

Canada

Newfoundland  
Labrador

# Cook's Harbour

*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.

# Cook's Harbour/ Memories of Early Childhood

DEBORAH DECKER

*Deborah Decker is a lovely woman with a ready sense of humour. Like most people on the Northern Peninsula, she had her share of hardship growing up, but she weathered it well and looks back on her growing up years as some of the best of her life. In particular, she remembers how much fun she had playing Colours and Tiddly. When she was twenty-six years old she married Harold Decker and, together, they ran a general store and raised three children in Cook's Harbour. When Harold suffered a stroke, they gave up the business and she spent much of her time with him until his death in 2008.*

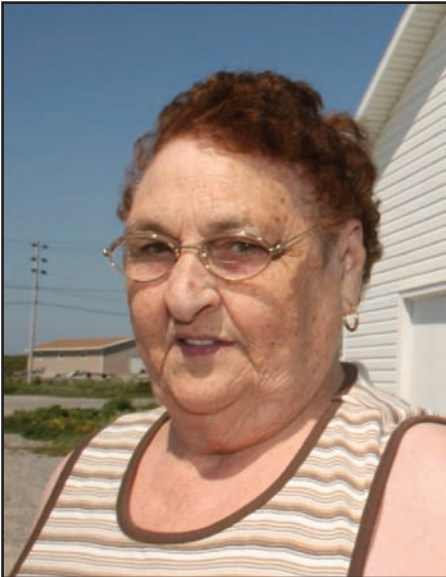


Figure 1 Deborah Decker shares her memories of Cook's Harbour

## From Lock's Cove to Cook's Harbour

Well, maid, it was rough and ready when I grew up. We went to

a little school up there on the hill. My parents were Eliza Elliott and John Pittman, and they came originally from Lock's Cove and resettled here in Cook's Harbour. My two grandfathers and my brother is buried over there in Lock's Cove. My father's people died before I was born; they died when my father was small. I was born here in Cook's Harbour March 24, 1932. There were eight of us: three boys and five girls.

My mother made all our clothes; she was a very handy person. She used to work for the Mission, working the pockets for parkas; and she used to knit; and, when she'd get so much done, she'd take it to the Mission and go to the clothing store and get clothes for us. What clothing she didn't get to the Grenfell, she'd go down to Elliott's Store and get some material and then she'd make it. She was a wonderful sewer, too.

When it came to shoes, well, my dear, we had skin boots wintertime. And for summer we had little black shiny lumps. Mr. Elliott, the storekeeper, used to have them come in. Half the time in summer we were in bare feet. In wintertime, as soon as the snow come, on with our skin boots.

Growing up, I used to have to iron the clothes and we had sheep, so I carded the wool. We had cows and made our own homemade butter, and we had milk and cream. Summertime, the girls used to have to go look for the cows because they weren't fenced in; we might have to go up to the bay looking for

them. We had plenty of hens, but we never killed them, we needed the eggs. But everybody helped with the fish; it wasn't just the boys helped with fishing, it was a family affair. Scatter time they'd have a shareman. And we had a garden: cabbage, turnip, and potato, and lots of rhubarb.

We ate plenty of beans, stewed and baked. We had salt meat, turnip, potato and dumplings. There was pea Soup on Saturday and Sundays was a big, hot dinner.

More than once I came home from school and had porridge, or rolled oats, for dinner.

## Lumber camp to fishing boat

Father used to be over in the lumber woods all the winter at Main Brook. And he walked, too, and I guess it was a two or three-day walk. He'd work in the lumber camps during the winter, then he'd come home at Easter. Sometimes we'd be down to a bit of buttered bread and molasses by the time he got back. Then he would fish all summer.

## Games Children Played

We skipped; any kind of rope you could find. We played Colours, it was our main game, and hopscotch.

## Colours

You'd set up a group of children along a building, and you'd give

them colours: navy, green, blue, red, pink, and yellow. And then you might say, "Run, navy, run!" My sister, Isabella, told me they used to play it, and they had a Barrett lady here; Eliza Barrett was her name. And when it come time for Eliza to call the colours-instead of saying 'navy'-she used to say, "Run, you navy-green so-and-so, run!" She used to swear at the people.

