

Canada

Newfoundland  
Labrador

# Cape Norman

*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.

# Last Lighthouse Keeper

ALVIN CAMPBELL

There's something unique about the cemetery at Cape Norman; only family members of the Campbell clan are buried there. That little cemetery, sequestered in a fenced-in grassy meadow and sheltered from the shouting wind and pounding seas that batter the coast, tells a tale all its own.

## A family tradition

Alvin Campbell, the last keeper of the light at the Cape Norman station, remembers his growing up years on the Cape. That all-seeing beacon at the Lighthouse saw more than passing ships on the Strait of



Figure 1 Mr. Alvin Campbell, last light house keeper at Cape Norman. Keeping the light was a family tradition.

sisters, and recalls that his father and grandfather were also born at the Cape.

“My great grandfather was John William Campbell. He came from

light from 1870-1890. Once Alvin's great grandfather installed the fog alarm – which was steam-powered – he took over manning the light. After that, there was a procession of Campbells: Alvin's grandfather Alexander (Alec), and then Alvin's father, Jake Campbell. “There were two Jakes,” comments Alvin. “Young Jake was my first cousin and Old Jake was my father.” Young Alvin, who grew up watching his father and grandfather manning the light, was fifteen when he received his first paycheque. At that time, he was still attending school. No courses were required to man the light until the advent of electronics; prior to that it was all mechanical.

Cape Norman, at the farthest point north on the mainland portion of the island of Newfoundland, has a barren, other-worldly, almost lunar landscape; comprised of limestone and dotted with rare plants and flowers found nowhere else in the world. For Alvin and his brothers and sisters – as well as children



Figure 2 Cape Norman

Belle Isle. “You never knew who might have their eyes on you. If you stepped out of line, you'd hear a shout pretty quick.” Born in 1932, he had four brothers and two

Pictou, Nova Scotia and installed the first fog alarm.” The light at Cape Norman had been built in 1870, and a light keeper by the name of Lock had been working the





Figure 3 Model of the Cape Norman Light House made by Warren Campbell

from nearby Wild Bight – it was a playground like no other. “There weren’t too many rocks out there that I didn’t put a foot on,” he says. “I saw thousands of ships go by – perhaps thirty a day, what we called ‘foreigners’. Cargo ships, aircraft carriers, battleships – you name it, it went through.

In its heyday, the Cape Norman station – accurately depicted in a model created by Alvin’s son, Warren – boasted a principal light keeper’s residence, an assistants’ residence which housed two families, and a garage. While they had a garage, the roads weren’t started until the late 1960s and it was early in the 1970s before the road was completed. Prior to the highway there was a cow path and pickup trucks were used. Alvin Campbell’s grandfather had the first pickup in 1926; a Model T. As well, at the Station there was a warehouse for storing supplies, and a cistern in each basement for catching rainwater. There was no

plumbing in the lighthouse and, until 1956, no plumbing in the residences either. Like other families in that area, water was carried in buckets and heated on the stoves for laundry and cooking, and clothes were pegged to a clothesline to dry in the wind. There were no telephones either; if you wanted to send a telegram you walked to Cook’s Harbour.

At the time sea traffic was going, it was all wireless, and there was no wireless on the station: just the light and the foghorn. If a ship needed to communicate it used flag signals and if it was foggy then no communication was possible.

In winter, there were dog teams on the Cape just as there were in other outport communities. The dogs were kept outside in wintertime and penned up in summertime. Wherever soil could be found, a garden was planted.

Alvin remembers attending the Wild Bight School and talks of a time when thirty-eight youngsters

attended a one-room school, from primer to grade eleven. “A lot of times you had a hard go...you had a teacher not much older than yourself trying to figure it out. Every year we had a different teacher and sometimes in between you might have one, too.”

Mr. Campbell remarks that, historically, it was Quebec that erected the light at Cape Norman in 1870. They put lighthouses on both ends of Belle Isle, as well as at Cape Bauld, Cape Norman, the Greenly Islands on the other side of Point Amour, and down the Quebec shore and over on the Newfoundland side to Cape Ray at Port-aux-Basques. It was in their interest to install light houses; sea traffic at that time was primarily French and the Strait of Belle Isle was a major shipping route to Quebec.

