

Bridging the Generations - Remembering the McLeans of Chase, Michigan

By Shanna Avery, 2020

The chill in the late October air was brisk on a bright Saturday morning in 2012, as Scott and Dolly Wright gathered with a group of us local folks in a small northern Michigan community, to honor the memory of Scott's ancestors, the McLeans.

The small town of Chase, the first and former seat of Lake County, now mostly consisting of a couple churches, a gas station, restaurant and a few other small businesses, library, post office, and a couple old buildings reminiscent of older times, was a booming lumber town when the McLean family settled there well over a century ago. Like many families who lived in the area, the McLeans arrived from Canada, to harvest the towering stands of pine during Michigan's logging era.

Originally from the Scottish highlands, the family patriarch, Donald McLean, at some point traveled across the Atlantic and started a family with his wife, Mary Patterson, of Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. The young family moved to Ontario, and by the early 1880s, began to carve out a life in Chase, where some were born, and where some had died, for nearly four decades to follow.

Donald lived out his final years in Chase and was laid to rest in 1895 in an unmarked grave in the soft grounds of the remote, peaceful cemetery on the southwest outskirts of town. Two of his sons joined him, as well as others over the years, including a great-grandbaby, in those hallowed grounds.

Within the 1910s, some of the family followed the logging north, some to the west, and others took up with the railroad at various points in Michigan. But like the North Star, Chase, remains a constant for the McLean family, though scattered and branched out in different directions, so much of the family's history took place here, and here, remains.

After the last of the McLeans dispersed from the area, and nearly a century had passed, the name McLean stirred once again on the lips of residents of Chase when Scott contacted the Chase Historical Society, part of the Chase Township Public Library, in October of 2010. At that time, I was asked by the group if I'd be interested searching the archives for Scott. I gladly did the research. I was 26, but had recently become involved in projects with the group and being an "old soul," immersed myself in local history, gaining a deeper understanding of myself and community through the past which birthed us.

Over the next few months, I uncovered quite a bit of information on the family through marriage records, death records, township archives and rolls of microfilm newspaper archives. The McLeans came to life for me. Appreciation of their lives and presence formed. When I drank in the beauty of the gently rolling hills carpeted with summer wildflowers, I could picture them marveling the same beauty, climbing these same hills, picking the flowers; or treading through the heavy snowdrifts in the harsh northern winters; or enjoying the cool banks of the swift Chase Creek winding through the countryside (headwaters of the acclaimed Pere Marquette River) while snagging a trout for dinner; or hunting deer in the distant fields and woods edging the town.

As I related the local history I uncovered on the family, Scott would share about the Scottish clans and their rich past and culture. I took on appreciation and new understanding of my own highland ancestors, the Campbells and McDonalds, and learned of the colorful history and rivalries they both had with Clan McLean. However, there was nothing but unity and

discovery when details of the family's life here kept surfacing, and when five of seven graves, spanning four generations of McLeans, were finally marked.

When I first began the research, the copy of Chase Village Cemetery archives available to the public didn't have much information on the McLean grave sites, but in the early winter of 2011, I was digging through drawers of old ledgers in a back room of the library. That is where I found the original cemetery book. Some of the writing was faded and hardly detectable, but sure enough, I was able to piece together the puzzle, the mystery that eluded me for so long, where all the McLean burials were located in the cemetery.

Upon hearing the news of the discovery, Scott said, within his lifetime, he would like to see these graves marked, perhaps with a wooden marker, maybe a couple with stone. My cousin Sid Woods, local historian and sexton of the Chase cemeteries, offered to make the stones, and only asked for money for the material. I wanted in on the experience, to do something for this family that taught me so much about heritage and the importance of the world around us. As Sid poured the cement mix into the mold to form the shape of tall, rounded stones in the style of the late 1800s, I inscribed the names and dates.

