

[Page 72 - My Meeting with Red Dan Smith](#)ISSUE : [Issue 71](#)

Published by Ronald Caplan on 1996/12/1

My Meeting with Red Dan Smith • A Memory from the First 25 Years of Cape Breton's Magazine • by Ronald Caplan

Heading into our 25th year, I realize that a lot of Cape Breton's Magazine stories have not been told • because the story of getting the story wasn't the story. At least, not so far. I've always been more interested in presenting the stories as they were told to us. Still, readers ask questions about certain stories, call to mind events that I cherish, and I more and more want to share the view from the other side of the camera and the tape recorder. I have come to realize that the rest of the equation, my part in the story, to some degree, should be shared. Let's start with Red Dan Smith and the earliest days of Cape Breton's Magazine. Visits with Red Dan and his wife Mary at Jersey Cove resulted in "How to Make Rope from Wood" in Issue Number One of the magazine. Years later, Red Dan would also be part of an article on rumrunning. That was the time this man who never drank and certainly never ran rum found himself accused of piracy! But this first visit: It is important to know how nervous I was, calling ahead to set up interviews and then actually going for the visit. It just felt different from my first months in Cape Breton, when I was visiting my neighbours with more ease, asking a lot of questions that would, it turned out, be the kind of questions that would be in the magazine • but in those first months it was only that, meeting my neighbours, trying to find out how to get and use an axe handle, or build a kitchen fire that would actually produce some heat, and how to cook a piece of salted cod. I hadn't yet started going around asking

Nightingale Nursing Services  
{2 24 hours; 7 days a week service {2 R.N.'s - L.P.N.'s ei. {21 Homemakers & babysitters " iZI Care provided in home or hospital {2i Bonded & insured {2i Reasonable rates FULL TIME R.N. NURSING SUPERVISION Local People Professionally 465-9777 'Tv'!;!'" 562-6274 DARTMOUTH r/A: 469-9250 SYDNEY SERV NG ALL CAPE BRETON SLAND Red Dan and Mary Smith of Jersey Cove questions and taking pictures with the magazine in mind. In any case, one day I saw a piece of odd-looking rope. I think it was in a gift shop • a few foot-long pieces under glass, about an inch thick. It was being sold as "rope made from wood." I was told that an old fisherman, Red Dan Smith, made these pieces of rope by twisting long thin strips of wood. And I was warned to stay away from him, that he had a quick, sharp tongue. I like to think back about that warning, because if I had listened I would have missed out on a story, a friendship, and an extraordinary afternoon's exhibit of Cape Breton hospitality. I had called the day before, and arrived at the porch door with a tape recorder and camera. Mary opened the door with a serious but welcoming look, took the handshake I offered her, didn't let go, and pulled me along through the first floor, welcoming me by saying, "You're here to see Red Dan," hauling me through the kitchen into the living room, driving my hand into the two powerful hands of a thin wire of a man with eagle eyes and a beak that challenged my own, high cheeks and a tight smile and a voice • unlike any I'd ever heard • a voice thin as he was, but raspy and very Scottish. He was the first person I ever met who made two syllables of the word "farm" by rolling the r • "Far- rum." As in,



"That's a wonderful far-rum you're living on." He had my hand, and somehow my arm as well, pulling me down beside him on the couch. 1 Ron May pontiac buick gmc ltd. Serving Cape Breton Over 15 Years • Sale of New - Used - Cars - Trucks • Goodwrench Service • Body Shop • Parts Dept. (902) 539-6494 • 1-888-4RONMAY • 1-888-476-6629 1 147 PRINCE STREET • SYDNEY 1 PONTIAC 1 MuraE 1 GAAC TRUCKS | 1 RON MAY 1