



Our Lives  
Memories  
of Silver Fox Island

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Memories of Silver Fox Island

## Memories of Silver Fox Island

I was born and raised in a small place called Silver Fox Island, Bonavista Bay. My parents were Job and Maggie Rogers. I had three sisters—Eva, Statia, and Priscilla—and a brother, John.

Childhood days were exciting days. I loved going to school and I liked helping my mom around the house. I was the oldest child and felt responsible to help. My sisters and brothers grew up the same way.

My father spent a lot of his time away from home. He went down to Labrador in the summertime, or was away getting firewood, cutting logs and catching rabbits in the wintertime.

Wintertime we would have a lot of snow. Sometimes it would be up over our heads. Mother would work so hard shovelling it. First she had to clear a very long path for us to go to school. Then she would have to clear a path to the woodshed, the drinking well, and the clothesline. Then she would take a break to prepare dinner for us children, who would come home hungry as bears.

In the afternoon she would go right back shovelling again. She would make sure it was all cleared before another storm came.

We would have fun sliding over the hills in the snow and making snowmen. Evening we all had our chores to do. I would get two one-gallon cans and fill the water barrel, which had to be filled every day. Then the woodbox had to be filled and kindling had to be prepared for lighting the fire in the morning. Mother would light the fire and warm up the place before calling us children up. Sometimes our bread would be frozen. We would put it in the oven until it got hot and then put butter on it. It would be delicious.

I loved my father and hated to see him working so hard. He would have to bring firewood up over the hill on his back. I would help him saw the wood with the old crosscut saw. Later we got a bucksaw which was easier to use. There were no chainsaws in those days. My dad would cleave the wood and my brother and sisters would pack it in the woodshed. The shed would be filled, making sure there was enough for all winter.

One day at school I took very sick. I tried to walk home but only made it halfway and couldn't walk another step. My sister stayed with me while my brother ran home and told my parents. Dad came and picked me up in his arms and carried me home.

Each day I got worse. Dad went to Greenspond and brought the doctor. He said I had rheumatic fever and had to have total bed rest. Mother brought my bed down to the kitchen where she could be with me all the time. I grew worse and couldn't feed myself. After a month I could stand but my feet were still swollen.

Our minister, Rev. Sheppard, came to visit me one day and encouraged me. I wanted to go to school so badly, even though I could hardly walk. I was determined to go, so mother would dress me warm and pack a lunch. I would go to my Aunt Lizzie Hunt's house, which was near the

school. My brother and sister would pull me on a sleigh to and from school. How I loved to be back in school again. It wasn't long before I was back on my feet.

Our first year of school was primer class, where we learned about animals and their names. Then we went into grades one and two. The only books we had then were the Royal Readers and an exercise book. We had a slate and learned to add, multiply and subtract. We had bookbags to carry our pencil box, slate pencils and water in a bottle, with a cloth to clean our slates. One morning I was so disappointed. My water was frozen and my pretty little bottle had broken.

Sometimes we would carry a couple of pieces of wood to school for the woodstove, our source of heat. School days were exciting. Sometimes the harbour would freeze over and we would walk across the ice, which was a much shorter way.

We dressed warm, with our knitted caps, mitts, and socks. There were no slacks for girls, but we had spats to pull over our boots and button up the sides. We also had fur muffs to put our hands into.

We looked forward to Sunday. It was our feast day. Saturday was a day of preparation for Sunday's breakfast, dinner, and supper.

Hard bread was put in soak, salt fish cut up and soaked, and salt pork cut up and fried. That would be for breakfast. Vegetables would be peeled and cleaned for dinner, with rabbit, bird, or fresh pork, and for supper tarts and cakes that were made on Saturday. This was a tradition all through the years on our island. I kept it up long after I got married, but gradually left the old tradition behind.

We used kerosene lamps in those days, one in each room. They were filled and trimmed each day before darkness came.

Sunday morning, the church bell would be ringing. After breakfast, dishes were done. We dressed in our Sunday best and off to church we would go, as happy as could be. We were taught the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer. At the age of ten or eleven, we were ready to be confirmed by the laying on of hands by the Bishop. Then we would receive our first Holy Communion, the bread and wine as commanded by the Lord.

