



NEWSFLASH!

Rural community has growing population

Quality of life attracts quality people who create a quality community:
Is Tatamagouche NS the model for our ailing rural towns and villages?

by Sandra Phinney
photography: John Sylvester

At this stage in our history when many small rural communities have lost their identity or *raison d'être*—or have become virtual ghost towns due to massive waves of out-migration, Tatamagouche, NS, is bucking the trend. In 2006, the population of this village (located in Colchester County) was 689; yet five years later, in 2011, it was 752—a 9.1 per cent increase, practically unheard of in rural Atlantic Canada.

Although fate often plays a role in the growth or demise of a community, the eclectic gaggle of citizens who live in Tatamagouche (some of whom affectionately refer to the village as “Tata,”) have bucked the trend and stayed afloat, sailing through thick and thin.

To wit: in 1950 and again in 1953, the village business district had two major fires, yet everyone rallied; the village became stronger than ever.

In 1992, when Scotsburn Dairy Group closed its creamery operation and the buildings were on the chopping block, local organizations got together, formed the Creamery Square Society, and saved the buildings.

In 2006 Tatamagouche’s long-established farmers’ market moved into the new market facility at Creamery Square.

In 2009 the Heritage Centre opened.

This year, a 160-seat centre for the arts is under construction.

Close by stands the old grain elevator. In 2005 it, too, was destined to be demolished. Enter James (Jimmie) LeFresne and Richard Duggan, who bought the place. Shortly after, Richard and his wife, Sara, cleaned it up, and started a business, which includes unique gift shops and a biweekly



Clockwise from left: Cammie Harbottle and son, Keir, on Waldegrave Farm; Tatamagouche’s sleepy facade belies a thriving, active community; Jimmie LaFresne, owner of the Train Station Inn.

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coffee house called “Against the Grain.”

Richard’s also been a die-hard fan of horror flicks since he was shorter than an axe. In fall 2010, while browsing through Gunnar Hansen’s website (Gunnar portrayed “Leatherface” in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*), Richard discovered that the film star would be making an appearance in Ellsworth, Maine. In lickety-split time he booked tickets. While there, he met Gunnar face to face and popped the question: would the famous actor be interested in making an appearance in Tatamagouche, NS?

“I’d be delighted to,” was the reply.

That’s how the Summer Fear festival started. The second season, last year, was a blockbuster featuring the world’s most prolific cinematic killer, Kane Hodder, a.k.a. “Jason” of *Friday the 13th* fame. Although horror movies may not be everyone’s cup of tea, the community fully supports the festival and gets caught up with the buzz.

Jimmie LeFresne grins when asked about the progressive nature of the community. The former council member and long-time owner of the Train Station Inn, explains: “In the past people said we needed big industry—smoke stacks and call centres. It didn’t happen; that’s a good thing. If you have big company and it closes down, you lose a lot of jobs. I’ve always said that the future lies in our past. “In Tatamagouche, people have taken initiative to get things going.”

Jimmie credits the community’s growth, in part, because of its diversity. “In the 60s, teachers moved here from India; Germans came in the 70s; Mennonites in the 80s, Buddhists in the 90s. Tatamagouche is a real melting pot. For example, people like Av Singh and his wife Karen Shepard started Christmas at the Creamery a few years ago. The community now feeds more than 400 people on Christmas Day. Everyone gets involved! We also have the biggest Oktoberfest east of Kitchener and West of Munich!”

The wiry and excitable 57-year-old adds that in the mid 1900s, affluent professionals from larger centres like Halifax, Truro and Amherst built cottages on the outskirts of the village. “Many came back to retire, like former Halifax area restaurateurs John O’Hearn (Your Father’s Moustache) and Tom Innes (The Chickenburger). They got involved in the North Colchester River Restoration Association and we now have a \$250,000 fish ladder at The Falls.”

John O’Hearn is quick to point out that although the pair serve on the committee, others deserve the credit. “The main driving force to have The Falls’ ladder installed was Allan Bonnyman, a past chairman of this committee and Charlie MacInnis from DFO.”

It all started 14 years ago when Maritimes and Northeast Pipelines needed to cross the French and the Waugh rivers. “Our focus then was to protect the river, now it is to improve the spawning habitat for returning salmon and sea run trout; installing the fish ladder opened 12 kilometres of the main

river [Waugh] and countless miles of feeder streams to ideal spawning habitat.”

John’s fondness and attachment to the area developed after his parents bought a farm on the outskirts of the village in the late 60s. John and his family frequently visited and eventually built cottages adjacent to the farm property. “Over the years we met and became friends with neighbours in the Brule Shore area and with people in the village of Tatamagouche.” Approaching retirement, he and his wife decided to leave city life behind to move to this region.

