

DYKED LANDS OF NOVA SCOTIA

(By E. D. Haliburton in The Family Herald & Weekly Star.)

Perhaps to most people in Canada the term "dyke" always brings a thought of Holland, but in at least one section of the Dominion it has no such association; it connotes a different vision of broad meadows and marshlands close at hand, of a plain dotted with teams and men and mowing machines at haymaking time or of broken embankments and a wide lake of muddy red water after some unusually high autumn tide has found a weak spot and in a rush of riotous mischief tears away in a few hours what many hands and weeks of labor have built up.

Maybe Nova Scotia vies with Holland herself in the extent of dyked lands she possesses. There are thousands and thousands of acres of such land bordering the Bay of Fundy from which the swiftly rising and falling waters are kept back by running dykes along the tide washed shores and along the banks of winding tidal rivers; rivers which the summer tourist might languidly note as a dried and parched up mud creek, wondering at the size of it and the trickling mud stream in its depths, as he motors across a long wooden bridge in the afternoon and he wonders still more if he has lost his way when he comes back over the same bridge at night and watches the moonlight play on the rushing turbulent river beneath him.

The soil of heavy red clay is naturally fertile and rich, requiring no fertilizer and producing heavy crops of grain and hay year after year. At the head of the Basin of Minas in Cumberland county lies the famous Tantramar Marsh, the greatest area of reclaimed land in one unbroken sweep that the province can boast of, and the greatest dyked area in the world outside Holland.

In this district and across the border into New Brunswick, the dyked land is called "marsh". Further down the bay, in the region of the Annapolis Valley, the land of apple orchards and the scene of Longfellow's "Evangeline", it is known simply as "dyke". Perhaps it was the "dyke" itself that in part inspired the poet. For the "dyke", except in winter, is always inspiring. In spring it shows sweeping spaces of vivid green, chequered with newly ploughed squares, while the upland is still brown. Later in the drowsy summer sunlight when the shining water is at high tide beyond the dyke, it forms a pleasing background; or when the grain has taken on its golden tint and great fields rustle and undulate in the early autumn wind, it is no less impressive; neither fence nor barn mars its expanse on Grand Pre. Perhaps it was partly this marsh land that early attracted the French. Some time about the first part of the eighteenth century they began to settle there. But although the French are often credited for having built the dykes by far the greater part of the work, and real work it must have been, was done by the grandfathers and great grandfathers of the men who now own the land.

The Grand Pre or Grand Prairie was the largest area reclaimed by the Acadians. After the English Government, driven desperate by their inability to make the Acadians recognize their authority, had expelled them, the vacant lands remained unoccupied for five years until a band of settlers, two hundred strong, from Connecticut came there. They occupied the upland but found the dykes broken and dilapidated and most of the meadow under water. For a long time the Yankees made little or no attempt to keep the water out. The construction or repair of these embankments, and of the abortive or the sluice or trap arrangement, which is ingeniously built to allow drainage water to run out at low tide and to keep the sea water out at high, called to a very special kind of knowledge or skill which they did not possess. But a few of the exiled Acadians, who had escaped the soldiers and were lurking in the vicinity of their old homes, did have this skill and enlisting their aid, the newcomers gradually shut the tide out from all the area that had been previously enclosed.

That extensive meadow stretching more than three miles east of Wolfville and more than two miles across to Long Island, forming the Grand Pre dyke as it is today, was not completely reclaimed until 1810. It is still cutting two and three tons of hay to the acre. The actual dyke is simply a mound of earth sometimes fifteen feet high, sometimes five, according to the elevation of the marsh, and about fifteen or twenty feet wide at the base, tapering to perhaps two feet wide at the top, depending on its height.

Almost every year dykes have to be repaired. Each section of land enclosed has a "Dykemaster" and under his skilled and experienced direction the work is carried out, every farmer who owns a plot on that particular section either must work himself or send a man in his place. These men bind themselves into a mild form of organization and submit to a peculiar set of regulations known as "dyke laws"; three officials are appointed to administer the affairs of the land and owners, a dyke commissioner, a secretary, and the dyke-master. Another task these autocrats must perform is the determination of the day when cattle shall or may be turned on to pasture the aftergrowth, after the grain has been all gathered in, or ought to be gathered in.

