

Folklore

**Ghostly Tales, Superstitions and
Local Traditions & Customs**

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Straitsview: Spooky tales and superstitions

John & Susie Hedderson
Straitsview



Figure 1 John Hedderson 2014

On the topic of seventh sons and healing powers:
Thomas Henry Eddison of Hay Cove

According to John Hedderson of Straitsview, when Tom Eddison's first wife, Phoebe Jane Pynn died he married Mary Ann (Bessey) Elliott of Raleigh, and lived in Raleigh.



Figure 2 Tom Hedderson is buried at Quirpon.

It is said that Uncle Tom (*also known as Tom Hay-Cove*) had healing powers. When he died he passed on his healing powers to a seventh son, Alvin Elliott, of Raleigh.

John says, "Uncle Tom Hay-Cove could charm teeth; if you had anything the matter with you, he could lay his hand on you. When I went to have my tooth charmed, Uncle Tom took his cap off, put his finger on my tooth, and mumbled something under his breath, but it didn't work for me. I guess you had to believe, and I didn't."

"All the healing powers he had, his mother, Joanna Coombs, gave him. Joanna was an old Roman Catholic woman, and she was a midwife, too."

Susie adds, "That's like Uncle George Decker at L'Anse aux Meadows...he could charm teeth, charm boils, whatever was wrong, he could charm it."

Ghosts at Straitsview?

When asked about ghosts in the community of Straitsview, John Hedderson laughs and says, "Straitsview is a wonderful-clean place, girl. The ghosts is afraid to come here!"

Superstitions: all the way from Ireland

Susie's grandmother comes from Ireland, and her ancestors come from Ireland's Eye, Trinity Bay.

Susie remembers, "We used to go over on the hill, back of Hay Cove, and if it was foggy, my grandmother would say, 'Now! Don't go without turning your sweater, or your socks, inside out.'

"And I'd ask why.

"If you goes over and you don't have something on that's inside out, the fairies is over there; they'll get you.'

"So we would off the sweater, turn it inside out, grab the thing, and go!"

Legend of buried treasure and a gruesome find

His eyes light up when John Hedderson hears the word treasure. He gestures out the window and says, "There was treasure here in Straitsview; I knowed about it all my life."



Figure 3 As a young man John searched his property for buried treasure.

According to legend, which was passed from John's Grandfather to his father, and down to John and his siblings, the treasure was said to be buried on the corner of John's property—five crocks of it—three silver crocks and two gold.

The land John owns, and now lives on, wasn't always his; at first it was Crown land, then his brother owned it, and finally John bought it from his brother. As a young man John believed the tales of buried treasure and spent a good deal of time and energy digging for it.

"I dug everywhere, but I never found it," he says, shaking his head.

Frank the Frenchman—a foreigner left over from the French Fishery who ended up staying in the area—suggested to John that, in order to find the treasure, blood had to be shed; a suggestion that was in accordance with pirate lore. "There're a couple of crocks left there now," prompted Frank. "What odds about shedding blood? Take a cat and chop its head off, or get a mouse and kill it." But John never had the heart or the inclination to shed blood to find a treasure.

He wasn't the only one hooked by the irresistible lure of digging for buried treasure; one of his older brothers was completely obsessed. "My brother Edgar, he was shocking about digging up stuff," laughs John. "He was always digging holes...digging holes. Finally the old man told him to put a stop to it. Edgar dug everywhere looking for treasure." But one day, in the back garden, Edgar's shovel struck wood and he figured he'd hit 'pay dirt.

John chuckles, "He thought he had the fortune!"

But what Edgar had stumbled upon was not a crock of gold, but a rotting coffin: the grave of a Frenchman, long since dead.



Figure 4 Down at John Hedderson's fishing stage.

Weather lights

There is a phenomenon along the coast of Newfoundland that old-timers are very familiar with: phosphorescent lights, often seen in the riggings of ships or occasionally hovering over bogs or marshlands. And, as strange as these phenomena are, they were a part of the seascape and landscape of long ago.

John Hedderson was no stranger to these lights. Many was the time he looked out his window and saw them glowing in the rigging of a schooner at anchor in the bay. Whenever ⁱⁱ*weather lights* were seen, it was said they presaged a storm.

Ghost ships or Illusions?

There were times these weather lights seemed to affect more than just the rigging on schooners; sometimes, John said, schooners would appear to disappear entirely. “And I witnessed that many times!” He says. On one night in particular, he relates, “It was a beautiful night in August, and I saw a vessel coming in with a side of lights and what is called a weather-light up in the mast...the vessel came in, and came in, and when she got to the place where the anchorage was she just ...disappeared!”

Another time, around about ⁱⁱⁱJannyng time, John remembers, “When I was a young man we were over at Uncle Quill Hedderson’s in Noddy Bay. A couple of the boys told him, ‘There’s a schooner coming in over there...watch it now!’ And when Uncle Quill looked out the window, he said, ‘There’s n’er one there now, boys,’ he said.

“And Noah objected, ‘She was there.’

“‘Yes, boy,’ he said, ‘look out for the southeast wind tomorrow.’”



Figure 5 John Hedderson and daughter Elaine feeding a lamb.

Ghosts lights on the marshes

But phosphorescent lights weren't always seen at sea; they were seen at dawn as hunters walked along the shore gunning for birds, or at dusk as they were walking home.

These lights are called ^{iv}*Ignis fatui* (from Medieval Latin: "foolish fire"), or 'will-o'-the-wisp, and are atmospheric ghost lights seen by travellers, especially over bogs, swamps or marshes. The phenomenon resembles a flickering lamp, a pale flame—or phosphorescence—and is said to recede if approached, drawing travellers from the safe paths. ^vIt is known by a variety

of names: friar's lantern, jack-o'-lantern, ghost candles, spook lights, ghost-lights, and hobby lanterns. Folk belief attributes the phenomenon to fairies or elemental spirits.