“I think that Tata’s location plays a role in its growth. It’s located within 30 kilometres of Truro, Pictou and New Glasgow, all with the same shopping and dining opportunities as you might find in Halifax or Moncton,” John adds. “And Tata is a happy town. People are friendly and eager to help.”

Hanna Hunziker (also known as Annette) can attest to this. She recalls receiving a letter from the Department of Citizenship and Immigration back in 2005. Slowly, almost reverentially, she opened the envelope. Two words leapt out of the mumbo jumbo: Not accepted. She and her husband, Chuck, would have to leave Canada. “I felt as if we were sucker-punched,” says Hanna.

The couple had immigrated to Tatamagouche from the US under the Community Identified stream of the Nova Scotia Nominee Program. They bought a small flower shop and added a bookstore to complement the flower business. The rejection of their application (there had been many) was final and devastating.

“At first, we kept quiet. Then we told some friends. They started a petition and it went viral,” Hanna says, shaking her head—still incredulous after all these years that 1,700 people in Tatamagouche and surrounding region cared enough to come to their rescue. Journalists picked up the story and it hit radio waves and newspapers. In February 2007, the Hunzikers finally got the green light to stay.

For the past five years they have operated Fables—a cross between a bar, small restaurant, literary club and lounge. Due to an unexpected health concern, Hanna and Chuck closed Fables effective June 1, but are hoping to sell their unique business. Community-driven, Fables has operated under the auspices of the Loquacious Compendium Society. A board of directors is elected from a membership upwards of 400 who pay an annual fee of \$50 (half price for seniors). Although Fables has been open to the public, members have always had first dibs and discounts on a variety of programs including film nights, literary events (lectures, book launches) along with music gigs ranging from classical concerts to fiddling, folk, jazz and blues. The Hunzikers never drew a salary, even though they put in mega hours every week.

“We did this as a not-for-profit for two reasons. To have something for the community that’s supported by the commu-

nity, and for Chuck and me to give back,” says the 59-year-old. “If it wasn’t for this village, we wouldn’t be here. We’d love to sell it to someone who can carry on the essence of Fables.”

One of the things they love about Tatamagouche is how eclectic it is. “People are so different, and this diversity is the fabric that holds the community together,” says Hanna. “It’s like a tapestry. Everything’s interwoven. Mind you we have our differences. After all, a good tapestry has contrasts. But one thread without the other—everything would unravel.”

Maggie Wilkinson agrees. She moved here from Halifax with her husband, Desmond Gore, about 13 years ago. “We were visiting friends here and just fell in love with Tata. So we quit our jobs and moved. Just like that. We didn’t even have a place to stay or jobs.” But with his skills as a carpenter and her experience in the hospitality industry, it didn’t take them long to find work in the region. Now, Maggie owns and operates Green Grass Running Water, a gallery and café named after Thomas King’s novel. Maggie is Mi’kmaq and features works of aboriginal artists in her gallery, including paintings by renowned Mi’kmaq artist, Alan Syliboy.

The main thing that strikes her about living in Tatamagouche is how welcoming people are. “I’ve never felt any racism. It’s an honour to be native in this community.”

Meanwhile, back at the Train Station Inn, Jimmie is juggling bookings, ordering supplies and hiring staff. He bought the train station in 1974, when he was 18, to save it from the wrecking ball and opened for business in 1989, while his wife, Shelley, continued to work at the Willow Home for Special Care. “She’s always been the stable one—and the one with the paycheque,” he says with a grin.

A few years ago, Jimmie was instrumental in getting *The Week the Women Went* TV series to be filmed in the village. “The wives really wanted to go to the Algonquin Resort,” he says, “so during the producer’s interview of the community at the school, some of the wives got their husbands tipping the bottle. The guys showed up in drag with suitcases. That sealed the deal.”

Tatamagouche received \$10,000. Wearing his village councilman’s hat, Jimmie got the county to pony up another 10 grand and the province kicked in 10 more. “Then men from this community went out and got another \$65,000 in donations,” he adds.

The men used the money to build what is now known as Patterson Wharf Park while the women were off being pampered at the Algonquin Resort in New Brunswick. Lawyers, high school kids, backhoe operators—people from all walks of life pitched in to build the park—a testimony to a mindset that crosses class distinctions.

Elizabeth Spence lives close by in the old Patterson house, built in 1858. A retired professor with two doctorate degrees (German literature and music), Elizabeth was horrified when a lovely stand of black ash was cut down to make way for the project. “When there’s a rock concert there on Friday nights I blast Beethoven out of the window,” she says.

Although Elizabeth knows she can be vociferous about some issues (she refers to herself as “the old cow that lives down by



From top: Richard Duggan, founder of the Summer Fear festival; Chuck and Hanna Hunziker, Fables club.



the wharf”), she loves Tata. Sure there are personality clashes and flare ups, but Elizabeth says that tolerance usually overrides. “Everyone hated the fact that we went way over budget on our million dollar green library, but everybody paid. We got it done and moved on.”