When you were told to run, you had to run a certain distance, and if the person who called your colour caught you before you got that distance, you were out of the game. The game of Tag is just about the same; only thing is, we call it Colours. If you ran after a 'colour' and couldn't catch them, you was out, and that person would call the next colour.

### **Tiddly**

I loved Tiddly. You used to have two rocks and a stick about a foot long; you'd lay the stick across the rocks and you'd get another stick and you'd hook it, flip it up, and when it came down, you'd hit it. It's like Baseball; but instead of hitting a ball, you'd hit the stick with another stick, which was like a bat.

The harder you'd hit it, the farther it would go. If the team in the field caught it, you were out. But if they didn't catch it, they would have to stand where it landed, pick up the stick, and you would put your long stick across the rock. And they'd throw that stick. If they knocked it off the rock, you were out; if they missed, you got to go again. Boys and girls both played Tiddly. There was nothing else to do; only that. I mean, you'd go to school, and

when you got out of school, that's what you'd do.

### **Twenty-five cents at a Time**

We played Ring around a Rosie. Some of the boys played Cowboys and Indians. I suppose there was a few trees there on the hills, but nothing you could hide behind. The trees could never get a chance to grow because every November they'd be cut down for Bonfire Night on November 5th.

People might have a dance every Friday night, even on their bridges. Or we might open up the Lodge and have a dance. Or, someone's house, if they never had it finished, we'd go in that and have a dance. The Lodge is still there, my love, right up there on the hill.

have a church hall, we had the school. When I was growing up, seemed like the churches owned the schools. We used to be some proud because it was church time: big supper in one end, old-fashioned square dance in the other: two-room school, see?

### **Schooners at Cook's Harbour**

In the middle of June you'd see the fishing schooners come. They used to come in here and they'd be here the whole summer; that cove would be right full of them. My dear, right full. They'd come in towing their boats behind them. And we used to get the punt and we'd row out to all them schooners when we was young people. We'd go aboard: just visit and talk to



Figure 2 In Deborah's childhood the cove was full of schooners

We used to get together a lot; we used to have a lot of that at one time. Every one or two months we used to have 'times' for the church, to make money. You'd pay twenty-five cents to sit down and have something to eat. But we didn't

them; perhaps wash the dishes. There was every bit of twenty, twenty-five schooners; sure, you could hardly get in the harbour with your boat! They used to anchor right near here. Sometimes they'd almost come aground; they



wouldn't be able to move till the water would rise. Some of the people on the schooner would come into the community to visit; some wouldn't, but the young men used to come ashore at nighttime. That's the way it was in them times. They'd be in the stage till one or two o'clock in the morning.

The schooners had their own boats and had their own set-up. The stages and the wharves were for the inshore fishermen. The schooner fishery; they came up from Notre Dame Bay, Bonavista Bay; they came here for the summer, towing their fishing boats behind them. They would moor their schooners in the harbour for the summer, and they'd fish from there. In the fall, when it was all done and they had a full load, they'd sail back to sell it, or they'd go on to St. John's and sell their catch.

### **Sunday Fishing**

Nobody fished on a Sunday back then. I don't care how bad the

times was, you would never see my father fishing after Saturday. Saturday evening was the end of the week; it was a clean-up day. You washed the stage down good for Sunday, because people would be coming around looking. There was definitely no work on Sunday, and it was, more or less, a very religious day. To we, growing up, you had to go to church, and that was it!

### **Superstitions**

When a crow flew across the road, you'd cross him off, because then you'd get no bad luck.

If you walked in through a door, you had to leave by the same door; you wasn't allowed to leave by another door.

### **Leaving Home at thirteen**

I was thirteen when I went to work as a servant girl. I was in Englee for a year, in Roddickton for a year and in Gambo for three years. I was in St. John's, working in peo-

ple's homes, and they were all strangers. I'd hear about people in those places needing help, and I'd go to work for them. Such a one would speak about it; that someone had a call from somebody up around looking for girls, and I'd get ready and go. I also worked as a nurse's aide at the hospital. I was away for thirteen years, and never came back to Cook's Harbour once in all that time.

### **Marriage, Family and Running a General Store**

I was twenty-six when I got married. I married Harold Decker and we had three children: Howard, Barbara and Clyde. We ran our store for years while we raised our family. It was a general store, so every little thing that people needed, we sold. Harold used to fish, and he bought fish, too.

