

Heritage Update



Heritage NL

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What the Past Has to Tell Us About a Sustainable Future

By Jerry Dick

Often when we think about sustainability we focus on the role of science and technological innovation in supporting a sustainable environment. But the past can also inform how we can create a more sustainable world going into the future.

That was the subject of a Canadian Wildlife Federation webinar that Jerry Dick and Dale Jarvis recently presented to a group of 14 to 20 year-olds across Canada. The session focused, in particular, on how traditional knowledge and skills -- derived from working in a local environment with the materials at hand -- can support not only a sustainable environment but a sustainable economy and culture as well.

In Newfoundland and Labrador, traditional building knowledge, passed down from generation to generation and based on observation and trial and error, allowed people to construct buildings from local materials (mostly wood) that could withstand our challenging climatic conditions. Knowledge of the right wood for the right application along with an understanding of appropriate architectural detailing to shed water using a sustainable local building material, meant that there was a built-in sustainability. As one retired carpenter stated, "it only makes sense that the wood that grew in our



Restoration woodworker Walter Furlan

environment would be appropriate to construct buildings that would perform in that environment."

Today many of our building materials are synthetic, made from petroleum-based resources, and are non-recyclable. And a significant portion of these are imported from outside of our province which contributes to green-house gas emissions to transport them.

Just as we talk about the need to recycle all of our wastes to preserve our environment, so too we should be recycling our existing building stock whether it has particular heritage value or not. An existing building has a lot of “embodied energy” locked inside it, that is, all of the energy and greenhouse gases expended to create that building. When we tear it down and replace it, we lose all of the embodied energy and expend more greenhouse gases to build a new structure, not to mention that a lot of building waste goes to landfill. Preserving our older buildings is simply the “green” thing to do.

In addition to their homes, the Indigenous peoples and European settlers, relied on local materials and traditional skills to make much of what they needed. And what people used was often recycled. New buildings were often constructed out of wood salvaged from an old building that had outlived its usefulness.

Beautiful and functional hooked mats and quilts were made from scraps of old clothing. Not only was all of this environmentally sustainable but it contributed to a unique culture and identity.

As we seek to create sustainable local economies, particularly in rural parts of the province, we can often find inspiration in this traditional knowledge, sometimes giving it a modern twist.

A great example of this are the hundreds of craft producers across Newfoundland and Labrador. Traditional trades such as blacksmithing are seeing a revival. And more people are growing their own food and even storing it in existing or newly-built root cellars. Good for the environment! Good for the economy! All while supporting a unique culture!

History of the Burgess Family of Whiteway, Trinity Bay

By Maryssa Barras with files from the Burgess Family

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Originally hailing from Carbonear, the first permanent settlers of Whiteway (formerly Witless Bay, Trinity Bay) were Charles Burgess, his three children Caroline, Henry Charles, and Henrietta, and his second wife Sarah Butt. Arriving in 1862 as a sailmaker, Charles and his new wife Sarah built a typical Newfoundland outpost life in Whiteway, welcoming their daughter, Ellen Burgess, in 1864 as the first resident born in the town.

Whiteway remained a very small town for the next few decades, listed as only having a population of 31 settlers by 1873 - with at least 8 of these residents being Burgesses at the time.

Sometime in 1872 Thomas Pippy moved his family to Whiteway, where he operated a dockyard building ships for fishermen in Trinity Bay until 1894. The Pippy and Burgess families at this point had a close relationship, with the first ship built a Pippy's dockyard being named 'Caroline' - after Charles Burgess's eldest daughter.



Henry and Naomi Burgess, with Phoebe Jerrett

Charles's eldest son, Henry, eventually married Thomas Pippy's daughter Naomi. Henry Charles was granted ownership of the Burgess Registered Heritage Property through a Victoria Land Grant on November 11th, 1891, where he lived with his wife Naomi. While Henry was the first legal owner of this property though it is unclear if he and Naomi were the first occupants of the property given that Burgesses had been living in the area for 30 years at that time.

According to family records the land was registered at this time in order to avoid losing their property claim to the Drovers, who were building a sawmill nearby, as well as to formally draw out the family's land before it was subdivided to make room for Henrietta Burgess and her new husband.

The earlier Burgess generations were not literate, and so left very few records behind for us today. Henry and Naomi's children were, however, able to get educations and became important local figures because of it. For example, their eldest son, Richard Burgess (1877-1946), was a church layman, served on Whiteway's Methodist education board for many years and was a notable member of the Orange Order, and their younger son Henry served on the road outport board in the 1910s and 20s.

By the 1900s the Burgesses had established themselves as skilled in a number of trades, exemplified by the diversity of buildings they operated. The Burgesses were sailmakers, fishers, coopers, and small scale farmers - maintaining gardens around the property to sustain themselves with. In the early 20th century as well the Burgess's expanded into the lumbering business, building a sawmill and working through the winters hauling and processing wood used by people across Trinity Bay in boat and house building.

