



Belle Isle

A People of Spirit, Courage and Resourcefulness

PREFACE

With them the seed of wisdom did I sow
And with mine own hand laboured it to grow
And this was all the harvest that I reaped
“I came like Water, and like Wind I go.”

- *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*

What do the people of northern Newfoundland have in common with a poet by the name of Omar Khayyam? At first glance, nothing, except that this obscure piece of Persian poetry captures the essence of what this year-long Community History Project has taught me.

In the past year I ventured into sixteen communities: telephoning, knocking on doors, and sitting at kitchen tables drinking endless cups of tea, trying to learn customs, traditions, and wisdom from the older people in northern Newfoundland so that the stories could be set down in writing and preserved for future generations. *With them the seed of wisdom did I sow...*

Back at the office, after each interview, I would review the outcome of each story and try to write in a format that would satisfy not only the person interviewed, but the people who would read the stories at some future date. *And with my own hand laboured it to grow...*

By year's end there were stacks of photographs, pages of typewritten interviews, maps criss-crossed with names and dates, and hand-drawn pictures submitted by enthusiastic contributors. In people's homes there were interviews where we laughed, cried, walked over hills to the back of land, walked along winding pathways to graveyards, ventured out on the high seas in boats enjoying boil-ups with scalding tea, fisherman's brewis, beans and bread, and still more stories.

In these interviews, I was often perplexed by words and expressions totally unfamiliar to me and, without

the assistance of my husband, Len Tucker, I suspect the dialect would have defeated me utterly. Yet it is the words and expressions of northern Newfoundland that are, and were, the lifeblood of communication in a time when modern technology was unheard of. I learned that, while there are official names on Newfoundland maps, local fishermen have their own names for islands, bays and coves. I learned that the people who settled this wonderful, terrible place have an intimate relationship with the sea and the land that no tourist or outsider can truly fathom or appreciate. And at the end of the year, I knew that I had only managed to collect a few small pieces of the puzzle that make up a larger picture of hardships endured, joys celebrated, and lives lived to the fullest. *And this was all the harvest that I reaped...*

I came like water and like wind I go...

This precious generation of people you will read about in these pages were born, lived, and will, one day, pass on. In writing their stories I have attempted to grasp the 'wind and water' of their lives – as well as their customs and traditions – which are fast slipping away into obscurity.

This is not so much a historical document as it is an opportunity for these people – in their own time and in their own way – to tell the stories that were nearest and dearest to their hearts. Whether you are a student, a come from away, or a Newfoundlander, you may find in these pages the heart and soul of the people of Newfoundland.

Shipping Lanes in the Strait of Belle Isle

BILL CARPENTER

Belle Isle and Black Joke Cove



Bill Carpenter's much-used chart of the tip of the Northern Peninsula, Labrador and Belle Isle

Bill Carpenter says he has walked over most of Belle Isle, and points out places on the map that he is familiar with.

On the northeast end of Belle Isle there is only one harbour. On the chart it says Black Joke Cove, but it is known locally to the fishermen as Black Joe. This is where they moored up the fishing boats; they had holes bored in the rocks, with ringbolts. Now, that's not Ringbolt Cove, which is up by Lark Tickle (on the northwest side of the island), this is right down on the northeast end of Black Joe. There is a winding trail from the light-house along a concrete ramp, and

the sea comes right on through in the back, so it's a dangerous place. At Black Joe there is a cove where Paddy Miller and the Millers of Fogo Island had a mess hall and a bunkhouse; they used to have two or three crews of men. His stage was built up on the cliff; built high off the water about thirty feet to forty feet. Black Joke Cove was a place you had to be prepared to leave at a moment's notice.

Black Joke Cove

Black Joke (known locally as Black Joe) was our home port and the boys had their cod trap in a

place called Wreck Cove. Inside of Lark Isle is Ringbolt Cove; that's what we call The Purse. They used to moor the boats right under the cliff; the schooners and long-liners. I think the name Purse comes from the type of fishing nets they used, called purse seines.

Today, people might call The Purse a cul-de-sac; a neat little spot for the boats to moor. There were ring bolts in the cliff, and they'd anchor outside to keep the boat off the rocks.

The irony of Greenpeace

We were out fishing on the northeast end of Belle Isle, staying in Paddy Miller's old bunkhouse there, which was really dilapidated at the time; it was hardly fit to stay in. If it rained, you had to move your bed around to find a dry spot. It was usually blowing hard at Belle Isle. That was in the early 1970s when the seal protesters used to be on the go; Greenpeace. And they used to come to St. Anthony and bring out the caches of fuel, and drop them off on Belle Isle so they could fuel the helicopters and go back out to the front where the ships were.

