
Peter Aiken | The Legend of Dunkin

By Lorraine Rouillard Aiken

Translation by Sandra Jewett

And just who is this Peter Aiken? Why does he deserve to be called the Legend of Dunkin? What has he done?

Peter, affectionately called Pete by all who knew him, was born on December 17, 1915 in Dunkin. His early childhood was spent near "Singerville", a mountainside logging camp near the head waters of Ruitier Brook, on property now owned by the Nature Conservancy of Canada. Singerville was well named since much of the hardwood cut off the mountain was destined for cabinetry made by the Singer Sewing Machine company then located in St.-Jean-sur-Richelieu.

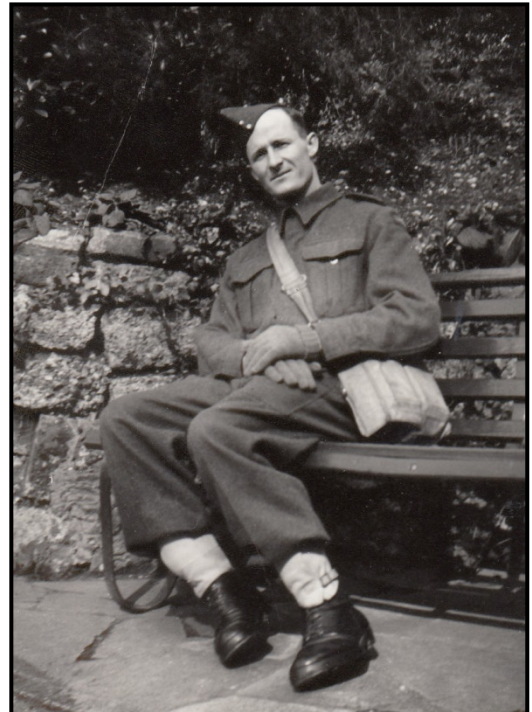
It was in Dunkin however, that he lived the greater part of his life.

Pete Aiken was a man of many facets and a veritable jack of all trades.

At 10 years old, he left the family home to earn his living as a farm hand. He returned home only on holidays. His help was appreciated by the families for whom he worked. Pete learned quickly, and this practical experience taught the young man lessons which would serve him all his life. In time, Pete found better paying work as a lumberjack, a profession he practiced for several years. Before long, he became very skilled at honing axes and saws to razor-sharp edges. At a time when lumbering depended exclusively on man power by back breaking labour of saw and axe, his talents are in great demand! Over the years his skills lead to him becoming an expert sawyer specializing in crosscut. He teaches his techniques to his wife Bridget and to their children. The family travels far and wide to various woodsmen

competitions from which they often return as champions in their respective categories

But, let's return to Pete's younger days. He enlisted in the Canadian Army in 1940. Quite apart from any patriotic inclination, many believed that volunteering for the Army would result in a steady income and better living conditions upon their return from active duty. Such expectations however, often meant disillusion when the perils endured were compared to any gain. Pete would serve from 1940 to 1945. During these years, his duties as a gunner would bring him from England to campaigns in North Africa, Italy, France, Belgium, and Holland.



Pete Aiken | Années '40
Collection Lorraine Rouillard.

Pete's army experience overseas must have had its moments of happiness however, for it is in England that he met a pretty Irish colleen who stole his heart and was to become his wife in March 1941. In March of 1946, Bridget Gaughan and her 4 year old daughter, Eleanor, arrived aboard the Mauretania at the Port of Halifax to begin their life in Canada.

The post war experience was not easy for the young couple. Jobs and lodging were often refused to the returning soldier. The first years of married life were difficult, living as they did in the small logging camp on Mount Echo which they called home. We can only imagine the courage and resilience that Bridget, a young wife and mother, must have shown in her determination to make circumstance work! In time, more children are borne to the couple as Pete and Bridget become parents to five daughters and one son.

Perseverance often brings opportunity! And one day, the young couple's fortunes changed. They were able to move to a small farm in Dunkin.

Pete knew farming, so he raised cows, pigs, hunting dogs to sell! He knew wood and lumbering, so he sold wood. Pete adapted quickly, becoming a jack of all trades. He is industrious and very practical, so rarely is he short of work as a carpenter, cabinet maker or stone mason specializing in foundations and stone walls. It does not take long for many newcomers to the Missisquoi Valley to call upon Pete's services.

Boredom is not a problem on the Aiken farm! Soon the children have a real menagerie of dogs, cats, cows, calves, horses, goats, rabbits, and pigs to care for. For a time there was even a circus bear that had been abandoned by his handlers! Games and laughter echoed in the Aiken household, for Pete and Bridget enjoyed playing with their children who sometimes lived in a world of fantasy, with creatures imagined by their dad. Some were magical and benign, some were scary and fearsome much to the delight of the kids. Pete had an incredible imagination and was a gifted story teller. To his children though, whatever Dad said must be true!



