

## GREAT NORTHERN PENINSULA



Canada



Newfoundland  
Labrador



# Tuberculosis

*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.

## Nurse's Aide at the Grenfell Hospital in St. Anthony

ELIZA COLBOURNE, L'ANSE AUX MEADOWS



Figure 1 Eliza Colbourne

### Nurses's aide

The Grenfell Hospital was a big industry in St. Anthony. For girls like me, coming out of school, getting a job as a nurse's aide was common. I finished grade nine and went to work at the hospital because there was a great need for nurse's aides back then, and some say there were as many as eight hundred patients at the hospital at that time. While I worked as a nurse's aide I lived in St. Anthony.

By August 1961 I was seventeen years old and had been working as an aide for a few years. There was no formal training involved; four or five of us would be working a shift together and we would bring up the

trolleys and serve the patients their meals, put up their tables so they could eat, and crank up their beds. We would rub their backs with liniment and make sure they took their pills, and we'd take their temperature.

One day while working at the hospital, my father, Selby Tucker, showed up. He was obviously sick and, after testing, was admitted to the sanatorium with a suspected case of pneumonia, and that was the first I knew he was sick. Later, we discovered he had Tuberculosis. Father's physician was Dr. John M. Gray.

I visited my father every day I worked there, because I worked on the same floor. I wasn't worried about getting TB because we used to wear masks; we didn't wear them all the time, mainly when we cleaned or changed the bedding. If we just walked into a patient's room, we didn't bother.

My younger brother Harvey and my younger sister Sheila were both admitted about a month later; I think they had an iron deficiency, and they had arrived aboard the *Albert T. Gould*. While they were in hospital, they attended school; all the children in hospital used to attend, and they were all in one classroom together. None of the children were that sick that they couldn't attend school.

Later, when Harvey and Sheila were better, they were flown home to Ship Cove by plane.

I liked working at the hospital and, if I lived in St. Anthony now, I'd work there again.

## Ship Cove

ROBERT TUCKER



Figure 1 Bob Tucker Recalls a Time When His Father Had TB

*Robert (Bob) Tucker was born December 11, 1948 in Ship Cove. He was the oldest boy in a large family when his father was hospitalized for six months with tuberculosis. Bob tells how their family carried on while their father recuperated from TB in the sanatorium in St. Anthony.*

The summer of 1961, my father had been fishing as part of a crew – Uncle Wilfred, his father Kenneth, and himself – and I was just getting my foot in the door. I remember me and Father was out in boat jiggging, and within a couple days after that he went to the hospital in St. Anthony. I was twelve and a half years old then; the oldest boy. When Father got sick, Uncle Bill Tucker took him across Pistolet Bay to Western Brook by boat; then either Thomas Penney or Lewis Evans, I'm not sure which one, took him to St. Anthony in a car. The roads

were gravel back then; more of a trail than anything. When he got to St. Anthony, he stayed at the home of Gideon (Gid) Colbourne. He went to the hospital the next day, which was August 29, his thirty-fifth birthday, and they kept him in. He was diagnosed with tuberculosis and it was automatic then, he had to be admitted.

There was a part of the hospital that was especially for those who had TB; it was called the “San”, or Sanatorium.

I suppose it was late September that we got the news that everybody had to go over for chest x-rays. We went over to St. Anthony on the *Albert T. Gould*, the mission boat. There was my mother and us children, plus our grandmother Betty and our grandfather Kenneth Tucker. The skipper of the mission boat was Captain Small and he let me take the wheel for awhile with Grandfather standing behind. Gee! I was only that tall! I’ll never forget it. I kept the wheel of the boat straight. And when we arrived at the Grenfell wharf, I was amazed at all the buildings in St. Anthony.

I think the two youngest children had to be hospitalized for a month because they were run down.

I didn’t see my father for five months. He came home, so far as I know, late one night in February; I remember waking up and hearing his voice. The next morning he looked at me, and said, “Well, you grew a little bit.” But he couldn’t do anything in the way of work; he was laid up for two years. And for two years he took roughly thirty pills a day out of big brown bottles. He had a hole in his lung, and the only cure was pills, good food, and bed rest.

So, here we were, going into the winter of 1961. We all started back to school, but in spring 1962, mother kept me out of school to haul wood. One day an RCMP officer showed up at our door; the teacher had reported my absence and my parents were fined ten dollars for keeping me out of school.

### Helping out

I had to go up around the shore cutting wood, me and Rick, who was 11. Sometimes my younger brother Len, who was eight or nine years old, helped to haul wood.

Uncle Reg at J&R Decker store sold us a couple ton of coal, and Ray Decker brought up the coal in a truck on the local road and dropped it off; it was kept in a shed. I had to bring a bucket of coal in each evening. We were only able to afford coal because Mother applied for Welfare and they paid for it. Using coal helped us because it burned longer, and it could be used along with wood. There wasn’t much wood because Father was too ill to cut it.