Scientifically, it is believed to be due to the spontaneous combustion of methane or other hydrocarbons originating from decomposing organic matter.

St. Elmo's Fire

What northern Newfoundland fishermen refer to as weather lights might possibly be what is commonly known as ^{vi}St. Elmo's fire. This phenomenon was named after St. Erasmus of Formiae (St. Elmo for short), the patron saint of sailors. The light exhibits a bright blue or violet glow, appearing like fire in some circumstances, from tall, sharply-pointed structures such as lightning rods, masts, spires and chimneys, and on aircraft wings. St. Elmo's fire can also appear on leaves, grass, and even at the tips of cattle horns.

St. Elmo's fire is plasma, as are flames and stars. The electric field around the object in question causes ionization of the air molecules, producing a faint glow easily visible in low-light conditions.

The nitrogen and oxygen in the Earth's atmosphere cause St. Elmo's fire to fluoresce with blue or violet light; this is similar to the mechanism that causes neon lights to glow.

Superstitions and ghost tales

Selby & Delilah Tucker
Ship Cove



Figure 6 Selby & Delilah Tucker recall ghost stories.

Paddy Bessey's Ghost

Paddy Bessey lived on the shores of Cape Onion, just down over the hill from the graveyard (his house was located on the graveyard side of where Boyce Bessey's house is situated today). Paddy's house was so close to the water that whenever there was a sea on it'd wash away the beach, so he finally built a breakwater to surround his house.

At nighttime, when everybody went to bed, Paddy

Bessey and his son, Charlie, would hear somebody walking up and down the stairs. Sometimes they heard the damper rattling on the stove in the nighttime. These hauntings seemed to happen at certain times of the year, and usually when it was very quiet in the house. Paddy never actually saw any ghostly apparitions, but he heard doors opening and closing, and once a ^{vii}flatiron was thrown down the stairs.

It got to the point that he said he must have built his house on old graves.

Three Drowned Frenchmen

Three Frenchmen, drowned in the mid-1800s, were buried not far from where Paddy Bessey's house was situated.

Is it possible that the hauntings in Paddy Bessey's house had something to do with its proximity to the three graves of the drowned French fishermen?

Ghosts up around the bottom at Ship Cove

Up around the bottom of Sacred Bay people used to hear a chain rattling somewhere in the vicinity of Woody Island. The old people used to say it was the devil.

The Ivy: a haunted schooner?

In the 1930s, a small schooner named the *Ivy* was anchored at Ship Cove and, during a storm, broke loose from its moorings and drifted into the bottom of the bay, where it was

wrecked on the inside of Partridge Island, near to the Point at the bottom of the bay where Francis Tucker once lived. Part of the schooner sank beneath the waves and part of it was still above water. Come winter, part of the wrecked schooner could be seen above the ice.

According to Selby Tucker, the old wreck is still there on the bottom of Sacred Bay.

Local lore has it that at certain times of the year people used to see sailors aboard of her, walking up and down on the deck, so the local people would paddle a boat out to the wreck and climb aboard the schooner for a look, but they never found anybody. Delilah's brother, Francis, claimed to have seen sailors walking along its deck, and many times he rowed out and climbed aboard the old vessel, but he never found the ghostly sailors.

Some old fellers could spin some tales

On a fine day in the spring of the year, Simon (Si) Grinham and Bart Green often walked down to Ship Cove from Raleigh. According to Delilah, sometimes they'd stay overnight, or perhaps two.

"What yarns they'd tell!" she laughs.

"Uncle Si told how one time he was thirsty. It was the spring of the year, and the water was running in the springs and brooks, and he wanted a drink. When he stooped down to get a drink, he says another feller kneeled down alongside of him and drank, too, but he could only see the other feller when he stooped down to get a drink."

It's probable, says Delilah, what Uncle Si was referring to his own reflection in the water.

Grandmother Priscilla and the old feller behind the rock

"Grandmother Priscilla, who lived over where Uncle Lance Taylor currently lives on the Point, always warned we children to be very careful of a big rock not far from their house.

"When we used to look out the door in the evening, Grandmother would always say that something was coming up from behind the rock. 'That's the old feller,' she'd say. She used to tell us, 'Don't you dare go out by the rock because he'll have you!'

"My sister Alice was frightened to death; the minute the sun went down over the hill, she'd be gone in the house, afraid of the old feller," laughs Delilah.

Ghostly Tales

Winston Colbourne
L'Anse aux Meadows

Tales of being hagged and chains rattling in the night

Figure 7 Winston Colbourne is a great storyteller.



Winston relates an incident in which he believed he had been ^{viii}hagged.

One night I dreamed we had a big lot of fish, and there were two big piles of money on either side of me. We had had a good catch of fish, and that's all that was on our mind back then; fish and money. Dad was alive, and I had six or seven brothers, and we were just deciding how much each was going to get. Anyway, this big pile of money was on both sides of me, piled right up.

I argued that everyone should get a full share. But in the dream, Dad was going to take a full share, pay the expenses, and whatever was left, split it among his boys. Well, that made me kind of mad, and in my dream, I grabbed the money in both hands, and when I woke, I was stood right up in bed, and all I had in my hands was the bed sheets. And there was nothing, only sweat, rolling right off me.

I used to have that dream often when I was younger.

They say the worst hag you can have is to dream about money, because it's hard on your heart. I've heard a lot of people say that.

The ghost of my grandmother?

I lived with my grandmother when I was a young boy. When I was born, my grandmother and grandfather took a liking to me, and they took me and reared me up. But then Grandmother got cancer of the brain and I had to go back home. After she had surgery, she eventually went blind. But she had such pretty blue eyes I found it hard to believe she was blind.

She and I used to talk about ghosts, among a lot of other things. She said you know the way George Decker talked about ghosts, and the down-along crowd, how they ran into this person head-on, and someone saw a spirit...and so on. So, she always said, 'Winston, I'm telling you right now, if there is any such thing as coming back, I'm coming to see you, so don't get afraid.'