A typical year at Cape Norman was divided into two parts: from December 23 to sometime in April or May, all work at the station ceased. From May to December the light keepers, principal and assistants, worked straight through. And while someone living outside the community might suppose that life at the Station might have been a solitary and lonely existence, other members of the Campbell clan lived close by at the site; there were three other houses besides the two official residences, and plenty of other children to play with. Mr. Campbell grew up, married Jessie Laing, and they had four sons. He served as a Canadian Ranger for thirty-five years, and served a total of forty-five years as a Civil Servant with the Canadian Coast Guard at the Light Station.

Alvin Campbell has seen many

changes since he began work at the Cape Norman light. As a young man he kept the fuel and maintained the mechanical equipment. Supplies were brought in annually from Prince Edward Island by Coast Guard boats from 1936 till 1966. Food was ordered from a merchant in PEI, which the light keeper paid for himself. Later, helicopters brought supplies. St. John's took over management of the light stations in 1966; they cut off the boats and, once the roads were through, supplies were purchased locally.

Eventually, the lights became automated. Alvin was a few years shy of sixty-five when the Cape Norman Station became automated and, although he wasn't ready to retire, his job at the Light had come to an end. For ten years after that, the lights were computerized but, according to Mr. Campbell, that didn't work too well, and the Cape Norman light has ceased to be automated and is now operated electrically and is manned by Alvin's



Figure 5 Mr. Campbell's home, once a light keeper's residence

son, Warren. Warren Campbell works at the Cape Norman Light Station eight hours a day: twenty-eight days on and twenty-eight days off.

But the story doesn't end there. Cape Norman had been a one-man station since 1978 and, in 1990, Mr. Campbell was living in the principal residence. He purchased the as-

sistants residence and moved it by flat-bed tractor-trailer to its present location on Route 435 between Cook's Harbour and Wild Bight. "We jacked it up, moved the trailer underneath, and rolled it off onto the trailer," he says, and adds, "I haven't seen anything I couldn't do yet, if I wanted to do it."

### Strength and spirit

Mr. Campbell doesn't live inside the community of Wild Bight, nor does he live within the boundaries of Cook's Harbour. From his position on a ridge between the two communities, he commands a view of the light house, the Cape and the Atlantic. With hair as white as the froth on the whitecaps and with eyes as blue as the sea, in Mr. Campbell's features are written the strength and spirit of light keepers down through the generations; of those who lie beneath the soil in the Campbell graveyard, and of those who yet remain, as keepers of the light.

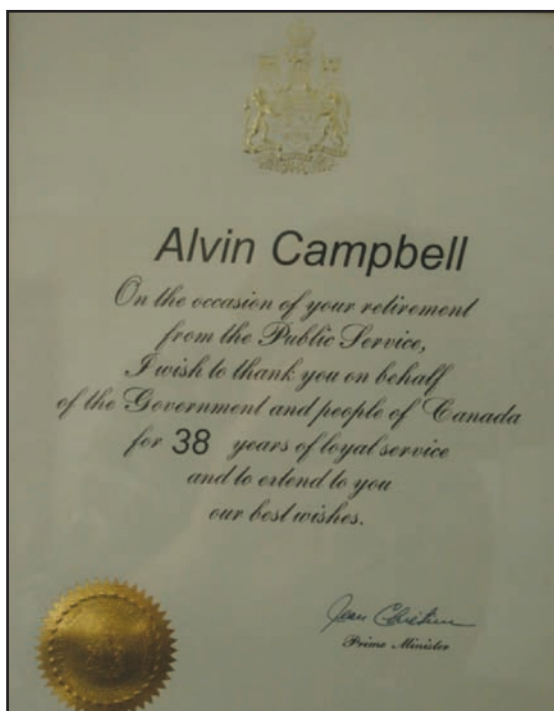


Figure 4 Certificate signed by Prime Minister Jean Chretien and presented to Alvin Campbell



# Wild Bight/ Cape Norman

LYLE CAMPBELL

*Lyle Campbell grew up in the shadow of the Cape Norman light house and was born into a family of light keepers. He left home for a spell and worked in construction, but most of his life was spent fishing. While he didn't follow in the footsteps of his father, grandfather and great grandfather by tending the light, he still maintains that sense of individuality that seems to be a marked characteristic of those born at the light: not for him the close confines of a home within a community. Lyle Campbell makes his home on the limestone barrens between the Cape and Wild Bight, overlooking Cape Norman Bay and within sight of the light house where he was born and raised. And, while the government forced him – and many like him – into an early retirement from the fishery, there are some things the government has not been able to take from him: his respect and love for the land and the sea, and his sense of belonging to a place and a people who have endured in a harsh and challenging environment, and will continue to endure.*

