

Thomas Raddall 1954 letter to DL Fisher on
"several" Halifax references to hockey on
ice in 1700s and early 1800s.

Dalhousie Archives

January 25th, 1954

D.M. Fisher, Esq.,
Lakehead Technical Institute,
Port Arthur, Ontario.

Dear Mr. Fisher,

In my research for the Halifax book I came across several references to hockey played on the ice in the latter 18th and early 19th centuries. These references were in letters and newspapers, but I did not make exact note of the sources because the point did not seem of historical value, and I invariably came across them in looking for something else. However I can give you one accurate reference. Thomas Chandler Haliburton ("Sam Slick") in "The Attache: Second Series", published in London, New York, Philadelphia and Boston in 1844. In reminiscing about his youth in Nova Scotia, and the games of his school-days (i.e. about 1810 -- Haliburton was born in 1796) he writes of "the school room and the noisy, larkin' happy holidays, and you boys let out, racin', yelpin', hollerin' and whoopin' like mad with pleasure; and the playground and the game at base in the fields, or hurly on the long pond on the ice."

Tradition in Halifax is that the first white settlers found the Micmac Indians playing a form of hurley on the ice, and that officers of the British garrison later adopted it. Certainly the Micmacs had such a game. Silas T. Rand, in "Legends of the Micmacs" (Longmans, Green & Co., New York and London, 1894) records amongst other ancient Indian games, the ball game, "tooadijik". He goes on to say (page 181) "Another kind is called wolchamaadijik; this is played with hurleys, the ball being knocked along the ground." On page 200 he mentions it again, with an alternative spelling, -- "Another game was Alchamadijik (hurley)." Remember that here he is speaking of Indians in their aboriginal state, when there were few open spaces in the forest where the ground was hard enough for such a game. When winter froze the lakes and rivers the obvious place for it was on the ice.

In 1943 there was an interesting discussion of the origin of ice hockey in the sport columns of the Halifax Herald and Mail. (I'm sorry I can't give date and month, my only note is a pencilled 1943 on the clipping) Frank Power, of Halifax, whose father James W. Power long conducted a sports column in these papers, contributed a long article under the title "Halifax Prominent In Early Stage Of Game", quoting largely from his father's notes. (James W. Power wrote sports for the Herald and Mail from about 1880 to 1937.)

James Power had known personally Colonel B.A. Weston, and he noted, "Colonel Byron Arthur Weston tells me he played hockey in the Sixties, and that they had games with the Micmac Indians who resided near the lake. 'They played with a block of wood for a puck,' said Col. Weston, 'and stones marking the place to score goals.'" Colonel Weston believes the Indians played the game on the Dartmouth Lakes long before the Sixties. The hockey sticks, which differed slightly from those in use today, were made by the Indians; and it may not be generally known that for many years sticks manufactured by these Indians have been shipped from here to the Upper Provinces and the United States."

This drew a letter from Joe Cope, an intelligent old Indian of the Micmac reserve at Millbrook, near Truro, N.S. It ran as follows:-

"Re the somewhat lengthy Pow Wow over the origin of the Hockey Game in the Herald of the 26th and where it began, I believe the honor and credit belongs wholly to the Micmac Indians of this country, for long before the pale faces strayed to this country the Micmacs were playing two ball games, a field and ice game, which were identical in every way. Each had two goals which the Indians called forts and were defended by the owners. I do not believe any white man living today ever saw an Indian field game played because it was suppressed by the priests about 100 years ago on account of the somewhat cruel nature; a good second to a prize fight.

"My father, who died in 1913 at the age of 93, saw ...Indians of the old Ship Harbor Lake Reserve playing a skateless hockey game before the Reserve was abandoned about 100 years ago. When the Micmacs left the Ship Harbor Lake Reserve they came to Dartmouth, and camped on what was then known as Buxton's Hill. Father said they played their old games in Maynard and Oak Hill Lakes long before they moved up to the Dartmouth Lakes. I was born in a birchbark wigwam near the old Red Bridge on April 24th 1859, so I am no longer a papoose. The old Indian field game should be studied and revived by some sports enthusiasts for a change. It is a 20 man game -- 10 on each side. I well remember Col. B.A. Weston and other old players."

All this is sketchy, I know, but it throws some light on the descent of the game from Indians to whites in the region about Halifax. None of the earlier references I struck gave any description of the game. They merely mentioned games of hurley played on frozen lakes or streams. An objective research of early Halifax letters and newspapers might disclose more.

Sincerely,

I discovered this letter in 2023, which seems to have gone unnoticed in discussions of early Halifax ice hockey. This 1954 letter sheds more light on the two main sources we have - Raddall's, from 1948, and a 1965 essay by Dr. Bruce Fergusson. Raddall's mention of the "first" settlers being involved is new, and the "several" references he saw adds to Joe Cope's claim that the Mi'kmaw were playing pond hockey before the colonists arrival in 1749. - Mark Grant

Hockey Stars

Thomas Raddall - Halifax: Warden of the North 1948 *Nearby, at the Forum, he could indulge his sporting instincts in winter with ice hockey, a very old occupation in Halifax and Dartmouth. It is a fact little known in Canada, but a fact none the less, that ice hockey, Canada's national game, began on the Dartmouth Lakes in the eighteenth century. Here the garrison officers found the Indians playing a primitive form of hurley on the ice, adopted and adapted it, and later put the game on skates. When they were transferred to military posts along the St. Lawrence and the Great Lakes they took the game with them and for some time afterwards continued to send to the Dartmouth Indians for the necessary sticks.*

Dr. C. Bruce Fergusson Early Hockey at Halifax, 1965 *- Haligonians might just as well say that since troops were stationed at Halifax from 1749 it is quite possible that English troops played hockey in Nova Scotia as long ago as that year. There is also the likelihood that hockey was played on the Dartmouth Lakes in the eighteenth century. Perhaps the game was played by the Micmacs, as it has been stated, at Tufts Cove on Halifax Harbour, in the eighteenth century, and earlier also, with a rounded block of wood as a puck, and with eight men on each team.*