

Remembering Conrad Byers, Part 1

By Sandra Stephenson

(Editor Note: Sandra is preparing a multi-issue account of Conrad Byers' impact on Parrsboro and his renowned worldwide reputation. She hopes to eventually turn her extensive investment of time interviewing Conrad into a book.) Here is Part 1

Conrad Byers was well known in Cumberland County and further afield as historian, storyteller, the last captain on the Bay of Fundy (before Katie Belle) of a Nova Scotia made wooden boat, the Avon Spirit. He was chronicler of old houses, the saviour of the Kipawo ferry as stage for Ship's Company Theatre.... Two brothers still live in Parrsboro.

Conrad was also a poet. We culled poems out of his many writings, to be published in a small book, *Salmon Dreams* out of Main and Station (the Old Post Office) in 2015. In that book I describe his deep understanding in story as "leaving my heart thrumming like a wind in the ropes." While we worked, many stories, new and old, emerged, which I noted and recorded. Some of them will appear like this one, in a series of articles in the *Shoreline Journal*. Some have also been recorded by CBC and others.

Conrad made a profession of photography. One day we sat in the cool archives room at Ottawa House Museum, a room built in large part to hold papers and photos donated by Conrad. There's a room on the second floor of the Historic House called The Conrad Byers Reading Room. In answer to how he had got so many photos dating back to the 1800's, he said, "I never considered myself a photographer, but I was interested in the old photos. So when I got the building [on Main Street in Parrsboro] - my aunt owned the building and it was empty at the time so she let me move in there - I had no intention really of a shop. It was just a place to store stuff and work on the photos. So pictures like that one, 1920's or so, those were photos I just picked up in flea markets and stuff. I practiced on copying them, but didn't know much about them if they didn't have the name already on it. I put them up around the shop and gradually, eventually I got a lot of them identified."

Picture by picture, like a tour of the old town a hundred years ago, Conrad recounted bits and pieces of its history. There was a photo of the building Conrad lived in at that time, on the Inner Harbour, a two-storey yellow building that was once the courthouse, he said. Parrsboro was incorporated in 1889. The newspapers in those days had lots of print and fewer photos. He had a painting that had hung in the town hall, from the incorporation, listing all the businesses in town.

"People didn't much appreciate history then, but I would go in and photograph that painting. One town clerk had no appreciation for anything older than a week. He said, 'Why don't you just take that thing? You seem to appreciate it.' It hung on my wall for some years, and last year when they put a new mayor and council, and this guy was gone, somebody asked where the painting was. Nobody had missed it in ten years. I said, 'Well, I've got it.' So I brought



This sketch of Conrad is by Judith Bauer of Main and Station, Parrsboro

it back and it's hanging in the Town Hall. I feel like a depreciating asset!" Conrad did not live to see the old Town Hall demolished, complete with office furniture and porch ornamentation made in Parrsboro's own Block Shop, though he did see the Town "unincorporated" only 130 years after it began. He passed away in 2017 at 74 years of age. If you take the time to read the historic markers on the Main Street of Parrsboro, you'll read his writing, as at the Day Use trail panels in Chignecto Park and Age of Sail Museum. Near the "Tidal Viewing Area" on the Inner Harbour of Parrsboro, there's a photo of Conrad along with a note on shipping in the Harbour.

"I couldn't afford to get photos from negatives made by a professional so I just got myself equipped. From the old photos, you can tell the date. Starting in the 1890's there were a few types of cameras around, but not many before.

What they did in those days, the photographers, they would travel around and would have either wagon or cart, come into town and set up, not in the Post Office because it was federal, but some place like the hotel lobby, and they'd advertise in the local paper for a week or two that someone like Reid, a well-known photographer was in town, and people would come and have their portraits taken. He had all the costumes, backdrops painted on canvas."

Leafing through photos, he commented:

"This is a hotel which was where the auto parts store is now. It burned. That's from the rum-running days. This woman just died a few years ago, she was one of the maids there. This was the owner. These guys look like real hoods, you know? They're all dressed up.

