

Our Lives
Life in Aillik, Labrador

Gladys Burdett

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Life in Aillik, Labrador

My father, Joseph Chard, was a Newfoundlander from Coley's Point, Conception Bay. His father came to Labrador to a place called Turnavik and from there he went to a place called Aillik, which means in Eskimo "the sleeve of your coat."

Father was brought up in Coley's Point, but he got an urge for Labrador and furs. My mother was Ethel Sparkes, from Bay Roberts. They married and they came down to Aillik for a winter.

That was about 1911 or 1912. Father started a fur business. They had no house to stay in but they got a store to stay in, something like an old shed, and later I came along. I was born in Aillik and the midwife who brought me into this sinful [laughing] world was an Eskimo woman. The only English she could say was "yes" and "no."

My mother sent a dog team seven miles to Makkovik to get another woman to interpret for her.

I couldn't speak English until I was five years of age. All I played with were Eskimo children.



There was no penicillin, nothing, when the Spanish flu hit. Out on the islands they went into places where there were people dead on the floor and sitting up to their tables. They went into one house where there was a small child. The parents were on the floor, dead. She was in the bed and there was a dog coiled right around her. He kept all the rest of the dogs away from her. They had to shoot that dog to get close to her.

Before they got there all she lived on were the frozen redberries. She used to put them under her arm and thaw them and eat them. They took the child and put her in a room by herself and they washed her, because she was full of lice. They didn't get the flu and she didn't get it. I've seen the woman. She has been in our house. And I know the woman who rescued her.

Some women came from Indian Harbour, farther down the coast from Rigolet. They had this flu and my brother and I got it. What mother did they wouldn't do now because it stinks too much. She took a pick of flannelette and she soaked it in the cod oil rendered out in the puncheons, by

the sun. She put that on our chests and on our backs. I can imagine that smell and I can remember sitting up in bed at night with the kerosene lamp. There was a saucer with molasses in it and a few drops of kerosene oil. She warmed that and she'd give it to us to drink.

When Sir Wilfred Grenfell came back down in the winter, in February, she told him what she did. He said, "That's the only cure."

Mother said, "But I don't know what it smelled like."

"It doesn't matter about the smell. You caught it."

It saved our lives. She said I used to go blue in the face so long she thought I was gone. Just the two of us got the flu. My other brother didn't get it at all. He was out going around in the fresh air. I don't know how we got it; probably from somebody kissing us or something.

Father dealt in furs. In 1923, it was the year of white foxes, and of course the season was closed the fifteenth of April. But there was a lot caught after that. I'll say no more!

Father caught ninety himself that year and they were twenty dollars a skin.

I was two years old when my father made three trips to the Kiglapaits. We'd go down with him for loads of fur. And we had one trip to Nain. Then my mother took me and my two brothers and my nanny, and an interpreter, and went to Nain buying another load of furs. In the morning this woman came in with a silver fox. A silver fox was worth nine hundred dollars.

Mother said, "What do you want for this fox? Do you want all cash or do you want to take it up with food?"

"No, no, no."

"Well, what do you want?"

"I want your baby."

Mother said, "Take the foxes and go on. You don't get my baby and I don't want the fox!"

Because I was a white baby.

It was a good healthy life. People then, they shared with everybody. Everybody was your friend. When you went to their house you didn't have to rap on the door or go in and ask for a cup of tea or a cup of coffee. It was "come on in" and "I wonder what I've got to share with you." It's not that way now.

You were always welcome. And they always had something put away for the white man—a tin of milk or some sugar, a bit of butter. That was put away for when the white man or minister came there.

My Torn Dress

In March the old folks all gathered in for a time on the weekend. We went to John Anderson's house. We put the quilts up to the window so the minister wouldn't see any lights if he passed by the house.

Of course, mother said, "Gladys, you're not going dancing."

Father said to Mother, "Ethel. She wants to go dancing. It's only keeping time with the music."

Mother said, "No, she's not going at that wickedness."

Anyway, I went. My friend said to her aunt, "If Gladys comes out to dance, you won't tell Mrs. Chard, will you?"

"No."

I had this beautiful dress that Father brought from Montreal. No one had a dress like it. I got out to dance, and going around the table there was a nail there. If I didn't hook my skirt! Well, the dance was spoiled.

