

The Newfoundland Disaster:

By 1914 the spring seal hunt, a tradition in Newfoundland for well over one hundred years, was on a steady decline. The hunt which started about 1763 was first prosecuted from small schooners (no greater than thirty tons). The size of the sailing vessels gradually increased to one or two hundred tons. In 1805 eighty one of such vessels went to the ice. By 1857 the number had increased to 400. These ships crewed by thousands of Newfoundland fishermen set out each year for the ice flows off Northern Newfoundland and Labrador (the front) and to the Gulf of St. Lawrence (the back). Hundreds of thousands of seals were slaughtered each year.

In the early 1900^s a number of the wooden sailing and steam ships were being replaced by steel hulled steamers which were much more maneuverable in the ice and thus more effective seal hunters. Wireless was installed in many- not for the safety of the men aboard but for the good of the hunt. Skippers could now relay to each other (if employed by the same firm) information about the whereabouts of patches of seals and have regular contact with the merchant owners back home in St. John's.

Although technology had created a much better ship with capabilities unheard of before, the uncontrolled killing of seals for a hundred years had taken its toll— only a small number of vessels went to the ice in 1914. One of them was the **Newfoundland**, a wooden steamer which had already enjoyed the best of her days. She could not keep up with the others in open water, could not break through the ice as easily, nor even communicate effectively with them— for economic reasons, the owners had removed the 'wireless'.

The move to the modernization of the fleet was confined to the ships. The method of sealing and the unspeakable hardships endured by the sealers remained the same as it had been for generations. Those 'lucky' enough to get a berth made their way to St. John's where they were taken onboard and given their 'crop' by the merchant— a gaff, rope, knife, tobacco and a few personal odds and ends which would later be deducted from his share of the voyage. From then until they reached the seals there was little to do. Once 'in the fat', however, the bloodiest, dirtiest and most tiring of all the fisherman's labours would begin. The working day began at dawn when all the sealers would charge out over the side of the ship unto the ice. Sometimes the ship could get close to the seal patch and there would be little walking required. On other occasions, however, the sealers would have to walk considerable distances, and over some of the worse terrain on the face of the earth, before the 'harvest' could begin. The slaughter was simple— club the seal on the snout, quickly remove the blubbery pelt from the carcass, pile them in heaps and mark them with the ship's flag. If the ship could maneuver in the ice, they would be picked up later and hoisted aboard, if not, as often happened, the sealers would have to drag them on a rope to the ship. The fishermen's clothing, ropes, knives and gaffs soon became caked with drying blood and, since little provision was made for washing, they usually remained that way for the duration of the voyage. The killing continued as long as there were seals left alive or until night approached. The weary men would then make their way back to their ship, partake of the meagre rations, "ice" down the pelts in the hold and, finally, sleep, fully clothed, for a little while until it all started again the following day. When the ship was loaded, they headed to St. John's. The men received one third of the value of the pelts. That value, of course, was determined by the merchants!!

In late March 1914 the **Newfoundland** was experiencing the worst kind of luck for a sealing vessel. She was close enough to see that other steamers were panning seals while she was jammed steadfast in the ice.

The Captain, Westbury Kean, in consultation with the Second Hand, George Tuff, decided to sent his men on a trek of about four or five miles over the ice towards where the other crews were busy panning seals. This decision was made even though his Navigator, Capt. Charles Green, had suggested to him that he

believed a storm was brewing. He gave instructions to Tuff that, should it become necessary, the men should stay aboard his father's (Capt. Abraham Kean) vessel for the night. Tuff later testified that he did not hear that part of the instructions.

The men set out for the **Stephano**, Capt. Abraham Kean's ship, at 7:00 A.M. on Tuesday, March 31, 1914. It was a beautiful warm spring morning and many left their heavy clothing behind. After walking for two hours, thirty-four of the men, concerned that a storm was approaching, returned to the **Newfoundland** where they were met with showers of abuse from Capt. Westbury Kean. The rest continued and reached the **Stephano** just before noon. They were given a lunch of 'hard tack and tea'. Kean then took them to a spot that he calculated would put them in a patch of seals within three miles of the **Newfoundland** and from which they could walk back onboard their own ship for the night. It was snowing when they were dropped off.

