

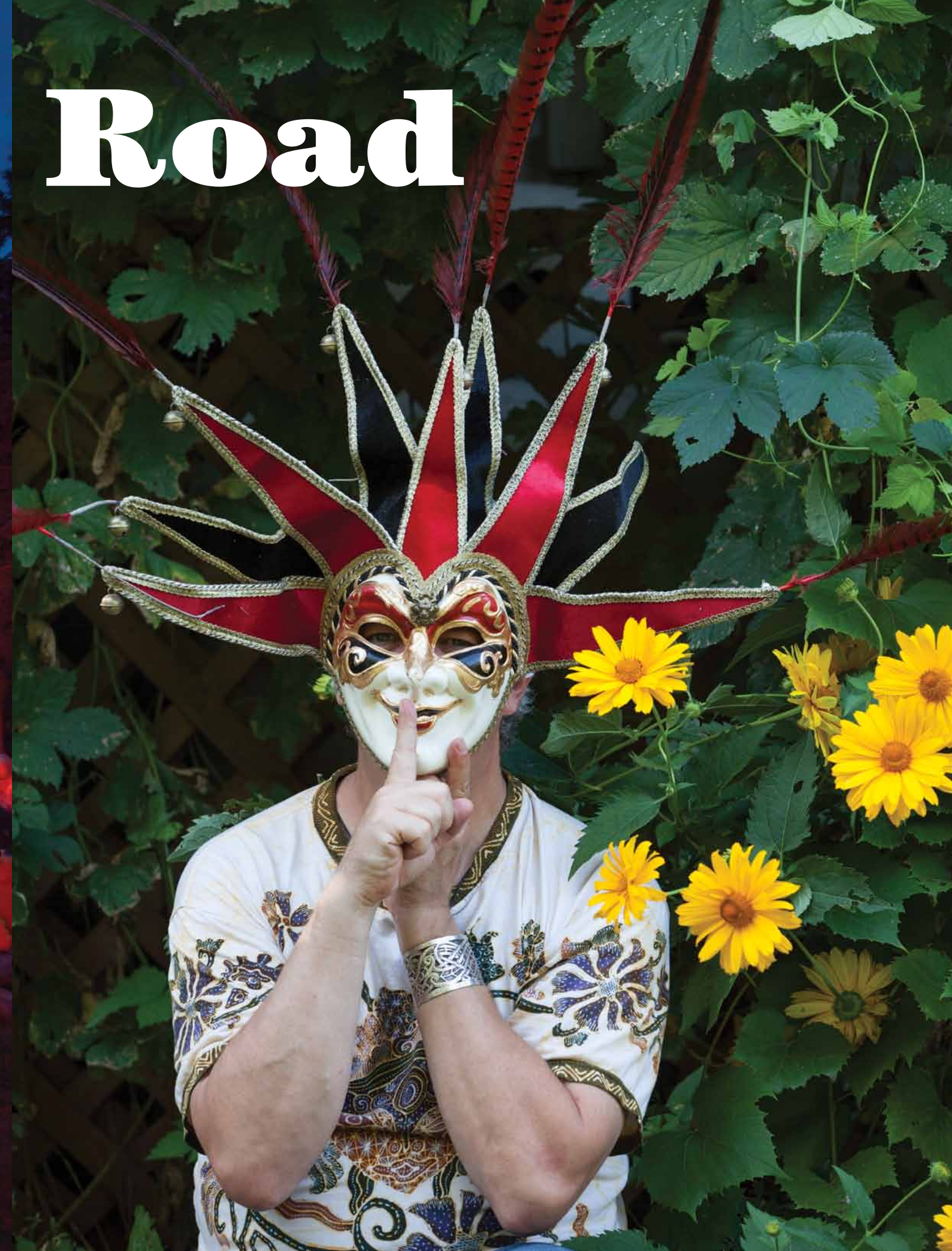
The Dixon Road

A peek inside PEI's legendary enclave of unconventional creative types, with community spirit to spare

by Sandra Phinney
photography: John Sylvester

There's an old saying in Prince Edward Island: "We're so far behind, we're ahead." Nowhere is this saying more apt than on the Dixon Road—and there's a certain pride in the statement.

Part of Breadalbane, and situated halfway between Charlottetown and Summerside, PEI's Dixon Road is an innocuous 5.5-kilometre country road that rolls by a couple of small fields, then weaves through a quiet nondescript forested area. Yet, it's home to a colourfully eclectic, grassroots community, including actors and artists, carpenters and clowns, foresters and filmmakers, weavers and writers, print makers and playwrights, singers and sheep producers—to name just a few. (The list is as long as the surrounding potato fields.) And the community is arguably now just as vibrant as it was during its heyday, in the early '70s.



