

# The Old Train Station News

Newsletter #34

December 2011



Back in November, before winter set in, John Westenenk hung up his skates for good by donating them to the museum. What makes his skates unusual is the fact that they are Dutch wooden ice skates brought over from Holland when the Westenenks emigrated in 1949. John and his wife, Wilhelmina, were part of that wave of Dutch immigrants who, shortly after World War II, took over old abandoned farms in Antigonish County and subsequently contributed to the prosperous agricultural industry that we have here today. The Westenenk skates are a nice reminder of the hard work and the success of these Dutch settlers in our community, their new homeland.

Skating is the quintessential Dutch sport dating back many centuries in history. In fact, the Dutch are credited with the invention of the first real ice skates when, somewhere around the year 1500, they added a narrow metal double-edged blade which then allowed the skater to push and glide with his own feet rather than aided by wooden poles. Dutch art demonstrates the passion that Hollanders have for natural ice. Artist Hendrick Avercamp, renowned for his winter scenes, depicted skating as one of the ways people enjoyed the ice in the deep of winter in the early 1600s. When the canals, rivers and ditches froze over, everyone headed out onto the ice – young and old, rich and poor, alike.

The Westenenk skates are classical wooden platforms with metal bottom runners. The skates are attached to the skater's shoes with leather straps. One is a regular pair of skates while the other is a pair of speed skates. Both are in good condition and both are clearly marked. The speed skates have "Condor" written in an italics script on the blade. "Condor" was the trademark of Gerrit Nijdam who produced skates from 1937 to 1968 in Oranjewoud, a small village in the province of Friesland in the north of Holland. John, who loved speed skating, clearly remembers buying this pair in a shop. The regular pair of skates was manufactured by J. Nooitgedagt & Sons in IJlst, a city in the province of Friesland. Further research shows that Jan Nooitgedagt was the founder of a skates and tool factory. From 1865 to 1900, Jan produced skates trademarked with his own name. By 1900, his four sons had joined him in the business;





from then on, the trademark on the skates read “J. Nooitgedagt & Zn, Ijlst”. Nooitgedagt’s sons continued to produce skates until 1965.

Skating is clearly ingrained in the Dutch culture but then, of course, Holland’s landscape is a skater’s dream come true. Canals, rivers, lakes, ponds and a network of interconnecting drainage ditches all provide skaters with thousands of kilometers of potential routes. Each winter Hollanders prepare and then wait for a cold snap but warmer weather has meant less skating in the past few decades. John’s wife, Wilhelmina, remarked that there used to be more ice when they were growing up but often there was more fog than ice. She remembers that there were six weeks of frost back in 1942. “We could skate just about every day.” At the time, she was working for a family with small children but her employers would give her a few hours off in the afternoon to go skating. John assured me that, for him, there was no time for skating during the week. “The cows had to be milked.”

Why was skating so popular in Holland? “That is a good question,” replied John, a well spoken ninety-year-old. “It was pretty conservative where we lived. In our community (of Raalte, in Overijssel), there was not much entertainment. Maybe the boys met the girls once in a while (on the ice). There were no dances. That came later, after the war. In the summer you could go out on the bike – after you milked the cows.”

“Skating was a gathering of mostly young people,” Wilhelmina added. She recalls that her skates were made from the rims of a wagon wheel. One of her early memories is of twisting her ankle while trying to learn to skate.

John noted that skating on the canals “used to be pretty good” but the canals were a transportation route. Time and time again, the boats would break up the ice as they ran through the little towns and villages to deliver supplies. “We didn’t like the boats trying to keep the canals open.” When there was too much ice, the boats could no longer travel the canals. “Then it was clear sailing for the skaters!”

John and Wilhelmina brought their love of skating over to Canada with them. “We even skated on the Rideau Canal in Ottawa!” John proudly announced. Visiting cousins in Ottawa about fifteen years ago, they borrowed some skates and took to the ice. “It was very nice,” exclaimed Wilhelmina. “You could see the Parliament buildings and the ice sculptures.”

