

Belle Isle



Norman Cull Great Brehat Fishing at Belle Isle



Norm Cull sits at the table at his home in Great Brehat. He shares memories of the fishery and tells a few stories about fishing at Belle Isle.

Although he had been born and raised in Great Brehat, Norman Cull fished at Belle Isle for at least a dozen years, and that because there were more fish there than in the waters surrounding his own community. Generally, when fishing, he and his crew moored the longliner in Lark Tickle at Ringbolt Cove and lived aboard of her. When fishing, they'd ice the fish in the ⁱhold and when they had enough fresh fish they'd steam to Quirpon—a 2 ½ hour journey there and a 2 ½ hour journey back. Depending on the size of their catch, they might deliver the fish once or twice a week.

Moored at Lark Tickle was Glen Penney's longliner *Penney's Dream* and Harold

Parsons' schooner **The Willing Lass*. Roderick Cull took over Paddy Miller's ⁱⁱroom at Black Joke. There were two crews using Paddy Miller's ⁱⁱⁱstage: the Stricklands from Lushes Bight, and Roderick's crew.

Norm Cull's crew consisted of himself and his brothers Wallace and Carl. They fished from June to August in a 22' speedboat. During the day they'd haul the ^{iv}trap from the speedboat and at night, sleep aboard the longliner. After the first year Norm had a 26' trap boat built.

“Fishing Belle Isle goes back to old fishing schooners and men like Saul White and Paddy Miller,” remarks Norm. “Before local fishers set traps at Belle Isle, fishers from Twillingate, New World Island and up around Fogo came up every summer to fish. These men usually moored their schooners in Black Tickle because they couldn't stay in Black Joke with a schooner; only smaller boats could moor there. Some fishermen moored their schooners on the south side at Greenham's Bight, or there was always Ring Bolt Cove,” he recalls.

The Honour System

When it came to trap ^vberths there was never a draw system at Belle Isle; fishermen never took another fisherman's berth. There was an understanding that certain berths belonged to regular fishers at Belle Isle, and whatever free berths that were available were used at will.

A Living Hurricane

--By Norm Cull

“The Strait of Belle Isle is one of the roughest places on earth. The swells are coming at you from every direction; it’s like a river. And you can just drop off a swell with no warning. We were coming across one time in a 35’ boat. I had an escape hatch on the boat; it had a frame around the hold and a Plexiglas cover on top, which allowed light to shine down into the hold. That cover wasn’t hinged; it sat on top of the hatch.

“One day we were halfway across the Straits when we hit a living hurricane. The ocean looked like ice; it was white. I was at the wheel when all of a sudden the boat plunged into a hole, and came up, and when she plunged into the next hole she went down so fast that the skylight lifted off and stayed in the air, and when the boat came back up, the skylight came right back down on the hatch and never missed a beat. My brother Wallace was up on deck, and he said to me, ‘Did I just see what I saw?’ I said, ‘Yes, you did.’ But it happened so fast that I went right to my knees at the wheel; it was just like a free-fall. You had to see it to believe it.”

Paddy Miller Jr. shared the following story of a nor’easter and his father’s schooner, the *Mile R*

--as told by Norm Cull

“Paddy Miller Jr. was eight or nine years old when he sailed to Belle Isle with his father, Paddy Miller, Sr. According to young Paddy, the *Mile R* was the best schooner that ever sailed the seas, and she had two tall spars.

“So, the story goes that Paddy Miller and his crew were moored in Lark Tickle at Ringbolt Cove towards the northwest end of Belle Isle. At one o’clock one night a nor’easter blew in. A storm had been brewing all day but the crew hadn’t given it much heed; they figured it was just a storm; but by the time they decided to leave Lark Tickle, the storm wouldn’t let them.

“They had two 500-pound anchors at the end of the *Mile R*. From one ‘o’clock until ten o’clock the next morning they were trying to saw the chains off, enough to let the anchors go. Paddy had a 150-pound ketch anchor with a two-inch hawser attached at the stern of the schooner to keep her from slewing around, and this anchor was attached to a rock. The ketch anchor washed off the rock and ended up somewhere in the middle of the ^vickle between Lark Island and Belle Isle.

“The storm got so bad the crew were about to give up. One of the men sprinkled holy water on the crew, although one man aboard the schooner refused to be sprinkled and remarked stoutly that he could depend on his own mettle, thank you!

