

## Our Lives

A Fisherman  
and Storyteller

Art Wicks

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# A Fisherman and Storyteller

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## The First Wicks

This old fella Wicks, he moved to Port Nelson first. When he came in he built a house right by the seashore, I would say no more than fifteen feet from the shore, a kind of a two-storey house.

At that time the place was densely populated with wood. There were birch trees up in our garden, a good two, three hundred birch trees and some were as big around as a barrel.

The old fella Wicks went to cultivate some land there and he came across this coffin. No one seems to know why it was there. They think it was from a pirate ship that came in long before that.

Now the man who took the coffin up, that was Alfred Wicks. He took up the coffin to make an ice-hunting box from it. Grandfather told me the board was just as dry as could be. In those years, people carried an ice-hunting box to the seafishery. It was a real heavy, crude box.

But whoever the man in the coffin was he was a tall guy. He had blond hair but when he opened the box he just disintegrated. They don't know who it was, a Norwegian, or a pirate, or someone else.

He didn't live there. He had to be brought in on some ship steamer or schooner. He probably had died or someone killed him aboard a boat.

Perhaps they dug him up because they thought there might be some money.

Most generally pirates would have some money, but there was none there. The only thing he found was the body.

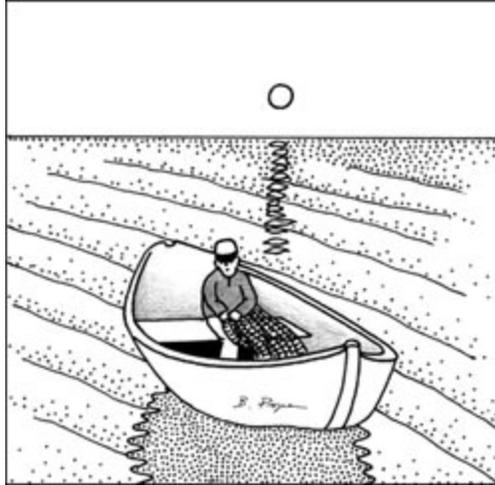
Years ago I think I was carried aboard the boat wrapped up in Uncle Jim Wicks's oil jacket. The first boat he had, he brought her home from Quirpon. He was down there with my father. My father fished with him, and Grandfather, on the grounds.

So when I got old enough I had to go. We had no choice because everybody in the family at that time, which was eight or nine of us, we all helped with the chores, with the fish, and in the gardens.

We were taken out of school at a very early age. If the father thought he had to take you out of school, he did. He figured what's the use of education anyway? They carried you out in the fishing boat, and then in the winter, they took you back in the woods.

I can recall going out in boat and being seasick as a dog, praying to God that there'd never be another fish caught in them days. But as time progressed, I got away from thinking like that, and this became my way of living.

You had to get out there in your own boat and do your own thing. We most generally fished the inshore grounds. Flower's Island grounds.



At that time there were fluctuations in the fishery during them years. Some years you did good, some years you didn't do nearly as good. In those days, all the fish caught was salted and dried.

Handlining, that was the main thing. They handlined and they used the dapper with caplin for bait. Father didn't use a trap. He used cod nets and a trawl.

We would fish anywhere from three to four miles from Port Nelson, out on the Flower's Island ground. There were all kinds of places there. There were Three Rock Shoal ground, Ireland, and Jimmy Green's Knob, and I could go on and on.

Everybody went on the fishing grounds in them years by knowing fishing marks. We could use a house in Wesleyville or a house in Safe Harbour or a church there to position ourselves. The church was a really good landmark for people to get on the ground.

## The Labrador Gull

I'll tell another story about Grandfather, who used to fish with Skipper John Blackwood in a schooner called *Tulip*. Grandfather said to me, "Now, you look out to the pigs when I'm gone to the Labrador and I'll bring you home a gull."

Now that was something. Everybody wanted a gull as a pet. They were captured on the Labrador, put in a crate or something, and brought home.

In the fall, Grandfather came home on the schooner. Skipper John Blackwood threw the crate up on the wharf. "Here's your gull now, Art. Look out for him."

Before he went in the house Grandfather said, "I think I'll go up now and see how the pigs are."

He went up and looked at the pigs. When he saw the shape they were in he came down on the wharf. He turned to Pete Blackwood or someone. "Come here, Pete. I want you. Here's a gull for you."

