

# Aspects of Socializing and Partying in Outport Newfoundland\*

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## Abstract/Résumé

*L'auteur définit, décrit et, dans une certaine mesure, analyse la "veillée" traditionnelle à Terre-Neuve — soirée sans façon bien que structurée — en prêtant une attention particulière aux rapports avec d'autres activités traditionnelles du même genre, ainsi qu'aux relations spatiales et sociales entre les exécutants et leur auditoire.*

*This paper defines, describes, and to some extent analyses the traditional Newfoundland "time," an informal (though structured) party, paying particular attention to relationships with other similar traditional occasions and to the spatial and social relationships of performers and audience.*

It is probably true that no culture has been discovered which does not have some equivalent of what we in modern North American society loosely term the party. Partying in its many forms appears to be a cultural universal, yet virtually no studies of this important form of social interaction exist. What little we do have is largely anecdotal and descriptive rather than analytical.

This paper is not an attempt to fill the void. It is rather a brief, descriptive consideration of some aspects of one form of partying or traditional entertainment in Newfoundland culture — what we generally refer to as a "time". Although it is not easy to define the time, I offer the following as a tentative working definition. The time is a formal or informal festive community event characterized by dancing, singing, and other kinds of "creation" sometimes preceded by some other activity such as a soup supper or card-game.

The time as we know it in Newfoundland has its parallels in other cultures. For example, the Irish *ceilidh* and *booley* are basically the same kind of occasion.<sup>1</sup> A nineteenth-century Scottish account of a *ceilidh* describes the event as "an entertainment where stories and tales, poems and ballads, are rehearsed and recited, and songs are sung, conundrums are put, proverbs are quoted... in the house at night."<sup>2</sup> Similarly, among Old World and New World French people the term *veillée* describes the same kind of home entertainment.<sup>3</sup> A recent Italian study refers to the

*veglia* of Tuscany as a ritualized evening gathering of family and friends in the kitchen of a peasant house.<sup>4</sup> Such events are, of course, occasions for talk, indeed for the whole range of social actions but as well they tend to move into performance.<sup>5</sup>

Such times and places are endowed with significance by a community. The rules of appropriate behaviour and of communication at such events have yet to be much studied. How do events function for the community and its members? I later discuss some aspects of one performance genre — singing — to answer this question.

Rather than describe the time for Newfoundland culture as a whole, I consider the event as it existed in one Newfoundland outport community. That community is Harbour Buffett in Placentia Bay, the community where I was born and raised. Most of the information presented here is based on interviews with residents of the community and my own recollections of growing up there.<sup>6</sup>

Harbour Buffett is located on the southeast coast of Long Island, the second largest island in Newfoundland's largest bay, Placentia Bay. It was settled about 1800 primarily by people from Devon, Dorset, and Somerset in southwest England along with a few from Ireland. It reached its peak population of 498 persons in 1921 after which it leveled off to about 300 persons until its death in 1967, when all the people moved away under the Newfoundland government's resettlement programme. People first came to Harbour Buffett and the surrounding islands chiefly for the codfish. The islands were like ships anchored on the best fishing grounds. Because of its central location in the bay and its natural advantages as a good harbour, Harbour Buffett became the base of operations for fish merchants. Most

\* This paper represents a brief, preliminary look at what is to become a larger study of "times" in Newfoundland. I should like to thank George Casey, Herbert Halpert, and Gerald Thomas for suggesting some of the sources cited in the notes.

Newfoundland merchant communities of comparable size had only one merchant; Harbour Buffett had two equally large businesses from the beginning of settlement. It was a kind of market centre where men from surrounding communities could obtain work, purchase fishing supplies, and sell fish. This dual merchant phenomenon was a major influence on the social and cultural life of the community. Though small in population, the community became highly stratified socially with strong emphasis on upward mobility. Harbour Buffett was in fact an important commercial, administrative, and communications centre for that section of Placentia Bay.

