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A PAIR OP STOCK SKATES X stock skates were the first kind of ice skates used on Cape Breton. Some people call them block skates. They were followed by the spring skates which clipped onto the shoe, fiercely gripping the heel and often ripping it off. And these were followed by the full shoe and hockey skates we know today. But it was the stock skates people used here years ago when the winters seemed frostier and the scholars around the is? land could be seen skating to and from school. Alex Matheson took his skates to school, and dried them by the stove. He was born in 1898, at a place called Big Hill. He's been a blacksmith since 1919, and one of the few whose forge (at South Haven) still sees fire. Recently, he made a pair of stock skates from a bar of quarter-inch by one-inch Swedish steel (children's skates long ago were often made from an old rasp), a quarter-inch rod of iron, soifte wire, two screws and two blocks of ash. He used no mold or pattern beyond a simple tracing to be certain the blocks would be both longer and considerably narrower than the feet of the man who would use them. He worked with only the memory of a finished pair of skates, and a know? ledge of what happens to certain metals when they are heated and struck. "The most of the tools are made, right there. All the chisels are made, the punches are made. You'd buy an anvil and a blower, a vice and dies, press drill...but all them tongs, I made them all there. Everybody did. Everybody made his own tongs f'r whatever he wanted them for. The hot and cold cutters • they're all made by hand." "ou get a bar of tool steel • you buy that • and make whatever kind of chisel you want." To start a fire, he made a little space in the spent coal at the opening of the forge and put in a handful of shavings. He lit the shavings and turned the blast on gently. The air comes up from below and is sucked up the chimney. He built the coal up at the sides to create a good draft, and let the green coal • the soft coal • bum till he had red coals. Some of the days he worked were bitter cold and oddly there was no heat from the forge. When it is right, the chimney sucks up all the gas and smoke, and most of the heat. He took the bar of steel and put an end in the fire and left it there. The fire was kept small, just enough to heat up the section to be worked. He took the bar out bright red on the end and put it on edge on top of the anvil and with the ball peen hammer he beat the very end to 1/2" wide and 1/8" thick. This would be the heel of one blade. He put the end to the fire again, set it on the anvil and punched a hole for the screw. It was a job really requiring three hands. Alex did it with one hand holding the hammer, one hand holding the punch, the pimch itself pressing the hot steel to the anvil while Alex neatly balanced the rest of the bar across his knee. Once through the metal, he put the end over the hardy hole and worked the punch to the desired size hole. L?"CAPE BRETON'S MAGAZINE, NUMBER THREE SKIR DHU, CAPE BRETCW, NOVA SCOTIA SBCmD CLASS MAIL • REGISTRATION NUMBER 3014