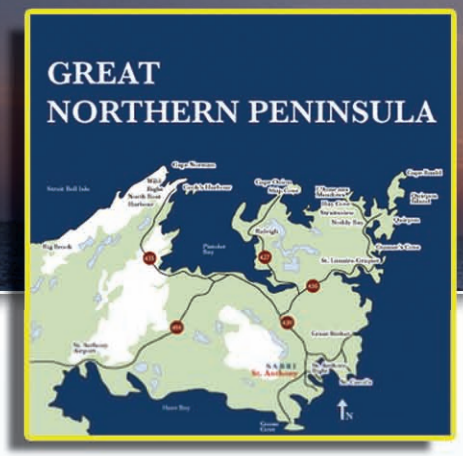

St. Anthony Bight

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.

St. Anthony Bight

John and Kay Pilgrim

John and Kay Pilgrim live in St. Anthony Bight beside his grandfather's one hundred year-old house. In January 1963 John was a young man of 21 years old. He got out of bed one morning to see a big wave roll into the fishing village of St. Anthony Bight, knocking down stages as if they were dinky toys.

John and Kay Pilgrim have fished the waters of the North Atlantic. John says it wasn't easy being a fisherman for thirty-five years in a little place like St. Anthony Bight. Now retired, he is an artist, painting what he sees around him: the landmarks, the culture and the people of Northern Newfoundland.

John Pilgrim was born in 1942 and Kay Pilgrim was born in 1948.

THE BIG WAVE
The storm of January 28, 1963

I was just getting out of bed and the day was dawning when the storm broke. There was no warning at all; no weather forecast predicting a storm; just a bit of slob coming in the Bight. All of a sudden it started to rise up out there; we couldn't see Fishing Point Head. When the waves rose up out there we could just see the top of the hill and it's pretty high (If you're looking out John Pilgrim's kitchen window, you can see a big headland in the distance.)

Something's happening!

The first time I saw it, I got up and looked through the window of the old house the way I always did. I said, "Oh, my God!" and cried out to Father, "Something's happening!"

John Pilgrim's Father in later years

He jumped up and everybody in the house got up and looked out. Some people in the community was already on the scene by then. There was people on the point and they already knew about it because they heard the roaring in the early morning. The people thought they might be able to salvage something but, by the time I got to the stages the wharf was already gone.

The storm didn't happen quickly; it happened over the course of an hour. There was a sea on, people could hear it, and the sea was higher than normal, and things were starting to get broken up. Big waves started to form and roll in and then they were doubled up like you would see in Hawaii, with the top curling up. The two or three families over there by the water – they all had to be evacuated. The windows broke out of their houses. There was an old grandmother; they hauled her up on the komatik to another house. The houses kept standing there, but the siding was ripped off the one closest to the sea; took the clapboard and the bridge off the side of it. They found ose eggs in the sink. The windows were broken in the house and the ose eggs come in with the sea. And that was way up high, too.

The waves were coming into the harbour at an angle – the wind was southeast – and the slob all went in ahead of it and packed in the bottom. The sea had nowhere to back up and so it come on in – and it was

John Pilgrim's father is one of three men (seen to right of picture) surveying the wreckage of stages and breakwaters

like tipping over dinkies. We were all down there, standing back, watching.

There's a path comes down from the knap, and once the sea was going good, the water come right in and flooded the knap and the ice clumpers were coming down the road, just the same as a waterfall or a river.

Buried in slob or sand

Twelve fishing stages were destroyed, plus two wharves (or breakwaters); they went first. There was nothing left, only rocks. We never lost either boat; they were just far enough out of reach. We had our rodney in the stage, up on top of the beams; we had her there for the winter, see, and the stages all got crashed, and we found the rodney out away from the ruined stage, with not a dent into her. She just survived, sitting pretty (bottom left of above photo). We don't know how it happened. Only one end of the stage was still standing. We had the make and break engines in there, too, and all the grapnels; all that was gone. We found our engine partly submerged in under the sand, and the grapenels were all buried in slob or sand.

All the puncheons was up there in Upper Cove; they were bobbing up and down in the slob like corks in the water. The puncheons were full of dog's grub: herring, and stuff like that.

Around dinner time, things started to taper off. The sea started to calm off (calm down) and everybody came out. After the storm we had a right beautiful evening; couldn't be no better. You could walk down there with your shoes on.

The Storm of 1963 at St. Anthony Bight

From trap skiffs to speed boats

And that was the first introduction to we of speedboats. That summer we couldn't use the motorboats no more because we never had no water to put them into; just rock. Before the storm fishermen used trap skiffs, but once the launch area was destroyed, they had to borrow flat-bottom speedboats.

