



### **(1) A Brief History of Washabuck**

Situated in the centre of the Island of Cape Breton, surrounded by the waters of the internationally fêted Bras d' Or Lake lays the community of Washabuck. Undeniably, the native Mi'kmaq people were these waters earliest navigators. The name Washabuck is of Mi'kmaq origin, the most likely meaning being "an angle of land (Washabuck Peninsula) formed between a river (Washabuck River) and a lake (Bras d' Or Lake). For centuries fishermen and traders from France reconnoitred its shoreline, with Loyalists later settling more out-lying lands, before the pioneer Hebridean Scottish Gaels, made Washabuck their new homeland in 1817.

Two ships, *Ann* and *Harmony*, arrived in Sydney Harbour carrying Gàidhlig immigrants some of whom settled in Washabuck and these were joined by a second influx of settlers in 1821. Pioneer families dignifying clan names of MacKinnon, MacNeil, MacLean and MacKay merged with families named MacAulay, MacIver, Munro, MacDougall, MacKenzie, MacDonald, Sutherland, Ross, Matheson, creating a thriving mosaic hamlet.

During the ensuing two centuries these intrepid pioneers and their descendants gradually established themselves and advanced their humble homesteads into a maturing community. The pursuit of farming, fishing and forestry activities became traditional industries that were rewarded with the erection of government wharfs that in-turn helped the community sustain itself and even flourish economically. Commodities including, pit-props, pulpwood, lumber, livestock, farm-produce, fish, and shell-fish were transported and marketed via these wharves by vessels and steamers while expediting passage for the travellers along the same corridor. A matrix of roads gradually connected residences, stores, schools, a church, and post-office stations.

Washabuck's heritage has been perpetuated by its Gàidhlig culture. Traditional pipes and fiddle melodies and Gàidhlig airs now enriched with a palette of supplementary instruments, reflect the lyrical strains and harmonic voices that today captivate world audiences.

### **(2) THEN AND NOW:**

The forest has reclaimed much of the farm land originally wrestled from it in the early eighteen hundreds. Gone are our government wharfs, store, gas pump, post offices, schools, and regularly scheduled Church services, all victims of drastically diminishing population and numerous other circumstances. Now we are barely fifty permanent residents; in 2014, through a Canadian Automobile Association campaign, our main exit road, known as "The Gillis Point Road" was voted "The Worst Road in the Atlantic Provinces". Yet this is a community that will not, ever, die; the memories, stories, and personalities of the past, shared and remembered in the present by and with young and old, with nostalgia, pride, humor and/or pathos are kept alive through tales told around

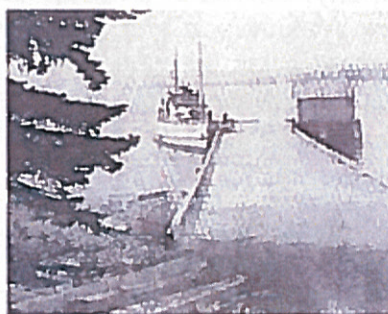
summer camp fires, winter wood stoves, numerous house parties, and community ceilidhs.

It is difficult to accurately describe the tremendous "sense of place" possessed by Washabuck residents, but we will try. For example, the site where our Co-op store stood is still called "Marjorie's," even though both long-time storekeeper Marjorie and her store are gone and many who now use the appellation remember neither; the site of our last government wharf is still referred to as "Down at the Wharf" and "Murdock's Beach" is the prime summer swimming spot, although both wharf and Murdock are no more. Many of the present homesteads are still referred to by the names of the original homesteaders and families.

Many changes have taken place since 1817, but the enduring sense of loyalty and commitment to family, community, and neighbour, and the pride that these ties engender, locally and beyond, make this a very special place to be.



Marjorie MacLean in front of the "OLD"  
Washabuck CO-OP



Down at the Wharf



Murdock's Beach

There is much more to tell, let's start with our Community Centre, the heart and hub of the community.

### **(3) The Washabuck Community Centre:**

The Washabuck Community Centre, originally a one room schoolhouse opened in 1949 and closed in 1972, is our "go-to" place. The metamorphosis from its humble beginnings to its present "ideal" multipurpose state did not occur without extreme determination, hard work, long range planning, and commendable foresight on the part of numerous community members, many since deceased. However, the "community spirit" torch was continually passed on to younger residents, assuring there has been continuous attention paid to the Centre's care and development.