“Paddy Miller and his crew made an attempt to sail for Black Joke on the northeast bill of Belle Isle, but the *Mile R* hadn’t enough power to make headway against the wind and the seas were breaking all around them. They had no other choice but to turn back; to keep the wind in their stern. Paddy Miller Sr. hauled the schooner around in the harbor and headed south. Somewhere in the tickle between Lark Island and Belle Isle there was a cave in the cliff face of Belle Isle. When the boat yawed with the heavy seas, her two spars hooked into the cave in the cliff and

snapped off right to the deck. Now they had no spars and the wheelhouse was gone. They were left with no equipment. They lashed themselves to the wheel until they were out in the middle of the straits and were headed for Quirpon, and by the time they sailed into Quirpon there wasn't a thing left on her.

"They spent a full week repairing her, enough to get back out to Belle Isle. Paddy Miller Jr. told me he had never witnessed anything like it in his life.

"The following year Paddy Miller Sr. couldn't find a crew willing to sail. The only crew he said he could find was greenhorns, with little or no experience."

A 'slingshot' escape from a place called Beauty Cove

Norm Cull recalls a narrow escape in a terrible storm:

"We were moored up at Beauty Cove with two ropes to the stern and two to the head of the boat (you moor up on all four corners). Glen Penney was moored up in the shelter of the cove, but I was on the western side and the sea was coming right in and ^{vii}flousing on top of my boat. At three o'clock in the morning the wind veered from the south and I could feel the boat tugging more than she should. Dishes were starting to fall out of the cupboards, and I said to myself, 'Gee, what's going on?'

"So I called the boys and said, 'Boys, we're going to have to get out, if we can get out.' I was afraid we might lose the boat and end up climbing the cliffs. It was pitch-dark; I couldn't see a thing. And I wondered how we were going to get out this time. I called Glen and told him we were in trouble and we were going to make a break for it. So, in my mind, there was only one thing to do. I got the motor going and told the boys to get to the stern of the boat with the fire axes and when I gave the command to chop the lines, they were to chop. I turned the motor on full power and watched the seas. There's always a third sea. After the third one, she'll calm down a bit. When she calmed down, I said, 'okay boys, cut!'

"The boys cut right through the ropes, then scabbled back inside the boat and away we went, but by that time the sea was coming in again. When we passed the point, the sea broke in over our boat and floused right down on the stern. The boat levelled off and became heavy. But we made it out, and motored through the waves to Black Joke and moored there."

An old fisherman gets even

There was a fellow fished at the berth called The Rock, but the following spring Paddy Miller took the berth first. The other fellow had an old condemned tow-boat, so he took the old tow-boat, placed her above Paddy Miller's trap, and filled her full of rocks and sunk her right on top of Paddy Miller's trap. Next time Paddy Miller tried to haul his trap, he couldn't do a thing with it.

Skippers and their boats at Belle Isle:

- Glen Penney. *Penney's Dream*
- Melvin Penney. *Even Tide*
- Harold Parsons. *The Willing Lass*
- Ralph Rose. *Connie James*
- Sherman Saunders. *Saunders Endeavor*
- Gus Young (Twillingate). *Blue Foam*
- Morris Ford (Fogo). *Three Brothers*

They all moored at Ringbolt Cove.

Ruby Penney Great Breat Fishing at Belle Isle

Before Ruby Penney went fishing with her husband Glen and his crew she worked at the local bank in the accounting department; then she opened a sewing shop. But when the shop didn't pan out she decided to go fishing. In the winter months when she wasn't fishing Ruby sewed a good many quilts and fashioned sealskin garments and footwear.



Penney's Dream moored at a place called Beauty

The boat swamped...

Ruby loved being out on the water and claims she was never seasick. She fished at Belle Isle with her husband Glen from 1981-1989. She recalls, "There was one time when the boys came in with a boatload of fish; I was aboard our longliner, *Penney's Dream*. Melvin Penney's longliner, the *Even Tide*, was moored alongside ours. Our boat came in, and Melvin's boat came in, and then the sea came in and swamped Glen's boat. It was still afloat, but her gunwales were level

with the water and the fish were floating away. We had to go out and take the boys out of the boat; they were knee-deep in water. Paddles and fish were floating out through the cove."



Hauling up the nets

Ruby hauled a few ^{viii}traps in her time, but mainly she stayed aboard the longliner cleaning fish. Once the fish were clean, they were taken to Quirpon and sold fresh. There were a few summers when they sold fish directly to the Russian ships, which were anchored outside and ready to buy from local fishers. Mrs. Penney guesses that the Russians were likely regulated by Canadian authorities. She laughingly remembers, "We used to roll cigarettes and pass them up to the Russians and they used to give us Russian coins."