There was a feller down in St. Carol's, he already had some speedboats. There wasn't a speedboat in the Bight before that storm but, that summer, we had to leave the trap skiffs where they were, turned bottom up.

A trap skiff (above) and a speedboat, carved by John Pilgrim

Repairing the breakwater

The storm happened in January, and the following fall we started to repair the breakwater. The government paid people to rebuild it; my father went to work on it. That winter, everybody went into the woods to cut logs to build their stages again. I worked like a dog; I was in with the axe, cutting wood; there was no chainsaw or bucksaw back then. By the following year they had the harbour all scooped out and dredged out and we were able to use it again.

We lost our old flat; we never seen her no more. We used a flat because you couldn't get in no further than the wharf with a load of fish because the trap skiff would bring up on the bottom, so you'd go out to the wharf with the flat, shovel the fish into the flat, and haul it back to the stage. There'd be a crowd on the stage head with a rope and they'd haul the flat in. They'd haul her right fast and she'd slide over the bottom. That's how the fish was brought in. The old fellers lived all their life in sacrifice; they had to do

all this extra work because they couldn't just bring a boat in like they could in other communities.

In spite of the extra work, or sacrifice involved, I think the reason the early settlers chose the Bight was because it was a better place to fish. If they settled elsewhere, they would have had a longer way to row. The whole idea of the settlement of Newfoundland was to be close to the fishing grounds, and the further out on the point you could build, the less distance you had to go. That was before the days of motorized boats. Back then you had to sail or row everywhere.

Best Fisherwoman in the bight

Kay Pilgrim took up fishing after John's father retired. Her memories of the fishery are bitter-sweet. On one hand she loved to fish; on the other hand, the government didn't treat her as fairly as she thought they should have. When she began to fish, her two children, Sheri and Johnny, were thirteen and six respectively. Kay fished for twelve years and never missed a day. Sheri was old enough then to take care of herself and young Johnny joined his parents in the boat when he wasn't in school.

They had no cell phones on the boat. "Just a compass," said John. Young Johnny liked to be in the boat with his parents and often spent the whole summer with them on the water.

John

Kay fished twelve years...never missed a day on the water...she never missed an hour. Ask any man in the Bight or St. Carol's or Brehat. They used to always say she was the only fisherwoman that ever they seen. She was a good fisherwoman; never seasick.

Kay

John's father retired at sixty-five and John fished alone seven years. I realized I could take care of a family and fish at the same time, and I took my son Johnny with me in the boat; he was six years old, and my daughter Sheri was thirteen when I started fishing. I jigged; I did gill nets, salmon nets and the trawl.

The other fishermen never treated me any differently; they'd just as soon stand up and talk to me about the fishery as anyone. It was the same going over to the fish plant to sell fish; the men used to come and talk to me about where we'd fished and what we'd caught.

John

They said she's the only fisherwoman that stayed on the water. If they wanted information on the fishery, if someone wanted to phone somebody to see how it was, they always wanted to talk to Kay. The fact that they phoned and asked Kay about the fishery meant they considered her an equal.

Kay

I took up fishing because I liked it; I liked being out on the water; I liked the rubber clothes. When I fished, I wore nylon gloves with rubber gloves overtop. We'd get up early and go out in the morning at five or six o'clock. At noon, we'd have sandwiches, tea, coffee, cookies, chips, whatever was handy, and get back home around four or five o'clock in the evening.

John

Back when Father and I fished together, we used to light a fire in the boat. We had an old piece of iron, and we put it on the afterlocker and we'd cook on that, or we'd put it on the cuddy. Dinner time, we'd stop fishing and light a fire or, if there was more boats around, we'd gather around and have a cook-up; or sometimes we used to go ashore, and they'd all gather around and have a yarn. We'd fry pork and onions, fresh fish, potatoes and fresh bread all together in a pan.

John

But if there was any fish to catch, then you wouldn't eat, you'd wait till the fish was took up. It was at noontime, almost every noontime – if the women were in the motorboat especially – around twelve o'clock the fish give up. You couldn't get no more fish.

Kay

The fish used to go to their dinner, I used to say. Once they went to the bottom you couldn't jig them.

John

Around three or four o'clock in the evening they'd take on again. Our main fishing grounds were right near St. Anthony Bight, out along the coast. Trawling and gillnetting was in the same place, but further out, on the banks. In late years we used to go across the Bay up towards Conche and Croque. And then we'd go to Brehat shoal, right down off St. Lunaire-Griquet.

Fair pay

John

The first year Kay went fishing, she never got no stamps. I didn't know she could do it. I was that bloody honest. She fished the first summer for free, just to see could she do it. Now! What a foolish thing, eh?

