



# Midwifery

*A People of Spirit, Courage and Resourcefulness*

## PREFACE

With them the seed of wisdom did I sow  
And with mine own hand laboured it to grow  
And this was all the harvest that I reaped  
“I came like Water, and like Wind I go.”

- *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*

What do the people of northern Newfoundland have in common with a poet by the name of Omar Khayyam? At first glance, nothing, except that this obscure piece of Persian poetry captures the essence of what this year-long Community History Project has taught me.

In the past year I ventured into sixteen communities: telephoning, knocking on doors, and sitting at kitchen tables drinking endless cups of tea, trying to learn customs, traditions, and wisdom from the older people in northern Newfoundland so that the stories could be set down in writing and preserved for future generations. *With them the seed of wisdom did I sow...*

Back at the office, after each interview, I would review the outcome of each story and try to write in a format that would satisfy not only the person interviewed, but the people who would read the stories at some future date. *And with my own hand laboured it to grow...*

By year's end there were stacks of photographs, pages of typewritten interviews, maps criss-crossed with names and dates, and hand-drawn pictures submitted by enthusiastic contributors. In people's homes there were interviews where we laughed, cried, walked over hills to the back of land, walked along winding pathways to graveyards, ventured out on the high seas in boats enjoying boil-ups with scalding tea, fisherman's brewis, beans and bread, and still more stories.

In these interviews, I was often perplexed by words and expressions totally unfamiliar to me and, without

the assistance of my husband, Len Tucker, I suspect the dialect would have defeated me utterly. Yet it is the words and expressions of northern Newfoundland that are, and were, the lifeblood of communication in a time when modern technology was unheard of. I learned that, while there are official names on Newfoundland maps, local fishermen have their own names for islands, bays and coves. I learned that the people who settled this wonderful, terrible place have an intimate relationship with the sea and the land that no tourist or outsider can truly fathom or appreciate. And at the end of the year, I knew that I had only managed to collect a few small pieces of the puzzle that make up a larger picture of hardships endured, joys celebrated, and lives lived to the fullest. *And this was all the harvest that I reaped...*

*I came like water and like wind I go...*

This precious generation of people you will read about in these pages were born, lived, and will, one day, pass on. In writing their stories I have attempted to grasp the 'wind and water' of their lives – as well as their customs and traditions – which are fast slipping away into obscurity.

This is not so much a historical document as it is an opportunity for these people – in their own time and in their own way – to tell the stories that were nearest and dearest to their hearts. Whether you are a student, a come from away, or a Newfoundlander, you may find in these pages the heart and soul of the people of Newfoundland.

# Midwives

DEBORAH DECKER

There was a midwife here by the name of Violet Fields. She worked Cook's Harbour, Wild Bight, and Boat Harbour, everywhere there was a baby. Violet Fields was a trained midwife, but Aunt Suse Barrett was the old-fashioned midwife. Aunt Isabella Elliott, my father's aunt, borned me. She reared my father up because his mother and father died when he was small. That was in Lock's Cove. Then there was old Mrs. Brown at Wild Bight, she was a midwife, too.

I remember one time, when I was ten years old, Mother called me. "Deb," she said, "You got to go down and tell Aunt Suse Barrett to come down. I wants her."

It was six o'clock in the morning, in August, it was. No men home, see – they were all down the shore fishing.

I said, "It's six o'clock! Why would you want Mrs. Barrett?"

Now, this was for Isabella, see? She was having her first child. Mom had one in April, and me sister had one in August.

So, I got up and called Stella and said, "Come on Stella, maid, we got to go down for Mrs. Barrett." So we walked down the harbour; all the way around, and when we got there, I told Mrs. Barrett, "Come on maid, you got to come up, there's something wrong."

Poor old Mrs. Barrett come up and we were drove outdoors, but we didn't know why. We were told, "Now, get out of the house."

So, that was good enough. We weren't outdoors too long; I'd say we were back in before dinner hour.

When we went back in, a baby

cried!

I said to Mother, "A baby!"  
"Yes," she said, "a baby."

I said, "Where did you get the baby?"

And she said, "Well, didn't you see Mrs. Barrett taking that baby out of the stump?"

I said, "No, I did not, Mom, maid!" Then me and Stella were gone out for days, digging wherever there was a stump to, for a baby. We was hoping to get one, because Mrs. Barrett got a baby in a stump! Now boy!

Back then, there was no such thing as pajamas for a baby, or sleepers. Babies were wrapped in nightdresses. And you wouldn't see a crib anywhere, or clothes laid out for an unborn baby. There wasn't a thing to let you know that there was such a thing as a baby coming.