The cables burst at a place called Beauty

One day the crew of *Penney's Dream* had gone out in the motorboat to check their traps. Ruby Penney was aboard the longliner, alone, cleaning the catch. The skipper had moored the longliner at a place called Beauty; which was ordinarily fairly calm, with tall cliffs on either side affording shelter. Suddenly a wind sprang up; bursting all the steel cables, and the longliner was being driven by the wind towards the rocks and the cliffs. Ordinarily those steel cables held the longliner in place: there were two at the stern, two at the bow, and another cable running across to the point. Ruby says, "You would think it was almost impossible to burst those cables; but they burst."



Fish on the longliner waiting to be cleaned



She started calling lighthouses for assistance, and finally got through to Cyril Campbell at the Cape Bauld Light Station. She had the longliner in gear in an attempt to keep the schooner away from the cliffs. Cyril asked, "Ruby, what's wrong?" she said, "B'y, I'm going to go ashore and beat up on the rocks. I've got her in gear but it's not enough when the sea hits."

"Hang on," said Cyril. A few moments later he came back and said, "Nels Roberts from Quirpon is right around the point. He'll be right there." Nels Roberts was the mail carrier in those days. "And I looked and saw them coming around the point. In no time at all they were aboard the longliner and had grapelins attached to her and hauled her out in the middle of the cove, and moored her safely out there."

The boys with a boatload of fish

When the boys came back from fishing (they had no idea of the turmoil Ruby had just been through) the storm was still on, but it had abated somewhat. Ruby was back to cleaning fish. So they asked, 'What's goin' on? The boat's not where we left her.'

Ruby said, 'If you had been here...' and they laughed at her; they thought it was a big joke. They had just got all the fish thrown up on deck when the sea slammed into the longliner and

everything went again. Ruby remembers, “Suddenly it wasn’t such a joke anymore. They got out of there right fast.”

Surplus fish were kept in a cod bag



A cod bag up close



The Seas were too rough

Ruby recalls that the seas were so bad there was no way they could get out with the motorboat in tow, so they left it behind.

Recommended Reading: Facing the Sea: Lightkeepers and Their Families
by Harold Chubbs, Wade Kearley, Foreword by Lorne Humphries
FLANKER PRESS | November 4, 2013

Recommended viewing: *The Last Fishing Schooner—the Willing Lass, Harold Parsons.
Land and Sea.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ITv8CvnFHV0>

Berths at Belle Isle

1. Green Cove. Fished by Daryl Parsons and Herb Saunders.
2. Black Point. Fished by Norm Cull.
3. The Brook. Fished by Norm Cull.
4. Mustard Cliff. (the cliffs were the same colour as mustard) Fished by the Penney family.
5. White Point Cove. Fished by Harold Parsons and later, the Penney family.
6. Round Head Cove. Various fishers.
7. Blandford's Cove. Various fishers.
8. Lighthouse Cove. Various fishers.
9. Barbers Cove East. Fished by the Penney family.
10. Barbers Cove West. Fished by Gus Young of Twillingate.
11. Gull Battery Cove. Fished by the Penney family.
12. Three Brooks Cove I. Various fishers.
13. Three Brooks Cove II. Various fishers.
14. Three Brooks Cove III. Various fishers.
15. Greenham's Bight I. There were various fishers but in the early days. The Greenham's of Twillingate fished this berth.



Figure 1 Nautical chart Belle Isle

ⁱ Hold: a structure consisting of an area that has been enclosed for storage.

ⁱⁱ Room: a tract or parcel of land on the waterfront of a cove or harbour from which a fishery is conducted; the stores, sheds, 'flakes,' wharves and other facilities where the catch is landed and processed, and the crew housed; often with specifying word: ADMIRAL, BOAT, COOK, FISH(ING), FLAKE, SHIP(S), STAGE, or the name or nationality of the original user; sometimes in place-names indicating the whole of a cove, harbour or settlement.

ⁱⁱⁱ Stage: an elevated platform on the shore with working tables, sheds, where fish are landed and processed for salting and drying, and fishing gear and supplies are stored; FISHING STAGE.

^{iv} Trap: a type of fixed fishing-gear used in inshore waters, box-shaped with a length of net stretching from shore to entrance through which cod enter and are trapped.

^v A particular station on fishing grounds, and in netting seals in coastal waters, assigned by custom or lot to a vessel, boat, crew or family; frequently with specifying word COD-TRAP, SALMON, TRAP.

^{vi} 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, tides.

^{vii} Flouse, flowse: of a vessel, to come down heavily in a running sea.

^{viii} Trap: a type of fixed fishing-gear used in inshore waters, box-shaped with a length of net stretching from shore to entrance through which cod enter and are trapped.