To the stranger, ownership seems rather mysterious. On Annapolis Valley dykelands, at least, there are no boundary lines, no distinguishing mark, no fences, mile after mile of sameness unbroken; yet each man knows his own dyke as unerringly as he knows his own home, and he points out the

drains, which, to his mind, mark it off quite clearly from his neighbor's land. Originally in the hands of the small but sturdy band who did most of the reclaiming work, the dyke has been divided and subdivided to a bewildering degree. Large areas like the Grand Pre and the Tantramar, are owned literally by thousands of individuals, some of them living ten miles and more away, and is divided among children further every generation. Illustrative of still another way in which it may be acquired is a story which a certain old farmer told me.

"A man came up to where I was mowing one day," he said, "and he asked me how much dyke was worth," referring to the common practice of selling hay standing at so much per acre, says I. "I don't know," says he. "Do you own the dyke?" says he. "No," says I. "Well, didn't you rent it?" says he. "No," says I. "Well, what claim have you on it," says he.

"I married it," says I. And he laughed heartily at his joke as he assured me that it was the very best way to acquire dyke. Many stories are told of the old French days, mostly of treasure buried in ghost-guarded spots, by the supposedly wealthy farmers who were taken away long ago; and if one is inclined to be dubious of the wealth that may be buried, old people steeped in dyke lore will hasten to remind you that pirates also buried gold there, even the famous Captain Kidd!

So there is one spot where at a certain season a fierce great dog appears when a man comes too close; the man retreats hurriedly and the dog vanishes, the man retraces his steps again and again the dog appears; the man goes back for his gun and a companion; but returning, finds that he cannot locate the spot again. And then there are mysterious lights, and many years ago when the old people were children, there were mysterious visitors, who came by day and dug by night and vanished in the early morning; afterwards the hole would be found with perhaps the imprint of an old-fashioned ironpot in the bottom. A story is told of two men who appeared late one night asking permission to spend the night in an old barn, down where the upland merged into dyke. The farmer urged them to stay in the house, but they refused; they preferred the barn. Next morning the strangers were gone and in one of the giant hand-hewn timbers of the old French structure they found where a sliding door had been pushed aside, revealing a fair-sized cavity; what had been in there is still a secret.

It is probable that many of these stories were not entirely without foundation. It is recorded of the Acadians that they were extremely covetous of specie, that they got all they could and it never made its appearance again, so obviously they must have been in the habit of burying it far away from their old homes. The secret of the hiding place would be handed down with each generation, until some descendant found his way back to reclaim what was probably a slender hoard.

Another story is told of a certain tired individual who hated work so, that he sold his run-out farm and lived most of his life by visiting around where ever he could visit. It came to pass that one day a much bewhiskered peddler, who was also a palmistry expert, essayed to read his fortune, gratis, and this fortune-teller found that his victim was going to find four bars of solid gold on Grand Pre dyke before he died. That summer the tired one was a willing worker on the dyke at haying time, in fact he seemed loath to leave the dyke at all and only lost faith in the gold bars when the grain was ready to be harvested.

During the war years and just after, dyke land in the Annapolis Valley sold at unheard of figures, prices going as high as \$400 per acre. Today it will hardly fetch half that. Yet the almost identical marshlands of Cumberland county and vicinity will command only from twenty to fifty dollars per acre, that being near the shore changing hands at the better price. It is hard to see why the difference between prices in the two places should be so great, especially as Cumberland would appear to be more favorably situated in so far as markets are concerned.

