

Great Breat

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.

Big sea, young boys

DON CULL



Don has memories of a Narrow Escape at Grand Brehat

Mr. Don Cull was born May 5, 1939. His parents were Reuben Cull and Viletta, daughter of Bramwell Pilgrim. He had one sister, Millicent, who married Loomis Fowler. Mr. Cull lives with his wife, Miriam, in St. Anthony. He returns every couple of years to see Great Brehat, but says he wouldn't live there because everything he needs is in St. Anthony.

Mr. Cull worked all his life with Newfoundland Hydro and, when he retired, he laughingly says he threw away his tools. He admits there is plenty of work around, if he wants it, but he is enjoying his retirement too much to be doing that.

According to Allan Richards of St. Anthony (formerly of Great Brehat) a big storm created a mighty sea in the small fishing village of Great Brehat sometime towards the end of the 1940s. Don Cull says he was probably at least eight years old and likely older, when this incident took place. Mr. Cull recalls

that he was already attending school at the time of the rescue.

In Don's recollection, the three of them had just been let out of school and decided to go for a walk to see the sea. A typical pastime for young boys in those days was to tease the sea, and this is a true story about how the sea recoiled and struck back, and almost succeeded in ending their lives that day.

FRED CULL

He stands in his kitchen at Great Brehat – he celebrates his seventieth birthday this year – but in his memory he is once again a young boy on the threshold of more danger than he ever reckoned with; and whatever action he would take in that moment of swift decision would forever influence the outcome of the lives of his two cousins, Ron and Don Cull.

He recalls a pivotal moment on top of the bellicatters, when, if he



Figure 1 Ron and Fred Cull 2009

My father was William Henry Cull. My mother was Eunice Nobel from Nipper's Harbour and I was born November 14, 1939.

Remembering the big sea

It's plain to see that when Fred Cull remembers the event of the Big Sea in Great Brehat in the late 1940s, the memory is still as fresh to him as it was sixty years before.

had moved too quickly he, too, would have been plunged into the gulch where certain death awaited him. Instead, he crawled back off the ice, got to his feet and ran first to Harvey Richards' house, but couldn't open the door, so he ran across to Sam Cannings (locally called Sam Cansas) and right into the house, calling, "Ron and Don are in the water!"

"I tell you the truth, I don't know

if I ever seen since, what the sea was like at that time. I can't help but think what would have happened if all three of us had fallen down into the gulch; it would have been all over with. It would have done us no good to call out; that was useless with those mountainous seas. Nobody would have heard us calling for help."

Sixty years have passed and all four men are still alive to talk about it. And, if the sea had her tales to tell, her story might be about 'the ones that got away.'

RON CULL



Figure 1 Ron Cull of Great Brehat

Ron Cull is full of irrepressible energy. It is hard to believe he is seventy years old. Mr. Cull says he has worked as a jack-of-all-trades: as a carpenter and caretaking at the Viking Mall in St. Anthony. "I never asked for a job in my life that I was turned down. Everything that was built in St. Anthony, I worked on it. I worked on the new hospital; I helped to build the stadium; the mall; the elementary school. I managed the mall for twenty-four years."

More recently, Mr. Cull performs skits and musical numbers with a group of Newfoundlanders called The Pumper Boys. In their earlier days, they were asked to perform to raise money for the St. Anthony Firehall's new pumper truck. When asked the name of their group they said they didn't have a name, and Ron Cull suggested that, seeing as they were playing to raise money for a pumper truck, they'd call ourselves the Pumper Boys, and they've been called the Pumper Boys ever since.

Early days in Brehat

I was born March 13, 1939. My father was Uriah Cull and my mother was Lavinia Pilgrim from Little Brehat. They resettled in Great Brehat with the two hundred dollars Joey Smallwood gave them to move their whole family. I was born and reared here in Great Brehat. There were five boys and three girls. One brother died seventeen year ago. There were three girls, and one of them died when she was six or seven weeks old.

