

## The High-spirited Crossing of 1848

Yeomen and ladies of Prince Edward County.

I'm happy to be back in beautiful Prince Edward County. It's such a pleasure to be back after all these years.

I lived here at the Stone Mills for about six years and across the reach at Hay Bay over yonder for another five. My father, Hugh, ran the mills and was a local magistrate here years ago. So I know these barns and mills like the back of my hand. My father had me working all through my teenage years. Some say I slept here but I say I swept here.

Ah yes, and I remember I used to walk barefoot 5 miles to Picton to visit my cousins the Macphersons. Yes, it's true. We, Scottish-Canadians, are a frugal lot.

As my father used to say "Ach aye laddie.... Mony a mickle maks a muckle!" (Saving a penny makes a penny.)

In case you don't recognize me, my picture's on the ten dollar bill. My name's John, but my good friends call me John A. I was born in Glasgow when the British were fighting the Battle of Waterloo. That's 1815 if you're taking notes.

And so in 2015 it will be the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my birth. I'm not one to make a fuss about these things but I don't mind if you do. I really like bronze statues—especially of me when you're paying.

But seriously, I remember living right here along the Bay of Quinte. I love this old place...It brings back lots of memories.

I'm going to tell you a story about what happened right here at the Stone Mills in front of these very Courtyard Barns in 1848.

On a cold January day, there was a hot election up in Picton. If you know your history, you'll know that the capital of Canada moved from Toronto to Montreal this year and we were about to get a new government. Have you heard of Baldwin Lafontaine? Well, that's the year and this is the election.

And political contests are not for the faint-hearted in Upper Canada, I'll have you know. They're a blood sport and I mean that literally. I have a few scars I can show you.

I'm 33. Look at me. The Globe and Mail says I'm very well preserved in Upper Canada malt and rum. But don't you believe it. I'm a successful corporate lawyer in Kingston and for the last while Receiver General for the Government of Canada. Yes and did I mention that I'm only 33.

This is the election year when the Reformers Baldwin and Lafontaine took over from us, the Tories.

Picture being here in early January 1848. I've come to vote for my friend and ally David Stevenson. He's going to represent the County--and I, Kingston in the third Parliament up in Montreal.

He's a Tory you know, like most of my friends. We're not democrats like the newcomer Yankees. We prefer things just the way they are. We're loyal to the her Majesty and not to a Republic. And we enjoy a bit of patronage now and then...like everyone else.

Last evening we arrived by sleigh from Kingston. It was magic in the moonlight. I remember us spanking along over the crisp

snow, which creaked and cracked under the runners in harmony with the sleigh-bells.

But now it's morning, the sky is clear and the ice is new.

In our party is Henry Smith and Alexander Campbell, both knighted some time later. Oh yes, and me--later Sir John A. Macdonald. So we were three knights on a quest so to speak.

We all slept at Adolphustown last night recovering from the refreshment stops at every tavern along the Bath Road.

Five as I recall.

Joining us were a few others. They were also just a bit under the weather.

You know me. I never take anything for granted, so this time I made arrangements to meet with someone on the other side. Canniff Haight was a druggist in Picton, a Quaker from Adolphustown and a good friend. He was waiting to take us by sleigh up to Picton.

We knew there was a sharp battle ahead between the solid Conservatives and those hothead Reformers, like William Lyon Mackenzie. Remember him? The Republic of Canada indeed.

So here we are, the next day after the long trip from Kingston. The sun is shining and we go looking for the twelve or fourteen boats that were supposed to be there to take us to Glenora.

But we looked and looked and no boats. Some scoundrels had taken them across the bay. They'd do anything to keep us out of the fray!

(Mind you. We'd do the same thing.)

We were in a real fix. The large ferry was frozen in during the night on the other side.

So we signalled across to Canniff on t'other side and began our attempt to cross the thin ice. But can you imagine crossing in early January? Brrhh...it was as cold as George Brown's handshake and just as treacherous.

Thankfully, David Lake, who then ran what was known for years as the Widow McGuire's Tavern right next door to us here furnished planks from this very barn and they placed them end to end across the thinnest places.

My friends and I crossed carefully, one by one in that way with a little drink from time to time to help our balance.

So the planks you see around you here in this courtyard helped save the First Prime Minister of Canada from a watery grave!

Thanks to our host, Ann, for saving those planks.

As we balanced our way across the Reach-- about half way across--Smith slips and falls in the freezing water and screams with shock.

After he regains his thoughts, he yells out: "John, help me...I'd gladly give \$500 to be on either shore."

So I said to him: "Give me 600 and you've got a deal."

When we got to the other side, Smith was dripping wet and shivering uncontrollably. He was what you would call "true blue." But we wrapped up well and the sleighing was good. So we dashed away in Canniff's good care.

In Picton, we voted at the old courthouse where I once worked. (But that's another story.) I'm happy to report that our man Stevenson won. So we were all again in good spirits—so to speak. And Canniff brought us back here in the evening. Ah yes...I remember it well.

But this isn't the end of my story.

Before we set off across the bay on this historic day, just near here I mounted the long platform in front of the Widow McGuire's Tavern and gave everyone an imitation of a well-known circuit rider Methodist preacher visiting the old church at Hay Bay. He had a great wit.

He told us how he was chastised by a new magistrate for riding a fine horse when his predecessor had ridden a donkey. He agreed with the magistrate that he would ride a donkey, but that the task of finding one was difficult as the "government having made up all the asses into magistrates!"

He also had a marvelous method of intoning his speech.

I remember he began: "And Jacob was AN hairy man....Yes, and Jacob was AN hairy man." He insisted on teaching grammar as well as virtue.

I'm told I did a pretty good impression of him. It was a trick I picked while trying to learn that Loyalist twangy accent while I lived here as a boy.

And so that was the end of it. We had a hearty laugh, and we all went our separate ways.

Yes, I love this place and the people. They voted for me time after time. They never asked me for anything. And that's exactly what they got.

At heart I will always be a Quinte Boy – That's the truth!

So here's a toast:

To fond memories of the Bay of Quinte and especially to the people of Prince Edward County. They are the salt of the earth... they're there when you need them and always good LOYAL friends.

-- John A. Macdonald 1848

*The Highspirited Crossing of 1848*

by David Warrick

Performed by Peter Hill,

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Workshop: Alan Gratias, Jean-Paul Harney, Marilyn Warrick

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