I remember Mother making soap. She would save all the fat from the table until she got enough. Then she took ashes from the stove and poured boiling water on it to make lye. She added salt to it and put it outside to cool and harden. Next morning she would cut it into cakes and put it on boards to dry in the sun. It would be stored in the attic to be used for washing clothes and cleaning floors.

My mother used a large wooden tub and a wooden washboard to wash clothes in. Sometimes in winter the water in the well would be low and she had to melt snow for water.

We bought Sunlight soap to wash ourselves with, and to do the dishes. There was no liquid detergent those days. Everyone did the best with what they had and no one complained.

In later years there were large galvanized tubs and glass washboards. Small children could bathe in the large tubs. For adults, a large earthen basin and matching jug would be kept on a washstand in the bedroom, for sponge baths.

My favourite pastime at night was to help my mother hook rugs. My father would make a rug hook from a fork or large needle. Then he made a large wooden frame.

Hard bread and potatoes came in burlap sacks. These sacks would be ripped apart, hemmed, and laced onto the frame. Strands of burlap would be barked for colour and a pattern of choice would be marked out on the rug. Some patterns were done with pretty colours from white material we had dyed. When it was finished and taken off the frame it would be beautiful. There was no carpet in those days, but the bedrooms and hallways were covered with hooked rugs.

Once every week, on a good day, the rugs would all be rolled up and taken outside to be dusted. I would do the rugs while Mother cleaned the floor before we put the rugs down again.

We were always helpers. When we left home we were well trained and knew how to keep house. I thank God for my parents. They worked very hard to provide for us children. When I became a teenager I wished many times I could earn money to help them, but it was not possible. Some people were much worse off than us. Some children I know had to wear patched clothing, but we always had shoes and nice clothes.

In late summer or fall my father would arrive home from Labrador. Sometimes they had a full load, but other times they had only half a load. It was very disappointing for them because they had worked so hard.

The fish was taken to St. John's and shipped away. When they returned from St. John's they brought back our winter supplies. This always depended on how much fish they caught. We always looked forward to Dad coming back from St. John's. We were sure he would have something for us: a few oranges, apples, and candy as treats.

Many precious souls never made it back from St. John's in the fall. There would be terrible storms at sea and many a schooner went down with all the crew lost. It would be heart-rending to all.

When I was a little girl, my father's brother Uncle Chris got lost in a storm. He was married with a wife and two little children. They were living with us at the time, and he had promised to bring me a doll when he returned. Their schooner was lost with all on board. I remember the terrible time my father went through. He was broken-hearted and no one could comfort him. It seems he took it harder than anyone else.

Another man from our island, Thomas Button, was lost on that boat. Their bodies were found and brought home to be buried.

Christmastime was a very exciting time for us. We looked forward to it with joy. All work ended on Christmas Eve. Our traditional supper that day would be watered salt cod and molasses raisin bread. Even today, I like the same on Christmas Eve. It brings back pleasant memories.

After supper, our tree was hung and trimmed and stockings hung. Before nine o'clock, we would be in bed, anxiously awaiting next morning to see what we received in our stockings. Next morning we would run downstairs and bring our stockings up. We found candy, apples, sometimes grapes, and candy canes.

Then we would look at our tree all trimmed with fruit. Figs and apples would be dangling down. Best of all were the beautiful, big heart-shaped candy. It was so tempting to us but we had to wait out the twelve days of Christmas when the tree came down before we could eat the fruit. We wouldn't dare disobey our parents. Finally the day would come and we enjoyed eating all except the big candy hearts. They had to be carefully put away for next Christmas.

The last night of Christmas we would hang our stockings up again for another time of excitement. We were truly thankful for whatever we received. The children of today are bored and unhappy even though they have so much.

Christmas was twelve days of fun for everyone. We all went from house to house to share in what we had.

Sometimes we would dress up in old clothes, cover our faces and go mummering. We knocked on doors and asked, "Any mummers in tonight?" In some houses we would dance, anything to make fun. There would be a soup supper and concert at the school and we'd have homemade ice cream.

There was no drinking and very little smoking in those days. I never saw a girl or woman smoke. That would have been a great disgrace. Once I saw a man get sick from drinking, after a soup supper. I became very frightened and fainted. My parents had to take me home.

