

Moose Factory Journal.... June 2003

Friday, June 13, 2003

To catch up... Last week (2-6 June) was devoted to Diocesan Clericus. All the clergy were there. It is our once-a-year opportunity to catch up with each other. This Clericus, like last September's, was at a basically summer camp near Timmins. It looked out over a lake. Geese and Loons were present – and vocal. One morning, early, a mother duck brought her hatchlings out for display for us early-risers. The rest of the time was spent on the Gospel of Mark with Don Cruikshank, quiet, and catching up.

On Sunday, June 8, we had the annual Sunday School picnic: a highly efficient rendering of Morning Prayer, awards, more awards, games outside, and mountains of hot dogs and hamburgers. The day was simply gorgeous – clear as a bell, cool, and a slight breeze.

On Monday and Tuesday I headed back to The Old Reserve for the tail end of the 'Ceremonies' – about which I promised not to write. So, what I learned from that must come in some other way, at some other time.

Wednesday, Thursday, and today: I have been catching up on everything else that had been sliding. Last night I had an important project come to life again; it had been sleeping since last August.

As I had described last August, we had our annual Memorial Service in 2002, as in every other year that anyone can remember, on the first Sunday of August. Lots of people are on The Island for that Service. Last August two groups of Inuit were there – each from a different community. One of the groups was organizing a project whereby Inuit folks from their village, who had died and who had been buried at Moose Factory years ago, could be remembered now, in our generation, by the placing of a memorial in or near The St. Thomas' Cemetery.

Under the best of circumstances this is a tough project. A very large stone has to be cut by an expert and then moved over distances and routes that stones do not ordinarily move. In this particular project two critical factors are missing. One is that the location of the graves is no longer known. There was never a coherent map of the cemetery. And one year all the crosses got moved; and no one knew where to put them back again.

The other big problem is/was the names. Last August the Inuit came with a list of names of people they thought had died here. Evidently they were certain about some of their forbears. But they had 8 or so names they wanted to check against the records.

We couldn't find the records for those critical years – basically the 1950-60's. There were no records. There were no copies of the records. We were stuck.

Until last night.... Bobby had been cleaning up his cellar and discovered two old books that evidently hold all the burial records from somewhere in the late 60's back to about 1914.

I phone Rosie Ivillaq, my contact in Puvirnituk. She wasn't there, but I left a message telling her what we had found. Then I got to work.

One book – the more recent – was an original (not a photocopy.) It had few entries. The book had been used only for a short time. Then the Burial Book we are now using replaced it. The reason for the (premature) switchover was that the 'new' book has a better layout for the entry of information – more blanks to fill in.

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The other book is a photocopy of an original – presumably in the archives in Sudbury. This book had been completely filled. I created a database of over a hundred names and faxed the information immediately to Rosie's work fax number. This morning I mailed the same stuff in hard copy.

I didn't get the fax sent off until after midnight. It took that long to worry my way through the records. I entered a lot of names of folks from communities north of here – unless their names were so obviously Cree that even I recognized them. The Inuit were often identified with an ID number – beginning in E9- ... Regardless of the stated residence of those persons, I entered their names (as best as I could read them) into the database.

As I was plowing through the names I began to recognize some consistencies.... The spelling of the names was, at best, rudimentary. Often there would be an entry something like this: First Name: Baby; Last Name: Annie. Death dates, burial dates, and that ID number would generally be clearly entered. There were only two birth dates in all the records I researched; one of those birth dates was a year (nothing more). Many records had at least an estimate of age at time of death.

Another thing: Many of the deaths occurred the day before the burial. Several deaths occurred on the same day as the burial. I had the sense that the funeral party for many of these souls consisted of the priest, the gravedigger, and perhaps one of the hospital staff. I shared some of these thoughts and was told that usually the community up north simply got a letter some time later – stating date of death and date of burial, number, and maybe some semblance of name. Families were unable to be here through the dying and the burying. In this culture the respect shown the deceased (even these days) is of critical importance to everybody. I pondered the burden on the priest (usually Samuel Iserhoff) who would have been aware of all this – as well as of his own helplessness to do anything about it.

Saturday, June 14, 2003

Today has been catch-up day. I'm trying to tie up the loose ends before – and not after – vacation. I may – or may not – be caught up by the 24th when I take the train south.

WCPE (in Raleigh, NC) has a request program on Saturday night. It is now evening. And they just played a Mozart Horn Concerto (with Dennis Brain) at my request. The announcer, however, got Canada and California mixed up somehow; and Moose Factory ended up in California when he gave my (first) name and address. I doubt anyone else on The Island here is listening to that particular station right now. But I had to rush off an email to the station with a little bit of northern history and geography. One should not be surprised that North Carolina is not fully informed about Northeastern Ontario. I was surprised, however, as I have come to realize that very few people here have any idea of what New England is. It's in the States; and that's another country.

Friday, June 20, 2003

Time to wrap up the month. Things get busy in a few hours: graduations, National Aboriginal Day of Prayer, weddings, baptisms, and who knows what else. Monday should be quiet, but that's when I close down the office (ie computer.) On Tuesday I'm on vacation until the end of July. I doubt I'll post a July installment. If anything happens in July, it will show up in August's Journal. I will have been here a year.