I went home and one day later Mother said, "Gladys, I never see you wearing that beautiful dress your father brought you from Montreal."

I said, "Why, Mother, I'm not going to wear that around here. That's only for special days." And I never did tell her what happened.

I was about fourteen.

The Moravian School

When I was seven years old I went to Bay Roberts with my grandmother for two years. At nine I came back. In Makkovik they had the Moravian mission station there with a boarding school. I went to the boarding school with about sixty-eight children. We went there in September and finished in June. They used to take children until they were fifteen.

At that time I thought the rules were cruel but now I appreciate it. Every big girl had a little girl to look after, to see that her teeth were brushed and no buttons were off and no rips in her clothes. At seven-thirty the little boys and girls would go to bed in their own dormitories. Then the big girls would go to bed at eight.

And the boys all wore suits of clothes to school.

Everyone had to go to church Sunday morning. On Saturday the big girls would take the boys' suits and press them. Skin boots with white bottoms were the Sunday boots and the girls cleaned them too.

On school days we would get up at seven o'clock. They'd come in the morning and wake us and we weren't allowed to speak. Sometimes we'd have to crack the ice in the enamel jug to wash our faces in. Then we all lined up in the corridor.

You'd go in and stand around the table, the boys to one table, girls to another. We would sing our grace and sit down. We still weren't allowed to speak. And you know what we had for breakfast? A cup of molasses tea, a cake of hard bread with no butter and a plate of porridge, cooked the night before in molasses, and that was lumpy. If we didn't eat it for breakfast we had it for dinner. I used to think, Oh my. Home it was sugar, tea and jam, toasted bread and look what I'm eating. What am I eating this for?

But I'm glad now because I can eat anything. I can eat frozen meat. I can eat frozen fish. I can eat dried fish. There's only one thing I can't eat and that's beans.

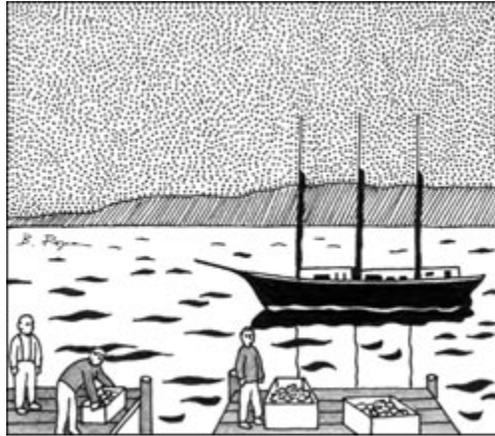
The Moravians had a litany like the Anglicans and they had their confirmation like the Anglicans. Their hymns and music were the same but they were slow. They used to have a rule. The women and girls would sit on one side of the church and the men on the other side. They had two kigoks, that's two elders, two women on one side and two men on the other.

We had to march to church and sit up straight. If we turned around, Aunt Bertha Anderson or Aunt Susie Anderson would glare. If we did that in church we wouldn't have any dessert for lunch. We had to behave ourselves.



When we were going to school in Makkovik they got the Christmas tree in the morning and by three o'clock all the work was done on Christmas Eve. We dressed in our best clothes for church. The schoolchildren would come out with candles. There were no candlesticks. We all had a candle stuck in a little bit of square turnip. Of course we ate the turnip afterwards! The turnip was a delicacy.

The schoolchildren sang "Silent Night." We were dressed in our best clothes. After supper Santa Claus came with his bag and gave every child a gift. Then we had our stockings hung up in the night. Christmas was a very holy day.



My brother was drowned when he was sixteen, off Aillik.

We don't know for sure how he drowned. He and another fella, a Newfoundland fella, went out in the morning on the ninth of October to catch fish for the dogs for the winter. They were gone a long while. Someone finally went to look for them. Someone said the last time they saw them they had their heads in the engine house. Apparently the boat broke down. Now, off Aillik Cape there's a shoal that breaks every three quarters of an hour.

They figured they went on the shoal and the boat went over, because the top of her was all beaten off. My father went to look for them and all he saw were bits of the boat that came ashore. He came home bawling and Mother ran to meet him. She collapsed. I don't know how I got through it.

