

Pete Aiken | Missisquoi Valley Man

By Joe Smillie

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Pete Aiken

Photo | Joe Smillie | 1983.

A introduction to Pete Aiken

I first met Pete Aiken in the spring of 1971 when we were renovating an old house near the Glen Sutton border crossing. The house was situated on the side of the valley above the Missisquoi river. This valley stretches from North Troy Vermont through Québec to Richford, Vermont.

We were facing some monumental problems with a caved-in foundation wall and had made

a number of inquiries as to who could help us out. Moving "back to the country" presents a number of hefty challenges to those raised in suburbia. The answers we got approached a consensus. The man we should see was Pete Aiken who lived up the valley in Dunkin. Needless to say the foundation was well repaired but it was the stories we heard during those hours in the basement that have an even more enduring value.

Stories about the valley; the people who had lived there, the river that ran through it, the border that crossed it, and the mountains that formed it. Tales of the "booze cars" that ran the valley road at night, fabulous treasures hidden in the hills, log drives down the river and the numerous characters who made the valley their home.

People who have lived there, and some who have just passed through, have recognized its special beauty. Pete says "it used to be called the Missisquoi valley when I was a child. Now the Pottton county line is just a mile from here. People who live on this side of the line call it the Dunkin valley while those on the other side call it the Glen Sutton valley".

Pete is a storyteller in the grand old tradition. He even has a pot-belly stove in his den. These are just a few of his recollections; many of these he thought would be of historical interest. The 'buried treasure' stories and the hair raisin' escapades will have to wait for another time. You have to leave Pete's house to hear the tales of his [dare I say, hell raisin'] adventures.

Pete was born in Dunkin 66 years ago and has lived there all of his life except for a few years when he went to war. His father had moved to Singerville [a Blair veneer mill town on Ruitter Brook] from Barton, Vermont, just before Pete was born. His mother was from Beauce county and had met his father when her family moved to North Troy, Vermont. They weren't the first Aikens in the area however as an Aiken had been among the first settlers at Ruitter Brook. This settlement, which started around 1796, was the result of a loyalist land grant given to Col. Hendryke Ruitter of the British army. His gravestone, among many others, can still be seen in the cemetery near the town of Dunkin.

A lot of this is going to be hearsay; it's things that I heard from people when I was a kid. They were good people so I would imagine the foundation of most of this stuff is true ... if not, it won't hurt anyone. These things all did happen, that's for sure, and probably a whole lot more.

Lumbering was the staff of life throughout all the years that this little town was in existence. Most of the people made their money that way because they lived beside Ruitters Brook which empties into the Missisquoi. They would work in the woods all winter, pile the logs on the frozen brook and have a log drive in the spring. The logs would go down the brook and dump into the river. They'd drive them down to Steven's Mills (near Richford) where they'd be processed. It was quite a sight to see all those logs coming down the brook into the river.

I remember that they'd get such log jams they'd have to use dynamite to break them up. There would be huge logs flying up in the air and landing all about. The drivers would roll the nearest ones back into the brook and away they would go. The others are what we called

swampers. A lot of people got their wood and their lumber that way-free of charge-just by picking up stray logs.

These log drivers were quite a crew and they'd board in the village. My mother kept them. They would work for 50 cents a day and a quart of white whiskey a week. There was something about they believed if a man got wet and drank this whiskey he wouldn't catch cold.

People also sold their logs to the Blair Veneer Company in North Troy. They would have to haul them there with 4-horse teams. Wages were very low. It was always a poor town-no industry just the logging business. This was a seasonal thing and with a good winter it would flourish but when the snow got too deep to log, it was hard times.

It was hard to get a good education cause the highschoools were 15-20 miles away and the people weren't in any position to take their kids. There were no cars. There were two schools in Dunkin - grade 7 was tops here. When kids got out of grade 7 that was the end of their education. Two-thirds of the people were too poor to dress their kids properly to make the trip on foot through the deep snows to school. The primary school teachers of the time would board with a farmer. Some people were awful reluctant to have a teacher board because they considered the teacher coming from a better class than they were themselves. Once they got to know each other over the winter things went along just fine.

I remember the fantastic jobs that the mothers would do taking care of their children. They seemed to be able to take care of anything that went wrong with them. They were as good as any doctor in most cases.

They learnt the hard way; but they never lost anybody.

Women who bore their children were always delivered by a mid-wife. That's one reason why so many people around here and in all parts of the country have no birth record. They never bothered to write the date down when a child was born. Right out of this area here I know of 6 or 7 people that didn't have a birth record - they had to get an affidavit made. When the doctors had to come, if the people didn't have any money they'd get a bag of potatoes or a bag. of turnips.

Everyone would help out - if someone was sick why his neighbours would help. People were rich in friendship. They would dig in and help out - for years if necessary. Why I remember a fellow walking four miles every morning and night to do another man's chores for three months. There was no such thing as asking for pay or even accepting pay. The guy would say - well I'll do something for you - they would pay each other back in this way.

This town was always in danger of a flood in spring. You see the brook comes down from Fullerton's pond and passes close to the village. I remember the great flood of 1927; every building in the valley near the river was washed away; all the bridges from Glen Sutton way up through were knocked out. Every bridge on Ruitter brook disappear in a gigantic foam of water rolling down from the mountains. The whole of Dunkin was shaking in fear because they thought the mill pond would go. Now this pond is ½ mile wide and three miles long and very deep. I remember people staying on the side of the mountains waiting for the waters to subside. This was the greatest scare this town ever had.

The culture of this little village was always alive. People made their own fun. Parties were always held in someone's house and the dancing was in the kitchen. There was a hall overhead of the old store and a man by the name of Mr. Shaw used to come and put on these movies for ten cents a person. If you had the money that was okay. If you didn't you could set it on a bill and he'd set the ten cents down against you. Course if you were a child that made you feel pretty good cause your credit rating was all right.