"That's the United Church in the 1960's when it was built, and that's Parrsboro Met-

alfab. That was the one that Kerwin [Davison] founded. They made furnaces. It's still operating.

"This was the Parrsboro Power Plant. Coal-fired at first, and then they went to oil that was brought in by railway. This is what my father looked after. It supplied the town's power. A big fire wiped out most of Main Street. Houses were close together. My father and I were the first there, I think, when the fire started. The operators would call my father, like a fireman, when there was any fire because he had to go and cut wires off of buildings. They couldn't put hoses on with these live wires on. So we'd always get the first fire call. He put a ladder up to get to the wires. He brought a ladder and a pair of snips. He'd go to the pole where the wires led from, climb the pole. He had spurs to climb.

"The oil truck would back

in there, big bulk tanks. The truck driver had backed in and didn't have it properly grounded and there was a spark set the end of the truck on fire. The driver got in the truck, it was blazing, and drove it away out into the yard before it really caught under or blew the oil tanks. He had burns on his hands, and it was touch and go with the tanks. He was still there when my father and I got there, the first responders.

Conrad continued to flip through photos. Ottawa House has a wealth of them, tidily organized in binders by Conrad and June Wagstaff, who both took a course to be certified as archivists. "This is where the Irving station is now. Two fires there burned that garage down. It was a gas station, so there were explosions. I was going to University then, but I was home that weekend and from Whitehall I watched the barrels exploding.

We flipped like time travel, past the Salvation Army hall, the last building on Main Street, beside where the Art Lab is; past Resnick's in the 1950's, where the Antique store is now; the Band Hall when it was a Presbyterian (he thought) Church; to a Temperance Hotel, in the place of Tim Horton's. No liquor was served there, but it wasn't rehab!

"This is when they cut ice for the iceboxes over on Riverside. Trucks with wooden spokes and a big set of springs. This was a guy that worked in

Film Festival Returns

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taries by New Brunswick filmmaker, Phil Comeau, The Secret Order and Women Captains.

Newfoundland filmmaker Christian Sparkes will be present for the screening of two of his acclaimed films, *Sweetland* and *The King Tide*, on Saturday evening.

Sunday morning, October 6, a free session will be offered beginning with the documentary *Sistema Revolution* by Hemming House Films of New Brunswick, followed by the first public viewing of a documentary-in-progress highlighting the Ships' Company Theatre on the occasion of its 40th Anniversary Season. Artistic Director Laura Vingoe-Cram will be on hand to introduce this special project.

Sunday afternoon, we will screen *What (a) Wonderful*

World with a Q&A afterward, followed by *Songs of U'nami*, closing with Ben Proudfoot's Oscar-winning short film, *The Last Repair Shop*.

The Hall is a welcoming venue, with theatre seating, surround sound and a 16' screen for your viewing experience. The enticing on-site Film Festival Cafe offers refreshments at the breaks.

The full weekend pass including the Gala is \$75.00 and is transferable. Tickets for individual film segments are also available. For more details on the films and to purchase tickets, visit our website at www.parrsborofilmfestival.com. The Festival venue is The Hall 44 King Street Parrsboro

Lori Lynch a resident of Parrsboro is Parrsboro Film Festival Committee member

the Block Shop. They made blocks, pulleys, and the Shop was on the Whitehall bridge, run by water power.

"And that picture is the bridge to PEI! Some guy thought he was gonna clean up, and he did a lot of pictures of that bridge when it was first built. I don't know how many thousand copies he got made for postcards, and he didn't sell any. He paid me hundreds of dollars to have them made.

"This is Glooscap with a hood over his head to keep

the snow and ice out of his face so he wouldn't deteriorate. He's been there for 35 years (at time of interview, around 2014). His builder just died. Nice man too. He was an Anglican Minister. Did other sculptures in other places on his circuit."

Conrad once told me he was invited to a ceremony with the Mi'kmaw to honour him for his part in keeping Mi'kmaw stories alive. More on that in the next installment.



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