

## Learning About the Past

Newfoundland and Labrador Adult  
Basic Education Social History Series

A Joint Project of  
The Writers' Alliance of  
Newfoundland and Labrador  
and Cabot College Literacy Office

### ***In This Series...***

**Book 1 - Timelines of Newfoundland and Labrador**

**Book 2 - Facing the New Economy**

**Book 3 - Learning About the Past**

**Book 4 - Desperate Measures** *The Great Depression in Newfoundland and Labrador*

**Book 5 - Health and Hard Time**

**Book 6 - Multicultural History**

**Book 7 - Surviving in Rural Newfoundland**

**Book 8 - The Struggle for Work in the Great Depression**

**Book 9 - How Long do I Have to Wait?**

**Book 10 - William Pender** *The Story of a Cooper*

## **Book 3: Learning About the Past**

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## Foreward

In 1994, the Writers' Alliance of Newfoundland and Labrador and Cabot College Literacy Office combined to produce a series of Newfoundland books on tape. Under the general title *Increasing Access to Newfoundland Literature*, the tapes and accompanying book *A Woman's Labour*, offered ABE Level 1 students and instructors, as well as the blind and the general public, an accessible and proven set of local literacy materials. The success of that project led to a second collaboration: the *Newfoundland and Labrador Adult Basic Education Social History Series*.

A major difference between the two projects is that while Newfoundland Books on Tape dealt with previously existing material, the essays in the *Social History Series* have been newly created by five professional writers. The prime objective, however, remains the same: to provide adult learners with meaningful literacy materials drawn from their own vibrant culture.

Topics in the series were chosen for their human and social interest and their importance in shaping who we are today. In addition to historical topics, current social and economic issues such as the closure of fish plants are also examined in an attempt to provide a contemporary perspective.

The five writers employed on the project carried out extensive research in public and university archives and libraries. Some also conducted personal interviews. Many of the essays contain new and fascinating historical research. Often the pieces deal with controversial subject matter: the Great Depression, Commission of Government, workfare, the erosion of social programs, poaching and the future of our rural communities. In an effort to dispel the notion that history is "dry and dull," the approach is fresh and provocative. The object is to inform, entertain and, in conjunction with the accompanying notes and questions, to effectively stimulate lively discussion among literacy students. Consequently, this series will also be of interest and practical use to the general public and, especially, to students.

The intended audience for the *Social History Series* is ABE Level 1 students. Because of the disparate subject matter, however, the essays are written in varying degrees of reading difficulty. In particular, students may need help with some of the quoted source material as this sometimes involves archaic syntax and vocabulary.

## Acknowledgements

The essays and accompanying notes and questions in the *Newfoundland and Labrador Adult Basic Education Social History Series* were researched and written by Ed Kavanagh, Carmelita McGrath, Janet McNaughton, Kathryn Welbourn and Kathleen Winter. The series was edited by Marian Frances White.

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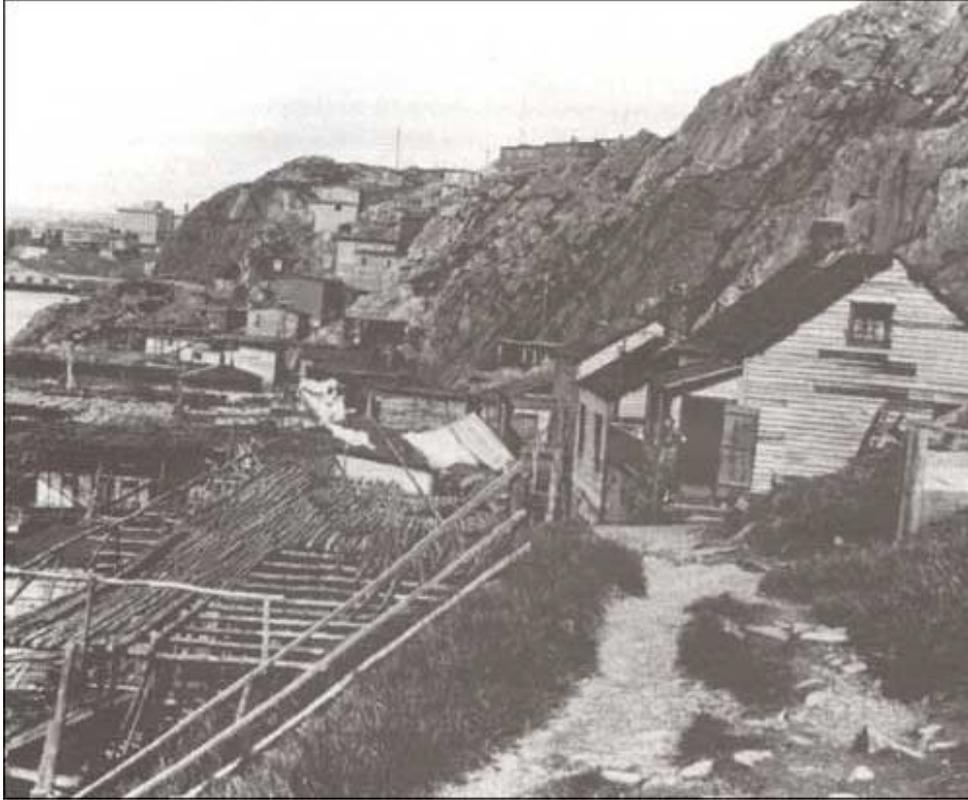
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*The Newfoundland and Labrador Adult Basic Education Social History Series* is a joint project of the Cabot College Literacy Office and the Writers' Alliance of Newfoundland and Labrador.

