

Dungannon Tea Room - Ononette 1927

Following World War 1, new opportunities opened up for women. The right to vote and work outside the home gave them a greater sense of independence. Two young women, best friends, restless to explore the world, dreamed of travelling to Europe in 1927. Margaret and Esther were coming of age, eager to test their strength and resolve. Money for travel had to be earned - but how?

With her parents' support, Margaret Gilmour made plans to open a summer tea room in their home at Ononette. Esther was a school teacher in Saint John, available during the summers to tackle this project. Margaret's parents had rebuilt the family summer home after the Westfield fire in 1921. It was situated on a beautiful sloping hillside overlooking the St John River with an extensive covered veranda and two kitchens. One kitchen was used for baking and preserving garden vegetables, fruit and berries that grew on the property. After they had selected reliable recipes, menus and suppliers, and created several large roadside signs, Margaret and Esther opened for business on June 27, 1927. The name Dungannon was chosen to reflect the town in Ireland where the Gilmours originated.

Their illustrated poem describes their quest:

"By the shining Saint John River, by the shining silver river. In that home of homes – Dungannon – toiled two maidens, fair and lovely, Margaret "Pearl" – Esther "Good Fortune". Through the long sweet days of summer, dewy morn' 'til scented evening, worked these maidens, nimbly fashioning rolls and salads, cakes and sherbets. Everything to please the palate, to delight and please the palate. Why thus toiled these lovely maidens, when they might have carefree wandered through the fields, along the roadways or upon the glistening river paddled their canoes of birch bark? T'was to consummate a vision of a voyage across the ocean, of a voyage full of pleasure, wanderings in foreign countries, visits to a land enchanted. But their purses needed filling, needed to be filled o'er flowing, 'ere upon this voyage 'barked they to the lands of their desire, to the lands of their forefathers".

Dungannon business cards advertised afternoon tea, salads, cold drinks and ices. Arrangements could be made for Friday and Saturday bean suppers and special orders for luncheons. Closed on Sundays - Phone number: Westfield 70. Fresh salads included chicken, lobster, fruit or vegetable for 40 cents each. Ham, tomato, cucumber, cheese, chicken and lobster sandwiches were offered for 15 and 25 cents. Chocolate cake, almond macarons, lemon crumbles and caramel squares cost 10 cents. Waffles with maple honey were more expensive at 35 cents.

The guest register has 28 pages of recorded names and dates of visitors, strong evidence of their success. From June 1927 to May 1930, many gathered to enjoy good food and gentle country breezes on the beautiful veranda. Local residents from Ononette, Pamdenec, Hillandale, Ingleside, Westfield and Woodmans Point signed the register, as did their guests from Saint John, St Stephen, Fredericton, Maine, Nova Scotia, Boston, New York, Montreal, Toronto, Minneapolis, Winnipeg, San Francisco, Florida, Cuba, Ireland, England and South Africa. By the third summer, small wedding, bridge and dinner parties were documented as well as larger gatherings of private parties including the "The Willing Workers of Germain St. Baptist Church". Some descendants of these tea room hosts and guests still live in the area and might be amused by this account of who invited whom for tea!

What about their dream to travel? Their hand illustrated poem documents their ambitious plans...

“Therefore toiled they through the summer, through the bright and cheerful summer, till at length they reached their object, reached the goal of their endeavours. Now the fruits of all their labours they expect soon to be tasting. For, when ends the month of roses, they will start upon their journey, on their long and pleasant journey. First a week with friends in England, then a tour through British Islands, ‘ere they cross the boisterous channel, boisterous and fickle channel. May no breeze upon its bosom, mar the day on which they cross it and no mal-de-mer claim homage from these fair and plucky travellers. After that the tour of Europe, Holland, France and Germany too. And the mountains of Switzerland to the land of romance, sunny Italy. But when they have seen its glories, seen the glories of the old world, those of Florence and of Naples, Rome, Madrid and Vienna too, may their thoughts and their desires turn to friends they’ve left behind them, turn to friends in old New Brunswick. Friends who now are in their honour here assembled, and who pray for their acceptance of this token, of this small but useful token. And some day perhaps in Paris or some city still more distant, some fair city far more distant, may it give you some small pleasure and remind you of the givers, Margaret “Pearl” – Esther “Good Fortune”.

Margaret and Esther fulfilled their dream in July and August 1929!

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Feb 2013