

WORK THROUGH TIME

Cape Breton Stories of Land & Sea



The Village Blacksmith

With the recent passing of Hughie Beaton of Little Judique, much was lost to us in his memories, but it is fortunate indeed that the Chestico Museum and Historical Society was able to tape an hour and a half of reminiscing and storytelling with him.

Hughie Beaton was a man, like Longfellow's "Village Blacksmith":

*The Smith a mighty man is he,
With large and sinewy hands;
And the muscles of his brawny arms
are strong as iron bands.*

*His brow is wet with honest sweat,
He earns what'er he can,
And looks the whole world in the face
For he owes not any man.*

Hughie told how shoeing a horse would take an hour, and about eight horses a day was enough work for anybody. However, there was one December 23rd when he shod eighteen; and seventeen on Christmas Eve - he didn't make it to church that day! Hughie just wasn't the kind of man who'd send his neighbours home on ill-shod horses when the roads were slippery. In one twelve day period, he shod 110, and Hughie estimated he put a ton of shoes on in one year.

He started his working day at dawn, sometimes working well into the night. He was paid 85 cents to set the shoes on a horse, and about \$1.60 to \$1.80 for new shoes. Out of that came the cost of the shoes, the nails and the coal. For the same work, a blacksmith would be paid \$35 today.

Hughie loved his work with horses, though, and didn't mind pitting his determination and strength against that of a quarrelsome horse. Sometimes, he said: "I've seen myself fighting for two hours and a half with a horse before I shod it....There's a lot to handling horses." he added, "you've got to pet them and never be scared of them."

But Hughie's talents were not only with smithing, for many a time he would stop in the middle of a shoeing to give someone a haircut! If there was a dance on, he'd have as many as nineteen customers needing either horseshoes or a haircut. As Mary

Ronald tells it, women would go to him (in about 1928) to get their hair shingled, and Hughie gave "darn good hair cuts."

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An Interview with Hughie Beaton

John: I've got a question, Dan Willie told me to ask you. Hughie Beaton, he wanted to know what was the most horses that you shoed in one day?

Hughie: Eighteen.

John: Eighteen?

Hughie: I was pushing. I had to do it, there was 22 at the shop or more. I did eighteen and I did seventeen the next day and ten the next day. That was Christmas Eve. I'm telling you, I didn't go to church. [Laughter.] It's a lot of work but, I shoed 110 in 12 days. The road was slippery and they couldn't get home.

John: Where did you have your first blacksmith shop?

Hughie: Up home.

John: Up on Beaton Road?

Hughie: Beaton Road, the old home.

John: And how long would you have had your shop there before you moved down to Little Judique?

Hughie: About six years or seven years. I began a shop first, making sashers and wood sleighs. I built a fireplace and started the iron work mounting the sleighs...then the horses started coming. Well, I shoed a long time before I moved to the corner. I'd have scrap - old shoes, tires and stuff. I had five ton at the old place. I sold this scrap that I had gathering down. Then in 1930, I moved down to the corner, that was in June.

Spectator: What year did you start?

Hughie: In 1930, I moved down and it was six years before I owned the shop.

Spectator: Did you ever get a bad kick?

Hughie: Once. I got a kick in the chest and it put me down. I was down and the kicks came over my head. I got the pipe knocked out of my mouth. She had a flying kick too, if she had kicked me she would have threw my head off.

John: So what did you do to the horse after she knocked the pipe out of your mouth?

Hughie: I had the pick handle, I hit him back of the head. Well, he went down as flat and he came up. You try to kill me and I'll kill you. But that trained that horse, never lifted a foot off the ground again.

Spectator: She didn't?

Hughie: No. But thank god I got along good with horses. I was always nice to them, you know. That's the only horse I ever hit hard, and I went after him to kill him. He went so close to killing me that I said, I'll have you first.

John: What did you do with your horse, Duncan? The one that...

Hughie: Oh, I shod her up.

Duncan: Angus Hugh R. Beaton bought her after that. He had her for a long time. But she was quiet while he was shoeing her. She landed down at Frank Tracy's. She took off on us. She only had one shoe on and she took off.

Hughie: Oh, I had the bad ones. I shod one and had him tied with the rope. Well, he did everything. I put him down three or four times. Then he put his head between his legs and was thinking of somersaults. He couldn't get away, George Gould was with me. If George was wise, he wouldn't been with me.

Hughie: I built stocks at the last of it. They should have been built ten years ago.

John: What are stocks?

Hughie: You drive the horse in. Three big posts and a bar across. Then you put a bar behind and he couldn't get either way. You tie a rope from his hindfoot in through the post and raise his foot high up.

Spectator: Couldn't move?