# Time Travel with Stories

by Carmelita McGrath



Credit: Rhoda Dawson, courtesy of the Centre for Newfoundland Studies Archives.

A woman stands by her doorway, The Battery, 1936. The drying laundry and the fish flakes show two aspects of women's work in the 1930s. But even hard work was no guarantee that you would have what you needed to live on.

Most of us have heard many stories. We hear them first when we are children. They give us pleasure. We listen for stories all our lives, and people are always telling them. Most of the time, we think of stories as fun. But stories can do many things. They can tell truths about people's lives. They can show us the times and places where others have lived. Stories can help us enter history. They can be doors that lead to the past. Here is a story I heard as a young girl.

## Counting the Berries

This story was told by a woman in Branch.

In the 1930s, many people in Newfoundland had to depend on government assistance. People called it the dole. It could be as little as 6 cents a day for each adult in a household, or \$1.80 a month. It could be less for a child.

There were also dole inspectors. These men would go to houses and check how much food people had stored up. Then they would decide how much dole people could get. This was not cash, but a note for the amount of food you could get at the local store.

The dole inspectors looked very closely at what people had in their houses. If you had flour left over, you could not get the full amount the next month. If you grew vegetables or had an animal to kill, you might also get less dole the next month.

Many people tried to hide food they had saved so the dole inspectors would not find it. They hid food in barns, under beds, in dirty laundry and even in wells.

This woman said that one dole inspector was very determined to find every bit of food people had. Once, she hid her blueberries in an old trunk, but he opened it and found them. She said he counted the berries. Then he told her she would get an allowance for flour that month, but none for raisins. He said she had plenty of berries for making duff.

When I first heard this story, I thought it was a tall tale. Could such things happen? I wanted to find out more.

When you know the time and place of a story, you can track it down. Books, photos, newspapers and other records can break the barrier between the past and the present. The story about the berries came to life in the Provincial Archives of Newfoundland and Labrador. The Archives has many kinds of information. It has government records for the time in which the story took place.

The records show that the story could well be true. The amount of dole was right there on a page. There was also a list of things people could get on their dole order. There were hundreds of pages of other information. They told of a time when things were very hard. The government thought it was spending too much money on the dole. It wanted the dole inspectors to make sure that nobody got help they did not need.

In one file, there was a dole inspector's report. The man had searched houses. He reported finding barrels of potatoes, when people said they had nothing to eat.

Other files had letters and reports from many people. Some told their own stories of need. Others told what was happening to people in their area. Some wrote to demand changes to the dole and the way poor people were treated.

The newspapers added more life to the story. Letters and articles showed what happened day to day. They told stories of the time from different points of view. Ads showed the price of things.

Out of all this information came an essay, and many more notes than the essay could use.

Here is another story.

## **Hard Boots and a Hoe**

One year in the late 1930s, a woman worked all summer making fish on the flakes. It was back-breaking work. There was a lot of fish that summer. The woman was tired all the time, because she had to do her housework and look after animals and gardens too.

She kept herself going by thinking about what she would get for all the fish she was making. Maybe she could get something nice—for herself or the house, or for her children.

At the end of the fishing season, she went to the merchant to find out what she would get for her work. The merchant told her the price of fish was very low. When she paid her bills and bought her food, she had only enough credit left for a pair of hard boots and a hoe.

The woman in the story was my grandmother. From her I learned about the work women did in the Newfoundland fishery. This little story is about many things. It is about work, and what people may get for it. It is also about dreams and hopes. It is about the fish trade and world fish markets. It is about merchants and prices. It is about women's roles in one time and place.

This story has led me to much reading. And there are ways to find out more. The time and place are in the story. But it could have happened any year when there was lots of fish, but the price was low.

Sometimes, we think of the past as a far away place. We think we cannot get to it. This is only half true. Stories can lead us to other sources. And sources can help us build larger stories. In a way, stories help us travel through time.

## **Topics for Discussion**

1. The value of stories as ways to learn more about the past.
2. How to use a story to build a picture of a person, place or time.
3. Research methods used to follow up on stories.

## **Questions for Discussion**

### **Counting the Berries**

1. What was the dole?
2. What were dole inspectors? Why was the woman in the story hiding food from them?

### **Hard Boots and a Hoe**

3. What was "making fish?" Why was it "back-breaking work?"
4. How did the woman in this story get paid for her work? Why didn't she know how much she would get until the end of the summer?

## **General Questions**

5. The past may seem to be "a far away place." How can stories help us know more about the past and the people who lived in it?

6. What things do we need to know about a story before we can use it to do research?

## **Projects**

1. Tell or write down a story that someone told you when you were a child. Discuss what this story tells about:
  - the story teller
  - the time and place the story comes from.How could you find out more about life in that time and place? Make a list of sources.
2. Pick a day. It could be any day at all, a day of historic importance, or the day you were born. Find a newspaper for that day in the Archives or reference library. What story of that day can you piece together from the newspaper? What were people thinking about? What were they wearing? How much did things cost? Tell or write what you find out.
3. Take out an old family photograph album. Look at the pictures. From the pictures, what can you tell about the people in them, and the time and place in which they lived? Tell or write a story about them.

## **Learning About the Past from Old Newspapers**

**by Janet McNaughton**

### **Introduction**

Old newspapers let you look into the past. You can see what people read every day. You can learn what they knew about the world around them. We use old newspapers to understand how people lived, thought and felt in the past. Old newspapers also give us facts about people and events.

