John Andrew Mara, prominent Shuswap politician

A *Shuswap Passion* column for the Shuswap Market News

By Jim Cooperman

As the days get fewer before we head to the polls, it is interesting to reflect on our history to determine who could be deemed one of Shuswap's most prominent federal politicians. While the Shuswap has not produced any leaders and likely not even any cabinet ministers, there is one very early MP who rose to prominence for his part in the early settlement of the Shuswap. Although he lived in Kamloops, John Andrew Mara served this area in both Victoria and Ottawa from 1871 until 1896, and he was a business tycoon with many diverse enterprises.

Mara was one of the Overlanders who travelled across Canada during the gold rush. He arrived in Kamloops in 1862, at the age of 22, to begin his quest was for gold. He joined the rush to Seymour Arm and the Big Bend on the Columbia, where he quickly realized that the best way to make money was not in the diggings, but in selling goods. After establishing a store at French Creek, his business soon had the monopoly in the area. Mara was a strong believer in Confederation and when British Columbia became part of Canada in 1871, he ran for the first legislature and was elected in the Kootenay constituency.

Within the year he had moved to Kamloops and set up a store that provided substantial competition to the Hudson's Bay Company, whose chief factor, John Tait was alleged to have considered Mara to be ruthless in his business tactics. In 1874, Mara purchased the first Shuswap steamer, the Marten, which became the nucleus for his shipping business, the Kamloops Steam Navigation Company. When the Marten was wrecked on rocks three years later, the company went on to build more steamers, including the 255 ton Peerless, which was then the only way to transport freight and passengers between Savona and Fortune's Landing, now Enderby.

Politics and business were interconnected even more in the 1800s than now, and as Mara continued to expand his business empire, he was also elected again to the provincial legislature as the representative for the Yale Riding, and from 1883 to 1886 he was the Speaker of the House. When his Shuswap steamship company became somewhat irrelevant after the CPR was completed in 1884, he along with partners expanded into the Kootenays to service the growing mining industry.

In 1882, John Mara married Alice Barnard, the daughter of one of B.C.'s most prominent pioneer business tycoons and politicians, Frank Barnard, who held the Canadian monopoly on the essential carriage of mail, freight and gold. The Mara home in Kamloops was considered one of the finest in the burgeoning community. But like some politicians today, Mara was not free of scandals. It was alleged that he seduced and impregnated the sister of the infamous McLean brothers, who became outraged and went on a killing rampage across the Nicola country.

From provincial politics, Mara moved into federal politics when he was acclaimed the Conservative MP for the vast Yale-Cariboo riding in 1887and again in 1891. There is no doubt his political influence and connections helped with the expansion of his business empire that included part ownership of the Shuswap Sawmill and various other land developments in Kamloops. In 1890, Mara became a chief shareholder in the Shuswap and Okanagan Railway Company that built the line from Sicamous to the Okanagan. When the first station was built, the community there was named Mara.

After his 1896 federal election defeat to Liberal Hewitt Bostock, who founded the Kamloops Sentinel newspaper, the ever-energetic Mara built a river sternwheeler to supply the Klondike gold fields. But his hopes for another successful gold rush enterprise were dashed when his ship sunk in a storm at sea. After Mara moved to Victoria in 1900, he continued to be very active with the Board of Trade, the hospital and other pursuits until his death in 1920.

While he did not reside in the Shuswap, Mara played a huge role in the development of this region as both an entrepreneur and politician. In his day, he was recognized as one who fought hard to help British Columbia join Canada and his contributions are duly recognized here with Mara Lake, Mara Mountain and the cozy community of Mara. In July, the community will be celebrating the launch of its new Mara history book.