## Born at Cape Norman

My name is Lyle Campbell. I was born in 1942 at Cape Norman, and the midwife who borned me was Aunt Martha Brown from Wild Bight. I had four brothers and two sisters, and they were all born at the light station. My dad was a light keeper; his name was Jake Camp-

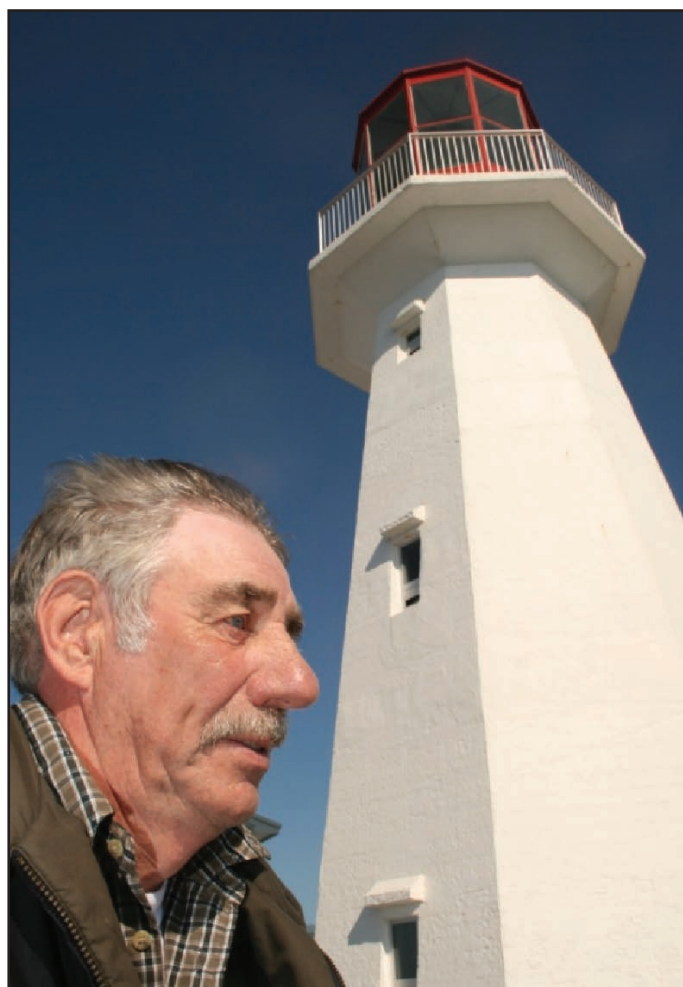


Figure 1 In the shadow of the Cape Norman light house

bell and his father was Alec Campbell. My great grandfather was John Campbell. You can go up to the graveyard and see their headstones. That cemetery belongs to the Campbell family; nobody else is buried there.

The house I was born in was a duplex – the light keeper's residence. In 1956 they built two separate houses; one was a storey and a half, one was a bungalow. But before that it was a double two-storey house. There were three men working at the light: a principal and two assistants. When there were three, they'd work eight hour shifts, but when my father worked there, there were only two.

At the Cape, there was no church building, but the minister used to come to the house Sunday. I can

still see him, in my mind's eye, coming through the drift. I don't know exactly where he came from, but I suppose he worked his way around from St. Anthony.

I'd say it was a bit over a mile's walk to the Wild Bight School, and I walked with my brothers and sisters. We would have walked along the old road, in the valleys. Grandfather had the only truck, but you didn't use a truck back then the way you do now; you'd put the truck in every evening and you'd take care of it. If you had something to do, you'd go and do it, but school wasn't important enough to get that truck going. And that truck was his; it wasn't the Government's. They never gave him a vehicle here at Cape Norman but they did in other places, I think. They could



Figure 2  
John Campbell's  
grave is within sight  
of the Cape  
Norman lighthouse



Figure 3  
Lyle Campbell's  
playground was the  
limestone barrens  
at the Cape

have had one here, too, if they'd wanted it.

When my two sons went to school, ah, boy, now that's a different situation than when I went to school! The truck had to go and pick them up, and the truck had to go and drop them off; it's a different attitude altogether. The School Board had two buses coming out here because so many of the students used to go into St. Anthony, and the other bus used to go to Cook's Harbour. It's not like it was for me – you'd come through the drift and good luck to you – and if you didn't, well, it was still good luck to you.