Have you ever seen a pile of old newspapers lying around? Maybe you noticed that these papers were starting to turn yellow and even to crumble around the edges. Newspapers are printed on a type of paper called newsprint. This paper contains lots of acid. The acid makes newsprint fall apart after just a few years. That is why old newspapers do not last very long.

## Microfilm

When we use newspapers to find out about the past, we almost never look at real copies of old papers. They are large and dirty and difficult to store. They fall apart too easily. Instead, we use microfilms. These are long strips of film, about one inch wide, with very small photographs of each page of one newspaper, such as the *Toronto Star* or the St. John's *Daily News*.

When a microfilm is made, each page is photographed, beginning with page one, for example, of Monday, January 1, 1939. Every page of every day is photographed in order. About two months of a daily newspaper fit onto one microfilm reel. Each reel fits into a box about five inches square. This means that years and years of newspapers on microfilm can be stored in just a few filing cabinets.

The pictures of newspapers on microfilms are far too small to read with your eyes alone. To look at microfilms, we use a machine called a microfilm reader. This shines light through a strip of microfilm, and through a magnifying lens. The lens makes the picture bigger. Then the picture is projected onto a screen so you can read it. You move from one page to another by moving the microfilm strip across the lens. Microfilms are sometimes blurry and can be difficult to read.

There are many different kinds of information in newspapers. There are news stories, editorials, letters to the editor, advertisements (ads) and classified ads.

## News Stories

National news stories tell people what is happening in other parts of the country they live in. International stories tell them about other parts of the world. When we read national and international news stories, we learn what people knew about the world around them and what they thought was important. For example, there are many, many stories in old newspapers about the British royal family. Even the fact that the Prince of Wales decided to wear silk shirts instead of cotton shirts was considered a news story in 1923. This tells us that people in Newfoundland were very interested in the royal family at that time.

Local news stories tell us what was happening in the place where the newspaper was published. This helps us to understand what that place was like. Some of the local stories that appeared in the newspapers 100 years ago were more like gossip than news. For example, in November of 1898, this story was printed in the St. John's *Daily News*:

### ***An Outrage***

About one o'clock yesterday morning, a messenger connected with a certain Water Street...establishment, arrived at his home on Belvedere Street and, not finding everything to his satisfaction, commenced abusing his wife. The poor woman...made some reply in her defense, when the brutal husband jumped up and, catching his wife by the throat, beat her unmercifully about the head and face and then threw her violently to the floor. The parties who live next door, hearing the woman's screams for help, rushed in and found her lying on the floor nearly insensible with blood flowing profusely from the wounds that had been inflicted on her face. When one of the neighbours threatened to call the police, the man left the house and has not returned. Had this been a drunken squabble, it would not have attracted so much attention, but the man was in his sober senses, and what renders the affair more serious is that the woman is in a very delicate condition.

This is not the first time this fellow had treated his wife roughly, but this last exhibition of brutality surpasses anything that he has been previously guilty of and may be attended with very serious results.<sup>1</sup>

It is hard to imagine a story like that in the news today. What does this tell us about St. John's 100 years ago? It lets us know that St. John's was a smaller place than it is today. We could wonder if people felt closer to their neighbours than they do now. Maybe the person who wrote the story believed he could change the way this man treated his wife by making him feel ashamed.

## Editorials

Editorials are written by people who run newspapers. An editorial is an "opinion piece." Instead of giving facts, it tells how a person feels about what is happening in the news. When we read editorials, we learn how the people who wrote the news felt about what was happening around them. For example, in the early 1900s, many editorials and letters to the editor in St. John's newspapers talk about Chinese people coming to Newfoundland. Editorials written at that time call the Chinese "the yellow peril."<sup>2</sup> These editorials show us that people were afraid of Chinese immigration.

## Letters to the Editor

Letters to the editor are written by people who want to give their opinions on stories in the news. Most people write about things that are close to home. People disagree and argue in letters to the editor, so we see different sides of the same story. In St. John's in 1919, some doctors were trying to raise money for a maternity home (a hospital where women could go to have babies). Some people wrote letters to the editor of the *Daily News* saying that they did not like this plan. They did not think unwed mothers should be taken care of in the same building as married women. Their letters tell us how some people felt about single mothers. (To find out more about this, see the essay "More Sinned Against Than Sinning: Single Mothers and the Law in the Past," in book 5 of this series.)

## Ads

Advertisements (ads) can be lots of fun to read. We learn what movies were shown, what kinds of clothes were for sale in stores, what kinds of foods were sold and how much things cost. An auction is a sale where people tell the person in charge, called an auctioneer, what they want to pay. If someone else wants the same thing, they offer to pay more. This is called bidding. Each article is sold to the person who bids the most. Sometimes, before an auction, an auction house will put a list of everything being sold in

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<sup>1</sup>St. John's *Daily News*, 21 November 1898, p.4 (unnumbered). Unmercifully means without showing any mercy or kindness. "The parties living next door" is an old way of saying the neighbours. When the writer says that "the woman is in a very delicate condition" he probably means that she was pregnant. The word pregnant was thought to be rude and impolite to be used.

<sup>2</sup> Editorial, the St. John's *Daily News*, 29 November, 1905, p.1. See Ed Kavanagh's essay, "Early Chinese Immigrants in Newfoundland," in book 6 of this series.

the newspapers. If the auction is held after someone died, this could be a list of almost everything the person owned. These lists tell us what kinds of furniture, dishes and household goods people had.