Hughie: Couldn't move, no. I saw them playing, jumping and tearing, chain over their back. They'd lay down and I'd put the chain under them, they'd be between the two chains. I didn't use to bother with them though. I just loved work - fighting with a horse - I found myself fighting for two hours and a half with a horse before I shod it.

Spectator: Did you find that they were better when you shod them the second time?

Hughie: Oh yes.

Spectator: Some, it might be a nervous condition. They're getting worked up.

Hughie: There's a lot in handling a horse, too. You gotta be nice to them. You gotta pet them, talk nice to them. And never be scared of them, that's the worst thing in the world. Go to a horse, just go right up to him, and he'll know then that you ain't scared of him.

John: I'm wondering about the four people whose horses you didn't shoe. You said there was twenty-two horses in the morning and you only shod eighteen.

Hughie: Well, the four had to crawl home some way. Ya, but I think there was sixteen or seventeen the next morning. Well, come to ten o'clock, there was no horse in the hall. Then ten horses came in half an hour. That was Christmas Eve. So I finished them. They couldn't get to church if I didn't - it was slippery, och! All ice.

Mildred: What was the fee for shoeing a horse?

Hughie: Well, it was too small. Fix a set of shoes on, set them up and cork them, say eighty-five cents.

Mildred: Eighty-five cents a foot or for the four feet? Eighty-five cents for the total?

Hughie: And a dollar-sixty for new ones.

Spectator: Was that when you started?

Hughie: The first few years? Yes. All money, pay for the shoes, the nails, and the coal for them all. You'd get \$35 today.

Spectator: So that would include the shoes - you'd have to pay for the shoes?

Hughie: Oh, yes.

Spectator: You wouldn't have too much left for yourself.

Hughie: No.

Spectator: That's the way to get rich!

Hughie: Never got too much money.

Spectator: But \$50 today would shoe that shoe, wouldn't it?

Hughie: You'd get \$35 anyway. I put a ton of shoes on one year or more. I ordered twenty-two kegs. That's a hundred in each keg, and I put them all on but two. At 250 pounds a keg. Ha! I drove nails then for 24 years.

Spectator: The hammer that you had...

Hughie: It was a dandy hammer.

Mildred: The same hammer?

Hughie: Yes, I had it for twenty-four years. And I couldn't get another one that would be...There was that much steel on it, you know. Oh, there was a lot of experience in it.

Spectator: Where did you get the shoes? Where did you order them from?

Hughie: I was getting them mostly from Simmons in Halifax and Donovan's in Amherst. There was an awful lot of stuff in Donovan's. Be getting maybe \$1500 a year. That was a lot then, steel was cheap.

Spectator: I suppose you had a problem sometimes getting good waxmen's coal.

Hughie: Oh yes, the best coal. I used them all. Everything, even Inverness Coal, English coal, Mabou Coal Mines is the best. Port Hood is second.

Spectator: Why would one kind of coal be better than the other. Was it to get more heat?

Hughie: Well, it's the kind of coal, the grade coal, there's no sulfur in it. And there was no copper. Sulfur and copper can never weld it right.

John: Would you have an assistant in your forge?

Hughie: Well, I did have a fellow helping me at the last of it. Taking the shoes off, he couldn't put them on. Just pulling them off. Last three or four years I was getting stiff and getting older.

Spectator: On the average, how long would it take to shoe a fairly good horse with a decent shoe?

Hughie: Well, a horse an hour you'd get a good work. Eight horses a day - well, that's good work for anybody, he should quit then.

Spectator: About how early would you start?

Hughie: Oh, soon as it would get bright.

Spectator: You were pretty lucky, Hughie, you never got kicked by a horse.

Hughie: I was lucky, awful lucky.

Spectator: Yes.

Hughie: You'd have to be quick. When you have a hold of the horse by the foot, what's he going to do next? You can tell by perception. He's nervous - you can feel it go through him- it's time to let him go.

Spectator: Did you ever have one you had to give up on?

Hughie: No, not one. I wouldn't give up.

Spectator: You used to work on tires too, right?

Hughie: I was bracing these rods, rubber tires. There's a cord going through the tires and there was brass, you couldn't see this brass in the flax. I used to get them, hand them out and put them in. Brace them on. This machine caused [held] the wires, then you'd cut them and brace them together.

Spectator: That was the rubber tires.

Hughie: Rubber tires.

Spectator: You'd put steel on too?

Hughie: Oh yes.

Spectator: Around what time did they start using rubber tires?

Hughie: Oh, about fifteen, twenty years ago. The big job on rubber tires is putting the channel on under the tire. You have to get them in bars and you'd have to weld them. There's a divot in the channel tube, you'd have to make sure you had it the size of the tube. You couldn't stretch it or shrink it. You have to know how to cut it and then weld it. There's three sides. It's pretty particular. Oh I was born thirty-five years too soon. Welding is the most particular thing. If you aren't a good welder then you can just quit.

