

Robert Tilley

In 1840 Thomas Cole (1768-1840) died at Bird Island Cove. In his lifetime he had become comparatively wealthy. In his last will and testament (Registry of Wills- PANL-Vol 1.) prepared in 1833 he left all of his estate to his surviving family; his wife Susannah, his son Richard (1799-1856), and his daughter Sarah (bap. 1797-1865) [Mrs. Thomas Clouter].

Before her marriage to Cole, Susannah (nee Ayers) had a child, Elizabeth, who was raised in the Cole family. Elizabeth married Joseph Tilley in 1810. Thomas Cole made no provisions in his will for the Tilley descendants of his wife, however, he predeceased Susannah, and in her last will and testament of 1845 she stated (Registry of Wills- PANL-Vol 1.) :

...I give to my grandson, Joseph Tilley, one hundred pounds current money of this island. I give to my grandson, Robert Tilley, one hundred pounds current money of this island. I give to my grandson, Thomas Tilley, ten pounds current money of this island...

Robert Tilley (1824-1872) of Joseph was then a teacher at Openhall, Bonavista Bay.

From the Tilley Collection (The Robert Tilley Collection, PANL, P7):

Open Hall,

8th October, 1852.

I hereby acknowledge myself to be lawfully indebted to Robert Tilly, schoolmaster of this place, in the sum of three pounds, four shillings, currency, and I hereby agree to pay the sum of one pound currency annually to said Robert Tilly until the above debt of three pounds, four shillings be liquidated.

In witness whereof, I have hereto set my hand the date above written.

his

Christopher X Gould

mark

It is probable that his inheritance (four times his annual salary) was expended in the establishment of a small business at Bird Island Cove. It consisted of a large main store in the Cove and a smaller one on the North Side. The first entry in the ledgers for this business was dated May 9th, 1853. (The Robert Tilley Collection, PANL, P7/A/67)

From the **Evening Telegram**, August 29, 1963, is this extract:

...Robert Tilley...was a Bonavista-born teacher who, in 1853, had set up in business in nearby Elliston, on a £100 legacy from his recently deceased Elliston grandmother, Mrs. Susannah Cole. He became the place's first resident "supplying merchant", having, at his death in 1872, every fisherman in the settlement as a dealer...

Six months after Robert Tilley launched his business in Bird Island Cove, he and his aunt Sarah Clouter (daughter of Thomas Cole above) considered the possibility of a business partnership (The Robert Tilley Collection, PANL, P7/A/67):

TERMS OF COPARTNERY

The following is an inventory of the effects, both real and personal, being a list of the balances in my favour and against me, Robert Tilley, on the 2nd, December, 1853. I having on that day agreed on that day to take my aunt, Sarah Clouter, into partnership (if certain conditions hereafter to be mentioned be fulfilled) each to be concerned in the following proportions, viz., Robert Tilley - two-thirds, and Sarah Clouter, one-third share.

The business to be carried on under the Firm of Tilley and Clouter, and to be managed by Robert Tilley, for which he is to be allowed per annum in name of salary.

There followed a list of all of Tilley's assets and liabilities, and a concluding note:

From this date forth the business is to be conducted as if the partnership is begun.

Robert Tilley.

The 'certain conditions' were unfulfilled; Robert Tilley carried on his business as the sole owner until his death in 1872.¹⁰

The Tilley business far surpassed that of the Slade store in Bird Island Cove. The latter operation was a branch of a principal enterprise at Trinity, while Tilley's entire business was confined to the town; he was a 'resident merchant' and every aspect of the business was conducted under his direct scrutiny. In his favour also, which would delight any merchant with the monopoly that he enjoyed, was the rapid population growth- from 1853 to 1869, the total population doubled.

