



THE TEA PARTIES

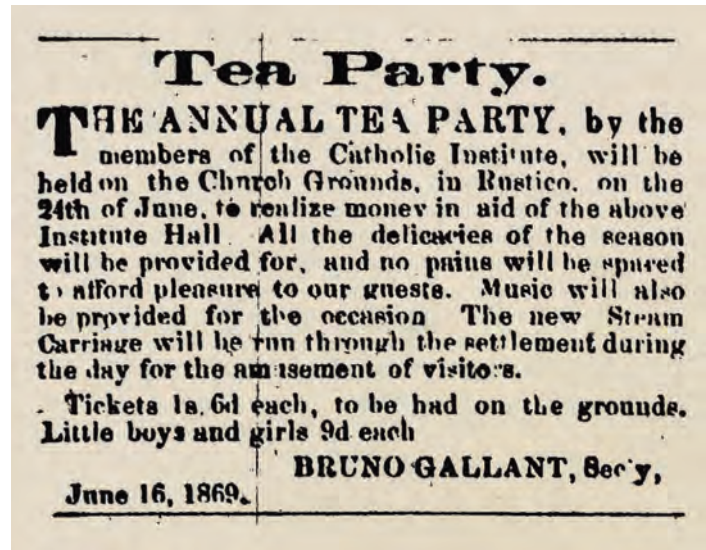


Prince Edward Island

A POPULAR ACTIVITY

Tea parties, also known as picnics, were growing in popularity on Prince Edward Island before Father Belcourt came to the Island in 1859. They were large gatherings during which a meal (a tea) was served. They also included a procession of the members of the organization holding the activity, band music, speeches, sometimes a religious ceremony, games, a bazaar and even a concert. Of course, there was a fee to attend a tea party.

In 1863, Father Belcourt and his Catholic Institute organized their first tea party. They saw it as an excellent way to raise funds for the projects of the Institute. It was held on June 24, the feast day of St. John the Baptist, the patron saint of the Institute. A brief account of the event was published in *The Vindicator*:



Ad published in *The Examiner*. ▲

Wednesday last, the anniversary of the nativity of St. John the Baptist, was solemnly celebrated at Rustico. His Lordship the Bishop of Charlottetown officiated at the occasion. Two sermons were preached, one in English, the other in French [...] Rev. A. Trudelle ably presided at the splendid organ lately purchased by the Rev. G.A. Belcourt, the venerable Pastor of Rustico. After divine service, and a procession of the Rustico Temperance Society, etc., about a thousand persons sat down to a plentiful repast prepared on the grounds adjoining the Church.

The festivity of St. John the Baptist in Rustico brought together not only the Acadian parishioners, but a large number of English-speaking Catholics and many Protestants. At a time when there was considerable conflict on the Island between Catholics and Protestants, Father Belcourt believed that due to the celebration on June 24th, “there [was] a great change in the disposition of the Protestants towards the Catholics.”

THE BAND, A GREAT PRIDE

The 1863 picnic was such a great success that the festivity became an annual event. It always attracted a large crowd and, on each occasion, the Catholic Institute’s band was well received. Father Belcourt told the French historian, Edme Rameau, that at the 1865 picnic, the rector of St. Dunstan’s College was so impressed with the performance of the ensemble that he invited them to play at the students’ public examination.

Father Belcourt was always happy to give Edme Rameau news of the success of the picnic organized by the members of the Catholic Institute in his parish. In a letter written to his correspondent before the 1867 picnic, he explained the impact the picnic had on the members of the Institute and what the profits were used for:

The band, the bells chiming, the flags, the sound of the cannon, the banner ahead of the 250 members of the Institute in their uniforms and separated from the crowd, all this has a powerful effect on this chosen group of remarkable young people. It bonds them to their institution and stimulates the envy of the younger ones who join as soon as they are old enough. The income allows us to expand the library every year, and very soon it will be sizeable when we will have paid our share of the construction costs of our new building. (Translation)

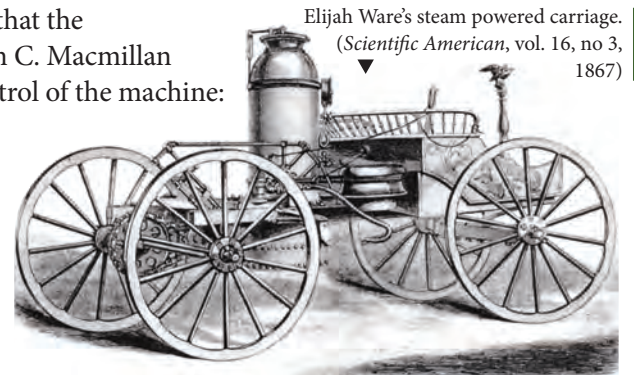
A STEAM CARRIAGE

At the 1869 tea party, Father Belcourt demonstrated a great invention: a carriage powered by a steam engine. He had imported the carriage from the United States in 1866. It would appear that he waited about two and a half years before showing it to the public. At least that is the impression given by the account of the tea party published in *Le Moniteur acadien*:

But what added much to the amusement of the gathering was the steam carriage that belonged to our good parish priest which he put into gear and took for a ride. To you, Mr. Editor, who sees railroad engines every day, this would not have seemed at all strange; but to those who saw it here, it was a welcome novelty. (Translation)

The author of the article, however, does not mention that the demonstration ended poorly. About 40 years later, Father John C. Macmillan wrote that during his demonstration, Father Belcourt lost control of the machine:

[it] became altogether unmanageable, left the beaten track of its own accord and finally became entangled in a fence by the wayside, where it came to a sudden and inglorious halt. Father Belcourt was grievously disappointed and soon the famous steam-waggon made its way to the junk heap.



Despite the fiasco, Father Belcourt's steam wagon was enshrined in history and is considered the first automobile on Prince Edward Island.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

1. The picnic was an important way of bringing people together in the community. How do communities come together today? Give examples.
2. The newspaper provided many details on the picnic to the community. How are events advertized today?
3. Father Belcourt wrote many letters during his life to explain what was happening in his parish. Can you write a letter to describe an event to a friend?
4. The history of the automobile in Prince Edward Island is full of arguments between citizens. Imagine why there were arguments and do some research to verify your hypotheses.

