

Labrador Fishery for “Culture Days” 2010

The salt-cod fishery was at one time essential to Newfoundland and Labrador’s economy. The *Labrador Fishery* began to become prominent in the 1820s, when increasing numbers of fishers started migrating to Labrador to fish each summer. Those who travelled to Labrador had to spend weeks or even months away from home. As a result, some fishers brought their families with them; this was both for company and to help cure the catch.

Stationers and Floaters

The Labrador fishery consisted of two groups of workers: *stationers* and *floaters*. Islanders who set up living quarters on the shore of Labrador and fished each day in small boats were known as *stationers*, while *floaters* lived on board their vessels and sailed up and down the Labrador coast, often travelling further north than *stationers*. *Floaters* packed their fish in salt and brought it back to Newfoundland at the end of each season to be dried there, while *stationers* salted and cured their fish on shore shortly after catching it. Both methods had their drawbacks. Labrador’s damp weather often resulted in a poorer cure, while *floaters* risked damaging their catch during the long voyage home.

Sharemen

Fishers going to Labrador could work as *sharemen* who shared profits from the fishing venture. In a floater enterprise, *sharemen* prepared the vessels and gear for the Labrador fishery, starting in early May. When the fishery ended, usually in October each year, the catch from the voyage was shared. Half the catch went to the vessel owner to pay for expenses; the other half was equally distributed among the sharemen. However, amounts owed for personal supplies such as tobacco and clothing were deducted first. The cooks were paid about \$25 for the season.

Women in the Labrador Fishery

Women were essential to the work of making salt-fish. Although women certainly cut throats, headed, split, and salted fish, they were most obviously involved in the washing and drying of fish. It seemed as fish moved further away from the water (the domain of men) and onto the land, women became more and more central to the processing.

Salt Cod Fishery in Bay Roberts

The firm of C. & A. Dawe of Bay Roberts was formed in about 1877 by Captain Charles Dawe (1845-1908) and his brother, Azariah Dawe. It was a typical outport fish merchant operation: goods exchanged with fishers in exchange for their produce, which was then shipped to and sold in foreign markets. C. & A. Dawe registered 37 vessels between 1873 and 1907. This firm, under Captain A. Dawe, became an important fishery supply firm, exporting 300,000 quintals [1 quintal = 100 kilograms] of fish, building an average of two vessels a year. [They had their own “alphabet fleet”. They did not reach “Z” with names, but they got as far as “Q.”] Until the 1930s, the fishery was the prime source of wealth in Bay Roberts.

In addition to the local fishery, there was the Labrador fishery, which involved the sending of as many as sixty to seventy ships to the Labrador coast each summer.

Bay Roberts was in 1965 the largest salt-fish producing centre in Newfoundland with two large fish plants on Water Street (across the street from where the [Bay Roberts Volunteer Fire Station](#) is located today.) Bay Roberts Fisheries at that time was handling approximately 60,000 quintals of salt-fish a year for export to European, Brazilian and Caribbean markets.

The Role of the SS Kyle

In 1926, the [SS Kyle](#) became a vital part of life for the Labrador. The vessel provided Labrador with its first regularly scheduled ferry service. For years, the [S.S. Kyle](#) ferried fishers back and forth between Bay Roberts and other towns in Conception Bay North and the Labrador coast during the spring and summer months. Often the [SS Kyle](#) was the only link between Labrador and the outside world, providing both stationers and permanent residents of Labrador with supplies, transportation, mail service and medical care.

Merchants, Fishers, & the Truck System

Newfoundland and Labrador's outport economy depended not on cash, but on merchant credit for much of the nineteenth century. The [Truck System](#) was a type of barter based on an honour system.

- In the winter and spring, the merchant gave fishers the goods they needed, including food supplies such as flour, molasses and tea; building materials such as nails; and clothes, food, fishing gear, and other supplies they would need to go to the Labrador. The merchants did not say what the price was, but kept a list of what the fishers had been given.
- In the fall, fishers brought their annual harvest of salt cod back to the same merchant.
- The merchant calculated what the catch was worth based on the prices merchants would get for fish in international markets. Then, the merchant calculated the value of the goods that had been given to the fisher in the spring; and deducted value of the goods from the amount paid for the fish. The merchant had total control over the value of the catch and the price that was charged for the items purchased.
- The system maximized the opportunity for merchants to profit from the fish trade, but left the fishers with the prospect of simply breaking even or falling into deeper debt each season.
- The 'truck' or 'credit' system, a cashless exchange, had advantages and drawbacks for all parties involved. Merchant credit helped fishers withstand poor fishing seasons and provided them with goods they could not produce locally, such as molasses, tea, and nails. However, many fishers could not catch enough cod to pay off their credit and sometimes fell into deeper debt each year. Some merchants also exploited fishers by charging too much for goods and paying too little for fish. The merchants, meanwhile, had a guaranteed clientele through the truck system, but had to absorb any losses when the cod fishery failed or when fishers failed to pay debts.