

Chapter Nine

WORLD WAR II AND ITS AFTERMATH

THE HOTEL WAS very sophisticated when I was there. Very much the cream of society. People dressed for dinners or for functions. It was a great clientele. There was one man, Mulligan, who used to come up in his Cadillac with his coloured chauffeur, Sidney. Tremendous person. I don't know what business he was in; I think from Washington, DC. And every summer he would drive up in this great big Cadillac limousine, and stay for anywhere from three weeks to a month. Sid had his own accommodation.—Victor Burt, Algonquin porter and eventually manager of several large hotels

DURING THE FIRST part of the War, business continued as usual. The summer people arrived on schedule, stayed their allotted two months, then took the train, or increasingly the automobile, back to New York, Montreal, or Boston. There was the feeling that the War was “over there” and did not concern them directly. Traffic at the International Bridge in St. Stephen continued its steady rise from year to year, and the growth was mainly due to tourists motoring up from New England. Motor coach tours constituted an increasing percentage of this traffic, partly as the result of gasoline rationing and Europe’s inaccessibility. On one day in 1941 there were thirteen buses lined up on the International Bridge. The clientele was noted to be rather better-heeled than usual. Like the typical automobile traveller, sniffed the *St. Croix Courier*, coach travellers that summer “were largely in a class far removed from the type who comes home to sponge off the old folks for two weeks, bringing with him a shirt and a five-dollar bill and changing neither during his vacation.”

SHIRETOWN ITEMS

Makes a Good Story

THE ALGONQUIN IS doing a better business this year to date than has been done in any season for several years, and it is expected the house will be practically filled to capacity for the rest of the season. The help, however, who depend mostly on tips, are not doing so well as they would wish. I heard an older member of the staff, in speaking of the good times of former years, say that at the end of the one season he had collected seven nail-kegs full of quarters and fifty cent pieces. I would not attest to the truth of the statement, however.—
Frederick Worrell, *St. Croix Courier*, Aug. 10, 1939. ~

The Algonquin hosted several distinguished visitors during World War II. Bellman Gerald Mitchell was introduced to Queen Wilhelmina of Holland one evening. He thought she was a very nice woman, though she could not speak English very well. This visit probably occurred in the summer of 1942, when she visited Canada and later addressed a joint session of the United States Congress. Her daughter Juliana had been living in Ottawa for several years already, and had given birth to her daughter Margriet in a wing of the Ottawa Civic Hospital, declared Dutch territory for the occasion. Wilhelmina must have stopped in St. Andrews either on her way to Ottawa or to Washington from London, where she was living in exile during the War, and the visit may have been kept secret. The local papers make no mention of it beyond an intriguing reference in the *St. Croix Courier* by columnist and former St. Andrews Mayor Frederick Worrell, to having met an expatriate Dutch man and French woman at the hotel in late August.

A surprise visit by Winston Churchill also took place in 1942. "As bell-boys," recalls Mitchell, "we had an inside tip on who was coming and not coming, so we'd be on the lookout when they came in so they would get the proper service. So this fellow came and says, 'Guess who's coming?' I said, 'I don't know; who's coming?' 'Winston Churchill!' 'You gotta be kidding; can't be.' Well, Churchill was over here at the time, on this side of the Atlantic, but he wasn't anywhere near St. Andrews. But we didn't know the difference; thought it must be one of those funny, off-the-cuff visits. So we waited and pretty soon this old, rambling car you'd swear was going to fall apart pulls up, and this artist steps out, dirty shorts on, dirty shirt, and says, 'I got a reservation in here for the night.' 'Under what name sir?' 'My name's Winston Churchill.' He was an artist from the States."

THE ALGONQUIN MAY have appeared to be sailing along at its usual care-free pace but appearances were deceiving. Money was a problem. In the fall of 1941 the hotel applied for a renewal of its customary ten-year fixed property valuation, citing a six-figure debt and asking for no increase. Local businessmen were not supportive of what they felt was a perpetual money loser and one which did not honour its old verbal agreement to buy and hire locally whenever possible. In a column former Mayor Worrell acknowledged a certain truth in these grievances, but thought they were somewhat exaggerated, so opposed the increase. He noted instances of local stores having received substantial orders from the Algonquin, and of the hotel having hired locally both worthy individuals and a certain type of person "who finds it difficult to get employment anywhere." He suggested that it was doubtful that the Algonquin was ever a paying proposition, but that if the hotel were in debt by six figures, the town itself had probably profited by an equal amount precisely because of its presence.

