ASPECTS



The Newfoundland Historical Society Editors Terry Bishop-Stirling and Jeff Webb

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FOGO ISLAND CO-OPERATION: 1967

BY JAY MCGRATH

THE YEAR 1967 IS SYMBOLIC OF THE SOCIAL CHANGE, YOUTHFUL IDEALISM, AND ZEITGEIST OF THE ERA, BUT FOR MANY PEOPLE IT WAS ALSO A TIME OF CONTINUING ECONOMIC DEPRIVATION. A DECLINING INSHORE FISHERY MADE IT DIFFICULT FOR MANY RURAL NEWFOUNDLANDERS TO EARN A LIVING, WHILE A PATERNALISTIC PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT LEFT MANY CITIZENS FEELING POWERLESS. PREMIER JOSEPH R SMALLWOOD'S PHILOSOPHY OF "PROGRESS OR PERISH" INCLUDED UNSUCCESSFUL DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS, AND PROVOKED DISCONTENT. OVER 20,000 PEOPLE RESETTLED BETWEEN 1954 AND 1971 UNDER THE SMALLWOOD GOVERNMENT'S PROGRAM.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PADDY BARRY

espite facing adversity, the citizens of Fogo Island, are often held up as an example of cooperation as a tool for community rejuvenation. The Fogo Island Shipbuilders and Producer's Cooperative provided opportunities for families and communities to continue to live on the island.

The catalyst of MUN Extension

There were 10 communities with a total population of less than 6000 people scattered on the island when Fred Earle arrived–Joe Batt's Arm, Seldom, Little Seldom, Tilting, Shoal Bay, Fogo, Stag Harbour, Island Harbour, Deep Bay, and Barr'd Islands. Over 900 fishermen operated out of Fogo Island and Change Islands (three small islands west of Fogo Island). Seventy-five per cent of those who fished

were over the age of 39 and only five per cent of their 368 boats were more than 30 feet long. Cod, the primary species they harvested, was dried on the island or shipped out, while other species were dumped, as there was no facility to process them. To thrive, fishermen required bigger, more expensive, boats with modern equipment. But social and religious differences, and poor roads, made it difficult for communities to work together.

When Smallwood was sworn in as Premier his development strategy encouraged co-operatives. With government's assistance, the Newfoundland Co-operative Union formed in 1950 with the goal of promoting co-operatives. By 1964, 154 registered co-operatives existed in Newfoundland, and the provincial government hired Donald Snowden to

study on co-operatives in rural economies.³ Snowden had introduced co-operatives in the Canadian Arctic, and believed that earlier Newfoundland co-operatives suffered from a lack of experience and inadequate support. He suggested that co-operators could not rely on government to rescue them, and similarly, government must recognize that co-operatives must grow on their own merit. Snowden concluded that government should focus on regulatory functions and that Memorial University's Extension Services should act as a catalyst and coordinator of co-operatives through community development initiatives and local leadership training in Newfoundland.⁴ Later that year, the university hired Snowden as Director of Extension Services.

Memorial's Extension Services's primary goal was to foster economic and social improvement. It recruited fieldworkers who lived in rural communities and tasked them to empower local leaders who would start projects and identify problems.5 Fred Earle was one of these fieldworkers. Born on Change Islands in 1912, Earle worked for the family business as a bookkeeper and office boy at the age of 15 and spent over 20 years working on the island in various roles. 6 Based in Lewisporte, Earle started working with Extension in January 1964. As a fieldworker, he worked mostly in the background of community initiatives, and provided a link to the university and provincial government.7 Both were evident in his partnership with the Fogo Island Improvement Committee (FIIC), on which he sat as an ex-officio member.

The Fogo Island Improvement Committee focused its efforts on improving the welfare of the people and the fishery. It had representatives from every community on the island except Tilting.⁸ By 1966, the Committee had 34 members, all married men, with an average age of 40.⁹ The FIIC organized one of the first significant steps on the road to the co-operative in March of 1967 with a fisheries conference.