What she said played on my mind as I was growing up. And I wanted to see her, but then again I didn't. I loved Nan, but it was just the scary thought of a ghost or a spirit.

Attack from behind

We had a dog called Sport. Back then, I might walk down to Straitsview or Hay Cove to visit the girls, or just to hang around. I might have been sixteen or seventeen. It happened one night I was all alone, and when I bent down the dog's nose hit me right on the back of the calf,

and down I went! She jumped right on me, licking my face. I didn't know what to do; it was dark and I couldn't see, and I thought, this is Nan for sure. Then it come to me, this was Sport! Now, don't you say I wasn't a happy man, though, after it was all over! I grabbed the dog by the hair and said, "Come on, let's go home."

A surprise encounter on a foggy night

Another night I left home on the other side of the harbour; I was going with Eliza then. I was coming home alone, and the fog was right down on the land, about six or seven feet high. The sea was calm and I was going along, in the grass, on the gravel, in the grass, just weaving along in the nighttime. And the once, something hit me smack in the chest, and I fell back, staggering. Well, now, I thought, this is Nan! But, you know what it was? We used to have a brook house; a little, small house built over the well. Never painted; the siding was weathered with the wind, and this is what I slapped right into. Oh, my, oh my! Every hair was standing up on my head. But, I think it is safe to say that Nan is not coming back. I guarantee you that!

Rattling chains in the dead of night

When I grew up and was a man—especially when I was going to Uncle Hedley's to see Eliza—I'd go to George Decker's at night, then I'd end up over to the Bartlett's where Eliza was staying, then head back around three or four o'clock in the night. I'd be coming around the bottom of the cove and I'd have to skirt past the cemetery.

One night coming home, I heard something. It was a beautiful night, but pitch dark. I heard a chain rattling, and I said, "that's not Nan for sure; she got no chain."

The chain kept rattling...and it was coming nearer and nearer...and it kept on coming.

I said, "Oh, my!" and I stopped, my heart thumping. And I said, "Nan, I hope that's not you coming towards me! Jumpin', dyin', I hope that's not you coming this way!" Chills ran up my arms and all over my body.

I must have stood there ten minutes before I caught a glimpse of what was coming toward me...a white dog! But right behind that dog came more dogs; half a dozen at least.

Well! I let out a big roar and they took off for home, the chain rattling behind them.

Now, Jobbie Anderson used to have his dogs all chained to one stake. Each dog had a collar around his neck, and a chain attached, and they were all tethered on one stake. So, sometime in the night the dogs must have torn the stake out of the ground, and there were six or seven dogs attached to that stake, and they were scavenging in the cove, looking for a fish or a ⁱlump or something to eat. Next morning we found out that Jobbie's dogs had got clear, and after I sent them away, they had got hooked up beneath some of the wharves. They each had a ^xtrace on them about four ^{xi}fathoms in length, so there was plenty of chain there for them to get tangled up in.

The thought of my grandmother coming back to see me had me looking over my shoulder for quite some time, but at least on this night I was safe from ghosts and spirits.

SUPERSTITIONS

Guy Bussey and Winston Colbourne

Guy Bussey of St. Lunaire-Griquet and Winston Colbourne of L'Anse aux Meadows discuss the topic of folklore and superstitions on the Northern Peninsula.

Guy Bussey's ancestors were from England; they three brothers: George, Solomon and Jacob. The three brothers went first to Port au Grave, and then moved to what Mr. Bussey refers to as St. Leonard's; now called St. Lunaire.

According to Mr. Bussey, those three brothers brought their superstitions with them from the Old Country. "And that superstitious streak carried on right down through we," he asserts, though he is quick to say that he is not superstitious himself.

Bussey reflects that his ancestors must have been pretty well off because they all owned schooners or traps.

Guy had two brothers. George went to Toronto to work for Hydro and was killed in 1955.

Hayward went to Thompson, Manitoba, and worked as an under-cover officer with the police force. "We were a very close-knit family," says Mr. Bussey, so when he heard that his brother Hayward was drowned in 1961 while on duty, it was quite a blow. Bussey recalls that shortly before he was killed, Hayward had written to him, saying, 'Guy, I'm coming home. It's too hard a place.'

"Well," says Mr. Bussey, "He never made it home. They say he was a strong swimmer, but he was out in a boat and was drowned."

He recalls some of the folklore and superstitions he remembers growing up.

The Fishery

- Dad would never set a trap on Friday.
- He wouldn't put a white rock aboard the boat.
- They wouldn't turn their boat against the sun. Meaning, if the sun rises in the east and sets in the west, and moves across the heavens in a clockwise direction, then you should not turn your boat counter-clockwise. Fishermen would turn the boat in a complete circle to follow the path of the sun, rather than risk turning it against the sun.
- If your boat was moored out in the harbour and you took it off the collar, you would turn with the sun when starting off, not against it.
- If they put the paddles in backwards they called that jackass (the paddle of the oar had to be facing the stern of the boat)

Winston:

- If you put something in the wrong way, the old man would say, go up, get ashore, and don't come back before tomorrow morning.

Guy:

- It was the same thing with the gaff; the hook faced the stern of the boat.

- They wouldn't dig a grave on a Monday.
- They wouldn't buy a broom in May because the family would be swept away.
- And you couldn't meet someone on the stairs. If my mother was going up the stairs and you was coming down, she'd go back down.
- I remember once my mother dropped her dishcloth and a cup fell; she said, 'Jake, b'y, I'm going to have to put more potatoes in the pot because we're going to have strangers to visit.'
- And they'd put a piece of money in the foundation of the house when they built it, for luck.

Winston:

- Mostly you'd put the money between the first sill (joist) and the shore (a post that went down into the earth). We used 20 cents then.

