

The North's forgotten schools on the rails

Andrew Clement was born in Dunbar, Ont., in 1905. In 1924, he graduated from Teachers' College in North Bay. Back then, they called it Normal School, whatever "normal" meant.

Clement had a fascinating career in education and wrote an astounding book about it. Either he had one hell of a memory or kept one hell of a diary.

The Bell and the Book was published by the Highway Bookshop in Cobalt and is still available there.

After a short stint teaching in southern Ontario, Clement accepted a position at the one-room school in Missanabie. Like many similar communities, Missanabie had difficulty attracting and keeping teachers. The local three-member school board was just as political as any, perhaps more so, primarily because of the tension between those families whose first language was French and those who spoke mostly English.

In the middle of his second year, Clement met and fell in love with a young Metis woman by the name of Mary Morrison. Unfortunately, Mary had apparently engaged in some indiscreet behaviour that involved alcohol. The indiscretions occurred in Chapeau.

In spite of this, Clement loved her and wanted to continue to date her. He heaped scorn on the local grapevine commenting that there was no gossip more malicious as that "forming from mind to mind of the louts hanging around the corners of main street in a small town like Chapeau."

Clement's relationship



WILLIAM E 'BILL' MCLEOD

The Chapeau Game Preserve

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What: Bell and the Book

Who: Andrew Clement

Where: Highway Book Shop
in Cobalt

with Morrison was doomed from the start.

The couple suffered the approbation of the whole town of Missanabie and Clement finally had to terminate the relationship. After two years in Missanabie, Clement had had enough and accepted a teaching job in Toronto.

In 1926, the Ontario Department of Education had established the school cars — classrooms on wheels to serve the children in isolated railway hamlets in Northern Ontario. They rapidly proved to be very successful and Clement obtained a position on School Car No. 3 that was scheduled to start running west out of Port Arthur in September 1930.

Clement wrote brilliant descriptive pieces about many of the people and places where his "school on wheels" stopped to teach children who had no access to a regular school.

In the spring of 1942, Clement was getting restless and when the teacher on the

run west of Sioux Lookout offered to trade routes his offer was accepted and approved by the Department of Education.

In 1946, Clement moved again, this time to the Ontario Northland Railway route between North Bay and Cobalt — where he stayed until 1958 when school car service was discontinued between those towns.

Clement's description of one challenging child from Tomiko on the Cobalt run seemed to stand out from all of his other stories.

A six-year-old boy was one of the pupils brought to the school car. Clement felt that although Joey's chronological age was six, he functioned at the level of a four-year-old. He couldn't sit still, couldn't concentrate and, not surprisingly, couldn't learn very easily. One of the funniest vignettes in the book was Clement's attempt to teach Joey the Lord's Prayer.

In spite of Clement's valiant efforts, Joey kept insisting that "My king didn't come."

After his last school car term, Clement moved to Sault Ste. Marie where he taught high school until his retirement.

This absolutely first-rate book is hard to categorize. It is part memoir, part autobiography, part social commentary, part history and, perhaps, part many other things. It is still available in hard cover from the Highway Book Shop in Cobalt.

► Bill McLeod is the author of the book *The Chapeau Game Preserve: History, Murder and Other Tales*. Contact the author at 522-3858 or visit www3.sympatico.ca/wemcleod.