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ACROSS THE ISLAND

Belle River Tale Is Most Unusual

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I VISITED Mr and Mrs. Malcolm A. Bell, Belle River recently for one of the most unusual stories I have heard in my many trips across the province and I have to thank Waldo Taylor, Wood Islands for the tip.

A Naval "Q" Boat ran ashore in a severe storm Saturday night, November 26, 1942 on the beach of the Belle farm. It was three-quarters of a mile to the house but two half-frozen sailors made the trip, roused Bell from bed and thus begins a tale that sounds more like the coast of France or Norway, than tiny, peaceful; P.E.I.

Mack Bell, as he is known to his neighbours, harnessed a horse and travelled to the shore where he helped haul 16 sailors and their Captain Strange, an American whose first name is unavailable, up the bank which was 25 feet high. The sailors were so wet, and cold, most of them had to tie the rope around their bodies and be dragged up as they couldn't hold on. But the captain who had jumped into the sea earlier to rescue one of his men and lost his boots, tied the rope around his middle and came walking jauntily up the bank with the ship's dog mascot in one hand, and a bundle in the other, Mr. Bell told me.

THE BELL'S had two huge jobs that night. They hunted every dry stitch of clothing in the house for the storm victims. They also had to feed the ravenously hungry lads. Food was rationed then, Mrs. Bell reminded me, but she had just finished a week's baking and that with other food and several huge pots of soup she finally got the hungry visitors filled. The chaps slept on the living room floor and posted watches to keep the fire going. Next day the captain sent some of his men to the ship for bread and other food, and the ship's cook stayed to look after that task until the crew left two weeks later, although other neighbours shared the task of hosts. They included Lauchie and Alex MacMillan and the Compton homes.

Two of the Q boats had been standing by a crippled freighter in the Strait, but lost her in the storm and got separated themselves. As soon as his crew were looked after, Captain Strange and Mr. Bell spent most of the stormy night looking along the shore for the other boat, in case it had also run aground.

Disaster Really Struck On Sunday

IT WAS a long and difficult night for Mr. Bell, but disaster really struck him Sunday afternoon when his large barn was burned - he had just finished putting a hip roof on it and added a shed - along with ten of the best Guernsey milk cows in the country, five

young animals, a number of pigs and all of his feed. He had got close to his cattle several times but the intense heat had driven him back.

The sailors and others formed a bucket brigade to keep water on the house - they were handicapped too because the ladders were down at the shore where they had been used to bring provisions from the ship that had been cast up against the bank. But there was grave danger the house would burn, so volunteers completely evacuated it of furniture, clothing, bed clothes, linen and the works.

AND HERE fate struck a second cruel blow at the people who had opened their home and their hearts to the shipwrecked sailors a few hours earlier. The volunteers unfortunately piled the furniture, bedding etc. in a spot where it was ignited, and most of it was ruined from the sparks from the barn. They had no bedding at all when it was over, and many other things were ruined. Mr. Bell had been keeping the pump going during the fire and was unaware of this happening until it was too late.

And here's the most completely unbelievable part of all. Some people stole several cases of canned meat, and canned chicken, the Bells had put up for the winter, and which had been moved from the house. I've never heard of a meaner or more completely despicable deed.

The captain and crew brought bunk mattresses from the ship and the Bells used them until they could afford to buy new ones. The loss of the barn, and particularly the cows - cows are the wage earners of a dairy farmer - was a terrible blow, not to mention the many other things they lost, and Mr. Bell recalls that he was in terrible shape. His nerves were shot and his morale low, and little wonder.

Hair Turned Gray In Two Weeks

"MY BROWN hair turned completely gray in two weeks", he couldn't sleep for weeks, recalled the likable, friendly farmer who credits the late Dr. Lester Brehaut of Murray River with helping him "to get settled down" again. His daughter Ann, the Mrs. Williams who is Premier Walter Shaw's secretary now, told me that she and a sister had been moved temporarily to a neighbour's home for some two weeks after the fire, and she recalls that "Daddy was completely gray when we came back home."

The Bell's felt that the barn fire had been started by a cigarette butt, or a match that had not been completely snuffed out before it was dropped by one of the sailors. But they never received a red cent in compensation from the government.

"I LEFT it to the Captain. I even wrote to him later at Halifax", Mr. Bell told me, but nothing has ever been done to help him. And the Bell's needed help then, with a family of six small children and many expenses, in addition to those caused by the disastrous fire.

Mr. Bell consulted a member of parliament several years later who told him it was too late to do anything. If I am not mistaken, this is the sort of thing that could have been covered by the War Claims Commission, which was presided over by our own Chief Justice Thane A. Campbell, and that court was sitting during the years I was in Ottawa, in the middle fifties, and even after that I believe. But nobody brought it before the commission. Like most other people, I had never heard of it until Waldo Taylor told me this summer.

I'M NOT sure whether the commission's work has been finally closed out or not, but I submit that a case like this should never be closed out, not when there is an opportunity to reimburse two wonderful people like Mr and Mrs. Bell for a disaster that struck them after they had been real "Good Samaritans" to total strangers.

The Bells did not ask me for any help, or even suggest I try to help them, but I'm going to see that it is brought to the attention of responsible government people in Ottawa, and I suggest our two MPs for Queens should take up the case and push it with all of their vigor. It's complete nonsense to say it's ever too late to help people like these.

I should tell you, before I drop the ship story, that the Bells told me the captain was "a nice man", and they said the sailors "did everything they could for us. They even gave us the ship's radio which had been given to them as a present", the Bells told me. The captain and crew finally left on December 14 or 15 when a minesweeper came from Halifax to tow the disabled ship to drydock. It had previously been stripped of guns, ammunition and depth charges. Even the mast had been taken off her.

Old Story Of French Treasure

THERE'S another interesting tale connected with the Bell farm. Older folk in Belle River recall a rock near the shore. I'm told Mrs. George Offer, the former Catherine Bell - her father was Donald Bell - who was the grandmother of Elmer Offer of the Ideal Dairy, Summerside, if my notes are correct, used to sit on it as a girl. The rock had some lettering on it, but nobody ever deciphered the meaning.

Years later, during Mack Bell's father's time - he was Angus Bell - a schooner approached the vicinity one afternoon and crewmen came ashore, overturned the rock, dug for a time and left. A threshing crew at the Bells investigated later and found nothing but a hole in the ground. It was believed that some of the French treasure, money or other valuables, had been buried there years previously for it was from that vicinity, Port Bahn, later Bell Point, that the last French ship had left the Island when they were driven out by the English, I was told.

Speculation In West Prince Ridings

THE LIBERALS in 1st and 2nd Prince are holding conventions next week to nominate candidates for the next provincial election.

Prosper Arsenault will probably be the French choice in the First District with Bob Campbell and possibly Alexander Campbell, Summerside offering for the other seat. There has been talk for several years anticipating the entry of the young Summerside lawyer into the political arena, and I'm told there is considerable talk about his seeking the 1st Prince nomination. Bob Campbell is well known through the district as he is a cattle dealer who travels a great deal and is popular, reports indicate.

Another Summerside lawyer, Neil MacLeod, is mentioned as a strong possibility in 2nd Prince where Raynall MacNeill and Harris Rogers, candidates in 1959, are expected to offer again, according to my latest information.

My old friend Watson MacNaught gave me a terse “No comment” when I asked him a few days ago if he would be offering this time, but I don’t think he would be offering in either of the two Western ridings anyway