Guy:

- When I tore down grandfather's house, there was a Newfoundland 5 cent piece on the sill and a Newfoundland 20 cent piece and a 50 cent piece. And the 5 cent piece was a like a herring's scale. It wasn't very big, and it was right thin too.
- Down in Quirpon, when we was boys, one of the boys picked up what he thought was two pennies, or coppers, and he put them in the collection plate at Sunday School. And they were actually two five-dollar gold pieces. I saw the coins; they were thicker than a copper.
- If you were going birding, and you forgot your shotgun shells, and come back to the house to get them, they'd tell you it was just as well to stay home, you wouldn't get any birds. I went out anyway, and I got my birds.

General Folklore

Other Contributors...

Weather

1. The wind will rise with the sun and go down with the sun.

Nature

1. Lots of dogberries on the trees in the fall means lots of snow come winter.
2. On Good Friday, don't go in the forest and cut a dogwood tree. The sap is red and it will bleed.

Fishery

1. A shark won't die before sundown.
2. Never turn fish^{xiii} hand-bars upside down, or leave them upside down.
3. Never fish on a Sunday. Saturday evening, a major cleanup was performed on your stage head and washed up nice for Sunday.

4. Never use a broom handle for a ^{xiii}thole pin; it was considered bad luck. One man says he tried it once, but he kept looking back over his shoulder, waiting for something bad to happen.
“And I say if you’re looking for bad luck, you’re going to find it.”

Household superstitions

1. If you came in through one door, you wouldn’t go out through another. You had to go out through the same door you came in. Otherwise, it was bad luck.
2. Good Friday you couldn’t throw out wash water. The night before Good Friday the woman of the house would put the washing tub in the porch and all the wash water would go in that tub till after 12 o’clock. The woman could cook the biggest kind of a dinner and there was no problem with that. After 12 o’clock—after dinner was eaten—the wash water was thrown out. The reason you didn’t throw it out before dinner was, if you threw it out before 12 o’clock, you were throwing it in the face of God.

George Decker and the Brown Man

By Carmen Hedderson



Figure 8 Carmen Hedderson of Hay Cove

There are all kinds of stories, but they're all lies anyway. I never met the Brown Man; he disappeared when the roads were made and all the rocks were bulled away. They said he beat up people and everything, but if lies could be told, then Uncle George Decker was the man to tell them, and there were all kinds of older men who could tell you this story, too, but they're all gone now, boy.

Uncle George Decker got stuck in the snow once. One time he was going down for a load of wood, eh? They say he had a good team of dogs. Some men heard a big row going on – it was the spring of the year – and they went out to see what was going on, and here it was Uncle George. His dogs were barking; he had a load of

wood on the komatik and he'd go and lift up the komatik, then go back and try to get the dogs going. He swore and called the Master down and come down to the foot of the sled, and went back and forth trying to get the dogs and the komatik going. There were three men watching, see, and they all saw another man at the komatik with Uncle George.

Uncle Quill was one of the men that seen him. When Uncle George Decker would go to the nose of the komatik, the other man would go to the back and hold on, so it wouldn't move, and so it went. Uncle George couldn't see anybody, but the men could, —and they could hear him swearing! By-and-by the brown man left and walked on to Muddy Cove.

Later, Uncle Quill said, "Uncle George, who were you rowing with this morning?" "Nobody, boy," he said. "Oh, yes, sir," he said. "You were rowing with somebody; we seen the man." When Uncle George denied it again, Uncle Quill said, "Well, boy, there were three of us watching you." Uncle George Decker thought his sled was stuck in the snow, but that's not what the other men saw; they saw a man playing games with Uncle George. But 'twasn't in my day, eh?

Jorden Sheppard and the Brown Man

A mystery explained



Figure 9 John Hedderson of Straitsview

Muddy Cove is a small cove located between Hay Cove and L'Anse aux Meadows on the tip of the great Northern Peninsula. This area was visited by the Vikings around the year 1000 and in the 1600s; the French arrived to fish its rich waters. It was in the early 1800s when the English arrived and established a settlement program and over time were to displace the French. In the area were a small native population of Eskimos and Indians. There are stories passed down of an Eskimo family living in Sacred Bay by the name of Maggashoe.

A man named Jorden Sheppard

Sometime during the middle of the 1800s there was a man by the name of Jorden Sheppard living at Muddy Cove, a fishing settlement situated between L'Anse aux Meadows and Hay Cove. Sheppard and a friend named Robert Taylor brought their families with them from Conception Bay. Other people fished there, but Jorden Sheppard and Robert Taylor stayed.

Robert Taylor had a son by the name of Robert John Taylor, who fell in love with Jorden's daughter and married her. Robert Taylor's wife died and he married Rebecca Jane Butler, also of Conception Bay.

Sometime after Robert Taylor married Rebecca Jane, the Sheppards left Muddy Cove and lived at New Harbour, across from Ship Cove, Cape Onion. Robert John Taylor had a large family and named one of his sons Jorden after his grandfather. Jorden Taylor also had a large family.

One evening Jorden visited his friends at Hay Cove and then decided to visit someone living at Muddy Cove. It was a nice moonlight night. Jorden was carefree and enjoying the walk.

What was to befall him became one of the most fearful ghost stories of the century, because it put fear into the hearts of a lot of people travelling in that area at night.

Harry Taylor's Corner

When Jorden Sheppard drew near to a place called Harry Taylor's Corner he met up with someone dressed all in brown; wearing buckskin and moccasins. Before he knew what had happened, the stranger in brown clothes jumped at Jordan and wrestled him to the ground.

Jordan thought it was his friend John William Decker, known locally as 'Bill', who was playing pranks on him. Bill had always been able to lick him in a fight.

This so called brown man—so named after the scuffle with Jorden Sheppard—grabbed Jorden and pinned him to the ground in a vise-like grip that Jorden could not break away from.

They wrestled for a long time. The man in the brown clothes did not speak; only grunted.

