



*M.J. McIver Family  
(Courtesy of Sr. Winnifred McIver, C.S.M.)*

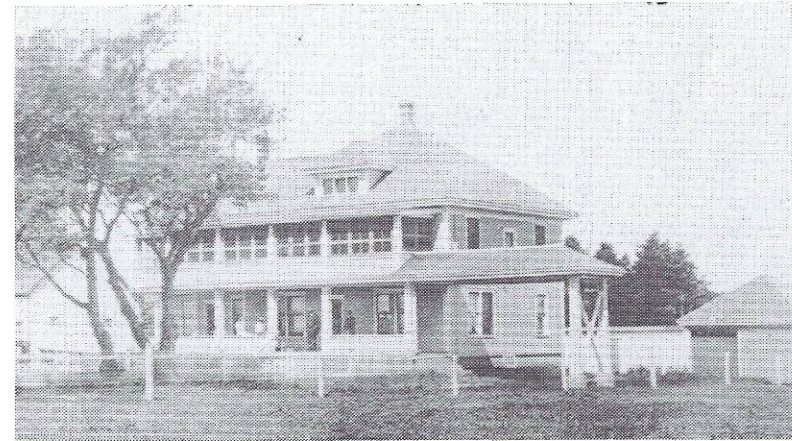
## The Potato King

It is widely known that Prince Edward Island is a major potato-producing province in Canada. It is less well known that the birthplace of the Island's most prized potato export, white seed potatoes, was the Kinkora area; and that the father of the P.E.I. seed potato industry was Michael J. McIver.

"M.J.", as he was usually known, was born at McIver's Point near Hampton in Township 29, P.E.I. in 1878; and after his marriage to Mrs. Catherine (Hughes) McGuigan in 1904 moved to Maine, U.S.A., eventually settling in Van Buren, Maine in 1908! There he gained experience in the production and marketing of potatoes. But he desired to return to his native province, and kept informed about efforts at the P.E.I. experimental farm, Charlottetown, to substitute white potatoes for the then popular blue variety.<sup>2</sup> In 1919 he returned to P.E.I. and test-grew twenty-five acres of white potatoes in Newton.<sup>3</sup> Satisfied with the results he purchased the eighty-acre farm of John Wall in Kinkora for \$8,000.00 in 1920.<sup>4</sup> The following year he moved his family to Kinkora, and had a large home built on this property. Within the next few years he purchased or leased several more farms within the area, on which he grew potatoes. His choice of area to begin a seed potato industry was ideal. P.E.I. was a preferred source for seed potatoes because its potatoes were not seriously affected by scab, as were potatoes in other parts of Canada.<sup>5</sup> The area around Kinkora lies within what is called "the agricultural heart

of the Island."<sup>6</sup> Moreover, Townships 26 and 27 were the only townships which recorded increases in potato production between 1890 and 1920.<sup>7</sup> Using his marketing skills and his personal contacts with American buyers, M.J. quickly became a success. By 1924 the newspapers were referring to him as the "Potato King."<sup>8</sup> The following excerpt from 1926 is a sample of the enthusiastic praise heaped upon him.

*Mr. M.J. McIvor, (sic) Kinkora, the pioneer of intensified potato culture on P.E.I. started an enterprise in Kinkora, P.E.I. several years ago which has nearly revolutionized old methods of growing potatoes, and has been a great source of revenue to a large number of our people — making of their farms a perennial gold mine — with a rich annual 'paystreak'. Mr. McIvor has grown this year 35,000 bushels of potatoes. He is also an extensive buyer and shipper of potatoes; he has shipped 50 carloads to New York city alone this fall. He bought and sold 125 carloads in all. P.E.I. wants more men like Mr. McIvor — men who will 'start' something.<sup>9</sup>*



*M.J. McIver Home, Kinkora  
(Courtesy of Sr. Winnifred McIver, C.S.M.)*

The changes he introduced to the growing of potatoes included the use of a horse-drawn potato seeder, which dropped the potato “sets” (cut portions of potatoes bearing the buds or seeds) into a drill, and covered them with soil; the use of chemical fertilizer; and single-crop farming. His use of many workers during the whole year to prepare the soil, plant, spray with insecticides, hill the rows of potato plants, harvest and grade the potatoes, was also a “revolution” in potato growing. Neighbours were surprised; some disapproved of such intensive activity in a single crop; and one even condemned the use of chemical fertilizer. But others remember he paid workers well; that more cars were purchased in the area after his arrival; and that he had many admirers. His example was copied by many Island farmers. In 1920 only about one-fifth of potatoes grown on P.E.I. were for seed (about 533 acres), by 1928