I helped look after the dogs, keeping them fed. There were six or seven dogs; they ate dried capelin or Mother would cook them a meal.

As far as I can remember, my mother pretty well had everything down pat; she had to do it all. She had to look after the dogs getting fed, and eight children getting fed, and the coal, making sure she had enough in the shed. She kept the wood by the door, kept eight or nine hens, and there was water that had to be brought by hand or by dogsled.

In those days there was no TV – just a radio. There was only one

phone in the community. There was no electricity; just a mantle lamp (a tall lamp that went on a stand on the wall), and the old Comfort stove (cast iron with an oven on top). I can remember if Mother plucked a duck, we would roast the livers and hearts on top of the stove, and they’d ‘flutter’ across the surface as if they were alive.

For housework, Mother had Louise at home to help. My oldest sister, Eliza, was working at the hospital; she was a nurse’s aide. That was a big thing for young girls back then; a lot of them worked there, and they were paid.

I can’t remember too much about that first Christmas when he was sick. He wasn’t home, and there wasn’t very much for Christmas, but we went through all that, and when February came, he was home.

Back then, we just accepted that my father was ill and my mother was in charge. It was just the way things were. We never thought, “What’s going to happen? What are we going to do?” Father just went to St. Anthony and that was it. Mother took care of everything. He was one of the lucky ones; lots of people had to have operations; but the medicine took care of his.

Around here, tuberculosis was referred to as, “the poor man’s disease.” People never really had enough nourishment or proper nutrition. If they got sick with influenza or caught a cold, they couldn’t afford to give up and quit; they’d keep going, and that would make things worse, and then they’d get flu on top of it. Far as I know, when he went into the hospital he went right down to 124 pounds; when he came out, he was around 165-170 pounds.

I remember Mother, she started making us drink a glass of milk at night, but it wasn't fresh milk, it was canned. We used to get cod liver oil going to school. It was a provincial thing; they came up with the idea to give it to the children at school. They also gave us coco malt. The government encouraged that because, in the isolated places, the diet was so limited.

I don't remember going hungry; beans was a big thing. Before Father got sick, we used to have wild meat, and ducks, and stuff like that. While he was sick we had bread, molasses and tea. There was squashberry, bakeapple, and partridgeberry jam to eat with bread.

Mother kept a garden, so we would help pick up the potatoes and put them in sacks. She had to set the garden in spring, and come September she had to dig it up. She grew turnip and carrots, and she pickled turnip greens in salt and water.

Of course, half the time we weren't really dressed that well, not compared to the way it is now, probably a pair of rubber boots and worsted socks on, and the house, back then, wasn't good by no means. It was just a storage shed made into a house with a bit of clapboard on and a few windows; that was it.

When the old man was in the hospital, probably around the middle of January – there was a storm. The wind was northeast or northern. All we had was a bit of wood and a bit of coal and the mantle lamp, and when we went to bed the fire was out. I remember waking up, and sometime during the night towards morning, the old-fashioned wind-up clock stopped – you'd wind it up with a little key – it was

that cold. And Mother took the clock and put it down under the bedclothes – there were a dozen blankets on the bed, likely – and by and by you heard the clock, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick.

It was tough times back then – but we never really knew it – and we made it through.

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## Tuberculosis

SELBY & DELILAH TUCKER,  
SHIP COVE

**For almost twenty years of my life with the mission, tuberculosis was by far the most critical problem we faced. Malnutrition, scurvy, rickets, diphtheria, beriberi, and typhoid – housing, medicine, and public health gradually beat them down. Tuberculosis was far more stubborn.**

*- Dr. Gordon Thomas,  
From Sled to Satellite*

In Newfoundland, during the 1940s and 1950s, tuberculosis reached epidemic proportions. If the epidemic was bad in Canada, it was worse in northern Newfoundland and, if it was worse in northern Newfoundland, it was doubly worse in Labrador.

Most TB patients suffered from pulmonary tuberculosis, which involved the lungs. Standard treatment at that time was bed rest and good food, but if that didn't help, surgery was the next step. At St. Anthony, a new sanatorium opened its doors summer 1953; prior to that, there was only a wooden frame annex behind the hospital, and it was habitable only in summer. Patients were discharged in the winter and usually sent home at the

risk of infecting their families.

Dr. Gordon Thomas, in his book, *From Sled to Satellite*, highlights the factors that contributed to the demise of tuberculosis: first, the standard of living improved after Confederation; second, isolation of patients in the new sanatorium; third, surgical techniques improved; and fourth and most important, the use of new drugs, starting with streptomycin.