With the holidays fast approaching, I asked John and Wilhelmina about their childhood Christmas memories. In Holland, Christmas has always been strictly a holy day of obligation but the feast of St. Nicholas celebrates the gift giving tradition. A few weeks before December 6, the good saint, known as *Sinterklaas*, arrives from Spain by steamboat. Dressed in his bishop’s garb and accompanied by his helper, *Zwarte Piet* or Black Peter, St. Nicholas travels the countryside on his white horse. Black Peter carries a bag of coal and some switches which he threatens to give to naughty girls and boys. At

each house, St. Nicholas checks his big book to see how each child has behaved throughout the year. Good children are rewarded with a present and some treats; bad children are not.

John remembers leaving a little bit of hay and a carrot in his shoe on St. Nicholas Eve when he was young. "You had to be in bed early," he recalls. To reinforce the children's belief in St. Nicholas, his father would take the horse out and walk it around the house to leave hoof prints. "Sometimes you could hear the horse." Of course, the next morning it was exciting to see the prints left behind by the saint's horse. The hay and the carrot would be gone, replaced by some candy.

Wilhelmina recalls getting something useful for St. Nicholas, like a pair of socks or a pair of mitts. "I can't remember ever having a doll but that's all right," she offers graciously. "I didn't mind because I didn't really know about it."

Saint Nicholas would also come to visit the schools with candy for the good girls and boys. Black Peter always carried a sack for those who were really bad. John remembers children shivering at the sight of St. Nicholas' helper. They knew that he would gladly stuff naughty children in his sack and take them back to Spain but, as Wilhelmina said, "We didn't know what Spain was." At the same time, there were no colored people in the village and so, needless to say, Black Peter painted a rather formidable and unfamiliar image.



While the feast of St. Nicholas was a playful celebration, Christmas was a very Catholic feast day. "It was the holiest of holy days," Wilhelmina told me. "There was nothing you could do." John echoed his wife's sentiments. "You could never go out. You had to sit in the house the whole day. You couldn't do any work except milk the cows." They did travel to midnight mass though. Wilhelmina recalls getting up during the night and getting dressed for the 4:00 a.m. church service. "It was a forty-five minute walk. We would sing carols on the way to church." The singing "sounded nice," John remembers.

Did the Westenens continue to celebrate the feast of St. Nicholas here in Antigonish? For the first few years they carried on their Dutch traditions but soon they were celebrating Christmas like the rest of their neighbours in the St. Andrews area. Wilhelmina, who had never seen a Christmas tree in Holland, clearly remembers their first Christmas tree here in Antigonish. It was 1952. "We got a few bulbs for the tree. For a long time, we had a picture of that first tree." While the Westenens have willingly become a part of our local community, they have wisely recorded stories of their immigrant experience for their children and their grandchildren so that their story will never be forgotten.

*Bedankt voor de mooie en interessante verhalen. Fijne Kerstdagen en een Gelukkig Nieuwjaar!*

Warm holiday wishes!

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Catherine MacGillivray



## The Church Bell at Tracadie



On 24 December 1876 there was an entry in the Tracadie register concerning the bell. In the "old days" the church bell in the tower used to be "baptized" by the priest and actually had people designated as godparents. The bell was anointed with Sacred Chrism and was given a name.

The bell in St. Peter's was baptized by Fr. Hubert Girroir, Parish Priest of Havre Boucher, as delegate of Bishop John Cameron, Bishop of (Arichat) Antigonish, and assisted by Fr. Charles Pierre Martel, Parish Priest of Tracadie, Fr. John J Chisholm, Parish Priest of Pomquet, and Rev. Dr. Angus Cameron, Professor at St. F. X. University. The name given to the bell was St. Pierre (St. Peter).

There were several godparents, including Casimir Deslauriers (Delorey) and his wife, Elizabeth Mallet (Myette). Elizabeth was the last living godparent. When she died in 1927, at the age of 101 years, the bell was tolled from the time her body left the home of her grandson, Simon Bonnevie, with whom she resided, until her remains and the funeral procession arrived at St. Peter's Church.

As compiled by **Lloyd Boucher**



**Tracadie Church circa 1922.**



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## Submissions

We would like to thank **Lloyd Boucher** for his contribution to the newsletter with his article, *The Church Bell at Tracadie*. We welcome stories that reflect a tradition or speak of an event, a business or an institution. Some may wish to write a biographical sketch. Articles can vary in length from short and sweet to something a tad lengthier.

