MEET MR. MAWSE

By MALCOLM FOSTER

MR. Berton Robinson's delightfful article in a recent issue of the *Dalhousie Review*,* in which he mourns the passing of the old-time loafing emporium, must have struck many a nostalgic chord. It did in me.

For I was reared in the Annapolis Valley—or, as some wag has dubbed it, the Cider Belt; and if we go back to the turn of the century, I doubt if any region in the Province offered a more varied or richer assortment of these great social institutions. There was the shoemaker's shop beside the road, the blacksmith's shop, the country store, the harnessmaker's shop, the grist and carding mills, the barbershop, the lumber camp with its "deacon seat"—which, if you have forgotten that bit of terminology, was a place of honor for which competition was keen; it was reserved for the biggest liar. We must not overlook the possibility that it was the "staffing" of these Valley hangouts that contributed as much to their greatness as any single factor. Their frequenters largely the descendants of the Planters and Loyalists, those two waves of Yankees that reached our shores in 1760 and 1783; and there were many appointments to the "faculty" from the back-country Lunenburgers who had "come through." Their picturesque speech and earthiness could not be ranked second to the Valleyites!

But these loafing centers are gone; and they won't be coming back. Only the barbershop can claim to be a survivor of that era; and what with its more modern "atmosphere," *its* claims are, to say the least, doubtful. They are casualities in the march of time. Take the country store which, I think we would all agree, was the most important of the whole group. It's gone! It has become too citified to function in its old-time capacity. We should shed a tear. Big gleaming slabs of plate glass have replaced the dingy little six-by-eight panes. Yes, even in "Hardscrabble." Jingling cash registers have taken over the chores of the wooden till. The horse collars are no longer in evidence, nor the ring of buggy whips. And the creamers and larrigans are missing from their accustomed points of suspension on the ceiling. Along the topmost shelf there's not a single "thundermug." Lo, these are evil days! Modern heating plants (and this is the saddest of all) have banished the potbellied stove; for its grate, you may recall,

* The Loafing Place, *Dalhousie Review*, Vol. 31, No. 1, Spring '51.

was the target of those sharpshooters whose favorite ammunition was "Napoleon." Gone too, is the box of sand with which the proprietor hoped to lure the patronage of less competent marksmen. What *is* there about this place which would tempt one to stay a while? Nothing. Nor would we be welcome. All is business, business. It's "Hello and good-bye." There isn't a stick of furniture in sight. The veranda is gone, and with it, of course, that rows of loafers' chairs that once adorned it. Remember those chairs. They were low-backed and broad of beam. They were commodious enough to accommodate Lord Plushbottom. They *had* to be.

Now these desecrations have only recently been made complete. One doesn't have to be middle-aged to remember the old-time country store. Of course, we knew it mainly as a forum—for men only. But older folk knew it also as the fount of a lot of local folklore, and regard the drying up of this source as a calamity as serious as the loss of the forum. They can recall generous portions of ballads and "strips of poetry" which represented the concerned efforts of the village bards on a Saturday night. It was doggerel, to be sure; the most of it was *awful*. It bore a striking resemblance to the bravest efforts of The Sweet Singer of Michigan.* And some of it "made" the hand-set Valley weeklies. But perhaps the local poets could not have been better occupied in those days of almost complete isolation.

I know of one country store at which a prayer (of all things) was evoloved; and, as we might expect, it was tailor-made for the private use of a local gentleman about whose piety there was some uncertainty. It should also be unnecessary to add that this project had been undertaken *voluntarily* —that the deacon was quite satisfied with his *own* well-ordered masterpiece. It was a bit coarse, and hardly fit for general circulation; but its imagery compensated in full measure for these obvious defects. The old boys who cooked up *that* one were not without their poetic talents. Had Bobby Burns known about it I'm sure he would have been tempted to rewrite the supplications of Holy Willie. It was genuine folklore, and for many years a favorite number with all the Valley wags and mimics of another day who staged their "shows" in the farm-house kitchens. And like all folklore, it was constantly in a state of flux. Too many cooks *didn't* spoil the broth.

* Mrs. Julia A. Moore. Her *Sentimental Song Book* appeared shortly after the American Civil War and is bad (good) enough to have merited several editions. Mark Twain and Bill Nye have quoted her extensively.

As a small boy I used to hear my father sing a stanza from the Irish ballad "Brennan on the Moor" which I have failed to find in any of the anthologies; and I suspect, though my search has not been exhaustive, it may have had its origin in some Valley country store or harnessmaker's shop. Some years ago I gave it to Burl Ives when he gave a recital at Wesleyan University. He liked it very much, and said he would be using it on his radio programs, but whether or not it has been on the air I am unable to say.