The day of the birth, after the dad was allowed back in, he would go up to the loft and get the crib, and that's how it was.

---

## Aunt Renee Sexton

EVANGELINE DRUDGE

### Irene Sexton: midwife

#### A marvellous woman

Aunt Renee was a marvellous woman. My mother had eleven children and Irene Sexton delivered them all; she was an interesting lady. She was born in Ireland Bight; one of a twin; came here to Goose Cove and married Patrick Sexton and they had two children of



Figure 1 Irene Sexton (photo contributed by E. Drudge)

their own and adopted one child. Apparently her mother-in-law used to be the former midwife, so Irene did a few deliveries for her and after that she was the community midwife. She delivered all of our generation. Women from Ireland Bight or Lock's Cove, they would come to the community before the delivery and stay here in homes around the community.

There is a scholarship in her name, in her honour, which originated from the last Come Home Year in Goose Cove. Aunt Renee, she walked and went by dog team, she walked and went by boat, in all kinds of weather. She did whatever she had to do, and some places she went, they wasn't very well prepared either, and most never thanked her. She was dedicated to what she was doing. I remember she would go in and sometimes there was just bare boards; not a bed to lie on, so she'd come to my mother lots of times, to gather things. Sometimes people had nothing because of poverty, but sometimes they just didn't care.

## Looking to see where the plane landed

Pregnancy, in those days, was never mentioned to children. At that time, people lived very private lives; a lot of their silence had to do with pride and respect. Some of those old people had more respect than all the young people put together today. Back then, children were seen, not heard. For example, a couple adopted a child from across the harbour. Now, they had no children. And we came home from school and found out that Aunt Alice and Uncle Leo had a baby boy, and an airplane had dropped it off. Well, we were going up on the point, looking to see if we could see where the plane landed. Now, honestly!

And the other thing about it, as children, we never had time to think about those things, because we weren't in there sitting watching television, or on the telephone. We were out. If we weren't in washing dishes or doing housework, we were gone; we were self-entertained. The outdoors was our playground: the hills, the trees, the rocks. I spent hours up there on the hills randying; sliding down the hill on the sled.

## Over 300 babies

As a midwife, Aunt Renee delivered well over three hundred babies, God love her! She visited every one for nine mornings running. I can remember when my mother was having my younger brother, Brendan. We were in school and came home at four o'clock in the evening; it was the fall of the year, the seventeenth of



Figure 2 A younger Irene Sexton (photo contributed by E. Drudge)

December. My father, being a merchant, was away in St. John's. So, when I came home at four o'clock, it was really a bad evening. My uncle, who was a crippled man, was gone down the harbour to get Aunt Renee. I remember we had lots of snow and wind. My aunt, next door, was with Mom upstairs in the bedroom.

I was probably eleven years old, and I had to take care of the rest of the family downstairs; cook supper and everything else. In the meantime, I didn't have two clues what was going on. I knew absolutely nothing, and I heard nothing. My mother's bedroom was just up at the top of the fourteen stairs. All I knew was that Mom was upstairs and she had told me to get supper.

I was looking after Maurice and Sheila, Gertrude and Mary. Now, Uncle Pat and Mrs. Renee came in through the front door. We were out here in the kitchen, and Mrs. Renee came in the front door and went upstairs. We just thought she was coming in to visit Mom. I

mean, you didn't ask questions in those days, and we were used to people coming and going.

## "I got a baby brother!"

The next thing, Mrs. Renee came downstairs and showed us our baby brother. Well, you can imagine the excitement, because we had four girls and only one boy. I ran out the door, all excited; I didn't even know what I was wearing, to tell the truth. I had on ski pants – and, at that time you wore ski pants – you had to wear skirts over them, girls didn't go around then with just pants. And I was wearing a plaid skirt over my ski pants, and I had a parka. I ran next door to tell Grandmother I had a baby brother. I told Grandmother, then down to the shop where Uncle Pad was, and they were just closing up; it was six o'clock in the evening. I said, "I got a baby brother! I got a baby brother!"

## She let drift...

So, after that I went back home. And, just as I was going up the steps of the house, Mrs. Renee was coming out with the pan of water – I suppose where she had cleaned up everything – and let drift, and it landed all over me! So, I always tell my brother he was never worth the trouble I got into.

