

FROM THE ARCHIVES

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Staff: This is part of an article written for the Beacon by Garth Orchard who was recounting his early days on Amherst Island. At the time of this account, he would have been in his mid-teens. He had come out from England on a contract to William Hill who will be called 'Willie' in the account that follows. 'Mr Hill' is Willie's father and 'Becky' is Willie's sister. The farm was on the Second Concession.]

The winter of 1929-30 was known as the 'bad ice year'. Although the bay froze over as usual around New Years, mild and changeable weather caused many weak areas and bad cracks so that only ice-boats or very light rigs could cross. Consequently supplies of all heavier goods could not be brought in. Coal was the first to run out, followed closely by flour and sugar, then supplies of coal oil for lamps gave out, so that many residents had to go to bed with the sun, or sit in the dark. The few cars that were around were laid up for want of gasoline. The situation was becoming serious by the end of January, and finally Neilsons chartered the ice-breaker tug Salvage Prince from Kingston to tow a barge load of coal and needed goods through the ice to their dock. Most of the population were on hand to see the landing and help unload precious supplies. It was a day of relieved rejoicing in Stella.

I had my first scary experience of ice crossing that month, when it was necessary to get a doctor from the mainland for old Mr. Hill. Willie let me undertake the trip, since I was the lightest weight. We hitched our smallest mare to a light two-seater racing cutter and I struck out for Bath. Much of the ice was 'glare black' where you could see the thickness by the depth of tiny cracks which formed as you drove over the flimsy surface. From two inches down to one inch, which I was told was the absolute minimum to take the weight of a horse. But our old mare was really ice wise (she had been through the ice before and rescued), and trotted gingerly around the worst spots. Dr. Northmore was known as a keen judge of ice conditions, and met me outside the big dock in Bath harbor. He never refused even the most perilous crossing, and the Islanders really respected the simple efficiency and quiet courage of this dedicated doctor. We made the trip to the Island and back to Bath safely, but I learned more about ice conditions from Doc. Northmore that day than any other time. It always amazed me to observe the nonchalant acceptance by most Islanders, of the dangers of ice crossing. Each season they would keep driving across until someone went through, and there have been several tragedies over the years.

February turned very cold with snow piled high in all the roads. There was no attempt at winter car travel in those days, and where the roads filled up, farmers would just cut

the fence and drive through the fields. After each heavy snowfall it was the duty of various farmers to break a track with their team and sleigh for the mailman, who had to make his deliveries by horse and cutter along the concession roads each day. The mailman was our only contact with the outside world, and a determined, faithful, and obliging man he was! Just a phone call to the store for a badly needed item would see it delivered to your mailbox along with the Whig-Standard and the Farmers Advocate, which provided the only reading around the coal oil lamp each evening, along with Eaton's catalogue. The most exciting day was when the mailman dropped off the expected parcel from Eatons. You gloated over every goodie you admired in the catalogue picture, and never minded that they "substituted with a high priced item at the same price, rather than disappoint you". One thing that always amused me with the girls at the Orange Hall dances. One would glare at her rival in a new dress and mutter "Huh! Eatons, page 79 - \$5.98" They knew them all by heart. Even the material in the pretty homemade dress was expertly appraised, "Looks pretty good for \$1.69 a yard"

My parents had taught me basic needlework in England, so, with long winter evenings to fill, I ordered a bundle of quilting patches, and started cutting and sewing the pieces for a Dresden Plate quilt. When the front pieces were all assembled, Becky got out an old quilting frame, and arranged with a few of the church ladies for a quilting bee to help finish it, and this quilt has been used in my family ever since. Now faded and thinning the stitches have stood the test of time for over half a century; my only remaining souvenir of those happy Island days.

My Dad had written that he was coming out to try for a job in Toronto, and find a house, once he was established, for the rest of the family to join him. So on a crisp 25 below zero day in February, Willie and I drove to Ernestown with the team and sleigh to meet him. With a light English topcoat and a fedora hat, Dad was ill prepared for a Canadian winter. But we bundled him into an old "coon coat" and the overshoes and Yukon cap I had brought, and we settled down in the straw of the sleigh box, covered with a big buffalo robe. Dad was fascinated with this wildly different mode of travel, and I can still hear his delighted "Oops" every time the sleigh dipped into a snowy pothole. We spent a few grand days of companionship before he continued on to Toronto. That winter had seen the great market crash of '29, and the beginning of the great depression here, so he was very fortunate in finding work in his trade, and saving hard to have the family rejoin him, which they did the following Fall.

Due to lack of funds for his fare, my younger brother had to wait till later in the Spring of '31.

[Staff: In later issues, we'll reprint more of his accounts.]