Those of us who are familiar with these old-time "strips of poetry" are aware that the rural bards had their favorite themes; and that their muses must have known approximately what was expected of them as soon as evoked. They were particularly partial to the stories of jilted suitors, and courtships and weddings that somehow misfired, to elections to be remembered, to disasters of all sorts, line-fence brawls, lawsuits and shotgun weddings. Quite naturally the inspiration for all of this was derived from the local scene.

Mr. Robinson's article has prompted me to recall the country store I knew as a boy. Located in a little village on the Nova Scotia Central which, by the way, is the original name of the branch of the C.N.R. which connects Middleton and Bridgewater, it was about two miles from my home. It was there that we did the greater part of our "trading," where I went afoot to exchange "aiggs" for copybooks and slate pencils and figs of "lickwish." And I should like to recall its most illustrious frequenter, Mr. Jonas "Mawse." I use the quotation marks because his name was Morse, and "Mawse" the favorite South Mountain pronounciation in that day.

The proprietor was one Elijah Stoddard. A jolly, even-tempered soul, with a poundage, by his own admission, "just a mite under three hundred," he made an ideal master of ceremonies. He also "kept" the post office. Why he wore spectacles I shall never know. The diminutive lenses were always parked either atop his forehead, or out of harm's way at the very end of a very long nose.

Now as to Mr. Mawse, it was unfortunate that he could spend only his mornings and evenings at the store. His daily itinerary demanded his presence at the blacksmith's shop in the afternoon. He had retired. But upon *what*, was a favorite matter for speculation by the local busybodies, for it seemed highly improbable he was fortified with extensive holdings of 'Tel. and Tel.' In fair weather Mr. Mawse was always ensconed

in one of the chairs on the veranda, his chin resting upon his hands which, in turn, were cupped over the head of his cane. Like Tam O'Shanter, he was "planted unco right."

Now the title may be unfamiliar to my readers, but I should like to nominate Mr. Mawse as the "world's champion wisher."

When The Nova Scotia Central first began to operate, everybody in the village was at the station to see the train come in. For months it was the sole topic of conversation in the neighborhood, and it was in the heat of this enthusiasm that Mr. Mawse made the wish which, in my judgment, justifies the nomination. He wished that the station agent at "the Falls," for that was the popular name for the village, would send him a postcard saying there was a trainload of *fourteen cars of gold* sitting on the siding for him; and would he *please* come and get it, as the Central was short of cars and needed them for other purposes. Furthermore, that when he went over to inspect this unexpected shipment he found the cars so overburdened with bullion that every last groaning axle let go "right before me eyes," and went "SMASH, CRASH, RIGHT DOWN TO THE RAILS."

For months this was a daily wish; and, of course, he always had an audience. And someone among his listeners could always be relied upon to ask Mr Mawse the question he *hoped* would be asked. It became a sort of ritual.

"Well now, Mr. Mawse, if you had all *that* money, don't you think you could spare me a few dollars?"

At this point daylight appeared between the seat of his pants and the chair beneath him. His eyes flashed lightning. He grabbed his cane from under his chin and flailed it furiously upon the floor of the veranda.

"NOT A ——,—— CENT."

I found Mr. Stoddard's store especially interesting on a sunny morning in the first weeks of July when the men from several communities had gathered for the selection of haying tools. He had a grand display. The veranda, saddle-backed, even when empty, sagged ominously. It fairly groaned under its deckload of pitchforks, boxes of scythes, grindstones, hand rakes, whetstones, snaths (or scythe-handles as the Lunenburgers called them), section guards, pitman rods, a telescoped pile of straw hats; and amid this litter, to further endanger its safety, sat Mr. Jonas Mawse with his usual aplomb. But he was no nuisance at this season of the year; far from it.

We were pleased to see him. For, happily for all concerned. Mr. Mawse was available for consulation on all haying prolems. Though I doubt he had been retained in this capacity by the management, his role was somewhat analogous to that of the Steinway blond who demonstrates the use of cosmetics at the five-and-dimes.