We can even find out how people's ideas about health have changed by looking carefully at ads. For example, ads for vitamins or tonics used to show thin women as unhealthy. These ads promised to make women plump. Today, women are more likely to want to be thin.

Old newspapers have lots of ads telling mothers to give laxatives to their children. Here is one example that was published in some St. John's newspapers in 1923:

Mother! Child's best laxative is "California Fig Syrup."

When baby is constipated, has wind, colic, feverish breath, coated- tongue or diarrhea, a half-teaspoon of genuine "California Fig Syrup" promptly moves the poisons, gasses, bile, souring food and waste right out. Never cramps or over acts. Babies love its delicious taste.

Today, we almost never give laxatives to children. If we wanted to know why these ads were in the papers, we would have to ask about what foods children ate, and the ideas mothers had about health and illness. If children did not eat enough fresh fruits and vegetables, constipation may have been a real problem. But it seems as if the makers of this laxative wanted mothers to believe that the digestion of food could be dangerous to babies. To find out what mothers thought, we would need other kinds of information. Maybe we could interview older women. But these ads give us a whole new way of looking at, and thinking about, one small part of the past.

Classified ads are the ones that ordinary people put into the paper when they want to buy or sell something, or when they want to hire someone for a job. These ads tell us the prices of property and rents, the wages people were paid and about working conditions. They also tell us what people expected from their employees. In St. John's in the early 1900s, many people hired young women to work as servants in their homes. These girls did housework and helped to look after the children. In these ads, many people said "outport girl preferred." This tells us something about the working habits of outport girls and what employers thought of them.

THE  
**ARCADE ADVERTISER**  
303-305 WATER ST. St. John's. 303-305 WATER ST. St. John's.

This Page is published by the "Arcade Stores" in the better interests of the Shopping Public.

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**THE ARCADE STORES  
GREAT FALL CLOTHING SALE**

It was in Fall Week, bringing everybody Dollars and Dollars of Savings!  
HURRY! HIT THE BARGAIN TRAIL TO THE ARCADE STORES FOR SAVINGS.

REMEMBER  
**THE ARCADE STORES  
Clothes the Family for LESS MONEY**

<p>Men's Double Breasted Suits With-in Check</p> <p><b>Overcoats</b></p> <p>Value to \$12.50 Now <b>10.95</b></p>	<p>The Arcade Stores are famous THE country over for their the system. Come in today and select one.</p> <p><b>Neckties</b></p> <p>5c. up to 45c.</p>	<p>(MEN) Shop right in to New- foundland's Cap Headquarters! Men's Every worthwhile style is here at lowest prices.</p> <p><b>CAPS</b></p> <p>49c. up to 1.49</p>	<p>Men's Sweater Tailored Trousers, Herring Bone and All Shady Stripes</p> <p><b>SUITS</b></p> <p>Value to 6.98 or to <b>21.00</b></p> <p>Every Suit worth \$8 to \$6 More.</p>
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**MOTHERS** Shop at the Arcade Stores to-day and see the great assortment of Boys Suits and Overcoats. SPECIAL PRICE BOYS SUIT AND OVERCOAT SALE.

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**Look! Ladies Read This.**

Then put on your coat and come on down to the Arcade Stores and stretch your Dollars TWOFOLD.

**DRESS, COAT and HAT SALE.**

Golden Savings for All! Thousands of Unadvertised Bargains! Come, See and Save!

<p>NEW FALL <b>DRESSES</b></p> <p>1.00 up to 3.98</p>	<p>ALL WOMEN'S and MISSES <b>WINTER COATS</b></p> <p>SPECIALLY PRICED.</p>	<p>WOMEN'S All Wool, Part Wool and Brushed Wool <b>SWEATERS</b></p> <p>All Styles, All Sizes Value to \$1.50. <b>98cts</b> SPECIAL.</p>
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All Mail and Phone Orders attended to Promptly

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303-305 Water Street, St. John's, Newfoundland. **THE ARCADE STORES** 303-305 Water Street, St. John's, Newfoundland.

Credit: Centre for Newfoundland Studies Archives.

The ads in old newspapers show us how prices have changed. This ad appeared in *Newfoundland News-Magazine* in 1938.

## Old Newspapers as a Source

When we were writing the booklets for this project, we all used old newspapers to help us find some of the information we were looking for. But old newspapers only gave us part of the picture-like a handful of pieces from a jigsaw puzzle. We put these pieces together with other kinds of information, such as old letters and documents from archives, interviews that we did with people and things we learned from books. Then our pictures of the past were more complete.

We will never know some things about the past because no one wrote them down. Now, all the people who lived in that time have died, so we cannot interview them. We can also never be sure that the information in old newspapers is true until we check it with other sources. But when we look at lots of sources, we are more sure of the facts. Our pictures become clearer and easier to understand.

## Notes for Instructors

The content and style of newspapers has changed quite a bit in the past 100 years, but the basic form of the newspaper is pretty much the same. Today's newspapers contain local, national and international news stories, editorials, letters to the editor, ads and classified ads, just as older newspapers did. Students could be encouraged to go through any daily newspaper and identify which articles fall under these headings. They may also notice other areas (such as the "Lifestyle" section, and book and movie reviews) not covered in this piece.

Old newspapers make the past seem very immediate, especially if they were published in the community where your students live. Senior citizens in your area may have scrapbooks or collections of old newspaper clippings. It may be possible to arrange a field trip to a local public reference library, public archive, or university library, where students may look at actual copies of old newspapers, or microfilms. If this is not practical, these places usually have microfilm photocopiers that will allow you to make readable copies of some pages of old newspapers. These machines are often very busy and sometimes need to be booked in advance.

