

"A Village to Quicken the Poet's Pen"

"Sweet Auburn, loveliest village of the plain
Where health and plenty cheer'd the labouring swain."

Clashmore may not be the loveliest village but to Neil Forsyth and me as we sat and talked in a suburb of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on August 1, 1967, it was the field of our boyhood memories and we had deep pleasure in sharing them with each other.

It was, in fact, a village to quicken the poet's pen. Four roads met there just at the bridge over the burn; the stage-coach Clashmore Inn was there, Sandy the Tailor lived beside the little bridge, the shop and post office, just 50 yards along was the home and the business of three staid, occasionally bustling ladies, the MacIntoshes. Willie Cumming's smiddy provided clang if not colour; notable villagers besides the MacIntoshes were the Munros, incumbent at the Inn, Lizzie Ross and her mother, Hugh "The Bard," Wat the shepherd, and the Forsyth family; last, but certainly not least, Miss Hyslop, the teacher—even the com-

This is the fifth letter to "The Northern Times" from Mr Donald Grant, a native of Evelix, Dornoch, whose business is travelling the world as a lecturer to universities and schools. During this latest trip to North America he is sending us regular reports of his journeyings.

plete teacher. This is the country school of which I have written at other times. Miss Hyslop was the school. It was central in Clashmore, yet it properly was called the Skibo School. Indeed it had been built a century earlier by Dempster of Skibo, one of the best lairds in the North of that day.

Lived to be 93

Willie Forsyth, Neil's father, handled Skibo's finest pair of shining Clydesdales throughout his working life—a fine simple and good, for he lived to be 93. The Forsyth home, where 11 children were born and brought up to be, all of them, good fine men and women, was near the bridge and just 20 feet back from the main road to Skibo, Spinnisdale and the Highland Railway at Arday, 12 miles to the west.

In the Forsyth Garden, back of the house, the potatoes ("red champions") grew; but it is the peony roses in that garden that I remember, and Lizzie Ross's garden had them, too. Mrs Forsyth usually wore a small white cap on her head; a real mother, ready at any time, to make "a piece" for a young boy.

When the day arrived, over 70 years ago, by arrangement with Miss Hyslop, who sometimes visited the Evelix Farm Grants, for me to go to school, a child's unreadiness—as I clearly remember—to face a new experience made me climb upon "a stoolie" and hide behind a heavy lobby door in Evelix House. Once I was at school, however, my fears vanished. For I met another "new boy," Angus Forsyth.

Together we went through those very early, unforgettable years. If help or even a degree of protection from wilder youngsters should be needed, Neil, three years older than Angus, was always at hand. These school days were times of unalloyed happiness.

Went to Pittsburgh

Neil left school at 14. The peony roses, the daffodils as well as the "champion" potatoes of those early years, and Neil's gardens and

In 1905 he joined his older brother, Andrew, in Pittsburgh—the city linked always with the name and fame of Andrew Carnegie, of Skibo—worked there, and, in 1913, married Ann Will, "a lassie from Dundee." In 1919 Neil and Ann moved to Greensburg, 30 miles from "the steel city." There, for 35 years, Neil was head gardener on the estate of the late General Richard Coulter.

So, on August 1, 1967, I left Baltimore, Maryland, and very soon was heading westwards in a Greyhound Scenicruiser on the Pennsylvania Turnpike. At Pittsburgh bus terminal Neil and his two daughters met me, guided me to their Oldsmobile, and soon I was at table in Greensburg, where Mrs Forsyth waited to greet me. Happy meeting, indeed, with welcome and hospitality. But Neil and I, close in our early boyhood and meeting now after 60 years, felt a deeper emotion and we both knew it.

Memories quickened; the old school, the village, Skibo, The Big Ferry, the older generations. So we talked for hours, remembering and discussing: Willie Oaz and the Cowies carting trees for the building of Skibo Castle and the fine trimmed stones from Evelix Quarry; the special moment each year when Willie Cumming killed his pig; (the smiddy was just over the school wall); the Clashmore market every April; the Gypsy basket-caravan which sojourned once a year; Roddy Mackenzie, ferryman at The Big Ferry—who always looked the handsome pirate and was, in fact, the complete seaman; the Ayrshire men working at the castle and the good football team that Skibo had then—about 1900: the Irelands, the Hamiltons, the Brebners, all Skibo families.

Uncle Angus

Then Neil mentioned Angus Ross, Lonemore, his mother's brother, one of the best-known, best liked men in the parish; small crofter, Free Church precentor, "whipper-in," if there were any truants; a regular on the concert platform with "My Nannie's Awa" or "Afton Water." "Yes," said Neil, "every Saturday two of us, usually Angus and me, would visit Uncle Angus in Lonemore and return home on the Sunday. Uncle had a dog called Leo. Each Friday evening Leo would make his way to us in Clashmore, would stay the night, then proudly accompany us on the Saturday to Lonemore."

Life was simpler in those days. It meant toil, little money, but food, shelter and clothing were the common lot, sometimes hardship. Families were large, but life was meaningful and hopeful. There were 10 or 11 members of the Forsyth family and several of them went to America. An older sister, and Neil, still in America, are in good health while the two youngest members of the family, twins, are Mrs Gray, Benoran, Dornoch, and Mrs M. Mackay, who lives in Clashmore, a stone's throw from the old Forsyth garden where the peony roses grew.

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