After he was beaten, Jorden Sheppard lay on the ground for a long time thinking about what had happened, and the buckskin clothes came to his memory. He knew only one other fellow who wore buckskins in the area. Of course, there were aboriginal people living around Sacred Bay and Pistolet Bay. He had met them on the trap line several times.

When he was able to get up he headed for the home of Bill Decker at L'Anse aux Meadows who, Jorden taught, had bested him in the fight. When he got to L'Anse aux Meadows he saw that Bill Decker's light was in full bloom, so he made no delay. He walked in and stood framed in the doorway.

Bill Decker was laid down on his couch and bid Jorden a good night, but Jorden was vicious. He shook his fist at Bill Decker and said, "Bill, you're the only man who could trim me; your chance come tonight and you made sure that you licked me. But I warn you, now I will get even for this. I don't care where it is—on the barrens, on the ice, in the woods, or anywhere—if I got my gun I will shoot you."

Bill Decker got up and protested that it wasn't him, saying that Jorden could ask his family; he had been home all evening. Jorden snapped back that Bill's crowd was as bad as he when it came to telling lies.

When Bill Decker asked why he blamed him, Jorden said Bill was the only man around who wore buckskins and moccasins. Bill told him not to be so foolish; he had been resting all night.

After which Jorden slammed the door and left to walk home to New Harbour.

For days and weeks after Jorden Taylor's threat, William Decker carried the dread of Jordan's death-threat with him wherever he went. But it never came to pass.

In the February storm of 1886, Jorden Sheppard, together with two others, his son Frederick and a man named Joseph Barrett, were found frozen to death at Burnt Bottom on the south side of Sacred Bay.

John Hedderson elaborates:

Jorden Sheppard did not say he met a ghost; he knew he had met a human being.

At that time it was common for people to wear buckskin clothes and moccasins made from harp skin or some other species of seal skin. They dyed or 'barked' the skins with birch bark and when the skins were dyed, they turned a rich reddish-brown.

Jorden may have encountered one of the aboriginals who were living in the area at that time; probably not an Eskimo, but an Indian. It would have been natural for Indians to have been on their trap line during the winter or spring.

Bill Decker was wearing, or had worn, buckskin and moccasins. Jorden assumed he was wrestling with Bill Decker on account of the clothes he was wearing.

According to the history of the area there was a tribe of aboriginal people living at Western Brook at Pistolet Bay who were descendants of the Red Indians who lived at Red Indian Lake, central Newfoundland—the Beothucks.

Tradition has it the Indians had their trap lines from Pistolet Bay down across Eastern Pond to Sacred Bay and as far as Parkers Pond. It was generally known that Jordan wasn't above meddling with the Indian trap lines, and the Indians knew it.

An Indian had met Jordan several times on his trap line; he probably did not mean to hurt Jordan, but decided to give him a fright and 'learn him a lesson' for the way he had meddled with the trap line.

To sum it all up, Jordan did not say there was a ghost; he saw, and wrestled with, a man. Never for one minute did he think he had met with a ghost.

However, after that event, whenever local people saw a stranger at Muddy Cove—especially at night—they assumed it was the 'Brown Man' whether the man was white, black, or brown.

How typical of Newfoundlanders!

The Brown Man

By Maude (Bartlett) Colbourne

Harvey Colbourne and Maude Bartlett were coming from Griquet from a ^{xiv}Time at three o'clock in the morning on a ^{xv}komatik pulled by a dog team, and it was a beautiful night with a bright, full moon. Maude was sitting on the komatik box. Harvey always carried his five-cell flashlight, just in case he had to get out and clear up one of his dogs. When they tipped to come down into Muddy Cove, Maude said, "Somebody's coming down Millie's Pinch."

Suddenly Maude exclaimed, "Harvey, there's a man ahead of us!"

"Yes, maid," he said. "I sees him." The man was coming out through a rocky hill; the man and his shadow were visible on the snow. Harvey and Maude drove on and would have passed along, but the dogs stopped in their tracks. Nobody said, "Whoa, dogs," they just stopped and looked at the man.

The man went on, and when he got to a rock—there is a rock in the formation of a chair at Muddy Cove; well, first thing Maude knew—the man sat down in the chair.

Harvey urged the dogs ahead, took out the flashlight and shone it on the man, and he was brown right from his foot to his head. He was called the Brown Man because his clothes were all brown.

There were no words spoken.

When they got home Harvey and Maude told her father, William Bartlett, but he didn't believe it.

But there are many who did.

The Brown Man of Muddy Cove

Mike Sexton & Art Eddison
 Visitor's Center
 L'Anse aux Meadows



Figure 10 In this photo of Muddy Cove, the 'old road' is still visible, running through the center of the picture. The new highway runs parallel to the old road and left of the photo.

Haunted trail or
 haunted cove?
 Visitor to Park's
 Canada

One fall day, driving along the road past Muddy Cove at L'Anse aux Meadows, we met two Park's Canada employees, Mike Sexton and Art Eddison. Mike was only too happy to relate a few tales about to the notorious Brown Man of Muddy

Cove.

He grins and says, "I was in the men's workroom at Park's Canada when a woman from New York sailed through the door, walked straight up to me and said, 'My grandfather hated this place!'"

"Apparently," says Mr. Sexton, "the woman's grandfather used to walk along the old trail through Muddy Cove, and never passed along by Muddy Cove without seeing something strange."

Mysterious hitchhiker
 Wade Decker

"Wade Decker works at the Parks Canada Site at L'Anse aux Meadows every summer. At dusk a few years ago, he saw a hitchhiker on the road near Muddy Cove and stopped the car

just ahead of the hitchhiker to wait for him. When he turned around to look for the hitchhiker, he wasn't there.”

Right between the eyes!