Spectator: So when you started shoeing horses, did you more or less give up the sleigh?

Hughie: Well, I got so busy that I couldn't. I built new wagons. I built eight new buggies. Driving wagons, painted and cushioned them and everything.

John: Did you shoe horses in Port Hood when the race track first opened here?

Hughie: Oh yes.

John: What was the big difference between shoeing a race horse and a work horse?

Hughie: Well they just had to be so neat. They had to be leveled off the right way, race horses. That's the main thing, level the hoof. Some horses they strike their knees. Some more horses they cross fire. As they cross fire, they catch the other foot with the hind. I saw a horse that walked away from the forge and he cut himself.

Mildred: Would it be a lighter weight shoe?

Hughie: Well some of them, it would have to be heavier on one side and lighter on the other. To level them off, you would often have to put leather under them - to keep the hoof level.

Spectator: What's the largest set that you shoed? Number eight shoe would be the largest, would it?

Hughie: Four ounces, five ounces. I used to shoe for a Doctor in Inverness. I shoed the day he sold the horse. That was the horse that day, he drove in the race and he lost.

Mildred: Would you be shoeing any heavy draft horses in those days, like Persians?

Hughie: Oh yes.

Mildred: And Clydes?

Hughie: Yes, lots of them. These western boys were bad, terrible! They were clear crazy, they'd jump on top of you. I was talking to a fellow from Saskatchewan where they used to lasso them horses. I was telling him I was shoeing them. You're as crazy, he says, as the birds. I wouldn't go near one of them for God's sake, and he was right.

Spectator: They'd likely be ranch horses.

Hughie: They'd be ranch, catching them on the prairie. Getting them for maybe five dollars. Then they'd throw them on the car and send them down here. Charge maybe two hundred dollars for one.

Spectator: How long did you shoe horses, Hughie?

Hughie: Thirty-five years.

Spectator: You were there thirty-five years?

Hughie: Yes well, I was at that steady. I was going to make hay or grain. But thirty-five years without leaving the anvil.

Spectator: Did you notice a change in the stock and that sort of thing?

Hughie: When the Westerns came in, they done away with horses.

Spectator: Inverness County had some of the best horses in the country.

Hughie: Yes, they did.

Spectator: They shipped cargos to the States from here.

Hughie: Oh yes.

Spectator: Way back years ago.

Hughie: They took cargos from the West. There was work with pretty near everyone. If he didn't have a job he had contracted or something.

Spectator: That Western I had there. She was worth it. How come so many of them had the heaves, or took the heaves when they came here?

Hughie: They weren't used to the climate.

John: What was the second thing you said, they either had the heaves or they contracted?

Hughie: And their hooves were contracted on account of, on dry you know? They were never pared or anything, and they, instead of spreading out, the hoof got smaller.

John: Is there much of the dead tissue, what you drive the horse shoe nail through?

Hughie: Oh it's not very much, maybe, nothing over a quarter of an inch much.

John: Did you ever drive a horse shoe nail into the...

Hughie: No, no I always watched that.

John: Would a horse go lame?

Hughie: Oh god.

John: Forever?

Hughie: Ya, liable to ruin him if it goes in too quick and the dirt gets in.

Spectator: Tough job, hard, hard work.

Hughie: It was good if you liked it though.

Spectator: When you'd get up to the forge there'd be half a dozen horses ahead of you.

Hughie: Times there's twenty-two ahead of you.

Spectator: Did it bother your back anytime?

Hughie: Never had a sore back in my life. Account of shoeing I could stay stooped there all night about. I had a doctor examine my back, Dr. MacLellan he says, my, my, what a back. Well he says, whether it was bad or good I don't know. My my, what a back. Oh you get muscles, that's all. Oh it's a good trade, anybody that'll take speed shoeing, boy, will make a lot of money today. But it will take a long time to learn.

Spectator: Where do they teach them today, are there many places they do it, learn a trade they don't normally learn?

Hughie: No, no, no.

Spectator: They have schools, haven't they?

Hughie: Yes, they have.

John: They're teaching at the Agricultural College now I think.

Hughie: You got to get out and do the work. Then if you know how to do it, you take a lot out of books, boy. I took a lot out of books.

John: How did you pick up the trade in the first place?

Hughie: I just start myself and I had kind of a good idea, you know.

John: Did you work with a blacksmith?

Hughie: No, no.

John: You never worked in a blacksmith shop at all?

Hughie: No, no, I never worked in one. I learned the hard way, do it yourself. The best way in the world to learn. Oh, god, welding. That's the hardest I'd do. Weld a shoe, and sharpen it out with the heat. And if it wasn't welded it wouldn't stay, it had to be welded good.