Kean, however, was mistaken. He had dropped the men off at a point further from the **Newfoundland** than he had calculated. Unable to find their ship in the blizzard that lasted all night and through the next day, they were left on the ice until the morning of April 2. No search was made for the men despite many attempts by the crew of both ships to convince their captains that something may be wrong. Each of the two Skippers, Westbury Kean and Abraham Kean, believed that the men were safely aboard the ship of the other. Without a radio Westbury Kean was unable to communicate with any of the other Skippers.

Seventy-seven men of the **Newfoundland** froze to death on the ice. George Allan England, an American writer, who "went to the ice" on the **Terra Nova** in 1924 stated¹⁰:

So it struck the sealing steamer Newfoundland, on the last day of March, 1914. On that ship, Captain Westbury Kean had 119 men caught on the ice by an immense blind whiteness that raged for two days. Seventy-seven men died. Sixty-nine frozen bodies were brought in on April 4th by the Bellaventure. Forty-two survivors remained mutilated and crippled, after treatment at the General Hospital in St. John's. Eight men, alive when found, later succumbed. Again the Colony was plunged in woe.

(By far the best narrative of this disaster was that of Cassie Brown and Harold Horwood. **Death on the Ice**¹¹ is a spellbinding and heart breaking account of this terrible catastrophe.)

The following account of the men from Elliston who were aboard the sealing vessel, **Newfoundland**, on her fateful voyage in March of 1914, written by N.C. Crewe, was published in the March, 31, 1964 issue of **The Daily News**.

Of the several places that contributed victims to the Newfoundland sealing disaster, which occurred fifty years ago today, Elliston, in Trinity Bay, my boyhood home, was the severest sufferer, as no fewer than eight deaths took place among the number of men from the settlement who were members of the Newfoundland's crew. Included in this toll was the most poignant event of the disaster, the freezing to death, in each other's arms, of a father and son. Another unique feature of the settlement's connection with the tragedy was the circumstance that another father, who was one of the crew of the rescue ship Bellaventure, searched among the frozen corpses until he found the body of his own son. Besides the eight dead, two men suffered severe frostbite, losing parts of fingers and toes, one of whom, Mr. Charles Lodge Martin, is still living, one of the few remaining survivors.

There were twelve men from the place in the steamer Newfoundland that spring, and all were in the crowd that set out, on that fatal morning, to walk from their own ship to the Stephano. It will be recalled that, after about an hour on the march, a number of the men, deciding that the weather looked too threatening for safety, wisely took things in their own hands, refused to go any further and turned back to regain the Newfoundland. It was snowing even then. Among these who turned back were William Porter and his nephew, James Porter, both experienced sealers; the other men continued to the Stephano and were caught in the fatal blizzard.

Simon Trask wandered away from the main bunch of men on the icepans and was picked up, delirious, by the Stephano, with two nunny bags over his hands. All his fingers and thumbs were amputated at the General Hospital, but he later on managed to drive a horse and carriage, and even to mow grass with a scythe, with the stumps of his hands. He died about fifteen years ago. He was my second cousin.

Charles Lodge Martin lost parts of some fingers and toes, but has worked as a fisherman and logger. He was, I believe, so far gone as to be laid aside with the dead when rescuers noticed a sign of life in him.

The following eight dead men were, like the rest of the dead, thawed out to normal shape in the swimming pool of the George V Institute at St. John's and laid out in uniform style coffins. The eight coffins were sent by rail to the way station and hauled on dog slides the four miles to Elliston. Snow lay so heavy on the road that horses could not be used, so the slides were hauled by hand by men from the settlement. There they were placed in the Orange Hall, awaiting burial.

My foster mother took me, a boy of twelve, up to the hall to have, according to custom, a last look at the dead faces.

