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The MacCuaig Story OUR MOUNTAINS AND GLENS is the product of the research of Ms. Farrell, a retired train station operator. It has the genealogical connections one would expect, but it also has the good reading of ghost stories, community events and so forth • preserving fragments of local relationships and making the book of interest beyond the people with specific links to the place. Here is a sample from the book, another example of From Our Mountains and Glens: The History of River Denys, Big Brook and Lime Hill (North Side) by 'ita Heuser Farrell what we call Family History • the story as the family remembers it, focusing on key moments. It is the kind of telling usually only family members have, the kind they speak of only when they gather for family events. It is a rare opportunity to share in this. This portion of Our Mountains and Glens is taken from a letter written from his own memories as well as family lore, by James' son Donald. ~ The MacCuaig Story ~ ABOUT 1831, THREE MACCUAIG BROTHERS, James, Donald and Alexander settled in River Denys, where their sister, Janet MacPhail, married to Archibald MacPhail Sr., had already settled. The number of family members included in this party of immigrants is unclear but there were a number of children and as well, their widowed mother. James settled on the lot immediately behind the Wallace lot, later the property of John Kennedy [Angus's son]. Donald and Alexander settled on adjoining lots on the north side of the river, later the properties of Lauchlin and Angus Kennedy. James MacCuaig was born in 1800 to poor but honest parents in the south of Argyleshire. His father's ancestors were known to follow the smuggling trade, and for a few generations intermittently had the honour of supplying the Ducal castle of the Lome family with illicit Scotch whisky. James's father died when James was quite young, however he, being too young and inexperienced to pursue such an uncertain and sometimes dangerous occupation, left at the age of 15 for Ayrshire. There he became a hewer of wood and drawer of water on the Eginston estate. For the next 15 years he became thoroughly experienced in agriculture as it was practised in the nineteenth century. James was a man of more than average physical strength, tall, lean, firmly built, standing straight and square shouldered with an energetic spirit and an almost inexhaustible endurance. How fortunate for him that he was so endowed, as all these attributes would soon be called upon to be strained to the utmost. He rose to positions of trust, in the way of foreman or overseer of his fellow labourers, becoming head gardener at the Castle of Montgomery. While he could be hasty and passionate, he possessed a warm and generous nature, ever ready to assist the poor and unfortunate in time of distress. James's wife was Catherine Taylor, born 1803 in the small fishing village of Skipness, Argyleshire. Her mother died when Catherine was nine and she went to live with her married sister who lived at West Killbride in Ayrshire. There she met and married James MacCuaig in 1827 when she was twenty-four. She also was in robust health, which she retained, like her husband until they were well into old age. Having been left to themselves at early

ages, their education was confined to reading and writing on James's part, and reading only on the part of Catherine. This accomplishment she put to good use in later years when, for the benefit of her children she purchased a few books. The memory of her reading Bunyan's "Pilgrim's Progress" or singing in her sweet musical voice from a collection of old U.P. or Morrisonian hymns on a Sabbath afternoon, remained ever after in the minds of her children. Thus she taught and entertained them in the backwoods, before churches and schools. Having lived amid the scenes of Bums's early life and at the time of his career's great but sad closing, they had gathered much by way of tradition and song. These Catherine sang as they were sung in that day in the homes of the land of the poet. The sad experiences of her life in River Denys and later in Ontario, perhaps can convey to the reader why the lines of "Bonny Doon" and "Mary in Heaven" as she sang them over a hundred and fifty years ago, should have in them a power and sadness unheard in today's modern music. After paying a short visit to their Argyleshire home, James and Catherine, with their son Donald (three years) and daughter Catherine (one year), in 1831 emigrated to Cape Breton, settling in River Denys in the midst of the forest. Between them and their nearest neighbours were long stretches of unbroken solitude, where they endured