

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, July 2, 2018

July 1, 1936: As I write this on July 1, I am reminded of this day 82 years ago when we were on Cape Breton Island in Nova Scotia. We were staying in a hotel in Sydney and had planned to do some local sightseeing, including the Glace Bay Coal Mine that extended some 10 miles under the ocean and the old French Fortress of Louisbourg, guarding France's claims in North America, on a small island accessible only on low tide. We found these places closed because of Canada's National Holiday, now called Canada Day, but then known as Dominion Day.

The motor trip to Nova Scotia and the Gaspé Peninsula had been planned by my parents for more than a year. John E. McCurdy, owner of Sydney's only department store, was also a trapshooter who attended the Yorklyn tournaments annually. With no trapshooting in Quebec or the Maritime Provinces, his only shooting each year was during the week at Yorklyn and about two weeks later at the Grand American Tournament at Vandalia, Ohio. Traveling entirely by train, he would spend several days in Montreal, doing the annual buying for his store before coming to the U.S. (beautiful Hudson Bay woolen blankets were about \$5). For several years he had been encouraging my father to visit Nova Scotia and especially Cape Breton Island. He promised that the roads were being rebuilt, and it would be the perfect time for a motor trip. So, on June 20, 1936, my parents and I, together with my father's humorous cousin Mary Passmore, a fourth-grade teacher at Wilmington Friends School, left Auburn Heights in my dad's '34 Packard Twelve limousine and headed northeast.

Before we reached Sydney, we had spent a cold, rainy night at Canadian Pacific's Pictou Lodge, a nice place but with no heat. The lodge was preparing for a visit from Babe Ruth and his wife; 1936 was his first year in retirement. We also encountered a man named MacKenzie, who operated a small fleet of Pierce Arrow 8-passenger motor coaches from Boston to Sydney, a 2½-day trip of about 850 miles. MacKenzie's Pierce Arrow and our big Packard brought the tiny Ross Ferry, about 30 miles from Sydney, up to full capacity. While in Sydney, Mr. McCurdy took me to a baseball game, and at North Sydney, we observed the large coal-fired steam ferries that connected Nova Scotia with Newfoundland. Our host also described to us the trip around the scenic Cabot Trail, which followed the rugged north coast around Cape Breton. When my dad asked him about the condition of the road, the reply was "smooth as this floor," referring to the floor in his store.

We proceeded clockwise around the Cabot Trail, as my dad said he wanted to stay "on the inside" if it became necessary to pass a car traveling in the opposite direction. The road was not paved and mostly only one vehicle wide, and tourist services were nonexistent. A few miles into the trip, we were winding along this one-lane gravel road on the side of the cliffs. About every 10 miles, we would come to a small French-speaking fishing village. Needing something to eat, my parents knocked on the door of a tiny cottage and gestured to the woman on the inside that four of us were hungry. With no words spoken, she sat us down at her kitchen table and served fresh blueberries with milk and homemade biscuits. By late afternoon, we had arrived at North Ingonish, where a farmhouse accommodated overnight guests. The main entrée for dinner was steamed lobster, scooped from the Atlantic less than one hour before.

We left Cape Breton but toured much of Nova Scotia before returning to New Brunswick and heading north to the Gaspé Peninsula. A massive road-building program was taking place all over this area, and the dust from passing cars, plus the rough surfaces of the road made traveling somewhat unpleasant. We visited Halifax and Chester, and the "Evangeline Country" surrounding Grand Pre on the Bay of Fundy. It was near here, in trying to cross the Minas Basin on a ferry that the cable broke on the boom used to load cars onto the deck, and our big Packard bounced like a rubber ball. The car was not damaged, but we feared one of the deck hands suffered an injury. They repaired the cable and unloaded our car and about four others after the two-hour ferry ride to Parrsboro, some miles east of Moncton, New Brunswick.