For something to do summertime when we were kids, we'd straggle over on the rocks, climbing up over the cliffs. Then we'd be all

scratched up and moaning and groaning with scratches and bruises; and by-and-by the summer would be gone; then it was back to school in the fall, and that was life.



Figure 4 Whales, a different kind of sea traffic

There was nothing else to do; we never had what some people call a playground. Behind the cemetery there was a meadow and we used it for a ball field. They used to come out from the school at Cook's Harbour and play baseball there; it was a beautiful field; perfect.

I can mind when we first had a generator at the Cape. But we never used it to light the lamps, kerosene lamps was all we had. My mother cooked on a coal stove because there was no wood at the Cape. Fish was an important part of our diet; we didn't have a lot, but I don't remember going hungry. We had a garden and grew a few potatoes, but there was no refrigeration, so you either caught your food fresh, such as birds, or you bottled it.

### **Everything was moving then**

There was a lot more sea traffic in those years than there is today. The most that goes through now is container ships, but when I was growing up, there were oil tankers, draggers, cruise ships, you might



see four or five at once. As a boy I used to watch the boats and the people out fishing. Everything was moving then; it was exciting. I'd see a feller coming in with a load of fish, and I mean, what better could you see than a man coming in with a load of fish? And, if the boat was full, you'd hear someone say, "He got her to the gunwales!" But we'll never see that again. She's gone now, boy, she's gone.

I think we had lots of excitement. We never had excitement like you would today, but we was entertained. For instance, Santa would show up at the Cape every Christmas; he never missed, boy. And some Christmases were pretty good, too; it wasn't too bad. As for having a Christmas tree, I can mind when we didn't – but at the last we did.

### **The moratorium, the buyout and the end of the fishery**

I left the Cape when I was a young man, and I worked all over, wherever I could make a dollar. I never followed in my father's footsteps with regard to keeping the light. I suppose I might have been better off, but I'll never know that for sure. I spent some time with construction work and with heavy equipment; then I fished, and that was a living, too. You wasn't living high on the hog as a fisherman, but sometimes you could make a better pay-cheque fishing than you could slaving all day long. Anyway, we started fishing boy, and we didn't do so bad. When we weren't fishing, we used to work down in Labrador. Back then, Goose Bay was a very famous place; lots of



Figure 5 Cape Norman Light House

young fellows went there. You could go to Goose Bay and get a bit of work, and Labrador City was pretty good back then.

Boy, I guess you could say I'm retired, but I retired because I had no choice. When they bought our licenses back, it wasn't a buyout; it was a crucifixion. It hurt, and it's still hurting today. And some, we had to pay taxes, and the other fel-

lows never had to pay. And I was one of those that had to pay, and that hurts. And the ones they gave the taxes to never paid it back. They told them, 'Don't breathe it. Don't breathe it!' If we had all been treated alike, it wouldn't have been so bad; we wouldn't have noticed it. That was in 1999. I took the buyout, but there's no enjoyment to it. The ones that sold out before

that, they was okay; they even got the bonus for selling out.

But the fishery is pretty dismal now. It's heart-breaking this year. You turn on that radio or that television, and that money they come out with for the lobster fishermen, I think its \$1500 per fisherman. Yes, boy, now that's a good size isn't it? Not enough to pay their light bill. Not enough to pay their light bill.

### **Living near the Cape**

I married a girl from up in Reef's Harbour, Evelyn Hynes. We had two children, two boys, they're both in Ontario, and we've lived here on this spot since 1968. We

hauled this house from the Bight; there was nothing here before that. My family all live around the Bight, but I wanted to live near the place where I was born. I couldn't really live any closer to the Cape; it's all rock out there. The Department of Highways hasn't plowed this road for the last eight or ten years, but I can get in the truck and go on any time I want. Wintertime, you put down that plow and once she drifts in, you got trouble. There's n'er blower made like the wind for blowing snow.

There aren't too many animals around here. I seen a polar bear one time, coming along one evening; one in a lifetime. But I've seen

caribou. Man alive! Eight or ten year ago, that point out there was moving with caribou! But I think the coyotes cleaned them off.

### **The end of a family tradition**

Manning the light at the Cape, that's all gone now, boy, and the houses is gone, too. One of them is up on the hill at Wild Bight. When they finally automated them, the light houses converted one after another: Cape Norman was converted the same as Cape Bauld, both ends of Belle Isle, and Camp Islands.

All that remains at Cape Norman now, is the light house.