Until I was thirteen I was a spoiled little brat. I didn't know how to make the bed. I didn't wash the dishes or anything. When Mother went in shock I had to go and call out next door. "How do you cook pea soup? How do you cook fish and brewis?"

The woman said, "I think Mrs. Chard cooked her brewis ten minutes." Can you imagine brewis cooking for ten minutes?

The nearest place to us was seven miles away. There was an old lady there and her grandson or son who stayed with us. We had a small place and I had to feed Mother. The only way I could get her to eat was I'd take a mouthful and give her a mouthful.

When Sir Wilfred Grenfell came in the winter he said, "If you hadn't treated her with kindness she would have gone mental."

I don't know how I did it.

I was thirteen the year my brother drowned. Sir Wilfred Grenfell came down and wanted young women to go and train as nurses. I wouldn't tell my mother because I knew she would say no, but I told my father I was going to put my name in.

He said, "The proper thing."

That's what I decided to do. My friend was going. They were going to pick us up in late October to take us out to the States to train us as nurses, but my brother drowned and that was the end of that.

One spring we had money but we didn't have any food. I can't remember the date or year, maybe 1936, somewhere around there. We had the money in furs but there was no food on the coast. The telegraph office was seventy-five miles north and we couldn't get there by water and we couldn't get there by ice, because it was break-up time.

For two weeks we lived on salt fish boiled in water. I guess we might have had red berries from the year before, partridge berries. We might have had bakeapples but I know we had no bread.

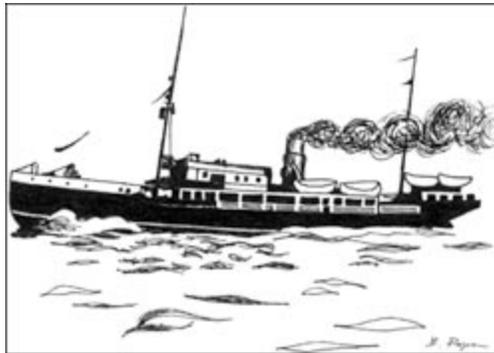
One time two families came from out of the bays. They had about five children. Before that we could have three slices of bread. Mother said we had to cut down and give those children a slice of bread in the morning and a slice in the evening, or a bun. I'd go down with a little basket, quite proud, and give everyone a bun for their breakfast and dinner. I can remember that just the same as if it was yesterday.

One beautiful evening Mother said to Father, "This is the last pan of buns in the oven for the children."

He said, "What are we going to do now, Ethel?"

"Oh, by the time this is taken out and eaten, there will be something here."

As she opened the oven door and took the buns out the old *Kyle* blew in the harbour! We couldn't believe it.



Father said, "I want to see what you had."

She said, "There's a quarter pound of sugar, a quarter pound of tea, half a pound of butter and a tin of milk."

She said, "There's a quarter pound of sugar, a quarter pound of tea, half a pound of butter and a tin of milk."

"Now," father says, "what would that do?"

"Well," she said, "if someone got sick, we could give them a drop of tea with a bit of milk and sugar in it. They could survive on that for awhile."

If people were faced with that now they'd commit suicide, I think. They couldn't stand it.

I didn't find it lonely living in Aillik. When I got to about thirteen or fourteen I had my fox traps out and snares out for hares. With my gun I went shooting partridges. I had a shotgun sawed off for killing small game. I'd get up in the morning and bring home my partridges for dinner.

On my best day I got four or five partridges.

But the best day Father and I had was in April. The partridges flew south and there was what we called the Berry Banks, where a lot of partridgeberries grew. For a couple of days in the middle of April all the partridges pitched there. This morning we went up.

Father wouldn't shoot if he didn't kill four to one shot.

The next morning we went up until he was down to one cartridge. He said, "Now, look. There are four partridges there on that rock. See if you can kill the four with one shot."

Of course I did. We killed a hundred and ninety. And I got pictures of it somewhere where Mother got some cleaned, put on the komatik and all.

And ducks! We had three hundred ducks hung up in the store.

One year we had two hundred and fifty seals we got right around the cove in the nets. They were for dogs' food and sealskin boots. I caught five Arctic hares. We had fresh meat all the time.

I killed a seal one day, what we called a crawler. They get up out of the ice and they can't find the water. We saw one coming around the point and Father said, "Come on, get your gun. There's a crawler coming. See if you can kill it."