Reuben Crewe, aged 47, married, with a family. An older brother of my foster father, Alfred Crewe. His last previous trip to the ice was in the steamer Harlaw, when she was lost in the Gulf, and her men got ashore on St. Paul's Island and lived until taken off. Reuben had then given up going to the ice, but, when his younger son got a berth in the Newfoundland, for his first trip out, he decided to get one also, in order, as he prophetically said that winter, "To look after Albert John." It was noted that, in the last Methodist class-meeting he attended before going away, he "raised" a typical seaman's hymn, "Let your lower lights be burning." A fisherman, he was also a good amateur stonemason and builder of walls and chimneys, before the days of concrete in his native place, and I have heard it said that he could build a slide "in no time at all". I composed the simple epitaph on his headstone. In his coffin, Reuben's eyes were wide open in death.

Albert John Crewe, the younger of Reuben's two sons, aged 16 and some months. A perfect Saxon blonde, Albert John was a marvellous rifle shot. How proud he was that winter when he got the berth in what my foster father later called "that old rattle-trap", the Newfoundland. I understand from a still living survivor who saw them die that the father and son kept together until both were exhausted, when they lay down on the pan and the father drew his son's head up under his guernsey for him to die in his bosom. The father died soon afterwards, and thus clasped together, they were brought into St. John's.

Samuel Martin, aged 52, married, with a family. Three years later his oldest son narrowly escaped the fate of his father, as described below.

Charles Cole, aged 24, single, son of Thomas Cole. My second cousin. It was thought that Charlie would be among one of the first to succumb to the blizzard, as he was not robust, but he actually lived until the rescuers came to him, when he feebly signed with his hand and died.

Noah Tucker, aged 22, married with, I think, one child. In a recent letter to the St. John's Evening Telegram, a survivor says that the victims were congealed in various shapes, some in the posture of praying, on their knees. It was said in Elliston that

that was how Noah died; I know that his coffin was quite two feet deep, so that his body could not have been straight inside it.

William Oldford, aged 22, single, son of James Oldford. He lived in a different cove from me and, although he was my mother's first cousin, I do not recall seeing him except when dead.

Benjamin Chaulk, aged 35, single. The only adult son of deceased parents and a first cousin of Reuben Crewe.

Alexander Sanger Goodland, aged 22, single, son of John Goodland. My first cousin. Tall, thin and, like his brothers and sister, handsome. His father, although elderly and slightly lame, went to the ice that year in the Bellaventure, and I have heard him tell how he went out with the rescuers from that ship to look for his son, dead or alive, and finally found his body on the icepan.. "I know my son by his legs...there, that's my son..."

The eight coffins were taken to the Methodist Church on the 8th of April, where the funeral services were conducted by English-born Rev. Thomas H. James, an old white-bearded man with an extraordinary literal knowledge of the bible, whole sections of which he could recite. In those more simple days, evangelicals took the event of death "hard" and it was expected of the minister that he would "improve the occasion" with a sermon and service forcefully calculated to inspire the unconverted living with "conviction of sin" leading to conversion, and to impress upon all the solemn need "to prepare to meet thy God".

I do not recall much of the funeral service except the constant weeping of the women relatives and the minister's reference to Ben Chaulk as he went over the deceased name by name. Later, I recall, my foster father gravely saying to a fellow Salvationist that Mr. James had not made a deep an impression as he should have done "with them eight coffins lying there before him."

When the news of the disaster was coming over the telegraph wire, the operator was Miss Elizabeth Martin, a niece of poor Samuel Martin, and a foster-sister of Charles Lodge Martin. She was, of course, under some strain, and I recall she announced to the waiting crowd of people the names of Charles and Simon as survivors.

The judicial inquiry into the Newfoundland sealing disaster was, in my opinion, a ludicrous farce, in its dealing with the matter of responsibility for the tragedy. Had there

been at the inquiry a keen, analytical, fearless and determined legal counsel, acting on behalf of the crew of the Newfoundland, he would have brought forth evidence, from these shy and diffident folk, the sealers, that would, I feel, have materially altered the findings...