We had a nice dinner on Christmas Day, but never turkey or chicken. Maybe ducks or pork. We raised our own pigs.

Mother made sure we had a new garment to wear on New Year's Day. That was a tradition as well. We always had special clothes to wear to church but were not allowed to wear it any other time.

As a child, I loved to visit my grandfather at Newport. My grandmother died before my mother married. Mother was their only daughter and they had a son, Uncle Elias Collins. Later my grandfather remarried. I knew and liked my step-grandmother. My father's parents died before I was born, so I didn't know them.

Grandfather Collins would often come up to my parents' home to visit. He always brought me something, a doll, a cap, or candy. He gave me so many little things I appreciated very much. Of course I was his first grandchild, so I got all the attention. When I got older I used to go to

Newport to visit Grandfather. I loved his house. There was something special about it that still brings back good memories that I shall never forget.

Uncle Elias Collins married Aunt Jane. They had a family and all lived at Grandfather's house. I can still picture my grandmother putting her white flour-bag tablecloth on the table and her beautiful homemade bread. With roasted cod and homemade jam, it would sharpen the appetite of any child.

Pancake Day, the beginning of Lent, was a day we looked forward to. We knew what we would have for dinner that day. When we got home from school there would be a large plate of pancakes on the table. Each one had something inside it, such as a ring, a button, or straw. Each was supposed to mean something. The child who got the ring was going to be married first, the button meant a seamstress, the straw a good housekeeper, the nail a good carpenter. I must have gotten the nail! The person who got the nickel was supposed to get rich. We all wanted that one.

The next day, Ash Wednesday, we went to church, morning and evening. We also went every Friday all through Lent. It was a solemn time when everyone was supposed to fast from something. There was no activity during that time, not even a marriage. On Good Friday nobody would work or cook a meal. We wouldn't even throw water outdoors until after sunset. Saturday was a solemn day as well, thinking of our Lord's death, but Sunday was a day of rejoicing, remembering the Lord's Resurrection.

Eggs were a treat for us children. We had a couple of hens and sometimes we watched them to find out where they laid their eggs. We were sure to save up enough so that everyone had one on Easter Sunday morning. We boiled them and put them in egg cups.

Of course, Easter Monday was a big day. There were soup suppers and teas, and dancing at the school house.

Valentine's Day was another day we enjoyed. We didn't send cards like children of today. Our tradition was to make a request for something in the form of a rhyme. We didn't ask for anything big, just small things, as we knew we were more likely to get them.

I used to watch my mother making bread and begged her to let me do it. She wouldn't, but one day I went to Newport to visit my Aunt Elsie. She was in her sick bed and needed bread made. Her children were all younger than me, so I offered to make it. I placed the pan on a little chair and made my first bread. I had a problem putting it in the pans and couldn't see how I could manage it. I did my best and the children enjoyed it anyway.

Summertime we would play outside. We would cover the top of the woodhorse and make a tent. We would chew hard bread and make cakes from it, then enjoy eating them.

Wintertime I would watch my father knit or mend nets. Sometimes he would make a casting net for casting caplin. We used caplin for fertilizer on our gardens in the summer.

Dad and Uncle Bill would build boats together in the wintertime, either motorboats or rowboats. The rowboat had a sail, and depending on the size, paddles or an oar. When the wind was in the right direction you could sit in the boat and have a nice time along.

Sometimes I would watch Dad and Uncle Bill saw plank with a crosscut saw. One man stood in the stage while the other stood up in the stage loft and they pulled the saw up and down until the planks were sawed. When the boat was built it was caulked and painted. It was fun watching the boats being launched and given names.

The motorboat had an old-fashioned engine. Before I got out of bed in the morning, I would hear the boats all around the harbour, with the *click click click* of the engines. Everyone was on the move as soon as the ice moved out in the spring, getting their firewood home. It had been cut in the winter and hauled out by rope and hand slide to the shoreline, ready to be loaded aboard the boat in the spring. Sometimes they would tow a small, full boat behind. They had to have enough to last until fall. It was hard bringing it all uphill to the house and sawing it up and packing it away.

The women would be busy in spring also. Most everyone owned sheep. They would shear the sheep, wash, card, and spin the wool. There were plenty of mitts and socks to be knit, making sure everyone had enough for the winter.

