

THEY SENT TO ITALY

By EILEEN C. CUSHING

SAINTE John, N. B., is a city whose history falls very quickly into divisions which are easily recognized, and which are apt to come into any discussion that hinges upon the history of the place.

Yet, it is not the purpose of this article to name these divisions but to consider only the shipbuilding and milling era, which affected the prosperity of the whole community. These industries had their foundation in the forests of the province. For it required a great deal of timber both to build the ships and to load them with the lumber, the product of the mills.

The mills sprang into being, in increasing numbers, as new settlements were created. In the 1850's, some enterprising citizens of Maine came to Saint John and built mills. Their idea was to cut the timber at the head waters of the St. John River (in Maine), have it rafted down the river, saw it in Saint John and ship it to the United States, thus avoiding American duty. A great deal of money was made by these men and by the other mill-owners, descendants of families, which had previously come to Saint John.

Into the minds of many of these shipbuilders and mill-owners came a strong desire to build commodious homes for their families. They must be beautiful within and handsome without, and set in large grounds where shrubs, flowers and vegetables would grow in abundance. These houses were in a very special way, to express achievement and to typify the success of the owner.

It is not known today how the idea originated; but five of the mill-owners—Jewett, Barnhill, Clark, Sutton and Cushing—decided to band together and to send to Italy for painters to decorate the walls and ceilings of their homes. There is no record of how the idea was carried out. It is only known that the painters came, and what work they did. Perhaps Mr. Moran's method was followed.

For it was in 1860, that Mr. Moran, a wealthy shipbuilder of Saint John and St. Martin's brought out a painter from Italy on one of his own ships. His house on Chipman Hill is still standing, and the draw-room is untouched and perhaps the most unusual of any of the rooms done in the '60's and '70's by any of the Italians. On the cornices are cherubs of plaster. On the walls are painted fruits and vegetables that look so much like the eatable variety, that one is tempted to reach out and pick a grape or pluck an ear of corn. There is a wine glass that you

can look through. The centerpiece of this ceiling is a thing of rare beauty, composed as it is of fruits of various kinds. Mr. Moran was the only man in Saint John, who had both his city and country home decorated. The latter, at St. Martin's, where he built his ships. In it were plaster mouldings and illusionary mouldings, created by the painter. Soft greens, grey and gold-leaf were used in the rooms and throughout the halls.

But to return to the five-mill-owners. It was in 1872 that Alex Barnhill built a home for his son George, and the latter's bride, Ella Sutton. The lower floor, the halls, and the master-bedroom were all decorated by these painters. It took them three months and cost one thousand dollars, quite a sum in those days. The letter B in gold-leaf is still on the pillars in what must have been the drawing-room.

A few doors up the road, in what was then Fairville, still stands the Sutton house which was similarly decorated.

The Clark house stood on ground now occupied by the Ford Plant in Lancaster. The house was burned many, many years ago. A grand-daughter whose memory goes back nearly eighty years tells how the decorations of her grandfather's house fascinated her as a child.

The Andre Cushing house was also built on Lancaster Avenue and most of the stone wall which separated it from the road is still standing and gives a slight idea of the width of the lot; while from the back of the house the gardens sloped to the river below. It was decorated throughout and the paints of a certain green, blue, and deep maroon are the same shades that appeared on the English china of that day and we are told that they cannot be duplicated today. These rather unusual shades have a quality to them that has always had a strong appeal to me—so soul satisfying. Much of the decoration in the house is as it was in the early days. Though the Italians' work has been retouched over the years, it has not been marred.

