

# WORK THROUGH TIME

*Cape Breton Stories of Land & Sea*



## **Gabarus to Port Hastings, the Telegraph in Cape Breton**

Mary and George Lavery

The telegraph office in Gabarus was one of many in Cape Breton in the early 1900s. Telegraph service began in Nova Scotia with the establishment of the world's first government-owned offices in Halifax, Truro and Amherst in 1849. Two years later the service was sold to Nova Scotia Electric Telegraph Company, who crossed the Strait of Canso with an overhead line and extended service to Port Hood and Sydney. Other lines followed, funded by private investors, to Newfoundland and then across the Atlantic to England. Western Union established a telegraph office in North Sydney, with relay stations in many local communities in Cape Breton. The Sydney and Louisbourg Railway also had its own system. Cape Breton became a focal point for news gathering from all of North America and Europe. For many years in the Gabarus area telegraph communication was the accepted method of keeping in touch with relatives in the States and other parts of Canada.

The telegraph office and post office in Gabarus Lake was in Hughie MacDonald's store. Hughie operated the store from 1870 until about 1930, while his wife, Flora, handled the telegraph and the post office. Alex MacDonald operated the store for five or six years until 1936 when Flora's daughter Tina MacDonald took over the store, the telegraph and post office. From 1914 to 1958, the telegraph operated as a relay station between Mira and Fourchu. Government telephone service came into the area around 1950; but up to 1961, when regular telephone service began, there was only one phone in the community and it was at Tina's.

The first telegraph office in Gabarus began operation in 1903 in Herbert Gunn's store. Later it was moved to Captain Grant's store and operated by Christina Grant, daughter of Absalom and Margaret (Munroe) Grant. She operated the telegraph for over 40 years. In 1947 Mrs. Mildred "Mid" Gray became the local agent for the Government Telephone and Telegraph Service. At that time much of the Gabarus area was without service of any kind. Some communities had telephone connection with Louisbourg through Government lines, but others were provided with telegraph service only. There was a telegraph office in Gabarus Lake operated by Mrs. Hughie MacDonald, and one in Fourchu operated by Dan Hughie MacLean. Mid would receive messages from these and other communities by Morse code, and then relay them by telephone to neighbouring communities, including Louisbourg. In 1959 the telegraph service in Gabarus was terminated, leaving only a few private telephones with Louisbourg as their central. In May 1961 the Maritime Telegraph and

Telephone Company began telephone service in Gabarus, with Mid as their agent. Seventy-nine people subscribed to the service, which extended to Gabarus Lake, Fourchu, Framboise, and Sterling. Mid retired on December 19, 1976 when the service was switched to the dial system. As one resident said, "That was the day we were switched on to the rest of the world!"

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### **The Port Hastings Telegraph**

Much like in Gabarus, telegraph services in Port Hastings were essential to communication both within and beyond the island. Beginning in 1818 and continuing for nearly 80 years communications between mainland Nova Scotia and Cape Breton Island were the responsibility of the MacMillan family. Hugh MacMillan and his wife and children settled on land identified as MacMillan's Point on older maps; land that today borders on the Canso Canal.

The MacMillan family were pioneers in introducing the telegraph to this area of Cape Breton. The first telegraph office appeared in Port Hastings in the home of Hugh's grandson and namesake, Hugh MacMillan. While the exact date cannot be ascertained it is thought that the Port Hastings telegraph office began operations in 1864. Initially the telegraph cable between mainland Nova Scotia and the Island of Cape Breton was stretched from the top of Cape Porcupine Mountain on the mainland across the Strait of Canso to a tall pole on high ground above the present-day Canso Canal. Due to the long unsupported weight of the cable, it would often sag and become caught in the masts of ships. Subsequently, a submarine cable was laid under the waters of the Strait between Auld's Cove and MacMillan's Point. Tar was placed on the cable, oakum was wound tightly around the tarred cable and then more tar was spread over the oakum to waterproof the cable. The cable was taken up each year and repaired.

Hugh MacMillan was in charge of the Western Union cable landings. With the telegraph office being in the family home, everyone learned Morse code and became operators. Daughters Annie and Euphemia, as well as adopted daughter Sadie MacInnis, sons Douglas, John Finely and Angus Beaton MacMillan and later grandson Douglas MacNeil learned to operate the keys. Some of them would use this skill in their lifelong employment like Angus B. MacMillan who graduated from Saint Francis Xavier in 1901 and then went to work in the office of the Inverness and Richmond railway in Inverness, eventually becoming train dispatcher by 1921 and then yard master.

Hugh MacMillan's sister, Christine, was also no stranger to the keys. She was widowed young when her husband, merchant and lawyer John Chisholm, died leaving her to care for her family. After his death in 1880, Christine opened a telegraph office in the house and later a fourteen room hotel called the Hastings House.

Eventually, Christine and John's daughter, Annie, married William Petrie who was station agent for many years at Port Hastings. William had the telegraph lines connected to the Hastings House so Annie and Christine could send messages. Annie Petrie later became a teacher of Morse code and taught many people from her office in the Hastings House on Church Street. After her instruction, the students were often employed in the government office operated by Mrs. Petrie or the Canadian National Railway offices.

In a 1981 interview with Kaye Fraser Snyder who was born in Port Hastings, Kaye noted that it took about a month to learn the code from Mrs. Petrie. In 1920 when she learned the trade, the salary of a telegraph operator was approximately \$20.00 per month and the operator had to remain in her home most of the time in case a message came through.

Mrs. Christina MacMillan Chisholm died in her home in Port Hastings on January 31, 1923. Her daughter, Mrs. Annie Petrie died on January 2, 1934.

These excerpts from the history of the telegraph in Port Hastings were provided by Yvonne Fox of the Port Hastings Historical Society.

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