When the last Washabuck school closed in 1972 the community felt the land and building should be kept for community purposes; following negotiations, in 1973 the property was transferred from the Municipality of Victoria to the newly formed Washabuck Community Centre Association (Incorporated in 2000 under the Societies Act of Nova Scotia.) From that time to the present day, continuous and varied fundraising efforts, beginning with weekly card games to help pay maintenance and insurance, and assisted through numerous successful grant applications (e.g., "Little

Red School House" program, Federal funding through the Department of Employment and Immigration, the Federal Agency ECBS, etc.) the building has become what it is today - a modern, secure, all-season wheel-chair accessible structure, capably and comfortably acting as a site for a wide range of community events; these include, but certainly are not limited to, celebrations for weddings, wedding anniversaries and birthdays, exercise hall, card and dart playing, square dances, fund-raising dinners, special holiday events such as Christmas, New Year and Valentine parties, the "control center" for our annual ALS Walk or Run fundraiser, kids' activities days, funeral parlour, community and special-interest group meetings, (e.g., with our provincial and federal politicians, local councillor, Barra Forest Trail Group, etc.) and our rapidly expanding and extremely popular summer festival.



"NEW" School, 1949



"OLD" School, 1972



"REBORN", 2015

#### **(4) Along the Shores of Washabuck Summer Festival:**



"Along the Shores of Washabuck Summer Festival," was first introduced in 2009 as part of the one hundredth anniversary celebrations of our local church (more on that later!) and was such a resounding success that it has continued annually, getting bigger and better each year. In 2012 it won the WestJet Provincial Festival Award and its timing is faithfully coordinated with vacation "come home" time by numerous ex-community and extended family members. Beginning on a Friday night with the pre-Highland Village Square Dance, first introduced in 1975, and ending ten days later with a Mass of remembrance and thanksgiving at Holy Rosary Church and a cemetery service, followed by a delicious closing lunch (which has always been donated by a community family) it is a fantastic event of fun, fellowship, and general community cohesiveness.

Festival planning is already in progress for the 2015 version. As in the past, it will include numerous activities for folks of all ages, including a "poker walk" each morning, along with a daily "café", catered to each morning by a different small group of volunteers, an "old-timers" ball game, preceded by a children's ball game, all followed by a late afternoon pork chop barbecue and indoor and outdoor games, (inclusive for all ages), a "best-ball" golf tournament (this year in memory of a past resident recently deceased), a 45 social (also in memory of a community couple, now deceased, who

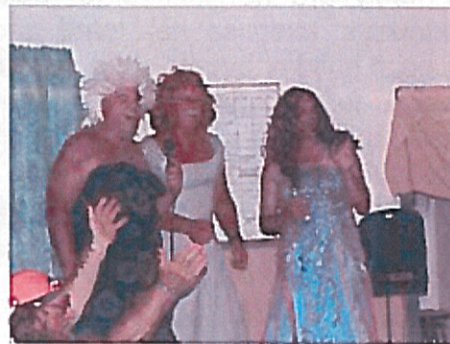
were avid crib and 45s players), a day devoted to childrens' games, (lunch included), nature hike, kayak and canoeing on the Washabuck River, and many other activities.



Why do they call it "Square Dancing"



WestJet Award 2012



Washabuck Beauty Pageant, 2013

The above is a general description of the festival, but certain parts are worthy of individual attention. Let's start with our children.

#### (5) Our children.

As mentioned earlier, Washabuck is very sparsely populated, there are very few children who are year-round residents. However, few in number does not make them less important, as the future lies in their hands. As soon as they are able, boys and girls help as volunteers at community events, are invited to community meetings, and given opportunities to contribute ideas and suggestions to community ventures. The logo used on the T-Shirts that commemorated our church's 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary was designed by one of our young people, and several of our youngsters have had the opportunity for summer employment through, once again, our constant dedication to seeking out, and being awarded, grants.

Children from other communities are invited to take part in various planned events; for example, at "Murdock's Beach", where Red Cross guided swimming lessons take place, and the annual visit from Santa Clause at the Community Centre, where, of course, Santa Clause always has gifts for *everyone* - even the attending adults!

The children are expected to help with the annual roadside clean-up and such things as beach clean-up, especially after a long Sunday afternoon of swimming, hot dogs, and fun.