*Provincial Bank of Canada, Kinkora; Bernie Farmer in foreground  
(Author's Collection)*



*Foxes at Aden Mulligan's Fox Ranch  
(Courtesy of Gladys Mulligan)*

half of all potatoes grown were for seed (25,883 acres).<sup>10</sup>

The price paid to potato farmers fluctuated, averaging about 95 cents per hundred pounds.<sup>11</sup> The total farm value of P.E.I. potatoes averaged \$3,808,000.00 per year in the 1920s compared with an average of \$2,528,000.00 during the previous decade.<sup>12</sup> In 1928 Island farmers had their highest acreage of potatoes, 51,900 acres and produced almost as much as in the peak year of 1924, 5,708,000 cwt.<sup>13</sup> Fittingly the P.E.I. automobile license plates in 1928 carried the logo “Seed Potatoes [and] Foxes” — the Island’s two most important industries.

Fox farming had become a major source of revenue to Islanders in the previous decade. Only a few men from the five communities were involved in this industry: Wilbert McCarville and Ezekiel Roberts in Kinkora, and Aden Mulligan in Newton; however others bought shares at \$100.00 each in a company directed by the merchant, John P. Smith, who bought and sold foxes.<sup>14</sup> By the mid-1920s



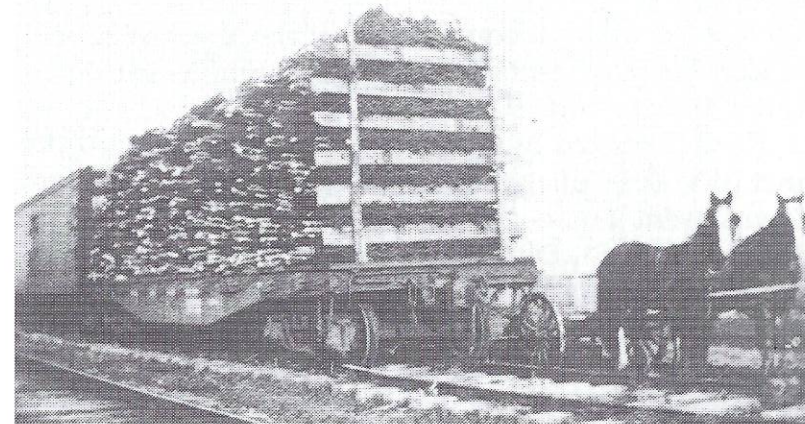
*John W. Farmer and wife; bank manager at Kinkora, 1926-50  
(Author's Collection)*

fox-farming was estimated to be worth \$3,000,000.00 annually, in P.E.I.<sup>15</sup>

The result of this economic boom is evident in the outburst of business starts, especially at Kinkora. In 1920 the Provincial Bank of Canada opened a branch in Kinkora, and a few years later a bank was built.<sup>16</sup> In 1924 the Canadian National Railroad appointed its first full-time agent at the Kinkora station.<sup>17</sup> Three potato storage houses were built by the three leading potato dealers: M.J. McIver, T.A. McIver and John P. Smith. Joseph Monaghan became the owner of the Kinkora Electric Company in Freetown;<sup>18</sup> and his brother Philip began a funeral service in Kinkora. In 1927 some unknown entrepreneur started the export of Christmas trees from the Kinkora area, the first such exports from P.E.I.<sup>9</sup> In 1929 the first telephone exchange office in the area was set up in the home of Mrs. Mary

Sullivan, Kinkora.<sup>20</sup> And several new homes were built during the decade. Feeling proud of these developments people began to announce in the social columns of the newspapers that they had “spent the weekend at Kinkora Korner.”<sup>21</sup>

During this decade there was also a major change in education at Kinkora. In 1921 the Sisters of St. Martha, a religious congregation founded in Charlottetown in 1916, was invited to supply the teachers in the Kinkora school.<sup>22</sup> That change is credited to the new pastor at St. Malachy's, Rev. Dr. Mathias J. Smith. He had been a public school teacher in P.E.I. before becoming a priest, and was strongly committed to education, especially to Catholic education. Having the Sisters as teachers was seen as solving several problems: they assured the school of having a reliable supply of trained and committed teachers; as members of a religious group professing a vow of poverty they could be counted upon to be less financially demanding, at a time when P.E.I. teachers were becoming unionized; and as



*Exporting Christmas Trees from Newton  
(Courtesy of Gladys Mulligan)*