



L'Anse aux Meadows



Winston Colbourne L'Anse aux Meadows



Winston Colbourne reminisces about the fishery. Photo, Kathleen Tucker

Back when fish were thick and plentiful



A tub full of codfish, gutted. Photo by Nicolay Eckhoff

Winston Colbourne sits back at his kitchen table and reminisces about the fishery when he was a young man. “I can remember hauling the ⁱcod trap at a prime ⁱⁱberth named Pynn’s Point, where fish were plentiful. ‘Many, many were the times the fish were that thick...that

Kathleen Tucker. Researcher

plentiful...that we saw thousands...thousands of fish. But we'll never see that no more. I don't care; they can do what they like; it'll never happen again.”

Those who had no sons, hired ⁱⁱⁱsharemen

Winston, son of Harvey and Maude (Bartlett) Colbourne of L'anse aux Meadows, was born in 1943, the oldest of eleven children. He went to work in the fishery when he was just a boy. “I was working in the ^{iv}stage when I was seven years old, ^vcutting throats,” he recalls.



Harvey Colbourne and crew hauling a trap. Photo: Hans Hvide Bang

“Do you want to know how fishing crews were formed?” he asks, leaning across the table. “Every year my mother produced a baby....she had seven boys and four girls. That’s how Harvey Colbourne formed his crew...with his own sons,” smiles Winston. “Those who had no sons hired sharemen.”



Winston’s oldest son, Whyman, spreading fish to dry. Photo: Nicolay Eckhoff

Nearly every family at L'Anse aux Meadows had fished with hook and line but eventually most switched to the cod trap, although the initial outlay was expensive. Winston remarks, "You needed a trap, you needed a boat and you needed a crew."

Fishing crews (skippers) at L'anse aux Meadows

1. George Decker and sons
2. William Bartlett and sons
3. Charlie Anderson and son Goward
4. Max Anderson
5. Alf Anderson
6. Harvey Colbourne and sons (a rough man, but he was a good skipper and a hard worker)
7. Cliff Colbourne
8. Winston Colbourne (when he struck out on his own)

New ideas about fishing

Winston remembers a group of men who came around to the communities every year teaching new skills to the fishermen; week-long learning sessions where they introduced new technology, new ideas, or reinforced everyday skills such as how to tie on a grapnel, or tying knots. The Bounty system was also introduced as an incentive from the government to modernize the fishery in the small communities. For instance, a man could build himself a boat and receive extra dollars from the government. "There was even a subsidy for gear; you'd buy so much gear and you'd receive money," recalls Winston.

Winston's father, Harvey, was a trap fisherman with three cod traps. When Winston was 19 years old and just married, he broke off from his dad and went his own way. He bought Eber Elliott's stage and store and built his own boat. "I went in over the White Hills and stayed all winter with my brother-in-law and cut the wood for my boat. I never had a clue how to build a boat, but when I finished it was one of the nicest in the harbour. At that time you could get a bounty for your boat—Federal and a Provincial—at so many dollars a foot.



A speedboat used in the trap fishery. Photo: Kathleen Tucker

"So it was May and people were getting ready for the fishery. Ern Patey from St. Anthony Bight had been hired by the government to go around and measure boats; to assess their condition. I filled out a form and sent it to the government, and waited and waited until sometime in the summer, and not a word. Joe Rousseau was in Ottawa then; the Minister of Fisheries. So I went

down to Max and Gladys Anderson's store because they had the old phone that you crank up. And I got through to Rousseau and told him my story about the bounty. 'Ern Patey don't do that anymore,' he said. "It's been passed off to the Welfare Officer."

Rousseau told him that Charles Pynn was a boat running out of Raleigh, carrying the mail all around the coast.

"Well," remembers Winston, "one day there was a living gale from the westward. I got up and seen old Charles coming out through the vi run. He tied onto the wharf and when he come off the boat, I met him. He went back into the wheelhouse and told the Welfare officer I wanted to get my boat measured for the bounty. The welfare officer came out and said, 'Yes, Mr. Colbourne, I'll be there shortly.' Once he measured my boat, I was able to get hold of the man in Ottawa to get my bounty.

"That was 52 years ago, and you know what I got for my boat? I got \$1700!"

"So I had my cod trap all lined up; Buddy down in Quirpon sold me a trap for \$300; I had an 8hp engine for my boat and the boat was painted and ready to go."

Tides and berths at L'Anse aux Meadows

When it came to choosing a berth, Pynn's Point was one of the best, "But the tide was fierce. Everyone called it the Devil's Hole." There was another berth around Mouse Island, and Harvey Colbourne always called it the Copy House because it was always calm. Winston recalls, "The Copy House was just the same as going into Black Duck Brook; you'd set your trap and when you wanted to haul, you'd haul, because the tide wasn't fierce; but once outside of Mouse Island and headed towards Warren's Island, then the tide was galloping," he laughs.