Aiken Family's Home
Photo Lorraine Rouillard | 2020

Pete was very good natured, sociable, and cheery; gifted in the art of conversation. He was a man of quick wit and infectious good humour. Sourness didn't live long around Pete. No matter what their social status, origin, or religion, everyone was at ease with Pete and he with them. The welcome mat was always out at Pete and Bridget's, be it for a social visit or from someone needing a hand. Pete reciprocated with his neighbours as well. Over a cup of tea and a cookie, reminiscence came easily. Pete could pull a story or two from his endless store and then be on his way, leaving his host with a smile on their face and a warm feeling in their heart.

There was little about the Missisquoi Valley, its residents or their stories that Pete did not know. Time stood still and work slowed when Pete came by for a visit. Depending on his mood (and his audience) Pete told stories of close encounters and daring escapades during prohibition. At other times he wove tales of fabulous treasure hidden in the hills, or shared bits of wisdom and stories everyday life. His accounts of log drives on the Missisquoi were so real that one could almost feel the mist off the water.

Unfortunately, at one time in his life Pete was afflicted with a form of a rheumatic illness that left him debilitated and unable to walk for well over a year. Recuperation was long and when discouragement threatened, he would lift his spirits by playing his harmonica and violin. He had always enjoyed dancing and was particularly fond of folk and bluegrass music.

Not one to be idle, Pete whiled away many hours developing his skill at wood carving. Without formal training, and patiently using nothing more than a sharp jack-knife, Pete coaxed blocks of wood into the likeness of animals or human form. Naïve art made for his own pleasure was derived from his imagination. His pieces of folk art all bore

distinctive colour, predominately warm reds and pinks, because Pete abhorred the drab and dreary. Even Pete's home sported a cheery red roof! At heart, it seems Pete was a bit of a romantic for often he included red roses in his creations.



Sculpture by Pete Aiken
Collection Lorraine Rouillard.

Some who read this may already know that Pete Aiken also wrote poetry. A compendium of his better known poems is available at the Library in Potton. His poems were based on his observation of the life and legends of the Valley, and are valuable chronicles of a sort. Many of his works contain memorable and comical historical elements, invariably lifting one's spirits in the reading.

Definitely Pete Aiken was a man whose colourful personality and easy nature left no one indifferent. In fact, his personality was reflected by the clothing he wore. His socks were often mismatched, shirt and trousers likewise uncoordinated; however Pete made little of that! Always a cap worn at a jaunty angle and a tie to complete the tidy ensemble! One or two of the more mischievous of his friends enjoyed cutting inches from his ties. No mind! Pete would wear the shortened tie anyway.

It is a tribute to this gentleman, that still we talk about Pete Aiken, some twenty-five years since his passing. This unique, special person, gifted with so many talents, well deserves the honour of being called a 'legend'. While there were no special or extraordinary accomplishments, he left few hearts untouched by his charm, wit and positive nature – itself a gift.

As for me, I have loved him as a father since I had the good fortune of marrying his son.

I will leave you with one of his poems, chosen from amongst his children's favourites.

Lorraine Rouillard Aiken

**"People will seldom remember what you did –
they will never forget how you make them feel –"**



Bridget Gaughan (b. May 12, 1918 – d. April 13, 2014)

Peter Aiken (b. Dec. 17, 1915 – d. April 24, 1995)

Collection Lorraine Rouillard

The Letter | Pete Aiken

In the peaceful little valley where the
Missisquoi River flows,
There was a man who lived there,
now he was living there alone.
He sits beside the fire and watches the flames,
they seem to dance and play
They make him think of his children
before they went away.

He listens for their laughter and envisions
the sparkle in their eyes
He looks across the pasture and thinks
he hears one cry.

Sometimes in the evening, the fog
comes down with the silence
Of a gliding butterfly and nestles
around his homestead cabin
There is a glowing of the sunset,
such beauty to behold
Just like a sparkling diamond, all mounted
in precious gold.

Then comes the blanket of darkness
It comes for man to sleep and hide
his grief and sorrow,
And gives a man a chance to weep.
Then comes the breaking of the morning
The fog goes back to the arms of the clouds to
nestle in its bosom so it appears another night.
The sun is now rising and it kisses
away the dew
It wakes up the sleeping roses around his
homestead
The place his children used to know.
When they left the old homestead,
they told him they would write

They were soon lost in the wonders
of the city and he was soon forgotten.

His hair had turned to silver
He stayed on the homestead,
although he was getting old
He longed to get a letter, but it seems
one never came.
He would walk down to the mail box
down the crooked little lane,
Still looking for the letter
that never came.

He would start back to the homestead
and watch the squirrel and chipmunk play
He would listen to the songbirds
so high up in the trees.
Then he would wonder, why is it
I never get a letter
For them I did the best I could
I know they could write if
only they would.

He picked a bunch of roses and
tied them with a ribbon of scarlet red
He put them in the mailbox with a note
and this is how it read:
"Each rose here tells a story of the love
I held for you
I hope this note will find you
and you will remember me again
My heart is filled with sorrow
waiting for a letter.