## Recent Acquisitions

- **Donald and Mary Barry** donated one issue of the Morrison School newspaper (1967), one issue of the Regional Times school newspaper (1979) and a portrait of Bishop Morrison.
- **Laurie Stanley Blackwell** brought in a dessert menu from the now closed Lobster Treat Restaurant.
- **Teri Arsenault** donated an original photograph taken by her father depicting that familiar view of the Canso Causeway.

## Newsletter list

If anyone wishes to be placed on our newsletter list, kindly contact the museum by phone or e-mail.

You guessed it! We're renovating.



To say that the past number of weeks have been a tad hectic at the museum is an understatement, to say the least. **Atlantic Cathedral Painters** took possession of the building on the thirteenth of November and they worked steadily for a month. **Sam MacLean and Susan Gottschall** strike a confident pose in this photo but spectators would readily agree that this project was not only painstaking but even somewhat intimidating. This old train station boasts tongue and groove walls, very high ceilings and lovely detailing on the wainscoting, ceiling and trim as you can see in the background of this

photo. The architecture of the building is beautiful but the crack filling needed to prepare all that old wood for painting was absolutely grueling. The ceilings could only be described as daunting. Thanks to these great professionals, the museum now has a whole new fresh look.

Needless to say, all of this work has been quite disruptive for Jocelyn, her volunteer staff and visitors alike but the timing was right for the renovations. The museum had applied for and received funding from the **2011 Benjamin Moore Community Restoration Program**. Working with Community Foundations of Canada, Benjamin Moore & Co., Limited offered grants of cash and paint to support heritage restoration and community projects in Canada. This money was all the motivation Jocelyn and her team needed to tackle this very large undertaking.

There had to be a volunteer component to qualify for this grant. Well, the Antigonish Heritage Museum has lots of dedicated individuals who were only too happy to devote their time, energy and expertise to this project. One volunteer promised to be there "with or without bells on". Sure enough, **Leo MacDonald** arrived wearing a sleigh bell tied to his belt buckle and thus he cheerfully jingled his way through work the whole day long. His enthusiasm was all the motivation that **Dennis MacDonald** and **Pam and Shaun Chisholm** needed to dismantle and rebuild the old bookshelves that once lined the walls of the museum.

"Many hands make light work," Jocelyn reminded us as the project was nearing the end. While **Joe Delorey** scrubbed the blinds and then reinstalled them, Jocelyn rolled up her sleeves and started priming the bookshelves. One day I found **Meg Lowe** down on her knees, not praying but giving those old shelves one more coat of paint. What a transformation! The new colors, picked by **Teri Arsenault**, have certainly brought the museum back to life.

We must make mention of the volunteers who packed up all the books and items on the shelves, boxed them up and packed them away. Everything had to be moved in order for the painters to do their job. Once the work was completed, everything had to be put back in place.

Over the next few weeks, Jocelyn and her volunteers will be trying out the new **Click Rail Hanging System** that has been installed for display purposes. Already a lovely old hooked rug graces one of the walls of the museum. No more nails or hooks will need to be hammered into these old walls!

Jocelyn can't thank her volunteers enough. "The volunteer component adds to our ability to complete those things on our wish list that would otherwise be out of our reach. The museum always has a wish list. This year we were able to surpass what was on that list. Our volunteers have made these things a reality. This is a big Christmas gift to the museum."

Jocelyn Gillis is, without a doubt, the happiest gal in town. Even in the midst of all the chaos and confusion of this project, she continued to smile. One day I dropped in to find her sitting, peacefully having her lunch in the middle of display cases, artifacts, books, furniture and whatnot. The museum was in complete disarray but she seemed oblivious to the mess. Clearly, she and her team had a vision of a whole new look for the interior of the building. "There are a few changes," she says. "We have repositioned some items. I think people will be pleasantly surprised with this more inviting look." Come in and see for yourself. Our museum looks amazing!

## Genealogy

**Marlene MacDonald Cheng** of Vancouver sends us the following note.

*Hi there everyone. I am wondering if by any chance you might have the genealogy of Florence MacMillan, my former dance teacher. Also, might any of you know Mable MacInnis, a wonderful dancer in her day (and mine). Mable and I both took dancing from Florence MacMillan. I am also interested in Mable's genealogy. Any help you can give me would be greatly appreciated. Thanks loads.*

## February Book Draw

At our February meeting, we will have a draw for a copy of the book, **A History of the County of Antigonish, Nova Scotia** by Rev. D. J. Rankin. If you would like to place your name in the hat for this draw, kindly send an e-mail or a note to the museum with your name, address and telephone number. This book was donated to the museum by Joe Delorey.