This is the Mouse Island berth. The berth at Pynn's Point was farther out.
Photo: Kathleen Tucker

"When it came to hauling our traps, we always went by the moon. The tides were set on the full moons; that's when the raging tide was. The half-moon meant the tide was withering away. Then you had the quarter moon...no tide for two or three days...now, boy, you had to scabble then. It was no good for a fisherman to say, 'Oh, I got a cod trap out. I'm going to haul it now.' There

were days you couldn't get near the cod traps; days and days you'd go out and there wasn't one

thing to be seen...only a pole, perhaps, from the ^{vii}grapnel. All the rest would be gone under; driven down by the seas; or sometimes everything—grapnels, buoys, the whole shebang—set adrift by the seas. Unreal! You had to see it to believe it. The tide was like a raging river and you went by high tide and low tide: two hours a day the tide was supposed to slacken, and you'd better be there! Even on a perfectly calm day you could still have a raging tide.”

Local Names

Atlantic Shoals on the chart was called Rudder Cove by the fishermen.

Trap Berths in L'Anse aux Meadows

1. Duck Pond Point used a shallow trap due to shallow depth of water. 2nd draw.
2. Black Rock; set to the eastward towards L'anse aux Meadows. Prime.
3. Fish Rock West. Prime (Max Anderson)
4. Fish Rock East. Prime
5. Flint Island. Prime
6. Crocker Shoal. Prime (Gow and Charlie Anderson)
7. Mouse Island. Prime (fished primarily by William Bartlett)
8. Pynn's Point on Warren's Island. Prime (fished by Harvey Colbourne)
9. Copy House at Bluff Point. Prime
10. Gun Rock. Shallow water. Prime (George Decker)
11. Big Sacred Island Cove. Ship Cove fishers had one berth and L'anse aux Meadows fishers had the other. 2nd berth.
12. Pigeon Gulch on Little Sacred Island. Prime. (Charlie Anderson)
13. Kenna Shoals at Little Sacred Island, near the CLOCK. Prime. (George Decker)
14. Capelin Cove. 2nd berth.
15. Green Island. Prime.
16. Duck Pond Cove. 2nd berth.

Setting up the Draw System was like the dawning of civilization

“All the (above) berths were used by the down-along crowd years and years ago. The three best berths were Mouse Island, the upper part of Fish Rock, and Pigeon Gulch on Little Island.



Winston Colbourne's speedboat tied up at the fishing stage. Photo contributed by E. Colbourne

“Before I started fishing on my own there were only a few berths; the fishers then were Bartletts and Andersons. Later my father Harvey Colbourne had a few berths; the Bartletts had two; the Andersons had two; and the Deckers had two. Sometime in the mid-'60s, once I was out on my own, Fisheries helped set up the draw system; they picked eight of the best for prime berths, and whatever was left over was second draw. Whatever berths weren't in the first or second draw were open for any

fishermen to use.

“But there were disputes before the Draw System. I fished with my dad when I was 12 or 14 years old. Dad had a couple of sharemen at that time. Anyway, Pynn’s Point was a prime berth and my father wanted it. So one Sunday evening he was looking through his spyglass to see what the Bartletts was doing. Suddenly he said, ‘Alright boys, they’re getting their boat and I believe they’re hauling a grapelin. Now, be careful! I’m going to send you out. Make sure you wait till 12 o’clock midnight.’ John (one of the sharemen) and I got the ^{viii}punt ready; we had a main mooring and a rifle aboard.

“You could hold a berth for three days. As long as that main mooring was there—and there was no danger from ice—that guaranteed the berth. But after three days you had to set all the moorings or someone else could claim that berth. We paddled out there in the punt and hauled it up at Capelin Cove. We waited and waited, and every now and then John would look at his old pocket watch. Half an hour before midnight I heard the sound of oars dipping in the water—of paddles hitting the ice off Warren’s Island. Sure enough, this was the honorable George Decker’s crowd.

“I yelled out and told them not to put down their mooring. Well! What a racket! At 12 o’clock midnight I dumped the grapnel and there were a few words over it, but we got that berth. Now, I only did that once. When I grew up to be a man and started on my own, I could see that the old way wasn’t going to work, so we got together and decided to use the Draw System, with the help of the fisheries office in St. Anthony. After that, all you had to do was go to the school, draw your name and draw your berth.

“It was like the dawning of civilization; because the old system had been pure hell.”



L'anse aux Meadows fishermen

Winston Colbourne Repairing nets and knitting with a twine needle

Constructing a cod trap

To make a cod trap, various pieces of equipment were required.

Twine needles were necessary to knit the twine. A fisherman had to know how to knit a leaf of twine, as well as how to repair his nets. Twine needles were initially hand-carved from wood; later they were a durable plastic and could be purchased from J.R. Leckie. Often children helped fill the twine needle, but special attention had to be paid to the tension on the twine needle to ensure it was snug. The twine was suspended from a large spool on the ceiling called a twine jenny.

A card was used for knitting twine, and a fisherman would knit a leaf of twine onto the yarkin(g), which was 99 meshes. Knitting a leaf of twine to make a net was something a fisherman would do in the house during the winter months. He might have 200 pounds of twine to knit some years. He'd start off with a half hitch knot.