In November 1966, Earle and two members of the FIIC, Dan Roberts, a fishing merchant from Change Islands, and Don Best, a fisherman from Fogo, attended a fisheries conference in Corner Brook. Roberts and Best suggested to Earle that Arthur LeBlanc of United Maritime Fishermen (UMF) would be a suitable guest to meet with the FIIC. On December 9, the FIIC requested that Earle invite LeBlanc to a meeting in January. Earle suggested

that the meeting be expanded to a conference, with Leblanc, David Garland of the Co-operative Union, Snowden, and a representative from the Department of Fisheries. 10 By late February a date for the conference had been set-March 29 and 30.11 With a delegation of islanders and government officials attending, Earle realized the best strategy was for the FIIC to organize and develop the agenda. During the first week of March, Earle spent a lot of time working with the FIIC and advised them to be ready to present their problems at the conference. Earle believed that much of the success of the conference rested on whether Leblanc saw potential for a cooperative in Fogo Island. Earle advised the FIIC that the whole island had to be represented, and speak as an island, not as individual communities. 12 Earle stressed to Snowden that if 200 people gathered at the conference, nothing would be accomplished. 13 Earle realized the best strategy was to gather a smaller, more engaged group that could keep discussions focused on their challenges. He also thought that if an idea gained momentum at the conference, the news would quickly spread to the rest of the island. Earle worked closely with Roberts in the week leading up to the conference. He coached Roberts to have questions ready, insist on definitive answers, and prepare responses. Earle also advised Roberts that if fishermen expressed an interest in collaborating he should set up a committee immediately.14

Every hand went up

The fisheries conference took place at the Fogo Island Motel. The goal was to discuss problems faced by fishermen. The FIIC requested Extension be the official sponsor of the event. Forty-nine people registered to attend—nine from Fogo, seven from Joe Batt's Arm, four from Shoal Bay, three from each of Barr'd Islands, Seldom, and Change Islands, two from Deep Bay, Tilting, Stag Harbour, and Island Harbour, and one from Little Seldom. The other 11 people registered included Earle, Snowden, LeBlanc, and Eric Jones, the MHA for Fogo District.¹⁵

Snowden opened the conference, followed by remarks from Jones. ¹⁶ Jones summarized the problems facing the area, including the shortness of the season, the shortage of work on the island, the lack of organization in the fishery, and the high ratio of able-bodied welfare. He also said that government would not force people to



Wadham. Little Fogo Islands is an archipelago comprised of nearly one hundred tiny islands approximately five miles north of Fogo Island. It is a spiritual homeland for many Fogo Islanders.

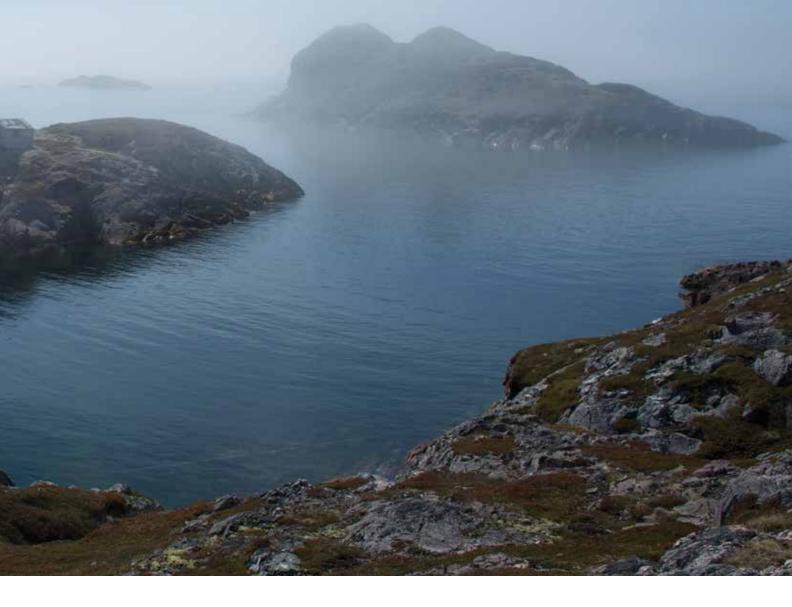
resettle, but pointed out that aid was available should people wish to move. Jones stated he did not see their situation as desperate and believed that the situation needed improved organization and facilities.¹⁷

