

Three Southern Shore Maids



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Introduction

In 1994, while studying folklore at Memorial University, I wrote a paper about women from the Southern Shore who had gone to St. John's "in service" as young women. The topic was inspired by a photograph in a family photo album - a picture of two smiling young women, one holding a broom (fig. 1). My Nanny Rossiter was one of the women. The picture showed a strong, robust woman, not at all the tiny woman that Nanny became in her later years. When I showed her the picture she replied, "Oh that's me on Nunnery Hill when I worked for the Vaughan's."

In the lead-up to Heritage NL's Provincial Historic Commemorations Program recognition of "Outport Girls and Women in Domestic Service" as Exceptional People from the Past, I revisited the paper I wrote. Some excerpts are below.

Southern Shore Maids

It was common for young women from the Southern Shore to go to work as live-in maids in St. John's - and even as far afield as the United States and Canada. Some also worked for families in communities along the Southern Shore. Going into service afforded them a degree of financial and social independence. At the time it was one of the few employment opportunities available for young, unmarried women.

I interviewed three women from the Southern Shore - Margaret Power Sullivan from Calvert, my grandmother Monica Rice Rossiter and my great aunt Rita Rossiter, both from Cape Broyle. Mrs. Sullivan was born February 2, 1910 in Calvert,

then called Capelin Bay. She moved to St. John's when she was 16 years old and worked there for sixteen years until she married and moved back to Calvert. She passed away on June 5, 1998, aged 88 (fig. 2). My grandmother, known as Mrs. Mon, was born July 22, 1913 in Cape Broyle. She went to St. John's when she was 18 years old and



Fig 1. Unknown maid and Monica Rice Rossiter, St. John's, circa 1930s.
Source: Rossiter family.



Fig 2. Mrs. Maggie Sullivan, Calvert, circa 1980s.
Source: Sullivan family.

stayed there for three years. She then worked as a maid in Cape Broyle for a few years before she was married. She passed away on March 16, 2004, aged 90 (fig. 3). My great aunt Margaret Rossiter, Rita (pronounced Reta) to those who knew her, was born November 6, 1915. She lived in Cape Broyle until she was in her late twenties, when she moved to St. John's to go into service. She stayed in St. John's for the rest of her life. She passed away on February 20, 2017, aged 101 (fig. 4).

Leaving Home

For generations, young women from the Southern Shore of the Avalon Peninsula went to work as maids in St. John's. They weren't forced to go by demanding parents or family financial circumstances. They went because they couldn't always find employment in their home communities. As my grandmother told me, "[I] had to go somewhere, couldn't stay home. There

was nothing to do home." Most were teenagers when they went into service and some had never been to St. John's before. The women I interviewed obtained work through friendship and kinship connections, and sometimes purely by chance. My grandmother was offered a job through a man who lived in the neighboring community of Brigus South. One of his relatives in St. John's needed a maid. Mrs. Sullivan secured a position purely by luck. A woman was staying at a boarding house in Calvert and asked her if she would like to come to St. John's to work as a maid. A friend of Aunt Rita's knew a family in St. John's who needed a maid and she arranged for Rita to be hired.



Fig 3. Matt and Mon Rossiter, 60th Anniversary, 1997.

Source: Rossiter family.

The Life of a Maid

The duties assigned to a maid depended on the circumstances of the home. A maid-of-all-service would be responsible for collecting coal in the morning to fire up stoves and fireplaces. They



Fig 4. Rita Rossiter with her nieces and nephews on her 100th birthday, 2015.
Source: Rossiter family.

would bake and prepare meals and tidy up after them. They would empty chamber pots. They would heat water for hand-washing laundry, hang it out to dry, and fold and iron it. They made beds, swept floors, and dusted. They ran errands for the ladies of the house. They looked after any children in the house. More well-to-do households would have several servants who took on only some of these tasks. The majority worked long hours, with some free time in the evenings and one day off a week (fig. 5).

Depending on the financial circumstances of the employer, maids were paid varying wages – although room and board were always considered part of the wage. My grandmother worked for a middle class couple who lived in the Gower Street area and had one young child. She described her duties as "doing housework, looking after the child that was there." She lived in the house with her employers and received a wage of seven dollars a month.

Mrs. Sullivan had similar duties in most of the homes she worked in. She first worked for a family on Gower Street. She recalled that "they had a lovely home, three storey house, and a basement kitchen, which I spent the most of my time in." She received twelve dollars a month when she began working in St. John's. For eleven years she took care of children. Her last job in St. John's was housekeeper at the presbytery in Corpus Christi Parish on Waterford Bridge Road. Here she was manager of the household and was afforded much liberty to plan her own time.

When Rita first began working in town she was hired by a couple to look after their house and provide personal care for the wife, who had been released from hospital following an injury. She went on to work longer stints in two other households, for a total of about twenty-five years. Her employers were business owners - including the O'Dea family who owned Newfoundland Brewery Limited - and would have been considered upper class at the time.



Fig 5. Advertisements for maids.
Source: Evening Telegram, January 17, 1930.

