

A “Home Child” at Delta

By the time he arrived at Delta following the Great War, Tom Naylor had had a rough life. Born in July 1900 in London, England, he was the second child in a family of three. But he probably knew little about his parents, who were either dead or too poor to support him because, at an early age, he was sent to live in an Annie MacPherson Home, run by a charitable organization for needy children. In 1910, Tom was shipped off to Canada with his sister Daisy, a year younger than him, supposedly to get an education and, eventually, start a new life. His older brother George had been sent the previous year. Up to 100,000 of these “home children,” as they were called, were conveyed by well-meaning British philanthropists, from the 1870s to the 1930s, to Canada as well as other parts of the Empire. They were viewed not as children to be loved and cherished, but as cheap workers: boys as “farm labourers” and girls as “mother’s helpers”. Many were abused and would bear lifelong psychological scars.

Arriving at the port of Quebec in the company of a Mr. Merry, Tom and Daisy took a train to Ontario, bound for Stratford, where they were probably enrolled in a local school and boarded with a farm family who put them to work. After five years of life as a farm hand, Tom had had enough. In December 1915, at the age of 15, he swore before a magistrate that he was an adult and joined the Canadian Expeditionary Force heading for Europe. At 5' 2", with a fair complexion, blue eyes, and light brown hair, Tom still had a little growing up to do. And he likely did it fast in the trenches. But at least he came back in one piece, returning to Canada, along with brother George (who had enlisted a couple of months after his little brother) at the end of the war.

The veterans travelled west, arriving at Delta around the time that the road was constructed to the lakeshore, in the early 1920s. Taking up commercial fishing during winter, the brothers found occasional work on the farms around Oakland and Portage Creek in summer. Tom picked up odd jobs such as moving the outhouses of cottagers. A little matter of game regulations which prohibited commercial fishing in the summer did not stop him. Every Friday, Tom would peddle fish that he had caught to cottagers and residents, charging 25¢ for enough to feed a family of four. Meanwhile, sister Daisy had found employment as a housekeeper for Dr. Fred Cadham at his cottage on the east side of Delta channel near the present site of the Waterfowl Station. Each brother had his own one-room shack that was pulled by horses out onto Lake Manitoba during

the fishing season then brought back in the spring. Tom’s shack, nicknamed “Skylark,” was remembered as having a bed and woodstove, with a small table under a single window. Pots and dirty dishes were usually strewn about the place.

The Naylor brothers lived quietly at Delta for the rest of their lives, neither ever marrying. By the 1950s, Tom had become a fixture, hanging around the Hutchinson store, or walking down to the public beach to socialize. It was said that Tom “never ventured further north than a fishing shack out on the lake, further east than the Waterfowl Station, further west than the West Public Beach, or off the road into Portage, where his only destination was the Portage Hotel.” George pinched his pennies and had a small Plymouth car which he used, after getting nattily dressed, to drive into Portage each Saturday night. But Tom, at the opposite end of the fastidious scale, bummed rides from whomever was going to and from town, or took a cab. He befriended several of the local young men, who would pay visits to the Skylark to share recreational pursuits, mostly drinking beer, laughing, and listening to Tom play the fiddle. He was a mean player, often exclaiming that “I have tunes in me that’s never been played before.” One fellow would later recall an especially memorable New Years Eve, when Tom convinced him to try a swig from a bottle of liniment to which he, Tom, was partial:

“... no gasoline could taste like that! I ran out the door and into a snow bank, and ate snow for a full minute trying to quench the burning and kill the taste. Tom drank the whole bottle and seemed to enjoy it ...”

Realizing that the old guy was lonely for company, the locals looked after him as he grew older, bringing him groceries and supplies as he needed them. They came to appreciate his easy sense of humor and gentle nature, learning life lessons that only began to hit home after he passed away. Tom loved kids and was always handing out treats, especially at Halloween, and small toys on special occasions.

In August 1968, while walking along the Delta highway, Tom was struck by a car and killed. The eccentric home child of Delta was buried without fanfare but lives on in the fond memories of several generations.

Compiled using information from the Library and Archives of Canada, and several of Tom’s friends and acquaintances.

Upcoming Events

Delta History Fish Fry

Our next all-you-can-eat-pickereel fundraiser will take place on Saturday, 28 February from 11:00 am to 2:00 pm at the Herman Prior Centre, 40 Royal Road, Portage la Prairie.

Tickets (\$10 for adults and \$5 for kids) will be available at the door.

Open Houses

Do you have memories of Delta Beach or Delta Marsh that you are willing to share? Do you want to learn more about Delta history? If so, join us in one of four public Open Houses.

Sunday, 7 March, 1:30 to 5:00
St. Ambroise Community Centre

Sunday, 14 March, 1:30 to 5:00
Westbourne Seniors Centre

Sunday, 21 March, 1:30 to 5:00
Herman Prior Centre, Portage

Sunday, 28 March, 1:30 to 5:00
Oakland Curling Rink

Bring photographs and other memorabilia. We can copy them on site and return them to you immediately. Bring a friend - everyone is welcome!

Refreshments will be served.



Hugh Armstrong (1858-1926) was guarding the treasury at the time this caricature was drawn in 1909. Before becoming Provincial Treasurer, he was a fish buyer on Lake Manitoba. He was also a founding member of the Portage Country Club.

“Darkness On The Delta” *

When it's darkness on the delta,
That's the time that lovers love best.
When it's darkness on the delta,
Let us linger by MacDonald's with the rest.

Miles of marshland all around us,
birds singing sweet and low.
Gee we're lucky we have Delta,
Where mighty Manitoba waters flow.

Sittin' on the breakwater,
Watching as the waves they come and go.
Laughter on the beaches, no one's heart is heavy,
All young lovers got someone to love.

When it's darkness on the delta,
Stars and moon they're shining bright.
When it's darkness on the delta,
Let us linger in the shelter of the night.

* Alternate lyrics to the 1932 popular song of the same title.

Delta Marsh History Initiative

In its heyday, Delta Marsh attracted people from all over the world and all walks of life. Generations of farmers, fishers, hunters, and trappers found themselves in the company of royalty, movie stars, and even astronauts.

A group of people who share an interest in the area, the Delta Marsh History Initiative, is preparing to write a book. It will feature histories of the prominent people and organizations of the marsh, from the earliest aboriginal inhabitants to the present cottagers, hunters, and scientists. We hope that the book will encourage conservation of this world-class marsh.

You can help!

- provide photographs, reminiscences, family stories, or any other information pertaining to Delta
- let us know about people who have information
- volunteer your time to help collect and organize information, contact people, and prepare a book on Delta history to be published in 2004
- make a tax-deductible donation to help with costs

Delta Marsh History Initiative

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