The following day the meetings lasted more than 12 hours, with discussions on processing, fishery cull, and inspection. In Leblanc's address he explained that the UMF processed and marketed fish on behalf of its members and that he saw potential in Fogo Island to do the same. But he warned that fishermen who participated in a co-operative must take on considerable responsibility. A few days later, LeBlanc submitted a proposal to the provincial government to acquire facilities on the island. Dan Roberts also spoke to the delegation about organizing under the direction of the UMF. He felt the responsibility to negotiate with government and the UMF rested with the FIIC. Before moving in that direction, Roberts wanted to have the

full support of the delegation. Earle reported that every hand went up.¹⁹

The day after the conference ended, more than 30 additional fishermen showed up to participate in the discussion, thinking that the conference continued for a third day. Informal discussions continued and Earle noted most people used the term "we" and did not refer to themselves as Fogo or Tilting fishermen.²⁰ Notwithstanding the ambivalence the small group of attendees had about forming a co-operative, through discussion the idea gained momentum and spread throughout the island.

Despite the potential progress, the absence of influential government officials at the fisheries conference, government's inconsistent communication, and, ultimately, government's rejection of UMF's proposal, hampered relations between islanders and government. A month after the conference, the



government had not responded to UMF's request.²¹ Many on the island believed that government was not interested in helping them create a viable future. Some islanders believed the provincial government would rather people receive welfare than help them find work.²² On April 12, Smallwood reassured the FIIC of his determination to do anything possible to help fishermen on Fogo Island and claimed he would gladly support any plan to help them.²³ Less than a week later, Smallwood responded to a telegram from the FIIC stating that government would only act in the best interest of all.²⁴

Weeks passed, and by early May government had not responded to the UMF's proposal. Earle noted a tense environment, claiming that a recent meeting of the FIIC was poorly attended because many thought trouble would start. Earle admitted to Snowden, though, that they would have known before the first

week of May if UMF's proposal had been accepted.²⁵ A little over a week after Earle's correspondence with Snowden, UMF advised the government they no longer had interest in Fogo Island developments, as not enough time remained to get the required supplies to the island for the fishing season.²⁶

Individuals are not co-operatives

While the FIIC continued to await a response from government, the Yellow Fish Company announced it would be operating out of the Seldom plant. Earle referred to this lack of communication from government as a "sad situation" and stated that it was "unfair" to have people work towards a goal that the government knew it would not support. The FIIC requested that government officially announce its decision. Jones responded that the Yellow Fish Company would operate the plant, and added that



Smallwood had invited a delegation from Fogo Island to meet with him on May 23 to discuss their problems. Earle did not support this meeting, as the delegates would be tired from travelling and unable to properly discuss the issue.²⁷

At the meeting, Smallwood claimed he had rejected the UMF proposal on the grounds that the UMF was not a co-operative, and he had concerns with the request for a loan from government. Later, at a FIIC meeting, Dan Roberts commented that \$400,000 to help UMF would save the government money in the long run, as it would limit the cost of welfare on Fogo Island. He also claimed he heard a member of Smallwood's cabinet say that islanders would waste the money and go back to government for more.²⁸

Aiden Maloney, Minister of Fisheries, further explained government's concerns. The UMF wanted a loan to purchase fish during that season, and government felt there were better ways to spend public funds. He added that islanders needed to show greater commitment, not just enthusiasm, towards a co-operative. Mahoney felt that fishermen were "rugged individualists" and would not become co-operative overnight.²⁹ Maloney also claimed that fishermen should leave the research to the scientists, and decisions to government, adding that it would

be more feasible to ship fish and other species to nearby plants, rather than begin a new one on Fogo Island. He also explained that 30 million pounds of fish would need to be processed annually on Fogo Island to make investments sustainable. Research indicated that under current practices, only 20 million pounds could be produced during the season. If the fishermen could extend their fishing season, the request would be more feasible. A step in this direction would be the securing of larger boats, such as longliners.30 In order to obtain a longliner, money would either have to come from the fishermen's pockets or from loans. Some fishermen experienced difficulties borrowing from the Fisheries Loan Board. Roberts approached the Board for \$7000 to purchase a longliner and claimed the Board's representative laughed at him and asked why he did not just buy the boat. Roberts left the meeting and approached a bank who lent him the amount without a down payment.31

