Excerpt from "Life"

Source: From "Life", a hand-published book by R.N.Rowsell

Up to this point I have been thinking of and writing of matters that I have in common with, and applicable to, every individual on earth.

Now, therefore, I want to say something about my family and my personal experiences in this "atmosphere", this "being", this "IS", and, in doing so, I shall, of course, make some observations that may help not only us, the members of our own family and relatives for whom this book is written particularly, but to those in a little wider field, as we all work together for the improvement of our common life in the days ahead.

In the year of my birth, 1909, my grandfathers and my father were fishermen and members of the Methodist church.

At the beginning of the twentieth century in our numerous isolated communities the occupation of the cod-fishery by the bulk of Newfoundlanders and their religious affiliations were the two aspects of Newfoundland life that superceded all others.

Two other aspects of our island life were of the school boards and the road boards which about this time were beginning to get considerably more and more attention in our communities.

The church, the school and the road boards were the three organizations where most of the men of that day first practised their democracy.

One other group, the fraternal organization, the Loyal Orange Association, for example, held the interests of many fishermen and usually provided good fellowship, recreation. These associations were entirely denominational and very secretive.

The winter months were spent "in the woods", cutting firewood, sawlogs, timbers and plank sticks for new boats, buildings.

Father was employed with the Grand Falls pulp and paper mill for two or three winters as a teamster. He used horses and bobsled to haul wood from the tree stump to the brows at the riverside in readiness for the spring drive.

The family spent two winters at Grand Falls. It was there that Dad and I had the mumps and measles. Both of us were in bed together.

Of course dad had to be back to Rowsell's Island fairly early in the spring in order to spend many hours in the "twine loft" mending his nets for the summer fishery.

Father spent two springs at the sealhunt as ship's carpenter on the S.S. Eric under the command of Capt. Isaac Barbour who had married father's sister, Theresa.

Though he was ship's carpenter, he very often went with the sealers to the kill. He wrote a diary each day he was at the ice but in these he never gave much detail. One day, for example, he went with a message from Capt. Barbour to Capt. Abraham Kane whose ship was "in the ice" not too distant from the S.S. Eric but he did not say what the message was about.

Father did not always spend his summers fishing with his brother, Israel, at Rowsell's Island in Leading Tickles. He spent at least two summers as "second hand" (first mate) with grandfather Anstey, in the latter's schooner, The Picadello.

These summers they fished in Labrador.

Coming home one fall, when they were crossing the White Bay, father was at the wheel. There was a terrific storm. Other members of the crew were below deck. The schooner was "under bare poles", that is, the sails were lashed to the booms - no sails hoisted at all. A smashing wave washed father overboard. They were towing a "trap boat" and father when he was going over the stern of the schooner, was nimble enough to grab the towline.

Grandfather Anstey, who was looking through the cabin window, saw what had happened. He and one of the crew succeeded in getting father onboard. When father had put on dry clothing and a new suit of oilskins, he took the wheel again.

This time they lashed him to the wheel. "You'll have to do it, Arthur, boy," the skipper said. "You're the only one to get us out of this."

After the family left Rowsell's Island in 1914 and came to Pilley's Island, father, at the request of Mark Winsor, the merchant, became the captain of a schooner, "The Olive B", and spent two summers fishing at Belle Isle in the Strait of Belle Isle.

The individual fisherman by himself or with his brothers or his neighbours had pretty tough times as the fishing season approached. They made trip after trip to the merchant to know if he would "fit them out" for the summer, that is, give them groceries, equipment, clothing, which of course would be paid for in fish during and at the end of the fishing season.

To fit them out was not the only question. What will you pay for a quintal of fish this summer and fall? So often the question was one that was not answered until the last of the fish for the season was brought to the merchant's premises.

How many times have I stood as a boy among these fishermen and heard them talk about the price of fish and when would they know. I used to be sick at heart. I still am with I think of it.

Even in 1940 - 1942 when as a United Church minister in Notre Dame Bay, there were instances when men, in order to obtain a few dollars to pay their minister, had to go to the merchant and plead for the money.

More humiliating still they did not always get it. They would say to me, "I was over to the store and arranged for them to pay you some money for me." The merchant would debit the fisherman's account with the amount and credit it to my account, paying me the cash periodically. The fishermen never had the privilege of passing this money to me personally. No wonder these men and their sons rejoiced exceedingly when in an industry or at United States military bases in 1939-1945 and later at the end of each week or two weeks or a month they received their pay in cash, and, more surprising still at the end of an employment period to receive unemployment insurance. They not only wondered, they almost went out of themselves.

Coming out of such a niggardly economic background, these men will require more than one generation to learn how to accept and how to cooperate in an entirely new economic system.

In this book, I have mentioned in part that period of father's life and his family previous to our going to Corner Brook in 1923.

I want now to refer to a letter which he wrote at Corner Brook relative to the old home on Rowsell's Island.

The last thing that the economic system did to father was to take his home. He must have owed the merchant a considerable amount to lose his residence (and grandfather's)
because of a debt.

I remember that he wrote that merchant a lengthy letter . What he said, I do not know. How much he owed, I do not know. I wish it were possible for me to read that letter. A small firm is still on the site where that merchant was located and managed by a man of the same name, I believe.

I have a picture of that house before it was taken from Rowsell's Island. Standing in front of the house were father, mother, grandfather and two or three others. Thank goodness somebody had a camera. Mother sent me the picture a year or two before she died.

Hard to believe that such a bleak economic system could have existed about the middle of the twentieth century.

Perhaps Joey Smallwood was right or knew more than he thought when he said to the fishermen of Newfoundland, "Burn your boats." Nevertheless, not yet can I forgive him for saying that.

I haven't referred very much to our living in Corner Brook. There are two or three other things to be mentioned one of which follows:

I called on a Major Bert Butler when he was a patient at the General Hospital in St. John's. For several years as you know he was Employment Superintendent or Personnel Manager with the paper company in Corner Brook. When I called on him one day at the hospital, we made several references to father. Major Butler said to me, "Your father was one of the best citizens Corner Brook ever had."

Mother was a fisherman's daughter and a fisherman's wife. What an ordinary, and yet lovely thing to say.

Fishermen's wives were angels from heaven. They lodged in thousands of homes, hovered about hundreds of isolated communities, brought the quietness of the eternal God, the humility, solicitude and faith of a Mary of Nazareth and services to children and men unequalled anywhere in the world. Allowing no exception whatever, I believe these mothers did more for Newfoundland than any other group of citizens. These fishermen's wives were the salt of Newfoundland. That salt did not lose its savour. It still hasn't.

These wives were the springs from which Newfoundland's hospitality bubbled over. With needle and thread they made dresses, coats, suits, mitts, socks, sweaters, underware. There was not money enough to purchase these items. I myself never had a "store suit" until I was five years of age. The homemade "matts" these mothers hooked bedecked the bare wood floors.

These mothers often sawed and split the wood at the wood-horse and the chopping block. They often helped as well to spread the "waterous" fish upon bough-covered flakes and "pick up" the fish before the sun had set.

The babies in their cradles were sung to sleep with gospel hymns. The sentiment these mothers had about their babies and their growing children was to their lives as to their bodies was the oven-heated beach stone laid in the woolen blankets of their beds in unheated bedrooms on wintry nights.

The love these mothers had in all their dealings with their offspring was like a strongbox which in all the wear and tear of life kept its treasure safely.