

# WORK THROUGH TIME

*Cape Breton Stories of Land & Sea*



## Industry North

Community Learning Association North of Smokey

*The various areas north of Smokey Mountain include Ingonish, Green Cove, Neil's Harbour/New Haven, White Point, Smelt Brook, South Harbour, Cape North, Aspy Bay, Sugar Loaf, Bay Road Valley, Bay St. Lawrence, St. Margaret's Village, Black Point, Meat Cove and St. Paul Island. This story of Industry North offers a snapshot of swordfishing, forestry and mining, once thriving industries in these remote communities in northern Cape Breton.*

**Swordfishing** was carried out in the communities North of Smokey from the 1930s to the 1980s. Swordfish were so plentiful that boats used to come from Yarmouth and as far as the United States to fish. The season would start in late July and would run until late September, sometimes October.

Swordfishing was one of the largest industries North of Smokey in the 1930s and 1940s because it was a lucrative way for fishermen to make money at that time of the year and people would make more money at that than they would lobster fishing. According to Leonard Jackson, "Everyone that had a boat swordfished back then." Leonard's relatives went out twelve miles, fished for three days, got nine fish and sold them at 43 cents per pound.

With the head and tail cut off, a North Atlantic swordfish can average six feet long. The head is about one and a half feet, and the sword approximately four feet, making most fish eleven and a half feet long. An average fish weighs close to three hundred pounds dressed.

The harpoon used in swordfishing consisted of a fifteen-foot wooden stick, often referred to as the pole, attached to a metal rod called the lily iron. The lily iron was inserted into a small metal dart to which rope was fastened. The rope had a keg or buoy attached which allowed the fishermen to follow the fish. Three men called spotters would be positioned in the masts to spot the fish. The person in the stand, a platform that extended beyond the bow of the boat, would have to have good aim when throwing the harpoon or the fish would get away. Once the fish was struck, it would continue with the keg (pronounced cag) while the men got more rope ready for the next fish. To bring the fish in, a dory would be lowered from the boat and a fisherman would row out to the dying fish which was visible because of the buoy. While sitting safely in the stem of the dory, the fisherman would haul in the

swordfish with the rope, attached to the buoy, which passed over a roller in the bow. The larger ship was not usually far from the dory.

Although most of the harbours in the 1930s and 1940s were booming with activity, Dingwall Harbour was especially busy. This harbour would often be so packed with swordfishing boats, people could walk from one side of the harbour to the other on the decks of the boats. It was not unusual to see some gypsum boats and even the Aspy tied up at one of the wharves.

George Burton was one of the first swordfishermen in this area. Older generations thought that swordfish were sharks and so never tried to catch them. When George fished in Massachusetts, he saw people swordfish and decided to try it himself when he returned to the Bay. He took a swordfish dart home with him, went out into the Bay and harpooned a swordfish. George then explained to the older people what the fish were and that they were good to eat. After that they used to box and ice the fish and ship them on the Aspy to the States.

Joe Curtis was born in 1922 and started swordfishing in September 1937, at the age of 15. Jerry MacDougall and Ed Zwicker fished in the same boat with Joe. Since Joe had not been swordfishing before, he asked them how he would know if he saw a swordfish. They said to look for two things sticking out of the water: the dorsal fin and tail fin of the fish. Ed got Jerry to go up in the stand to harpoon the fish, but he missed the first one he saw because he was right in the sun which blinded him causing him to miss the fish. Normally, swordfishermen wore a special hat that had a long bill and had a green underside to save their eyes from the sun reflecting off the water. Because Jerry missed the fish, Ed called upon Joe, and that was when he caught his first swordfish; they caught three in all that day. One of the last fish Joe ever caught weighed seven hundred and seven pounds.

Allan and Gussie MacLellan were also known as great swordfishermen. They fished out of the Angus L., a forty-eight foot swordfishing boat, with Peter Canary. They fished out of Dingwall, but would also go up to Scaterie to meet the swordfish.

The mercury scare in the 1970s may have hurt the swordfishing industry, but it was the long liners that finished it. Long lining works on the same principle as trawl gear: it is a long line with baited hooks on it that catches everything, even some little fish. Harpooning did not hurt the fishery like long lining did. Some people feel that the swordfishery closed because of foreign long liners, and that Canadians were treated unfairly during the mercury scare. When swordfish could not be sold in Canada, they could still be sold in the United States. Today, swordfishing is banned in the Gulf of St. Lawrence but is allowed beyond Money Point.

### *Forestry*

Many men in the North of Smokey area went lumbering in the fall after fishing or farming work had been completed. According to Jim Stockley, "That's what nearly

everybody did." Since wood was necessary for heat and building houses and boats, forestry was an important part of life in the community. Even though forestry has diminished over the years, some people still practice this traditional way of life.

Jim Stockley described the early days of logging in Ingonish when men travelled throughout Cape Breton seeking work in the woods. Jim reminisces that he, Henry Stockley, Charlie Stockley and Angus Link all cut wood on Juniper Mountain, near Marion Bridge. People said that no one could cut as fast or as good as Angus Link; he held the record.