They went away and left all the fuel on Belle Isle in drums; usually on the highest knob or knoll. Helicopter fuel is like refined kerosene; it's very high-grade oil. We went up on the island and the wind was westward; and as we were walking across the island I said, "Geez,



Figure 1. Photo courtesy of Dave & Phyllis Taylor. Paddy Miller's stages bottom right

boys, I can smell oil.” So we went over an embankment and looked across a marsh, and saw six or eight drums of fuel, and the vegetation was all turned yellow. And this is where a drum was on its side and it leaked and the oil was all over. And I said, “How ironic! These are the people who are supposed to be saving the environment.” The oil was spilled throughout all the vegetation in the marsh; but it had evaporated by the time we got there. The drums were rusted out; and were probably never recovered. I’d say the oil is still out there on Belle Isle; two or three miles in on the northeast end.

Features of Belle Isle

From one of the highest points on Belle Isle we could see Cape de Grat, Noddy Bay Head, Round Head, Western Head at Cape Onion, and the White Hills. And on a really, really clear day you could see the Cloud Hills at the back of Roddickton. On the west end of Belle Isle it’s about seven hundred and sixty-five feet high. They say there are three hundred and sixty-five ponds on Belle Isle and three

hundred and sixty-five trap berths. You can jig all around the island, even close to the shoreline.

Fishermen named the Coves and Inlets

Just off Green Cove there’s a place called White Point Shoal and you can see the bottom; that’s a good place for jigging fish. But usually anywhere around the island is good for jigging.

On the east side of the island, there’s a place called Three Brooks. The water comes out from a pond and comes down over the face of the cliff in three different places.

There’s another place farther south on the same side of the island where the water comes right out off the cliffs, and they call that Shower Bath. And it looks like a shower. And when its blowing hard, that water comes out and curls around and goes back; almost like a whirlpool.

On the southwest side of the island, there are the tar cliffs, named because it looks like big blobs of tar, called pitch, coming out of the rock. It’s a kind of a volcanic formation.

On the northeast tip of Belle Isle there are two little islands sticking up out of the water called Northeast Ledge; locally they are called the Mad Rocks, because when the sea gets churning you don’t want to be there; it’s an angry sea.

Lighthouses and temperature inversions on Belle Isle

The coastal boat used to go to Belle Isle sometimes. The boat would stop off there to drop off fishermen or to pick them up. On the west end they had a principal light keeper and two assistants, plus the wireless operators. On the northeast end I think they had a principal and an assistant. On the west end they had two lights, one down by the water, and one higher up. When they put the first light there, it was so high it was often in the clouds.

Out there in the Straits sometimes, you’d get these temperature inversions (layer of air on the surface of the water) with a very, very low ceiling. I came across an inversion one time in June, when the Strait was riddled with icebergs, and the only way to describe it would be to say it was like being in the biggest warehouse I ever saw in my life – with a ceiling – and it looked like the icebergs were keeping up the ceiling-great big pillars of ice. If you looked through them you could see for miles; I could look right across the Straits and see Cape Norman; and the ceiling was no more than a hundred feet high.

Keepers of the Light at Belle Isle N.E.

In the beginning

Dave:

I started working as a lightkeeper in 1976. I was filling in as an assistant lightkeeper at Cape Bauld before I started working at Belle Isle, and before that I worked for the federal fisheries as a guardian of the



Figure 1 Belle Isle NE



Figure 2 Dave Taylor (bottom right of photo) was a light keeper for 32 years

fresh-water brooks, which was seasonal work. I saw an ad posted at the Post Office for lightkeeper at Belle Isle, N.E., and applied.

I didn't have to take any courses; I was already qualified as a gas and diesel mechanic. I was also qualified in refrigeration. I had worked as a mechanic with Northern Equipment in St. Anthony, so I was experienced with machines.

At Belle Isle, there were three residences, because at one time there were three lightkeepers. There was a principal residence for the principal (or head) lightkeeper, and there was a duplex for the two assistants. Phyllis and I moved into a duplex, but it wasn't furnished; not a thing provided except a stove, a fridge and a furnace. Furniture was brought over by helicopter. We had a TV with an antenna, and one channel, —CBC. Reception wasn't very good...the signal came from Fox Harbour. The coast guard got television the year before we went out to Belle Isle, and a few years before we retired they came out with satellite dishes.