To make the most of your time with old newspapers, it helps to have a goal. Students could find out what was happening on the days they were born, for example, or you could pick a date that has special significance for your community. Changes in prices over time are pretty amazing. Students could be asked to estimate how much money they would have needed to live on in any given year. If this is done, each student or group could be responsible for collecting the information on one topic such as food, housing, clothing, entertainment, or wages. Making up the actual budget could be a group project.

The differences in language use and vocabulary is one of the most striking features of old primary source materials like newspapers. I often wonder if the people who read these papers were as confused as I sometimes feel. It may be useful to have students "translate" the passage "An Outrage" into plain English. Depending on the level students are working at, this could be a group or individual project, with or without aids such as dictionaries.

## Questions for Discussion

1. Name the three different types of news stories found in most newspapers. Can you find examples of these three different types of news stories in a newspaper printed this week? Which stories in this week's newspapers are most important to you? Why?
2. What is an editorial? Who writes editorials? How is an editorial different from the news?
3. What is a letter to the editor? Have a look at some letters to the editor in recent copies of your local newspaper. If you were to write a letter to the editor, what would you write about? Working alone or in a group, write a letter that you might send to the editor of your local newspaper.
4. Have a look at some ads in the newspapers. Compare these with ads in magazines and tabloid magazines like the National Enquirer and The Sun. Do some of these ads seem more believable than others? Do the papers tell you if

they check out the ads before they accept them? How can you tell if an ad is honest? What could you do to find out?

5. Why do we use old newspapers to find out about the past?

## **Learning About the Past from Interviews**

**by Janet McNaughton**

### **Why Interview?**

Interviews are a way to find out what other people know. Here in Newfoundland and Labrador, a lot of our history has not been written down. Sometimes, we cannot just pick up a book to find out what happened in the past, or to understand the work people did, how they lived, and how they felt. But we can find out for ourselves by doing interviews.

Interviews are only one way to learn these things, but they are important. Almost everyone has information about their own lives that no one else knows. Unless we interview these people, that information is lost forever. People also have stories to tell. These stories are more interesting than bare facts. Sometimes, people say things in very special ways. Their words make the past more real.

### **Finding People to Interview**

A good talker or storyteller with a good memory will usually give a good interview. Most of us know someone like that. Sometimes, we hear about people from friends and relatives. If you see a good interview in a newspaper, a magazine, or on television, you can track that person down to interview.

An archive is a place that keeps papers such as old letters, photographs and other information about the past. At Memorial University in St. John's, there is a special archive called the Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive. Many archives only have papers and photographs. The Folklore Archive also has interviews. Most of these interviews were done by students in folklore courses. They are recorded on tape, and sometimes transcribed (copied down onto paper). The Folklore Archive has between 15,000 and 20,000 interviews. That makes it a good place to find people to interview. When we were working on this project, some of us found the people that we interviewed by looking in the Folklore Archive.

### **Getting Ready for the Interview**

When we interview people, we ask questions. These are not just any questions that come into our heads. Some of us make lists of the things we want to learn about before the interview. Others write down the questions we want to ask.

Some questions are better than others. We look for the ones that will get the most information. We try to ask questions that will not lead people to give us the answer we

expect. It is better to ask "how did you feel about doing that work?" than "I guess you really liked that," or "you must have hated that." That way, we know the person is not giving the answer he or she thinks we would like to hear. We ask different people the same questions, to see how their answers match up.

Most of the time, the more you know, the easier it is to find out new things. Before we interview anyone, we try to learn as much as we can. We look in old newspapers, in archives and in books. We make notes. This information helps us to ask the right questions. Most people will take more time to answer your questions and give better answers if they see that you understand what they are talking about. Asking the right questions is one way of doing this.

Before doing interviews, we wonder if some questions might upset the person being interviewed. If so, how can we keep away from those questions? Sometimes, though, we have to ask about upsetting things. For example, if you want to learn about the lives of Chinese people in St. John's in the early part of the twentieth century, racial prejudice is an important topic. Racial prejudice is the bad feelings some people have about someone who comes from a different country or has different coloured skin. Racial prejudice makes people act unfairly. Most people would rather not talk about racial prejudice, especially to someone who is not a member of their own group.

If you are going to ask questions that may upset the person you will interview, you need to think about how to ask those questions. Some questions should be left until the end of the interview, or until you have done more than one interview with a person. Sometimes, we do not know what upsets people until we ask the wrong questions. This is not the nicest way to learn, but it teaches us a lot.

## **Using a Tape Recorder**

Some people write down notes when they do interviews. But it is hard to write down what a person says and be polite and think of the next question at the same time. Many people use a tape recorder. The tape makes a complete record of everything that is said. It does not mix people's words up or forget them. It leaves you free to think about what you are doing.

Tape recorders are not hard to use. It helps to use a microphone that plugs in to the tape recorder. Many tape recorders have built-in microphones, but these pick up the noise of the tape going around inside the recorder. This adds noise to your recording.

You can practice using the tape recorder before trying a real interview by pretending to interview friends, or just by letting a tape recorder record while you are at home. This shows you where to set the volume when you record. If the volume is too low, you won't be able to hear the tape. If it is too high, the recording will distort and be hard to understand. You also learn how to point the microphone to pick up the best sound. It is not a good idea to touch the microphone when the tape is being recorded. Every time the microphone is touched, loud noises are added to the tape. If you put the microphone on something hard, like a table, people sometimes make lots of noise with cups and spoons. It is better to put something like a paperback book between the microphone and the table. The "pause" button on the tape recorder and the off/on switch on the microphone can make it look as if a tape is being made when it is not really recording. It is best to leave those switches alone.