Pete grabbed it. "What's the reason you never gave the gull to Artie?"

Grandfather said, "I don't think he looked out to them pigs very well while I was gone. The pigs are that poor you have to tie a knot in their tails so they won't go through the fence!"

## Our Winter Playground

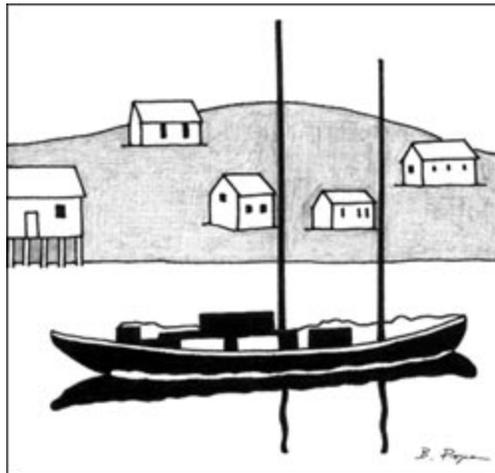
I can see it now. The harbour frozen over. The ones who owned the schooner frozen in the ice lived in Greenspond. They wouldn't know about us going aboard.

We would sneak aboard and go down in the cabin. We also would light a big fire in the forecastle.

A buddy of mine, Victor Burton or someone else would get some potatoes. He got the potatoes, and someone else got the carrot, and we would go aboard the schooner. Someone would swipe a bit of salt meat out of the barrel, not very much. We went aboard the schooner, put the funnels up and put on the biggest kind of a scoff.

I recall one night. I'll tell the story. It's not all true but there was something to it. The part about the overalls is not true.

Victor Burton said, "Now Art, we're going aboard the schooner tonight to cook up a scoff. I'll get the turnip, carrot and all that."



There were half a dozen of us together. He said, "What are you going to get for mutton, you know, fresh meat?"

"Boy," I said, "I don't know."

Now, in December the old people would kill a sheep and they would hoist it up into a gambol. A gambol is a frame of sticks between its legs, and that's how they would wash and clean it. It wouldn't take long for that sheep to freeze in those years, only overnight.

So I said, "It's no trouble to get mutton. Me and Grandfather killed a sheep this evening." I went down in the night, about half past seven or eight o'clock, when everything was quiet, December month. I chopped the mutton off, there is no doubt about that.

Now Grandfather had a dog, Rover her name was. He thought the world of that dog. Rover heard everything, every little crack. Grandfather knew if there was someone around, by Rover barking.

So this night, no mistake, I was down in the store. I had this big five-cell flashlight, the only thing we had then. We found the axe on the bench and I said to Vic, "You hold on the flashlight and train it on the mutton hanging down."

Just as I was going to make the chop at some meat, the flashlight went out. Instead of chopping the meat, I chopped off the rope.

At that time I was wearing a big pair of overalls two sizes too big for me. Instead of the mutton coming down and falling down on the floor it went down inside of my overalls. Here I was now, with the two hooves down in the overalls, and here was the dog barking!

I could hear Grandfather out there shouting, "There's something down in that store!"

The next morning he said to me, "What was Rover barking about last night?"

"I don't know," I said.

"I should have gone down last night."

He went down in the morning and found part of the mutton on the floor. "Art," he said, "are you sure you don't know who was there?"

Now, Grandfather thought the world of me. I could do nothing wrong. Even if I told him I did it, he would say, "No, that was someone else did that."

He would blame it on Eric Blackwood or some of the boys. "Cocky, my son, if you finds him who did that, let me know!"

"Yes, I'll sure let you know, Grandfather."

## That Day is Gone

Way back in them days, everybody respected each other. You wouldn't dare go and take someone else's berth. We respected other's property. And everybody helped one another. If I wanted to pull up my boat, everybody was there with a willing hand.

I hate to say this. You could go up on the wharf today and you bring up a conversation about someone. "You know, he's got a crab licence." Or say, "Someone else haven't got a crab licence."

He could push you over the wharf! I'll tell you, that's how heated the debate has gotten these days. Because if one segment of the fishery closes down people think they had to get in on the new fishery too.

There is a lot of animosity, and boy, there's a lot of greed over the quotas.

But it wasn't like that years ago, not in my recollection. If you didn't have a bit of paint, someone would bring a bit of paint to you. They would tell you where a little bit of fish was to be found, but today it's altogether different.