Supplying the lighthouse

When we first went there, we had an oil stove. They used to bring the oil drums on a coast guard boat; they'd bring it in on barges. There was a tractor on the island and they used to bring the oil to the landing and haul it by tractor – 250 drums of fuel a year. Off-loading the fuel was only one of the many duties I had to deal with. Whether I liked it or not, it was in my best interests to help.

I'd go over to Belle Isle in April or May. The coast guard boat would show up with supplies in



Family at Work
(Duplex in Background)

June or July. During the winter everything was shut down, but what time of year the lighthouse opened depended on the weather and ice conditions.

Phyllis:

There was one time we went over Good Friday. I remember that because it was Friday the the thirteenth. When I first knew I was going over to Belle Isle with Dave, it didn't really matter that I was going to an isolated place because I didn't need to be around people; I still don't need to. I was working at the fish plant before Dave took the posting to Belle Isle.

How many years was I out there without another woman to look at. Dave wasn't in the house much, either, but I never, ever felt lonely. There were fishermen there; I never noticed

I was lonely until they left; then it got quieter. I did normal, everyday things while he was out and about. Crocheting, knitting, sewing, playing the keyboard, working at plastic canvas, writing letters, writing poetry, painting. I did anything and everything.

Dave:

The barge brought all the supplies for the station. They brought paint and brushes. And paint! All I did was paint. Paint, paint, paint, paint, paint!

Phyllis:

When we left Raleigh, we took enough food to keep us for the whole season: flour, sugar. There was a storeroom in the basement, and going down there to get food was like going to a store. We took everything we needed for the whole summer – except fruit – we didn't have much fruit.

Sometimes when the helicopter would come down they might have something like fruit to drop off. Partridgeberries, blackberries and



Coast Guard Helicopter Delivering Supplies



The Old Foghorn

bake apples grew wild on Belle Isle.

Dave:

I caught fresh cod and salmon; I'd go out in boat jigging.

Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week

Dave:

I worked shift work. There was another family there. First when we went out, there was George Thomas. When I went there in 1976, I replaced Fred Osborn. He was transferred to Port aux Basques. Then Glen Taylor came in 1985.

Phyllis:

As for shift work, he'd work an eight-hour shift and the other fellow would work an eight-hour shift – that makes 16 hours – there were 24 hours in a day, and they

still worked. It was a twenty-four hour job. As far as the government was concerned, they were working eight hours a day; that's what they paid him for, but what do you think was going to happen in the other eight hours if something broke down, or if someone was out in the water? He worked twenty-four hours a day. If something happened, he'd be up all night looking to see if the light was still revolving. It was 24/7 as far as I was concerned.

Dave:

There was painting, too, eh? We worked all day together, and if something happened in the night we got up.

Phyllis:

During the night, whoever saw trouble first, called the other.

Dave:

There were two positions at the Lighthouse: Principal and Assistant. The Principal meant there was one fellow higher than the other.

Phyllis:

It didn't mean one was better than the other. In one sense, being principal didn't mean a thing, because they were two men and they were working together, but if anything went wrong, the principal took the blame. That was the only difference. When Jake, who was the principal, died, he had only one year left till retirement. Dave became the principal lightkeeper, but nobody told him.

Dave:

They only had telegrams or the RT set. There were no phones or nothing.

Phyllis:

I was at home in Raleigh at the time, and I got something in the mail, and it said that Dave was principal lightkeeper, so I phoned Randy Dawe, Dave's boss in St. John's, and asked about it. He said, "Yes, Dave's been principal since Jake died, and you're supposed to be over in the other house." So I

said, "Very good!" The coast guard had made Dave principal lightkeeper when Jake died – they did that in St. John's, but nobody told Dave!

(When a man became principal, he was supposed to move over into the main house). Glen Taylor came out at that time, as assistant. We had no word to move, and Glen was coming out and getting ready to move into the principal residence.

Dave:

There was no moving van to move our furniture and belongings over to the other house. We had to



A Crank phone was used by lightkeepers at the light station

hand-carry it. All Federal employees get isolation pay; we was out there on that island; no contact with the world, and we couldn't get isolation pay.

Maintaining contact with civilization

Dave:

I used my RT (radio transmitter) set to establish contact. We had one channel, and the only one we could talk to was the coast guard. If you



Principal Light keeper's House



Phyllis and Children



The Taylor Family at the Lighthouse

wanted to make a phone call, you had to contact the coast guard and get them to patch you through to a land line. But you couldn't just call anybody, unless there was an emergency. The coast guard wasn't too fussy about putting you through for personal calls.

