

Criddy – Fraserburg’s colourful character

Fraserburg, Muskoka, has its counterpart on the east coast of Aberdeenshire, Scotland, overlooking the North Sea. Founded in the 16th century by Sir Alexander Fraser, the Scottish village of Fraserburgh eventually became a busy port serving the fishing and oil industries.

Apparently the Fraser name is of French origin coming from La Frezeliere in Anjou, France. As is so often the case, emigrants brought the name to Canada where two of its notable perpetuations are the Fraser River in B.C. and Fraserburg in Muskoka!

This hamlet, located about 19 km east of Bracebridge, officially became part of Muskoka’s place name geography on September 1, 1881, when pioneer settler Alexander Fraser became the first postmaster. Due to the settlement’s unique location, it could boast of residents from four townships – Macaulay, McLean, Oakley and Draper.

Over the years, the south branch of the Muskoka River, which flows through the area, was used for log drives destined for the mills in Bracebridge, local sawmilling, and, as time went on, many home and seasonal cottage sites as well as a youth camp.

One of Fraserburg’s colourful characters of the past was Jane Cridiford (1860 – 1950), who along with her husband, William, and ten-year-old daughter, Elvina May, made the trip to Muskoka arriving on November 11, 1901, travelling in from town by ox-cart. After Mr. Cridiford passed away in 1943, "Criddy", as she was often called, moved to Texas to spend the rest of her life with Elvina and her extended family, which by that time numbered sixteen people.

While living at the farm in Fraserburg, Mrs. Cridiford took on the contract to serve as the mail carrier, a task she performed faithfully from 1914 until age forced her to retire about 1940. Due to her husband’s ill health, this was taken on to provide an income.

It was said that she braved the most severe weather, undaunted by burning heat or frigid winter cold. Dozens of people knew her along the route. She drove it three days a week for nearly twenty-five years – missing her deliveries only twice. She served not only as postman, but as a shopper, express-messenger and passenger service for residents along the way.

Jane Cridiford was not backward about being forward, especially on matters of religion. One story is told about an atheist who had given his lecture on this subject, remarking in his discourse that you could only believe what you see. Mrs. Cridiford quickly spoke up, asking the question "do you believe you have brains?" He had no snappy comeback for that one while the crowd chuckled.

For many of the fourteen families in Fraserburg, Mrs. Cridiford was their only communication with the outside world for much of the year. And no doubt, as she sat in her fur-lined coat, thick mitts, with a charcoal foot warmer at her feet, she had lots of time to think about life and what she could do for her neighbours.

The day came, however, when the Cridifords were sick and worn out. Even though she was over eighty, Jane still tried to make the trips to town. The Anglican Sisters sent a volunteer nurse to stay with them and tend to their medical needs.

When the Sister arrived, Criddy said "Well I hope you won’t mind sleeping between Mr. C. and me!" Taken aback, the young nurse soon learned the house had three little bedrooms in a row – the old folks each had an end one, so the middle one was hers.

The Cridiford home and farm were a short distance down the river from the Fraserburg bridge. Their memory lives on in the road past their place.

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Fraserburg circa 1910 showing Crittenden’s house and sawmill, the school house (beyond the mill) of S.S.#4 Oakley and across the Fraserburg Road, the frame Holiness Movement Chapel that in later years served as a community hall.

Photo courtesy of Barbara Booth Andrews