We bought quintals and quintals of salt bulk fish, right on up through the Straits. Wherever Harold would buy the fish to, a schooner would go there and pick it up in the fall, and the fish was stored in stages until the schooner came to pick it up. When the roads finally came, the schooners stopped coming and the tractor-trailers picked up the fish.



Figure 3 Harold Decker hauling his nets

## Glossary

### Dictionary of Newfoundland English

1. Tiddly: children's game in which a stick, balanced on a rock or over a hole, is hooked or flicked into the air and struck with another.

2. Colours: Children's game in which each player is assigned a colour.

3. Lumps: A heavy, ankle-high rubber boot. A pair of thick rubber boots which come as far as the ankles. Children came to school in

September in their bare feet and continued to do so until late October. At that time they were outfitted with knee-rubbers, both boys and girls, or supplied by the government with ankle-high rubber boots. Those boots were known locally as 'lumps' because of their clumsy-looking appearance. Lumps [were made] with little eye to the differences in foot size or the shape of the right foot compared to the left. The main virtue of lumps is that they 'stood up.' Which is to say that even the most ambitious and active

outport juvenile could not hope to wear out his lumps inside of five years.

4. Shareman: Member of a fishing crew who receives a stipulated proportion of the profits of a voyage rather than wages.

5. Punt: flat-bottomed shallow boat, broad and square at both ends.

6. Quintals: A measure of cod-fish caught by fishermen, 112 lbs.

7. Salt bulk fish: of split, washed and salted cod-fish placed not yet dried in a fishing stage or aboard a vessel.

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## Raleigh Roots

STAN ELLIOTT



Figure 1 Stan Elliott's roots are in Raleigh

My father was Alpheus Elliott and he came to Cook's Harbour from Raleigh. He married Priscilla Pelley. Our relatives came from up around Morton's Harbour. I have one brother and two sisters, and I was born September 6, 1928. My grandfather was Thomas Elliott. I can still remember my grandfather's hands; they were frozen when he

was a boy of fourteen, and they were always crimped up – kind of like claws.

I think my grandfather, Thomas, started his first business in Raleigh, even though he had no education. He didn't have very much learning but he could build boats. My Uncle Gersh ran a business in Raleigh, too.

### A Fisherman and a Merchant

Dad had a fishing place in Raleigh – he was a fisherman – then he came over here to Cook's Harbour in 1936 and bought a store from Moore's (Moore's had their main store in St. Anthony). The building my father bought from Moore's is no longer standing. Later, Dad built the Fish Store, he built the Shop (the general store),

he built a stage, and he built a house. I was ten years old when I came here. I worked in the Fish Store, but my mother had nothing to do with the business.

Initially, my father started this business on his own, but later he hired some good people. I started work with my dad in 1949, after Confederation, after I came back from school.



Figure 2 Unlocking his father's fish store

## The Fish Store



Figure 3 The fish store employed fifteen to twenty men

The Fish Store was 30 X 60 feet, and there were three stories. The wood was obtained from a radar site, which had been built on Cape Bauld by the Canadians during the war. After the war the site was closed down and all the buildings were sold locally. “My dad bought one of the buildings,” says Mr. Elliott. “He dismantled it and brought it by boat to Cook’s Harbour and built the Fish Store.

He knows his store so well, that he points to a beam and says, “Not all the wood was brought from the site; that beam is local.”

In its heyday, the store would have employed fifteen to twenty men and they would have worked eight or nine hours per day when they were packing fish. The Fish Store wasn’t heated, and there was no electricity then, so when the sun went down, they had no choice but to quit work for the day. There were plenty of windows, however, so there was ample lighting in day-time. All employees were paid in

cash, and most of the employees would have been local fishermen; between their fishing times they would work at the fish store. “When their fish was dried, they’d come here and pack it.”

### Salt Fish

Once the dried fish was packed in barrels, the Elliott’s had a schooner, the Brenda Marguerite; she would come in and tie up to the wharf. The schooner would be loaded: sometimes with casks and sometimes in bulk. “There were two kinds of bulk fish: there was heavy-salted, or ‘Labrador’; you shipped that in bulk. Or, you could probably wash it out and dry it and have it, ‘ordinary cure’ we called it, or semi-dried.”

“But the shore fish, that had to be hard dried, and that was what we put in barrels. We also put semi-dried fish in barrels, and we used to put it in 100 lb. wooden boxes, too.”

