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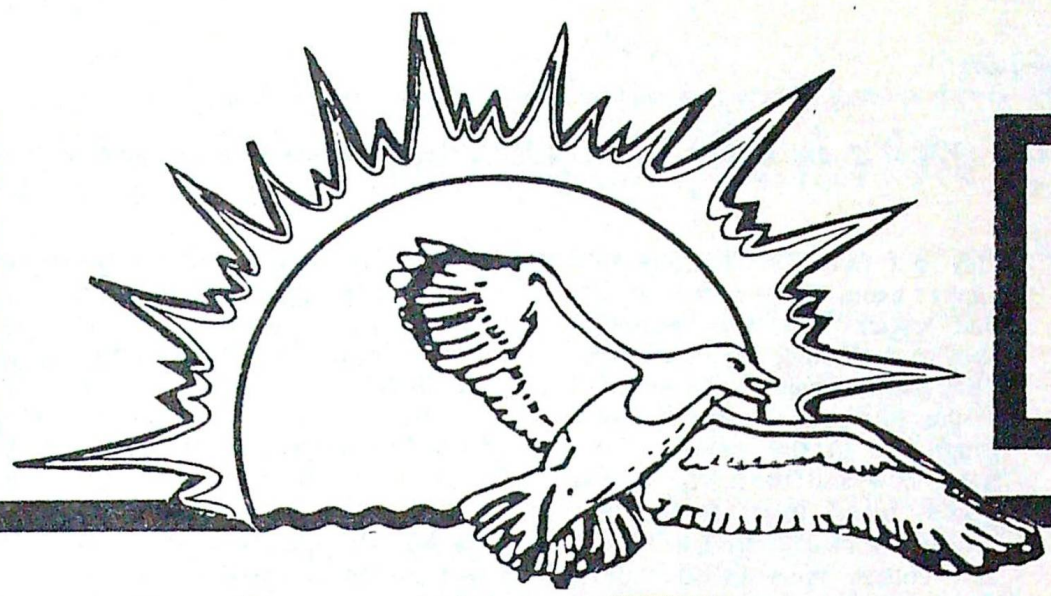
Have a happy July!



Partici-Paper

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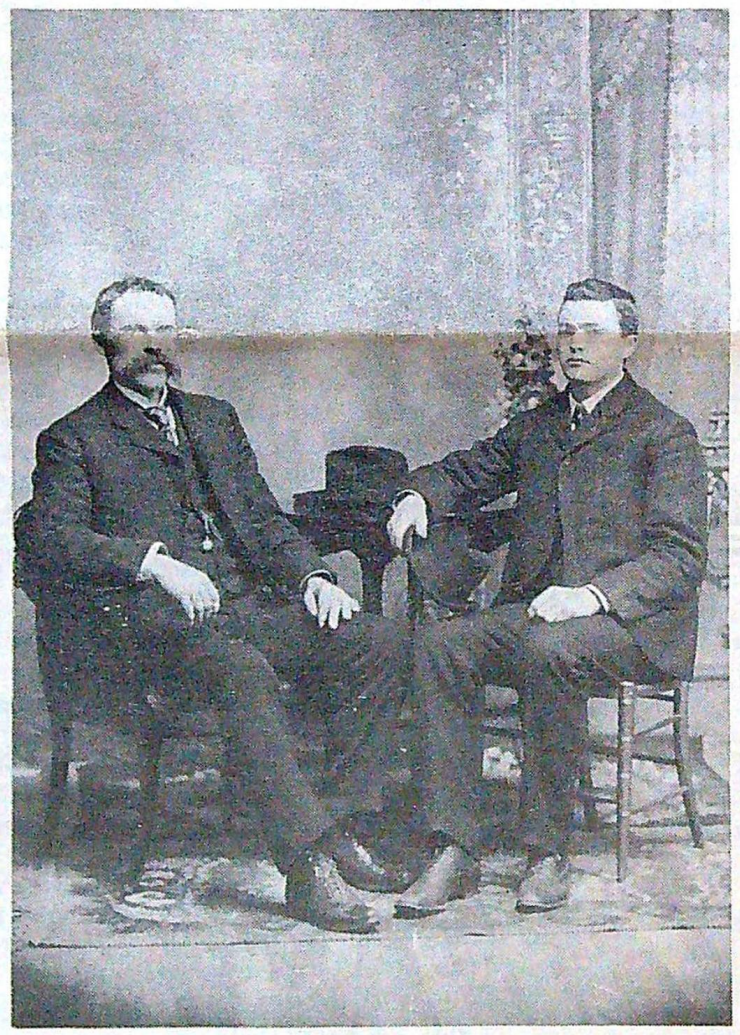
Headin' West