In those days of primitive haying weapons the choice of *any* tool was a serious matter, and a time-consuming job. We didn't just grab *anything* and hurry home. But the selection of a *scythe* took hours, and was not unaccompanied by a lot of hocus-pocus and superstition. The Lunenbugers, especially, had their favorite tests for a good blade. With the scythe held closely to one ear it was rapped sharply with a knuckle to determine its tone—or pitch, perhaps—I don't think I ever knew quite *what* they were looking for. I suppose it may have been the pitch, and that they hoped to find a scythe which was tuned to B flat. At any rate, when the matter had been narrowed to the choice of one of two blades, the final decision was entrusted to the oracle Mr. Mawse.

"Mr. Mawse, you've been a great handmower in your day —which of them there two scythes is the best?"

Whereupon the old boy puckered up his lips like the blow end of a Ben Davis and shot a snakey bolt of "Napoleon" to the opposite end of the road. Both for distance and accuracy, as the fly casters say, he held the local records.

Mr. Mawse had his *own* test. Along the entire edge of each scythe he sought to balance a five-cent piece—not the coin in use today, but one of the little "fish scales" of former years. And failing to accomplish this delicate feat, he returned to his chair without announcing his decision. Had he any *intention* of telling us? He had repropped his chin upon his trusty cane.

"Well, Mr. Mawse, whattayuh think?"

"Ain't either *one* of 'em worth a —— ——! I would'n' give 'em *hellroom!* Ain't fit to cut bullrushes!"

And that was that.

Now in addition to being a mentor of the hayfield, Mr. Mawse was also an accomplished liar, and locally, at least, was deserving of the blue ribbon. Indeed, one might have backed him for the honor with some confidence had the field of competition been extended well beyond the geographical limits of "the Falls."

I feel I should record his favorite and oft-repeated lie; for

it is a fair sample of the art of prevarication as practiced in the hey-day of the country store. He had told it so frequently that I think he had finally believed it himself. That *can* happen.

As a young man Mr. Mawse had "gone on," which, in the Valley vernacular of that day, meant he had gone to the United States. He had worked for several years as an iceman in East Boston; and once a day, as he was making his rounds, he used to drop in at a certain saloon to "splice the main brace"—to acquire a bit of the "oh-be-joyful." Now on one of these visits he had been greatly annoyed by the insults of a big Irish tough with a monstrous set of handlebar mustachios. But perhaps the reader would perfer to hear the rest of the story directly from Mr. Mawse.

I stood his guff fur a spell, bein' a kin' of a *peaceful* sort, but this fuller, he kep' givin' me more an' more lip, an' finally, thinks seys I, young fuller, if yuh gimme any more o' that stuff, I'll be takin' *down* a peg. Oh, this fuller, he was *really* big an' sassy. An', mind yuh, we used to see some *tough* ones up there 'roun' Boston.

Well now, yuh know, I'd taken a *few* lessons in boxin' up there, though, as the fuller said, I wuzn't exac'ly what yuh'd call a "*science man.*" Same time, I wuz *young* then, an' - guess I didn't *know* my stren'th, leastways, that's what they *tell* me.

Well sir, this fuller, he kep' up his sass fur a mite *too* long, an' when *that* happened, I up an' hauled off, an' let him have one *right between the eyes!*

Mister, see here, he went down like an ox! He wuz out cold, an' yuh could 'a' heard a pin drop in that there saloon. Everybody wuz shakin' like a leaf, an' the bartender, he looked plumb scared to death. But finally he comes over to me an' says, says he:

"Young fuller, *you* gut a hell of a lot o' nerve."

"Why?" says I.

"Well," says he, "there ain't *many* men 'roun' Boston that'd like to tackle *that* job "

"Whattayuh mean?" says I.

"What do I mean!" says he. "Humph! I spose yur tryin' to tell me yuh ain't ever *seen* that fuller before!"

"No," says I.

Says he, "Look here, young fuller, whatever yur name is, do you mean to *stan'* there an' *tell me* that yuh don' *know* who that fuller is that yuh jus' laid on the deck ?"

"No," says I, "I gut no idee *who* he is."

"Humph!"

Says I, "Whattareyuh humphin' about? All I know is that he gimme a trifle too much of his lip."

"Well, young man," says he, "fur *your* information that's JOHN L. SULLIVAN."

But before we accord Mr. Mawse the fistic honors which are undoubtedly *his*, a word of caution is in order; for I feel confident that further researches would reveal that Mr. Sullivan had been K.O.ed in many a country store.

With Mr. Robinson I mourn the passing of the old-time loafing emporium. The loss of *any* outlet for the imagination is a serious matter. Let us *all* shed a tear. It is a national calamity. Professor Stephen Leacock once said that if *he* were to found a brand-new college, the first thing he would establish on the campus would be a *smoking room.*