Before I was four year old I never made a step. My mother had a sealskin suit made for me. Instead of walking I used to slide along the floor, or even outdoors, on my belly like a seal, using my arms like seal flippers to pull myself along. I was told I had rickets. I was big and fat, too, and I'm not very small now.

I could sit down here if I'd a mind to and write a book, but I'm too busy. I could write a book about my mother. She worked just like a slave: in the garden, on the flake, in the stage, making hay. She used the old scrubbing board; no washer then. The line of diapers

reached from here to there, about a hundred feet long. I wonder when she got the time to do her own work; women was like slaves. The men would come up from the stage and lie down on the daybed and have a nap, but Mother's work had just begun, working over an old woodstove then. My father would be lying on the daybed and he'd say, "Keep the youngsters quiet," so he could sleep. She might have her hands in the dough making bread when he'd say that. Or, me and Dad would have a lie down and Mother would be out in the garden weeding her plants.

I never broke anything, but I was a mischievous lad. I used to swipe turnip and cabbage. We used to swipe heads of cabbage and go behind the big hill. We'd be sitting eating a head of cabbage, and by-and-by you'd hear someone go, Bluccchhh! "I believe I bit a grub!"

Ron has many more tales to tell but, for lack of time, is quick to point out when he is in the water he doesn't float; he sinks like a stone. He fell out of the boat one time and the crew found him under the water, rolling around on the bottom. The held the gaff for him and hauled him aboard the boat, then rolled him on a barrel and got the water out of him. Ron laughs, "I've got some narrow feet for the water, I'll tell you. I can get in the water and go and on and on and don't make a bob."

The big sea

Ron Cull's recollection of the incident at Great Brehat began one day after school, when he and his two cousins, Don and Fred, were heading for Uncle Sam Cannings.

Ron says everybody was called uncle and aunt in those days and, “We always ended up at Sam Cannings; everybody would get together there.”

“That year there was a montagne sea.” (It is very interesting to note that Ron Cull doesn’t refer to that stormy sea as a mountainous sea, but as a ‘montagne sea’. The word montagne means ‘mountain’ in French.)

“If Fred had fallen into the gulch with us, we would have been swept out to sea and nobody would have known about us. And we would have been jammed up around that bellicatter until spring broke.”

Big sea, small boys

ALLAN RICHARDS, RON, DON & FRED CULL

Allan Richards was cutting frankum off a spruce bough in Sam Cansas’ living room when young Fred Cull burst through the door, crying, “Ron and Don is in the water!” Allan, a young man of twenty, sprang up, dropped the knife and the spruce bough, bolted out the door after young Fred, and demanded, “Where are they!”

Fred’s answer sent a chill through Allan that had nothing to do with the February temperatures



Figure 1 summer in Great Brehat

in the coastal community he lived in. “They’re in the gulch!” Without a second thought, Allan ran to his father’s house less than a hundred yards away, grabbed the six-foot gaff, which was hooked up on the ladder at the back of the house, and raced towards the gulch, his heart pounding in his chest.

In the fishing village of Great Brehat, the gulch in summertime appears to be a pool of serenity, but in February its two sides are a mass of boulders and solid rock encased in sea ice. The sea ice builds up on the rocks as winter progresses – these ice formations are known as bellicatters – until walls, three to five times taller than any man, tower over the gulch. When the ice is thrown up along the shore, the action of the sea erodes the ice underneath the bellicatters, creating a honeycomb effect. Bellicatters are unstable and unpredictable at any time, especially with the action of the sea eroding them from underneath.



Figure 2 a view of the gulch in summer

It was on a shelf such as this, overhanging the gulch, that three young cousins, Ron, Fred and Don Cull, lay side-by-side, teasing the sea. “The sea was high and full of slob and chunks of ice,” recalls Don. “Teasing the sea was a great game, even in summer. We’d run

out on the beach to see how close to the water we could go, and call to the sea to come get us.”

