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ACROSS THE ISLAND

Mail Is Interesting, Ontario Man Writes

By NEIL A. MATHESON

THE MAIL has been unusually interesting this past week, add to that, chats I have had with friends and acquaintances and you get some really interesting material.

I was attending the dairymen's meeting in Bloomfield on Wednesday when I decided to go just a bit farther and have a very short visit with my friends, the Barbours, in Alma. I missed Gordon but talked with Rae and Sophie. As usual they had some interesting stories.

Imagine a sheep on top of a hen house. They have a picture of that at the Barbours. It was taken in 1923 when the hen house was covered by a bank of snow that drifted up against it. That's how the sheep managed to get on top. The building is about 15 feet high at the peak.

Another story went back to the stormy winter and deep snow of 1905 and it concerned a man visiting a Barbour neighbor who had to crawl on his hands and knees to get over the snow. He tried to walk but sank so deep in the snow that he gave it up. Apparently he was able to crawl along satisfactorily – at least it was better than the kind of wading he would have had to do.

A letter from Orangeville, Ontario sent my mind racing back to the winter of 1922-23 and the district of Middleton.

Lived In Middleton

AUSTIN CURTIS lived in Middleton, he went to school in the senior room. I was teaching in the junior room – grades one to six. Mr. Curtis made me really laugh when he told me what the boys of his room had to say about me.

Actually there were two school houses; Billie Smith, Kinkora taught in the senior one, the rest of the children were in the other school building. The buildings have been sold and now a modern building stands where the old ones stood.

Austen Curtis tells the story this way:

“One morning when I went to school, the kids were describing the monster of a man who was over in the other school. They said he was from the Scotch settlement, or Rose Valley. He was the strongest man that was ever raised there, and the biggest.

“He is a holy terror” one Irish kid said, Mr. Curtis wrote in his letter to me.

Little did I ever think that I was causing such a sensation; indeed I felt anything but fearsome as I walked from Rose Valley that first wintry morning to start teaching. It was my first time ever, and I certainly felt pretty humble.

Curtis tells about all the kids being anxious to see the “monster of a man” as he was described. Using the third person, Curtis tells it like this:

“WE WERE pretty anxious to get a good look at him. He walked to Bradshaws for lunch, (I boarded with Mr. and Mrs. “Toff” Bradshaw) and when he came back we got around him and looked him over. The kids were right about his size and strength. But he was a pleasant man, and when he spoke we listened.”

I'll confess that I felt better after Austin added that last sentence. I was beginning to get a creepy feeling that I had been regarded as a most undesirable character by those boys in Middleton, and I have never found anyone who could size a person up faster than a group of boys.

I was thinking this past week about that stormy winter. I recalled also that Mr. Smith drove daily from his Kinkora home, perhaps two miles away, and that I had to take the two schools and try my best to teach them when Smith did not arrive due to the storm.

What I do recall is that I only remember a very few days that the Principal did not arrive, despite the unusually storm weather.

Austin Curtis worked shoveling snow on the railroad during the winter of 1925 and he shoveled on the Emerald – Borden line.

"I worked 36-hours straight at times, he recalls. The wages were \$2.18 cents for an eight hour day.

Stanfield Underwear, Red Label

THERE WAS one hour off for lunch and in that hour you would likely walk a mile or perhaps two, to get into a house, or shack to eat. He wore "Stanfields unshrinkable, Red Label". And that must have been the really heavy ones which he would need out in bitter cold weather for such long periods.

Mr. Curtis asks me "Let's face it and tell the kids of today what it was really like in Middleton in 1923.

"There wasn't a house in Middleton that had running water, inside toilet or bath tub, there was no electricity. The houses were so cold one could see his breath in the bed room when you woke up in the morning, and the Chamber Mug under the bed would be frozen some mornings.

"The roads went through the fields and that track was staked with bushes.

"There were no Old Age Pensions, Baby Bonus, Welfare, Radio or TV", Curtis writes. No and there was none of the many other welfare programs that take an ever increasing share of our budget today.

Continuing his reference the 1923 period Curtis writes "Religion was plentiful and a doctor would drive 20 miles by horse and sleigh through the night if someone was deathly sick."

People Were Kind And Happy

DON'T play down your Middleton home area Austen. Other country areas were the same. But those people were happy; they didn't have to worry about money owed on a car. They had their horse and sleigh in winter, and horse and driving wagon in summer.

Don't ever think they were feeling sorry for themselves. I have many happy memories of my younger days, none were any better than the ones I spent in Middleton. And I still wonder how the Bradshaws ever put up with me at times.

The day I fell headfirst down the cellar steps gave them a laugh. Believe it or not, I wasn't hurt, except that one leg was scraped along the side.

Yes, Austin, and you might have added that neighbors would sometimes turn out with their own horses and sleighs to break a path for the doctor, if they knew an emergency

existed. They had a telephone line in Middleton when I was there, but many rural areas did not, but the news of sickness, or tragedy travelled through rural areas like magic. And few ever thought of their own comfort when a neighbor or even someone further away was in need of help.

Neighbor 'Magic' Word

"NEIGHBOUR" WAS a magic word in those earlier days. I remember a Southport man telling me shortly after I moved there once:

"Neil, you may get along without your relatives but you cannot do without your neighbors."

Incidentally I had some really good neighbors in Southport where I lived for some 25 years. I'll be back there this coming summer again, if I do not sell my cottages and home in the meantime.

Snow storm stories still predominate in the mail, though there are other items which I'll tell you about in the weeks to come.

Kevin MacAulay is a student at UPEI now – his home is in St. Catherines, next to Souris Line Road.

Kevin showed me an old Patriot with a story on the 1905 snow fighting. It was generally much like the story told by Jack Cameron, though there were some additional details.

1,000 Men Shoveling

THE PATRIOT said there would be 1,000 men shoveling snow on the railroad in all that winter.

Farmers with teams of horses followed the trains and hauled coal for the engines. They would slide it down to the engines that were in the deep cuttings.

Telegraph poles were dwarfed by the mountains of snow which crippled transportation for weeks and forced men to work as shovellers in the face of raging blizzards.

Snow fell practically steady for 18 days and one night would be enough to wipe out the effects of an entire day's work. After working all month on snow fighting one shoveller came home with \$82. That's the first reference I have seen towards pay for snow shoveling for a month.

Snow would get into the smoke stack, creating a gas that would force the engine crew to crawl out of the tender to give the fireman a chance to get the snow out of the ash pans, the old Patriot said.

One man said the engine crew members would be parboiled in front and freezing in their backs. The cabs were drafty and not built for crew comfort.

Jack Cameron talked several weeks ago of Watts cutting, that was close to Wiltshire. This story said snow in Watts cutting was 36 feet high and it extended over a span of the distance spanned by 11 telegraph poles.

Maintaining a supply of water, fuel and food was the greatest problem during the long snow fighting periods.