

The Guardian, Charlottetown, Thurs., Jan. 4, 1968

ACROSS THE ISLAND

1925 Whale Invasion Troublesome Episode

By NEIL A. MATHESON

VINCENT MACDONALD, Little Pond told me some of the interesting details of the invasion of that area by Black Fish – the date was October 29, 1925. Mrs. MacDonald recalled the date because they had just come home from voting at the federal election.

There were 60 of the Black Fish which are small whales. They were about 14 feet long and they came ashore right below the MacDonald home. One of our dictionaries says a Black Fish is a “Craing” (?) whale.

The following Sunday the shore was lined with people who had come from far and near to see the unusual sight. The fish lived three or four days, Mr. MacDonald told me.

Harry MacLean, Souris, this man was a long time Conservative member of the legislature, came to the area on Friday and told Mr. MacDonald there was valuable oil in the head of the whales. Later the oil proved to be worth \$10 a gallon and Mr. MacDonald and a neighbor, Alan MacKenzie got \$400 from the 15 whales they hauled up on the MacKenzie farm.

We were working on the potatoes – they had been dug but were in non-frost proof buildings and we didn’t know at first whether we’d bother with the whales, Mr. MacDonald told me. However they looked after the spuds first, then cut the heads off 15 whales, hauled them to the MacKenzie farm where there was a very large boiler for boiling feed for the pigs.

40 Gallons Worth \$400

THE OIL was rendered from the blubber in the head of the whale. The heads would be about one half the size of the old half barrel people used to buy with herring.

“We got 40 gallons of oil from the 15 Black Fish”, Mr. MacDonald recalled. That would be a great sum of money back in those days.

The only regret of Mr. MacDonald and his neighbor was that they had not hauled more of the whales ashore and taken the oil from their heads. None of the other whales were treated that way, apparently.

Some farmers who had fox ranches hauled some of the fish home and fed them to the foxes, I was told.

Stench Strong Despite Burial

THE MACDONALD MACKENZIE pair buried the bodies of the 15 whales in MacKenzie’s field but it was hard to bury such big objects with pick and shovels; this would be before the days of bulldozers and other heavy earth moving equipment.

So the burial was not complete. It wasn’t complete enough to stop the stench drifting toward the houses every time the wind was in the right direction or should I say the wrong direction.

Some of the carcasses were left on the shore and the stench from their carcasses offended the nostrils of the community for several years.

Mrs. MacDonald told me that one or two people in the vicinity tried to use the whale oil for shortening for baking. But the attempt was unsuccessful. There was more stink than anything else, apparently. I didn't ask for the names of the people who tried it.

The tide was not unusually high the time the whales came ashore, Mr. MacDonald told me. And they never did seem to try to get out again when the high tides would come. Instead the Black Fish appeared to try to get their bodies further ashore, he reported.

\$12.00 Souris To Winnipeg

MR. MACDONALD went on the harvest excursion in 1906 and he paid \$12 for a ticket from Souris to Winnipeg, he told me.

They took some lunch with them for the journey and the train stopped at stations where they could buy a bite to eat. The trip took a whole week, Mr. MacDonald said.

They received \$2.50 a day and board for their work. They had breakfast with lamplight and supper with lamplight. They had dinner at the house. They had to clean the horse stable before they went to the field in the morning. The man with whom they worked had two four-horse teams and a saddle horse.

The threshing machine was powered by the old steam engines which burned straw and kept one man busy forking the straw into the fire box.

Here we have to wait until the dew is off the grain before starting with the harvester binders used in those days but out there there was no dew, you could start as soon as there was light enough to see, Mr. MacDonald told me.

Many a Prince Edward Island boy stayed in the West after going on the harvest excursion but Vincent MacDonald came home in late October, though there still was threshing to do. There was a lot of rainy weather and they got paid only when they worked, so they decided to pack up and come home.

In order to get the same low price return fare, the farmer with whom a man worked had to sign the ticket. Mr. MacDonald's farmer signed his.

They left the Island on August 8, they left for home about October 20. Mr. MacDonald and his pals worked with a farmer about 40 miles west of Winnipeg.

Alkali Water Bothered Them

THE ALKALI water bothered the Islanders a lot. They drank skim milk instead of water most of the time, he recalled.

"Did you like the skim milk?" I asked. "It was better than drinking that water," he replied although he was not enthusiastic about the milk either.

The farmer had a herd of cattle and two of the cows were milking.

When he arrived home his father had bought a gang plow and that was really something in those days. It would turn two furrows at a time and a farmer could turn three acres or more with a good walking trio of horses. And that was a big improvement on the old single plow with the narrow bottom.

Sackville Plow, Pin Harrows

WHEN MR. MACDONALD was young he recalls that they had a Sackville plow and a set of pin harrows. And that was all they had to cultivate the land. Getting the soil broken up properly with the pin harrows was really a job.

Most farmers used their pin harrows, though they would have to (?) pins or spikes, as some called them, in the blacksmith shop.

He recalls that his father sowed all of the grain by hand, he sowed the grass seed the same way and that's something I have never been able to understand. How the men could sow this seed evenly when they couldn't even see it on the ground is something that has always caused me to wonder.

The first mechanical seeder – it was drawn by one horse – is still in the MacDonald barn at Little Pond.

Notes On Leadership Races

ANGUS MACLEAN has made no announcement as to whether he will offer for the PC party leadership here. I'll tell you now that Mr. MacLean will not offer at this time. Talks with PCs here indicate Mel McQuaid, MP as a likely favorite, if he offers.

MY NOTE ON Hon. Paul Martin as the favorite for the federal Liberal leadership race brought many comments. All agreed with my idea that Mr. Martin is the man most likely to make it. There must be those who think differently, but nobody has expressed that idea to me.