by Mary Anne Ducharme

Two sets of brothers, one set "properly" attired and stiff, the other two a little impudent and self-assured in their working clothes: these were among the men of Mabou who went west in the decade before the turn of the century, and in the decades that followed. In the picture at the left are Alban (with the moustach) and Angus "The Monk" Beaton, the granduncle and grandfather of John Gillies of Black River. The picture was taken at Connor's Point, West Superior, Wisconsin. In the picture on the right are Alexander (Sandy) Rankin (with the cigar), and Allan Rankin, the father and uncle of Angus and Tom Rankin of Mabou Ridge. This picture was taken about 1909 in Virginia, Minnesota.

The material in the article which follows was gleaned from a recent interview at the home of Tom and Angus. Many thanks to them, and to the invaluable assistance of John Gillies who arranged the interview and provided the pictures and information about Angus "The Monk" and Alban.

See the article on the following page, and the article "Stories are Told," about leaving Cape Breton for work.



"My brother and me, we're headin' out west"

Mabou men stuck together through thick and thin, especially the sets of brothers who went west to find work. The younger men who stayed behind on the cash-poor farms of their parents heard stories and songs about the adventures of older neighbours and family members, and some of them could hardly wait to follow the tradition of seeking "a stake" in the lumber camps, mines, farms, and dredges in the west. They went with brave camaraderie and self-assurance, and most came back with more stories than money, but without regrets.

The Cape Bretoners who went earlier looked out for the ones that followed, telling them what farms or mills or camps treated the men like slaves and took advantage of newcomers, and which ones gave the best grub, a decent bed and fair pay. There was a intricate network a kind of underground railroad of contacts for landing jobs for fellow Capers. "It wasn't what you knew that mattered out there, it was who you knew," remarked Angus Rankin of Mabou Ridge.

Angus and his brother Tom

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"My brother and me, we're headin' out west"

continued

remember their father Alexander (Sandy) Rankin, and their uncle Allan, speaking of going out west when they were in their early twenties, about 1899 for Sandy, and 1902 or so for Allan. "It was a bad time then to be starting out for young fellows. There were a few good years, then the Depression. There wasn't much money, a fellow needed a stake to get going. Before going west Allan, my uncle, worked on the railroad for a time, the new line from Port Hawkesbury to Inverness. Before my father left, he worked as a carpenter's helper; John Archie MacKillop helped him find that job. But it ended with the cold weather. He also worked in the steam mill, firing up the boiler. He was working for Johnnie "The Tailor" Beaton and Angus Cameron. The mill was moved around to three places: it was at the Crossroads on the Peter Campbell property on the Glencoe Road; near MacKillop's Road; and just above where Leo Cox's place is now. My father did boiler work in the lumber camps, too."

Sandy began his journey west in 1899 on the mail train to Port Hawkesbury, and then by train all the way to Virginia, Minnesota. Ten years before Angus "The Monk" Beaton, the grandfather of John Gillies of Black River, went by team to Orangedale and then by train, mostly through the States all the way to the same destination. Other men from Mabou went in coastal steamers, from Port Hawkesbury, to P.E.I. and on to Boston, and then by train west.

"Quite a few worked in Boston," said Tom, who himself worked in Boston for a brewery company, many years later.

He said that he heard of men who also went as far away Portland, Oregon; Kenny, the younger brother of Sandy and Allan went to Spokane, Washington.

For a while, Sandy worked with J.A. MacKillop who had taken a job as stevedore, in West Superior, Wisconsin and he shared bachelor accommodation with him. MacKillop stuck to this one kind of work for quite some time, but other Capers moved from lumber camp to lumber camp or from farm to farm among various places both in Canada and the U.S. Others worked in the iron mines, or in flour or threshing mills.

