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ACROSS THE ISLAND

Ice Boats Stopped On April 28, 1917

By NEIL A. MATHESON

THE LAST trip of the regular 'Capes' ice-boats was made in the winter of 1916-17, and the only loss of life from the boat crews occurred in February of 1917. I am told the date was February 13.

Jim MacDougall, Summerside who talked with me Monday at the Potato Industry Conference here was talking with Billy Pye, Cape Traverse on the day of the Centennial ice-boat crossing. Pye was a member of the last crew to cross, he told the Summerside man.

The man who died was Lem Dawson and his tombstone in the Cape Traverse cemetery indicates he was born in 1893 and died in 1917, so he was a young man of 24 or 25 at the time.

THE STORY I wrote in 1964 on an interview with Ed MacWilliams, a Cape Traverse veteran of ice-boat days, said Mr. Dawson was caught by a huge ice-field which had crushed him against the ice-boat and tore him from the grasp of companions. Two strong men had a grip on his wrists but he was torn out of their hands, Mr. MacWilliams told me at the time.

This week I talked with John Thomas Dickie who lives now at 271 Euston Street and he was close by as Mr. Dawson was lost. He recalls that Russel Bell – he lives now in Crapaud – had had a grip on one of Mr. Dawson's wrists. But nothing could have held the man up against the force of the ice. "You would have torn him in two", Mr. Dickie suggested.

Last Ice-Boat Trip April 28, 1917

I'VE NOW established definitely the last dates on which the ice-boats ran between Cape Traverse and Cape Tormentine. Mr. Dickie was on the last trip on April 28, 1917.

Mr. Dickie told me that the early part of the winter had been mild and the ice-breakers Minto and Stanley were making regular crossings. But they got tied up solidly in ice in March and the ice-boats were ordered out.

The first run was made on March 28 and the last one a month later, Mr. Dickie tells me. The Prince Edward Island car ferry was making crossings the following winter.

Jim Murley, Charlottetown has an interesting story. One cold wintry day when the Stanley and Minto were stuck fast in the ice, and the "Capes" ice-boats were commissioned to carry the mails, a farmer from near Charlottetown called Mr. Murley – he was then working with the telegraph office here, later he was manager – to locate his 12-year old son who had run away from home.

Boy Was Cold, Penniless

THE BOY had piled into one of the ice-boats, along with other passengers, and was safe in Tormentine at the time, but was cold and penniless.

The captain said he would return the boy on the next trip, if payment was made for both crossings. There was no money transfer service at the time, but Mr. Murley collected the full amount from the boy's father, and assured the telegraph agent at Tormentine, he (Mr. Murley) would send the money to him if he paid the fare to the ice-boat captain. So the runaway boy was returned to his family.

For the return trip one of the ice-boat crew members loaned the young lad a coat, as he had nothing on over his lightweight suit. The youngster surely must have been cold.

Another interesting part about the old ice-boat crossings is that horses were used to drag the boats to the edge of the board ice, before the crews took charge of them.

The boats were equipped with sails, and this helped propel the boats in water, or on the ice, when the wind was favorable. The sails were not used when the wind was unfavorable.

Ice-Boat Item Is Old

ONE ICE-BOAT item goes back before the turn of the century. It was made available by Charles and Frances Jones, Pownal.

Robert V. Jones was born at Pownal, June 25, 1838 so it would likely be in the latter 1950's that he was attending Acadia University as a student and had to make the trip across the Strait by ice-boat in winter.

A chapter in a book by his daughter, Mabel Jones Masgeson, tells how her father had to wait for a whole week once, before he could make the crossing between "The Capes". Later Dr. R. V. Jones had his degree of Master of Arts, and Doctor of Philosophy, and was professor of "The Greek and Latin Languages", an old copy of the Acadia Athenaeum relates.

Horse, Sleigh Could Have Crossed

MR. DICKIE told me this week of one period of two weeks, or more, when the ice in the Strait was so smooth and so unbroken that a horse and sleigh could easily have made the complete crossing.

He recalls too, however, that there were times when the ice was rafted as high as 50 feet. The Prince Edward Island once took a solid three days and three nights, he told me, to punch a channel through the ice to Borden that had rafted in close to the Island side.

Alex Scott, Charlottetown – Mr. Scott unfortunately is now a patient in the Prince Edward Island Hospital – told me recently an interesting story about Captain John L. Read on his arrival in Archangel with one of the ice-breakers he took to Russia back in the days of the First Great War.

The Captain arrived in Archangel in the middle of the Arctic winter, Mr. Scott tells me, and found his way into port without the usual navigation lights that had been banned because of wartime conditions.

Royal Reception, Resembled Czar

THE CAPTAIN and his crew received a Royal reception, Mr. Scott relates. He had a startling resemblance to the Czar of Russia – this was prior to the Russian Revolution – and this resemblance would account, in part at least, for his tremendous reception, it is suggested.

On a post-revolution trip, Mr. Scott relates, “the resemblance to the Czar, then deposed, was no asset, and the whole crew felt lucky to have escaped with their lives.”

Mr. Scott reports that board ice would form right across the Strait if a solid Causeway were built – O. J. McCulloch suggested a solid causeway – “because there would be no fast-flowing currents, similar to the condition which now exists on the north side of the Canso Causeway.

I’ve had so many calls and letters on this interesting question that I can’t possibly use all of them. I hope to come back on a future occasion with some of the many interesting stories told me.

First Passenger Train

SOME STORIES came from Mrs. Anna Gregory, Charlottetown whose father, Joseph Westaway Hicken, was a quartermaster and worked on the Minto, the Stanley, the Earl Grey and also, I believe, on the Prince Edward Island.

Mrs. Gregory tells me, among other things, that the first passenger trip from Charlottetown to Borden on a wide-gauge train was made in the spring of 1918.

I hope to see Mr. Scott in the very near future for some information on such interesting subjects as the widening of the gauge on the railroad and one particularly interesting development when a long section of the road was completed for wide-gauge travel, on a Sunday.

I wrote several years ago about the time when the freight had to be shifted at Borden from the narrow-gauge cars of our old railroad to the wide, or standard-gauge cars which were brought over on the new Prince Edward Island car ferry after she went into operation late in 1917 on the Borden-Tormentine run.