Sam Decker

“Sam Decker told me a story about three fellows leaving Hay Cove and walking over to L’Anse aux Meadows. This was before the road came through. As they were walking along the trail at Muddy Cove through a little patch of woods, the feller in the middle was hit, ^{xvi}flouse! Right between the two eyes! And the fellows behind and in front never saw nothing. It knocked him right back on his arse apparently.

“Buddy might still be alive and, if he is, he still bears the mark to this day,” grins Sexton.

The old road and the Brown Man’s chair



Figure 11 Muddy Cove. To the left and just above center, a wooden ramp can be seen, and just beyond the ramp is a pile of stones. The Brown Man's chair was located near the pile of stones, but when the new road came through the chair was ploughed under and the Brown Man never returned.

Art Eddison points out the old road running through Muddy Cove, then singles out the pile of rocks in the distance, and says there was once a rock shaped like a chair, and the Brown Man used to like sitting on the ‘chair’. Mr. Eddison remarks that the water used to come right into the cove, but the new highway (just left of the photo) cut it off.

The Brown Man: fact or fiction?

Sam Decker

Sam Decker grew up in L'Anse aux Meadows, the son of George Decker. He now resides in St. Lunaire-Griquet with his wife Neva.

George Decker was a great story-teller but Sam confesses that, as a youngster, he listened to only half of the stories his father told. One story he heard many times was the story of a man dressed in brown from head to foot; a man that some people called the Brown Man of Muddy Cove.

When asked if he's ever seen the Brown Man, Sam Decker laughs. "I've never seen him, but if I ever do, I can run pretty fast."

The man would just vanish

Stories abounded in the area of Muddy Cove in the early 20th century about a man in a brown suit who seemed to have the ability to materialise and then vanish into thin air. According to local lore, a man might be walking down the road when he'd see a man up ahead, walking toward him.

Sam remembers, "And in them days, when you approached people, you'd look at them just before you'd speak to them, or you might glance away for a second, and then look again.

"But in the case of the Brown Man, just as a man would be set to speak to him, he'd disappear."

Who was this Brown Man of Muddy Cove? Where did he come from? And what became of him?

Jorden Sheppard met a man in a brown suit

Sam Decker relates: My grandfather was Sam Decker and my great grandfather was William (Bill) Decker, who lived in L'Anse aux Meadows.

The story goes that Jorden Sheppard was somewhere in the area of Straitsview or Hay Cove and was walking over to L'Anse aux Meadows to visit my grandfather, Sam Decker.

As he walked, Jorden met a man on the road as he passed through Muddy Cove; a man wearing a brown suit.

"I don't know why those old-timers back in that day were so contrary and stubborn: one wouldn't move out of the road because of the other fellow, and in those days the road was really just a narrow path," remarks Sam.

Jorden Sheppard wouldn't step aside, and the other man wouldn't either.

It seems Jorden had never heard of the Brown Man at that time, so he figured the fellow he was meeting on the road, wearing a brown suit, must be Bill Decker and the only reason he figured it was Bill Decker was that Bill Decker was the only man who could 'take him' in a fight.

Because neither man would budge, they got into a scuffle, and every time Jorden charged his opponent, he would be thrown down on the broad of his back.

After a while Jorden Sheppard gave up the fight and continued walking down to L'Anse aux Meadows, and the other man went on his way.

“Don’t talk so foolish”

Jorden Sheppard wasn’t a man to overlook a grievance, so he went straight to Bill Decker’s house and found him lying on the day-bed.

Jorden said, ‘Bill, you was down there beating me up tonight.’

And Bill said, ‘What are you talking about? Don’t talk so foolish. I was nowhere, only here all night; the family can vouch for me. I was lying down all night.’

Sheppard wasn’t about to believe Uncle Bill; he was still feeling the bruises he’d acquired from being bested in the fight.

‘Oh, no, you wasn’t!’ he spluttered. ‘You’re lying!’

He and Bill had a few hard words between each other, and, as Jorden turned to go, he said, ‘You was down there and you beat me up tonight.’ He shook his fist at Bill and warned, ‘I’ll get you! I’ll have you! If I get you alone,’ he said, ‘that’s it!’

He never lived long enough to make good his threat

But Jorden Sheppard never lived long enough to make good his threat. On February 25, 1886, Jorden Sheppard, his son, Frederick, and a man named Joseph Barrett, all perished in a snowstorm at Burnt Bottom.

To this day no one is sure who Jordan Sheppard met on the road that night. All anyone knows for sure is the man was wearing a brown suit.

Down to Muddy Cove for a komatik-load of wood

One spring morning in the month of May, sometime in the mid-1920s, George Decker decided it was a fine day to take the dog team to Muddy Cove to bring a ^{xvii}komatik-load of wood home. The snow was hard which meant the komatik would glide easily over the terrain.

Back in those days—according to the old-timers—the weather was colder than it is now.

George Decker kept his firewood stacked at Muddy Cove, which is situated between Hay Cove and L’Anse aux Meadows.

As he dressed to go, he turned to his little girl Greta and said, “I’m going down to Muddy Cove to pick up a load of wood. Do you want to come along?” Greta was five years old and very happy to go for a ride on the komatik with her father.

George harnessed his dog team to the komatik and away they went, the runners gliding swiftly over the hard-packed snow. Once at Muddy Cove, George loaded his komatik with half a load of wood, and made ready to go home.

He placed little Greta on top of the wood and gave the dogs the command to go. Eight dogs leaped ahead in their harnesses, raring to go, but as hard as they pulled, the eight dogs couldn’t budge the komatik. George was perplexed. He pulled back on the traces and gave the command to go again, and the dogs went ahead with a sudden tug, but the komatik stuck fast.

Two or three times, George got off the sled and pulled back on the dogs’ harnesses to give them extra leverage, but the komatik seemed riveted to the snow.

Then George paused and said, ‘There must have been a screw come out of the ^{xviii}shoe, and it’s down in the hard crust.’ So he tipped the komatik and ran his hand along the runners, but there was no screw loose so he put the komatik down again.