There were a few men North of Smokey who had saw benches and engines for cutting wood. They would travel around, from place to place, sawing people's winter firewood into stove lengths. Dinner and supper were often the only payment these men received because there was a strong sense of community and people looked after each other. They did favours for each other rather than paying money. When this service was not available, the men had to cut wood with a crosscut saw and split it with an axe.

Getting wood ready for the winter was a lot of work. Besides cutting the wood they also had to pile it up in the barn once it was dry. According to Betty Stockley, the first lumber mills "must have been a wonderful thing for those men who had ripped those boards with a pit saw, for such hard work one can only imagine. First, the logs were cut down with an axe; they were then hand hewn with the axe to make them relatively flat on the sides. Next, the logs were hauled to the pit where they were pit-sawed into boards and then hauled to the site of boat or house construction." When saw mills started to emerge, they were found in almost every community North of Smokey, even where there were few residents - like on the north side of Black Brook, in the late 1800s.

### *Mining*

There is no mining activity North of Smokey today, but at one time various mines were active in the area. Gypsum mining was the most common form of mining. Gypsum is a soft white or light gray rock that is formed from seawater. Some local people say that because millions of years ago Dingwall was a bay that is why the gypsum deposit is so rich there.

The mine in Ingonish was the gypsum quarry at Whitty Shore, otherwise known as Beach Crossing Road. Construction for the gypsum mine in Ingonish Beach started in May 1924. The Aspy had to cut through over a foot of ice in order to land the cement for the construction. Later that year, Vincent Donovan started to set up drilling operations and numerous buildings were erected: a power house, crusher buildings, a tool shed and an office. Railway tracks were also laid for railway cars which would transport the gypsum.

The company that started mining at Ingonish Beach was the Canada Cement Company of Montreal. The company employed about one hundred men at varying wage levels: labourers received 27 cents per hour, drillers received 33 cents per hour, and the crusher operator received 54 cents per hour.

Drill holes were made into the rock and dynamite was inserted to free the gypsum from the hill. Once the gypsum was freed, electric shovels were used to load the railway cars which transported the rock to the crusher. The gypsum was blown from the crusher into piles or pockets. Under the pockets were five hoppers in a cement tunnel with a conveyor belt running through it. One hopper was opened at a time when loading a boat with gypsum, so there would not be too much rock on the conveyor. When a hopper was opened, the gypsum would fall from the pocket and be carried by the conveyor belt up to the trestle, which was like a big wharf, to where the boats loaded. The trestle had a chute on its end which would be lowered into the holds of the boat.

In 1925, tragedy hit when the wrong hopper was opened. Walter Whitty and Maurice Williams fell to their deaths when the No. 5 hopper, on which they were standing, was opened by accident. The work had to proceed in order to recover the men's bodies and after about three hours, the men's bodies were found and served as a reminder of how dangerous mining can be.

The only remains of the gypsum mine in Ingonish Beach are the old foundations on the land, the faces of gypsum and the ballast piles which remain in the water where the gypsum boats were loaded.

The other major mining activity in the area was in Dingwall, where a gypsum quarry operated from 1933 to 1954. The quarry closed down from 1940 to 1945 because of World War II; by that time, gypsum was getting harder to mine. Lillian MacKinnon recalls the days of gypsum mining in Dingwall: "It was like a city then; it was lively. They went, and there was nothing."

Jack Fitzgerald did many jobs at the quarry at different times: he operated the jackhammer, the compressor, and the diesel shovel; he also served as quarry foreman. He says that there were two shifts working day and night at the quarry from spring until fall. He remembers calling the dynamite holes fortyfives because, "that's the angle they went into the ground at." He also recalls that horse and carts were used at first to move the gypsum to the crusher in the early years; later on, Euclid trucks were used. Jack says that people started working at the quarry because "it was a chance to make a steady income," and because the wages were better than on the farms. He says that people from as far away as Chéticamp worked at the quarry.

In 1954, gypsum was getting harder to mine and ship. Because of silt in the harbour boats could not take full loads and the operation became very expensive. Gypsum was also starting to get scarce: "It was under sea level and getting harder to mine." Wendell expresses, "Some of the men went back to farming, but most went back to

fishing or moved with the quarry." When the gypsum company moved to Milford, near Shubenacadie, men from Dingwall and surrounding areas followed.

Lillian MacKinnon remembers, "It was awful when the gypsum company left and went to Shubenacadie. Many people followed the company when it left; the ones with nothing else to do started fishing. A lot of people had left their farms to work at the quarry; farms died out with gypsum and people began to buy their vegetables at country stores."

In Dingwall, and surrounding areas, gypsum mining had a profound affect on people's culture and lifestyle. It caused the focus of the communities to switch. Although people still kept small gardens and perhaps a few animals, the farming way of life virtually ended with the gypsum company's arrival in Dingwall. McEvoy's farm was the only large farm which remained in the Cape North area after the gypsum company left town.

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