There were three 'skids' a day: At 7:30 in the morning they would call you with the weather reports.

And there would be one 12:00 and again at 7:30 at night.

Phyllis:

And good luck to you if you were able to get through between those times. I don't know if they turned it off, but it was hard to get through. There were several times Dave would be over there calling and calling.

Dave:

We got CBs (CB radios) afterwards, and one of the girls got sick.

We had to put in a call to Mary's Harbour, and they called the hospital in St. Anthony, they called the coast guard and the coast guard called us.

Phyllis:

Melanie got an infection in her ears, and by the time they got a boat out to take her off (we had to throw her on board) the infection was oozing out of her ears. In later years, they used to get a helicopter to come out.

I fell downstairs once, but it never occurred to us to call a hospi-

tal. I was flat on my back for more than a month, I suppose.

Raising a family

Phyllis:

We had three daughters in those years we were working at the light. Melanie was born June 18, 1980, Jeanette October 7, 1982, and Sue Anne October 7, 1985. See, Jeanette wanted a baby for her birthday, so I gave her a baby sister!

When Melanie, the oldest, was born in June, I had the baby blues; I wanted to give her away. Back then, nobody understood the baby blues. August 1st, I had Pat take me to Belle Isle; he got fog-bound over in Labrador for a week, and when he got back I had him come and take me back to Raleigh. I couldn't take it; I was in some state. It lasted a nice spell, but I got through it. I'd say I didn't recover until Dave



This Barometer is similar to one at the Belle Isle Lighthouse

came out at Christmas. But nobody realized how bad it was.

Once the girls were in school, we would stay in Raleigh for the school year, from September to June. Dave used to come home anyway around Christmas...they used to bring the men ashore anywhere from the 18th to the 20th. They



Community Picnic

would bring them in from the island and close it down for the winter. Sometimes I'd be scared he wouldn't make it home because of the weather. Traveling back and forth was unpredictable; sometimes

you'd get a beautiful day and suddenly the weather would turn and you couldn't see a thing.

Summer retreat

Phyllis:

When I'd leave Raleigh and take the girls over to Belle Isle for the summer I felt like I was leaving everything behind. There was not a worry...we'd go out there and there was no pressure; not a worry or a care.

We lived only a road-width distance from the edge of the cliff and the bank went straight down, but I never worried. The kids never went that way. They'd be outdoors during the day, going back and forth, or down in the engine room with their father, or Dave had a

camp made for them, and sometimes we'd go for walks over the hills, or they played in an old boat we brought up, or there was a slide to play on. But I never, ever worried!

Duties

Dave:

I had to make sure the generators were all working; that the tanks were filled up with fuel; there was painting and cleaning. I had to clean the lights...they were covered in saltwater. We wore rubber clothes most of the time. We had a radio beacon and we had to keep that clean, too.

To get drinking water...there was a hose running from the pond up on the hill; the Drinking Pond, we called it; and it ran into a cistern in the basement; we used to have to



A Small Fishing Community in Black Joke Cove

fill it up and once it was full it was good for three months, but we used to top it up once a month.

All the amenities

Phyllis:

We had taps and running water and a bathroom. When I first went to Belle Isle, we didn't have a bathroom in Raleigh, but we had one at Belle Isle. We had hot water, too. And food was a lot better on an oil stove than on an electric stove, I got to tell you. I baked bread; I did everything, same as I do now.

Dave:

We burned our garbage in a 45-gallon drum and, later we had a 2000-gallon air tank out there, so they cut it in half and we used to burn garbage in that.

Phyllis:

I had three cats when I went out there. When we went for a walk over the hills, all the kids and cats were in a string behind us.

Dave:

We explored that island from one end to the other; its nine miles long. There were two lightkeepers stationed at each end of the island. We had paths and trails made all across the island; we had a John Deere tractor first, and then an ATV. We even had horses at one time.

Phyllis:

It's three miles wide at its widest point and one mile wide at its narrowest. The west end is always foggy; it can be beautiful everywhere else on the island, but the west end is almost always covered

in fog. A helicopter can land anywhere else on the coast, but it can't land on the west end.

Bringing in supplies

Dave:

Supplies were brought in by barge at Black Joke (called Black Joe) Cove. We had a landing there; a dock. A boat could come in, and there was a crane, and we could hoist the supplies up to the lighthouse. The beach was inside the landing. The landing separated the beach from the water. The boat I used for fishing was kept on the landing or on the beach. I couldn't moor the boat out on the water; the seas would have destroyed it.

Phyllis:

Dave would pull the boat up onto the landing with the tractor and keep her on the beach.