When Allan joined Sandy in 1902, they got work in a Minnesota lumber camp. "It was cold work," said Angus. "The men were not used to such cold, way below zero. They had to spend money on good clothes to stand it. It was kind of a rough life in the camps, a few fights now and then. The fellows would leave their trunks and valuables for safekeeping in a hotel, and collect them in the spring when they could get into town and get cleaned up."

It was an especially interesting cultural mix of men who worked in Virginia, Minnesota in those years: Cape Bretoners, Swedes, Finlanders, Yugoslavians, some of them new immigrants without a knowledge of English.

It was the same people in the hotels and camps year after year: the men who knew each other from back home stuck together whenever they could, and when they couldn't, they kept in touch.

The men from Cape Breton gathered in the hotels of "The Twin Cities," St. Paul and Minneapolis, or in the woods camps, and sang songs from back home, or new songs they learned in the camps. It was their way of entertaining themselves.

Sandy was a fine singer who sang mostly in English, and relished the lumber camp songs. But Allan was a beautiful Gaelic singer, and the men who spoke Gaelic really liked to hear him. "One time," said Angus, "somebody asked my father who that was, singing for the men in the bar. It was Uncle Allen. The man couldn't understand why anybody who could sing like that would be working in a lumber camp!"

Sandy came home in 1909 but went back west a short time later with Alban Beaton of Black River, who wanted to join his brother Angus "The Monk" Beaton, in West Superior. (He was known as "The Monk" because his father Alexander had joined the Trappist Order of monks for a short time, and the naming style has remained attached to the family.) That winter they worked in a lumber camp.

In the summer months, they worked on Great Lakes dredges, making $40.00 a month, enough to get by on, but not enough to put aside for the future.

Other local men also went to West Superior, among them Alex John Sandy MacDonald, also known as "Alex Dorsey," because he lived on the farm once owned by a Dorsey of Colindale. Another who went there was Sandy "The Dancer" MacMillan of Glencoe Station.

Angus spoke of a special fiddle that his father acquired on one of his journeys to the west, unusual because he did not play the fiddle, nor did his brother. It was one of the valuable items that he kept in the hotel in a trunk. He learned of it from Alexander "The Weaver" MacDonnell who saw it in a pawn shop, and being a fiddler, knew a good one when he saw it. It was interesting that he thought that Sandy should buy it, and not himself, for he was the one who knew how to play it! At first the shop wanted $10.00 for it, and Sandy didn't want it that badly, whether it was a fine instrument with two bows and a case, or not. A few weeks later, at MacDonnell's urging, he bought it for $8.00. Angus and Tom still own it.

The fiddle has a pleasant history, for it was frequently borrowed by the well-known fiddler Donald "John the Tailor" Beaton of Mabou; John Beaton of The Coal Mines, and by his son Danny. It was played as well by "Big" Ronald MacLellan, the father of Theresa and Marie MacLellan, and by John Alex "The Big Fiddler" MacDonald who won first prize with it in a Judique fiddling contest in 1924.

These men were gone for stretches of years, some over ten years at a time. Some of them married "girls from away," others came home to look for their brides. The wives and mothers at home sometimes became tired of their lives alone and simply put their foot down about leaving again. For instance, Angus "The Monk" wanted to go to Buffalo to work the dredges in 1920, because the wages there had jumped from $40. a month to $240.00 a month, and he wanted to raise enough money to build a barn. Sandy wanted to go too, for he liked the adventurous life, but this time he was married and his wife objected strongly. When his mother added her voice to this opinion, he resigned himself to staying home.

Tom remembers his father saying many years later that if he were young again, he'd go back to Minnesota in a flash. In 1959, Kenny, the youngest brother of Sandy's generation of Ridge Rankins, wrote a letter to Angus who was working in Boston, with a return address of Spokane, Washington. He spoke of "many happy days we had together" in those times of adventure; he, Allan, Sandy and Alex MacDonald.

Those were halcyon days of hardship, of song, of seeking fortunes and finding that it was in themselves.

(EDITOR'S NOTE:
To obtain a list of source material for any article in *Partici-Paper*, contact the editor and it will be gladly provided.)

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Mary Anne Ducharme

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