Ron recalls, “It was a mountainous sea, and we lay there challenging the sea to come get us.”

What happened next was totally unexpected. The sea, like a coiled snake, struck back.

“Suddenly,” says Fred, who lay sandwiched between his two cousins, “Smack! The ice caved in underneath Ron and Don and they went down like bullets into the gulch. And I was there looking down at them and I can tell you, I was pretty frightened to see them down there. I thought they was gone for sure.”

“We found ourselves down on the rocks at the bottom of the gulch, just after the sea had gone out and everything had quieted down,” recalls Don.



Figure 3 Don and Ron standing on the rock at the bottom of the gulch

Ocean swells were known to come in threes; then it would take a

few minutes for them to build up again, and it was into this calm that Ron and Don had fallen into the gulch, leaving Fred alone on a dangerous shelf of unstable ice above. Fred lay motionless for a fraction of a second, wondering if he, too, would be plunged to the floor of the gulch. Then, ever so slowly, ever so carefully, he backed up until he was on more stable ice, pulled himself to his feet, and sprinted for the nearest house.

“Fred took off for Sam Cannings, and me and Don beat our way through the ice and slob and got up on a rock,” says Ron.

Allan, a young man of about twenty, was thirteen years older than the three boys, and hurried to help them. “I had to get to the top of the wall of snow and ice – which had been thrown up by the sea – before I could see the boys.” When the two boys saw Allan, they cried, ‘Get me Allan! Get me!’

Allan didn’t hesitate a second, knowing he had no time to waste. He hurried down over the rubble ice as fast as he could, always aware of the great danger he and the boys were in. “It was a very scary place to be,” he remembers. “To make a slip was fatal.” He scrambled to the lower edge of ice, which was ten to twelve feet above the boys. Underneath the ledge, the ice had all been washed out by the sea; there was only bare rock. “I reached down with my gaff, straining to reach the boys. Don grabbed the gaff first, but when I got him almost close enough to grab his hands, he slipped from the gaff and fell back into the gulch.”

Ursula Richards, Allan’s step-mother, stood with a baby in her arms, watching from the window,

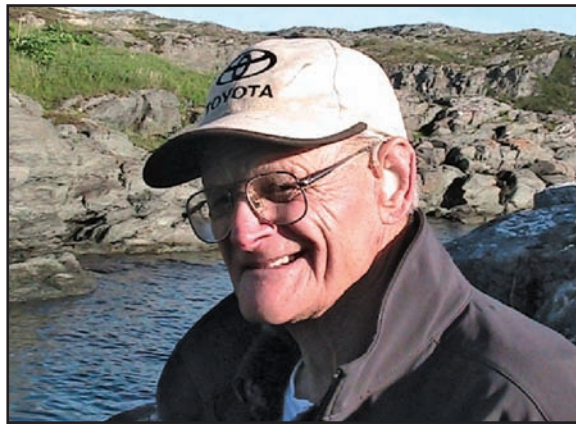


Figure 4 Allan was twenty years old when he made the rescue

and said to herself, “They’re gone; they’re all going to be drowned.” It was a race against time, and the incoming sea had the upper hand.

In the nick of time

Ron grabbed the gaff next and Allan pulled him up onto the ledge, where he could climb up over the shelf of ice to safety. Allan’s father and Sam Canning ran up with a coil of rope and threw the end to Allan, which he tied around his waist and, crawling as close to the edge of the ice as he could, he strained to reach Don with his gaff. Don grabbed the gaff again and held on for dear life, but when Allan had him almost close enough to pull him up, his little hands began to slip again. Holding the gaff with one hand, Allan reached down with the other and grasped Don’s hand, pulling him to safety as the sea thundered in.

“As fast as I could, with Don ahead of me, we got up over that

wall of rubble ice and snow. Just as we got to the top, the sea swept in and filled the gulch. Just a couple more seconds’ delay and there would have been no hope of survival.”