Leisure Time in St. John's

Because so many girls from the Southern Shore worked in St. John's they often gathered together during their free time. My grandmother recounted basket parties that she and her friends took part in. She recalled that "we'd all pack a basket and go into Fourth Pond, in there around Petty Harbour, and have our supper there. We'd all go in in a big truck...And we'd all boil up in there. We used to make the fire in between rocks, put down boughs between rocks that way." She also recalled that they "used to go into a place on Topsail Road, go into Mr. Peter Murphy's...That's

where we used to go when we got off...A scattered time down to Bowring Park...We used to go to dances in Kilbride Club" (fig. 6).

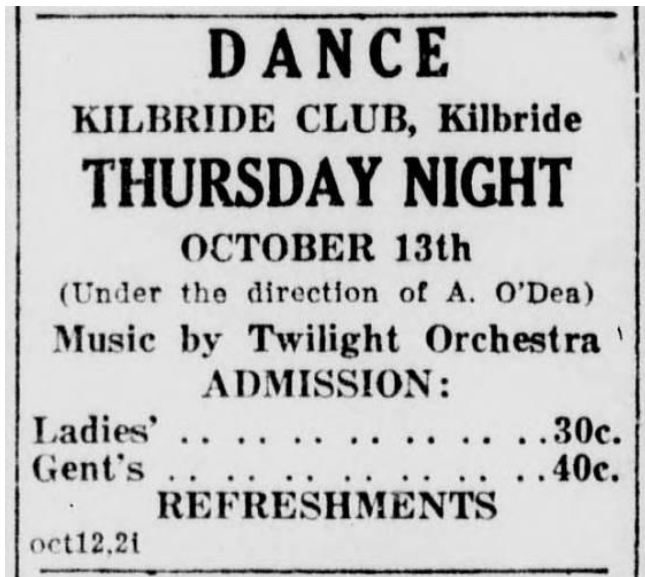


Fig 6. Advertisement for the Kilbride Club.
Source: *Evening Telegram*, October 12, 1932.

Mrs. Sullivan had similar experiences with her friends from the Southern Shore: "We used to go to a movie, up on Water Street. More Saturday nights that's where they'd be, down on Water Street walking around. And they used to look forward to it because you could meet everyone down there, have a bit of fun" (fig. 7).



Fig 7. Water Street looking west, circa mid 1900s.
Source: *MUN Digital Archives*.

Rita particularly enjoyed her free time. She had met many people in St. John's over the years she

lived in town and was also very close with the people she worked for, spending much of her free time with them. She went to parks on Sundays, to dances hosted by the American military, and to the Regatta in August (fig. 8).



Fig 8. Dance at the Red Cliff NCO Club, 1953.
Source: *c-and-e-museum.org*.

Connections to Home

My grandmother and Mrs. Sullivan were not permitted to go home very often when they worked as maids. They were given two weeks for summer vacation and did not get to go home any other time of the year. They had occasional visitors from home though. My grandmother's father would occasionally come to St. John's in a taxi owned by a man in Cape Broyle. When he visited Nanny often gave him some of the money she had earned to buy something for himself.

Mrs. Sullivan also recalled visits from home: "My father used to come out often, you know. And I used to see my brother Mark. At that time he used to work on the telephone poles and he'd always drop in, you know...We used to have dances in Kilbride Hall, if there was a dance [my boyfriend would] come out."

Rita had more opportunities to visit home. She was allowed weekends off as well as two weeks in the summer. Perhaps this greater degree of freedom was permitted due to the time and circumstances in which Rita worked. As modern conveniences were introduced, maids were no longer required to work constantly in the house

and had acquired a different role. Rita became more of a housekeeper than a maid (fig. 9).



Fig 9. Rita Rossiter, possibly in St. John's, circa 1960s.

Source: Rossiter family.

City Life and Outport Life

For young women from small outports, St. John's was another world. My grandmother wasn't particularly impressed with St. John's. She felt that "it was dangerous to go out afraid you'd be killed in the nighttime." This feeling was probably reinforced by the fact that one of her friends was attacked one night as she was returning to the home of her employer. Nanny told me: "I stayed until they laid me off you know. When the child got hardy they wanted no maid then. So they paid me off."

Mrs. Maggie Sullivan stayed in St. John's for sixteen years, compared to Nanny's three. She did not come back to Calvert immediately because she said "there was nothing to come back to...There was no place that you were going to get

work." She returned to Calvert when she was married (fig. 10).

Rita made St. John's her home. She only visited Cape Broyle occasionally for holidays. Rita did not marry and stayed in service her entire working life. She lived with her employers until she retired, at which time she went to live with the woman she had come to town to help so many years before.



Fig 10. John and Maggie Sullivan, 25th Anniversary, circa late 1960s.

Source: Sullivan family.

References

Rossiter, Monica. Oral History Interview with Andrea O'Brien. 1994.

Rossiter, Rita. Oral History Interview with Andrea O'Brien. 1994.

Sullivan, Margaret. Oral History Interview with Andrea O'Brien. 1994.

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