

CHAPTER ONE:

Lumbering on the St. Croix and Lepreau

Another familiar person, perambulating the bank of the river, with a pick-pole or oar on his shoulder, or guiding rafts of lumber in the swift current of the river, was that of "Sandy" Gibson, since known as Mr. Alexander Gibson, the New Brunswick Lumber King. I can only see Mr. Gibson as his appearance then was fixed on my boyish mind or vision. He was a fairly tall man, without superfluous flesh, but not thin; and his gear in warm weather was not expensive. I can't recollect ever seeing him without coat or vest on. He wore a checkered shirt, his suspenders showing conspicuously as they crossed and passed over his somewhat muscular shoulders. He generally wore a straw hat, and could often be seen about the mills, or on the river bank chewing a small chip of straw, as though in a brown study.

- George Boardman, "Men and Things on the St. Croix," *Calais Times*, 1884

IT WAS OCTOBER, 1900, and the lumber king of the Nashwaak, Alexander Gibson himself, had come to pay a visit to his old hometown after many long years. A lot had changed since then, and Mr. Gibson's fame went before him. Leaving a humble millman, he returned as "Boss" Gibson, operator of the largest lumber business in the province, extending from Marysville, a town he created virtually out of nothing, up to the Miramichi along the Nashwaak and Bartholomew Rivers. A tall man of imposing appearance, heavy of build and white of beard, with piercing blue eyes under a soft felt hat, Gibson had built an empire in spruce deals, the backbone of the timber trade, along with two railways, the Fredericton Railway Bridge, and the great cotton mill in Marysville. Quartered in a mansion across the river from his mills, just downhill from his magnificent Methodist church, a gothic masterpiece paid for entirely out of his own pocket, surrounded by family in houses he had built for them, visited by Governor Generals and courted by politicians, the Boss was arguably the largest employer of labour in the province and one of its most colorful personalities. Eighty years old now but still hale, he drove from the train station at St. Stephen out to his old homestead on the Oak Bay road, then up the Milltown road to his former home at Middle Landing, where his first children were born and where he worked for the prosperous lumber firms of William Todd and Abner Hill. "On Sunday," reported the *St. Andrews Beacon*, "the aged million-

aire worshipped in the church of his early manhood days at Milltown - the Methodist - occupying the same pew as he had occupied forty years before.”

But as remarkable as Gibson’s career had been, cracks in the edifice were beginning to show. Successive recapitalizations had added hugely to company debt, and his payroll, comprising up to 1,200 employees and topping \$45,000 a month in the summer months, was a considerable drain on his finances. His lumber business, though down somewhat from the days in which it had averaged 50 percent of all lumber shipped from the port of Saint John and 25 percent of all shipped from the province, was being used at least partly to prop up other, less profitable parts of his empire. The Canada Eastern Railway, for example, running from the town of Gibson to Chatham, was unable to pay even for routine maintenance, and the railway bridge across the Saint John River, built largely with federal funds, was hugely in arrears of payment. The cotton mill, the largest independent mill left in Canada, was built at a time when the industry was deeply in trouble and, never operating at more than half capacity, was struggling to keep its head above water.

Still, even those who saw the cracks could scarcely have predicted that in the space of fourteen years all would be gone: the railway and bridge, the cotton mill, and the lumber business, all having passed into other hands, the church and mansion destroyed by fire, the children living in houses owned by strangers. There would be little left of the Gibson edifice but the artifact of Marysville - that, and the memory of a man Lord Beaverbrook would later describe as “the most colourful and, in his day, the most important lumber operator on the Nashwaak and St. John rivers.”

NOT A LOT is known about Alexander Gibson’s early life. Though many short accounts were published in his own time, there is little to nothing about what transpired before his arrival in Fredericton in 1862, even though Gibson was in his early forties at the time; and much of the information on this subject, even, is as inaccurate as it is scanty. The first reference to Gibson in a Fredericton newspaper, for instance, that of the *Reporter* for July 4, 1864, describes his improvements in the new town of Marysville as the work of a Nova Scotia gentleman. Subsequent references to his birthplace are confined to New Brunswick, but given variously as Oak Bay, St. Stephen, Milltown, St. Andrews, and even Lepreau, while the date of his birth is usually fixed upon as August 1, 1819. An inspection of the birth and baptismal records of All Saints Church in St. Andrews shows that Alexander Gibson was actually born on August 1, 1820 in that town to John and Jane Gibson, and was baptized on August 6.

As the profession of Gibson’s father is given as “shoemaker,” it seems probable that the family lived directly in the town. Upon Gibson’s death in

1913, an elderly St. Andrews resident named Arthur Doon informed Robert Armstrong, editor of the *St. Andrews Beacon*, that he had attended school with Alexander Gibson, who had been born in a little house on the St. Andrews waterfront near the Thomas Odell store.

Public records show that Gibson's parents were part of a small family group that arrived in Charlotte County in 1818 from or by way of Ireland. It was headed up by Alexander Gibson senior and his wife Janet Moore, and they brought with them their four children: John, aged approximately 23 and married to Mary Jane Johnson (or Johnston), aged 17; Margaret, aged about 22, James about 17, and the youngest by a fair stretch, Stuart or Stewart, aged approximately 4.