Later that summer, the FIIC presented Smallwood with ideas for development. The Committee felt that antiquated fishing methods and low productivity resulted from the lack of local organization and capital investment from fishermen, merchants and government. They recommended the existing fishing facilities be operated by one management

under co-operative principles. They also requested that the recommendations concerning the fisheries be implemented by the opening of the 1968 season.³² Smallwood acknowledged their plan in a letter on August 10. He assured the FIIC that since their meeting in May his officials had been preparing a development plan. Smallwood would give their proposals "sympathetic study" and told them to expect a prompt response from his colleagues.³³

Smallwood sent two cabinet ministers, Jones and John Crosbie,

then Minister of Municipal Affairs, to Fogo Island to discuss the situation. Crosbie recognized citizens wanted to help themselves, and that government should help them. He believed, however, the only way communities could be sustained on Fogo Island was through a solid economic base. Crosbie added that government would not force resettlement, as the program could not accommodate thousands of people at the same time and added that government had not decided what to do with Fogo Island.³⁴

With inconsistent communication coming from the provincial government, frustrations grew on Fogo Island, and the momentum towards a co-operative movement seemed likely to fade. However, discussions continued, as in late summer, with the fishing season winding down, the National Film Board (NFB), sent a film crew under the direction of Colin Low to Fogo Island. Their presence, and their work with Earle, reignited the community discussions.

The Fogo films

The Fogo Project of Extension and the NFB was founded on two beliefs—that film had a vital, yet underdeveloped, role to play in community development, and that they had an opportunity to explore and develop the use of film in community development work. The partners hoped to enhance communication and understanding between those affected by poverty and social change. The films attempted to provoke the latter by changing attitudes that hindered the development of citizens and inhibited meaningful participation in society.³⁵ The

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NFB's project helped empower Fogo Islanders to shape their own future and keep the discussion of a co-operative alive.³⁶

Colin Low chose Fogo Island for several reasons, one of which was the presence of Fred Earle. Without Earle's support and enthusiasm, Low's team could not come to Fogo Island and accomplish their objectives.³⁷ In an interview conducted in August 2010, Harvey Best, originally from Fogo Island and former Assistant Regional Director for Atlantic Provinces of the NFB and

Extension Services *Decks Awash* host, claimed Low and Earle worked so well together because neither was bothered if the other took the lead.³⁸

Earle's relationship with the people of Fogo Island, particularly the members of the FIIC, who appear in many of the films, aided in the level of comfort people had in speaking on camera. In one film, a citizen addresses Earle as 'Fred', while addressing the other interviewer as 'Sir'. ³⁹ Low's influence also shaped the discussion in front of the camera, even as he remained behind it. Low promised people would be able to view, discuss, and suggest edits to the films before anyone else saw them. ⁴⁰

From September 8 to November 17, the NFB shot 23 films, covering issues such as fishing practices, welfare, education, and co-operatives.41 The films highlight the mixed feelings on a co-operative and the belief that people required more education on the issue. One film featured a conversation about co-operatives between a merchant and a teacher. The merchant believed a co-operative had the potential to solve the issues, but fishermen would not collaborate. The teacher responded that a lack of education held back the cooperative, as co-operatives are built on trust and grew a social conscience from grass roots.⁴² Another film highlighted the need for communities to solve existing differences. Earle asks men from Shoal Bay if fishermen should co-operate. The men argued that a processing plant in a suitable bay was needed. While Shoal Bay would be a good choice for the plant, other fishermen would want it in their bay, so the plant had to be looked at as one for the entire island. The fishermen



Early morning at a stage in Tilting, Fogo Island

agreed that to succeed a continued, united lobbying effort to government was required.⁴³