Everyone had vegetable gardens. Before starting gardening, they had to take the sheep away, as no gardens were fenced. Names were put around the sheep's necks with leather name tags. Then they were loaded into boats and taken over to Indian Bay where they were free to feed all summer. In the fall, after the vegetables were up, we'd go back for the sheep. Sadly, many of them were never found. The last one I had after I married was never found and I never got another. We would cut grass in summer and make hay to feed the sheep all winter.

Summertime we went berry picking. We would walk in a little path to the upper end of the island. Blackberries would be the first to get ripe. We got lots of them to keep Mother going, making cakes and puddings. After that it would be raspberries, red currants, and blueberries, enough to keep us busy all summer. Mother would go to the marshes to pick bakeapples and bottle them. They were delicious for desserts, lasting all through the winter.

When I got older, I joined up with a crowd and we would row over to the main shore to pick bakeapples. We would be gone all day, especially if they were plentiful. We would light a fire and boil the kettle on the beach and sit down for a big feed of smoked salmon and homemade bread. Some people on the island had smokehouses and smoked salmon all summer long. We enjoyed our trip and our feeds, making sure we got home before dark.

I remember the first trip I had away from home. My mother took us up to Glovertown on the steamer. It was at night and as we were coming up the bay a little bird flew down in the cabin. That caused quite a bit of excitement.

Mail was carried by the steamer, both in Newfoundland and Labrador. To send a letter to someone on the Labrador, it had to be addressed to the person, name the schooner, in care of

Labrador Afloat. If they chanced to connect with the steamer, they got their mail, but if not, they would be gone all summer without a word from home. If there were a death at home the steamer would raise a black flag.

If there were a telegram for anyone on our island, a flag would be raised on a pole at Fair Island. Someone would go up in boat to get the message. Often it wasn't for the person who went for the message, but there was much co-operation among the people. The mail boat brought our mail and we loved to see it coming in the harbour.

To get the train we would go by passenger boat to Gambo to connect with it. My first trip on the train was when I was about twelve years old. My mother went to Fair Island with me where we met with Caleb Ackerman who was going through on the train. I was going to Glovertown, so she put me in his care.

All my teenage years I spent away from home. The first summer I spent at Traytown with Uncle John and Aunt Florence Littlejohn. Aunt Florence's family were all grown so she wrote Mother and asked her to let me come and spend the summer with her. The following summer I came back to Traytown to work with the Kean family.

When I was fifteen, I went to Glovertown to work with Aunt Jane Holloway. She had four sons at home, but was unable to work. She was a dear lady and each day would manage to get downstairs and sit in her chair. She showed me what to do. I would wash, cook, and clean for them. People were so limited in those days, with no jobs and very little money. I remember I got five dollars and bought myself a nice grey coat. I was so pleased with it, and later got enough to buy a pair of white sneakers.

Aunt Jane taught me how to card and spin sheep's wool. I knitted socks for the boys. That benefited me much in years to come.

The next time I left home it was with my parents. They moved up to Lockyer's Bay to cut logs. I spent one night with them. The next day I went to Hare Bay and got a job with Percy and Nellie Wells who owned a business and took boarders. I earned five dollars a month. I stayed for six months and went home in the spring.

Transportation from Hare Bay wasn't easy. I knew the Matthews brothers were at Trinity building their schooner and would be going to the island on the weekend. I decided to go Trinity and go home with them. There I met Walter Matthews, who became my boyfriend and later my husband.

Later that spring I made up my mind to do something I never thought I could do, because I didn't like being on the water. I was always seasick. Father was going to Labrador with Uncle Bill Wicks in the *Polly Bee*. They needed a cook and asked me to go, so I decided I would go. I thought that I might meet up with Walter sometime during the summer, but I was in for a big disappointment. His crowd was home a month before we got back. We left home the first of July and arrived home the sixth of October. It was a terrible long trip, and unusual to be that late

getting home. We were over a month on the water. Everyone at home was worried and wondered if they'd ever see us again.

It was not all hard times, though fish was scarce and we only got part of a load. We went down as far as Mount Pike.

One day, it was a beautiful morning and all the men from our schooner and the schooner nearby had gone out to haul their traps. I didn't know anyone lived near where we were, but we saw a boat coming toward us, and heard men talking. The girl on the other schooner was just as scared as I was. Two dark men were coming right for our schooners. I didn't know what to do.

