Arts & Culture

The long return to down home

Terry MacIsaac presents his treasure trove of rare historical photos in Boylston

By Alec Bruce



As he prepared to travel to Boylston, Terry MacIsaac displayed a photo of his grandfather, Sandy Bruce. Heading there at the invitation of the Guysborough Historical Society, MacIsaac was scheduled to present a portion of his picture trove at the local community centre. Alec Bruce



Terry MacIsaac's selfie at the Boylston Community Centre on Sept. 22 captures part of the 54-person crowd that packed into the old building to hear him speak and watch more than 350 photographs flicker across the screen. Terry MacIsaac

BOYLSTON — It was well before noon when Terry MacIsaac walked into the Open Book Café in Halifax, a 65-year-old man holding a copy of The *Guysborough Journal* the way a boy might grip a map. It was Saturday, Sept. 20, and the café was noisy, sunlit, alive with its usual clutter of readers, tourists and small plates. Terry barely noticed. He unfolded his paper with care and grinned – the kind of grin that sits somewhere between pride and disbelief.

He was home. Or nearly.

I watched him from across the room. I'd been tracking this curious, slow-burn story of his for months. He didn't look like a stranger. Apart from the glasses perched on his nose, khaki shorts and black T-shirt, he looked exactly like one of the men in one of the old-time photographs from the 1930s, '40s and '50s I'd been running during the long, wet spring and early summer.

Pilgrimage, not pit stop

MacIsaac's journey had begun, in a sense, decades ago – in his mother's memory, in the shape of her voice when she spoke of down home, in the box of negatives she left behind after she passed in 2015. But his physical journey began just days earlier, after a plane from Vancouver deposited him in Halifax, and would finish a few days later in bustling Boylston, where, at the invitation of the Guysborough Historical Society, he was scheduled to present a portion of his trove to an audience at the local community centre.

"It took me seven hours," he told me later about the drive from Halifax, still laughing about the wrong turn he made somewhere along Highway 7. "But it was fantastic. Just the ocean, the trees, the place."

That place – Guysborough County, the broodingly lovely Eastern Shore, the long pull of a country route masquerading as open road – had been more myth than memory to him growing up on the West Coast. Now it was tangible.

Box of stories frozen in time

Terry's mother, Bessie Swan Bruce, had been born in Boylston. She'd started a life in Vancouver, raised kids, told stories – but held close a secret archive of frozen time: hundreds of black-and-white negatives and prints from her childhood, quietly waiting in a strong box.

Terry digitized many of them earlier this year, one painstaking scan at a time at the Vancouver Public Library: girls in summer dresses, boys in Sunday collars, a church that still stands, a kid on a bicycle nobody could name.

And then there was Sandy Bruce – his grandfather. Terry and I were related, we had decided. Exactly how, we weren't sure. It didn't matter. When he reached out to *The Journal* to run some of the photos – to ride the tides of time on ripples of remembering – I knew we had something more than mere "content."

These weren't just images. They were stories – waiting for names, for places. Waiting for someone to say, "That's my grandfather," or "I remember that fence."

Resonance measured in newsprint

Week after week, we ran the photos in a special feature: "Time Unveiled: Glimpses of Guysborough". The response was instant. Letters poured in. Facebook threads lit up. The drugstore in Guysborough town, Terry told me, couldn't keep copies of the paper on the shelf.

"One old timer stood at the counter for an hour," a local woman told him the night before his presentation on Monday, Sept. 22, "just talking about the articles and all the stories that went with them."

All of that was still in store for the veteran, award-winning newsman at Global TV, sitting here in front of me at the Open Book Café. He was no longer the man holding the images, but a man being held by

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Through Len's Lens

By Len P.D. MacDonald

Slip slidin' away? Not on your life!

I have passed the halfway mark in my month-long rehabilitation.

No, I'm not at some fancy resort trying to kick booze and drugs. I'm staying on a rural property that was once a farm here outside Victoria, B.C. It still feels a bit like a farm, and there are days when I feel like I'm involved in animal husbandry rather than trying to unlock a frozen shoulder. I had hoped that my athletic therapist could also unlock my frozen brain, but she confessed that she isn't a miracle worker.