Notably, the Burgess women were active participants in the family's labour force, and even practiced some trades of their own. Naomi (b.Pippy, 1849/50?-1921) was a well-known midwife in Whiteway despite having lost an arm to amputation as a child. Jane Mave Burgess (b.Butt, 1878-1969) was also a staple figure in the Whiteway Labrador fishery throughout the 1890s. In Labrador she would cook for the fishermen, and clean and break the heads off of codfish. According to family oral history, one day in the 1950s when Jane was in her 70s she went out to help some young boys who were having trouble cleaning fish by the flake, and shocked them with how quick and efficient she was at it.

Jane Mave and her husband, Richard, inherited the Burgess Property following the death of Richard's father Henry Charles in 1915, and soon became community staples. Chris Sooley of Heart's Delight drove the Harnum's Grocery Bus with his son Howard on Saturdays through Whiteway. Howard has shared that he specifically recalls parking in

Burgess Lane every week so that Jane Burgess, dressed in black with a white apron, could come aboard to pick vegetables to buy for her family's Sunday Dinners. Ruth Jarret (b.Burgess) would also frequently visit her brother Richard and his family from out of town. Their granddaughter, Lois Hicks, recalls frequent trips visiting Whiteway in her father's 1929 Chevrolet as well, and taking trips by horse and sleigh around Christmas as a treat.

Richard Burgess died after battling stomach cancer in 1946. His granddaughter, Claire, recalled going up to the bedroom with her mother before he died, where he would lie in the bed drinking tea by holding the tea pot with both his hands. Richard's funeral was very well attended, as illustrated by photographs of an exceptionally large procession through the town. The size of his funeral reflected his significance to his community throughout his life, as an active and important figurehead in Whiteway.

Jane Burgess continued to live on the Burgess property in Whiteway until her death in 1969, although Richard's will left the house to his sons William and Henry Charles. The remainder of the property was divided between their three sons Jesse, William, and Henry Charles Burgess. After 1969 William Burgess occupied the home seasonally for nine months of the year until he sold his share to his brother Henry Charles around 1990. After Henry Charles passed away in 1995, the house passed to his spouse Margaret, who then willed the house, stable, cellar, and sawmill to Bob Burgess in 2008.

Craft at Risk: Threats to Traditional Skills in Newfoundland and Labrador

By Dale Gilbert Jarvis

Heritage NL's Craft at Risk project is working to identify those crafts which are most at risk of disappearing and to assess the current viability of

those traditional skills. For the purposes of this research, we are using the definition developed by the UK-based Heritage Crafts Association, which defines a heritage craft as "a practice which employs manual dexterity and skill and an understanding of traditional materials, design and techniques, and which has been practised for two or more successive generations."

Preliminary results have been collected and are already providing useful information about specific skills at risk, but also about the major threats that traditional craft skills are currently facing. For example, craft producers and makers have noted that a lack of networks between craftspeople results in less information about potential crafts and skills-building opportunities. Also, little documentation of crafts is occurring in the province. More documentation of crafts, craft skills, and traditions will allow for better understanding of the learning process, and will assist with safeguarding measures.

Below are some of the key threats to traditional crafts and skills, identified by participants in our craft at risk survey. Each is accompanied by a quote from a survey respondent, addressing issues specific to their area of specialization. While this may paint a bleak picture, it is important information for us to gather in order to better understand the needs of the community.



Dry Stone Wall, English Harbour, 2013

Training for Practitioners

The general lack of training opportunities, both formal and informal, is common. Training is not offered enough to interested practitioners. There is interest around traditional crafts, but difficulty in accessing the knowledge as well as issues in recruiting practitioners to teach the crafts.

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Access to Materials

Materials needed to produce specialized crafts are becoming limited. Some materials and tools are too costly to obtain, while some supplies are just too rare and difficult to find. Particular issues include the rising cost of materials for smaller businesses that can result in their inability to buy in bulk, a shortage of raw materials, and a shortage in tools and equipment. Some crafts rely on very specific materials and tools, and the lack of supply may affect the future of these crafts.

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Marketing

Poor marketing, or lack of marketing skills and experience, can result in not connecting to potential customers. Getting information out about traditional crafts to the public may raise further interest, and potential training sessions for makers could aid in craft marketing efforts overall.

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Bark Tanned Canvas Cossack, photo by Cindy Colosimo Robbins, 2020

Public Education

There is a lack of awareness by the general public of the differences between a hand-made object and mass-manufactured. Also, a lack of awareness by potential customers of the difference between high quality and poor quality craft products.

Often, there is a lack of traditional crafts being demonstrated. Some craft trades are also not even being recognized, and certain practices are not being considered as fine arts in their own right.

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Costs/Taxation

The rising cost of raw and allied materials needed has affected craft production. Practitioners are unable to make a livelihood from their craft due to the production costs.