Everyone makes a few mistakes while, doing interviews. All of us have done at least one interview that was not recorded by mistake. As we use the same tape recorder over and over, we make fewer mistakes.

## **Doing Interviews**

We usually phone people to ask if we can visit them before we do an interview. We explain our project. We do not want people to think we are trying to sell them something. It is good to tell the person where you got his or her name. This makes it easier for the person to trust you. Tell people that you are looking for information and stories from their own lives. Many people will say they do not know anything worth learning. You can tell them they know things you cannot learn in books. It is a good idea to tell the person you will be using a tape recorder. I always tell people I use the tape recorder so I do not forget or misunderstand what they tell me.

Let the person you want to interview decide when you will visit. That way, you are likely to have their full attention. Sometimes, we have to wait weeks to do an interview. A person might have visitors from out of town, or might be sick. We never try to force anyone to talk to us. It is disappointing when someone says no, but a person who does not want to talk would not give a good interview anyway.

Doing an interview is scary at first. Will the person like you? Will you learn the things you want to know? Each interview is a surprise. But most people are happy to talk about their lives. When you do your first interviews, it is easy to get excited and talk too much. In one of my first interviews, I talked to a woman about people she had known. I told this woman everything I had learned about these people from books I had read about them. I told her so much that she thought I knew everything I needed to know. I did not learn what she might have told me if I had listened. I blew it.

To be a good interviewer, you have to be a good listener. You learn not to rush on to the next question too quickly. You learn to be quiet and let people talk, even when they are saying things you think you already know. Sometimes, what they tell you will surprise you.

When you begin your interview, explain your project again. Tell about your project and what the interview will be used for. Many people are afraid their interviews will end up on the radio, or that lots of people will listen to the tape. You can make them more comfortable by explaining what you are doing.

When you interview, it is good to keep the tape recorder running, even when you think you are finished. Sometimes, when people relax, they remember stories and important facts they had forgotten. But it is wrong to tape record anyone without permission. Never, ever tape anyone without letting them know.

At the end of the interview, thank the person, and let them know that their help is important. If you think you might want to come back again, say so. It is always good to write a thank you note and show the person anything you will write using the information you got from their interview.

## After the Interview

Now the interview is over. We are left with a tape, or many tapes. It is important to listen to your tapes as soon as you can, while the interview is still fresh in your mind. If anything important happened that was not recorded on the tape, write it down.

Some people try to write down every word on their tapes. This is called transcribing. Transcribing takes a very long time —an hour or more for just five minutes of tape. It is easier, and faster, to write down a list of the things that are said without trying to catch every word.

If someone talked about life in a lumbercamp, you could write down the subjects as they were talked about: food in the lumbercamp, who did the cooking, how the beds were made, problems with lice, getting around in heavy snow, caring for the horses and so on. Most tape recorders have a counter. Start the counter at 000 at the beginning of the tape. Write down the counter number when every new subject begins. That way, you will always be able to find those subjects on that tape recorder again. What you write is called a tape table of contents. (The counters work differently on every tape recorder, so this only works well if you use the same tape recorder when you go back to the tape.)

Of course, sometimes people will say things that are so important, or said in such a nice way that you really do want to write down every word. As you do your tape table of contents, you can mark those places and transcribe them later. You can also put the words you want to transcribe into your tape table of contents as you make it.

When the tape table of contents is finished, look for the things you do not understand, and the things you want to know more about. If there are a lot of these, you need a second interview with the same person. The second interview is more focused. We have a much better idea which questions to ask, and what we can find out. But it is still a good idea to give the person lots of time to talk.

When you have finished writing down the contents of your tape, you have collected new information. Sometimes, this is information that no one else has ever collected before. The facts and stories you have gathered on your tape can be used with written information to help create a more complete picture of your topic.

## Notes for Instructors

Successful interview projects have been carried out with school children at the grade two level. Collecting information by doing interviews has also proven to be a good way to motivate reluctant learners in high school. For the adult learner, a project based on interviews may seem more immediate, and less intimidating, than book-based learning. Yet the challenge of creating a list of questions, doing the interview, processing the tapes and creating a booklet or display will call many basic language skills into play.

An interview project may be carried out by classes working as a group, in pairs, or as individuals. The topic should be simple and focused. Even if students are to work alone, it is a good idea to brainstorm to develop a common list of topics or questions, and have students practice using the tape recorders and doing interviews together before they set out to do actual interviews. It is often good for students to begin by interviewing family members or acquaintances, especially if self-confidence is an issue. For a more detailed look at interview-based projects and how to design them, see *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, Paul Thompson, (Oxford University Press, 1978). Thompson gives examples of

simple, successful projects, detailed instructions on interviewing and sample questions on many topics related to everyday life.

For students in St. John's who are interested in the idea of learning from interviews, it may be worthwhile to arrange a field trip to the Folklore and Language Archive at Memorial University of Newfoundland. Contact Philip Hiscock at 737-8401.

Interviews are everywhere in our mass media. You may wish to have students look at interviews in newspapers and magazines and on TV. In media interviews, the interviewer will often lead the person being interviewed to say something that fits the "angle" of the news story. Sometimes, interviews seem designed to provoke a certain emotional response as well. Understanding this is a part of "media literacy." You may ask your students to study the interviews they see on the news, and try to decide what the interviewer was trying to accomplish.