During Festival time, at least one day is devoted to children's activities, including games that teach sharing and good sportsmanship along with fun, cultural events such as learning to square dance, or clicking off a few step-dancing steps or a Gaelic chorus, art projects, and, of course, nutritious snacks and lunch. The whole day is planned by a

summer resident, a qualified early education teacher, not a native Washabucker, but a "want-to-be" who, along with a gaggle of eager volunteers, delivers a fun-filled day to the children of the entire area.



Washabuck's Future



HOI HOI HOI



Festival Games Day

The children's ball game is the opening act for the "Old-Timers" game.

#### (6) "Old Timers" - The Washabuck Saints:

In the early 1960s, a beloved Pastor, Rev. Dan E. Mac Donald, initiated the formation of a softball league, consisting of teams from several surrounding communities. For whatever reason, Father Mac Donald chose to play with the Washabuck team! He was *the catcher*, youthful, beloved and highly respected, with a keen sense of humor and a fierce competitive streak, the ball league quickly became a huge weekly event. There were not many people at home on a sunny Sunday afternoon – everyone was at some ball field, cheering their home team.

There was so much community support generated within the Washabuck area that the Washabuck Altar Society, a Church-affiliated group of local ladies, at an official meeting, unanimously passed a motion to purchase a complete set of team sweaters! These sweaters are still being produced and the few remaining tattered originals are treasured items.

This particular era has become part of community lore, tales of fantastic plays, glorious victories, shameful defeats, and youthful heroics are now frequently the substance of late-night summer discussions. There was nothing more dreaded than a rainy Sunday afternoon – *ball game cancelled*– although that did mean that the young Washabuck men who studied or worked outside the community could get back to Antigonish, Halifax, or wherever, before the sun rose on Monday morning. Once, in early September, for an important play-off game, the team even pooled their meager resources to *fly* their star pitcher from the other end of Nova Scotia!

A highlight of the summer Festival is now the "Old Timers" softball game, where the once-youthful Washabuck Saints relive their glory days, before the era of arthritic joints, failing eyesight and sluggish reflexes –but the spirit remains strong!



Washabuck Saints , 1963



MP Mark Eyking Umping In the Rain



"NEW Coach" same "OLD Gang"

Now, we have to tell about some other "Old Timers!"

### (7) Old Timers - Supporters and Community Activists:

Criterion for the Community Spirit Award wishes the community to have "*an authentic respect for seniors*"; in Washabuck seniors form a significant ratio of the permanent (small) population and take an active part in all activities. Our community would be bereft without their support – as they would be without the opportunity to make meaningful contributions.

This important symbiosis does not go unnoticed. Since the introduction of our summer Festival in 2009, a "Washabuck Wall of Fame" has been constructed (by a volunteer, of course!) at our Community Centre. Each year sees new inductees; recipients include both "Washabuck Saints" ball players and all-important fans. We shall mention just two of the latter.

The late Irene Mac Lean, mother of two of the original "Saints" was a staunch supporter who never missed a game, vocal encouragements ever present. Recently deceased at the age of 94, she was presented with the hallowed shirt and officially inaugurated into the "Wall" in 2011; she wore the shirt to every subsequent annual game, including 2014.

The late Angus Mac Donald, permanent resident, hard-working farmer, woodsman, and card-player *extraordinaire*, (children eternally wondered how he *always* ended up with the Ace of Hearts!) unfailingly insured every youngster had transportation to ball practices or games; his truck unerringly found all who waited. "*Uncle Angus*" is an inductee into the "Wall" and an annual crib tournament has been held in his honor. Many of the original "Saints" now retired seniors, continue to live in or near Washabuck and unfailingly partake in events – you will usually find a number of them as barbecue masters at fund-raising dinners.



Irene Mac Lean



Cribbage Tournament



Don't feed the Bear

There were two things you didn't miss on Sundays – ball games and **church!**

**(8) Holy Rosary Church – Spiritual Oasis and Historic Landmark:**

Holy Rosary Mission Church cornerstone was laid in 1909, and provides seating for approximately two hundred. A unique feature of the church is its "penthouse" vestry suite – a fully equipped "bachelor apartment" with outfitted bed, fold down table, dishes, potbellied stove, chamber pot, etc., aimed to provide comfortable accommodations for the infrequently visiting priests of one hundred years ago.

