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Mait McKeown knew the Value of Friendships

Ernest Maitland (Mait) McKeown was born on May 10, 1904. His birth announcement read "Port Maitland, Steve McKeown is the proud papa of an 8 lb. fisherman." Steve was not the only one to have something to do with Mait's arrival, so did his mother Rosetta Martha Thompson, daughter of Wellington (Dilly) Thompson and Sophia Ross. Mait descends from a long line of Port Maitland pioneers. On his mother side is Henry Ross one of the first commercial fishermen on Lake Erie and on his father's side is Thomas O'Connors of which Connor Bay is named. Just where in Port Maitland, Mait was born is unknown. We only know it was in *Granny's house*, in Sherbrooke Twp., and soon after his birth, his father built a new home on the east side of Port Maitland, located roughly where the Wilson cottage is today. The property this house stood on was sold to the TH&B Railway in 1915 for one dollar. The house was then sold to Jim Jones who moved it across the river. It now sits a couple lots north of the Port Maitland Apartments and is owned by Barry Fraser. With the sale of his early childhood home, Mait would move to west Port Maitland and grew up in the present day home of Bill and Shannon Nolan.

Things have changed a bit at Port Maitland since the days when Mait grew up. He once told me that he recalled the boat Belladonna tying up at the Club House on the east side of Port. His uncle Charlie Ross owned both the Belladonna and the Club House. Mait remembered his mother taking him to the dentist in Dunnville on the Belladonna. Then he would say, "*About the only way to get to town in those days!*"

Mait's early fishing experience with his father and uncles prepared him for a long stint on board the Railway ferry Maitland # One, a ship owned by the TH&B Navigation Company. He experienced many eventful times aboard the Maitland # One, including the rescue of the crew from the sinking ship Howard S. Gerkin and at least two dangerous groundings of the Maitland # One. While working on the Maitland # One he married Esther Strong in Ripley NY in November 1932. Mait liked to tell the story that he met Esther in a Kresge's store in Ashtabula Ohio. He loved to sing the tune "*... met a million-dollar baby in a five and ten-cent store.*" The young couple lived in Ashtabula for a couple years before returning to Port Maitland where he took over his father's fishing business. I never met Esther but was told by others, that she was one of the finest women they had ever met and Mait was a lucky man to have this first-rate lady at his side.

In May 1927, Mait and lifelong friend Carl Gustufson (Gus) spent a night sleeping on the ground under a newspaper in Washington DC, waiting for Charles Lindbergh to return from Paris after his record-breaking flight of the Atlantic. They did indeed see Lindbergh, his mother and President Coolidge.

In 1935, Mait and Esther purchased their home from Henry Patterson, a house presently owned by Terry Powell. Mait and Esther's new home was only three doors east of the house his parents had built when they moved to the west side of the river in 1915.

Mait fished the steam tug Maitland Rose, a boat that his father and uncle Jack McKee built from locally grown oak trees. Jack and Steve cut the trees and had them milled while Jack Passch of Erie PA, built the Maitland Rose on the side of the creek near the place where Terry Powell presently has his shipyard. Mait understood that sailors stick together, if not always in good times; unexceptionally without fail, in bad! It was Sunday August 8, 1936, Mait with his crew of the Maitland Rose were heading home from a successful day of fishing when the propeller came off leaving them stranded twelve miles south of Port. After several uncomfortable hours of drifting, the F. B. CLAY tied onto her but was unable to pull the much heavier boat. After being assured that all was well, Captain Fred Clay headed to Port, where he rounded up Mait's 2nd cousin Percy Siddall, who took the Earleejune to the rescue. The Maitland Rose fished for another nine years before being sold to the Hamilton Harbor Commission.

In 1945, Mait contracted Northern Marine of Bronte, to build him a new steel boat with a diesel engine. The James B, -named after his nephew James Backus, it would be one of the finest boats in Port. So good that only a year later Percy Siddall would have Northern Marine build him the J P Siddall, in which many of the quality features on the James B were included.

Mait graduated in 1921, from the Robinson Business College in Dunnville. This business training served Mait well. It provided experience needed while serving on the Maitland # One and William G. Clyde. It would be well applied while co-founding the Port Maitland Fishermans Co-op with Arnold (Hickery)Clark, the Minor brothers, Allan Jones, John S. Wheeler, Elmer Moyer and the McIntee brothers.

Mait and Esther would not be blessed with children of their own but they were not without youngsters to create special memories. Mait's sister Greta, lived in the old homestead until her death in 1971. There was a path worn through the field between Mait's house and the old place from the constant pounding of many little feet trekking to Uncle Mait and Aunt Esther's. Mait and Ester had a unique popcorn maker - black, with a red lid and a crank on the top that you turned as the corn popped. Mait and Esther remained very close to both of his sister's children. Christmas's were always shared between Greta and Leeta's children.

One of Mait's favourite places as recalled by a niece was the Dairy Queen in Port Colborne where he went for a thick milkshake. Mait spent his waning allotment of ninety-seven years living comfortably in an apartment in Dunnville. Although slowly losing his sight, he only gave up the apartment to live at Grand View Lodge a year or so before his death. With his family at his side, he departed on June 23, 2001. Mait was never short of friends or visitors. He revelled in his many friendships and would often say "*I am lucky to have so many friends.*"

If you have items, you wish written about or pictures you would be willing to lend, please drop me a note. Let me know how you feel about these articles. William (Bill) Arthur Warnick 180 Rosslyn Ave. South HAMILTON, ON L8M 3J5 e-mail wwarnick@cogeco.ca Phone 905 531-4350.