If you refer to the picture (page 8 bottom) you will note the landing (made of concrete) on the lower right of the picture and the fisher-

men's shacks nestled in the hollow between the lighthouse and the landing.

The fishermen

Phyllis:

Melanie was born in 1980. That's the year the fishermen came. They came from the Triton area. Sometimes they'd come up to the house and watch TV. They kept their freezers down in our basement; Saturday night you'd see them all coming; they'd go to the basement – it was like a store – and pick something from the freezers. And by the time they went home, it'd be one or two o'clock before we'd get to bed. They'd just sit around and talk.

Phyllis:

Have you heard about Paddy Miller? Years ago, he had a schooner. That was before we went out there. He built the bunkhouses that you see in the picture (above). The fishermen came and took them



Figure 3 Dave & Phyllis Taylor are retired and are currently living in Nova Scotia.

over while we were there, and they added buildings. The fishermen used 23'-25' speedboats, and any storm come; they'd take the winch and pull all their boats up out of the water. Their stages were perched right on the edge of the cliffs, and the fish were salted.

Dave:

Glen Penney, he used to come here in the fall. He had a chute made to go right from the stages into the boat. And that's what they'd do with the fish. He'd take his fish to Burden's at St. Lunaire, and sell the salt fish to them.

Phyllis:

The fishermen had stages, and in the summer they would have them down by the beach, and take them up in the fall. They built the wharves or stages right below the ones that are up on the cliff (bottom right of photo); that's where they off-loaded their catch, split their fish, and salted it; down closer to the water. And in the fall they'd take them up because the sea would take them otherwise. The only thing that would be left in the winter was the salting sheds. It would have been a perfect harbour if the government had only put up a breakwater because the sea used to come in and rush right on through and ruin everything.

Church

Phyllis:

There was no church building as such, but Sunday we'd get together for church. The Pentecostals would have a sing-along and there was

Sunday school for kids; at one time there was twelve to fourteen kids. It was better even than Raleigh because there was no Sunday school there! We had Anglican, Pentecostal, Salvation Army, and Seventh Day Adventist. Saturday was their day off; they'd fish on Sunday when no one else would fish.

Plane crash on Belle Isle

Dave:

There was a plane crash on Belle Isle; the plane was full of meat. It was a four-engine plane, and it crashed during WWII. There are pieces of it still left out there; somebody took parts off it though, like pieces off the wing. The body (fuselage) is still there. It looks like

it belly-flopped in. It was full of beef – for the Army crowd. A war was going on, see? Nobody was killed. The plane iced up; that's why it went down.

Banks and shopping

Phyllis:

The coast guard deposited our pay cheque directly into our bank account. And when it came to clothes, that was the last thing we ever worried about. You had what you took and you came back with what you had. And what was wore out was used for rags in the engine room.



Figure 4 Dave Taylor has a sheaf of certificates documenting his career

Safety Issues

Phyllis:

There were safety issues we weren't aware of back then. Me and Melanie used to play with the balls of mercury under the light; and Dave lost his teeth, and I lost mine! But now, because the mercury has gone out of our system, the coast guard denies that we lost our teeth due to handling mercury from the light.

There used to be cans of mercury down in the basement. The kids and I used to take it outdoors and play with it. It was fun!

The coast guard changed some rules in later years; eventually nobody was allowed to go in and handle the light without wearing special suits!

Retirement

Dave & Phyllis Taylor have retired in Raleigh, and have many fond memories as Keepers of the Light. The light on Belle Isle N.E. stands a lonely sentinel, completely automated now, but the Taylors have a rich collection of family photo albums, paraphernalia from the lighthouse, maps and books and

video collections that will last a lifetime.

Dave and Phyllis Taylor have been featured in a number of documentaries and books, owing to the nature of Dave's work. A painting of the Belle Isle Lighthouse has been featured in the book, **Let There Be Light**, by Leslie Noseworthy. See: <http://noseworthyfineart.com/leslie.aspx>. The next book the Taylors will be featured in is **Northern Lights** by the same author. The Taylors lived and worked at the Belle Isle Light House N.E. from 1976 to 2001, a total of twenty-five years.

Recommended Reading or Viewing:

Video Recording: *Keepers of the Light*
"East in Motion Pictures"

In Association with Canadian Broadcasting Corporation
Circa 1988

Read the book by Jim Wellman: "*Lighthouse People*"
ISBN: 1-894294-14-9 Robinson Blackmore P. 125
Story of a tragedy on Belle Isle in the mid-1960s