Sadly, the Church no longer has regular service, and, at one point, prior to 2009, the Parish Council, of which Holy Rosary Mission Church is part, recommended it not only be permanently closed but condemned as being unfit for occupation. This morbid news nurtured a call to arms by the entire Washabuck population. In rapid succession, a qualified engineer (another volunteer!) certified its structural soundness, a major fund-raising campaign took place and extensive, but normal, refurbishing was performed. The fund-raising campaign was a wonder to behold; through concerted networking, hundreds of people who had *some/any* Washabuck connection, albeit it generations ago, contributed thousands of dollars. Today the church continues to stand as a witness to community strength, pride, and determination.

The Church, now opened only for special occasions, never fails to evoke comments of admiration from the congregation; it, and associated cemetery, one of the most beautiful on the Island, is entirely the responsibility of the (small) population of Washabuck.

The *Holy Rosary Ladies Society*, formed in 1956, disbanded at a final meeting in 1998, was integral to the overall wellbeing of both church and cemetery. In 1956, charter members numbered 34, from grandmothers to high school girls, more than half the entire population of Washabuck in 2015! However, the initial aims and goals (care and maintenance of both Church and Cemetery) remain part of our current **culture and heritage.**



Washabuck Congregation, 1909



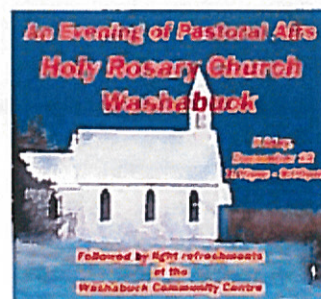
Centennial Celebration, 2009



R.I.P.



Vestry Penthouse



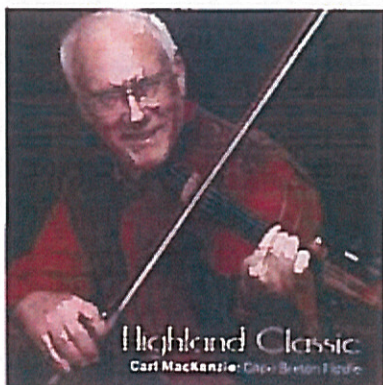
**(9) Washabuck's heritage and culture – Honoring and promoting:**

Once furled a standard to the breeze  
Where stood stout sons of Hebrides  
But unfulfilled were fate's decrees  
On sad Culloden Moor.  
Yet n'er undaunted pluck went forth  
To find new homes, Dame Fortune court,  
Within this Garden of the North  
By bonny blue Bras d'Or.

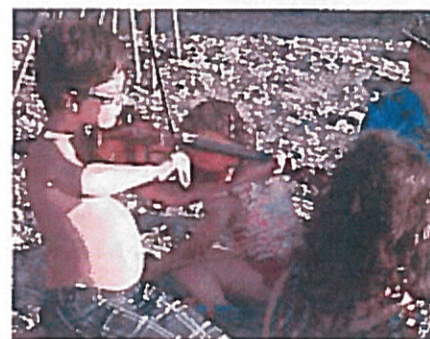
(Ronald Stephen MacDonald, 1934.)

With a few brief words, this poem captures the background and essence of our people; unfortunately, many have lost the Gaelic language but the same cannot be said for the talent, creative ingenuity, preservation and interpretation of Celtic music and dance; over the generations the Washabuck community has contributed greatly and generously to bring Celtic culture to the masses. Celtic music, fiddle, song, and dance, was, and still is, easy to find in Washabuck, especially if you have the good fortune to find yourself enjoying a ceilidh, kitchen or summer beach party.

So many talented performers have Washabuck roots that it is impossible to name them all, but family names such as MacKenzie, MacLean, and MacNeil spring easily to mind. Washabuck's Carl MacKenzie, and *The Barra MacNeils*, a family group with Washabuck roots, have performed, composed, recorded, won awards and taught workshops throughout the world. These performers generously share their skill and talents at every opportunity, it is quite possible that they, along with other talented performers can be found at "Murdock's Beach" on a sunny afternoon belting out a few tunes and offering free consultation. As Susan MacLean, fiddler and skilled keyboard player explains when asked, "So, where did you learn to play?" "It's in your blood you know." And it continues to be passed on!



Reefing on the Beach



Washabuck Idol Competitor

**(10) Is There More? Of course!**

There is so much more to tell, and space is running out, we are going to have to resort to point form:

- Residents are a very physically active group – including a weekly exercise group, yoga attendees, walkers, an annual snowshoeing trek (most recent March 7/15), an annual 22 km mountain bike race, the “*Tour de Washabuck*”, daily 5 km. morning walk during Festival time, and kayaking and canoeing.



