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ACROSS THE ISLAND

Murder Stalks Desable Woods

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TODAY'S COLUMN takes us to Desable for the murder of Jerry Sweeney, a likable pack pedlar in the early 1800's, and the story of the United Church at Desable which once served the Crapaud Methodist congregation and was torn down stick by stick, and hauled to the present site. Also involved is a story of the Lorne Orange Lodge which met for some years in a blacksmith's forge, but that will come as the story develops.

Sweeney had sold out his pack and was on his way to Charlottetown with 10 pounds Sterling in the pockets of the brown corduroy suit he always wore. He had stayed overnight with the MacAlders, an elderly, highly respected couple. The previous night had been spent at Stordy's Mills. Neither place is standing now, though traces of the old cellar remains.

That was the last the countryside knew of Sweeney who disappeared as completely as though the ground had opened to swallow him, and many a family wondered what had become of the man they had liked to see coming to their home.

Some years later Christopher Smith - he lived just back of the site of the present Crapaud cemetery, parts of the cellar are still visible - called in a neighbour for a death bed revelation. Sweeney had been murdered by two brothers who had lived not far away, but had later moved to New Brunswick and by that time were both dead.

Corduroy Suit Marked Victim

SMITH HAD come upon them that early December morning as they were burying the body of the man whom he recognized at once by the brown corduroy suit, At first they were going to kill Smith too, but he managed to talk them out of it, but only on his solemn oath that he would never breathe a word of what he had seen. The secret had often bothered Smith, but somehow he had kept it bottled up within him until his dying moments.

The cold blooded murder for 10 pounds - it would be a large sum in those days - was committed under a large Yellow Birch tree in a ravine on the back of the farm owned recently by Clifton Ince, now by Henry Ferguson. A large tree three to four feet on the stump, it split into a fork and reached high into the air much like a horse's hames, Mr. Ince told me when I visited him. The now dim outlines of a cross and the word "death" are still faintly visible on a tree not eight feet away, Clifton tells me.

This part of the story has been told many times - Frank MacArthur did it for The Guardian a long time ago under the byline "Uncle Joe" - and there are many variations, but I have picked parts from what several people told me, and have shortened it a great

deal to make room for another phase of the story which is not so well known. I doubt, in fact, that any of it has ever been told in print.

Norman Nicholson, Charlottetown tipped me first on the Todd Road murder, as it is known, for it was the road, perhaps a blazed trail in those days, that Sweeney was following when he was waylaid by the two men and done to death. Norman had heard the story 30 years or more ago from his father-in-law, the late John H. Myers, a one-time member of parliament, who had been provincial minister of agriculture before he went to Ottawa.

And Mr. Nicholson was good enough to take me to Mr. Myers' brother-in law, Reg Dixon. Tryon who was born on the Todd Road close to the spot where the murder was done. He left there as a boy, he told me, but recalls clearly that he wouldn't go near the spot, not even in daytime. Horses shied when they went close to the spot, and many tales were told of Sweeney's ghost being seen. Many people avoided the vicinity, particularly in the early days.

'Ghost' Terrifies 'Big Archie'

THE ONE I LIKED best concerns "Big Archie" Campbell who had felled a tall tree once, and was starting to limb it at one end, when he looked up quickly and saw the figure of the little pedlar standing on the other end of the tree, only his head was off just above the knotted scarf around his neck.

A normally fearless man, Campbell was tremendously shaken by the ghostly encounter. His daughter Flora, a big woman with a grey cloth wrapped around her head and long skirts sweeping the ground, as was the fashion in those days when even a lady's ankle brought blushes of at least pretended modesty, told the story in her own words.

"When father came home that night he speak no word. He feared nothing that crawled or walked, but he lay on the sofa with his face to the wall. He ate no food."

There are many others but I must get to the other phases of this fascinating yarn.

Soon after Smith died people who presumably were relatives or friends of the murderers, the old tale relates, erected a monument to him in the Crapaud cemetery which bore the words "Erected to a man of real worth". Smith's people naturally did not take kindly to the idea, and they removed the dark headstone which somehow got placed in the back seat of the Crapaud Methodist Chapel. The headstone bears the date 1837.

And that brings me to the last phase. The Crapaud Methodists who had built their chapel in 1840, on the lot where the cemetery is now, decided about 1880 to give it to the Methodists of Desable who had no church, and to the Lorne Orange lodge who were meeting in a forge because they had no hall.

So the chapel was taken apart stick by stick, and hauled by oxen and horses to the spot made available for the church by Lord Melville - the church is on the South Melville Road - where it was rebuilt with the lower part serving as a house of worship, and the upper as a home for the Lorne lodge which is still going strong, Mr. Ince told me as he took me into the church that is steeped in history and showed me the old timbers that are heavy and large, as building timbers were in those days.

Anvil Rates As Museum Piece

THE ORANGEMEN had met previously in a forge on the farm now owned by George Villet, and they had used the anvil as an altar. I visited Mr. Villet and found the anvil is still there, though it has been unused for some years. The lodge was founded in 1880, E. C. Holm, Desable told me.

Surely here is one of our most interesting historic relics which, I suggest, should find a spot in the provincial museum we are to have when the Fathers of Confederation Memorial Building is completed.

The monument to Smith stands in the Crapaud cemetery. I visited it with Mr. Ince on one of the coldest days of the past winter, and recall that my fingers numbed with cold in the few seconds it took me to scribble the part of the inscription I have written here.

The old stone bears scratches, and other scars inflicted on it, I'm told, by the boys who sat in the back seat and whittled at it with pocket-knives, possibly to pass the time while the service progressed. What boy has not at least one memory of having sat in a back seat, and done something he shouldn't have done, while divine service was being held?

Chat With A Woman Sharpshooter

I TALKED A FEW DAYS ago with Mrs. Crilly Lea, Murray Harbor whom most of you know better probably as the former Mary MacLennan, the Alexandra girl who was the only female sharpshooter ever to make a Canadian Bisley team, and I believe that also includes other Commonwealth Bisley teams.

I had often talked with Mary before but this time there was a difference. I had always had to speak loudly as Mary's hearing was greatly impaired. This time I spoke in a natural tone and the lady who was on Canada's Bisley team in 1951 heard me clearly. Better still, she told me her sister Annie, Mrs. Robert Carter of North Milton, has had the same transformation wrought and she now hears just as easily and distinctly.

The two sisters went to Toronto early last month for what is known as Stapedectomy at the Sullivan Clinic where Dr. Kenneth McAskile removed the Stapes bone for both of them. A tiny thing, it resembles a chicken's "wishbone" in shape, although it would only be a slight exaggeration to say it is little more than visible to the naked eye. A bit of steel its put in its place, I understand, and this gives the resonance that renews hearing.

Sport fans in particular will recognize the Sullivan name when I say he was the goalie for the Toronto Varsity Grads hockey team that won the Olympic title for Canada in 1928. Now a member of the Canadian Red Chamber his full name is Senator Joseph Albert Sullivan.

I asked Mary what it felt like to hear clearly again. "Did everything sound loud and jarring to you?" I wondered. Her answer was in the negative. The hearing comes back gradually, it seems. It seemed perfectly normal when I talked to her.