I'm a big believer in holistic healing. In addition to my regular therapy sessions, I have been walking at least 10 kilometres a day, doing my stretching exercises, watering the gardens and plants, driving to the feed store for chicken supplies, and harvesting some of the crops. As well as an abundance of chickens, there are two goats, and I have been threatening to join them in some goat yoga. Those two have quite the life. They spend most of their days on the roof of a small building sunning themselves – and the rest of the time, just wandering around the property.

I believe that all of these activities aid in the healing process. I walk through old growth forests every day and it is simply awe-inspiring. I'm definitely not a tree hugger, but I could see myself becoming one.

Some of you are familiar with the ROMEOs. It is a group of men who get together once a month to share a meal and camaraderie. The acronym stands for Retired Old Men Eating Out. They often have a guest speaker. After my trip to India in 2016–17, I attended one of their lunches as their speaker.

There is a similar group out here. I was talking with one of their members and he told me that they have a rule: any attendee can only discuss one of his physical infirmities. As aches, pains and war wounds pile up, any septuagenarian could rhyme off a half-dozen complaints before soup was served.

And why do I bring this up?

Unfortunately, I had another rather nasty spill last week. While walking on Matheson Lake Trail, I stopped to take a picture. When I turned around to continue on the path, I tripped on a large root and down I went, landing on my arm. Yes, that arm. For a moment I was actually terrified, thinking that I might have broken my arm again – but fortunately I only suffered an ugly contusion just below the elbow… and a bruised ego. A few days later, after receiving excellent medical care from my therapist, I was no worse for wear.

And that incident got me thinking.

I had to admit to myself: I was no longer just getting old – I'm actually old.

Several of my regular readers receive my weekly wisdom (?) by email. They are not on Facebook. They have decided that dumpster diving is not for them.

While walking through the forest last week, I saw the most amazing configuration of a tree. I thought to myself, "What if trees could talk?" I went straight home, sat down at my kitchen table and wrote a short poem with that as the title. Since then, I have written a poem every day and have contemplated doing a book of poetry.

A sample, germane to the moment, seems appropriate:

Life has been
a terrific run,
Of this I'm
completely sold,
I've had more than
my share of fun,
It's not so bad being old.

We're in the later innings,
In the game of life,
I'm told,
Grab hold of
all your winnings,
And be happy
that you're old.

Have a great weekend and… stay young!

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them – an ambassador of long-forgotten dreams bound to be returned, restored, resurrected. And he was grinning, watching himself emerge in this strange, new, old, ineffably familiar land called "down home."

"I've read newscasts to thousands from a radio booth in a T-shirt," he joked. "But I've never spoken in front of a crowd like this."

I laughed.

"They don't bite... well... not usually," I said.

A ROOM FULL OF RECOGNITION

A nicer gentleman you couldn't meet in Chris Cook. So, his overwhelmingly positive review of the evening might seem suspect – except for the fact that he's also the president of the Guysborough Historical Society, the man behind the event, and the sort of person who'd tell you if something had gone sideways.

It didn't. "It was an outstanding success," he said.

Fifty-four people packed into the old building that night – neighbours, cousins, quiet keepers of memory, curious onlookers. The room filled and then some. They raised donations, split between the Historical Society and the Boylston Community Centre.

More than 350 photographs flickered across the screen – unlabelled faces that suddenly had names again. Many of the images held family members of those in the audience. A few held the audience themselves. "People shared stories and laughs," Cook said. "They reminisced over the images."

And Terry?

"You go into these things and you never know," he said the following morning. "It could have been a dozen people, and I would've been thrilled. But with that many, and with it being interactive – people identifying people and places – it was something else."

He pauses for a moment, before finishing his thought.

"There were two guys in the front row – in their 90s now – staring at themselves in some of those pictures. They came in with canes, and they saw themselves again as six- or seven-year-olds growing up in Boylston...

Well, you know, that kind of says it all, doesn't it?"









GLIMPSES OF GUYSBOROUGH REVISITED — Terry MacIsaac's Sept. 22 photo show in Boylston featured a trove of old images left to him by his mother, Bessie Swan Bruce, who was born in the community. Raised and now working in Vancouver as a Global TV producer, Terry was delighted to return with these resurrected moments in time for local audiences. Above are some of the images *The Journal* ran in its special photo feature this past spring and early summer. Contributed



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KEEPING AN EYE ON THE COAST