Now, you could go out here on the slip and you could scote the living daylight out of you. They wouldn't even lift a hand or turn an eye towards you. But years ago people would be glad to help. Every opportunity they helped you pull up your boat.

There was one thing that really amazed me. Every year before the schooners went to the Labrador they would come in by the wharves and would heave down. However many men were in that community, fifty or sixty, and sometimes women, would go and give that skipper a helping hand to heave down his boat. The boat was tipped on its side so the bottom could be cleaned and caulked and painted.

There were a lot of houses belonging to older people that died. They were on the other side of Port Nelson, about three or four hundred feet across the tickle, probably half a mile. If a man had bought a house there he would wait until the harbour was frozen over solidly. He would go rig the house out. Then he put a flag up when he was going to move.

Boy, you'd better believe the people would be going in droves. People were only too glad to go and help others.

Everyone was community-minded. Everybody had a helping hand for someone else. I hate to say it, but that day is gone.

## The Shag Rock Accident

I'm named after my uncle Art Wicks. He and my father and Jim Wicks had a hunting accident.

In the winter of 1917, in January, they left Port Nelson in a rowboat to go duck hunting down on what we called Shag Rock, off Greenspond.

They left around four o'clock in the morning, cold enough to perish you in them years, and vapour flying. My Uncle Art Wicks and Jim landed on Shag Rock. They went up over the island there in order to shoot ducks as they flew in. My father stayed aboard the boat until he heard the gun. That was an indication that they had killed some ducks and he would row out around to get them.

He heard the gun and he rowed out around. He didn't see anything so he wondered what happened. He landed the boat and walked up over only to find, to his amazement, that Jim had shot Father's brother, Uncle Art.

They were crawling along, and I supposed he must have hit the cap on the muzzle-loader. Father was only seventeen or eighteen years old, I think. Well, you can imagine the panic that he was in, and Jim as well.

Jim was a big man, two hundred pounds, I suppose. He had the job of getting Uncle Art down aboard the boat and lash him down in the boat and tie him to the risings. He had to row in then.

They went in and landed at Uncle Ned Blackwood's place and that's where they kept them until they got settled down. Then four or five men went out and brought in my uncle.

That was a very sad story. That really happened.

## Resettlement

When a man grows up in a place his roots are there. "You can take a man from the bay but you can't take the bay from a man," the saying goes.

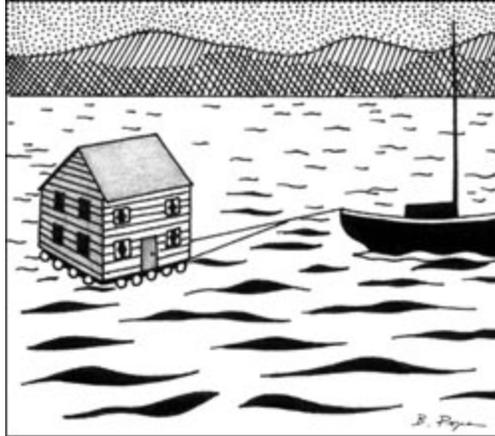
So when you live there and you build up a fishing premises, your roots are there. It's some hard to tear up stakes and go somewhere that you don't know, into a welfare state.

While they were there in the outports they were independent. They could fish and they could do all kinds of things, but government encouraged them to move to some kind of inland town. This is what happened when centralization came in, resettlement.

At that time the government was under Joey Smallwood's regime. He paid so much to move a house. One hundred dollars, two hundred dollars. It wasn't very much, but people I suppose grasped that opportunity. Because money then was something that was very scarce, so people did get a little bit for moving.

As one family left it made it harder for the other people to survive, to keep the whole society going. Then they got down to the point where the teacher left. You know what that meant. When the school goes, there goes rural communities.

Anyway, I was the last one to pull up stakes. They had all gone and I was the last family. Apart from Uncle Baxter Whiteway, an old man who lived on the other side of the cove, by himself.



But I was the last family. I was married. I had three kids. They had a bit of schooling, so what could I do? I had no other choice. I decided I would move over here to Badger's Quay. I didn't know what the future held for me after I left there, no more than the man in the moon.