Toronto singer-songwriter Holly McNarland performs on the outdoor stage at The Dunk, Hal Mills' property on Dixon Road. Opposite: filmmaker, bon vivant and Dixon Roader, John Hopkins. In winter, John hosts toboggan parties that are a cross between a masquerade and Mardi Gras.



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The road travelled

Back in the day, young adults from the US and other parts of Canada were drawn to the Maritimes. Motives varied from avoiding the energy crisis to escaping the Vietnam War. Some were lured by jobs, or inspired by well-known American back-to-the-landers Helen and Scott Nearing, who wrote about “the good life.” PEI, in particular, was a popular destination—small-scale farmers were packing it in, and this new breed of immigrant, eager to learn its traditional, rural ways, were able to buy land on the cheap.

Phil Corsi, who migrated to the Dixon Road in the late '60s, describes the attraction in the book *Memorable Musings, an Anecdotal History of Breadalbane*: “We wanted more control over our own livelihoods, to live more simply and sanely in an increasingly mad world ... with significant time left for vocational and avocational pursuits.”

And so they did—with passion and panache. Phil himself not only became an organic market gardener, he mentored scores of Dixon Roaders on how to grow their own vegetables. He also tapped maple trees and held sugaring-off parties, which are still popular today.

The road's inhabitants

Joanie Sutton and her husband, Jerry, moved to PEI from Illinois in 1970, after he landed a teaching job in Kensington. The young couple cut a few trees and built a home. They raised children, chickens, and their own food; Joanie got a job as a librarian in Breadalbane.

“The old library was so cold the books used to freeze on the bottom shelf in the winter,” says Joanie. Small wonder she felt like dancing a jig when the new Breadalbane Public Library opened at the top of the Dixon Road. It was built as an addition to the old school in 1994, which now doubles as a thriving community centre.

The author of three cookbooks, Joanie remembers swapping recipes with Laurel McLure, now 88, and a long-time Dixon Roader. Once, when she told Laurel about a trip to Costa Rica, her friend asked, “Why would you want to go to a place like that?” Joanie replied, “Well, there’s a lot to do; it’s an adventure.”

Laurel piped up, “Well, living on the Dixon Road was adventure enough for me!”

The road was originally settled by “Late Comers”—settlers

who arrived from the Isle of Skye in 1868, after all the shore-front land had been spoken for. They were given what was originally known as Lot 67, the only land-locked parcel of land on the island. Three years after they settled, the superintendent of the census returns wrote that in spite of not having access to the sea, Lot 67 was “... naturally productive, yielding all kinds of agricultural produce.”

Although Laurel says she didn’t work very hard, she was always feeding farm hands, family and visitors. She knit socks, mitts, and sweaters for more kids than she can count. She also knew a thing or two about raising sheep and was happy to share her knowledge.

Laurel loved the influx of new people during the 60s and 70s. She called them “the immigrants.” They loved her too, along with her fudge, cookies, and general know-how. Now, she looks forward to visits from her son, Doug, who works out west; he and a partner started the PEI Maple Syrup Company on the Dixon Road about 10 years ago, and he still helps run the business from away.

A visit from Doug is good news for Ron Wagner, a so-called immigrant from Toronto, who lives close to the sugar bush and works for Doug part time. In the early '70s, Ron was a young political science grad without a job; he headed to PEI to find his fortune.

“We were hopelessly naïve, but we were blessed,” he says, of himself and his then-wife, Cheryl Wagner. They got a grant and started a travelling puppet theatre. He and Cheryl eventually parted ways, but the PEI fixture has never lost his touch as a clown. Today, he and wife Wanda Naylor own and operate Merrytime Clown & Puppet Friends.

As Ron sews the finishing touches on a horse costume for his new act, Hal Mills is on the phone lining up musicians for his house concerts.

Hal lived in both PEI and the Northwest Territories off and on between 1970 and 2005. In the '90s, he bought some property on the Dixon Road, designed a home and had it built, knowing he’d eventually retire there. He rented his home to Jeff Stewart (a friend, chef and musician) who discovered that the large open kitchen and big walk-around loft had great acoustics. When Hal retired there in 2005, several musicians came over for a combined party: a homecoming for him, and a send-off for Jeff.



Pressed for a definition of a Dixon Roader, one resident says, “It’s a state of mind.” Clockwise, from left: Malcolm Stanley with dog Neville; puppeteers Ron Wagner and Wanda Naylor with a friend named MoMo; Joanie and Jerry Sutton, at home on their subsistence farm; a sign for the musical mecca.



Hal Mills and singer-songwriter Catherine MacLellan enjoy coffee and conversation on the foot bridge over the Dunk River behind Hal's house on the Dixon Road. Left: Weaver Christine Stanley with one of her animals.