This town is protected from the winds by the valley. It has a tremendous amount of beauty, but it's pretty difficult to live on beauty alone - so when people got older they had to move. To better yourself you had to get out. They always came back though because there is something special about the valley - you have to come back to see the old place.

Then there's the old Mill Pond. I don't think that there's a child alive that ever lived in Dunkin that didn't have wonderful memories of this place. They'd go for picnics and swim in the beautiful crystal clear water. It was a natural pond and they had dammed it to make it larger to hold the logs for the mill. You can still see the old flues. It's a memory for many people who were children even as long ago as the mill was in operation. They would allow the kids to swim there when the flues were closed.

Sometimes when I am there alone I stop and think of the ones I know that played there and made great friendships. I seem to hear the laughter of the children and the joyful screams of children splashing in the water.

The waters here - like the pond and Ruitter's Brook and the Missisquoi river were all consumed as people used to get their water right out-and it was pure and good. When we

were fishing we'd just dip it out of the river to drink - now it's so polluted...

People had not much transportation in the old days so they made moonshine. I remember working for this old fella and he used to go to church every Sunday with 5 or 6 bottles of this stuff and before church would open he'd sell this stuff to his special customers. Someone asked him what he was selling and he said "This is a house of worship and I'm selling spirits", "If the spirit moves you, you have to do something about it."

It was a boom time during the Prohibition years. Anyone who had a house with a big basement would have it filled with bottles. They'd pay you to do this and you didn't have to worry about the revenuers as they never came. When we were children we'd go down and see all these bottles and wonder what they were but it wasn't long before we found out.

There was a lot of coming and going on the old road. A lot of booze cars, people shot up, big wrecks and new hotels. A lot of people got rich even around here! Some went to jail but they didn't stay long. The customs men and U.S. state troopers had an impossible task. They'd try to stop these booze cars but many wouldn't stop. They'd take planks out of the bridges to try and stop them. For me it was a pity. It caused a lot of greed. The government needs the money anyhow. One thing about the whiskey business - its great for taxes.

Many of the Americans used to come over the border to get a drink. Now when I was young I worked at a place in Leadville in front of the Leadville customs house near Magog lake. The bar itself was on the Canadian side but they had it fixed in such a way that the glasses would slide across the bar to the American side.

They used to smuggle cattle through the same way. A man would have a pasture that was half in the States and half in Canada. They would buy in Canada and sell in the States where prices were higher. You sure saw a lot of different cattle in that pasture.

We used to have a lot of cheese factories in the valley in the old days. We got even more when a number of Swiss families moved into this area. They were, and still are, good farmers. They saw in this little valley a resemblance to their homeland. I'll tell you what happened to these cheese factories. When the government inspectors got into the act they put in such rigid laws that they couldn't operate. It just didn't pay when they had to test all the milk and install a lot of new equipment. It was a good thing that they did start testing because of the T.B. time around the early 30's. There were thousands of cows that were destroyed. You had to have a big operation to do your own testing or wait for an inspector to come from Sherbrooke or Montreal. Now many factories got this done but they just kept on passing more and more laws. Now the big (cheese) companies are in with the government - so that's the way it worked. They finally all had to close down.

There is sort of a similarity now to the depression. It's a different kind of a depression now - it's a mental depression. People are depressed in their minds more than financially. This may become a depression but it will never be like the Great Depression. We are wiser now and we have developed a lot of our resources. I hope that the small farmers can keep going and make a living. One thing, I sure hope they don't start a big war to end the depression.

The Chopping Contest | Pete Aiken

We used to have a lumber camp
The place called Sargent's Mill
Just above ol' Talkin Rock
On this side of the mill.

We had men who came to work up there
From every walk of life
They came from North South East and West
We had to sort them out and hire just the best
So we organized on Friday noon
What we called the big contest.

Now each man stepped up and made his cross
On a paper pure and white
And the contest was to chop some wood
Either that or hide from sight
Now many tried to be the best
But three stood out from the rest.

There was a man there in the gang called Sanitary
Sam
And I can tell you now he was a funny looking
man
He had bow legs, pigeon toes, a long horse face
and a crooked nose.

As the sun shone it was awful hot
As Sam chopped through his lot
The chips they flew both far and wide
As very few landed by his side
You could see Sam was filled with pride
He sat down to take a rest, thinking he'd won the
old contest.

The next man up was Wild Bill Magose
He was tall and slim and his teeth were loose
His ears were big and they flopped around
His feet turned out and his socks hung down.

When he chopped you should see his speed
His ax moved faster than a galloping steed
Those chips didn't have time to hit the ground
As the others were up before they come down.

They had to stop just in time
Cause Poison Pete was next in line
He hopped about like a kangaroo
And had a face like a caribou
You could see by his looks he was no prize
When he looked at you through bloodshot eyes.

He grabbed his axe and in a couple of hops
Up to the wood and he starts his chops
The chips went so high they never came back
When finally he stopped to rest
It was time to tally the old contest.

When the results came out in a 3-way tie
They all shouted it was a lie
Screamed at the judge he was a fake
And went down to the hotel to celebrate.

When they got there I'm sorry to tell
They all got drunk and were raisin' hell
They broke up the bar and tore out the light
And ended up in jail for the rest of the night.

They broke out of there, no law or order
Borrowed a team and headed for the border
With Poison Pete at the reins they hit a stump,
Missed a turn, and ended up in the garbage
dump.

Well the rats had a meeting and thought it best
Under cover of darkness they all left
That's the way it was way back then
Workin' in the woods, it was hard to get good
men.
