Unlocking the ordinary, extraordinarily

Why AI may be deciphering ancient life – but HI still rules around here

By Alec Bruce







GUYSBOROUGH — Somewhere in a climate-controlled archive, a machine is quietly translating the secret messages of a forgotten civilization. Ancient Egyptian greeting cards – yes, greeting cards – have begun giving up their contents, millennia after being scrawled on papyrus with affection, sarcasm, or something in between.

One recent effort yielded this gem:

"Dear Da, I thought you would like this pear. See you soon."

There it is. Not a royal decree, not a map to buried treasure. Just a note from a kid to a parent, preserved in dust and ink for thousands of years. And now, thanks to artificial intelligence, we know it. We are beginning to hear voices that were once only guessed at, imagined, or lost entirely. Machines are unlocking the beautiful, banal secrets of daily life – stories as ordinary and remarkable as any we know today.

Still, when it comes to decoding the mysteries of our past – our grandparents' neighbours, our uncles' stores, that summer someone posed in front of the MacMaster's Store in Boylston – there is no substitute for HI: Human Intelligence. And in Guysborough County, it's alive and well.

Take the photo we featured in our May 7 edition, "two girls on a stoop."

"Good morning from beautiful calm Guysborough," wrote Marilyn Sceles via Facebook Messenger on May 14. "Just wanted to share a few memories you might find interesting."

She begins with identification: "I'm 99 per cent sure the young woman on the right at MacMaster's Store is my Aunt Emma, my mother's sister, who married my dad's brother, Henry Hull." Emma and Henry lived just down Glen Keen Road, she continues, where Henry kept a fox farm and operated the garage up the street."

That one sentence – "I'm 99 per cent sure" – embodies the whole project of Glimpses of Guysborough. Memory, inference, possibility, and connection. Marilyn's message is full of them.

"My mother, Nellie Hull, was asleep in Sandy Bruce's house (now a ruin) on Glen Keen Road when it caught fire and burned," she writes. "Sandy awakened her and told her, 'Get up Missus, the house is on fire.' She kept house for him for a short time."

The stories spill out like an overturned box of old letters. The little humpy bridge near Bett MacIsaac's cottage. The scrub brush and pail of Javex used each year to clean Sandy Bruce's gravestone in the Manchester cemetery. The retainer paid to keep it well cared for. The hours her father spent listening to Sandy's stories. The taxi runs he made for neighbours in Boylston and Sunnyville – for errands and appointments.

And, there's this from Wayne Simpson, commenting on the photo, "boy on a bike", which we also ran in our May 7 edition. No clue about the kid. But the windows on the garage that just about recedes out of frame in the far right of the photo. That he knows.

"Hi, awesome photos! Now, a bit of history on the photo showing part of the former garage in Boylston. The photo shows some windows in what was, before my time, the upstairs of the garage. My late uncle, Roy Simpson, told me several times about the upstairs. That upstairs housed a coffin and casket business, where they could be viewed, inspected and purchased. He probably told me who the person/people were who operated that upstairs business, but sadly, if he did, I no longer remember."

It's the last line in his note lingers: No one alive today would have seen that upper storey … And yet, one photograph and one memory later, there it is – clear as day, if you know where to look.

About last week's photo, "two boys in a field", we still know little. But Dallas Sceles may know something: "I would guess that to be Guysborough Intervale because of the large flat area with hills behind it."

So, dear readers, once again we invite you to bring your own 'HI' to those and this week's mystery photo (top right). Who's in the picture? Where are they? What are they doing? What stories wait behind the stoops, garages and summer cottages of the past? Let us know.

As for me, I thank providence for the presence of mind of my kin. My nephew Gabe Bruce – who also lives in Guysborough – informs me that my dear, old Vancouver-based second cousin Terry MacIsaac – who turned me on to his Boylston-raised mum Bessie (Swan) Bruce's treasure trove of pics that now grace these pages – is actually… um … well, I'll let him explain it.

"Terry is your fourth cousin once removed, and you are his fifth cousin once removed. The difference is due to the fact that despite being similar in age, Terry is a generation closer to your most recent common ancestor, James Bruce."

Which may only prove that around here, human intelligence still knows best.

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