Tilley operated almost exclusively on the barter system. Fishermen received credit for all the basic essentials; fishing materials, tools, food supplies, and household items. In many instances even the dealers' personal financial commitments to church and other organizations were paid by the business and deducted from the accounts. In return, all of the produce of the fishermen- cod fish, cod oil, herring, seal pelts, and lumber- were delivered to Tilley in trade. If, at the end of the season, a fisherman was fortunate enough to have earned more than the amount already taken out in credit, it was so indicated on the books- cash was rarely paid. It was usually unnecessary; most

of the fishermen found themselves more in debt each year, and the fortunate few with a dollar to spend were forced to deal with the Tilley monopoly.

All of the supplies for the Tilley business were purchased from St. John's merchants and shipped in coastal schooners directly to Bird Island Cove. In like manner, all of the products of the trade were transported to St. John's.

To succeed as a merchant in those early days, shrewdness was a necessary trait; Tilley was certainly not deficient in this respect. One year after the start of the business in Bird Island Cove the ledgers showed that many of his dealers owed a considerable amount of money. Tilley, whose survival in business depended on the collection of the same, requested that the debtors sign documents stating the nature of the debt and the proposed method of repayment- the signed statements all assured that the debt to the business took priority over all other matters. Hundreds of such notes were drawn up and signed. The following were typical (The Robert Tilley Collection, PANL, P7/A/67):

Bird Island Cove

August 5, 1854

Know all persons whom it doth or may concern. That we, William and John Hollahan of Sandy Cove, near Bird Island Cove, do hereby convey to Robert Tilly, merchant of Bird Island Cove, all our right title and claims to the fishing boat and craft to her belonging, built for us by Thomas Porter of Bird Island Cove, aforesaid, and in which we are now prosecuting the fishery, for and in consideration of the amount due by us to the said Robert Tilly, which sum greatly exceeds the value of said boat and craft.

Be it at the same time understood that if the said boat and craft is in any way damaged or totally lost while we have the use of her in the further prosecuting of this summer's voyage, the said Robert Tilly is not liable to pay or is in any way accountable for the same; as the said boat is lent to us free of hire, consequently if said boat is damaged or totally lost, we, ourselves must stand to the cost thereof.

In witness whereof we have hereto set our hands the date above written.

William Hollahan(X)

John Hollahan(X)

Witness present: Thos. Tilly

Housekeepers, maids, and general servants signed similar agreements (The Robert Tilley Collection, PANL, P7/A/67):

Bird Island Cove

Oct. 10, 1855

I have this day agreed with and shipped myself to Robert Tilly, merchant, of this place to serve him..from the 1st day of May 1856 to the last day of Oct. 1856 in the capacity of general servant, or otherwise for my master's interest in the good of the voyage; and in consideration of my services being strictly and duly performed without neglect or hinderance, he is to pay me as wages the sum of £22 currency, £4 of which (if I have that amount owing me from him) is to be paid in cash.

In witness whereof I have hereto set my hand the date above mentioned.

James Coles, His mark (X)

In 1870, eighteen years after the start of his enterprise and with the business at its peak, Tilley started the construction of the "Eastern".

From the **Tilley Collection** is this note (The Tilley Collection, PANL, P 6/B/16):

Know all men by these present that I William Baker of Bird Island Cove...Planter...in consideration of the sum of £45 current money of Newfoundland to me in hand paid by Robert Tilly, Merchant in Bird Island Cove...have hereby sold...that piece of land situated at Bird Island Cove with all erections thereon, and bounded on the North & West by Thomas Tilly's room, on the West & South by the public road, on the South & East by Henry Baker's land and on the East by the sea, as per diagram, including one half the fishing stage...

In witness whereof I have hereunto set my hand...at Bird Island Cove this 29th day of January one thousand eight hundred and seventy.

William Baker, Senior

His mark

Signed in presence of

Charles E. Thompson

James Crew

The following note written by N.C. Crewe was attached to the original document:

The above...is for the land on which the 'Eastern' still stands. The 'Eastern' is the building built by Robert Tilly...containing his shop and office on the second story and the fish store below, and was named after the 'Great Eastern' which had then

been at Heart's Content with the cable, an occasion on which Tilly went with his wife in his little schooner, the Mary Kate, to see the sights.....Robert, the deed's present holder, just tells me what I never knew before, e.g. that the 'Eastern' was partly built by his great grandfather at the time of his death and that it was completed after his eldest son, Arthur, took over the business.