Giving Dad a rest



Hot Meal after Snowshoe Outing, 2015



Kayaking on Washabuck River

- The Barra Forest Trail Group, containing people from Washabuck and surrounding communities, is presently working on trail development complimentary to the Trans-Canada Trail.
- The community is presently exploring the possibility of developing an access point as part of the Water Route portion of the Trans-Canada Trail.
- Those who have had to “go West” for work maintain their homes and return as frequently as they can.
- One young couple, determined to have their children “grow up Washabuckers” have abandoned city life and hope to successfully introduce a hospitality business, complete with mini-shop and NSCL outlet in the area.
- Retirees come “back home.” We have a number of retired people who, once again, are permanent and contributing residents.
- Since 1999, daily From July into September, Washabucker Nancy MacLean has successfully run the “Baddeck Gathering Ceilidhs, exposing people from all over the world to Celtic music.
- “The Stòras na h-Òigridh (Treasures of Youth) Fund, a scholarship administered by The Nova Scotia Highland Village Society, was inspired by the late Michael Anthony MacLean of Washabuck; is available to Nova Scotia youth who want to advance their skills in one or more of the following Gaelic traditions: Fiddle, pipes, piano, language, storytelling, song and dance.
- Both the annual ALS walk and our famous mascot deserve “stories” of their own, but we have to limit ourselves to few pictures!



ALS Walk



Bear Hug



Three Washabuck Bears

### **(11)The Final Tale:**

There is much more to tell, we could write a book! In fact, one of our long-time residents recently published one; it is called "These Were My People" and that is how we all feel about our community – it is *our* community and these were, are, and will always be our people! Our people who learned and shared with the Mi'kmaq who welcomed them to these shores, the ones who have gone before, those who presently think of Washabuck as "Home", including especially those who somehow manage to annually come back, those who happened to be passing through and decided to stay (fodder for yet another story!), and those who are our future – present and yet-born generations of young people in whom the seeds of love for self, family, community, neighbour, and the world at large is fostered through volunteerism, involvement, spirituality, formal education, and awareness of the needs of all.

Please come for a visit, we may have the "Worst road in the Atlantic Provinces" but memory of such an inconvenience will be obliterated by the inclusive hospitality of the people and the community at large.

We leave the last word to a little girl who lives in the urban sprawl that is called Toronto; her grandmother grew up in Washabuck and the family spends many happy summer days in the area. One winter day, in her home in Toronto, she looked up at her mother and father and exclaimed, "I LOVE Washabuck!" Out of the mouths of babes comes wisdom.



March 16, 2015

To Whom it May Concern:

I first heard about the community of Washabuck over sixty years ago. My first visit was in 1961. I got acquainted with university students from Washabuck in the sixties and we became great friends. The residents of this community are the friendliest people you could ever meet. They welcome you with open arms and this brings joy to every visitor. They promote their Celtic culture of music and dance at every opportunity. It is at the top of my list as a place to visit. I strongly recommend this wonderful community for the Lieutenant Governor's Spirit Award.

I wrote this poem a year or so ago as a tribute to my many friends and the good times my wife and I have had in Washabuck over the years.

Sincerely,

Norman Gillis  
Upper Margaree  
Cape Breton Island, N.S.

## AN ODE TO WASHABUCK

Washabuck, Washabuck, Oh what luck  
To have found a place called Washabuck  
Situated peacefully beside the Bra D' Or  
A place of such beauty never seen before.

In this community of beauty and charms,  
The people welcome you with open arms.  
Their friendliness and hospitality is unsurpassed  
And this makes every visitor so very relaxed.

Living beside this beautiful lake  
Gives everyone an opportunity to take  
A swim whenever they feel the heat  
Or just walk on the beach and feel the sand on their feet.

The Washabuck festival held each year  
Brings lots of fun and lots of cheer.  
The bear dance a yearly event  
Brings out laughter to the greatest extent.

The Washabuck Festival has a beach party too  
With the greatest entertainment for me and you  
Music and dance and food to eat  
There is nothing like it; it's hard to beat.

The community center where people gather  
To eat, sing and dance together  
It's a joy to participate in the fun  
And listen to the music until the party is done.

To all the people of this community  
Who live together in perfect unity  
Through rain or shine, snow or mist  
Long may its people and beauty exist.

Written by : Norman Gillis  
Upper Margaree, Cape Breton  
June 2014