The Fish Store was open year-round, not only during the fishing season. Merchandise on hand would have been bulk items, flour (kept in a flour store), and cornmeal for dogs: there might be 100 or 200 sacks of cornmeal come in for dogs in the wintertime.

### Relics from the Past: A Museum in the Making

Mr. Elliott walks through the old Fish Store, pointing at machinery and tools from the heyday of the fishery. The first item we come upon is a plastic bucket used as a cuckoo-pot, and he is quick to point out it is a modern invention. With the modern cuckoo-pot, a plastic bucket is used, with cement in the bottom for weight, and the top woven with plastic mesh. Bait is placed inside and the bucket is lowered through the ice. The cuckoos crawl up and fall into the bucket, and once inside, are trapped. Then the bucket is hauled up through the ice. Mr. Elliott says these modern cuckoo-pots have been around less than ten years, and he baits his cuckoo-pots with herring to catch cuckoos, and then uses the cuckoos as bait to catch trout.

The old-fashioned cuckoo-pot was a barrel hoop with a brin bag lashed onto it. It was set up with strings coming up from it, and then one string coming up through the ice. You’d cut a round hole through the ice, lower it down to the bottom with some bait on it, and the cuckoos would crawl across the bottom and pile up inside, where they remained until the cuckoo-pot was hauled up.



## Dip Nets and cast nets

Then there is a dip net, which was used for dipping fish out of the trap and into the boat. There is another dip net with a finer mesh, and that was for capelin. Capelin would be so numerous on the beach that they could be dipped right out of the water with such a net. Cast nets were also used on the beach when capelin was rolling in. Mr. Elliott remembers two years ago, in 2007, at Wild Bight the capelin came in on the beach, just like in the old



Figure 5 a scale commonly used for weighing fish



Wheelbarrow used for carrying hand-bars loaded with fish.



Figure 4 Stan Elliott and Len Tucker demonstrate how the cast net was used for catching capelin



Two big coal tubs sit side-by-side, and they were used for unloading coal from the schooner.

days. “They landed on the beach, but you had to be there early in the morning – four o’clock, five o’clock – to see them, otherwise the gulls would eat them or drive them away. You’d hardly believe it, but that’s the way it is these days; the gulls are so thick.” Mr. Elliott says he can’t recall the gulls ever being so thick back when the fishery was in full swing.

## Weights & Scales

“The scale was used for weighing codfish,” says Mr. Elliott. The

fish would be brought to the fish store, salted, and fishermen were paid by the quintal.

## A Different kind of Wheelbarrow

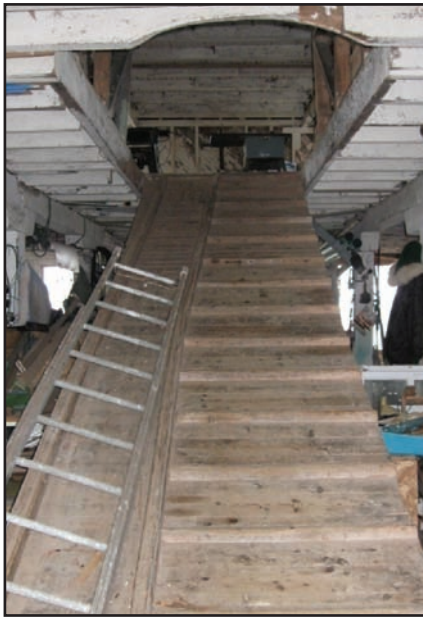
A handbar, loaded with fish, was laid on this wheelbarrow, so one man could take it and wheel it around wherever he wanted to. The store had three such wheelbarrows, and they were made in Lunenburg, Nova Scotia. There are only two wheelbarrows like it left in the Fish Store. “They’re heavy-made,” says Mr. Elliott.

## Fish Processing at the Fish Store

Once the fishermen brought in their catch, the fish was graded at the time of weighing, and the fish was separated into piles. Once the fish was weighed – in the downstairs portion of the store – it was brought up the ramp to the second level and packed against the walls of the building.

## The Ramp

Then, the inspector would come and inspect the fish and, when it



was ready to be packed, the inspector would go through it again, picking out the Prime, the Madeira, and the Tom Cods, which were the smaller fish.