First they went to the back of the schooner, I guess, to see her name. They were talking loudly in their own tongue. They could speak some English, and one man came over talking to me. He asked where I was from, and my age, and then asked me to marry him. I was scared stiff and didn't know what to do. I had bread baking in the oven, but I was afraid to go down to take it out. They had a loaf of dry bread and jug of water in their boat. They kept getting down in their boat to break off a piece of bread. I knew they were hungry and if I hadn't been so afraid I would have given them a meal, as I was taught to be kind to people. I had never seen a black man before, and I guess, the fear instilled as a child came forth.

As children, we were told not to tell lies or the black man would have us. That meant the devil. We never questioned the old people, but I did fear the "black man." I'm sure it was this fear that so terrified me. I didn't even know there were coloured people in the world, at that time.

We came up to a place called Ford's Harbour and I came in contact with Eskimos again. I was on the schooner alone this time also. I heard them come and was still very much afraid. I had heard that Eskimos didn't like heat, so I went down in the forecastle and put lots of wood in the stove, hoping the heat would drive them away.

Two women and two or three men came aboard. They went back and forth, looking at everything they could see. Then the old man came up to me and asked my name and age. I told him, even though I was almost too scared to speak. After that, a woman came over. They admired my hair. "We all black hair," she said. I was wearing a red skirt. They admired red and wanted so much to have it.

I knew they were hungry, so I invited them to have some pea soup I had cooked. They couldn't stay long because it was too hot for them. They brought a pair of beaded slippers and a little purse made of sealskin, which they wanted to exchange for some clothes. I looked among my clothes and gave them all I could spare. I really enjoyed my fur slippers and have never seen like it since.

The first of July when we left home it was a beautiful day. We planned to have fish and brewis for supper. When we were coming in to Seldom the wind changed and the schooner listed on her side. The pot with the fish and brewis came off the stove and over the floor. I didn't cook under sail anymore. I was too seasick for that.

We got caught in a terrible storm that came on suddenly. I was down in the forecastle and couldn't get back to the cabin where I used to stay under sail. The storm didn't feel so bad back there. However, I climbed up in the top bunk and held on for dear life. Every time she took a nose-dive, water came into the forecastle. It took two men pumping constantly to keep the water out. Every man did his best to get back to land. Every now and then I heard someone shout to ask someone to check on me to see if I was still alive.

We had been out in some high winds and heavy seas, but that storm was the worst. The *Polly Bee* was very old. She had no engine and they had to depend on the wind. When it came the wrong way it would be tough going, and when it was calm, sails were no good. They would put out the motorboat to tow the schooner. You can imagine how far we would get in a day with a small boat towing a big schooner. When we crossed the Strait of Belle Isle, it was so calm the men put the oars out and started rowing. We all looked forward to that wonderful day when we would reach home. Each day brought us a little closer. We never despaired, thinking of the joyful reunion we would have with our families who were anxiously awaiting our return. My boyfriend was also anxiously awaiting.

Tears of joy were shed that sixth day of October when we sailed in the harbour. Mom had a beautiful supper prepared for us, with bakeapples for dessert. To meet up with my boyfriend that night was an experience of homecoming one could not forget.

Uncle Sam Wicks's wife had a new baby the day we came home. So after spending one day at home, I went over to help my aunt take care of her family for a few days.

I was hoping to go to St. John's in the fall, but it looked hopeless for me. Our schooner had been so late getting home, and it would be very late before they had their fish ready to take to St. John's.

However, the *Silver Jubilee* had been home early, and ready to take their fish in. It would be the first trip to St. John's for the *Silver Jubilee* and a couple of the Matthews women were going and asked me to come along.

I gladly accepted and we had a very enjoyable trip. I worried about Dad and the crew of the *Polly Bee* having to travel so late in the fall. However, God took care of them and they made it back safely.

I was married to Walter Matthews at the age of eighteen, in St. Andrew's Church on Silver Fox Island, on June 5, 1936. We didn't have much of this world's goods or a big wedding, or large gifts as people get today. But we loved each other and love covers it all. I remember the day I walked down the church aisle with the man I loved. I felt like the happiest person in the whole world.