Little is known about Gibson's grandparents. Janet Moore and Alexander Gibson may both have been of Scottish origin. According to one story, Ms. Moore was a lady of gentle birth who against the knowledge or permission of her parents eloped with Alexander Gibson, a coachman on her estate. Whether or not that story is true, the couple definitely spent quite a bit of time in Ireland before emigrating to Canada, as according to the death certificate for the Boss's sister Charlotte, who died in Marysville in 1927, her father John Gibson was born in Castlerea, Ireland. As John was the eldest, all of the children of Alexander Gibson and Janet Moore must have been born in Ireland, though perhaps not at Castlerea. For when Governor General Dufferin visited Fredericton in August, 1873 and paid a visit to the Gibsons at Marysville, he was delighted to discover in a conversation with Gibson's mother that this lady hailed from his own estate of Clandeboye in County Down, near Belfast. The Gibsons he seemed to remember as having been tenants of his neighbour, Mr. Sharman Crawford. He later said he spent an hour with the Gibsons, "giving them an account of their grand-nieces and grand-nephews, and of their other various relations." From this it would seem that the Gibsons had moved from Castlerea to Clandeboye at some point, where they had an extended family, made the acquaintance of Jane Johnson, who according to Charlotte's death certificate was of Scottish birth, and after John Gibson and Jane Johnson were married sailed from nearby Belfast to British North America. It was a painful departure for the young bride. Fifty-four years after the event, Lady Dufferin noted that according to the old lady, "Her parents, having objected to her marriage, never wrote to her."

How long the Gibsons lived in Ireland is not known, but because of a possible connection with the grandparents and certainly with the mother, Scotland always trumped Ireland in the Gibson family's understanding of its cultural identity. Official documents for Alexander Gibson's children usually give "Scotland" or "Scottish" in the section concerning "racial origin." Gibson himself knew well and loved to sing the songs of Robert Burns, held Scottish

BAPTISMS solemnized in the Parish of <u>St. Andrews</u>						
in the County of <u>Charlotte</u> in the Year 18 <u>20</u>						
When Baptized.	Child's Christian Name.	Parents Name.		Abode.	Quality, Trade, or Profession.	By whom the Ceremony was performed.
		Christian.	Surname.			
<i>When born</i> 1 st Aug ^t 1820 * No. 193.	Alexander Son of Jane	John & Jane	Gibson	St. Andrews	Shoe Maker	James Alley Rector

27 th Oct 1822 = No. 247.	Thomas Son of Margaret	John & Margaret	McConnell	St. Andrews	Labourer	James Alley Rector
8 th Dec ^r 1821 No. 248.	James Son of Jane	John & Jane	Gibson	St. Andrews	Shoe Maker	James Alley Rector

Baptismal Certificates for Alexander Gibson (1820), James Gibson and John McConnell (1822).
Courtesy All Saints Church, St. Andrews.

evenings in his home in Marysville, and was a conspicuous presence at the unveiling of the statue of Robert Burns in Fredericton in the fall of 1906.

They weren't the only Gibsons in town. The 1851 census for New Brunswick shows two other Gibson families in St. Andrews at that time. George Gibson, an infirm and very elderly man aged 99 (he will die in the same year), lives with his son David, aged 40. Both are Irish, and the date of their entry into the province is given as 1818, the same as Alexander Gibson and his clan. There is another Gibson family in town as well, also headed up by a George Gibson. He is 44, and though the census has him as a native, his obituary for 1887 states that he emigrated from Ireland as a teenager about 65 years previously from County Down. His birthdate of 1806 puts him in the ballpark with Boss Gibson's uncles, and there may have been a relation - perhaps not the most cordial - between them. According to a story related by Mary Greenlaw of Upper Waweig, passed down from her grandfather, George Lee Gibson, after the death of William Gibson and his wife Evelina, George Lee Gibson's parents, Alexander Gibson

took in their children as wards and quartered them in Milltown, Maine, with a family that treated them poorly. George Lee Gibson remembered one of his sisters being beaten for eating an apple. He could never understand why Alexander Gibson, a rich man, could have sent his own relatives off to live with unkind strangers in a foreign country.

Public records show that George Lee Gibson did indeed have a father William, born in St. Andrews, and that both he and his wife Evelina died within a few months of each other in 1890. They also show a marriage certificate for an Evelyn Gibson of Milltown, Maine, formerly of St. Andrews, witnessed by George Gibson, presumably her brother. But William Gibson was not Alexander Gibson's brother, as the family story holds; his father was the George Gibson, aged 44, of the 1851 census. Alexander Gibson did have an uncle, James, who lived in Calais, Maine, adjacent to Milltown, Maine, but he died in 1860 and his wife, Mary Smyth, in 1881. There was of course Gibson's younger brother James, born in 1821, absent from the 1851 New Brunswick census and possibly resident in Maine, for whom, nevertheless, there seems to be no local death record.

Whatever the details, it seems fair to assume that there was indeed a relation of some sort between Boss Gibson and the other Gibsons of St. Andrews. An 1880 map of St. Andrews shows a Gibson property on William Street near Water; this is probably the George Gibson, aged 44, of the 1851 census. It could be that this family and Alexander Gibson's were neighbours at one time, and that they arrived in St. Andrews as part of a family group. Unfortunately, passenger lists for the 1818 period are incomplete and it seems impossible now to discover when this group - if indeed they were a group - left Ireland for the New World.

These Gibsons, whatever the relation between them, were part of the very earliest wave of Irish immigrants to take to the sea-lanes after the conclusion of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, and were among the first Irish emigrants to St. Andrews. The first boatload, perhaps in the hold of a returning timber ship, disembarked in 1817. As with the famine victims of the 1840s, a story told brilliantly in Ron Rees' *Some Other Place Than Here*, these Irish were poor, sick, and an immediate charge upon the parish finances. A levy was made to help defray the costs of medical care and their accommodation with local families; some died of diseases contracted *en route* and communicated these illnesses upon their hosts, sometimes with tragic results. This levy proving insufficient, in 1818 the Overseers of the Poor petitioned the provincial government for reimbursement of funds expended by private individuals and for the establishment of a poor house, which followed in 1819, one of many such to spring up around the province as the Irish presence continued to expand. According to Rees, in 1818 more than 2,000 emigrants landed in