

The Old Train Station News



Newsletter # 128

Spring 2026

Dear Friends,

I have been thinking of the turmoil we have been feeling in this time of the very rich and the very poor and those that are being squeezed in the middle. It made me think of the struggle that our ancestors and emigrants in general, must have been going through to make them leave the lands of their births and put their faith, hopes and dreams in providing so much more for their families in a new country. Whether they came in the 18th century or the 21st, the cultural shock must have been tremendous, and I am sure they stood and looked back across the sea, like my ancestors did, with sadness for what they left behind.

It was certainly a time of transition from the old world to the new and for those who came to Antigonish in the very early years; it was a world of forests, rivers and the sea, but they worked hard and land was the greatest prize. Within the lifetime of those early pioneers, they saw a drastic change as their children and grandchildren had to find paid work to support their families. Families waved goodbye to their children as they started “going down the road” to the “Boston States” or to the mines, farms and forests of the west. Most of this exodus was by men, but women and girls too headed to New England for work in the mills, nursing, and as maids and homemakers. To this day, we continue to educate our young to head off into the world.

In this edition, I will look at Antigonish in terms of the work that folks here have done through the transition times in both pictures and words. If you have stories and pictures that you would like to share about how your family got through those times of transition, we would love to hear from you.

The Epistolarion

Ben Paul who was a Mi'kmaq man born in Heatherton on Mar 20, 1920, began to work at about age 11 or 12. He worked on a farm in Heatherton run by a Melanson man. Ben did not receive any money but instead received chewing tobacco. Mrs. Melanson would also give him milk, eggs and potatoes to take home for the family. Mrs. Paul also did farm labour work for a Mr. Rogers.

Interview 1995



Nurse Companion Sisters

In a group of letters written to sisters, Bertha A. (Jun 6, 1885-Jan 2, 1967) and Winifred F. MacPhee (Mar 30, 1878 – Jul 1, 1949) from nurses in the “Boston States” either within the states or to them while in Lochaber, Antigonish Co. Their friends, mostly nurse companions, wrote about their experiences and the working conditions they endured. Bertha, after training as a nurse companion, worked her trade mostly in a hospital setting and eventually became an R.N. Winifred however, spent all of her time as a nurse companion at the sick bed of many very rich people and later, spent a considerable time caring for one couple, even travelling to Europe as their nurse companion and friend. She gave a great deal of time supporting the woman psychologically after the death of the husband and up until the woman’s own death (receiving a good inheritance).

Winifred went to the States in the late 1890s and after some training, was placed in homes as needed for various periods of time. She found housing, more as a place to keep her clothing and personal items while she worked, while living with her patient’s and often sleeping on a cot in the patient’s room. Work was always sporadic, based on the severity of seasonal illness, and the women frequently found themselves worrying about paying the rent. On many occasions, they didn’t receive vacation pay and often left employment without final pay. In a letter, Miss Smith *“thought she might take a lease for a couple of years, and Miss Whyte is going with her. I am so glad for her, she feels very much discouraged not to be working and is very much put out that her landlady wouldn’t give her a room”*.

Certainly, if your personality was averse to harsh treatment, it was very difficult to get work when you had a reputation for being “difficult” as many young women found out. With rooms hard to find, one friend commented, *“You just bet Mrs. Merriman (landlady) will have all that’s coming to her and if she don’t like them she ain’t afraid to say so”*.

As one nurse wrote, rich patients *“live on memorials of the time when they had twenty horses, innumerable servants and a grand chateau”*. In dealing with wealthy patients, another friend while nursing a wealthy old man wrote, *“One day when we were alone, I went down to build the fire. Five minutes later I came up to find him up with both windows open, bare feet etc. and the temperature at 50°. I was so cross I just stood still, after whacking him into bed and told him what I thought of him . . . he waited until I was through, then in the most injured manner and tone said, “You’re scolding me.” I was savage with him, but he said he did not know what he would do if I left him!!! He is very like to find out once we reach dear old Boston.”*

For some nurses they were very happy with their placements as one nurse said, *“This isn’t at all a hard case, only a lot of up and down stairs, no lifting and best of all, no night work”*. But most of the time, please Winifred, *tell Mrs. Stays I have a sore throat; they’ll be scared blue*” or *“I wrote a regretful letter, declining, which was hypothetical as wild horses would not drag me into such a case. Fussy!”* and again, if we *“had stayed much longer you would have seen two wild creatures sitting on steamer trunks waiting for the Boston train”*.

These letters reveal to us a lot about the uncertainty and difficulty inherent in the work of nurse companions who worked almost exclusively with elderly very wealthy patients. Often the patient’s partner just wanted someone to take care of the patient so they could go to their summer estate or take in their social obligations without a care for those who had to handle the responsibility. However, the nurses kept in touch with each other and warned each other about bad placements.

SOME OF THE MANY
WAYS THEY
WORKED IN
ANTIGONISH



History is not what happened, but what was recorded.

From the Curator . . .

Work In Progress

Spring finally seems to have sprung (dare I risk jinxing us!?), and with that comes the seasonal round of yard cleanup, seed planting, lawn mowing, etc. It is one of the few times of year that we seem to look forward to extra work!

We are all normally tempted to think of “work” as something that, for many of us at least, occupies our minds and bodies from 9 to 5 each day. Most of us are privileged to only have to work a 40-hour week, though there are many whose lives contain far less leisure time than they would like. The truth of the matter is, of course, that work is not limited to the office, mill, hospital, factory, or other workplace. Paid labour might be limited to a set number of hours per week, but there are always other tasks waiting for us at home and in our communities.

The concept of dividing our lives between work and play is a relatively recent phenomenon, to be sure. Until recent generations, women and men, and children of most ages, worked almost from before daybreak until dark, at least six days a week. For rural communities like those in eastern Nova Scotia, peoples’ survival was dependent upon ensuring that one’s hands were never idle, and there was no question for most folks of putting time limits on a task. Seeding, tending, harvesting, and stowing crops took however long was required, as did food preparation, tending animals, mending nets, etc.

Elsewhere in this newsletter, you will read about, and see images of, people at work. May we ever be mindful of the legacy of earlier generations who, unlike many of us, rarely had the luxury to clock out at 5pm.

-Barry MacKenzie



Words on Work from Scottish Tradition

“Set a stout hert tae a stey brae.”

Meaning: Approach difficult tasks with courage and determination.

“If ye like the nut, crack it.”

Meaning: If you want the reward, you must do the hard work to get it.

“A gaun fit’s aye gettin’.”

Meaning: Those who work hard and keep moving will always find opportunities.

“Better a wee buss than nae beild.”

Meaning: Be grateful for what you have and make the best of it.

“He that winna lout an lift a preen wull nivver be warth a goat”.

Meaning: If you are too lazy to do small jobs, you will never amount to anything.