

GREAT NORTHERN PENINSULA



Shipwrecks

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.

The Schooner Nelson

The Wreck of the Schooner

Nelson

October 18, 1939

Sacred Bay near Warrens Island

Fishing on the Labrador during the 1930s aboard a schooner was a common means of livelihood for many men in Newfoundland. In early spring, as soon as the ice conditions permitted, crews packed up and manned these ships by the hundreds, leaving the bays and harbours of their homes for points north. They fished the waters of Labrador until the schooners were fully loaded and, come fall, they returned home with their catch, hoping for enough money to feed their families for the winter.

But some crews weren't always so lucky. Some were shipwrecked, and all they had to show for their hard summer's work were the clothes on their back. Some never made it home at all. The following is one such story.

On October 17, 1939, the fishing schooner *Nelson*, owned by John B. Smith of South River, Conception Bay, left Labrador homeward bound with a load of fish and a seven man crew: Captain John B. Smith; his sons William, Clarence and Cecil; his grandson Jack Smith; and friends Tommy Bussey, George Warford and Leslie Batten. On October 18th, the schooner struck Little Sacred Island off L'Anse aux Meadows and sank.

The following is a true description of the disaster as written by William Smith, son of the captain,

in a letter dated October 31, 1939, to his sister Marion (Smith) Carson, who was a resident of Montreal, Quebec.

Dear Marion,

I'm sorry to hear you got the news of our disaster over the radio, or so I suppose, before we could inform you. One reason was we didn't have your address, and Father thought it would be a great shock, so we decided we'd write first chance, and as we were so far from a telegraph office. Anyhow, don't censure us because you can't imagine our circumstances.

Well, Marion, we left Punch Bowl near Corbett's Harbour October 17 at 11:30 a.m. with a nice moderate wind, went up the coast and got to Battle Harbour around 8:00 p.m. It was nice and sociable, and Father seemed a bit anxious to get across the Straits so we went on. Our glass was steady, as was everyone's in the vicinity, and showed no sign of a gale 'til about one o'clock Wednesday. That night, Clarence and I had had the watch from seven until 12 o'clock and coming on the end of the watch, the wind began to freshen a little, so Father decided to take in the mainsail and run with whole foresail. It was snowing a little then, but visibility was good and we saw Belle Isle North and lights, and the reflection of South End and Cape Bauld.

At 12:00 poor Cecil, George Warford and Leslie Batten came on watch and we went below, but we didn't take off our rubber clothes; to be ready if we were called. It began to blow fresh then and poor Cecil had the wheel and the Binnacle light went out, so he called me to fix it and I did. Father said we'd

have to reef the mainsail. When I met him he says to me, "We're in for a storm, the glass is gone wind." I stepped back into the cabin and looked at the glass, and I knew we were in for wind but were well fitted, and wind with plenty of sea room didn't daunt us.

Then we took in the foresail and in taking it in, the halyards got around the cross trees and stayed there. Then we double reefed the mainsail to lie in the Straits and before we could get her straightened, she came to wind and went around on the other side and the stem bore. The rudder caught backwater and broke the rudderpost. I was in the cabin getting a light and heard the crack. Poor Cecil was to the wheel then, and I called to him and asked what the noise was. He told me he didn't know.

Shortly after he called me and said the rudderpost was broke. I knew then that we were in for it and we were not far from land. It was blizzard; northeast wind and driving sleet. We could do nothing for awhile but secure our canvas, and before long we sighted land right alongside. So we ran, Clarence and I, and hoisted the staysail some more; hoisted the jib in hope she might clear the island – too late. She struck bowsprit first, put the bowsprit right in on deck. She came back with the sea and another hit her in the stern and drove her head-on again and ground her to powder.

Can you imagine a cliff about 200 feet high, straight and if anything, overhanging (a crow couldn't pitch anywhere) with the sea running about thirty feet up and the water like a tub of soap suds, blinding snow before dawning, water boiling into the vessel; not a nice

experience, but nobody flinched. She drifted away from that island (the Little Sacred Island) and then we saw another right ahead. Anyhow, we had our motor on the starboard side and couldn't hoist her out, so we decided to get in the boat and when the vessel sank we would float off, so that's what we did. We cut the rigging and let the boat float and the Nelson sank under us.