## A young girl and a post-partum hemorrhage

I was eleven years old then, and the boats were still coming in on the seventeenth of December, taking salt fish I suppose, or picking up groceries. Anyway, Mom had a post-partum hemorrhage, and we

had the only telephone in the community, so I had to call the CN in St. Anthony – Joe Patey answered the phone and Ern Bulgin was down there working at the time; he was from Lewisporte – and ask them to have an ambulance to meet the schooner, the *Shirley Ann W.* My mother was gone overnight and came back the next day. The trip to St. Anthony by schooner would have been about an hour and half sail, and I think my Aunt Alice went on the schooner with my mother. My mother lived to have many more children – you know she did – and every baby was delivered by Irene Sexton.

---

## Midwives and Old Lies

JOHN & SUSIE HEDDERSON

FANNY MITCHELL

### Midwifery: a respected profession but shrouded in secrecy

The art and practice of midwifery on the northern peninsula was an old and respected profession, but the birth of babies was shrouded in secrecy, and the ‘lies’ that surrounded the birth of a baby were closely guarded; children were not only ‘seen and not heard’, they were not told about the birds and the bees either. Susie Hedder-son of Straitsview says, “I wasn’t very old before I figured it out, but we pretended to our parents that we didn’t know, even though we knew they were wrong.”

Midwives and parents alike took great pains to shield children from the reality of the birth experience.

As soon as the midwife entered the house, the children were usually put outdoors or sent to someone else’s house until the baby was born. Then, when the mother and baby were ready, the children were brought in to see the new addition to the family. When asked where the baby came from, Mrs. Hedder-son remembers a common reply was, “Aunt Luce got her in a stump,” or, “Got her up the cellar.”

Men, too, were shielded from birth and delivery. One fellow said, “When my children was born, I just had to go and get the midwife and get out of it; just keep the fire going and one thing or another.” Men were often seen out at the woodpile chopping wood, or down on the stagehead with the boys. Mr. John Hedder-son says, “They’d never allow a man in the house when they was borning children. You had to get out of doors. I tell you, they’d drive you out.”

Once the women got ‘sick’, the midwife would arrive at the house, deliver the baby and usually stay the first night. After that, she’d come every day and go home every evening for a total of nine days. Mrs. Hedder-son says, “And Aunt Lucy would come first thing in the morning; we’d see her coming over Grandmother’s Hill.”

Fanny Mitchell of Noddy Bay says her memories of Aunt Lucy are a little different, because Aunt Lucy was her mother. “Mom learned from Alfreda, and then she delivered babies from L’Anse aux Meadows to Quiripon. My mother would walk in summertime and wintertime she’d go on dog team. I tell you, she went on some dirty nights, too. People would come and get her on dog team; you’d hear



Figure 1 Mrs. Fanny Mitchell

the dogs barking and say, ‘Well, someone’s going for Granny.’ You never knew when someone was going to come and get Mom to deliver a baby.”

Mrs. Mitchell thinks her mother, Aunt Lucy, delivered about four hundred babies, and Mrs. Mitchell’s own daughter, Roxanne, was the last baby Aunt Lucy delivered, and that was in 1969.

In Mr. Hedder-son’s memory, there were other midwives operating in various communities, such as Mrs. Gibbons in Quirpon and Aunt Ann in Griquet.

\*\*\*\*\*

*While women all over the northern peninsula called upon midwives whenever they were ‘sick’, Mr. Hedder-son tells a story of a birth that was every bit as shrouded in mystery as any he has ever experienced.*

### In the still of the night

“Dwight, my son, had a cat once. I come up and went to sleep; the cat slept on the pillow beside me. I didn’t mind. That night, I woke up, and when I woke, I heard kittens



Figure 2 Mr. John Hedderson

bawling, and here the mother cat had had her kittens right on the pillow! She had them all cleaned up – on my pillow! Well, boy! I went to sleep and when I woke up, they they were!

## Aunt Lucy, Midwife

WINSTON COLBOURNE

In this humorous little story, Winston Colbourne tells about the birth of his first, son, Whyman, and



Figure 1 Winston and Eliza Colbourne

the midwife who delivered him.

### Aunt Lucy Edison, Midwife

Aunt Lucy was a Bartlett, my great aunt on my mother's side. She married Rube Edison and raised her family in Noddy Bay.

### Birth of our first son, Whyman

Edmund Taylor ran the mail boat; he drove a small cabin cruiser. Anyway, he was supposed to come in and pick up Eliza to the wharf over there, at four o'clock in the morning; he was carrying the mail from Raleigh to St. Anthony. Eliza was pregnant, so he was going to take her to the hospital in St. Anthony. So, at four o'clock in the morning he came in alongside the wharf and sent his brother up to the door; his brother tapped, I suppose for awhile and, well, no one didn't answer the door, so he went on.

