"Re-Settlement and Sentiment, 1914" by R.N. Rowsell (undated)

Source: RNR Papers

In the last thirty years I have heard quite a lot about re-settlement, but not until I began writing this story did I realize that this social scheme played a large part in my life in 1914. At that time, of course, it was not a plan devised by Government; but the basic principle was the same.

My birthplace was at Rowsell's Island in Leading Tickles on the east side of the entrance to Badger Bay, Notre Dame Bay, Newfoundland. On this island, where my fathers had lived, I spent the first five years of my life.

My dad told me that when he was a young man, his family had the head of a salmon tierce which had been made by one of this forebears. That cooper had carved on the head of that tierce the date it was made. The head of that barrel was two hundred years old in the year in which dad had read the engraving. I myself have the head of a salmon tierce which was made by my great- grandfather in 1848 and he, William Rowsell, carved his initials and the date on the head of his cask as follows: "W R 1848."

The memories of my fourth and fifth years (maybe the third as well!) make the days I spent on Rowsell's Island the very brightest of my life because these years had more influence on me than my trip to the Holy Lands or the seven years I spent at the university and at the theological college.

I think I shall relate some of the stories of my Rowsell's Island days so that the reader will get an inkling of how strong the timbers were that have shored up the house of my life for more than three score years and ten.

First and foremost I must say that my father was a man of fervent prayer. He would leave his workshop or his twineloft in the afternoon, go to his bedroom and quietly make his prayer extemporaneously. I recall distinctly my visits to the little church where my dad or his brother, Israel, conducted the services. The prayers of these two men left a lasting impression on my receptive mind and spirit. These men had strong voices which they used fully in their prayers; and their earnestness was overflowing.

When dad came home one day from a neighbouring community, he told mother that when he was approaching the shop one of a group of men standing in the distance said rudely, "Look! Here comes that g.d. Wesleyan."

That left an indelible impression on father's mind. When speaking of the incident some years later, he said that he had forgiven the man but could not understand how one could be a confirmed member of a Christian chuch and speak so contemptuously against another Christian church and one of its members.

Never in my life did I hear father swear or curse, but on one occasion he nearly fell a victim. I was at the carpenter shop using a handsaw to cut in halves a piece of board on which he had ruled a line for me, while he was working on a piece of furniture. He had cut, planed, sanded a board and was putting it in place when he discovered that he had cut the piece too short. He was so upset with himself that he lodged the dressed wood upon the littered bench and in an irritable mood said, "Ad! Bad cess to it!" I cannot explain to my readers the significance of that phrase passed on to father by his forebears.

Down at the beach my buddies and I would gather sea-snails and, when we had enough in the can that mother gave us, we would pick up some wood, light a fire, boil our

snails in ocean water, and, by using a straight pin, we would hook out the cooked snails, remove the circular scale on the outermost part of the snail's body and then we, each finding a larger stone on which to sit in the sun and breeze, would eat the delicious meat.

When we stood on the shore and faced the water, a small hill on our right terminated our beach and served as a very good lookout. The water was shallow off this hill, or tiny headland, and often iceberge used to go aground. Many times I have watched these bergs roll over in the sea to free themselves from the shoals, the tides and the powerful winds. I shall always see the water streaming down from the sides of these fretted giants as if that water were a mercuric-like perspiration that oozed out of the blueish skin of the berg.

A neighbour of ours had a clever dog that was expert in expressing its loneliness whenever its masters left Rowsell's Island to visit friends on another island or at a villege on the mainland. That dog, by day or by night, would go to the top of the hill, and howl its plaintive lament or its great joy.

In a store, separate from our dwelling, there were barrels, boxes, kegs, tubs, bags in which we kept such things as flour, saltbeef, butter, molasses, partridgeberries, bakeapples, hard bread. Our goat got into the store one day and, having a taste for hard bread, she filled herself to the full. The consequence of this was that she became very thirsty, went to the beach and drank to her heart's delight. As you know, when hard bread is soaked it plims considerably (swells - as in brewis). Somebody found poor nanny goat down at the landwash. She was dead.

Speaking of hard bread, I am reminded that when the baby's store of food had been used up, mother brought out her carpenter's plane, made sure that it was thoroughly clean, turned it upside down, took a cake of hard bread and then drew that up and down over the sharp edge of the plane's blade. The powered hard bread fell down upon a linen napkin, was collected and turned into baby's pap by mother. The tool was known as "the baby's plane."

Early one morning dad and Israel had to go to Cull's Island for some salt and I wanted to go along with them. Mother had me dressed in my finest suit and I was with dad in the skiff prepared to go. When we were ready to leave the wharf the men realized that they had forgotten to attend to something. Dad and uncle Israel went ashore, warning me to stay in the skiff where I was; and not to follow them. Between the skiff and the wharf was a small rowboat which we used to call a rodney. The boats were both steady because there was no motion from an undertow, the sea was calm, the wind was too soft to cause a ripple.

