

## GREAT NORTHERN PENINSULA



Canada



Newfoundland  
Labrador



# Home Remedies

*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.

# Wilfred and Mabel Tucker

SHIP COVE

## Home remedies

*Wilfred and Mabel Tucker live in the community of Ship Cove. Wilfred started out as a fisherman, spent three years in the Canadian Forces, and served as a Commissioner in St. John's and St. Anthony. He met and married Mabel Taylor from Quirpon, who was teaching at Ship Cove. Together, they raised five children. Here, they reflect on some of the home remedies used when they were growing up.*

### Toothache

My mother dipped a cotton ball in Minard's Liniment, with some cinnamon, and packed it in the tooth. It cured the toothache, but it just took the skin right off the side of my jaw in pieces. Some people put aspirin in the tooth till they could get to the dentist.

### Sore throat

Some said you had to wrap the pickled herring in red flannel and place it on the throat; others didn't use herring; they'd rub red flannel with Minard's Liniment and wrap it around their neck.

### Sores or cuts

People made bread poultices. Some people made it with bread and sugar and some added soap. The poultice would draw out the infection.



Figure 1 Wilfred and Mabel Tucker were familiar with many of the old home remedies

### Poultices

The reason why bread was used was because it had yeast in it. Put the yeast on a boil and it used to draw it out; yeast rises. And sugar makes the yeast rise faster, that's why it was used.

### Water pups

A lot of fishermen had water pups on their wrists, probably from their rubber clothes chafing their skin. It would be like a big watery blister until it broke, then it would be really sore.

It was believed you had to have a band of red flannel to put around your wrists. Something else you used to see was chains; a lot of people wore chains around their wrists.

They used to say the green canker that came off the brass chain cured the blisters, while others said it was the iron in chains that healed the wrists.

The chain used to be loose, coiled around the wrist, and as the fishermen worked, it would move back and forth over the blisters and scabs and scrape them off so the skin would be exposed for healing.

The chain was similar to what you had on those old clocks. It was similar to a clock chain, but bigger. A shareman might have it on his wrists all summer. Others thought chains worked because they kept the wet sweaters off the wrist.

### Bed sores

Homemade bread poultices were used to treat bed sores. To make a bread poultice, Sunlight soap was good with a little bit of molasses and bread. Some people used sugar, and you would mix that back and forth till it was just like a salve.

### Bad blood

You knew you had bad blood when you had boils. You took pow-

dered sulphur, the old yellow stuff, and mixed that up with molasses and took it by the spoonful. You might take two or three spoonfuls a day. I remember one fellow, the back of his neck was nothing only boils, and he'd sit backwards on a chair, his head down, and the boils would be swelled up like marbles; likely infected from the old rubber clothes. After he took the sulphur and molasses, a poultice was applied to the boils to draw out the infection.

### **Treating infections in dogs**

When you dogs got sick, or had an infection, the Old Man (meaning Wilfred's father) used to buy sulphur by the five pound, and you'd take half a pound and put it in the feed, and they would eat that. It was no trouble to get a dog to take anything back then, they were so hungry.

### **Headache**

People would soak a brown paper bag in vinegar water and place it on the head; we did that hundreds of times. Then the bag would dry right up like a snar-buckle.

### **Juniper for colic and childbirth**

We used to go to the juniper tree, bring home and boil the tree branches, berries and all, in a pot for about an hour. Mother used to boil it down, or steep it out, and when she figured it was done, she'd strain it, add a little sugar, and keep it warm on the stove. She gave it to kids when the children had colic. Gripe water never seemed to work,

but juniper worked very well. You might use an ounce of juniper tea and three ounces of water, and give it to the baby in a bottle. Sometimes it was given to women after childbirth. It was cleansing.

### **Scalds and burns**

The people used Owl's Oil. They caught a speckled owl; a Snowy owl, plucked the feathers off and roasted it just like a chicken. They'd roast it till all the grease, or oil, came out and then put the oil in a bottle. It was put on burns and scalds.

### **Snow blindness**

You scraped the bulk off a raw potato with a spoon and placed it in a thin cloth, applied the cloth to the eyes and left it on till you regained your sight. You might change the cloth once or twice.



Figure 2 juniper grows wild in Newfoundland

### **UNUSUAL REMEDIES**

My father, Kenneth Tucker, was a community leader; he was the guy that, if anybody died, he shaved them and undressed them and washed them and dressed them and

put them in the coffin. When Ross Tucker drowned, the Old Man – I went over with him, I was ten or eleven years old – undressed him, shaved him, cleaned him, washed him, dressed him, and laid him out.