## New Year's Matinee: Mary Beth sings Robbie Burns

**Mary Beth Carty**, a former summer employee at the museum, will perform the songs of Scottish bard Robert Burns from 2 – 4 p.m. on December 31 at the St. F. X. Chapel in Antigonish. The local folk singer and instrumentalist will be joined by special guests Greg Melchin on bass and dancer Lilly Carty.

Tickets are available for \$12 in advance and \$15 at the door. Children will be admitted free of charge. Advance tickets are available at Antigonish 5c to \$1 Store and Easting Bread & Honey Ltd. A portion of the ticket proceeds will go to the Antigonish Emergency Fuel Fund. For more information, please call 863-8570.

## Highland Caravan

This past summer the Highland Caravan visited nine venues around Antigonish. At each stop, folks heard about the history, music and culture of the Scottish Highlanders who settled here. To celebrate this event, a DVD has been made by Seabright Productions. It sells for \$15 and would make an ideal Christmas gift for anyone interested in local history and heritage.

## Antigonish Heritage Association

- A donation in memory of **Eileen Anderson** was made to the Heritage Association by Angus MacGillivray.
- We'd like to acknowledge a donation by **Ro Anne Clavelle of Calgary** for Special Life Events.
- We'd like to acknowledge **David MacDonald of Bayfield** as a Silver Member Supporter of the Heritage Association of Antigonish.
- We'd like to acknowledge **Doug MacLellan of Cloverville** as a Silver Member Supporter of the Heritage Association of Antigonish.

## Message from the Chair – Heritage Association of Antigonish

**(Working today to preserve yesterday for tomorrow.)**

This is our last newsletter for 2011. Where does the time go?

Since my last message, I attended a few cultural events that were hosted by local organizations. In late November, I attended the Antigonish Highland Society's St. Andrews Concert. There was an Ode to the



Haggis, followed by a hot dinner and a concert with traditional music and highland dance. It was a beautiful evening that allowed everyone in attendance an opportunity to enjoy all things Scottish. Also in late November, I attended a seminar lead by Isabelle Knockwood. She is a survivor of the Indian Residential School and the author of "Out of the Depths". Her seminar was informative and allowed the undersigned an opportunity to understand better the social impact these schools had on the Mi'kmaw people.

I am pleased to report that on December 11, 2011, the Antigonish Highland Society, at their annual general meeting, approved a bylaw change that would allow all members of the Heritage Association of Antigonish to join the Antigonish Highland Society and receive a reduction in dues of fifty percent. The Heritage Association of Antigonish recently adopted a similar measure that would allow the same for members of the Antigonish Highland Society. For those of you that have a Scottish connection (and even those that do not) I would urge you to become a member of the Antigonish Highland Society. The link to their membership application form is as follows:

<http://www.antigonishhighlandgames.ca/files/ahsmembershipform.pdf>

Please note that they have also just approved a three-year membership fee. The fee is \$25 for adults and \$40 per family. The membership fees for members of the Heritage Association will be \$12.50 and \$20 respectively.

Their efforts compliment the efforts of the Heritage Association of Antigonish, especially as it relates to our Scottish heritage and culture. Further, we plan to work with the Antigonish Highland Society to ensure that we deliver and promote seminars that will be of interest to the members of both organizations.

The Board of the Heritage Association of Antigonish continues to work on issues that are important to our members. The work on the new website is moving ahead nicely. The Events Committee is busy planning the learning events for 2012. The Project Committee is also busy reviewing projects that we could undertake in fiscal 2012-2013.

The Heritage Association of Antigonish always appreciates your tax-deductible donations as this funding allows your Association to complete its important work. If you make a donation prior to December 31, 2011, we can provide a tax receipt for 2011.

We are still seeking people that have some free time to volunteer for work on the various Committees of the Association and Museum. Please contact the undersigned at the email provided below if interested or contact Jocelyn Gillis at 863-6160.

Until next, on behalf of the Board of the Heritage Association of Antigonish, I want to wish all of our readers a happy and holy Christmas and all the best in 2012.

Take care and God Bless.

Angus MacGillivray, BBA FCGA

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