Corks were not purchased, per se. They were hand-made from a sheet of cork. The sheets came in 2X4 or 2X2 sheets. The fishermen cut out the round pieces of cork and had a fire going, and they'd heat up a rod of some sort and run it through the center of a piece of round cork to burn a hole through it. This hole would be what fishermen fed their ropes through.

Lead balls, or 'bullets', were made by pouring molten lead into a mold and were called 'footings'. They were attached to the foot rope of the cod trap to add weight. The corks went on the top of the net on the 'roundings' which was the top rope on the trap. Corks were attached 'on the round' of the cod trap to keep the trap afloat. How many corks were used depended on the size of the net.

On the corners of the cod traps were moorings, attached to grapelins, which kept the cod trap in place. The grapelins used on cod traps were longer, while grapelins used on trawls were shorter.

A 'prior pole' was attached to the grapelin. The prior pole was a 'lunger' or a 'stick' through which a hole was drilled at the base. A rope was threaded through the hole and tied to the grapelin. This pole floated about the surface of the water in a perpendicular manner and was a 'flag' to fishermen, indicating that an anchor, or grapelin, was underneath.

Back at the fisherman's store or shed, when repairing a net, the net was often draped over a long pole, which was suspended from the ceiling so that any tears or holes could be readily seen and repaired. Or, the net could be hooked onto twine hooks, which were suspended from a ceiling, and repairs were made.

There were two methods for repairing a net: one temporary, one permanent

Scunning a net was a term used for a quick repair from the boat if a hole in the net had to be repaired to keep fish from escaping. The 'scun' was a rapid gathering of the edges of the torn net, which were sewn together or 'scunned' together to keep the fish contained. However, it was only a temporary measure and the net would have to be properly mended when there was time, otherwise 'the net didn't hang fair'.

On the other hand, once the fish were brought in and the net suspended from the ceiling, the net was mended using a twine needle. Mending a net was a much more meticulous operation and, once the net was mended, it looked as good as new.

Yarkin(g): any place where twine is put fast to a rope (or headline) is called a yarkin(g). The leaf of twine is attached to the yarkin(g). Some nets had two headlines for added strength; if one broke the other would hold.

Mending

Let's say there's a big hole in the bottom of the trap and the fish are swimming around and there's the possibility that the fisherman will lost his catch. In order to mend the trap, the fisherman must have two or four, but not three pieces of mesh. A three-piece mesh is called a ⁱxthree-leg. To mend the net, the 'fisherman's bend' knot is used, and the object is to knit a square mesh. You cannot have a three-corner mesh.

If there were a number of tears or holds in the net, a number of men might be repairing different parts of the net simultaneously.

Repairing nets could be down at sea, in the twine loft or fish store, or in the kitchen, and it could be done sitting down or standing up. Sometimes a fisherman knitted a 'new leaf' which was a section of twine, rather than attempt a repair. Then he'd knit the new leaf into the fishnet.

Photo Essay
L'anse aux Meadows
A fisherman's splitting table
--Photos by Kathleen Tucker



This rustic splitting table in Winston Colbourne's stage was once a hub of activity in a thriving fishery



A fish box in front of the splitting table: a young boy would usually place the fish in the box and the cutthroat would begin the process of splitting the fish.



A splitting knife: the man who split the fish usually wore a glove to protect his hand from the sharp blade.



The cutthroater's knife



The wheelbarrow was constructed to hold a quintal of split fish.

Photo Essay
L'anse aux Meadows
Tools of the fisherman's trade
--Photos by Kathleen Tucker



A 4-hook cod jigger (left) and floating jiggers to retrieve dead ducks (right)



An iron knife made by Heber Elliott (left) and an iron cookpot (right)



A jigger made from a wooden mold (left) and a jigger reel (right)



Looking down on a ladle and mold used for making lead balls for a trap (left). And (right) a watch buoy used on the end of a grapelin.

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- ⁱ Cod 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.
- ⁱⁱ Berth: A particular station on fishing grounds, assigned by custom or lot to a vessel, boat, crew or family.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Shareman: Member of a fishing crew who receives a stipulated proportion of the profits of a voyage rather than wages.
- ^{iv} 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.
- ^v Cutthroater: The names of Header, Cutthroat, Carver, Splitter and Salter are the appellations given to the Fishermen who perform the various offices in the stages or in the Rooms.
- ^{vi} Run: A narrow salt-water strait or extended navigable passage between the coast and an island or series of islands; a passage between islands; REACH, TICKLE.
- ^{vii} Grapnel: Light anchor to moor small boats and fixed or stationary fishing gear.
- ^{viii} Punt: An undecked boat up to 25 ft in length, round-bottomed and keeled, driven by oars, sail or engine and used variously in the inshore or coastal fishery; BOAT, RODNEY, SKIFF.
- ^{ix} Three leg: uncompleted mesh of a fish-net, having three corner knots and one loose strand of twine. A three leg is used for scunning leaves of twine together. The loose strand is joined to new twine to form the fourth side of a right mesh, thus joining two separate pieces of netting.