I was the fella they hired to rig out the houses for moving. I rigged almost every house over at Safe Harbour and brought them over here. The houses that are down here now in Safe Harbour Square, I was the guy who went over there and put runners in under them, put casks into them and floated them over here and brought them up here to where they are standing now.

I'm the man, Art Wicks.

After a few different jobs I got a boat and I got an engine. I went lobster fishing then, I guarantee you. I'm not blowing my own horn, but if I didn't get lobsters or fish I'd want to know the reason why.

I was out there when the weather wasn't fit. I shouldn't be saying this but I've seen some longliners come back, afraid of the weather, but I would go out. Everybody said to me, "You're crazy."

I don't know, probably I was, but I had a lot of experience on the water when I was growing up young. I guarantee you, I was never found in here with my legs dangling over the wharf.

I wasn't a hangashore, afraid of the water.

I recall the union had a strike on here. They were talking about the scarcity of fish. Bill Short came down here with the union. I was a regional representative. We were living in the old house then and I was down on the wharf. I was doing trawl lines, putting on sud lines, getting ready to go trawling. He said, "Art, I'll help you."

I said, "No problem. You can help me put on a few sud lines."

We ran out of sud lines and Bill said, "You got some more?"

"Yes. They're there in that store."

He went to the store on the wharf. The next thing I heard was Bill Short swearing.

He came in and threw down the twine. "Art," he said, "I know where you're coming from. I heard you say on the Fisheries Broadcast, 'The Good Lord helps those who helps themselves.' You got a hundred and fifty quintals of fish there in your store. Where did you get it?"

I said, "I got it while the longliner was tied up to the damn wharf because of bad weather." So I did. I fished every opportunity I got.

## Strange Things Happened

My father-in-law was Uncle Skipper Bill Atwood. He owned a schooner. He built her, rigged her out and sailed her to Labrador. The name of the schooner was the *Parallel*. Now that's a queer name isn't it? He built the schooner and he called her the *Parallel*. Often people wondered why he would would ever call the schooner the *Parallel*.

Anyway, he had a fella aboard, Peter Feltham. He was a hard case.

There was a place over here on Pool's Island what they called Paddy Poor, a little island, and they said this fella was drowned, Paddy, but they don't know who in the devil he was. Paddy Poor.

There was a light, the token of this fella, always coming down through the tickle. Someone remarked, "There's Paddy Poor coming."

And old Peter Feltham said, "Come aboard, you old so-and-so."

My mother said the light came and rested on top of the schooner. It shook the living daylights out of the schooner, the sails, the whole lot.

You can believe that or not. My mother told me that and she didn't tell any lies.

Uncle Isaac Wakely was the first man to live over in a place called Candle Cove, a little place no bigger than this kitchen, and right in the centre of the cove on that side there's a rock shaped like a candle.

Near that was Isaac's Droke.

Poor Sam Blackwood, he used to go up to Port Nelson to see Flossie White. He told me, "Art, boy, it's an awful queer thing. Nights we have gone up there and saw the smoke coming out from Isaac's Droke."

I said, "Sam, did it scare you?"

"No boy, that's something else. If someone told me about it, I might get scared, but seeing this stuff in person, it wasn't scary."

I believe that too.

There's another story. We lived in Port Nelson, this little place, and we had a school house down there, right in the bottom. Old Skipper Leez Blackwood's funeral was held in the school house.



Uncle Jim told me, my father told me, and my grandfather told me that they would go up in the mornings to go in the woods. They had to pass behind the school house and go in the woods or to get a turn of water. When Uncle Jim would go up there would be a woman with no head, standing on the bridge.

When the school was sold, Father bought the school, and you know what? As true as God the devil made...and he built a store out of it. I mean, jeez old man, we were frightened to death. He took the lumber out of the school to build it, and there were times that I didn't go out in that store, frightened to death.



I'm telling you a true story.

Now then, I'm going to tell you another story. This man who I'm referring to, he was a Christian man. He was a lay reader in the church. That was Uncle Elias Burry.

The night that the *Ella M Rudolph* was lost, he was lying down. The man told me that himself, a Christian man, lying down on that couch. He told me time and time again, that night the door came open and in came Poor Sam Carter, oil clothes and all on, with a lantern in his hand. He stood right in the middle of the room with water dripping down.

Now, Sam Carter was lost that very night on the *Ella M. Rudolph*.

By geez, that was able to make you shiver.

Elias Burry told me that time and time again.