



Heritage NL

***Revitalizing Barking in
Southern Labrador:***
**The Labrador Artisans
Co-operative**

Living Heritage Economy

CASE STUDY 005 • HERITAGE NL • JULY 2020

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Revitalizing Barking in Southern Labrador: The Labrador Artisans Co-operative



The Labrador Artisans Co-operative may be new, but the skills they employ have old roots. One of these is the tradition of barking. Barking has long roots in both Indigenous and settler traditions, and was used to colour and preserve textiles and animal hides. The Co-op is all about finding new opportunities to celebrate centuries-old Labrador traditions. By combining the strengths of their members, they have developed a line of products which showcase the Labrador tradition of barking using innovative materials and techniques.

Based in Southern Labrador, the group officially incorporated at the end of 2019, but they have been developing their brand and their products for several years. The idea for the co-operative grew out of investigations into Labrador traditions that were at risk of disappearing that were done as part of the Craft Labrador project with the Craft Council of Newfoundland and Labrador.

We did a study around 2013 or 2014 to see what was needed in the craft sector in Labrador and there was a lot of information about traditional skills that were dying out that people were really

concerned to learn. For example, how to make duffle products and how to do embroidery on duffle because it had died out in a lot of areas.
- Cindy Colosimo Robbins

From their craft studies, the group developed ideas for site specific crafts that told the story of the historic sites in Labrador. They realised that only some of these ideas were being made by craft producers in the area. Some of the skills and traditions at risk were ones that were better handled by a group, rather than individuals.

Cindy Gibbons, who was the site supervisor at Red Bay said, "You know, we need a group. Some of these ideas we've come up with, we aren't going to get an individual to take that on. We need a group to take on some of these things." We started working on a craft co-op. The idea of having a craft co-op in the area had come up a few years earlier when we did the craft study. It was recognized all along that there were some things that an individual couldn't do. The cost was high maybe, or it was difficult getting the raw materials in, or an individual would be hesitant to take on the whole business aspect of making and selling. So, we thought if we had a co-operative group we could try taking on some of these ideas. - Cindy Colosimo Robbins

As the co-operative developed, the decision was made to focus on skills which told the story of Labrador and which were used in the local area. They worked on incorporating these skills into making products which spoke to the history of the area with a special focus on the historic sites in Southern Labrador.

We also wanted to learn about natural dyes because we knew that barking was a traditional dye in the local area. We knew a little bit about that because we'd also been involved in an oral history project and craft history projects and we wanted to use barking and we also wanted to dye with Labrador tea. Visitors are really interested in Labrador tea. - Cindy Colosimo Robbins



BARKING in Labrador

What is barking? It is a process of immersing textiles in a solution made from steeping tree bark in water to colour and preserve fabric and other materials. It can be done with many different types of bark. Once common throughout the province, it has become less well known as pre-treated fishing gear became readily available.

As we went along, we discovered that barking was a story that the visitors are really interested in and it's got a strong tie to the local women, because they, and fishermen, would use the barking technique to dye their nets and the women would use it to dye cossacks. Cossacks would be made out of cotton duck which is white which is great camouflage in the winter but in the fall you want a darker colour and they barked the cossacks. The local ladies also tell us they would bark them because it would hide the dirt as the cossack got older and got a bit grubby and the dirt wasn't coming out. If you barked it, it looked like new again! They also used barking to tan seal skins for skin boots. So this was a technique that was being used in the local area. - Cindy Colosimo Robbins

The Labrador Artisans Co-operative is revitalizing the tradition of barking and using natural dyes by incorporating these old techniques into their contemporary products. Their goal was to develop a product line that used bark dyeing and block printing that they could recreate in multiples to sell wholesale and on consignment at the historic sites and craft fairs throughout Labrador.

We wanted to design products that we could make multiples of and that we could sell wholesale and on consignment as well as face-to-face in craft fairs. We wanted to tell Labrador stories. We picked some specific icons for specific historic sites but we also picked general Labrador icons. - Cindy Colosimo Robbins

Their product line includes scarves, placemats, aprons, and tote bags, but they are constantly experimenting with new items. One item they have experimented with is the traditional Labrador cossack, a loose fitting pullover jacket with a hood.

Karen (Pye), our fashion designer, made a traditional Labrador cossack and instead of bark dyeing it and immersing it in dye, she dip-dyed that as well so that the bottom of the cossack was brown and the colour kind of faded as it went up and the sleeves as well. And then she immersed the fabric for the hood and the patch pocket in bark so they were solid brown. And she used a sprinkle dyed muslin for the lining of the hood and the lining of the cuffs. She was using traditional materials, traditional

EAST meets WEST

We did some testing where we're using a Japanese dyeing technique. It's like fancy, high-end tie-dyeing and it's called shibori. It's either sewn and dyed or folded and dyed. We experimented a bit with the folding and dyeing technique with barking and cotton duck. It's a little tricky to get exactly what we want, but we can get some patterns then with the bark dyed fabric by using shibori techniques. We're experimenting with a new pattern for a smaller cross-body bag that will use that shibori dyeing. - Cindy Colosimo Robbins



pattern, but a creative dye technique to make a more interesting, fashionable garment. And that led us to start bark dyeing our aprons as well.
- Cindy Colosimo Robbins

They have also been experimenting with Labrador tea, a flowering plant local to the area that is promoted at sites like the Point Amour lighthouse. Labrador Tea is edible, and its leaves can be made into a tea, but they can also be turned into a natural dye. The co-operative combines Labrador tea with barking to change the colour from yellow to green.

With the bark dyeing we're able to start with the brown bark but change it and you can get a green or you can get a grey. I think with our green we were doing bark then Labrador Tea then a mineral bath. It was a little complicated. And we never know, because we're kind of new at the dyeing, sometimes it comes out a little different, a little darker, a little lighter. We're kind of getting familiar with it.
- Cindy Colosimo Robbins

The co-operative wants to create experiences for visitors that allow them to get up close with the bark pot. Seeing what is involved in the barking

process helps visitors understand how the products are connected to Labrador traditions.

I'd like to do some demonstrations for visitors where we can demonstrate how barking is done. There are a few places where we might be able to do that. We'd have to have our bark pot set up well in advance and it'd be like a cooking show where you have this pot just getting started, this pot we've got on the go, and this pot are things that are finished and ready to come out. - Cindy Colosimo Robbins

The Labrador Artisans Co-operative is staying true to their roots, telling the story of Labrador while getting creative with traditional techniques.

By doing these workshops where we experiment with traditional techniques and traditional materials but look at ways to make new products that are maybe more appealing to contemporary buyers, once you do that process you see opportunities everywhere. We're constantly looking for ideas for things that we can do with barking or different ways we can make the fabric look interesting.
- Cindy Colosimo Robbins

How to find the
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Prepared by Katie Crane and Dale Gilbert Jarvis of Heritage NL, as part of a series of case studies examining the links between living heritage, traditionality, entrepreneurship, and community economic development in Newfoundland and Labrador.

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Living Heritage Economy Case Study 005. All photos courtesy of the Labrador Artisans Co-operative except where noted.