## **Topics for Discussion**

1. Differences between written language and spoken language.
2. Interviews on radio and television: are they always fair?
3. If students are doing an interview project, they may wish to discuss the difference between interviewing someone for information and the interviews they see on the television or hear on the radio.

## **Questions for Discussion**

1. Why do we need to do interviews?
2. How can you find people to interview?
3. Pick a topic that you are interested in. Make a list of questions you would ask if you were going to interview someone about that topic. If you needed to know more about the topic before doing the interview, where would you look?
4. List the steps in an interview project.

## **Projects**

1. Life in my town 50 years ago.
2. Going to school in my grandmother's time.
3. Food people ate in the 1930s.
4. What it was like to come to Newfoundland as a new Canadian.
5. An important event in your town (for example: the building of a new fish plant or business, a fire, the opening or closing of an important service such as a hospital or business).

6. An important event in history (for example: World War II, Confederation with Canada, the moratorium on the cod fishery).

## **How I Wrote William Pender**

**by Kathleen Winter**

### **Finding the Story**

I did not know one thing about William Pender or his world. I went to the library at MUN. Anybody can go there. There is a wonderful room in there where you can hunt for stories that have happened here. It is called the Centre for Newfoundland Studies.

There are people who help you. You tell them what kind of story you are hunting. They go in a big back room where they keep all the stories. There are whole stories and bits of stories. You can use the bits to piece together old stories that no one ever found out before. Or you can make new stories.

I wanted to find a story about a working man around 1900 in St. John's. I found some essays about that. One said there was a man who made barrels. Barrel makers were called coopers. They had a strike in 1904. This one man never found work again. He wandered over the South Side Hill and perished.

That was all it said. It did not say his name. The rest of the essay talked about something else.

If I write something I like it to teach me. I want it to thrill me. I want to feel as if I am hunting treasure. It feels like when we did scavenger hunts as kids.

I decided I wanted to find out who the barrel maker was. I wanted to see his world, and smell it and taste it.

First I needed his name. If he died in a strange way, he would probably be in the newspaper. The same library has newspapers in the basement. They go back in time. I found St. John's papers from 1904.

St. John's had a lot of newspapers in those days. They told different kinds of news. They still had *The Evening Telegram*. They also had the *Daily News*. Then there was a paper that told a lot of working man's news, and another one that told rich people's news.

I looked in them all to find the name of the barrel maker who died. I did not know the date of the strike, so I looked through every day's paper in all of the papers starting in January of 1904. Finally in October, after reading hundreds of papers, I found the strike.

The strike was over in November. That meant the barrel maker could have died a few months later, in the winter of 1905. So I looked through 1905 papers too.

Finally, in June of 1905, I found a speech by the Roman Catholic Archbishop Howley. I found my barrel maker. His last name was Pender. His first name began with the letter W.

That was the only vital statistic I ever found out about him. But something exciting had happened to me along the way.

When you read newspapers from the past, day after day, you catch a thrill from those days. Those days in the winter of 1904 and 1905 were not like ours. The first part of my story tells all about what I found. I called it "The Golden Dream." Golden, because people were caught up in an age of discovery and hope in a new land. Dream, because in the end, that's all the hope really was. A dream that Newfoundland woke up from, to face a grim time.

I looked in old newspapers for a long time. They gave me a lot of details about W. Pender's world. By now I had started to call him William.

But newspapers only gave me certain kinds of information. There were other things I needed to know. Like how coopers made barrels. And details about the scarlet fever and other diseases the papers reported. And the kinds of clothes people wore. And the dishes and furniture they had in their houses. And what they ate. And where William Pender would have lived. What other working people worked at. Details of the strike. The names and plans of the streets he walked. Where the cooperages were, and the tanneries, and the cod oil factories, and the boot making factory.

What did a barrel maker or cooper do when there was no work? What did he feel? Where did he go? Who was around him, and what were they saying?

What were the children playing in the streets? What kind of candy did they eat?

What was a cooper's wife like?

What was going on inside his head?

When I started to ask these questions, two things happened. First, I started looking in new places for the answers. Second, when I found the answers, I had to find a way to shape them into a story.

## **Looking in New Places**

Once I got to know more about William's world, 1904 did not seem as long ago as it had. It was less than a hundred years ago. William Pender was not the last cooper that ever was. Maybe there was a cooper who was still alive. Someone who could tell me what it was like. What kind of tools he used. What a cooper's shop smelled like. What a cooper was like when he was a little boy.

The Centre for Newfoundland Studies has a file pile called a vertical file. I asked if they had one about coopers. They did. It was a thin file. It held one article. About a cooper who lived on Leslie Street.

The article was old. The cooper was old. I wondered if he was still alive. I looked him up in the phone book. I phoned him. He said I could come to his house and ask him about his life.

One thing about crafts like barrel making is that they don't change. The barrels Gordon Snow made in the 1920s were the same as those William Pender made before 1904.

Gordon Snow told me many things I could put into my story. He talked about where barrel hoops came from. About games boys and girls used to play with the hoops. About games they played throwing their hats on top of schooner masts. About changing times. About strikes, and working man's wages, and moving away to find work in Ontario. About what a cooper did to make extra money when the barrels were finished for the season. About the times and dates the fish were salted and put in casks. About swimming with girls on the south side of the harbour. Girls in woolen swim suits.