“A lot of the catches depended on the weather,” says Mr. Elliott. “If you got bad weather, the fish might not be as good. You wanted the sunshine to dry it; if you had rainy weather you couldn’t make good fish.” There were times when the fish might not be as good, such as August, when the ‘blackberry’ fish would come in from the eastern part of Belle Isle. “Blackberry fish was okay when it was salted, but you couldn’t sell it fresh; it had a bad smell.”

### Stencils

After the fish was graded and put in containers, stencils were used for marking and grading containers that the fish were to be shipped in. Many stencils hang from nails on the side of the wall: Small, Prime Dry Italian 100 lbs net; Madeira;



Choice Italian; Naples...the list goes on. Mr. Elliott says an appropriate stencil would have been placed on the barrel and painted over with a brush.

### Casks or Barrels



Once the barrels were stenciled, they were guided down the ramp to the main level and packed along the sides of the wall, then loaded aboard a schooner and shipped. When a barrel was full it weighed about 448 lbs, and when a box was full it weighed about 100 lbs.



### Screw Jack

Stan Elliott demonstrates how a screw jack was used for packing dried fish in barrels. The barrel, or cask, would be slid beneath the machine, and the ‘plunger’ would be cranked down on top of the dried fish in the barrel to compress it.

### The Fish Store Closes Its Doors

The Fish Store was built in 1947 and Stan Elliott closed it in 1985. “My dad died in 1982; I wouldn’t close it while he was alive because, as he’d have put it, ‘I’d have had a boot in my backside.’ My father wanted the store to keep running, but it came to a time when I had to look after my own ends; if you’re not making money, why keep going?”

What happened to Stan Elliott’s business happened to local merchants all over northern Newfoundland: once the roads linked the communities to the main centers, the merchants began to lose local business. “The roads came in and





Figure 6  
Mr. Elliott's  
longliner, the  
Joette

people shopped in St. Anthony and, after the roads linked up to Corner Brook, they went to Corner Brook on weekends.”

And then, in the 1970s and 1980s the fishery started to change. Elliott's Fish Store was a dried and salt-fish operation, but the fishery was no longer a dried fish operation; everything was sold fresh. Mr. Elliott read the writing on the wall and closed the store prior to the moratorium in 1992.

“You name it, we had it!” quips Mr. Elliott. “Flour and tea. Molasses for making moonshine...”

### Moonshine

According to Mr. Elliott, moonshine was big at Christmastime, but the shop didn't stock alcohol. Moonshine was locally made. Mr. Elliott says that, to make moonshine, you had to make beer first, and molasses was used to make beer. Mr. Elliott quotes a portion of an old song:



### The Shop

Most people in Cook's Harbour worked in Elliott's Shop at one time or another. On average, four people would have been working on any given day: two women and two men. The shop stocked everything.

*“What did you make the moonshine of?*

*The Judge to me did say.  
Of yeast-cake and molasses,  
Sure, that's the very way!”*

And he breaks into laughter.



Figure 7 Hand made timber saw

*What was once a thriving Shop is now a storage shed for Mr. Elliott's boat and a variety of other items. He picks up an old timber saw, made by his father: it was adjustable and used for building boats. Chains for tires, stove parts, and parts for a hot-water tank hang from nails on posts.*

*Dust has obscured the shine on boots and shoes; peanut butter and jam share shelf space with Minute Rice and seasonings. Cast nets, never used, are testimony to a time when capelin was plentiful and the fishery more than a memory.*

In the office, there is a calendar on the wall with a picture of the Norma and Gladys, along with a couple of Newfoundland maps, circa 1980; there are old Worker's Compensation manuals and piles of receipt books.

“After April or May, it was credit then until October or November,

whenever they sold their fish.”  
Every purchase was written in the  
receipt book; one copy for the cus-  
tomer and another copy for the  
shop. “That’s the way it was,” says  
Mr. Elliott. “That’s the way it was.”

“Edward Pittman, Propane  
Stove, \$89.

“Abe Brown...poor old Abe is  
gone.

“Albert Brown...Albert is gone,  
too.”

He opens a receipt book dated  
1981, flips through the pages, and  
reads:

He shakes his head sadly.

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Mr. Elliott’s dream is to see the old shop and fish store made into a living museum; a reincarnation of the past  
in this present day; something more tangible than memories or words written on a page.