“And he done that two or three times,” says Sam, “but the komatik wouldn’t budge. George was getting frustrated, and when George got frustrated, he got mad.

“Dad had a hot temper,” laughs Sam. “And by this time, he was so mad he started to swear and curse down God Almighty.”

“Brother George is rowing with a man”

Over in the village of Hay Cove, John Hedderson—Carm Hedderson’s father, whose nickname was Jack Tow—heard the ^{xix}row down in Muddy Cove. Because it was a nice, calm morning, George Decker’s voice could easily be heard at Hay Cove.

Jack Tow watched George Decker in the distance and said to himself, ‘Brother George is rowing with a man over there.’ It didn’t take long for a small knot of men to gather around Jack Tow, and all of them saw George at one end of the komatik and another man at the other.

The komatik broke free

Suddenly the komatik broke free from the snow and the dogs leapt forward and were off. George ran and grabbed the komatik, jumped on, and in no time at all they were gliding smoothly over the snow towards L’Anse aux Meadows and home.

Later, Uncle Jack Tow walked over to L’Anse aux Meadows and asked George, ‘Brother George, what man was you rowing with down at Muddy Cove this morning?’

George, mystified, looked at Uncle Jack Tow and said, ‘I wasn’t rowing with anyone. If you seen someone, you must have seen Greta.’

‘No,’ said Uncle Jack, ‘I saw Greta, yes, but there was also a man, and when you’d go to the nose of the komatik, he’d go back to the stern. And when you’d go back to the stern and lift up the komatik, he’d go up in front.’

Uncle George said, ‘I never seen no one.’

Uncle Jack Tow replied, ‘When the dogs and komatik broke free, you and the dogs went off towards L’Anse aux Meadows, and the man left and walked down the local road towards Hay Cove.’

A real person, or just a figment of peoples’ imaginations?

The question remains: who was George Decker’s invisible adversary?

Was he the Brown Man, and, if so, was the Brown Man a real person, or just a figment of peoples’ imaginations?

More Tales of the Brown Man of Muddy Cove

Winston Colbourne



Figure 12 Winston Colbourne tells stories about the mysterious Brown Man of Muddy Cove

Uncle George Decker and the spirit path

I heard one time there used to be a spirit path from the cemetery right on down along by George Decker's place. There was always a footpath there, Uncle George said, that never grew over and no one ever trod there. The footpath ran right by the Decker house.

So anyway, Uncle George Decker said, "By the so-and-so I'm going to find out if there's a spirit." Someone said, 'One of those days you're going to run into this spirit, and he's going to knock you down or kill you.'

Now, Uncle George built a porch onto his house off the kitchen, and after he got the porch built on, there was a rumpus, a racket, and a ruction, either in the porch, or on the second level above the porch. In other words, the new addition to his house encroached onto the spirit path, and now the porch and the bedroom above had become haunted. This really got on his nerves because no one else could hear it; only he. He'd say, "Lord, dyin', don't you hear the racket up there?"

And nobody could.

Uncle George was an awful man for reading books, so one night he said, "By the dyin', I'm going to find out about that spirit." So he put a big, long shovel in the porch and he sat down to wait, reading his book. By and by he heard it: a sound like someone dragging something across the upstairs floor, and he come upstairs, shovel in hand, cursing and swearing and swinging the shovel, but he never seen nothing.

But when he got up there, he was knocked down flat on his face on the floor.

He must have frightened the spirit, though, because it never came back. Uncle George Decker never, ever seen it or heard it again.

Uncle George Decker, a komatik, and a run-in with the Brown Man

Uncle George Decker had wood cut down in Muddy Cove, going in along where Parks Canada has their road now, up through that valley where they have the picnic tables. That used to be where they kept their wood. So it was the fall of the year and Greta went along with Uncle George to get a komatik load of wood. Greta was a small child then. And when Uncle George