The sign at the entrance of the village says “Tatamagouche; a meeting of the waters.” Elizabeth was told by a native that the name means “the place where there is a sandbar across.” There’s also some folklore regarding the name. Story goes that two men shot the same bird while goose hunting; each piped up saying, “Tat’s my goose.”

Although the origin of the name cannot be verified, one thing is certain—per capita, there’s more culture in this village than any major town or city. A driving force in the 20th century was Betty Murray (Anne Murray’s aunt), who started choirs and directed plays, often lassoing citizens to sing and perform. She also brought many famous performers to Tatamagouche including soprano Teresa Stratas and impressionist Rich Little.

A cultural icon in her own right, Elizabeth started the Tatamagouche Chamber Ensemble 17 years ago. The group performs at weddings and community events. “We try to cater to what people know, but we also introduce some interesting stuff under the table,” says the feisty baroque aficionado. More recently, Elizabeth started Tata Talks—a monthly series at the library that explores the lives and interests of creative minds in the community. The programs are so popular that the search is on for a larger venue.

Pondering the question of why people choose to live in Tatamagouche, she says, “I suppose like-breeds-like. But there must be something more. I emigrated to Vancouver from Wales based on the *idea* of Canada. Perhaps it’s the *idea* of Nova Scotia as a place that is at work here, as well as the *idea* of a corporate-free existence here in Tata.” For certain, people dance to the tune of their own drum and not that of big corporations in pursuit of big bucks.

That point hit home during the 2012 Governor General’s Leadership Conference last June when some of Canada’s brightest young leaders from various sectors across Canada met at the Tatamagouche Centre. Questions like “Why do you live in Tatamagouche?” and “How do you manage to defy the odds of survival?” were bantered about.

Delegates discovered that people who moved to Tatamagouche based their choice, not on money or even career, but on lifestyle. People here are willing to take risks and to diversify. They also discovered that the real heart of the matter has to do with community—it is what draws active retirees here, brings people back who have moved away, and why some young people are choosing to call Tatamagouche home—like Cammie Harbottle.

Cammie grew up in British Columbia, completed an ecological gardening program, then worked on an organic farm

From top: Dr. Elizabeth Spence at her home; David Swan charging his electric car at the wind turbine site near town.



for five years. When she met her partner-to-be, Yuill Herbert, several years ago, he and some friends had already bought 100 acres of farmland on the outskirts of Tatamagouche. Eventually, this morphed into the Tatamagouche Community Land Co-operative (an agricultural land trust). Cammie joined Yuill in Tata in 2008.

“Once things got settled, we built a home and I set up my business here, called Waldegrave Farm. I grow about 40 kinds of vegetables on a nine-acre lease from the land trust.” She loves how the community is situated in a country setting, but is so progressive. “We have lots of events, art, and culture here, and Tata is an amazing place to raise children.”

The young mother also pitches in to help stage a four-day Tatamagouche Summer Free School that takes place on her farm. The event is touted as “a radical education space that offers people tools to create a more just, sustainable and joyful world.” The miracle is that this actually happens.

And it’s been happening in the broader community for many moons. For example, citizens in Tata now own a wind farm. “About 300 shareholders from all walks of life bought into the concept by buying shares. Even the debt financing was achieved locally,” says David Swan, who initiated the project.

Since it began, the community has erected a metrological tower, one 800 kW turbine and two smaller ones. This year, another 800 kW turbine will be installed, meaning much of Tatamagouche’s electricity comes from its own wind field.

Another one of David’s special interests is electric cars. Although he was born in Tatamagouche and completed high school there, he eventually studied, lived and worked in various parts of Canada and the US for several years. Returning home in 2003, he established his own engineering business, which includes being a consultant and design engineer to the automotive and battery/fuel cell companies. As he was driving an electric car, the logical next step was to introduce public plug-in charge locations in the village. So he set up and paid the installation for one at the new library, and shared the cost of installing another one at Fables. “People are catching on,” he says.

The fact that there’s an extraordinary number of volunteers in Tata hasn’t gone unnoticed. For example, the IOOF Liberty Lodge 120 in Tata just celebrated its 100th year and is growing with new members, while other lodges in NS are closing. “People volunteer because they feel their views, emotions, and ideas have value, and if shared by volunteering, will make the world a better place,” says David. This may explain why there are more than 65 volunteer groups in the region.

No wonder this community has a pulse. Folks in Tatamagouche exemplify an old proverb that says, “If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.” In today’s world, that is really going against the grain.

Perhaps it’s really that simple. 🐾

From top: Creamery Square; John O’Hearn and Tom Innes at the salmon fish ladder, installed on the Waugh River by volunteers.

