

Chapter 2

LEGACY OF HARDSHIP

Harsh Existence

Elliston has experienced more than its fair share of hardship throughout its two hundred history. However, the twentieth century has dealt the community some of its most severe blows. The Town was founded for no other reason other than the fishery. It lacks a sheltered harbour, nevertheless, the initial plentifulness of cod offset all other considerations. Despite this abundance of fish, a great deal of hard work was necessary to make a living. Men spent many hours at sea, frequently in dangerous conditions, to haul their nets and land their catch. Mr. Fred Pearce (deceased) of Maberly tells the story of danger he encountered upon returning from fishing:¹

We'd just caught fast to the stagehead when a sea came in and went over the stern of the rodney. The next wave turned us bottom up. I went down under the rodney three times . . . The undertow took me out toward the point, where the sea was rougher. Each time a wave came by, it forced my mouth open and I took in a lot of water. I was just going around the point when three fellows in another boat got to me. Father was up on the bottom of the overturned rodney and we got him aboard too.



Fishermen coming ashore in Maberly during the 1920's or 1930's

On shore both men and women toiled to prepare the catch for market. It was a harsh existence that required people to risk their lives on an almost daily basis. Often this activity did not ensure the financial security that enabled a family to survive year round without additional sources of income or food.

Most families engaged in subsistence farming, to grow their own produce, and had a nearby root cellar in which to store it. Upon the conclusion of the fishing season, many men left their homes to supplement their income by working in the lumber woods of central Newfoundland. The conditions were harsh and the work was physically demanding. The men lived in log cabins and slept on boughs they had to cut themselves upon arrival. Modern logging tools were nonexistent making the task of cutting trees and sawing them even more labour intensive. These workers were separated from their loved ones for months at a time, and their only means of communication was an occasional letter. An account of life in the lumber woods is as follows:²

“When you went into some camps, there’d be nothing but an old shed,” the 83 year-old Mr. Pierce [sic] remembers. “There’d just be long sticks in the bunks and you’d have to get a bag and fill it with something soft to make a bed for yourself. There’d be almost nothing to eat but black beans and sour bread and you’d have to cut 100 logs a month. We used axes before the bucksaw came. We’d stay right through in the camp until the middle of March, making \$23 a month.”



Many families also supplemented the household income through berry picking. Families would spend hours on the hills picking berries. Once their sacks were filled, they placed them on their backs and carried them home. Firearms and hunting were also an important part of subsistence. The hunting of small game such as rabbits and seabirds was a supplement welcomed by residents. The seal fishery also served as another resource for many Newfoundlanders but tragically a number of them lost their lives at this activity. For instance in 1880:³

Another fatal accident happened at Bird Island Cove. A young man of the name of Job Steeds, one of a punt's crew, when coming in with his load of seals, also went down and was seen no more. His father met a similar sad fate when the seals were last in there four years ago.

Amaziah Oldford (deceased), in the spring of 1898, almost lost his life while sealing. In 1961, he told his story:⁴

The ice was close to land and the seals were plentiful . . . I met Gideon Coles who told me to go ashore because the ice was not safe. I refused . . . about 4 o'clock a wave broke over the pan of ice carrying away my seals and gloves . . . I was not too far from Maberley [sic] . . . but the men on shore couldn't reach me . . . I lay down and fell asleep. I had given up all hopes . . . On awakening . . . I discovered that some men were trying to reach me from shore. Using ladders, ropes and boards they managed to reach me, stepping on the pans of ice only when the sea forced them together . . . It is to these men of Maberley [sic] that I own my life.

Sealing was indeed a hazardous occupation that would claim even more lives.

Newfoundland Sealing Disaster

Disease, failures in the fishery, poor harvests, and other tragedies all took their toll. One of the most infamous catastrophes was that of the Newfoundland Disaster. It involved the wooden-hulled steamship *S.S. Newfoundland* that went to the ice in search of seals in March of 1914. The captain was Westbury Kean, the son of Abram Kean an experienced sealing captain himself. On March 31st, a series of errors and misjudgements resulted in 132 souls being left on the ice for fifty-two hours in a severe winter storm. One misjudgement was that “Captain Westbury Kean was confident his men were safe and sound aboard his father’s ship, the ‘*Stephano*.’ And aboard the ‘*Stephano*’ Captain Abram Kean was equally confident the ‘*Newfoundland*’s’ men were aboard their own ship.”⁵ Without the presence of a wireless radio set aboard the *S.S. Newfoundland*, it was impossible to confirm that deplorable assumption. A 1964 newspaper article on the 50th anniversary of the disaster discussed the involvement of those sealers from Elliston:⁶

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 that 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 [Reuben and Albert John Crewe]. 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 . . . There were twelve men from the place in the crew of the steamer *Newfoundland* that spring, and all were in the crowd, that set out, on the fatal morning, to walk from their own ship to the *Stephano* . . . eight dead 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 out 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.