The Jewett house which took five years to build, being built by day labour and not by contract, was the most extensively and elaborately decorated, as it was also the largest house. It stood in four acres of ground surrounded by flowers and with its own greenhouses. Across the road from it was a deer park of ten acres. At the time it was occupied by the owner, Edward Jewett, and his family, it was considered the most impressive residence in the community. The colours used in decorating were the usual soft pinks, greens, and blues, and a dull red, with a free use of gold-leaf to divide the panels and separate the colours. In one of the bedrooms a vine of ivy ran around the

walls near the ceiling. A cousin of the owner is known to have told her children and grandchildren, how that ivy bothered her, when as a child she slept in that room. Where was the earth from which it grew? Where was the pot or box in which the roots should have been planted? About sixty-five years ago this work was retouched by an Englishman and more recently by a local painter. This house has a history of public service—as a Baptist Seminary, as a Deaf and Dumb Institute, and as a unit of the Lancaster Hospital. Though internal structural changes were made, the paintings on walls and ceilings were still untouched, when it was demolished in 1952. A carved mahogany newel post and a marble mantelpiece are housed in the New Brunswick Museum.

In the house on Chipman Hill long owned by the King's Daughters, and now an apartment house, the living-room of the ground floor apartment is still in the original state. This room was of course the front drawing-room and no doubt the rest of the house shared in the work done by the Italians. The walls are divided into panels, just as they are in the other houses, and the same soft shades of the various colours were used. A small plaster cupid is poised above the arch that divided the front and back drawing-room. The pillars are fluted and gold-leaf is used with a lavish hand.

All the evidence points to the fact that all these houses were done by the same men, with the exception of the Moran house. But in that case the painter was also an Italian. The walls of the halls are divided by panels in the same way. Flowers, fruit and vegetables are utilized as motifs. Stars provide more specialized designs for some of the more important rooms in the different houses.

A story is handed down, that Senator Dever sent for the Italians and ordered them to decorate his house on Chipman Hill, telling them how he wished it done. The result did not please him. He liked the work already finished in the other homes, very much better. But tradition says that the original five, who brought out the Italians gave them *carte blanche* to do the work in their own way.

The houses were much admired, and perhaps the owners envied a bit. At any rate, for a while the wealthier citizens of Saint John scorned to paper the walls of the more important rooms in their homes. So other painters who came were given a warm welcome: a German, a Belgian, one of whom did Squire Tapley's house on Douglas Road, now Douglas Avenue. Then came an Englishman in the late 1870's, who decorated the

Girvan house on Coburg Street. He used the pinks—pale, and deep. An interesting feature of his work was the unique corners of the ceilings in the drawing-room. The rose, thistle, and shamrock were entwined as they are in the old familiar song.

It was not long before local painters were advertising that they could do fresco work, and many houses in Saint John still have their work in a well preserved state. They also did the plaster work—a lost art today, for no one can replace a missing leaf on a rose, or give a cherub a new finger. The J. K. Dunlop house on Coburg Street was decorated by a local painter in the late 1870's. The arch between the drawing-rooms was outlined in plaster roses, while the fluted pillars, mouldings and cornices had gold-leaf laid upon them.

It is amazing to find that a revival of this work took place as late as 1910. In that year an Englishman came to Saint John and the owner of the old Count de Bury house on Main Street, engaged him to decorate it. The front drawing-room ceiling is outlined by bands of colour, in between which, on the four sides of the room, are a few pale pink roses, much like moss roses, and on the ceiling of the bay window are cupids disporting themselves. In the corners of the room, near the arch into the back drawing-room, are pictures of Acadia University. In the back drawing-room, on the ceilings in the same position as the roses, are tiny paintings of the four seasons, and in the corners nearest the arch are paintings of the Suspension Bridge and Niagara Falls. It is work very different from that done in the '60's and '70's by the Italians. It lacks the uniqueness and beauty of their blending of colours. It lacks the life that they imparted. But it has a charm of its own, for it is a carry over from the Victorian period. It speaks of other days and ways, as truly as do the ornaments that collectors of antiques are seeking today. It breathe sa femininity that belongs to that age. The Seasons remain in one's memory—the daintiness of Spring, the quietness of Summer, the life in the Autumn scene, and the austerity of Winter with its cold sparkle.

Is it not interesting to know, that so much beauty exists in our city! True it is hidden behind wood, brick and stone; but nevertheless it is there, and is with us.