I've thought many times, that if my father had been educated...

Somebody in the community had to do it. And, in my opinion, the old folks didn't get recognized for what they did. My father didn't mind taking anything on.

Wilfred tells two stories about an infant, to illustrate his father's ingenuity.

### **Cod oil and a pair of scissors**

One night Father was in a state. When the baby was about two or three months old, his head was raw with scabs, and very sore. By and by the old man looked at him and looked at him, and suddenly he jumped to his feet. He took a blue

bottle of Gerald S. Doyle Cod Oil, poured it out in his hand, and he rubbed and he rubbed and he rubbed, and then he took the baby in his arms and went out the door and called the dogs.

And, because he put the oil on the baby's head, the dogs licked all the oil off. They licked and licked and licked, their big tongues hanging out – I can see them now in my eyes – and it was no time after that, the baby never had one bit of scaling or scabs on his head.

Then, when the baby got up to eight or nine months old, he started to die; he wouldn't suck no milk. And he was there, my son; he went off the face of the earth and turned blue. In the winter, it was, and the



Old Man was there, thinking what to do. He opened the baby's mouth, pulled up his tongue, and I seen him going. He grabbed the scissors and put them down into the kettle and kept them there to sterilize them. Mother opened the baby's mouth and lifted up his tongue and Father snipped. There was blood flowing. Then he grabbed the bottle off the table. You want to see milk going? By the dying, hell flames, brother. I'm telling you now, the baby took down the milk; he drank it all.

### **Glossary Dictionary of Newfoundland English**

1. Water pups: blister, sore or inflammation common among fishermen, whose skin is often in contact with salt water. Possibly a playful synonym of water whelp. Water pups are a form of boil [breaking] out on arms that have been rubbed by wet clothing and salt water.

2. Water Whelps or water welps: sores on the hands and arms caused by salt water, which yield to brass chains worn round the wrists. These were boils on the wrists [and] the usual remedy was a poultice made of molasses and flour or a mixture of laundry soap and sugar.

3. Snarbuckle: a tightly tied knot; a tangled or twisted rope; burnt or charred remnant (of food).

---

### **WINSTON & MAUDE COLBOURNE**



Figure 1 Maude Colbourne and son Winston

### **Cuts**

You know what the bladders on a tree is like; well, we called it turpentine. I seen me father split from toe to heel – his foot got caught in an autoboggan – and I was with him, just me and he in a blinding snowstorm. So, anyway, he come home, and this is what he wanted to put on his foot, turpentine. At the time, we used to have a health nurse going around from St. Anthony, so someone went over and got the nurse and my father said, look, when I get this washed off and cleaned off, I'm going to smear some turpentine on it. She said, I wouldn't do that if I were you; that's too much, she said, that needs stitches. Anyway, he listened to her but, after that, if she wasn't around, he would smear the turpentine on a thin rag – good material is the main thing – and wrap it around and leave it about a week. If you tried to take it off too soon, it'd take the skin with it. But, when you took it off, there was just a white line where the wound was.

### **Bladder troubles**

And if you had trouble with your water; say you had burning in your water; where would you go? Over on the barrens where there's low-growing juniper. Bring home what you need, put it in a clean can or kettle, steep it out berries and all, strain it out in a glass, drink three or four glasses, and no more talk about burning water. Put a bit of sugar in it if you like sugar.

### **Glossary Dictionary of Newfoundland English**

1. Turpentine: resin of a conifer, especially fir, used as an ingredient in pitch and for home-remedies.

2. Bladder: blister on the bark of a fir tree containing fluid resin.

---

## **Bill Bartlett**

### **GRIQUET**

### **Poultices**

There was a poultice people used to make with Sunlight soap and molasses, which went on all the water pups; poor Uncle Lance and all the fishermen, their poor wrists would be raw.

Tansy Poultices were made with little yellow flowers. My sister had major surgery on her throat, and couldn't talk. I said, "Get some tansy, my dear, and make a big poultice, and wrap it around your neck and it'll loosen up all those tendons."

### **Glossary Dictionary of Newfoundland English**

1. Water Pups: Water pups: blister, sore or inflammation common among fishermen, whose skin is often in contact with salt water. Possibly a playful synonym of water whelp. Water pups are a form of boil [breaking] out on arms that have been rubbed by wet clothing and salt water.

2. Tansy: the leaves of the common yarrow an infusion of which is used in home-remedies and cooking.