

Chapter 4

LEGEND AND FOLKLORE

Strongman Jimmy Chant

The exploits of the legendary strongman Jimmy Chant (1886-1924) are known throughout Elliston and beyond. There are numerous stories of Jimmy performing great feats of strength. In an interview with Arthur Chant, he told a Tourism Elliston researcher a few stories:¹

Jimmy was a strong man. He had big hands. He was quiet and had a strong deep voice. Jimmy died in 1924 . . . Jimmy always liked to do chores for other people. He use to take a boat up in under his arm and carry it to dry land. I remember one time, Jimmy carried a waterloo stove from Bonavista to Elliston, and on his way down he had to turn around and go back to Bonavista because he forgot something.

My uncle, the late Ross Pearce, once told me the tale of how Jimmy was seated at a table and for some reason a person on the inside wanted to leave. Instead of getting out of the way, he simply picked up the person, with one arm, and set him down on the outside. Another story involved Abram Kean of the infamous Newfoundland Disaster. Jimmy Chant signed aboard a sealing vessel captained by Kean. The Captain was fascinated when he heard that there was a man aboard who had the strength to bend nails into staples using only his bare hands. Kean didn't really believe it was true but wanted to see for himself so he arranged for a bag of nails to be delivered to his cabin and then sent for Jimmy Chant. Jimmy arrived at the Captain's



cabin and Kean placed an amount of money in front of him equal to several weeks pay. Kean then tells Jimmy it is all his if he can bend the whole bag of nails into staples. These were heavy nails of six to eight inches in length but Jimmy made short work of them and to Kean's amazement walked away with the cash in hand.

Another tale that focuses on Jimmy's strength involved the construction of the railway between Clarendville and Bonavista. A special harness had been made for Jimmy so he could attach himself to a tree stump and haul it from the ground. Also the railway workers had to remove large rocks by smashing them to pieces with sledge hammers. Apparently several men were working on a boulder for three days with no success. So Jimmy was asked to have a go at it. They found him the largest mall they could and with three massive blows he demolished it. Other feats of strength included having a man sit in each of Jimmy's hands and he would pick both up at the same time. Also he carried a bundle of shoe leather on his back weighing several hundred pounds from the Ryan's store at Bonavista to Elliston because the road was in too poor a condition to use a horse and cart.

In addition to Jimmy's strength and endurance he had a great tolerance for pain. At Christmas time a shopkeeper dared Jimmy to pick up some apples he had placed atop a hot stove. He offered him some money to pick them up using only his mouth. This seems simple enough, but the tip of his nose would touch the hot surface each time he tried. This did not deter Jimmy because he was able to get a grip on the apple and a monetary reward was at stake. Despite this discomfort he continued until all the apples were removed, but the smell of burn flesh was all throughout the shop.

These great feats of strength and endurance obviously took their toll. Jimmy Chant died at the relatively young age of thirty-eight and is buried at the Methodist (now United) cemetery in Elliston. Some people suspect he over exerted himself and this eventually led to heart failure.

Legend of Kitty Casey

Elliston and Maberly, like many other small Newfoundland communities, have their share of unique tales surrounding various events in their combined history. One such story is the legend of Kitty Casey, a headless woman, who is said to roam the Sandy Cove area. This particular case actually can be traced back to a court case recorded in *The Day Book*, St. John's on the 26th of September in 1862:²

Nearly the whole of to-day has been spent in the case of *The Queen vs. Patrick Casey*, the prisoner being found guilty. Several civil issues have also been disposed of:

During the course of the above trial, a messenger came from Bird Island Cove (where the prisoner resided) to say that his wife had just cut her throat and was in a dying state. She has since been visited by a Doctor who says she cut herself in five places, and that there is no hope of her recovery. She is now dead. The prisoner, Patrick Casey, was sentenced to one month's imprisonment.

