

Rural mail driver retires after 44 years of service on Route 337 - Antigonish to Cape George Point

Raymond MacDonald - better known as "Ray the mailman", of Ballantyne's Cove retired officially on December 5, 2003. Ray faithfully delivered the mail to his customers since beginning in the latter part of 1958. His brother Augustine "Gussy" delivered mail for 22 months preceding Ray. Ray's father, Colin (Collie) Francis MacDonald - son of Captain Angus MacDonald - delivered the mail from 1927 to 1934 and 1947 to 1956.

In the early years when Ray's father, Collie delivered the mail, his means of transportation included the horse drawn Express Wagon and horse drawn sleigh, also a Ford car. Collie would leave home around 4 a.m. and return home late in the evening - at least $\frac{3}{4}$ of each day was spent away from home. When he travelled by horse drawn wagon or sleigh - usually a fresh team of horses waited for him at Will Chisholm's in Harbour Center. Collie would have to stop to pick up mail on his way into town - he would leave his home at Ballantyne's Cove and travel to Cape George Point and then turn around and travel all the way to Antigonish town. Sometimes the incoming mail arrived late at the train station. The mail bags were taken from the station to the post office by Angus Kell (to name one person). Mr. Kell used a team of horses year-round. The mail was sorted into bags it was then delivered to certain homes along the mail route - usually hung on a post (spike) outside these homes - near the gateway. These mail bag post offices in the county soon became obsolete. Mail was delivered in all types of weather, road conditions - bogs in spring, lots of snow, icy roadways and the bitter cold days of winter. Between 19343 and 1947, A.J. MacKenzie and Frank Wallace also handled the mail bags along this route, to name a couple. When Collie delivered the mail, he would have Christmas Day and New Year's Day off.

Ray was asked to take over the mail route after his father became ill and was unable to continue to work. In the beginning Ray and his brother Augustine "Gussie" were into farming along with selling milk to the local creamery in Antigonish. At that time the farm consisted of 36 milking cows - total of 69 head of cattle, including heifers and calves. Gussie also fished salmon out of Ballantyne's Cove, as his father Collie did before him. Over the years they would have hired help, especially during the summer. Ray was involved with farming while delivering mail for at least 19 years. Eventually he discontinued farming altogether.

Once the individual mail boxes were installed along the route other changes would soon come along. Like, which side of the road was the safest or the most convenient to place the mail box. With the ever-increasing traffic flow on the roads, it became dangerous to drive back and forth across the roads to deliver mail to the boxes. Some mail boxes were moved more than once over the years. The mail driver had to get out of his vehicle at each stop because most of the mail boxes were on the passenger side of his vehicle. Eventually a flashing light had to be installed on top of the mail vehicle. This was a positive since it warned people to be more cautious. In recent years some mail boxes were placed side by side - to save on stops and for safety reasons.

For a number of years mail was delivered six days a week and today only five days per week. Some items delivered were the Simpsons Sears, and T. Eaton catalogues and the Family Herald and The Casket newspapers. The catalogues were delivered for Winter and Summer. Imagine how excited people were to receive these catalogues - they were able to order clothing, etc. More mail for the mailman to deliver - parcels. At one time letter postage cost 1 cent to five cents and kept on increasing over the years. Right now, postage for a letter is 49 cents (Canada) and 80 cents for US postage. The mailman also brought people to and from town with their groceries. People who had no other means of transportation at that time. Ray continued all of these services for a number of years.

For about 17 years, Ray made a second trip to Antigonish daily to pick up workers who travelled with him to and from their jobs in town. He can tell many stories about these days. He can tell you about his most memorable passengers, the most comical passenger and even the tardiest passenger. How he dealt with all of this and still managed to deliver mail one can only imagine.

In the 1980's Ray decided it was time to have a little time away - a short trip now and then. But how was he going to manage this? After all those years without a vacation he felt committed to his job - no one could replace him. No one knew what to do! After all, he would have three or maybe five holiday days per year at the most. Finally, he decided to give it a try and ask someone to take care of the mail route, pay them and get away from it all for a few days.

So, he did. He found some people to help him out. Carroll MacVicar, Garfield MacKenzie, Mabel Delaney and Ann MacEachern. These were times when Ray could not get someone to help him - like the time he had pneumonia. Or the time he fell and cracked some ribs while delivering mail. Or the time he had blood poisoning in his hand.

During his 44 years serving Route #4, Ray has had as many as 14 vehicles. He has delivered the mail on the main road as well as nice side roads - most of them unpaved. In the end he had 397 mail boxes along his route. With many people moving from one place to another over the years, this meant a lot of readdressing and returning of mail. As much as 50-100 pieces of mail a day in recent times. One challenge he had to contend with was the incomplete mailing addresses. Especially when dealing with people with the same name. Ray - kept his cool and managed to deliver most mail on time. Since a few years now, civic numbers are being used to help identify the mail.

Over the last number of years there were three different kinds of containers used to transport mail inside one's vehicle. One was the pocket sacks made of canvas, then cardboard boxes and plastic trays. In the sacks the mail was confined to individual packets while in the boxes and trays, the mail for each household was held together with elastic bands. It was difficult to keep the mail in order.

Ray dealt with all types of road and weather conditions, fuel increases and the many costly vehicle repairs. He always managed to deliver the mail year-round. Even when the snow drifts

were high and the roads barely accessible in winter - Ray had to deliver the mail. He worked all these years without any work benefits and seldom missed a day. Over the years he met many people often sharing a story or a joke.

Up until the late 1980's, Ray worked alone on the mail route, except for the occasional passenger. One day he decided to ask Marguerite "Sissy" MacInnis to help him deliver the mail. Sissy lives at Cape George Point - the last house on Ray's mail route. Sissy accepted the job offer and assisted Ray each day up until his recent retirement in December of 1003.

Let us not forget Ray MacDonald's 44 years of commendable service as Rural Route #4's mail carrier. Also, a special thanks to Marguerite "Sissy" MacInnis for a job well done.

Written by - Ann MacEachern
January 2004