I waited and waited for the men to come back and I made up my mind I'd go to find out where they were. I climbed over the side of the skiff and, when I was trying to step on the side of the small boat, I slipped, fell into the water, grabbed the gunnel of the rodney, held it tightly till my two rescuers arrived. Dad took me home but not to get dressed so that I could still go on the trip, but to be undressed and put to bed for the rest of the day. He said to mother, "He disobeyed his uncle and me. He could have been drowned."

I said a few minutes ago that those days on Rowsell's Island were the brightest period of my life. The main reason for that, beyond any doubt, was the influence of "Bop" which was dad's pet name for mother. I believe mother was lonely. Our house was considerably separated from the other homes and I, especially with dad away, was the only one she had with whom to share her passing reflections. She was born at Little Bay and spent her childhoom and youth there and at Pilley's Island - both were mining towns.

Mother's loneliness was occasionally relieved by visitors who often stayed at our house. The teacher, who spent some months of the year on the island, boarded with us as did the minister who called rarely. One visitor I remember very well, that was Sir Wilfred Grenfell. It was in the fall of the year. The good doctor wore a heavy, outer coat and I, in my boyisn reaction, wondered why our men did not wear coats like that. Grenfell and my grandfather, Mark Rowsell, had a long chat particularly about Mark's experiences on the Gull Island off Cape St. John from 1884-1904. Grenfell spent the night with us and mother was sure the spare room was top-notch and the meals were the best she had.

In those days men wore long, leather boots, without laces, that reached to the calf of the leg and, more often than not, were difficult to take off. The use of a bootjack was required to assist one in pulling off his boots. We had a visitor one night whose name I cannot recall, but I do remember his bootjack. He was well dressed. When he was ready for bed, he opened his 'valise', took out a wooden box which was stained and varnished and shone even in the kerosene lamplight. He opened the box and took out a bootjack which, like the box, was stained and varnished and shone in the kerosene lamplight. Father, who knew him well, was amused, and said so. For some minutes they joked with and teased each other about their lives; the one's poverty, the other's riches.

About the time of my falling overboard, mother told me that we were moving from Rowell's Island to Pilley's Island, that she and dad had talked about the plan and that we would be leaving Rowsell's Island in October 1914. This was extraordinary news for me and truly I was all agog. The reason why we left Rowsell's Island which my forebears inhabited for over 200 years was that my grandfather, Henry Anstey, at Pilley's Island, had asked dad if he would sail with him as his first made in the schooner Piccadillo, since his son, Joe, had left home fot service in His Majesty's navy.

As I recall, mother seemed pleased to share this secret news with me and I awaited the unexpected. Leaving Rowell's Island with its half dozen families, and moving to Pilley's Island which had at least a hundred times more families, was like receiving yearly tickets to a large variety concert hall.

Nearing the end of my fifth year, I, with my two younger brothers, mother, father and Uncle Jack, made the trip in motorboat - thirteen miles - from Rowsell's Island to Pilley's Island. We also had on board as much of our personal effects as we could conveniently carry. The water was smooth and we were happy. We saw one seal but dad refused to shoot it because he knew that at its distance from us the animal would sink before we could reach it. He also knew, of course, that since the boat was so much cumbered with people and furniture, it would not be easy to take a seal out of the water and place it on board the boat.

Looking back, however, I realize that while dad on the one hand was glad to be opening up brighter opportunities for his boyos, on the other hand he was sad to be leaving Rowsell's Island and its environs where his ancestors moved [lived?] for generations. His father - the nimble Master of a schooner, the discoverer of the bodies of the crew and passengers of the ill-fated Queen of Swansea, the selfless lighthouse keeper on the Gull Island off Cape St. John for twenty years - had died fourteen months ago. Leaving the old house and its site, dad was like a tree torn from the ground with some roots whole, some roots completely broken with parts of them left in the soil. That simile portrays the feelings that obsessed him that day.

Truly mother was the lucky one. In 1908 she married dad and now she was returning to her home community again and giving another pull, but a much gentler one, on dad's taut heartstrings.

Mother, when telling me about Pilley's Island, always referred to it as "Pilley's" as if it were not an island at all. Now, years later, I know the reason why. Rowsell's . . . was so tiny, and Pilley's. . . was so large. Mother told her first three (boys) children a lot about Pilley's and I, the eldest, speaking figuratively, was all ears, but I did not detect at the time that mother was so happy to be moving from Rowell's Island to Pilley's to which community it was now her privilege to welcome her own family.

At Pilley's with its larger churches, schools, mercantile establishments and a much wider social life, we had so many interesting things to listen to and to particupate in that we became involved. Our uncles and aunts, mother's sisters and brothers, had to be sized up. Our grandparents were kind, good, but stern. Some of my aunts and uncles were older than I, one was about my own age and two of them were younger. This occurrence could be explained by the fact that mother was the eldest child of my grandparents' children.

Our family lived at Pilley's Island until 1923 in which year we settled down in Corner Brook where, obeying the word of the politicians, we worked to the tune of "the hum on the Humber."