From 1953 to 1965 the sanatorium and the hospital were filled to capacity, with as many as one hundred tuberculosis patients in the hospital at one time.

Dr. Thomas concludes: "In our assault on tuberculosis we were up against persistent bacteria, ever ready to break out into new infections. But finally, with new medicine and better housing and nutrition, we achieved a slow decline in the incidence and severity of this disease. It was one of the most successful chapters in the long history of the Grenfell Mission."

*From Sled to Satellite*

## The Scourge of Tuberculosis

*This story highlights the plight of one family in a small fishing village on the tip of the Great Northern Peninsula when the scourge of Tuberculosis struck the primary provider in the family. It will give the reader some insight into the hardships that families endured in those hard times. Selby Tucker spent six months in the sanatorium, then returned to his home in Ship Cove to recuperate.*

*Mr. Tucker remembers Dr. John M. Gray very fondly, that good doctor who attended him for the full six months he was a patient at the St.*

*Anthony hospital. Both Selby and Delilah recount their experiences in this story.*

I knew I was sick; I could feel it. When I finally went to the hospital, I was 124 pounds. My normal weight was 155-160 pounds.

still eat. Then Monday morning he'd be feeling pretty good and he'd be out in boat all day, then he'd come in and be tired again.

It was Selby's thirty-fifth birthday the day he went to the hospital, and we presented him with a Bible.

*Selby*

When I got to the hospital, they told me to come in next morning for a chest x-ray. I stayed overnight at Gideon Colbourne's. When the hospital took the x-ray, they decided to keep me in.

*Delilah*

The way I found out he was staying at the hospital, the hospital phoned the Decker's (there was only one phone in the community), and somebody came up and told me. I wasn't really upset about his staying in; I couldn't do anything about it anyway.



Figure 1 Selby and Delilah Tucker 2009

### **Lying around all day**

*Selby*

The Sanatorium, called "the San" by local residents, used to get that cold wintertime they'd shift the patients back into the hospital. By the time I was admitted, the San had been condemned and they'd built a new sanatorium on the back of the hospital.

I was sick long before I went to the hospital. I was napping a lot. I'd be down at the stages and people would find me sleeping on the nets, or when I got home, I'd lie down and sleep.

He says, "You'd think you'd be alright; you'd rest so long, you'd think you'd be able to get up and go on, and then you'd start getting tired."

*Delilah*

He was tired. We figured it was flu, then a cold, he'd get better for a week, then he'd get it again. Saturday evening when he'd finish fishing, well then, Sunday he'd be lying around all day, although he could

### **I never seen a soul**

*Delilah*

I had set the garden in the spring of the year and trenched it in June or July. September-month, he was in the hospital, so I tell you what I done. It was time to dig the garden around the last week of September. Being the smart one, I said, now, I'll start a little bit early. I figured it was only myself, and someone would come along the once and help me. I decided the best time of day to dig potatoes was while the children were at school. I went up there in the garden, I hauled the



Figure 2 Delilah Tucker still has the Bible they gave to Selby in 1961

stalks up on four or five beds; they were long beds, and I started digging. I never seen a soul the first day. I tell you, I dug four beds. When I got them dug, I picked them up, I took the old wooden wheelbarrow, and I put three sacks at a time in the wheelbarrow, and I wheeled it down and I put them in the store.

Now, you have to understand, back then, wooden wheelbarrows had wooden wheels, so they were much harder to push than the kind people use now. That went on, day after day. Finally, I believe I had three beds left when, by and by, somebody phoned, or come up from the Decker's saying that Selby wanted to see me at the hospital. He wanted me to talk to Dr. Gray because Dr. Gray was telling him something about his treatment that he didn't understand. So, anyway, I believe the *Northern Ranger* was in Raleigh – or one of the coastal boats – I got ready and went on into St. Anthony in the coastal boat. Dr.

Gray told me then that Selby had a hole in his lung, and he was going to put him on treatment, and he'd keep checking, and if that didn't close in, he would have to have surgery.

### Still waiting for me!

When I got back to Ship Cove, there were the three beds of potatoes still waiting for me!

### The Sanitorium

#### *Delilah*

The first report was that he had pneumonia, and they had to clear that up, to see if it affected his lung. So, it was a month giving him treatment for pneumonia. When his lungs got clear enough, they done x-rays and found he had a hole in his lung, so they put him on pills.

#### *Selby*

If the treatment didn't work, they'd have to do surgery, but the

treatment healed it up. I took over 32,000 pills.

#### *Delilah*

The first month he was in there, he had needles, penicillin for pneumonia. The pills came in cans or cork bottles, and he had to take two kinds.