Seventy-eight froze to death including eight from Elliston although twelve were involved in the hunt. William Porter and James Porter defied orders to walk to *S.S. Stephano* and returned instead to the *S.S. Newfoundland* that tragic day. Charles Martin and Simon Trask were left on the ice and both survived although they suffered severe frostbit. Charles Martin was piled among the dead but as luck would have it someone saw him move and he was saved. Simon Trask wandered away from the others and was later picked up by the *S.S. Stephano*. The names of the dead were Reuben Crewe forty-six, Albert John Crewe sixteen, Samuel Martin fifty-two, Charles Cole twenty-four, Noah Tucker twenty-two, William Oldford twenty-two, Benjamin Chaulk thirty-five, and Alexander Sanger Goodland twenty-two. The inscription on Reuben and Albert Crewe's headstone states "Go home dear friends, and cease from tears, we must lie here till Christ appears. And when He comes, we hope to rise, into the light that never dies." It is ironic that the bell Abram Kean had donated to the then Methodist Church in 1901/02 tolled for the dead in 1914.

The bell Abram Kean donated still remains at the top of Elliston United Church



A commission of inquiry later absolved Abram Kean of responsibility, although many felt he put the hunt before the safety of his men. In 1915, Kean made an unexpected and unwelcome appearance at Elliston's Orange Hall. He spoke before an unreceptive crowd whose memories of the events of 1914 were still fresh. A letter soon thereafter appeared in a newspaper, by an unknown person who signed the letter simply as "One Who Was There," expressing the negative feeling toward Abram Kean:⁷

. . . he [Kean] evidently does not see himself yet as others see him. Kean's name is mud North of St. John's . . . We resent this 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. If Kean had a son lost in that disaster would he be so inhuman. . .

In his own book, Kean later wrote that the Newfoundland Disaster was not his fault. He claimed he was sure that the crew of the *S.S. Newfoundland* had reached their own ship. In any case, Kean believed the accident could not have been avoided even if the *S.S. Newfoundland* had retained its wireless device. It is surprising to note that he cites that seventy-three sealers died when the actual number was seventy-eight.⁸ Apparently Kean had not taken the time to confirm the numbers before the date of print or perhaps he had forgotten about the other five men.

The community of Elliston was the hardest hit by this disaster but it would not be the last. An economic disaster of an unimaginable magnitude was to follow some seventy-eight years later. This tragedy would change life not only in Elliston but life in the entire Province of Newfoundland.

Decline and the Cod Moratorium

The Elliston of the 1970's and 1980's was that of a community in steady decline. The fishery, although still an important industry, was winding down despite efforts to protect the resource such as the establishment of the two hundred mile conservation limit in 1977. Many people were employed at fish processing plants, and employment opportunities outside of the fishery were quite limited. Elliston Elementary, the community's only remaining educational institution, and the Salvation Army were both in operation, however, near the end of the 1980's both buildings stood empty. Effective community organizations and tourism activities were nonexistent. With the exception of a garden party, held in front of the United Church Hall, there were no public community activities. A celebration similar to Bonavista Day, which in the past was held at the same time as the Royal St. John's Regatta, was unheard of in Elliston and would remain so until the establishment of the annual Bird Island Puffin Festival. At this point in time, the outlook for this small outport was indeed bleak.

July 2nd, 1992, was an infamous date in the history of the Newfoundland fishery. On that day a cod moratorium was announced throwing thousands of people out of work. It marked the end of an era that can be traced back to when John Cabot (Giovanni Caboto) discovered the abundance of cod off our shores on June 24th, 1497. Thousands of people, who worked either directly or indirectly in the fishery, were now verboten from participating in this centuries' old tradition. On the tenth anniversary of the notorious closure, representatives of the Province, Fisheries Association of Newfoundland and Labrador, Fish, Food and Allied Workers, and others unveiled a plaque with the following inscription:⁹

For nearly 500 years the fishery sustained, employed,
and defined the people of Newfoundland and Labrador.
Generations of coastal people built a fishing society
along thousands of kilometres of rugged coastline. On

July 2, 1992, five centuries of fishing activity was abruptly halted. The northern cod moratorium altered the fabric of our province - economically, socially and culturally. Yet the people of our fishery endured. We honour their strength, determination and perseverance.

Many small communities were dealt a grave economic blow and Elliston was no exception. People clung to the hope that this was only going to be a temporary measure while the cod stocks were rebuilt, but that hope has faded with each passing year. It has become obvious that a return to the fishery of yesteryear is not likely. The fishery, which had been the backbone of Newfoundland and Labrador's economy, has now been reduced to weekend recreational activities and only in designated areas.