The following article appeared in **The Fishermen's Advocate**, April 7, 1961:

We pause in tribute to Reuben Crewe, and son Albert, Charlie Cole, Alexander Goodland, Benjamin Chaulk, Samuel Martin, William Oldford, and Noah Tucker, and all others who were victims of that great tragedy which claimed the lives of 78 brave Newfoundlanders.

To all remaining relatives we offer feelings of sympathy on this sad and memorable occasion.

Two other members of that crew from Elliston survived the ordeal, but with the loss of limbs and other injuries. Those were Simon Trask, who passed away some years ago, and Charles B. Martin who, we are glad to say, is still with us and expresses himself as being very thankful for a measure of health and strength.

Charlie lost all four fingers of his right hand and three of the left, also part of both feet, together with other bodily injuries.

He has braved his way down through those 47 years in various occupations, chiefly the fishery and logging.

Questioned as to how he could use a buck saw with but two fingers and thumbs, he replied, "I scarcely know how I did it, pretty hard at first but after a while broke myself into it and carried on for years."

We extend to Mr. Martin very best wishes for many years to be.

Some years after the **Newfoundland** disaster, Reuben Crewe's widow, Mary, married William Gough. Her daughter Mildred wrote the following article which appeared in **The Beacon**, Gander, NF., February 6, 1985:

Mary Crewe was very happy that winter morning in 1914 as she busied herself in her comfortable home, which was situated very near the ever-murmuring Atlantic Ocean. She sang as she prepared the midday meal for her family of four daughters, two sons and her husband. The sun shone through the window of her cosy kitchen and lighted up the shimmering waves of the ocean, which she could see, as she gazed out at the broad expanse. She thought, as she had done many times in her life, how calm, beautiful and serene it could look as it did that day, but she also knew how cruel and destructive it could be at times. She had known many of her relatives and friends whose husband's and son's lives had been claimed by the relentless storms, which could come so suddenly, leaving death and heartbreak in her wake. However, Mary was the daughter of a fisherman, and her husband Reuben followed the way of the sea, so she had become

accustomed to the constant worry and concern of fishermen's daughters and wives, and had learnt to live with it. For her, it was a way of life.

There was one branch of the fishing industry that Mary disliked with all her heart - this was the seal fishery in the spring of the year. The long weary days and nights of separation - of wondering if all were well with her husband - and then the many times, after all the worry, the hard work and constant exposure to danger, he came home with so very little in return. Sometimes there was nothing at all in the way of money to help the family along until summer came. In the village in which they lived only the summer inshore fishery was carried on. They were too close to the broad unsheltered, sweeping Atlantic Ocean, where storms rolled in, sending waves many feet high in the air; its high rocky cliffs did not lend themselves to the men's venturing out in late fall or early spring.

As Mary was looking out at the waves rolling in on the shoreline not far from her house, she was thinking about the decision her husband Reuben had made three years before. When he had returned from a seal fishing trip, which had proved most arduous and dangerous, he had told her: "Mary, I have made up my mind, I am not going to the seal fishery ever again. This trip made me realize I could have been drowned and you and the children left alone. God willing, we will manage without the extra bit of money. I know how much you worry, and I, myself, don't enjoy it all that much. Some men are cut out for hunting seals more than others - I'm one who is not." "Oh, Reuben," she replied, "Is this really true? You really mean it?" "Yes, my dear, indeed I do," he replied: "So your worries on that score are all over." "And," she thought now, "he has kept his promise, and how much happier this has made me."

This happiness which had filled her heart for three years was soon to be shattered, however, by the events that this very day brought.

Late in the afternoon, their eldest son, Albert John, who was the pride and joy of their lives came hurrying home, and almost breathless from running. "Mother," he said, "Uncle Ben had some berths come, and he told me he has one for me - in the S.S. Newfoundland. You know how much I've wanted to go, but father thought I was too young, I'm nearly seventeen now." he said, as he drew himself up to his full height - such a fine looking strapping young man, who looked at his mother from his blue eyes, so much like his father's.

