales College in Charlottetown, where 1 of ten attended St. James Presbyterian Church where the memory of Dr. Snodgras was revered.

Followed To Queens

"IN 1910" Mr. Lavers adds, "I followed Everett and the Lairds to Kingston, and to Queens", where he attended English classes taught by MacNeill among others.

At Queens he met Alexander MacPhail – he was known familiarly as 'Sandy' and he was a Queens Professor. Memory tells me that this man organized a company of Engineers from Queens' students, for service in the First Great War, 1914-1918.

Mr. Lavers notes in a letter to a Queens publication:

"After graduation from Queens Theological College with a B.D. degree and the Queens Research Travelling Scholarship, I went to the University of Chicago Divinity School where I obtained an M.A. degree in Sociology and for the second year an acting fellowship in the Divinity School.

In 1916, Lavers adds, "I visited P.E.I. and was invited to preach in St. David's Church from the pulpit made famous by three Queens' principals, Snodgras, Grant and Gordon.

"I am no doubt the only living person" says Lavers, "who knew all of the famous Islanders at Queens."

Highest Scholarship Obtainable

MRS. MACINNIS notes that the Queens Research Travelling Scholarship which her brother mentions so modestly "is the highest scholarship obtainable at Queens and permits the recipient to do post graduate study at the university of his choice in any part of the world.

"My brother chose Chicago and again won high standing as noted."

Ordained as a Presbyterian minister in 1916, Rev. O.R. Lavers held pastorates in various parts of Alberta. Now a retired United Church minister, he is still very active as a member of the session in Southminster Church, Lethbridge, also in musical circles there where his son, Tom, is a leading musician. Another son, George, has a distinguished career in medicine and now practices in California, U.S.A.