John: Did you ever have any fires? Working with fire in the shop all the time, did your building ever burn or come close to burning?

Hughie: No, no. The roof on the shop, that caught fire. The roof was getting old. That scared me and I tore it down.

Spectator: Did you used to make coffins, Hughie?

Hughie: Yes.

Spectator: How did you get into that?

Hughie: Oh, with my father. I made five in one week. That was going fast, two brothers died. They took one of them to the grave and they put the other in the coffin. Dan Angus, big Jim's brothers, two of them. That was the time of the flu was around.

John: That would be what, 1918, 1919?

Hughie: I suppose it would be 1919. I was only very young. And from then on my father learned me to cut them when I was making them myself I was only about 15. Ya know that I heard myself...do you believe in forerunners?

Spectator: Yes, I do.

Hughie: I heard my father, myself putting the cloth on the coffin.

John: Putting the what on the coffin?

Hughie: The cloth. Ya know we made them in an outhouse and it was cold as the devil. I suppose it was 22 below. You couldn't put the cloth on it was so cold and I put it in the kitchen. After dark I put the coffin. I went to bed a few nights before that, and I could hear them, tacks the way you know you'd hear. And I called the rest and I asked them if they were all in bed. It was right down below and I'd hear bang bang. In about a week's time I covered a coffin in the kitchen, I heard that just as plain.

John: Who was the person that died, did you know them?

Hughie: I don't remember, I believe it was Donald Steven's mother.

Spectator: Is that Donald?

Hughie: As far as I can remember. I know I covered her coffin. I made seventeen or eighteen coffins.

Spectator: What would you use for cutting out a coffin then?

Hughie: There was no pattern.

John: They'd be waked just on a board first, before the coffin was made?

Hughie: Ya, yes, they'd be laid out on a board.

Spectator: You didn't have coffins made like...

Hughie: Oh no, you'd have the mash up the remains in the coffins.

John: Was that the only forerunner?

Hughie: That's the only forerunner I heard. But I heard that sound just as it was. And I didn't know what it was until I took the coffin in to cover it.

John: And what would it be, what would it cost in the coffin business, if you could get it cheaper from...

Hughie: No, we weren't getting nothing from it. (Laughter.) It couldn't be any cheaper than that.

Spectator: That was an old custom, to make the coffin.

Hughie: Yes, that was charity. I've made about 17 or 18. The last one I made in the shop I went downstairs, ya know, and the coffin was upstairs. I went down for something and when I came up there was a fellow laying in the coffin. (Laughter.)

Spectator: How long did it take to make the coffin when you started it?

Hughie: Oh, you'd make a coffin in half a day, maybe more. Ya, you'd have sizes, 1000, 1200.

Spectator: I suppose you had a kind of a measurement lay out for that.

Hughie: Oh no, I just had a rule you know, for the shoulders. Ya know... There's a rule, cut the board ya know.

John: You went to the house, you measured the...

Hughie: Measured the remains.

Spectator: Did it bother you to be around the remains?

Hughie: No, no. Then they came after me one day to start a factory in Hawkesbury. Oh, they had the power up there. Make coffins at Hughie MacDonald's. MacDonald, he was a good man. He wanted me to go up there and start a factory. I was shoeing too many horses.

Spectator: Did you ever have to stop in the middle of shoeing a horse to give someone a haircut?

Hughie: Yes, lots of times.

Spectator: What would happen then?

Hughie: Especially, if there was a dance on, the girls would be heavy, I think it was nineteen one day. Shoeing horses (and the women would come for their hair). They used to get the hair, you know.

Mildred: The women too, huh?

Hughie: Oh yes, the women wanted the style.

Mildred: That was in about 1928, 26 or something like that.

Hughie: I suppose it was, ya.

John: I was talking with Mary Ronald a couple of days ago. She knew we were coming and she told me that one day she went to get her hair cut and you stopped in the middle of shoeing horses to cut her hair.

Hughie: Oh yes.

John: She said you gave her a darn good haircut.

Hughie: Well, there was nobody to cut hair.

Mildred: Where would you cut them, in the forge?

Hughie: Yes.

Mildred: Right there?

Hughie: If they'd come to the forge I'd cut them there but they generally went in the forge.

This interview was edited from a version that originally appeared in a Chestico Historical Society Newsletter and was provided by the Chestico Museum and Historical Society of Port Hood. The main interviewer was John Gillies, but other members of the Historical Society were involved in questioning Mr. Hughie Beaton. The interview took place in the winter of 1980. The interview was transcribed by Debbie MacNeil and can be found in its entirety through the Chestico Museum and Historical Society.

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