Of course I went out and shot it. But Mother, she didn't want to touch it because she was afraid of guns. Not me.

I guess I must have been around eleven or twelve or thirteen. I'd go with Father. In the latter years I went with him all the time because he had heart failure. We would leave in the morning

to see his traps until we reached his camp, seven miles away. We would stay the night and the next day we'd walk back.

Father had what they called two crews. We had so many men to go and haul the cod traps and bring in the fish, and so many ashore-to work in the stages to clean it. You put them on the table, then you have another person to cut their throats, then you pass them along to the header to take the head and guts out of them and then pass them along to the splitter. I was header. I had forty quintals of fish one day. My brother came in, a Saturday it was. He said, "I got two boatloads of fish and if I had a good header we will have them done by eleven o'clock tonight."

If it wasn't finished by twelve o'clock, at one minute to twelve, whatever was on the stagehead was all thrown away because it was a sin to do it on a Sunday.

I said, "I'll come and do that for you."

I went down eleven o'clock in the morning and half-past-eleven that night I took the last head off.

I was tired, but do you know what I had to do after that? I had to come home and scrub the floor with cork and sand because the minister was coming the next day.

You had a piece of cork and you had sand. You put a patch of water on the floor and put your sand in it. Then you would take your cork brush and you'd go over it to make it nice and white. Sometimes you used a piece of net, a piece of linnet, we called it. That would do it too. We had wooden floors and we had mats.

Winter Travel by Dogs

We had fifteen dogs. I had my own team with three or four. We had a special dog team. If customers bought more stuff than they could take, my brother took it to their homes with a dog team.

I had a dog team driver. One time I was almost caught out, me and a young fella. We went to Makkovik which was seven miles away, by dog team. We had to come back that evening, Sunday evening, because my other brother wanted the dogs the next morning.

I said to my driver, Uncle John Anderson, "We're going to leave now, Uncle John, and go to Aillik."

"Well," he said, "you better not, because we are going to have a storm."

"Well," I said, "we have to get over."

"You better not go."

"Oh," I said, "it's lovely."

We were just across the bay when it struck. We couldn't see the leader and the young fella with us said, "What will we do?"

"We'll let her go on. She'll bring us home. Father always said the dogs will bring you home."

We knew nothing, saw nothing until the dogs tangled up around the woodhorse out by our door. We went in. Father said, "Where did you come from?"

"We came from Makkovik."

"Well, if I had known you were out I would have been worried."

"Well, I'm home now."

Father always said, "If you are out in a storm, just let your dogs go. They will bring you to a house, somewhere."

Father was caught out one time for six days and six nights. I don't remember because I was two years old. He was in Nain. He went down for furs.

In the morning this old man said to him, "Don't you go today. There's going to be bad weather."

Father said, "No. It's a lovely day. I'll make it all right."

"Before dark it's going to be stormy."

Father wouldn't listen to him. He went on. About six o'clock she came and you couldn't see a thing. He said his dogs started to go in towards the ballycatters-ice humps in the rocks-but he kept turning them out. If he had let his dogs alone they would have went on in to the house, because people heard him going by. They were calling his dogs in, but he kept turning them off.

He got to a big bank and took his snow knife and he made a snow house. He got in there and stayed for six days. When it got fine enough he went up on the little hill to see where he was. When he came back the dogs were tearing up his skin pants. He said to himself, "If I go asleep again, I won't wake up."

He didn't know how he got on his komatik. He tied the lash line around his waist and sat on the komatik. He went from Davis Inlet over to Hopedale. When he was going in there were some dog teams coming out.

They knew that there was something wrong with him. He couldn't speak. They took him to their house and gave him something to eat.

The next morning he got out of bed. He knew he had to try to go back home because he was all swollen. The next morning there were eleven dog teams with him. The Eskimos brought him home and he went to bed.

He asked them what they wanted. They didn't want anything but Mother gave them grub to take back with them.

That was in April. He never walked, never made a step from April until September. His legs swelled up.

You know how Mother cured him? She said to the man we had for working around, "Go and cut a hole in the ice and get me a boiler of salt water."

She bathed Father's legs with hot salt water three times a day. That's what cured him. Just like Captain Jackman, the hero.