Recreational food fishery at Maberly

Approach of Darkness

Sadly, the number of permanent residents in Elliston has continued to fade. The entire twentieth century has been one of decline for its population. In 1891, the Town reached the zenith of its population growth with 951 residents. The numbers have since dwindled, primarily because of economic factors. In 2006, the approximate population of Elliston is somewhere in the neighborhood of 350, which is about the same as it was during 1830's and 1840's.

If the declining population trend continues, some may wonder if the community will one day revert to its pre 1806 existence of only seasonal settlement. Like the temporary fishing outposts of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the future may be a cluster of summer lodgings dotting the coastline. These short-term residents, however, will not have the freedom to engage in the very fishing activities that originally brought about settlement to this area.

With each passing year, Maberly is coming closer to this fate with very few permanent residents remaining. More and more people from outside the area and even the country are purchasing vacant homes to be used as summer cottages. Even some of the former permanent residents no longer live there year round and only return during the summer months.

The twentieth century introduced many modern amenities to Elliston including electric power. The main part of Elliston received power in 1929 and Maberly in 1963. Unfortunately the 1990's saw a reversal of that progress with the loss of the community's street lights. The Sandy Cove area, which lies between Elliston and Maberly, illustrates this transition. At one point in time Sandy Cove was in darkness with the only street lights being situated in the nearby towns. Eventually a single street light was installed in the vicinity of the municipal park/pump house. As time progressed the whole area was lit with a string of lights making it possible to drive through this area with

your vehicle headlights switched off. Unfortunately this state of illumination was not to last and darkness was to fall not only over Sandy Cove but the whole municipality.

Elliston had been in decline for many years, with more and more families moving away in search of employment opportunities. In September of 1994 the community hit, what only can be described as, rock bottom. The Town Council found itself in such an economic bind that they could no longer afford to pay all of the bills. Appropriately, “Elliston lights dimmed” was the title given to an article that appeared in the September 10th, 1994, edition of *The Evening Telegram*. It states that “. . . only about 40 per cent of street lights will remain on for the next six months in an effort to pay Elliston’s \$14,000 power bill . . . The reduced lighting was part of the plan worked out recently . . . with Newfoundland Light and Power.”¹⁰ Unfortunately this effort was not enough and a few weeks later, the “Council decided to disconnect all remaining street lights. Town cannot afford to pay for them due to people not paying taxes. . . .”¹¹ Soon thereafter street lights throughout the municipality were abruptly terminated with the only illumination being provided by private lights.

Regrettably, the Town’s financial problems did not end with its lights, and just over a month later steps were taken to discontinue water service at some homes. Homeowners, who had not paid their bills, were quite upset when workers ventured onto their property to suspend service. It became necessary for the RCMP (Royal Canadian Mounted Police) to escort workers because of threats.¹² Current and former residents alike were mortified as this reversal of progress drew national media attention. I recall watching CBC’s *Here & Now* and hearing this unsettling news. Elliston quickly became known as the Town where the lights went out. The community and its residents were plunged into a dark abyss with little hope in sight.

Fortunately this was not to last, and by 1998, the fiscal situation had improved enough to permit this service to be partially reinstated. The Town Council, on February 24th, “. . . had a lengthy discussion re: street lights. Council made a motion to

install 15 to 20 street lights on the Main Road . . . Motion carried, unanimously.”¹³ Although not restored to its former status of electrical service, the tarnished reputation of Elliston was somewhat improved.



Men erect the first telephone pole, in Sandy Cove, to bring electricity to the Neck and Maberly in October of 1963. At this time twenty homes were to be serviced.

Chapter Two Notes

1. "It was all in a day's work," Decks Awash 8.2 (1979): 29-30.
2. Decks Awash
3. "Local and Other Items," The Morning Chronicle 10 Apr. 1880.
4. "Old Sealer recalls brush with death," The Evening Telegram 21 Apr. 1961.
5. Cassie Brown, "Death March: The Story of a Sealing Disaster," The Daily News 31 Mar. 1964.
6. N. C. Crewe, "Memories 1914-1964 by N. C. Crewe: Elliston Men Among Ill-Fated Sealers," The Daily News 31 Mar. 1964.
7. "Kean was not invited to address the meeting: His presence an insult to the people of Elliston," Mail and Advocate 10 Jun. 1915.
8. Abram Kean, Old and Young Ahead, (St. John's: Flanker Press, 2000. Updated ed.) 31.
9. Government of Newfoundland and Labrador News Release, Department of Fisheries and Aquaculture, Government Marks 10th Anniversary of the Northern Cod Moratorium (St. John's: Newfoundland and Labrador, 2 Jul. 2002)
10. Sam Ryan, "Elliston lights dimmed," The Evening Telegram 10 Sep. 1994.
11. Elliston Town Council, Minutes (Elliston: Newfoundland, 29 Sep. 1994)

12. Bernie Bennett, "Tough Talk from Tiny Town," The Evening Telegram 24 Oct. 1994.

13. Elliston Town Council, Minutes (Elliston: Newfoundland, 24 Feb. 1998)