trials of which rural dwellers of today have no conception. Even the eight or nine weeks, cooped up in the hold of a small sailing vessel, with no better accommodation than that which would be afforded sheep or pigs today, and then for only a six day's trip at most, would be sufficient to break the spirit. But within a year of their settlement at River Denys, and within a few weeks of each other, Catherine lost both her children and came close to losing her mind as well. Alone in the wilderness in her sorrow, without even the consolation of neighbours, her husband forced to leave home to earn enough money to buy their necessities, only those who had lived through such an experience can appreciate her plight. Adding to the misery of her bereavement was the fact that in those times the forest was alive with wild animals who at times did indeed harass the earlier settlers. At the time the children died, Catherine was expecting her third child, a son whom the parents named Donald. For the next four years the MacCuaigs toiled to make a living on their farms and in that time another child, a daughter was born to them, whom they named Kate, again for the one they had lost. Little is known of James's brothers, except that at least one of them had children, as Donald had memories of playing with them. He also recalled a grandmother who lived with one of his uncles or his aunt, Janet MacPhail, as he did not remember her in life, but only when she died, when he was three years old. He remembered being taken by the hand to, in his words, view the old wrinkled face, wearing a white band over the forehead, and a white muslin cap with its single frilled border. This attire was worn by all Highland women in life and they were dressed in it in death. The grandmother was buried beside her two small grandchildren on James's farm. Donald was taken fishing with his older cousins in the river and on one occasion dropped the gad of trout over the side of the canoe, for which he was threatened to be thrown in himself, should it happen again. His father shot pheasants and partridge that would gather in the birch trees to eat buds. Thus they supplemented their plain fare of oat bread and potatoes. There was no wheat flour, the bread made from the meal manufactured from home-grown



oats. That, with potatoes and hay, was the only farm produce grown in the area at the time. Sugar was made from sap, using curiously formed buckets made from birch bark. Also at that time there was no mill either grist or lumber, in any part of the island. All sawn lumber was cut in a saw pit by two men with a whip saw. All the oatmeal was ground between two stones on the kitchen table. These stones were shaped like a small grindstone and were about a foot in diameter, one with a hole about three inches square, into which dried oats were placed by one hand while the other hand kept the other stone in motion, by means of a pole about the size of a rake handle, its upper end fixed in the ceiling of the room and the other end in a small hole in the outer edge of the upper millstone. The meal thus ground was afterwards sifted through a sieve made of sheep skin, through which small holes were burned with a red hot iron. In this manner all the oatmeal used on the island was prepared. Often the oats had to be dried in a large pot. These mills were borrowed back and forth through a settlement, carried by the women on their backs from one house to another. The mills were known in Gaelic as "Brah," probably from the same root as bray [bray in the mortar]. Donald, as a child, recalled being anxious to assist in the turning of the mill. By May 1836, James and his brother Donald had collected sufficient money by the preparation of hewed timber for the English market to enable them to seek better land to farm. Should they fail to locate at a better place, they were prepared to return to Scotland. After five years of struggle in an inhospitable climate where he had toiled to clear considerable land by mere hand power • as few could afford to own a yoke of oxen • he resolved to leave River Denys. For the plough and harrow brought from WE BUY AND WE SELL AND WE'RE AS NEAR AS YOUR TELEPHONE Sid's Used Furniture Phone 564-6123 436 Charlotte Street, Sydney • OPEN EVERY DAY: 9:00 a.m. to 8:30 p.m. • Country • Bluegrass • Rock • Folk Fiddle and Newfoundland Music Largest Atlantic Region Music selection in Eastern Canada. Tap your toe to Cape Breton & Newfoundland Fiddle, Accordion & Folk Music, & "Down East" Presentations. Write or ask for our list of Newfoundland & Maritime Music. ~ Available by Mail Order ~ 2 miles south of CHETICAMP, on the Cabot Trail P.O.Box516, Cheticamp. NS BOE IHO • Ph: (902)224-3782