County of Inverness

SEE PAGE 12

YOUR RESPONSE NEEDED ON CONTINUING EDUCATION

Partici~Paper

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A rare photo of good quality, this group picture shows Hilda MacDonald (at the back left, standing about 1900, with family members who pioneered the woolen mill industry in Glendyer. In the first row (left to right) is Marion (a sister who came with Donald MacLean MacDonald to break ground for the mills); Nancy, the wife of Donald MacLean; and their daughter Jessie. The small boy is David, the son of Duncan. In the row behind him are Nellie, and the brothers D.S. (Skinner), Walter (Hilda's father), and Duncan. Says J.L.MacDougall in his HISTORY OF INVERNESS COUNTY: "It is doubtful that any one family ever packed more public service into a short life than did this MacDonald family of Glendyer."

103 on November 9: HAPPY BIRTHDAY MISS HILDA!

On November 9, 1885, Hilda was born to Annabel (Cameron) and Walter MacDonald, and it was not suspected that this child, born in her home in a quiet Cape Breton glen, would lead such an adventurous and surprising life. Nor did anyone realize that in 1988 she would be celebrating 103 years as the oldest surviving person from the Mabou area. "Miss Hilda" would never tolerate any maudlin nonsense about her birthdays, but she is fond of saying that she was born the same year as the Canadian Pacific Railroad.

Hilda is the daughter of Walter MacDonald, one of the two brothers who ran the Glendyer Woolen Mills after the death of her Grandfather. Donald MacLean MacDonald, "The Dyer," was the man who began the first, and for many years, the only Woolen Mill in Cape Breton.

She is now a "paying guest" in a private home in Wolfville, still a snappy dresser; still a bottomless well of interest in all things and people, great and small; still very much in touch with the names, ages, interests of

continued page two

nieces, nephews, cousins, neighbours, friends -- and their children and children's children. Says Betty Jane Cameron, a cousin: "she has always had the capacity to walk into a room full of people and in a few minutes know more about them than most people would learn in a lifetime." But she is strictly unsentimental, though concerned in her approach to people, and dwells much more in the modern rather than the past.

Now when people visit her, they know they have to mentally prepare a detailed litany of the "latest news," even though she usually is ahead of them and is quite well apprised. But she enjoys listening to differing points of view and has retained a keen sense of humor. She is thrilled to see young people, is an avid reader of the ORAN, and remains a witty conversationalist. She has also carried on a remarkably wide correspondance that spans qontinents.

Her room is frequently decorated with flowers, for she has had a lifetime passion for gardening, though now she must enjoy the blooms of other people's gardens and not her own.

This love of gardening was one of the many themes of her life and she came by this love in a very natural way. Her grandmother, Nancy, the wife of Donald MacLean MacDonald, "The Dyer," would get up at 4 am to garden for an hour or two before her busy day. Nancy never went away without bringing back plant slips, and part of her Glendyer legacy to Hilda was a splendid flower garden in which phlox and other flowers, both rare and common, were a delight to all who passed by. To this day Hilda wants to know the name of every plant and flower that she sees.

But to characterize "Miss Hilda" as a mere botanist would be missing the point. She is interested in nearly everything that comes into her scan: literature, history, music, art, wildlife--especially birds, but above all else she was, and is a socializer. Many local people have vivid memories of Hilda, mostly affectionate, sometimes with tiny personal stings attached, for she has a very stong personality that does not leave much room for neutral feelings.

Hilda recieved part of her early education at Hillsborough School, and part of it with private instruction.

Her mother died when she was only 16 years old, and Hilda remembers very clearly the two nurses that looked after her mother before her death. Their influence on Hilda was both deep and permanent, for upon graduation from Hillsborough School, she enrolled at the Ladies College in Halifax for nursing. In 1910, she began more intensive training in the Presbyterian Hospital in New York City, (now called the Presbyterian Columbia Hospital).

Her dream was to go to Labrador to the Grenfell Mission, but her father, and fate intervened. Walter was against her Grenfell zeal, fearing that she would contract tuberculosis which was very prevalent in that area. When World War I broke out, she decided to serve as a nursing sister, though she had very little idea of the realities of war, or the danger that she would risk. But the girl from a quiet little glen in Cape Breton was not easily deterred when she made up her mind to anything.

She was first sent to Lord Astor's Estate near Maidenhead, which had been converted to a Red Cross hospital. Like the young men who were her patients, Hilda learned that the experience of war was not what she expected. When she served at casualty clearing stations in Belgium and France, near enough to the front to hear the bombs, she was in very real danger for long periods of time, but she spent very little time thinking of herself: like the other nurses, she was far too busy giving soldiers medical help and making them as comfortable as possible to do anything but take what came in stride. "There was no sob stuff around," she commented. "You couldn't sit down and hold people's hand and pity them. You pitied them by doing things for them. . . . in civilian life people complain about so little. .·. (the soldiers) bore it very bravely . . .there was wonderful fellowship."

Hilda doesn't like reminiscing about the war because she feels that many who were in the war really didn't know a great deal about it, just their own part, their own tiny place. Also, she feels that people's memories of war become overdrawn in time and that the nurses did not do anything spectacular or dramatic, not any more than a mother is heroic in taking care of her family from day to day.

When Hilda is asked about her decoration--she was presented with the Royal Red Cross by King George V at Buckingham Palace--she does not dwell on it, claiming that the only thing she did to deserve it was being there.

After the war, Hilda spent several years in Northern Sasketchewan and Alberta as a public health nurse, and was later appointed as nurse at the Normal College in Truro where she also taught health courses.

by Mary Anne Ducharme

A tranquil memory of times past . .

Tranquility has returned to Glendyer after years of bustling industrial activity. This building, near the site of the Woolen Mill which opened in 1883, is part of the built heritage that remains of an important era in Inverness County history. The house once belonging to "The Dyer" is still standing, as well as the house in which Hilda MacDonald lived for many years. Nothing remains of the Woolen Mill structure, though materials from it have been used in newer buildings. There is a model of the Woolen Mill in the Museum of Cape Breton Heritage in North East Margaree.

See the following pages for more on the MacDonalds of Glendyer and the Glendyer Mills

Partici-Paper
Mary Anne Ducharme, Editor

INVERNESS COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF RECREATION AND TOURISM

Send all contributions to:
Partici-Paper Editor
P.O. Box 179, Mun. Bldg.
Port Hood, Nova Scotia
BOE 3MO

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