I was nineteen years old in October and married in December, and now it was August and I was going to have a family. Eliza was nineteen years old, too.

Sometime that day, Eliza sung out, "I'm going to be sick." Now,

brother, that was something for me! Now it was up to me; do or die. So, Uncle Hedley had a speedboat tied on to the wharf and I went on down – it wasn't too bad of a day, it was August – and I took the boat to Noddy Bay (I had to go down around Round Head in a little fifteen-foot speedboat).

Now, Aunt Lucy was a big woman, I suppose she weighed two hundred pounds or more. I tied the boat on to the wharf and run, puff, puff, puff, and when I got to her house I said, "Aunt Luce, I'm in trouble!"

"What's wrong with you?" (She had the nerve like a grindstone, nothing frightened her. On the land, babies, that didn't mean nothing to her. She was afraid of the waves and the lops, but nothing else.)

### "Eliza's going to be sick!"

"She should have been at the hospital," she said. Well, I told her the story as best I could, one breath driving the other. When I told her Eliza needed help, she said, "I gave that up." (I'd say the woman was close to eighty then.)

"Now, then," she said, "How'd you get down here, in boat? I ain't going in boat. Never in my life," she said, "I went in boat, and I ain't going now."

And then she said, "What's it like out there, Winston?" Now, I knew the woman really well; I wasn't shy at that; I was just afraid that something was going to happen to Eliza and the baby. "Don't panic, she said, don't panic, Eliza's a young woman, she's only going to have a baby." And like that, you know, that kind of cheered me up a bit.

“Well, now,” she said, “give me the honest truth – there’s n’er draft of wind, no sea, and we’ll keep tight to the rocks?”

I said, “Oh, yes,” I said, “I’ll guarantee you.”

“And if there’s any wind,” she said, “we’ll land in Straitsview or we’ll land in Hay Cove, or we’ll put out anywhere else; I’m not going out in the lops and in the wind.”

Anyway, we got in boat, and she warned, “And don’t go too fast!” And she talked away to me coming up, the two of us on one thwart right close; I had my arm right around her, on her back. So, good enough, the blessed Lord was right with us, not a draft of wind; we come on up around.

“By cripe,” she said, “you know, I’ve never ever done this before, Winston,” she said. She meant she had never had to go in boat. She had always walked, or gone on dog team.

So anyway, we come into the wharf. “Now, you brute!” she said, “The next time you’re going to make a baby,” she said, “You make sure you takes things in time.” I said, “Aunt Luce, Aunt Luce, don’t make me no worse,” I said, “I’m going crazy.”

So into the house she went.

And anyway, I just waited; there was nothing to do but wait. I sat down, and the once I heard this little bugger when he made the bawl. Wow! Well, up I jumped. Well, well, well! I waited and waited and

waited, and the once she come.

“Nothing to it, Winston,” she said. “Beautiful, beautiful healthy boy.”

When she brought the baby out, she brought him out in a blanket and put him on the table. She looked at him from head to toe; checked him all over. He squawked, and he was right pink. Oh, I could feel my heart right there, pat, pat, pat. I had to hold on to the table; if something went wrong I would have died.

Boy, when she said, “Winston, everything is perfect,” what a relief!

“Now she said, don’t let it happen no more!” She’d tell you, right straightforward.

“And I put me arms around her and I hugged her and I kissed her, and said, “God love you!” They had a little charge with this midwifery, you know, they wanted a little money when they borned a baby. It might have been five dollars, but I give her more than five. She deserved every bit of it, God love her. But she didn’t mind turning the bottom up on babies to slap their bums, right?

Then, Aunt Luce came every morning for six and seven days, and she’d go down in the evening home, walk to Noddy Bay, and back every morning to L’Anse aux Meadows at eight o’clock. The first night she stayed all night with Eliza. Six and seven days she was back and forth, and Eliza wouldn’t be allowed out of bed, I suppose,

for nine days.

The second time Eliza was ready to born a baby, I was worse. For a woman to have a baby, to me, is scary. I mean, I was ready that day to jump overboard and drown. Whyman was the only home born, and he wouldn’t have been born at home if I could have helped it. I would have felt better if Eliza was in the hospital. I don’t believe Aunt Lucy ever lost a baby. As far as I know, she never lost a baby.

### **Glossary Dictionary of Newfoundland English**

1. Sick: Pregnant; with child.
2. Lops: The rough surface of the sea caused by a stiff wind and marked by a quick succession of short breaking waves.