"Oh no! Albert." Mary said, "You cannot go to the seal fishery, my son. It is terribly hard work out there on the frozen ice. Your

father has given it up, and you are still too young to go hunting seals."

"Now mother, I'm not - many others go at my age and even younger. Besides, even if father doesn't go, I can look after myself. I have to be on my own sometime. This is a good offer. It's only for a few weeks and it will give me a chance to see what it's like." Mary tried hard to change his mind, but could make no headway for 'youth must have its way'.

When Reuben came home from work and the other children from school, and they all sat down to supper, Mary broached the subject. "Reuben," she said, "Albert says he has a chance of a berth to the seal fishery in the Newfoundland. Uncle Ben offered it to him and

he wants to go. What do you think of that?" Reuben, who had experienced the hard work, the biting Northern winds, and the many frustrations, and dangers involved, was utterly against his son's going. Though the argument lasted well into the night, with his brother and sisters adding their words to those of their parents - all against his going, Albert remained adamant. In the end he got his way. They just could not persuade him, so, very reluctantly, they gave in. Albert went off to bed happy in the knowledge that at last, he was going to take part in the hunt he had heard so much about in his young life.

When Mary and Reuben were alone, there was a silence for some time. This was broken by a deep sigh from Reuben as he said: "Mary, you know what this means don't you? I must go with him. He will need me to help and advise him. He has never been away from home and knows nothing of what this is all about, or what he has to face. I would never have a moment's rest if I let him go alone." Mary's eyes filled with tears. "Oh Reuben," she said, "I don't want either of you to go. I dread the very thought of it, but still, if you are with him, I will feel he will be safer. I suppose, since he will not change his mind, he'll have to go." "Yes, my dear, but this will be my very last spring, you can depend on that! I'll see Ben in the morning and see if there is a berth left."

There was and Reuben took it. Mary was soon occupied getting her two men ready for the trip. Heavy wool mittens had to have the palms reinforced with canvas, to make them withstand the bitter cold, thick canvas jackets had to be made to cover the heavy woolen guernsey sweaters. Underwear had to be lined and lengthened with heavy flannelette and extra heavy wool socks knitted.

At last the day they were to leave, "I shall always remember how happy Albert looked that morning." Mary said. "Now mother," he said, as he hugged and kissed her, "Don't you worry about us. I got a feeling we'll get a bumper crop this year, and with both father and me bringing back our wages you'll get a new dress for sure!" As Reuben embraced his wife and saw her tear filled eyes he was very sober, but he tried to cheer her, saying, "Now, Mary, almost before you know we are gone we'll be home again."

"Why was it I wonder," said Mary later, "That as I watched them out of sight I had the feeling that I was really saying 'goodbye' to them for the last time? I couldn't let myself dwell on that thought. I had to look on the bright side and besides I had the other children who needed me."

Days and weeks passed and then came the night of March 31. "All day I seemed to see them before me," Mary said, "and at night when I went to bed I looked out over the water. Everything was calm and the moon was shining. Like every other night since they left home, I fell asleep with them on my mind, after I had prayed to God to keep them safe. Sometime in the night, I awakened suddenly, as if someone had touched me. As I glanced around the room, which was bright with the moonlight, I saw my husband Reuben and Albert John kneeling by the side of my bed. Reuben had his hands folded in prayer as I'd often seen him and Albert had his head bowed. There was such a look of peace on Reuben's face! Why - I even noticed the double stitching on the sleeves of their canvas jackets! It was only for an instant and then they were gone.

I got up, lit the lamp, and went downstairs. I lit the fire, and wrapped myself in a blanket, and waited for the day to come. I could not go back to sleep. I knew then that something dreadful had happened."