We drifted clear of another island and we were all pitched in the water when the boat struck the breakers. Everyone jumped and swam. Poor Cecil and Tommy Bussey didn't reach the rock where we landed and Father held on to the boat. She drifted in and he was saved. Jack was with us and he jumped and paddled and swam ashore. Then it looked hopeless, everyone wet, snowing and blowing.

In the evening they saw us from the land and came out at a risk of their lives and took us into their houses. They saved our lives. I don't think we would have lived that night. We were well treated, but with two gone we didn't feel too good. We couldn't make any preparations whatever. Everything came too quick, and if you were saved—well; and if not, well also. We all came within a fraction of death and now we are home, destitute—saved nothing and no insurance except on the vessel.

Jack and I haven't got a stitch; all the boys finds it hard, but they are single. I'm just beginning to realize my case now. Just the same as if I was dropped from the moon: cap, shoes, bedclothes, nothing whatever saved and not a cent to replace it. I've got along without relief for two years, but looks hard

now and I had enough to put me over the winter.

Father is as well as can be expected; hard and all as it is, you got to try and keep your chin up. The hard part was that we couldn't get the bodies, but the people are trying to get them.

Well, Marion this is nearly all I can tell you. This is just as it happened from start to finish. Jack saved the mouth organ you sent him. He put it in his pocket when I told him she was going to strike.

I must bring this to a close.

I am affectionately,

Will

Note: This copy of William's letter was sent to Selby Tucker, November 29, 2005, from Bill Strong, Box 643, Lewisporte, NL A0G 3A0.

Aftermath

Local stories tell us that the *Nelson* hit Gull Rock on Little Sacred Island, bounced off, drifted in and sank on Bennycaw Shoal. The motorboat floated off the schooner as it sank. The heaving waves carried the boat from the shoal and tossed it, high and dry, on top of Mouse Island.

John Hedderson of Straitsview was twelve years old when the *Nelson* grounded on what some people call Bennygaw Shoal, and he can remember the names of two men who ferried the shipwrecked crew in a dory off Mouse Island and safely to L'Anse aux Meadows: Hayward Burt from Random Island, Trinity Bay, and Pierce Blake.

Winston Colbourne of L'Anse aux Meadows mentions two other men who were said to have taken

the shipwrecked crew off Mouse Island: Don Pilgrim and Heber Elliott. Mr. Colbourne says, "Don belonged to Little Brehat; he was down here at the time, fishing."

The sinking of the *Nelson* is more than a story of a shipwreck; it's a poignant story of a father's search for the body of his drowned son, Cecil Smith. It was said that if Mr. Smith's hand had been a little longer—as long as a stick of chewing gum—he could have saved his son. "Poor Mr. Smith," says John Hedderson, "he made trips around the bay looking for his boy while they awaited the coastal boat to pick them up. He looked and looked for his son, but never did find him—never, ever found him. Some people say he did, but he never, poor man. He searched Black Duck Brook, Quarterdeck Cove, Evans Cove, and up as far as New Harbour."

People from all over helped search for the two missing men, but they were never found.

He blew the spar off with dynamite

For some time after the schooner sank, the spar from the *Nelson* could be seen sticking up out of the water. The following summer, Azariah Roberts from L'Anse au Pigeon blew the spar off with dynamite and used it for his own boat. It is said that the *Nelson* had two spars, but nobody ever got the other one.

Uncle Zachariah (Sack) Button—a merchant from Lead Cove, Trinity Bay who used to supply all the fishermen in Quirpon with nets—salvaged the motorboat and used it for years collecting liver and freight. He had

a liver factory on L'Anse aux Meadows point. The motorboat was a normal sized trap skiff, with a witch hazel keel made of yellow birch. According to Winston Colbourne, "The stem was the crookedest thing ever you saw in your life. It was shaped almost like the front of a canoe. Strangest thing you ever seen; they said she was the

finest kind of a sea boat. Uncle Sack used to take freight from the government wharf in Quirpon, down to Lower Quirpon, and he used that boat for years and years."

Mouse Island

Years later, the captain's daughter came to L'Anse aux Meadows to

see Mouse Island where her father and brothers had been shipwrecked and subsequently rescued. While there were no visible signs on the island of the tragedy, the memories in the minds of her family, and the people who witnessed the heart-breaking event, have survived the passage of time.