N. C. Crewe commented:³

. . . Casey, who was a tanner by trade, was either an Irishman or a native of Hr. Grace. I think he came to Bird Island Cove as a shareman fisherman with my great-grandfather, Richard Cole. He came to be a planter on his own account, his stage being in what is still known as Casey's Gulch. He lived nearby, on the point. His sister lived with him, and they had an incestuous child who married one Tom Sullivan, who lived for years as a fisherman there and later moved to St. John's . . . in old age . . . [Casey] died at B. Is. Cove and is buried in Bonavista, in R. C. Cemetery. . . .

The late Hon. J. V. O'Dea told me in 1958 that when he was a young bookkeeper at Ryans, in Bonavista, old Paddy Casey used to come in there selling poems he had made up. . . . this was about 1892.

Nobody knows who Paddy's wife was, but her name was Kitty Casey, and I have heard it said when a boy that raisins she attempted to eat came out though the cuts in her throat. She was buried in a droke in Sandy Cove.

. . . Kitty suicided from grief because of Paddy's conduct.

Kitty Casey was buried near Sandy Cove instead of in a cemetery because, at this time, it was believed that anyone who committed suicide should not be buried in holy ground.

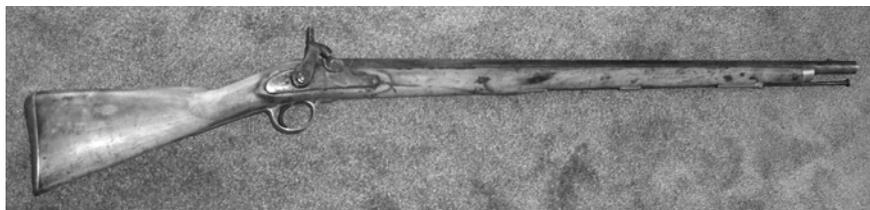
A Mysterious Disturbance

Unusual occurrences are not unheard of in the vicinity of Elliston, however, the mysterious *thunder growl* of 1830 or 1831, while not actually folklore, was a most peculiar incident. Philip Tocque notes:⁴

. . . a very signular and most extraordinary sound was heard in the neighbourhood of Bonavista, and of Bird-Island Cove. It commenced about 3 o'clock in the afternoon, and lasted until the next day about noon. The men of Bird-Island Cove were going about nearly all night, some with loaded guns - some with hatchets - and others with whatever weapon they could command. The sound is described as resembling distant thunder. It had also been compared to the growl of a bear, the bellowing of a cow, &c., conveying a deep sepulchral tone. What is most strange and unaccountable is, that it appeared alongside of every body, although at the time some were at a distance from each other of from one to five miles. Men hauling wood at the time thought the sound came out of the ground immediately under the slide or sledge, and in some instances were so alarmed as to leave the wood behind. Several females thought a bear had got into their bedrooms, and ran terrified from their dwellings. James Porter informed me, that when he first heard the sound he took his loaded gun and proceeded in the direction whence the sound came (supposing it had been a water-bear) until he came to the edge of a

cliff, when the sound seemed as if it issued out of the solid rock, and so deep and strong as to make his whole body tremble. By what means this singular sound was brought into existence I am unable to explain. It could not have originated from the rumbling noise made by the ice, because no ice at the time was near the coast - neither would the noise made by the ice be heard in the peculiar manner this sound was heard; and it does not appear to have been symptoms of an earthquake, because no trembling, nor the slightest motion was felt in the earth; and nothing remarkable occurred immediately after the sound passed away, except that two days afterwards one of the heaviest seas ever known took place. The origins of this sound could hardly be the eruptions of some distant volcano (the nearest of these being in Iceland); though Sir Stamford Raffles states, that the detonations produced by the eruption of Tomboro, a volcanic mountain in Sumbawa, were heard at a distance of nine hundred and seventy miles. The sound is termed by the inhabitants of Bonavista and Bird-Island Cove, "the thunder growl."