Gordon Snow sat on his couch and held a bit of paper the size of a playing card. He drew small lines on the paper. One for each merchant's premises around St. John's Harbour in 1926. He looked at each mark, and saw the merchant's place. He knew how many barrels that merchant bought from the cooper. He knew how many barrels were made from scratch, and how many were rebuilt from old margarine tubs. He knew the names of the candy the children ate. He knew where cooper lads went with their girls to see a penny theatre show. He knew how coopers felt when coopering was replaced with barrel making machines and cold storage.

Then I visited the Newfoundland Museum on Duckworth Street. They had a replica of a cooper's shop, with his tools and his fire and his barrels. There was a replica of a small grocery store too. A cooper's wife would often run a corner store in her house. Gordon Snow told me his wife had one. I sat and looked in the windows at the cooper's tools, and at his wife's boxes of dried apricots and raisins for sale, until I felt like I was there.

At the museum Colleen Borek helped me. She lent me two videos. One explained more about the display I had just seen. It was all about coopers and other trades people in St. John's around the turn of the century. The second video was about Newfoundland furniture. It helped me see what William Pender's kitchen table would have been like, and his day bed, and his bedroom furniture. The video helped me see inside his house.

I also went to the Provincial Archives in the Colonial Building. I found that place harder to understand, but once I got the hang of it, I found some good things there. They give you boxes and you don't know what's going to be in them until you open them. The best thing I got there was Kate Vey's diary. It was pencilled in a brown scribbler in 1904. You can see in the main story how I used it.

The Newfoundland Studies centre at MUN has an archive too. The people who work in archives can find things for you that you could never find on your own. A woman at this archive told me the lawyer John L. Joy used to study history, and he wrote a thesis all about coopers and the other crafts and trades and factories in St. John's around 1900.

I knew John Joy. I had talked to him. But I never knew he wrote that thesis, and I never found the thesis on any of my hunts because it was listed under his name. I was looking under topics like coopering, factories and trades. I found his thesis and several papers he wrote about coopers. He had done years of work on this topic, and he had put the work together beautifully. He had done a lot more hunting than I had. His work was like a big treasure chest full of doubloons.

I phoned him and asked him if I could use his work. I felt bad because he had done so much of it. I felt like I was stealing it. But he said go ahead, that's what research is for. To help people build on each other's knowledge. He had more things too, like minutes from coopers' union meetings during the strike. I found out more about things from the coopers' point of view. John Joy was very kind, and his work was rich and deep.

Then I remembered that St. John's City Hall has an archive too. That turned out to be my favourite place to find things out, and to think about William Pender. I found out he probably lived on the South Side Hill. I could see the hill out the archives window. The archivist showed me photographs that James Vey took of St. John's in the winter of 1904. She showed me a city insurance map from 1904 that let me picture the streets William Pender walked. She gave me a glass loop that let me see the pictures close up. It let me read the signs on shop windows, and see into the dim stores. I put all those details in the story.

Finally I travelled on foot through the berry bushes to the tall stones on the South Side Hill where William Pender died. I touched the stones and made a fire. Older stories came to me, from three hundred years ago instead of one hundred. The ghosts of old French battles came out of the rocks. I visited Placentia, and saw old coins and muskets the ghosts had dropped.

By now I was getting used to going back in time. Every night when I closed my eyes I could see William Pender's world. I could see William Pender himself, with his black moustache and his cap, and his T-handled snow shovel, as he shovelled the streets with gangs of other unemployed workmen. Whenever I walked in downtown St. John's, I no longer saw it only in 1996. I saw the present as a dream that hung like a veil over a very real 1904, and a vivid 1698. I saw that what used to be there is just as real as what we see there today.

## **Shaping the Story**

Now I knew a lot about William Pender's world. At first I wove two kinds of stories together. I wrote about him, and then I wrote about the things around him. I shaped the personal details around the last day in his life. I had him do things I knew a cooper in his situation would do. You can see what these things are when you read the story. But I kept the factual things about his world separate from his story.

For example, I inserted small essays about the poor house, factory working conditions, and hospital conditions, and Gordon Snow's memories, as separate boxes inside the main story.

After awhile I felt this did not work. The reader kept having to jump out of William Pender's story to get at these "side" stories. That works in some writings, but I did not feel that it worked in this piece. I did not know what to do.

One night I asked this question: How would it be if I melted all the side stories into William's main story? If I put everything inside William's head, or made it apply directly to him, how would it flow?

That is what I did. I gave William Pender Gordon Snow's memories. I gave his wife the recipe for curing scarlet fever. I gave his neighbour knowledge about what went on inside the poor house. I melted all my research into his life.

That was a big step. It raised a lot of questions about how you get at the truth of a story.

And that is the main thing the story of William Pender has done to me. It has got me excited about what history is.

When you read the story of William Pender, you can be sure that it is all true. Every detail comes from real life. It comes from old newspapers and diaries, from old men's memories, from poems and songs, and from things I have seen in my own life. It comes from maps, and loneliness, and faces in old photographs. It comes from the tall stones on the South Side Hill. It comes from life and mystery. And I know now that those are the places that all our history comes from.

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Newfoundland Museum, Duckworth Street, St. John's; Partial exhibit of show titled "The Working World of Egbert Warren," including model cooperage and attached grocery shop.

**Walks and Day-Trips:**

Walks through the old sections of downtown St. John's referred to in the story.

Walks along the portions of the South Side Road where William Pender lived and worked.

Campfire trip with a flask of brandy to the standing stones on the South Side Hill where Pierre le Moyne d'Iberville and his men hid and confronted settlers from the Waterford Valley at the turn of the seventeenth century.