To a small extent it may be less desirable because it costs more to keep it up. In the Valley, dykes across the mouth of a river suffice to put an end to the river and reclaim a large area of land, as the Canard dyke does across the mouth of the flat land. The Canard River once meandered through a comparatively short dyke, shutting in so

much land making the cost of maintenance very low; at the head of the Gulf on the other hand, the marsh is sometimes almost surrounded by the protective walls and the cost of upkeep is high, the farmer having to give a good deal of dyke labor. Often a breach high tide in spring or fall makes a breach and then the tide does immense havoc, the cost of repairs after such an incident may reach formidable dimensions to the owner of many acres. The long distance of some of this land from the home farms also lowers its value, although the Tantramar is dotted with barns where the hay is stored and where much of it is pressed and sold.

Once the tide piled up so high that the dykes were everywhere broken down with a result that appeared to be disastrous. That was in 1869, a date that has passed into Nova Scotia history and all around the Bay of Fundy people still speak of it, old men date from it, very old men talk about the times before it. It had been predicted by a man named Saxby, so it has been called the Saxby tide for it came on the day set for it.

Following a day of ominous calm and another of a hurricane of South West wind, blowing the water straight up the Bay, the tide began to rise, until heaped up by the gale it came far above any high water mark previously known, a tide only exceeded in one other part of the world. Once the water went above it, the dyke was as nothing. It was late in the fall and hundreds of cattle and sheep were grazing there, haystacks and barns dotted the plain. The tide took everything before it straight on to the highlands ahead, there were fences then and fence poles, barns, dykes, cattle, sheep and haystacks, all were caught up and carried along; cattle fought for places on the stacks and some of them found safety that way but most of them were drowned.

Yet for those who came after the tide was blessing. Temporarily it had reverted to its natural state as "salt marsh", covered by every high tide with a layer of rich sediment; gradually the dykes were rebuilt and repaired and the land within restored to a new lease of fertility by that tide which had seemed to ruin it. It is now customary after the dyke has been washed away very badly, to leave it for a year or two or maybe three or four, until the tides have deposited an entirely new soil. Then when recovered it becomes what is known as "new dyke", land as rich and fertile as any in the world, in the words of the native, "the best land that lies out of doors".

So it would seem that the time or the money the dyke owner gives towards taking back his land from the sea, should not be looked upon as a loss but rather as a fertilizer investment.

The good job does not always fall to the man who is fit for it, but to the man who has fought for it.

READING THE KING'S PROCLAMATION



The City Sheriff of London, England, escorted by the Beadles, reading the King's Proclamation for the Prorogation of Parliament from the steps of the Royal Exchange. British Parliament is not officially prorogued until this document is read to the public.

\$250 ALLOCATION FOR ACADIA WITHIN SIGHT

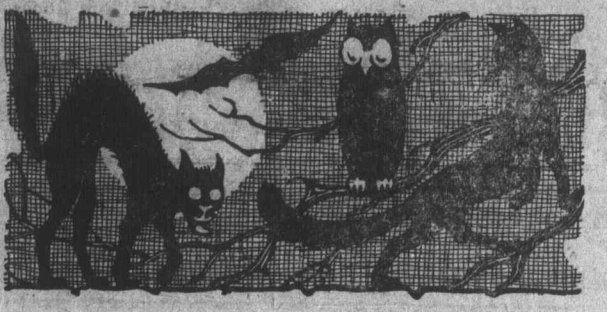
LAWRENCETOWN, Oct. 23.—In the Baptist church vestry, Lawrencetown, on Tuesday afternoon, the 21st inst., about forty of the Baptist women met for their missionary meeting and also for the purpose of raising their allocation of \$250 for the Acadia University Forward Movement. The president, Mrs. E. H. Freeman, presided.

Plans were made for the winter's work and committees appointed. Enthusiastic addresses on Acadia and her needs were given by Mrs. McLearn, Provincial Secretary, Mrs. D. H. Simpson, Miss Blackadar, Mrs. Joseph Bauroff and others. About \$185 was raised and the balance is within sight. Refreshments were served and the meeting closed with the Acadia yell and song.

DUMB DANIEL HIMSELF

Dan: "Can a cow-hide in a shoe store?" Philip Clerk: "No—but call'skin."

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