Kay

If I'd known then what I know now, I would have had my stamps. Yes, sir! And, at the end of the fishery – I fished as any other man did – John retired and he could have sold his license back. The government wouldn't transfer his Ground Fish license to me because I wasn't a blood relation. So, he had to give up his license to the government. Father-daughter could have done it, but not a wife.

The only one against me as a fisherwoman was the government.

John

I didn't retire me license afterwards; they just took it. I decided to go the other way and took early retirement.

Kay

And I never got nothing. The government took it. I had a personal fishing license. But John had the Ground Fish license because that's all we needed, we thought. And everything we sold over those twelve years was half and half – in both our names. I reported half the income on my tax return. When we got paid, we got two cheques.

John

I wasn't the skipper – I wasn't paying her. But when it come to the end of the day, they wouldn't give her my Ground Fish license.

Kay

If I had it to do over, I'd have got my own Ground Fish license, but then, we would have had to fish in separate boats. But it really poisoned me; it still do, that he had the license and I fished over twelve years, and the government said, "You can't have his license." The law protects the spouse in everything else, but not in the fishery.

John

One day I got an envelope by registered mail. There it was: Your license has expired. Signed and Sealed. I had a herring license, a mackerel license, a seal license...they all went.

Kay

Everything fell, and he couldn't pass it to me because I wasn't a blood relation. So when he retired, I was forced to retire, too.

John

My father didn't want me to go fishing; he wasn't a man of many words, but he told me fishing would be a hard life; mother used to say it, too. But I have no regrets. I guess you could say I grew into it; I followed in my father's footsteps, and I'd go back at it again if I could.

Glossary
Dictionary of Newfoundland English

1. Slob: Heavy, slushy, densely packed mass of ice fragments, snow and freezing water, especially on the surface of the sea.
2. Komatik: a long sled, adopted in northern Newfoundland for winter travel and hauled by dogs or sometimes men; sledge for hauling wood.
3. Ose eggs: Sea-urchin; sea-egg.
4. Bridge: a small, uncovered platform at the door of a house to which the steps lead; (b) a similar structure at the entrance to other types of building, sometimes at more than one level.
5. Knap: a raised portion of land, often with a round top; crest of a hill; KNOB.
6. Clumpers: a small ice-berg; floating pan of ice; GROWLER.
7. Rodney: a small round-bottomed boat with square stern, used chiefly as a tender; a small 'punt'.
8. Grapenel: light anchor to moor small boats and fixed or stationary fishing gear.
9. Puncheons: the largest of the wooden casks used as containers in the fisheries; a molasses cask with a capacity of 44-140 gallons.
10. Flat: a small flat-bottomed boat, ten feet long and with a square stern, rowed with a pair of oars and used chiefly by fishermen as a tender in a cove or harbour, occasionally for fishing in sheltered coastal waters.

St. Anthony Bight

Olive Pilgrim

Wet boots in Newfoundland are a common problem, so how does a person dry his or her boots effectively overnight? Olive Pilgrim of St. Anthony Bight says her grandfather had the solution.

Olive's maternal grandfather, Richard Applin, met and married his wife Catherine and settled in Shoal Cove West. Their daughter Christina was Olive's mother. Olive Barney was born April 12, 1947, married Gerald Pilgrim and they settled in St. Anthony Bight.

According to Olive Pilgrim, her grandfather Applin – who came from England – was a fisherman all his life and he was always at something out in his store. She minds how her grandfather, after a day out fishing, would come in with wet boots – she's not sure if he learned the method for drying them in England, or invented it himself – and the method he employed for drying them was unlike anything she had ever seen before, or since.

Small, smooth stones

One evening Olive and her husband, Gerald, dropped by the community of Shoal Cove West to visit her grandfather. Young Gerald took off his wet boots and left them by the door.

Imagine their surprise when, without a word of explanation, Grandfather Applin took a galvanized bucket of small, marble-sized rocks from behind the stove, spread them out on top of the woodstove, and began rolling them over the surface of the stove with his hands. When the rocks were warm – but not so warm he couldn't hold them in his hand – Grandfather poured the small, round rocks into Gerald's wet boots, and sat back down to his tea.

Later that night, in bed, Gerald muttered, "What do he think, me boots is going to run away?"

The next morning, when Gerald pulled on his boots, they were perfectly dry!

*****

If you'd like to try this method but don't have a woodstove, Mrs. Pilgrim suggests putting the small, smooth stones on a cookie sheet and warming them in a 100 degree F. oven.

The sea was too rough, there was no snow, and there were no roads

Rebecca Pilgrim

Figure 1 Rebecca Pilgrim

Rebecca, or Becky, was only six years old when her mother, Dinia (pronounced Dinah) died, leaving behind a husband , George Saunders, and five daughters. George moved his family from Cook's Harbour to St. Anthony Bight, where his oldest daughter, Bessie, was working as a servant girl. Becky's sister, Dorcas, who might have been fifteen at the time, went to live with the Pilgrims. Becky lived with her aunt and uncle Simms, and the youngest girl went to St. Carols to live with her oldest sister, who was married.