Young Ron stood on top of the wall of ice, breathless with apprehension. “When Allan pulled Don up, true as God’s in heaven, before Don’s feet had gone over the bellicatter, the gulch leveled right full; the biggest kind of flood – with ice chunks and clumpers as big as half a house rolling in – tumble, tumble, tumble.”

If young Fred Cull had fallen into the gulch with his two cousins; if he hadn’t run for help; if Allan hadn’t risked his own life to save



Figure 5 Ron, Don and Fred Cull with Allan Richards at the gulch

theirs, Fred says they would have been forgotten long before this; they would have gone out through the tickle that night, out into the harbour, and nobody would ever have known what happened to them.

“I’ve thought about it a dozen times,” he says. “Why didn’t I

leave and run for home? That's what a youngster will usually do if something goes wrong; he'll run for home. I had sense enough to run up the hill to get help, and that's why – sixty years later – we're still alive to talk about it."

And Ron Cull caps it off nicely when he laughs and says, "I never teased the sea no more, don't you worry about that!"

Glossary Dictionary of Newfoundland English

1. Frankum: spruce gum.
2. Gaff: A type of boat-hook with a short wooden handle, used for various fisheries purposes.
3. Bellicatters: Ice formed by the action in winter of spray and waves along the shoreline, making a fringe or band on the landward side.
4. Slob: heavy, slushy, densely packed mass of ice fragments, snow and freezing water, usually on the surface of the sea.
5. Clumpers: small ice-bergs; floating pans of ice; growlers.
6. Tickle: a narrow salt-water strait, as in an entrance to a harbour or between islands or other land masses, often difficult or treacherous to navigate because of narrowness or tides.

Ruby Penney/ Courage and Resourcefulness

Hockey player Marcel Dionne and his wife wear sealskin coats handmade by Ruby Penney.

Ruby, the daughter of Christina and Tom Cull, was the second of four children, born November 25, 1950. "I was born and raised in Great Breat," she smiles. Like many Newfoundlanders, Ruby has turned her hand to more than one enterprise: she has worked in the fishing industry, dispensed money from behind a wicket at the Bank of Nova Scotia in St. Anthony, and embarked on more than one business venture: the development of her own business making sealskin products and the management of Penneys Wharf in St. Anthony.

In 1977, Ms. Penney had been employed at the Bank of Nova Scotia in St. Anthony for approximately six years when she made her first sealskin coat. Brigitte Bardot, the famous movie actress, had arrived with Greenpeace to protest the seal hunt in Newfoundland. "I got into making sealskin products when the protesters came the first time; they were down at the Viking Motel – the Loon Motel was what everyone called it back then. I was upset that they were trying to take away our livelihood, so I decided to make myself a sealskin coat and wear it. And that was more or less how my business started."

Ruby learned the finer points of sewing at her mother's knee. "Mom and I were talking recently about my learning to sew. Up until I was about ten or eleven, I don't remember having a bought coat. My mom sewed all our clothes." And Ruby, in turn, sewed for her own children. "Up



Figure 1 Ruby Penney, entrepreneur

until my daughter Debbie finished high school she didn't want to wear anything except what I made. She would go to a store and say, 'Mom, there's a really nice blouse at the store, but everybody's going to have it, so I'd like to have one, but make it a little different.'"

Ms. Penney never actually decided to go into business selling sealskin products. Other people saw the coat she had made and asked if she could make them a pair of mitts, or a hat, or a pair of slippers, and she did, mostly for family and friends. She didn't invest, initially, in any fancy sewing machines, either. "My first sewing machine was a Morse, and it didn't have any special features. Later, I bought a Bernina, but it really didn't seem to work any better than the one I already had."