Fred Earle also spoke on camera with Brian Earle, the remaining merchant on the island. They discussed that in the preceding two weeks six boat loads of fish had left the island to be processed elsewhere. Brian Earle referenced a report by the Department of Fisheries that specified how much fish had to be landed to make a plant economical. The catch from the previous year suggested that Fogo Island could meet those numbers, but all fishermen would have to sell to the same buyer. The conversation turned to government and the welfare system. Brian Earle believed the community was demoralized when the government turned down a loan for a fisherman, while providing his neighbour with welfare.⁴⁴

Fred Earle believed that once the films were screened a sense of solidarity formed. People started referring to problems and solutions in terms of the whole island, not individual communities. ⁴⁵ Screenings began on November 22 and went through to January 29. Over 4200 people attended. Viewers at the screenings could discuss the issues and provide input as to what should be cut or expanded in the final version. Despite limited dialogue during the screenings, a consensus appeared over such topics as the inherent value of life on the island and the inconsistent communication from government. As well, the NFB crew and Earle found themselves staying after the screenings to discuss the films with groups of people. A lot of discussion

occurred outside of the screenings as well. The doctor, school principal, and store keepers informed the NFB's crew of discussions about the films in the streets and in homes around the island. The screenings also served as a tool for Earle and the FIIC to promote the co-operative meeting on December 7.46 Overall, the film project exposed disagreements between the citizens. However, through mediated discussions at the screenings and a continuation of discussions in homes around the island, issues were addressed, and the idea of collaboration gained momentum.

One five dollar share, one vote

That momentum culminated on December 7, 1967. At the meeting the motion to form the Fogo Island Shipbuilders and Producers' Co-operative received unanimous support. One hundred and twenty five fishermen joined the co-operative.47 They adopted a constitution that outlined the key objectives and principles. Those included the promotion of economic interests of members by using common funds. They also included efforts to procure, process, and market their goods and construct and repair fishing vessels. Any resident of Fogo Island or Change Islands could become a member by subscribing to at least one share costing five dollars. Each member had one vote. The constitution also stipulated that no less than five per cent of surplus had to be set aside to a general reserve to secure financial stability. Three of the four members of the first executive of the Co-operative included FIIC members.⁴⁸



After securing a loan from the bank, along with financial assistance from the provincial and federal governments, plans for a shipyard began. Despite the disagreements with Smallwood, the government provided a \$75,000 loan which collected no interest, and repayment was not expected as long as boat building operations required working capital funds.⁴⁹ By November 1968 four longliners had been built.50 In the Annual Report in 1970, the Co-operative reported the purchasing, processing, and shipping of approximately 8 million pounds of codfish. The report also highlighted that membership had reached 758.51 The Co-operative would eventually alter its name to the Fogo Island Co-operative Society Limited and its mandate shifted primarily to processing. The Society still operates three seafood processing plants on the island.52

Harvey Best summarized the situation on Fogo Island in 1967 by saying that resettlement was at its height, the fishery was in bad shape, and people were leaving the island. ⁵³ The Smallwood government presented the choice of developing or resettling. Fogo Islanders, despite their differences, the troubled fishing industry, and an unstable relationship with the provincial government, chose development through collaboration.

The road to the Co-operative contained many challenges. It included years of meetings, research, education, a fisheries conference, and a partnership with the National Film Board. The work of the Improvement Committee, including ex-officio member

and Extension fieldworker Fred Earle, led the way in overcoming these challenges. The people of Fogo Island were amongst the first to resist and challenge the Smallwood government. Their resiliency foreshadowed the events to come, as in 1971, the Smallwood government tasted defeat at the hands of an educated, informed people who demanded change.

The inter-relationship of people is the essential fiber of a co-operative movement. These relationships cannot be designed by outsiders; they must grow from internal participants and allies, nurtured through commitment, solidarity, and openness to discuss differences. MUN Extension, Fred Earle, and the NFB, all helped the FIIC to act as a community voice within the dynamic, complex system of relationships on Fogo Island. Capable of availing of organizational resources and human and social capital to engage in higher levels of commitment, the Committee created a long-lasting co-operative movement.

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