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ACROSS THE ISLAND

Giant MacAskill Tales Recalled

By NEIL A. MATHESON

BACK AT THE DESK again after a two-week vacation, I recall the visit Mrs. Matheson and I made to the MacAskill Museum at St. Ann's, Victoria County, Cape Breton Island.

I was disappointed in the museum, so far as my search of knowledge on MacAskill was concerned. But I did enjoy a talk with Annie Matheson MacDonald, a grand niece of the Cape Breton giant about whom I heard many colorful tales while I was still a boy in Rose Valley.

Indeed most of the Giant MacAskill tales that are still told in Cape Breton – many of them are in a booklet "The Cape Breton Giants". (?)

I heard for example of the time a "renowned fighter" – I never did hear his name – came to MacAskill and asked for a fight. The peaceable giant tried to talk the fighter out of it. When the man insisted on fighting, MacAskill asked him to shake hands.

In the Giant's powerful grip the fighter's hand was crushed so that blood oozed through his finger tips. There was no more talk of fighting.

Tossed Huge Log

ANOTHER TALE recounted the time MacAskill's father was sawing wood, and a group of neighbors were on hand to help him. One particularly heavy log was causing them concern, so they rolled it on to the sawhorse before they went to dinner.

Imagine their discouragement and dismay when they came back to work, when they found the huge log on the ground. The old story I heard indicted that MacAskill was still a boy, or a very young lad, and his family had no idea of his strength.

Immediately the youngster was blamed for the prank. The men complained bitterly about having to roll this big log back on the "horse". But young Angus MacAskill laughed as he grabbed the log in his hands and arms and easily tossed it back on the place where the neighbors had toiled mightily to put it in the first place. I found in Cape Breton that there are some variations on that story, but all of them feature the strength of the giant.

Was 16 At The Time

ANNIE MacDONALD told me that her grand-uncle grew big when he was still a boy. The book of which I have spoken said he was 16 years of age when he threw the great log onto the saw-horse.

One of the stories I did not hear in Rose Valley tells of the time Giant MacAskill was in a U.S. pub with a friend. Hearing that grave doubts of his strength had been voiced before he entered, the Giant called for a drink for all hands. While the rest were sipping at their drinks, MacAskill stepped over to a puncheon of Scotch whiskey that contained 140 gallons. He lifted it on end, struck the head a rap with his knuckles, then lifted it in

his hands as though it were a jug and tipped it, so that he drank easily from the oversize container.

Stories of MacAskill's time made a great deal of his touring the world in company with the midget Tom Thumb.

Thumb would dance in the Giant's hand which was held at arm's length. Indeed the illustration on the book cover features this likeness. Mrs. MacDonald said that this story was true, but she emphasized that the time her Great Uncle spent travelling was only a brief interlude in his life.

For the most part the Cape Breton Giant lived, worked and died among his friends at St. Ann's. He was a good fisherman, a successful farmer, and an accomplished miller, Cape Bretoners tell me.

Mrs. MacDonald also told me her great uncle had kept a store for some years.

Shouldered Anchor

OLDER READERS have heard of the time MacAskill shouldered a 2,200 pound anchor on a pier in New York. The giant put the anchor on his shoulder easily. Then he tossed it from him as he hurled it to the ground. But a fluke of the anchor caught the Cape Breton strong man in the shoulder and caused physical damage from which the giant never recovered.

His grand niece agrees that this story was also true, but she told me that giants did not live long as a rule. She suggested, I gathered, that her Uncle's age of 38 was perhaps fairly normal for a giant.

MacAskill was born in Harris, in the Outer Hebrides of Scotland in 1825. He died in 1863.

"Kind, Gentle, Humorous"

WHEN I ASKED Mrs. MacDonald what kind of a man Angus MacAskill was, she replied:

"He was kind, gentle and humorous."

The Cape Breton Giant was big and strong almost beyond belief, but he was loved in Cape Breton because of his many manly qualities, I gathered on my visit to the place where he lived during the most of his life.

Incidentally we also visited the Alexander Graham Bell Museum in Baddeck and I took some notes that I will pass on in this column in the near future. I was struck particularly by the number of things, and their variety, in which Mr. Bell was interested. I think you should find the Bell story interesting, as I did.

Long Tourist Season

TOURIST PROMOTERS in this province have long been trying to extend the season. In Cape Breton I talked with operators of the tourist accommodations where we stayed. I found that the length of the Cape Breton tourist season is no problem.

Two people told me they had six month seasons. The third – it was about two miles from the Cape Breton end of the Causeway – said her cottages were insulated and she had tenants throughout the winter.