

## **A Newfoundland History (Abridged)**

It's always interesting to hear wide-eyed tourists interact with Newfoundlanders. I remember being on a wharf in Salvage where a nice American couple was purchasing lobster. They struck up a conversation with an older fisherman and were making inquiries about Newfoundland's culture, economics and history. He offered the best summary I've ever heard.

"Well, 'tis like this," the fisherman said, slanting his ballcap onto the back of his head. "It's always been an awful scoat here, but we goes on."

When I went to high school, we had a program called Newfoundland Culture. I don't know if it has held its place in the curriculum, but it's a shame if it hasn't. Young people today really don't have much sense of our provincial culture. As part of my community service (not due to a conviction, as you believe) I am offering an abridged summary of Newfoundland's history, taking certain liberties with the facts for brevity and paying no heed to historical order. Here it is:

Sometime after Tyrannosaurus Rex and before high speed internet, Johnny Cabot and 17 buddies came across the Atlantic in search of fish, riches, chicks and a new utopia. They found the fish. Fish paid pretty well, so they returned year after year. Finally, they broke down and said, "ah, to hell with it, the commute is killing me" and went about

building some houses to stave off what was then, and remains today, the world's worst climate.

Then there were the Vikings – loud, rambunctious, steely bearded seafarers who reveled in chaos. This is the model of Newfoundland character still championed today. They bore grandiose names such as Erik the Red, Crosbie the Cantankerous and Rex the Indecipherably Verbose.

In between fishing and trying to locate the chicks, the settlers found time to row with the native residents of the island, who had no problem with anyone, for apparently little reason other than the natives refused to keep a pinky finger aloft whilst drinking tea.

Efforts were made through the years to get some political independence as a colony, but Newfoundland was generally regarded as a crowd of useless layabouts who must be governed from a world away. This sentiment persists today after Newfoundlanders accepted Confederation with Canada, the terms of which included promises of an NHL franchise for Trinity, an endless supply of lassie buns, the world's worst ferry system and the rights to subsidize hydro power to Quebec for eternity.

Moose were introduced to the province as a means to instill more cautionary behavior in Newfoundland motorists. This was actually a conspiratorial maneuver by autobody

repairmen who were complaining that there weren't enough car accidents to keep their enterprises afloat.

Since inception, Newfoundland has had a lot of politics going on. There have been grandstanders and podium-pounders and silver-tongued devils and money men all getting up in the morning and politicking their proud hearts out about restoring Newfoundland to grandeur. The politicians have claimed to have the answer to many pressing problems, but these pressing problems were, in fact, created largely by politics.

Cod were fished with vigor to a dramatic extinction. Foreign fishermen were only too happy to help facilitate this demise by using trawl nets you couldn't fit a toothpick through. With cod gone and the dangling sword of a moratorium above the province's head, a special committee on economic transition and rural development was struck. This crack unit of master economists, strategists, entrepreneurs and career bureaucrats assembled at the Kozy Korner in Pool's Island to set forth a bold new direction that would serve as a catalyst for a phoenix-like economic resurrection. After splitting a can of kippers and assessing the facts at hand, the committee decided she was pretty well effed, had a few beers and dodged on home out of it.

Someone got an idea that Mount Pearl be repositioned as the world's cucumber processing giant. This didn't work out so well, but Mount Pearl got a pretty sweet nightlight out of the whole affair.

Sometime before salt cod and after *Skipper and Company* a train came and went, roads were built and so on. People were driven out of homes and God was driven out of public schools.

In the wake of the moratorium, people left as fast as the ferry could take them. Those who stayed took advantage of a transition program for workers to prepare them to become meaningful participants in the non-resource sector workplace. There were soon 68 fully qualified hairdressers in Little Catalina, so you were never stuck for a haircut. Unfortunately, there were few heads left to perm and what was left was gray and thinning.

There was a time that Newfoundland women were popping out babies with the rapidity of a machine gun discharging. However, Newfoundlanders stopped having babies, because, by in large, babies are expensive. Even the Catholics went about sheathing the sword, and they could always be counted on to produce enough offspring to populate a small village or two. Rest assured, Newfoundlanders are still wildly fornicating, but it has become more about recreation than utility. If you listen carefully on a brisk winter night in Newfoundland, you can still hear the symphony of

singing bedsprings, but the last time the Stork was a regular visitor to Newfoundland, the Great Auks were crapping up a storm off Fogo Island.

As has always been the case, Newfoundlanders went greatest distances for a bit of work. Newfoundlanders who moved abroad went about overtaking Alberta with a scheming single-mindedness that would impress the Trojans. Having penetrated Fort McMurray and instilled their own leader, it is only a matter of time before the assembled throng will march on Government House in Edmonton, usurp the incumbent party and declare Alberta a Newfoundland colony. A boil-up will follow the upheaval. Insurgents are encouraged to bring their own Jam-Jams.

Then there was oil, which bolstered the economy. Some 7,000 new jobs were created on the Avalon Peninsula and a newfound hopefulness permeated the area. Unfortunately, Cow Head was still effed and other communities were folding up like cheap card tables.

Flags went down and went up and money rolled in and suddenly politicians had nothing to politick about because Ottawa had done something for the province. A quiet set over the land from Ferryland to Flower's Cove which was unsettling to many who are used to being in a constant row over something with the federal government. The politicians grew tired of playing 120s to stave off boredom in Confederation Building, so the special committee reconvened at the Kozy Korner to manufacture

some hot topics to politic about. They decided on reviving the lobby effort for that NHL franchise promised for Trinity.

Everyone was getting completely unsettled with the lack of opportunities to rant and roar about injustices so when the Prime Minister screwed the province over, the relief was perceptible. Everyone went back to a happy state of being enraged about federal-provincial relations and peace fell over the bays, arms, coves and inlets.

That's our history, abridged. Today, there are a number of small rural Newfoundland communities left clinging to existence like an urchin stuck fast to the bottom. Many towns won't make it; their residents will drift invisibly to bigger places with traffic lights, schools without any enrolled students will close and the community will become a footnote in our trying history. And one day, that abandoned community will receive a lost visitor who is using an outdated roadmap. They will drive to the community, surveying the overturned boats flaking in the grass and the tide lapping at a dilapidated wharf where a robust fishing fleet once berthed. The visitor will scratch his head in wonder where everyone has gone. He will call out and only the terns will respond in mockery. Then he will look upon a sign, crudely handwritten and half-hidden in the overgrown tangles on the side of the road, a last standing beacon, which reads: "It's always been an awful scoat, but we goes on."