Serendipity stepped in; they received an invitation to attend a party at Phil Corsi's and met lots of like-minded souls. Before long, they bought what Malcolm refers to as "a great big honkin' piece of land" on the Dixon Road.

Thirty-seven years later, they are going strong as ever, owning Stanley Pottery on the Dixon Road; Christine also recently opened Ewe and Dye Weaving, in Victoria by the Sea.

She recalls fond memories—like ringing in the New Year. "We trekked into the woods on skis and toboggans, built a big fire and cooked up a scoff. Even now, the tradition lives on; the Romboughs host the party at their place in the woods and we all bring our favourite foods."

One winter, Catherine MacLellan suggested a pie-off. "About 40 pies came through the door," says Hal Mills, "and now it's a regular event that takes place the first weekend after the New Year. Everyone gets on a pie high." All the pies are homemade; they are judged in categories such as best sweet pie and best savoury pie.

Food and family activities rate high on everyone's list. Skis and horseshoes are as common as potatoes. If you see someone on skis in the winter being pulled by an English Setter, it's Malcolm. He's skijoring, and trying not to get too beat up in the bushes.

"We also play bocce everywhere," says Christine. "At the beach, in our back yards—most of us have bocce balls in the trunks of our cars. I think all this stuff is normal but when I tell this to people and see their reaction—maybe it's not so normal."

Son Michael Stanley is also a potter, and is frequently found

at the wheel in his father's studio. Although he operates his own gallery in Charlottetown—Michael Stanley Pottery—he lives close by with his young family.

Michael says that the term "Dixon Roader" isn't about where you live. "Lots of people who don't actually live on the road proper identify themselves as Dixon Roaders. But they are part of this community. It's a way of identifying our lifestyle and lefty sensibilities."

Pressed for a definition of a Dixon Roader, Michael comes up with the word "tough." After a pause, he adds: "It's a state of mind. It's someone who isn't living a conventional life. But if you have an active community living the same lifestyle—even if it means going against the grain—it can be very rewarding."

Postscript: although the superintendent of the census back in 1871 noted that some residents in Lot 67 were unwilling to do the census, he concluded his report by saying that they were characterized by sobriety, perseverance and industry. Nonconformists to be sure, but none the worse for it.

"It's All Down Hilda From Here"

Pulling off an event like Funk The Dunk and the ongoing house concerts requires an army of volunteers. "We formed a formal group to help Hal," says singer-songwriter Catherine MacLellan. She heads up a society called Friends of The Dunk, which does everything from setting up fundraising events to renting sound systems.

Catherine loves living on the Dixon Road; fellow singer-songwriters Allan Rankin and Lennie Gallant have also lived there. Lennie's band Speed the Plow often rehearsed and hung out in an outbuilding fondly referred to as The Ritz. Catherine's father, Gene MacLellan (of "Snowbird" fame), had lived close by, being part of the music scene.

"There's this continuing story line in my life," Catherine says. "It's like one beautiful patchwork quilt and I'm so glad to be part of it."

Years back, when rumours started about paving the road, Malcolm Stanley wrote "Clay Country Roads." Although everyone complained about the dust, mud and holes, there was great resistance to upgrading it.

However the song that resonates most with the locals is Malcolm's composition, "Soul of the Dixon Road"—it's not uncommon for people to shout out this refrain between verses:

It's the heart of Hilda Woolnough
The soul of Speed the Plow
It's the hand of old Jake Gaudreau
Come on—sing with me now

Hilda Woolnough (1934-2007) had immigrated to Canada from England in 1957, moved to PEI in 1969, taught at the university, initiating a vibrant artistic community. One of the arts advocate's last projects, "Guantanamo," toured the world.

Her son, filmmaker John Hopkins, returned to PEI in 1995 to care for his mother who by this time had cancer. The following year, to beat the winter blues, he and his mother hosted a toboggan party called It's All Down Hilda From Here. The winter parties continued, morphing into an annual Jack



Filmmaker John Hopkins, who returned to PEI in 1995 to care for his mother, who had cancer. "Although Dixon Roaders have serious jobs and work hard, we've never lost our sense of play," he says.

Daniels Fool Moon Toboggan Party—a cross between a masquerade and Mardi Gras.

"We light up the whole hill with flaming torches, and have prizes for the funkiest custom sleds and costumes," John says.

A local band revs up around 8pm.

"The biggest challenge is to make it to the top of the hill with your toboggan... the reward is a hot shooter made of Phil Corsi's maple syrup, Italian espresso and a shot of Jack Daniels."

The second challenge is to slide back down the hill. Chances of seeing Vikings, fish and sombreros whizzing by are good; someone wiping out at the bottom is guaranteed. At 5am it's still tough to find enough room to dance.

"Mom loved to throw great parties. Although Dixon Roaders have serious jobs and work hard, we've never lost our sense of play." 🐼