### Dr. John M. Gray

#### *Selby*

Dr. Gray took care of me for the full six months I was there. He stopped by to check me once a week. They had a schoolroom at the hospital to teach children because some of the children was sick, too. There were nurse's aides, and they used to help teach the children and give food to the patients, things like that. Eliza was a nurse's aide; she was sixteen or seventeen when she worked there; she lived in residence with the hospital staff.

### Riding to St. Anthony on the *Albert T. Gould*

#### *Selby*

After they realized I had tuberculosis, they sent a mission boat to Ship Cove to bring Del and the children to St. Anthony for x-rays.

#### *Delilah*

We all went on the *Albert T. Gould*, and Selby's mother and father went too. Captain Small had Bob up in the wheelhouse, steering. But Bob was sick as a dog.

While I was at the hospital, Dr. Gray asked me, "What time did you last eat?" They had done an x-ray in the evening, and the next morning they wanted to do another one. And I said, "I had me breakfast." And he



Figure 3 Crafts made by Selby at the Sanitorium

took another x-ray, and he come back and he said he never seen anybody's lungs so clear in his life. The two youngest children ended up in hospital (Harvey was five and Sheila was two) for a month because they figured they had a touch of the same thing.

### **A \$10 fine**

*When Selby returned home, he wasn't able to do anything physically strenuous, so he and Delilah decided to keep their oldest son Bob home for a few days to haul wood.*

#### *Delilah*

It was winter when we kept Bob back to haul wood. He was thirteen years old then.

#### *Selby*

And the teacher blowed the roast because we had Bob took out of school. I wasn't allowed to take him out of school, see, so a Mountie showed up at the door.

#### *Delilah*

We had a bit of wood up along the shore and we wanted to get it home, so Bob stayed home a few days. When the snow got down and he could use the komatik and the dogs, he went down around the shore to haul wood. The wood was already cut, so he just had to load the komatik and bring it home. And the teacher never said we weren't allowed to keep him home without giving notice, and I never thought to tell him.

#### *Selby*

I told the Mountie my circumstances, that I was sick and I kepted him home for that, and he said I had

a good point, and that I could take it to court if I wanted to. If I had gone to court, I wouldn't have had to pay a fine of ten dollars.

#### *Delilah*

See, in the circumstances we was in, there was no transportation to St. Anthony, and he was too sick to go to court. We could have took it to court and wouldn't have had to pay nothing, but it would have cost me more than that to get back and forth to St. Anthony. The easiest way out was to give him ten dollars and let him go.

### **Sniffing and hollering**

#### *Delilah*

In the spring of the year, 1962, sometime in March or April, the seals come over Back of the Land – young seals – you'd hear talk of the young seals. Well, that put the top on it altogether. Selby said, "Seals over on the Back of the Land and I can't go over and get n'er one!"

"Well, Selb," I said, "You know you're not supposed to do anything."

He said to me – he's stubborn – "I don't have to do nothing. I can harness up the dogs and go over." He went on, sniffing and hollering. "Well, boy," I said, "If that's how you feels about it, if you thinks you can do it, brother. But don't you dare to go on the ice!"

Well, he was going to listen, just like that, eh?

"No," he said, "I promise. I won't go out on the ice nowhere."

He wasn't gone very long, when back he come with a couple seals. He just had to go out.

And up comes his mother – looking at his seals, when she heard

he'd caught some – up she come. "Now," she said, "When you get those seals cleaned, I wants a couple shoulders; a couple flippers." She had enough of her own, but she wanted some of what he had.

### **Hauling water**

*Delilah and the children had to haul water because, back then, there was no plumbing. The brook was perhaps three hundred feet from the house. There were different brooks spread around and, as they froze up in the winter, they had to go further afield. Eventually they had to go to Eel Brook, a mile away, just to get water. The water was used for drinking, cooking, and cleaning. There was no hot-running water; all water was boiled on the stove for laundry and cooking and washing up.*

#### *Delilah*

In those two years – when Selby couldn't take the axe or the bucket to get a pail of water – what had to be done was done by me and the youngsters alone. I tell you the truth; I can remember only one person coming to the house in the middle of the winter to see if we needed any water, or wanted anything done.

During those two years, there was no fresh meat, and very little fish or wild game. Sometimes we'd get a scatter fish or bird from somebody.

### **Clean bill of health**

It was not until winter 1964 that Selby was given a clean bill of health and was permitted to return to work. He made plans that spring

to return to the fishing boat with his father Kenneth and brother Wilfred. Sons Robert and Ricky, along with nephew Carl, would round out the crew. Shortly after, they got into the trap fishery and things began to

look up. Younger boys were coming up that could eventually join the crew. Selby began construction of an addition to the 'shack' on the hill, but then realized a desire to return to the place where he had been

born, and built a new house in Tucker's Cove. Selby, Delilah and children moved into the new house in 1964 and that is where he and Delilah live comfortably today.