The reaction of James Porter is particularly interesting. For him to assume that a Water or Polar Bear was the source of this growl suggests that such encounters may have previously taken place in the area. Considering the time period, he most likely would have carried some type of flintlock such as the Brown Bess, a muzzleloading British military firearm. It may have been popular with private citizens much the same way as are surplus British Lee Enfield rifles today with many local hunters.



Tower Musket

Rev. Charles Lench, in 1919, also made reference to this strange disturbance and compared the effects to a much earlier event:⁵

An old inhabitant eighteen years ago, explained to the writer, as well as he could, what the noise was like. The men heard it in the woods, and were afraid. The women thought a bear had got into their bed chambers, and were terrified. Two days afterwards there was a very heavy ground sea, and Bonavista harbour was partly dry for several minutes; but the noise of two days before has never been properly explained . . . The effects of the Lisbon earthquake were felt for ten minutes, in the year 1755, by the harbour being partly dry, and the waters around Cape Bonavista were most furiously agitated.”

The widespread effect of the infamous Lisbon earthquake suggests that geologic activity may have also been responsible for the 1830/31 disturbance. However, could this account for a sound that was heard for a twenty-one-hour duration? This event will remain a bizarre footnote in Elliston’s history.

Unusual Tales

There is no shortage of supernatural tales in rural Newfoundland communities, and something as simple as fog became the catalyst for many. Stories regarding spirits were common including the Jack-o-Lantern. One account is as follows:⁶

Well, I can remember hearing about the Jack-o-Lanterns. Our parents use to tell us to make sure that if it was foggy, to always turn out pockets inside out. If we didn’t, we would get lost. The Jack-o-Lanterns was something like fairies, I think. They use to drag people off in the fog, and make them get lost. When the fog cleared, they didn’t know where they were.

There is another legend concerning the ghosts of Frenchmen who are said to roam the hills of Maberly and the Neck. The story is that they were the crew of a ship or possibly several ships that had collided with the rocky cliffs near Maberly, on a foggy night, killing all hands. People say that the ghosts of these poor shipwrecked souls wander the area unwilling to accept their fate. It is said that when the fog rolls in, you can hear strange sounds in the distance. These sounds have a hypnotic call that encourage people to move toward the source. Some believe that if they follow these sounds, the Frenchman would lure them over the edge of a cliff to share in their disastrous fate.

The sight of certain types of birds is said to have a special meaning. For instance, "The appearance of the petrel awakens the superstition of the sailor, most sailors believing the appearance of Mother Cary's Chicken to be the harbinger of a storm."⁷

Even something as common as a root cellar was also incorporated into the play of local children. Apparently boys and girls would gather around cellars to engage in various games. In some cases, boys would hide in them and when the time was right, jump out in an attempt to scare the girls. Cellars were also shrouded in folklore and stories concerning the origins of babies. Instead of the story of the stork, children were often told that babies came from John Murphy's root cellar. One story detailed that ". . . they used to dig babies out [of root cellars] with a silver shovel. We used to go to the cellars and listen for babies."⁸ Such stories may be traced back to England where tales of Leprechauns, who lived in cellars, would sometimes kidnap a woman to help deliver her baby.⁹

For the people of Elliston and surrounding areas, the root cellar was something more than a storehouse for vegetables and other food stuffs. They held a special meaning and this was exhibited in some of the games played by children. Such stories of folklore were passed down from one generation to the next.

Chapter Four Notes

1. Arthur Chant, Elliston Resident, Personal interview, 9 Nov. 1998.
2. The Day Book 26 Sep. 1862.
3. N. C. Crewe, "Elliston File," Provincial Archives of Newfoundland and Labrador.
4. Tocque 118-119.
5. Charles Lench, The Story of Methodism in Bonavista and of the Settlements Visited by the Early Preachers, 2nd ed. (St. John's: Robinson and Company. 1919.) 22.
6. Sarah Oldford account obtained from Tourism Elliston
7. Tocque 73.
8. Ella Pearce account obtained from Tourism Elliston
9. Childs 20.