It was probably about this time, that away out on the Northern ice floes, in the freezing, gusting wind and snow, her husband and son lost in the blizzard, away from their ship in the company of a number of other men, were battling against the fury of the elements for many hours. As Mary was to learn later from one of the survivors, Albert pleaded with his father to let him sit down because he was so tired. Reuben tried to keep him walking knowing this was to only hope of survival, but at last Albert stumbled, fell down, and was unable to get up. Reuben then sat down, gathered his son in his arms and lifting his jacket and guernsey, drew his head under to shield him a bit more. As the night progressed and the bitter wind and cold increased, they both died there, in each other's arms - on the frozen ice floes as did seventy-five other men - six others from the village of Elliston.

When the news reached Elliston, it was the overwhelmingly sad and painful duty of the clergy to break the news to the bereaved families, when the United Church minister went to tell Mary, he was to say later of the visit: "She knew, even before I told her. 'They are gone I know - what happened? Did the ship sink?', she said to me."

Perhaps if the answer had been in the affirmative, it might not have been quite as hard to bear. The dreadful thought of her darling son and husband freezing to death on the ice, while she was in her warm bed was more devastating to Mary than words could ever express. "It broke my heart," she was to tell her daughter, years later. "I could never forget it - never." And she never did.

Mary was, in after years, to marry again, and bore two sons and a daughter. Actually, though she was never to recover fully from the shock and anguish, which pierced her loving heart. Such a warm and affectionate nature which she possessed found it almost impossible to feel the full and complete healing process of such a lacerated spirit.

"Mother," said her daughter of her second marriage, many years later, when this story was related to her, "That must have been a dream you had that night - it couldn't have been real could it?" "Well, my dear," she replied, "If it was a dream, it was unlike any I had before or since, in my whole life. I really was awake. I always thought I must have been very much in both their minds as they were nearing death on that ice, that night. They wanted me to know they were together." This daughter was to discuss this very strange tale with a well-known physician, in later years. He had delved deeply into the study of ESP. He said there are many stories on record of people who were bound together by a strong bond of love, whose images were seen at a time of deep trouble, trauma or death, by loved ones thousands of miles apart. "It certainly could have happened." he said.

This story is a true one, faithfully recorded, as my mother told it to me. Mary Crewe in later life became Mary Gough and was the mother of my two brothers and me from her second marriage.

In early June, 1915, Kean visited Elliston and spoke, uninvited, at a meeting of the Orange Lodge. The following account appeared in the **Mail and Advocate**, June 12, 1915:

Dear Sir;

Kindly grant me space in your paper to make a contradiction regarding an item which recently appeared in the grab-all paper about a meeting of the Orange Lodge held here at which meeting Kean attended. The report of that meeting in the grab-all paper said Kean was invited ashore to address the meeting. This is a deliberate bare-faced lie. Kean was not invited to attend the meeting and if he has any decency in him he would have remained aboard the Prospero and not force himself where he is not wanted.

I will tell you, Sir, how Kean got to the Orange Lodge that night. As per the usual custom, our Lodge was closed for the summer months; but on this particular day, one of our members being sick, the flag was hoisted on the hall for an emergency meeting called for by the Worthy Master. The lodge did not know anything about Kean coming on shore. He was not invited by the Lodge to do so, and considering how this place suffered from Kean's blundering in the spring of 1914, we think it will be some time before Kean will be asked to address a meeting here.

Kean showed what gall he is possessed of when he came to a meeting of the Orange Lodge here, uninvited. Had he possessed an ounce of feeling for the families of our poor fellows who were left to die like dogs on the Arctic floe, he would at least have waited until being asked to air his opinions in this or any other settlement. Being possessed of a swelled head and having gall and conceit stamped all over his countenance, he obviously does not see himself yet as others see him. Kean's name is mud North of St. John's and the quicker Bowrings realize this the better. We resent this recent insult of Jinker Kean and wish to inform him that when the people of Elliston, who have good reason to remember his name as one that stinks in the nostrils of all Northern fishermen, want him to address a meeting here, it will be time enough for this bumptious, brass-buttoned blowhard to do so...Furthermore, I can assure that had we known Kean was going to speak at that meeting, he would have been greeted with a full house of empty chairs.

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Information Provided by Mr. Doug Cole
from his book "Elliston: The Story of a Newfoundland Outport"