This building, successively owned by the firms of Arthur Tilley, Philip Templeman, and C. Tilley Ltd., was demolished in the 1970^s.

By 1870 Robert Tilley had obtained rights to a plot of land near Sandy Cove which became known as "Tilley's farm". The **Tilley Collection** contains a note book dated 1870 which lists the names of about one hundred people who worked part time on the farm. Most were women who were paid in barter from the Tilley store.¹⁰ The farm eventually became the property of Robert's son Arthur. Arthur's son Ernest wrote:¹¹

...Grandmother's farm was about a mile from home. Grandmother and Aunt Nell spent most of their spare time there, and I too thought it was wonderful there on a summer's day and so, as soon as I could make it, and this was not the first time, I went with them...

...Father had a farm; to get to it you crossed Sandy Cove by a carriage road behind a big pile of stones- beach rocks. Outside the ocean rolled in on a wonderful sandy shore, but more of that later. Today Tom is taking me with him to the farm where he is mowing grass to make hay. We rode in a dray, a wagon of only two wheels, but very convenient on those rough roads. When we got to the farm mother and several other women were there having what I called a wonderful picnic. They were raking over the hay field, making hay...

In the relatively short period from 1853 until his death, Tilley became the most influential person in Bird Island Cove. Apart from the respect that his comparative wealth demanded, he was also regarded as a prominent figure in church and community affairs. He was actively involved in the construction of two churches; the second Anglican Church (1872), of which he was a member, and the second (1858) Methodist Church. He served as trustee of both properties. He composed many petitions to government requesting improvements in transportation and education, and served as a member of the Local Road Board and the Trinity District Board of Education. The **Daily News**, October 25, 1967, printed the following:

The Codfish Aristocracy

Dear Sir:

For many years I have been using in speech the above three-word reference as a title for an economic class in our little Newfoundland society, as indicating the better-off planter fisherman. But it occurred to me the other day that I had never seen the term in print and, further, that I did not know what I myself meant by it. On consulting two of my historically-minded friends, they proved never to have

heard the term. I am therefore left with the impression that I invented the term myself. Should it apply so as to include not only better-off planter fishermen but merchants whose main suit of extractive industrial business, as distinct from trading as such, had to do with producing and/or purchasing fish?..

For example, there was my ancestor Thomas Cole, an illiterate small boat fisherman, born at Bonavista in 1768 and married there in 1794, who moved to settle in nearby Elliston about 1808. There he prospered, so that when he died in 1840 he bequeathed about six hundred pounds in money, plus a house and fishing room and outfit. The furniture of his house included a mahogany grandfather clock, sic beech chairs, a dozen silver spoons, etc. plus his own silver seal and watch chain. I would count him as a codfish aristocrat.

Two generations afterwards, a grandson of Cole's wife named Robert Tilly was sent to school at Bonavista by his illiterate fisherfolk parents sufficiently long to qualify him as a schoolmaster. When he received a hundred pound bequest from his grandmother in 1853, he left school teaching and set up as a small merchant in Elliston. At his death in 1872 there, he was the only merchant in the place and everybody dealt with him; he left a house, lots of land and a business premises and a stock in trade. At church, people used to wait until he and his wife and family walked out at the service's end before venturing to do so themselves, standing up till he had gone through the door, all quite in the manner of a village squire in England. Would he be counted as a codfish aristocrat, for his commercial existence depended on the fish that was caught in the place all of which he bought and resold to Job Brothers in St. John's?

Robert Tilley was forty-seven years old when he died. Through his own initiative, and in a short period of time, he had created a business enterprise that few men of his generation could boast. It is fitting that the restoration of his original store will preserve a part of the Tilley legacy for future generations to appreciate.

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Information Provided by Mr. Doug Cole