The business took right off. Ruby had been making sealskin products perhaps two or three years when the Craft Association approached her and asked her to start attending the Craft Fairs in St. John's, sometime in the early 1980s. The first time she attended the Craft Fair the organizers were a little bit leery of her taking her wares into St. John's because sealing and the making of sealskin products was a controversial issue; people

who already had sealskin clothes had stopped wearing them; they had put them into storage. “I took five thousand dollars worth of sealskin products with me to St. John’s and sold it all. At the Craft Fair I remember people coming up to me and saying, ‘Oh! I’ve got a sealskin coat but I put it in storage. I think I’ll get it out!’”

Ms. Penney remembers one Craft Fair in particular: “I had some people from the Base at Argentia; their kids started saying a few things about killing seals, so I asked the kids if they knew about the cod worm. They didn’t, of course, so I told them the cod were eating seal droppings and that, in certain parts of the Island,

whole bunch of stuff.”

At the Craft Fairs, Ruby was selling headbands lined with polar fleece, parkas, vests, hats, mittens, and slippers. As well, she made change purses and key chains in the shape of seals and mittens.

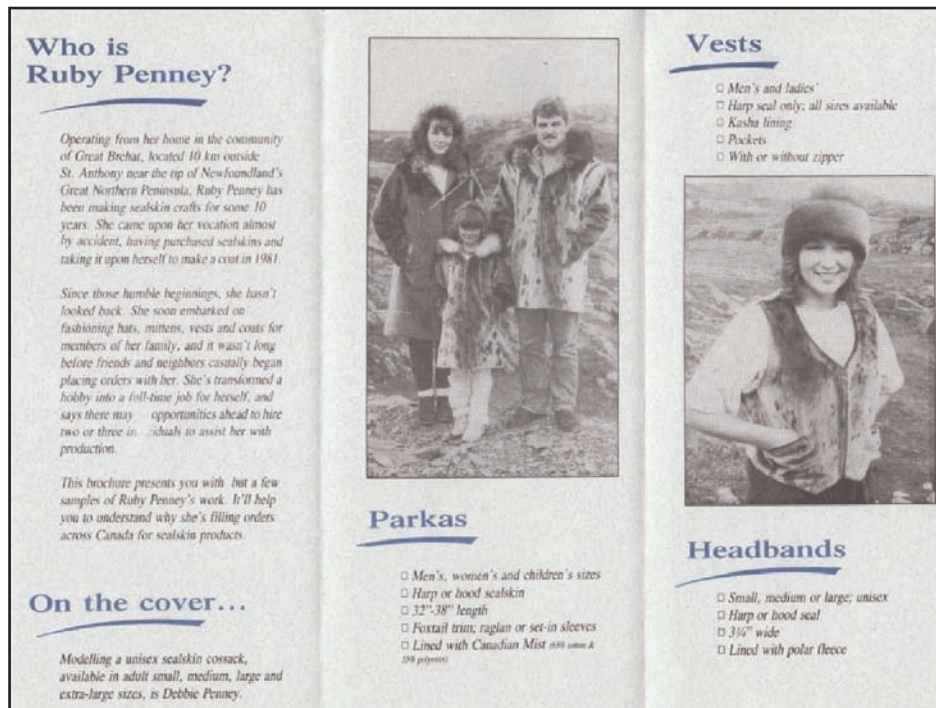


Figure 2 a pamphlet distributed by Ruby Penney showing examples of her craftsmanship

Figure 3 Ruby's daughter, Debbie, modeling a sealskin jacket

Ruby used the hides from the hood seal and the harp seal to make her products. “There were only eight or ten boats involved in the seal hunt after those years when the protest started. You could name on one hand all the boats on the Island that participated after that.” She primarily used the hides from the blue back seal, a young hood, which had a slate-grey or grey back. The blue back seals weren’t allowed to be killed till they were over fifteen months old, but, Ms. Penney remembers, “It was almost impossible to be able to tell if a blue back was fifteen months old.”