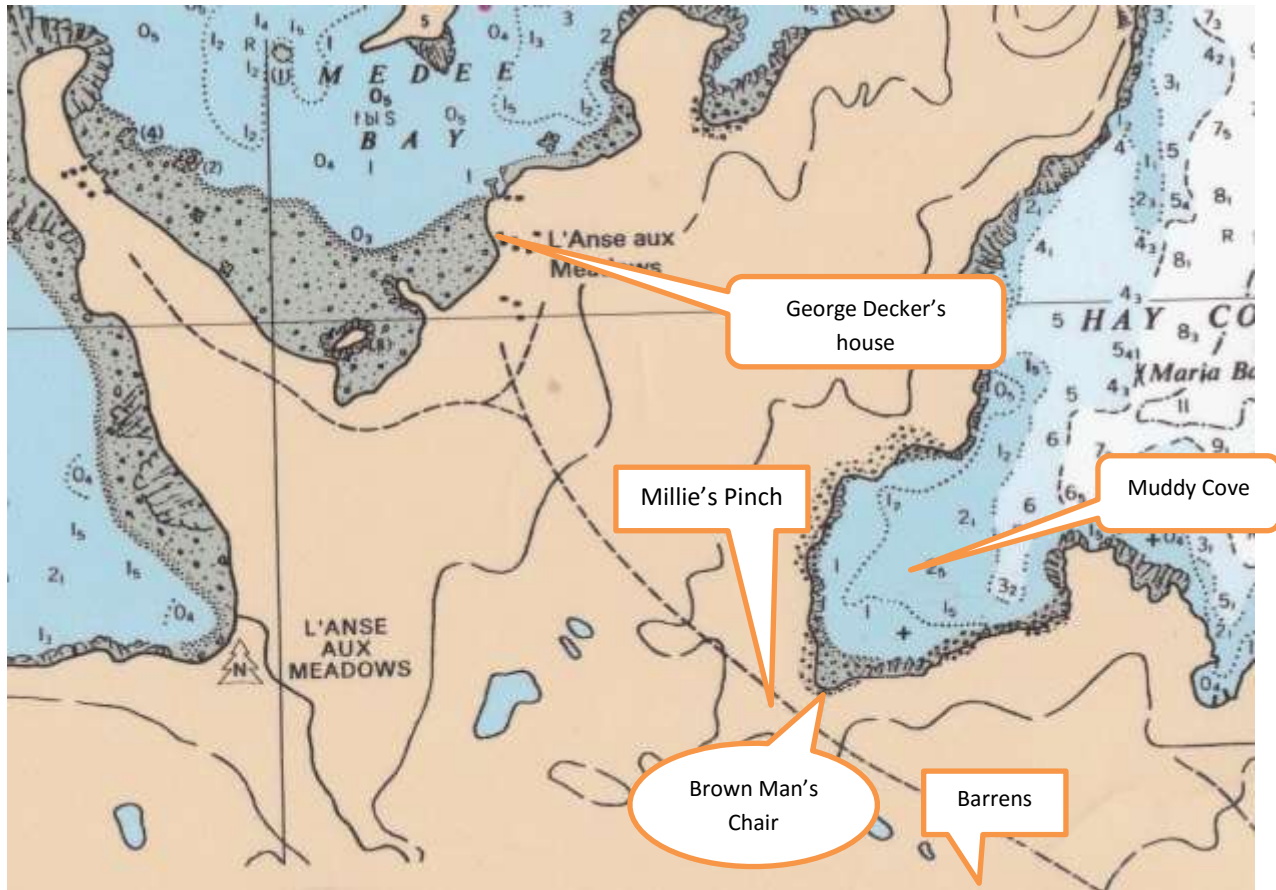


Figure 13 Map of area where Brown Man was encountered.....and spirits in L'Anse aux Meadows (the 'spirit path' runs parallel with the road in front of George Decker's House)

started to come up the grade along by the old school, which used to be located halfway between Muddy Cove and L'Anse aux Meadows (just before the turnoff to the visitor's center). The komatik got stuck fair in the path, though the path was smooth as could be.

He was singing out to the dogs to go ahead; the dogs were rising up in their traces; but no sir, they couldn't move the komatik. Anyway, Uncle George was at it that long that Uncle Jack Hedderson over in Hay Cove took notice; he could hear the oaths coming out of him.'

Just as Uncle Jack decided to investigate, the komatik broke clear.

"Jump on, Greta!" yelled Uncle George Decker. Greta jumped on top of the wood and he scabbled into the komatik and away they come for home.

Now, the story goes that Uncle Jack Hedderson—over in Hay Cove—could see this Brown Man, as could Uncle Quill Hedderson, but Uncle George and Greta couldn't. Now, Uncle Jack said, 'George is over there into a fight or a row with someone. Whatever in the world is wrong? Either someone is stealing his wood, or he don't like him. I'll dodge over and see.'

By the time Uncle Jack got close enough, the mysterious stranger had disappeared. When Uncle Jack caught up to Uncle George Decker, he said, ‘Boy, who were you into it with over there in Muddy Cove?’

Uncle George said, “I never seen no one.”

‘Boy,’ said Uncle Jack. ‘He was a great big man; a tall man with a brown suit on.’

Uncle George said, “I was swearing; I was swearing on the dogs because I was stuck here.”

Uncle Jack replied, ‘There was a man, right in front of your dogs, and your komatik never busted clear until that man moved away.’

The Brown Man’s chair

There was a big rock in the shape of a chair and a person could sit on that rock. We called it The Brown Man’s chair. When the highway came through in 1966 the road went right over it. Before the road, there was always a brook there. There was a local road and a bridge over the brook. Coming down through Muddy Cove you’d take Millie’s Pinch. Whenever anyone had to walk from L’Anse aux Meadows to Hay Cove or Straitsview, they followed the local road, but after the highway came through the local road was never used, and once the highways bulled the Brown Man’s chair under the highway, the Brown Man was never seen again.

ⁱ Informal. A useful or profitable discovery or venture. <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/pay+dirt>

ⁱⁱ Weather lights are a gleam or flicker of light at sea, thought to presage a storm. When you can see weather lights on saltwater at night, it is a sign of a storm ahead. Weather lights in the riggings of a schooner are the sign of a storm coming. The lights start at the bottom of the riggings and move gradually up to the top where they disappear. –Dictionary of Newfoundland English

ⁱⁱⁱ The practice of visiting houses disguised as a mummer at Christmas. Dictionary of NL English.

^{iv} <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/Ignis+fatui>

^v <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Will-o'-the-wisp>

^{vi} http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St._Elmo's_fire

^{vii} An iron that was heated on a woodstove and used for pressing clothes.

^{viii} To torment (in a nightmare).

^{ix} Lumps are black fish, shaped like big round blimps. When they die, they float... They are quite often caught in traps with cod fish and brought in the boats.

^x Sled-dog harnesses consist of a breast strap with one trace. www.thefreedictionary.com

^{xi} A unit of length equal to six feet (1.8 meters): used chiefly in nautical measurements.

^{xii} A device for carrying fish, which could be held on each end.

^{xiii} Thole or wooden peg, often used in pairs, set vertically in the gunwale of a boat and serving as fulcrum for an oar which is usu secured to it by a 'withe' or thong formed by a flexible branch, rope or leather strap.

^{xiv} Party or celebration, especially a communal gathering with dancing, entertainment.

^{xv} A long sled, adopted in northern Newfoundland and especially Labrador for winter travel and hauled by dogs or sometimes men; sledge for hauling wood; ESKIMO SLED.

^{xvi} An exclamation denoting sudden or violent action.

^{xvii} A long sled, adopted in northern Newfoundland and especially Labrador for winter travel and hauled by dogs or sometimes men; sledge for hauling wood.

^{xviii} Strip of metal about 2” wide and 1/8” thick, screwed onto the bottom of a runner.

^{xix} A noisy argument or fight.