The names etched onto each marker were:

- Donald McLean: patriarch and third great-grandfather to Scott; (Oct. 31, 1811, Mull, Argyllshire, Scotland – Jan. 31, 1895, Chase). Note: origins of his birth are still being researched by Scott and historians in Scotland. The information on his stone was transcribed from his death record, which was difficult to decipher. He died of influenza, after which time, his wife Mary moved to be near daughter Nellie Surbrook in Sanilac County, in eastern Michigan, where she died Oct 30, 1909, and was buried in Croswell Cemetery.
- Lochlan McLean: second great-grandfather to Scott; (Nov. 10, 1847, Nova Scotia – Oct. 10, 1908, Manistee, Michigan). He died of typhoid fever. A death notice read, "Lockey McLean, an old resident of Chase, died at the Manistee Hospital on Saturday, the 10th inst. The remains were brought here on the Monday morning train, and buried at 3 p.m. The funeral was held from the Congregational Church, conducted by Reverend A.J. Iden."
- Helen German McLean: (Jan. 30, 1850, PA - Jan. 1, 1910). She was interred next to her husband, Daniel McLean, son of Donald and Mary.
- Anna McLeod McLean: (March 3, 1854, Canada – Feb. 22, 1911, Chase), was wife of John McLean, son of Donald and Mary. She perished to pneumonia at age of 56.
- Baby, Earl G. McLean: (Jan. 18, 1906, Chase – Sept. 25, 1906, Chase.) He was a child to George McLean (son of Lochlan) and Grace Travis, and passed from spinal meningitis. His obituary read, "Baby Earl McLean aged 7 months, only child of Mr. and Mrs. Geo. McLean, passed away Tuesday, September 24th after a short illness. Services were held at the home Thursday, at one p.m. by Mr. Pomeroy. Internment being made in Chase Cemetery. The little white casket was covered with white flowers and little Earl looked very sweet lying among them."

[Note: Two other burials of the Chase McLeans which were already marked in the cemetery were Daniel, (1850-1905) son of Donald and Mary, and Almira Cone McLean (1881-1900). She was the young wife of George McLean, son of Lochlan. She died of typhoid fever at the age of 18.]

That summer, Sid and I put the stones in the cemetery when they were set and hardened. We made two at a time and each pair took about a week to dry. Each was made with love and respect. We saved Donald and Lochlan's stones, both of which I inscribed and painted the McLean Coat of Arms, however, for when Scott and his wife could make the trip from their home downstate on Saturday, Oct. 27, 2012.

After we met at my house for breakfast, on that frosty morning with the crisp air mellowed by the sun, I led Scott and Dolly on a tour through town and the old homesteads and places pertinent to his ancestors. At the cemetery Scott, Dolly, myself, Sid Woods, his mother

Lillian, whose family lived in Chase when the McLeans did, and my dad, Carlyle Avery, whose ancestors were among the first in the county (Cherry Valley Township west of Chase) and I believe went to church with the McLeans in Chase, gathered to give a fitting tribute. I believe among us, as well, were the McLeans in spirit, whose lives we brought remembrance and honor to.

At the graveside of Lochlan, with his stone proudly draped in McLean tartan from Scotland, I sang "Amazing Grace," accompanied by guitar, my dad harmonizing sweet low notes on violin, and Sid on harmonica. Then I placed holly, (a symbol of Clan McLean), in the ground where the stone would be placed, as a token of friendship of my ancestors who neighbored the McLeans. Scott and Sid then positioned the stone into place.

The final tribute was to Donald, the connection of Scotland in blood and spirit to the small town of Chase, where he made his final journey. I sang an old renown Scottish tune, "Loch Lamond," to the sweet strumming of my autoharp, blending with violin and harmonica. I placed some holly in the ground, and Scott lovingly placed heather tea from Edinburgh, Scotland, to connect Donald's fatherland to his final resting place.

I offered up a prayer of thanksgiving for the McLeans and how everything came together in not only remembrance of past generations, but the newness of friendship among the current generations who stayed in Chase, with those who reunited to the community where their forefathers lived, loved and passed from this life, resting beneath the sod through the bitter frosts and snows of winter; to the renewal of spring; and the sweet flowers fragrant with the warm summer winds; to the crisp, colorful fall, as the land prepares to rest, reminding us of the generations as they come and go, each in it's cycle of seasons.

Scott, Sid and my dad placed Donald's stone, clad in tartan, in the earth, etched with the McLean Coat of Arms and motto, "Virtue Mine Honour," and as we left the cemetery, a sense of community, family, heritage and the bridging of generations was etched on each heart of those who witnessed and took part in the touching remembrance to Clan McLean and their mark in Chase, Michigan, a place their descendants, who went out to all directions, will forever be a part of.