When her mother died of a miscarriage at the age of forty-five, Becky says she might have been saved if there had been roads, but at that time there were no roads. It was the first of November and the sea was too rough to go by boat, and there was no snow so she couldn't travel by dog team, so Dinia hemorrhaged and died.

Becky, who was born April 20, 1928, grew up and married William Pilgrim in 1945 when she was seventeen. She and Will had fourteen children and raised a grandchild as well. Like most young girls of her time, she was always told babies came from stumps. "I knows a woman over in the cove, she and her sister walked to St. Carols for to get the midwife, which was Aunt Grace Richards. They went down and got Aunt Grace to come up, because they wanted to get a baby out of the stump, and they was looking for big stumps going down, but they couldn't find no big ones, so they said, well, it don't matter, if it's a small baby, well, she'll grow up. Now, boy!"

William worked at various occupations. He was a fisherman, he worked in the woods and he worked on the American Radar Site. He worked at sheet metal for

about years, and was employed with the Highways Department for twenty years driving trucks and a snowplow in winter and building roads in the summer. William died in the mid-1990s.

Figure 2 Aunt Becky demonstrates the art of carding wool

Shearing sheep & spinning wool

Shearing sheep was a common practice in some of the communities on the Northern Peninsula. Becky grew up with sheep shearing and carding and spinning wool, and explains how it was done.

When we sheared the sheep in the fall of the year, or in the spring of the year, we put our wool in the washing tub and soaked it in water. And every once in awhile, probably every two or three days, we would change the water on it, throw that off and put more clean on it. But, the last washing you would put hot water on it and then we'd put suds in it, and then we'd keep washing with your hands, or use a stick to mix it up, and do that until it was clean. We used a little drop of Javex if we needed to whiten it up.

Now, lye, if you wanted to use lye, you could use it to whiten flour sacks, and we used to make sheets and pillow slips with the flour sacks.

We dried fish on hand flakes; they're four feet wide and eight feet long. So, to dry the wool, we'd take it and spread it on hand flakes and put them up a bit high, probably put them on meat buckets to have them up high in the wind, and the wind would go through and under and dry the wool and when the wool was dry it was ready to be sent away. We'd put it in bags and send it to Briggs & Little. There were a couple more places we sent our wool, and we still sends it away now.

After you got the wool dry, it'd be all matted together. When the youngsters got bigger, they'd sit down at night and pull the wool to loosen it and get the dust out of it. Then we'd put an old brin bag over our legs to cover our clothes, and we'd have kerosene oil, probably in a can, and we'd have a feather, which would be a bird's feather – from the wing of a bird – and we'd put the feather down in the oil and put a drop of oil on the wool, and card it so that it would be soft. And the wool would come out so long as your card anyway, and be rolled up right nice. Then you'd go to the head of your spinning wheel and you'd have your wool on the carder, and put it on the spindle, and you'd go with your wheel and haul out your wool; it was unbelievable how you could stretch it out. If you wanted big wool, you wouldn't stretch it so much, but if you wanted small wool, well, you'd stretch it some more. It was really nice.

Laundry was hung on the clothesline, winter or summer. When she first married, clothes were washed in a galvanized washtub, using a scrub board. As a wedding gift, Becky was given a scrub board, and still has it, sixty-three years later.

The Americans

Many young Newfoundland women married members of the American armed forces and went away to live in the States. According to Aunt Becky, "Leaving here and going to the States was a big thing back then." Aunt Becky Pilgrim was suspicious of the Americans when they came to St. Anthony Bight, and admits she was 'frightened right to death of them.' She would lock her door if she saw them coming. The American troops were stationed up on the hill in St. Anthony, so when they got time off they'd take a boat across to St. Anthony Bight and do some sightseeing. But as much as she locked her doors to keep the Americans out, she couldn't lock the doors of her oldest daughter's heart.

"My oldest daughter, Ruby, married an American, John McGonigle. He went back to the States after the Americans pulled out of St. Anthony, and then he phoned for her to come out to Ohio. After they got married he got out of the Forces and came back here to live."

Breech loader

Aunt Becky has a breech loader belonging to her husband Will's grandfather. Hanging on a nail beside the breech loader is a powder horn and a leather pouch for shot. On the powder horn there is an etching of a bird carved into the bone. The breech loader was used for hunting birds.

According to Aunt Becky, there was a man in St. Anthony who knew that Will had the breech loader, and offered to buy it, but, "Will wouldn't sell that for a fortune, because it was his grandfather's."

Figure 3 An old breech loader that belonged to William's grandfather