Selling sealskin products at the Fairs was not without its challenges.

they had to use a process, when they brought the cod into the plants, to take the worms out. The process involved ultraviolet light.” Ruby didn’t want to upset the children too much, so she added, “Now, don’t forget, cod worms are supposed to be rich in protein, and won’t hurt you if you eat them, but...!” She explained that cod will pretty well eat anything that’s in the water, and with all those seals, and all those droppings...well, she didn’t know if they could call the water contaminated, but, in one sense, it was. “The kids hadn’t known about that stuff,” she said. “Later, they came back and bought slippers and hats and mittens; a

A devastating discovery

But all that came to an end at a Craft Fair in St. John’s in 1991. Ms. Penney arrived in the city about two o’clock in the morning, parked the van, and went to bed. Early the next morning she went down and noticed that somebody had thrown rotten apples all over the parking lot and all over the van. “I thought to myself, gee, they must have had some kind of apple fight, and then it hit me: they were checking to see if there was some kind of alarm system on the van.” Sure enough, Ruby’s suspi-

cions proved correct; somebody had stolen everything in the van – cleaned it out. “I had about \$25,000 worth of product in the van, and I’d say around \$8,000 or \$10,000 of that was already paid for.” With nothing to sell, Ruby returned to Great Breat and set about making up the orders she had already sold, with the skins she had left over.

“And that was it.” She said. “I don’t suppose I’d ever start up the business again.”

Building a new business

But, in spite of that drawback, Ms. Penney had a resilient spirit and a sound work ethic, and directed her energies elsewhere. They had always been fishermen, owning their own boat, the Atlantic Treasure. There were times when they returned to St. Anthony with their catch and found it hard to get off-loaded, and sometimes there was often nowhere to tie up. At that time there was no wharf on the other side of the harbour either. “So, we decided to build our own wharf, just to tie up our own boat, basically,” says Ms. Penney. “From there, we realized there was a need for somewhere to off-load, so we bought the original wharf Ray Squires had.” The Penneys dismantled the wharf and filled in the cove with gravel and stone. “By filling in the cove we made a piece of land,” she says. “Then we built the wharf on the outside of it.”

After they built the wharf, the Penneys decided they needed a better surface, so they had it paved. Then, when they started off-loading they realized they needed ice, but there was so much trouble trying to get it shipped in, especially on the spur of the moment, they bought an ice machine. As business increased, they invested in a larger ice machine,

which they’re using now. Finally, when that wharf wasn’t big enough, they extended it. “Now,” says Ruby, “it is pretty well just right.” And, “About five or six years ago I started running the wharf. Prior to that, we had someone else doing the off-loading for us, but in 2003 I thought it was a better idea to take it over and do it myself. We had put the investment into the wharf, but weren’t really making a profit at it.”

She pauses and reflects. “It’s pretty slow this year, unless the shrimp takes off.”

Courage and resourcefulness

But, Ms. Penney says there have been times when it has been so busy at the wharf that she’s worked almost fifty hours without going home. It’s a little easier now because she has people who have worked at the wharf as long as she has, and they know what they’re doing, which gives her

the opportunity to leave for a few hours if she needs to. “But I always sleep with my cell phone by my head,” she says.

It’s hard to believe that a woman as busy as Ruby has any spare time on her hands but, somehow, she finds time to make quilts. She brings out a magnificent quilt, explaining that every one of the blocks on it has seventy-six pieces. “Every quilt that I’ve done has ended up being given away. I wouldn’t be able to sell them because, all the time I’ve put into them, I wouldn’t know what to charge. I gave some away for people to put raffle tickets on; raising money for sick people going away to hospital.”

So, whether it’s making sealskin products, or building and managing a wharf, or sewing quilts for friends, Ruby Penney of Great Breat symbolizes the spirit, courage and resourcefulness of the people of northern Newfoundland.



Figure 4 Ms. Penney oversees work at Penney’s wharf