

In Those Days in Victoria County

Catherine Weir Munro - new tasks



by Jim St. Clair
“ F I R E ! FIRE!” The dreaded alarm sounded along the shore of the Big Bras d’Or in Boularderie. Perhaps starting in one of the students’ cabins, the flames headed towards the large log dwelling house and the

frame school building that had been the centre of the life of Catherine Weir Munro and her husband since they arrived in 1839. Although the buildings were only yards from the shore, there was no way to pump water to extinguish the flames. Within hours, the site was that of a disaster.

The widely-known Munro Academy



Catherine Weir Munro

was no more. The hundreds of students who had come from all over Cape Breton Island and from as far away as Halifax would be sad to learn that fire had destroyed the buildings where they had learned so much - both men and women.

For Catherine Weir Munro, who like her husband, was a graduate of the Glasgow, Scotland Normal School and a protege of the noted educational theorist David Stow,

the destruction of the school and their house meant a change in life.

But they had experienced a great alteration in their style of living when the emigrated soon after finishing their courses in Glasgow. For the house and the school building they had been promised had not been put up for them. So, they had much building to do as they began to teach, he, academic subjects including navigation, and she, crafts, both practical and fancy, home economics of a sort, sewing, singing and even French - all to her female students.

It seems, however, during their twenty-eight years in Cape Breton, they had been clearing land and planting apple trees on the flat land, one level up from the shore. Perhaps, their students had been involved as well in the development of a farm. The location would be the site of their new undertakings.

The 1871 Federal Census reveals that in the year 1870, Alexander had fulfilled the responsibility of Inspector of Schools, perhaps for Victoria County but at least for the area. Their son Colin, born in 1846, is listed as being employed as a farmer.

But Catherine must have taken on many tasks on the farm as well. For there were six milk cows on their inventory. Only women, in those days, milked cows. She was fifty-three years old when their log house was destroyed by flames and they moved up the hillside where they constructed a large frame house with a Gothic peak on the front. But there was milk to be processed and butter to



Here, A.J. Bray, a world renowned Cape Breton artist, depicts the first school in Boularderie, Boularderie Academy. We see the school building & the home of Alexander & Catherine Weir Munro. On the far point of land, you can see small cabins which housed the students. The painting was donated to Boularderie School by the artist.

be churned, perhaps with the help of some girls of the neighbourhood whom she had previously taught. Four hundred pounds of butter prepared in that one year!

In addition, their flock of sheep, thirteen in number produced fifty pounds of wool which had to be cleaned, carded, spun and turned into cloth for garments and bedding. In the year 1870, she oversaw the weaving of 30 yards of home-made cloth - or perhaps she did all the weaving herself, for she was skilled at the craft and had taught dozens of young women how to prepare the woof and the warp and the setting up of a loom.

Certainly, in addition, she must have participated in the picking and storing of some of the 15 bushels of apples which they harvested from their one acre of orchard.

Some may have been dried for use during the winter. And so many potatoes - 150 bushels from 2 acres of land to see to, some to store, and perhaps some to sell. There were 200 bushels of turnips and 6 bushels of mangels dug in that one year.

So there she was, this woman of middle age, a native of Inverness, Scotland, and well prepared to teach at the school, now functioning as a farm wife and overseer of the work of a very productive site - new tasks for Cahterine Weir Munro!

Soon, as well, she would come to be grandmother and perhaps at times a helpful mother-in-law, after her son Colin married Jessie MacKenzie of a nearby farm, perhaps a former student. There soon would be four children, the youngest born the year before his father Colin Munro, the farmer of the property, died in 1887.

An unusual woman, Catherine, in the amount of training she had before she came to Cape Breton and in the high esteem in which she was held in Scotland by her teachers and sponsors, and in the effect her years of teaching had on the development of handcraft on Cape Breton, but well representative as well of many farm women of her era in the multiplicity of tasks which she was requiried to undertake as the circumstances of life changed. In those days in Victoria County, there was such a woman - Catherine Weir Munro.

Bookmobile Schedule

Wednesday, September 8: Cape Smokey School (11:15-11:45 am), Cabot High School (12:15-12:45 pm), Neil’s Harbour at the Highland Manor (1:30-2 pm), White Point (2:15-2:45 pm), Smelt Brook (3-3:30 pm), Dingwall at Church (4-4:45 pm).

Thursday, September 9: North Highlands School (10:15-11:30 am), Bay St. Lawrence Community Centre (11:45-12:15 pm), Cape North (1:45-2:15 pm).

Wednesday, September 15: Wagmatcook School (9:30-11:45 am), Little Narrows-Ferry (1-1:30 pm), Hazeldale (1:45-2:15 pm), Washabuck Community Hall (2:30-3 pm).

Thursday, September 16: Rankin School (10-11:30 am), Barra Glen (11:45-12:15 pm), Jamesville at Dunn Road (1:45-2:15 pm), MacKinnon’s Harbour (2:30-3 pm), Ottawa Brook (3:15-3:30 pm).

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

Footworks

Jerry Holland, SOCAN

reel

©Fiddlesticks Music

The above reel by the late **Jerry Holland** (1955-2009) can be heard on a recently released album titled *Jerry Holland and Friends*. A marvellous retrospective, Jerry and Paul MacDonald recorded and assembled the program together during the last couple of years of his life. The CD includes tracks of Jerry playing with with 20 different musical friends from all around the world. The tune *Footworks* was composed in 2001 for the Footworks Percussive Dance Ensemble of Annapolis Maryland.

Victoria County’s New Residential Curbside Organics Collection

Garbage Shipped to Guysborough

For the month of August, 2010, **348 Tonnes** of garbage were shipped bringing the total to **13,196.83 Tonnes**

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.

Organic Materials Collected

For the month of August, 2010, **18.76 Tonnes** of organics were collected bringing the total to **787.89 Tonnes**