The town also had problems with the exclusive nature of the Algonquin's swimming beach at Katy's Cove. At this time guests at the other tourist accommodations in town had no access to a public swimming beach. The town had no money to build one and the Algonquin had no inclination to open its facilities to anyone other than its own guests. It was pointed out that for this reason many town visitors left who might have stayed longer, and many chose not stay at all.

A little backroom negotiation seems to have produced a compromise on both issues. In October 1941 it was reported that the town council would recommend the fixed tax valuation and the Algonquin would lease shore privileges at Katy's Cove to the town for ten years at one dollar per year. The shorefront would be a full block in length and would be located at the end of the cove closest to King Street. In the spring of the next year the Legislature approved a five-year valuation. The town was relieved. Worrell noted that the closing of the hotel, which would have followed most certainly upon a failure to renew the fixed valuation, would have been considered an unqualified catastrophe by ninety-nine percent of the town's population.

NEVERTHELESS THE HOTEL did close, though for a different reason. It stayed closed for the summers of 1943, 1944 and 1945 because of the war. While the CPR's city hotels did a booming business during the war, the seasonal resorts across Canada were shut down. The closing of the Algonquin did not seem to have precipitated a calamity. Doubtless there were hardships such as rationing and an inventive stream of "just as good" recipes like potato water cocktail and sundry flour substitutes. But while there may have been less spin-off business for the town, there was more business for the Algonquin's competition. The golf course remained open, too, and the cottagers pitched in significantly, as they had done during World War I, in various fundraising activities. So the effect was muted.

The Casino, with its own heating system that could be easily fired up for small events, remained open during the war and wartime fundraisers were held there. There was one for bombed-out children in 1941, card parties and dances for the District Nurses' Fund. One memorable performance was held for the Charlotte County Children's Aid Society in the summer of 1944 by the St. Andrews Canadian Women's Club. Titled "Glimpses of Life," it featured the English actor George Dickson-Kenwin, who specialized in famous characters from history and Shakespeare, such as Cardinal Wolsey and Falstaff. He interspersed his routine with short humorous sketches and included various common sounds, such as planing and sawing wood, in his performance. He also included one sound almost forgotten in wartime, that of the drawing of a wine cork.

Because of the war, the Casino became somewhat less exclusive. High

SHIRETOWN ITEMS

Another Improvement

A VERY GENEROUS and much appreciated gift has recently been received from Miss Olive Hosmer, a smooth-running a commodious Lincoln automobile which Miss Hosmer has used during the past few summers here, has been turned over to the fire department to be converted into an A. R. P. service wagon. A body is being constructed with angle iron and Douglas fir plywood, the work being done in a serviceable and attractive manner by Joseph Meers, caretaker at the fire hall. In the center is a place to carry the small pumpers; an attachment at the rear to trail the large pumper; neat enclosed compartments at the side to carry 3500 feet of hose. It is a job of which both the town and the donor may well be proud.—St. Croix Courier, Jan. 14, 1943. ~

THE ALGONQUIN

school graduation exercises were held there in the 1940s. Hitherto, the only time the Casino had opened for a public dance of any sort was for the King's Coronation in 1937 when "Biscuit" Gillman provided the music and first prize was a combination radio-grandfather clock, valued at fifty dollars. The Casino also played host to dances for Commonwealth air force officers from the airbase at nearby Pennfield and for soldiers from Camp Utopia.

Marguerite Shaughnessy, daughter of Sir Thomas, organized many of these events, and local people were allowed to come and dance with the boys in uniform.



