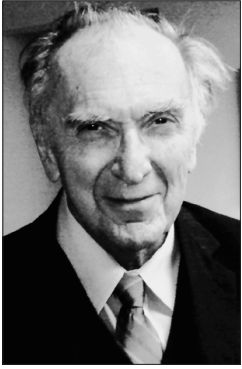


In Those Days in Victoria County

From casual exhibition to museological excellence



by Jim St. Clair

How does a casual display of family items on a store shelf eventually turn into a museum which is rated highly among the community museums of Nova Scotia?

If we could talk to the late Ruth Morrison of Cape North, we could find at least a partial answer to our question. The wife of the late Audie Morrison, she started bringing items from the family home to enliven the shelves in the Morrison Store at the crossroads where the Cabot Trail meets the road to Bay St. Lawrence and Meat Cove.

Although born in Boston, she spent much time as a young person at the homes of her Gwinn and MacLeod and MacDonald relatives.

Always interested in the stories of the early residents of the northern part of Victoria County, she early came to understand that each object, whether a teacup or a photograph, a platter or a yarn winder had a story to tell and could reveal insights into the lives of earlier inhabitants.

Her Gwinn (sometimes spelled Gwynn) ancestors were very early settlers at the northern tip of the Island of Cape Breton having left "the Boston States" at the time of the American Revolution and having lived for a time at the Gut of Canso. There were many stories about the Gwinn experience on the sea and on the land and in participating in the development of the community. Her Scottish relatives had other stories about the "old country" and Gaelic language and song. She came to be much interested in how these accounts could be preserved.

When Ruth married Audie Morrison and came to live and work in Cape North, she was able to bring forth the stories she had heard in earlier years and connect them with objects.

In order to increase the interest of people in their store, she began to display artifacts. This activity was a casual one with little attention to properly protecting, cleaning, studying, listing and recording the history of the item. The people who came into the store, whether residing locally or visiting from other places, seemed to enjoy looking at and talking about these historical items.

Eventually, the Morrisons opened a coffee shop in half of the store in order to meet the needs of the travelling public and to keep the store open as the population declined. Others began to take an interest in talking about the local history and in sharing their family treasures as well. Her cousin, Margaret Gwynn, and Evelyn Courtney were among the many who encouraged the idea of a more formal way of gathering history and presenting the varied personalities and activities of the years past. Thus came the idea of a museum structure.

So the casual approach to collecting and displaying took on a more formal approach as the community gathered to construct a log building to be a museum. A not-for-profit society was formed with a board of directors. And so arose the questions of, "what will make a good museum? How will we care for the objects? How will we best

tell the tale connected to each artifact? How will we cover our expenses? How can we promote our site?"

In order to learn more about museums and their operations, Ruth and the dedicated group of volunteers began to meet with other museum enthusiasts from around Cape Breton through meetings of the Iona Connection, to travel to seminars put on by the Federation of Nova Scotian Heritage. They also established a relationship with the Nova Scotia Museum in Halifax.

Step by step, with a strong interest demonstrated by the people of the area, the North Highlands Community Museum gathered both more objects and greater competence. Although Ruth died suddenly in 1988, her work was taken up by other volunteers.

Under the umbrella of the Nova Scotia Museum, an organization of community museums came into being, in 1995. The Community Museums Assistance Program was initiated to provide guidelines which would help museums develop and to encourage them to apply for some funding. The funding brought with it a necessity for the museum, its structure, its operation and its outreach to be evaluated every three years.

Accepted into the Museum Assistance Program, the North Highland Group began to look seriously at how best to meet the standards set forth by the Heritage Unit. Little by little, therefore, a casual display on store shelves and the enthusiasm of volunteers were turning into a much more formal organization.

The volunteers with the cooperation of the wider community began to realize that a new building was required to protect the

artifacts, to provide better opportunities for displays, to meet the needs of greater outreach and to house the increasing collection.

Thus following the advice coming through the officials of the Museums Assistance Program and consultation with many others, the Board and Members of the North Highlands started on the construction of the new building which was opened eight years ago.

With the interior spaces designed by a professional museological expert, the new structure encouraged more involvement by visitors with the displays and provided an opportunity for better labels and placed artifacts in locations more conducive for viewing by young people.

As well, the organization with its many committees planned programs which were of interest to the community, such as a heritage garden, a blacksmith shop, craft creation and lectures on historical and regional topics. New members with enthusiasm were integrated into the organization. "You are welcome" seemed to be the unwritten motto.

So, it is not surprising that in this year's rating by the team from the Nova Scotia Museum Assistance program, under the direction of Paul Collins, the North Highlands Museum received the highest rating in its history and the highest rating among the twenty-four museums from around the province which were evaluated on a rating scale of over 100 items. The group of evaluators was composed of officials from the N. S. Museum and volunteers from other museum boards. They awarded the Cape North organization a score of 89.5 This accomplishment was reported in *The Victoria Standard* in the issue of the end of November to December 12th.

Starting as a casual activity over thirty-five years ago as a way to attract patrons to a general store and to share the interest in local history, the late Ruth Morrison and her group of volunteers provided the impetus which has evolved into a museum of excellence in Victoria County, Cape Breton - a community effort worthy of its location and its people.

Wishing You Every Joy & Much Prosperity in the New Year

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**Bruce Morrison - WARDEN
Councillor - District 3**

FIDDLER'S CORNER by Paul S. Cranford.

If you have a tune you would like to share with other Cape Breton fiddlers or a musical event that could be promoted in this column contact The Victoria Standard or Cranford Publications (www.cranfordpub.com). Email psc@cranfordpub.com

Memories of Father John Allan Gillis

march

John MacDougall



The late **John MacDougall** (1922-2009) of Kenloch reel was the most prolific composer in Cape Breton's history. For over forty years he composed music every day and at the end of his lifetime his grand total was over 35 thousand melodies. Years ago I spent perhaps eight hours with John reading through his manuscripts. Astonishingly, his tunes all had originality and I liked over 75% of the hundred or so we went over that day. No doubt sometime in the future a large collection of John's music will be published.

Recently the above march was brought to my attention by fiddler **Yvon Lefort** of Westmount who supplied me with a vintage home recording of the late **Donald Angus Beaton** accompanied by his son Joey on piano. I called Joey about the tune's history and he told me that Father John Allan was an elderly parish priest still active at the time Ron MacInnis' film titled *Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler* came out. Apparently the priest's reaction to the documentary was to offer buy a fiddle for any youngster who wanted one. At the time, John MacDougall was teaching fiddle in the area, and undoubtedly many of his students benefitted from Father John Allan's generosity.

Victoria County's Residential Curbside Organics Collection



Residents can now put organic material such as vegetable peelings, table scraps, meat, fish, poultry, dairy, bones and soiled paper in transparent green bags to be collected weekly along with recyclables and garbage. Special transparent green bags for compost are now available in grocery & hardware stores in Victoria County.

For more information on Recycling or Composting Programs, call Cape Breton's **Recycling Hotline at 1-877-567-1337** or see "Recycling" in the Aliant Yellow Pages