*Eugene "Cuddy" O'Brien with
Cleveland Mitchell on the Casino
steps, 1942. CUDDY O'BRIEN*

Meanwhile the hotel sat in darkness. Then, early in February of 1946, the front door creaked open and a crew of young men peered tentatively inside to inspect the damage. They had arrived quite early to open and clean up the hotel because they needed more time than usual. After having sat unheated and unattended in freeze-thaw conditions for three years, the building was feared to be, and was in fact, a huge mess. One of the crew was a young bellman, Eugene "Cuddy" O'Brien of St. Stephen. O'Brien had started his career in the hotel business in 1939 as a pin boy in the Casino, then moved up to bellman until the hotel closed in 1942, when he was transferred to the Royal York. When he came back to the Algonquin after the War, he remembers that the paint, and almost everything else, "was just hanging." A lot of money and elbow grease was expended in pasting the "old girl" back into shape, he recalls. It took about four months.

IN A SHORT time the Algonquin and the town had resumed their former gaiety. The Cadillacs and guests would arrive by train, and the porter would be at the station with his list of guests to be transported up to the hotel. Increasingly, McQuoid's Taxi Service dispatched its drivers to McAdam or Bangor to pick up those who preferred to cut train travel as much as possible. The back corridors of the Algonquin were once again lined with the steamer trunks of vacationers who came to stay the entire summer. A memorable visitor to the hotel in the 1940s and 1950s was W.L. (Lum) Clark, Editor-in-Chief of the *Windsor Daily Star*. He always travelled with Mrs. Herman, the owner. The story went that he used to date her daughter, and that before the daughter died she had Clark promise that he would take care of her mother. "They'd come every summer," recalls O'Brien, "and he'd ship his great big Cadillac down from Windsor. And he'd write to me. He'd send his great big wardrobes down, two of them, one for him and one for her. And she always brought her sister, and they had the same rooms, 353 and 355 up on the third floor overlooking the putting green. So I would see that they were comfortable. I'd go upstairs and open up their wardrobes. That was a twenty dollar

trip; that was a pretty good tip in those days.”

Many guests were American, flamboyantly dressed, and in ritzy cars. “Marvellously interesting people,” one bellman recalled. One couple, honeymooners from New Jersey, came with enough clothes to change for every meal. At dinner he would be in his tux and she in her evening gown, both smelling slightly of mothballs.

There were a few famous guests in the post-war period. Matthew Corrigan, bellman and aspiring writer, met Fannie Hurst, in her heyday the world’s highest paid short story writer, and had a chat with her on the hotel veranda. She was then in her eighties. Myrna Loy, American actress of note, spent the summers of 1952 and 1953 at the Algonquin. Jay Stone Carleson, famous for having struck out Babe Ruth, paid a call on the manager one summer evening in 1950, but as former Bellman Frank O’Neill recalls, it was not a courtesy call. He was broke.

Another illustrious visitor to the hotel was Barbara Ann Scott. Scott, at that time world figure skating champion, had come to St. Andrews in the winter of 1949 with her troupe, Skating Sensations, and was so impressed with the town that she resolved to come back that summer with her golf clubs. She did so, staying for the month of June in Gordon Reed’s cottage on Water Street. Though she didn’t actually stay at the Algonquin itself, she did golf on its course and swim at its cove. A charming anecdote survives from the late Bill Cockburn, MLA for Charlotte. According to Cockburn, Scott was forbidden to swim by her mother because it was thought to be bad exercise for a skater. Scott found a way around the interdiction by taking a canoe out for a paddle and, after rounding a point out of sight, donning her bathing suit in the woods. She would swim out amongst the crowd, just one bathing cap among many, and later paddle back to the beach as though nothing untoward had happened.

She also found time to be run over. Joseph Pach, a twenty-two-year-old violinist with the Algonquin orchestra, down from Ontario for the summer, came barreling down Water Street on his bike and flattened a young woman who darted out in front of him. He himself went over the bars into the ditch, and had a fright when he discovered that the person still prostrate on the road was the women’s world figure skating champion. “I picked her up bodily,” says Pach, “carried her into the cottage, and then she came to. People at that level of a sport, if they have a fall, don’t get up until they’re checked out. So she just didn’t want to move until she felt there was nothing broken, I guess. Anyway, that was when she looked at me and said, ‘It was my fault.’” Pach uttered a quick prayer to a benevolent God.



Barbara Ann Scott with Algonquin band at golf clubhouse, 1949. Joseph Pach stands directly behind her. Orchestra leader Clarence Sawyer to her left.

LAURIE PACH