Harbour Buffett consisted of four locally recognized sections — Harbour Buffett centre, the North East, the Tickle, and Coffin's Cove. Harbour Buffett centre is where the two merchant businesses were located, the two public halls, the church, the school, the post office, the welfare office, the customs office, and the nurse's dispensary. Most people living in this section were employed as wage and salary workers by the merchants. Most people living in the other sections were self-employed in the fishery. These different sections more or less specialized in certain kinds of entertainment, and such specialization apparently occurred in other Newfoundland communities as well. It seems that the Tickle and Coffin's Cove, taken as one, formed the centre for singing and informal house times. The North East seemed to go in more for story-telling or "yarning." Harbour Buffett centre remained somewhat aloof from these activities; here the people seemed to attach more importance to attending the formal times held in the community hall.

The term "time" had two chief meanings at Harbour Buffett. Usually, it referred to entertainment in the local halls, which always consisted of a dance, sometimes preceded by some other activity such as a card party, soup supper, or sale of women's work. The term was also sometimes used to refer to a gathering at a house, fish store, or in the fore-castle of a schooner. The time was usually, but not always, characterized by dancing. Thus, times at Harbour Buffett may be divided into two major types — the formal ("hall times") and the informal ("kitchen," "store", or "boat" times).

Formal times were usually sponsored by church organizations to make money and were announced well in advance by means of posters in the merchants' stores, the post office, and by announcement in church at Sunday services. Admission was charged. One's formal or "Sunday" clothes were worn. One person told me he had one pair of shoes that he wore only to hall times. In the early days, a programme was posted in the entrance of the hall listing the order of dances for the night. A floor master announced each dance as it came about, but with the exception of the American Eight and the Virginia Reel the dances were not called. The square dance was the main

dance, but there was also waltzing and step-dancing. One informant described it as follows:

She'd start off with a square dance, praps two square dances, praps three. Next thing there was a waltzing period, another square dance, then American Eight ... praps another square dance and then twas the Virginia Reel. Now, that's the way we had it drawn out. When we were dancin' up in the Harbour, she was goin' pretty good about four o'clock in the morning. We were havin' a great time and to have a little rest, you'd have what they called a Virginia Reel. Now we're ready for another couple of square dances ... 'twould mostly be about daylight you'd blow out the lamps and go home.<sup>7</sup>

Music was supplied by a single fiddler in the early days, but about the time of World War II the dance ethic moved from noiseless dancing (or neat as it was called locally) to the noisy "break-er-down," and the fiddle was replaced by the louder button accordion. Good dancers only were expected to take the floor at these times. There was no singing at the formal times nor was there open drinking. The men, however, had flasks or bottles (usually of dark rum) which they drank during breaks in the dancing when they went outside ostensibly to "cool off." The community was on its best, "proper", behaviour.

Usually, the dance was held in the Society of United Fishermen's Hall, which had a hardwood floor, and was preceded as mentioned above by some other activity in the parish hall. These included sales of women's work (such as, aprons, socks, sweater, tablecloths) by the Church of England Women's Association (CEWA), concerts, or in the case of weddings, the wedding meal. If the main activity was one of the above, it was referred to by that name — CEWA Sale, soup supper, school concert. But if not followed by a dance, the term time was not used.

Times were held seasonally. Hall times often took place during the spring and fall when outsiders, men from other communities, had come to Harbour Buffett to work for the merchants, to obtain fishing supplies in the spring, and to deliver their fish in the fall. During the summer there were no formal times and few informal ones since this was the work season and many were away. During the winter, outsiders had left Harbour Buffett, the boats were tied up, work slowed down, and there was an intensive exchange of both kinds of time within the community itself. One person said "the best time to have a time was Christmas-time, and there were more times at Christmastime than any other time."

The informal times were more or less spontaneous. They occurred during the spring and fall when outsiders were present, but also during the winter. The central room in a Newfoundland house was the kitchen, and this is where the entertaining was done. These parties were thus called

"kitchen times." Informal times were also held in a fisherman's fish store. One of my informants said:

You'd have it in a kitchen or a store because there was a nice drop of St. Pierre rum and there's gonna be a good many songs on the go and 'twould suit better. Have a set (square dance) and then you'd have a few songs....<sup>8</sup>

That was the style then in a kitchen or in a store... my store was bet up from dancin'. How often used I shift cod nets and lines and get ready for a dance.... Get her goin', boys. Get old stands or tubs or something for seats to sit on. Wasn't carin' where you was to....

Praps ther's a few fellers down in the store dancin' and there's half a dozen or seven or eight up in the house singin' songs... crack right on her.<sup>9</sup>

Tell someone *now* to go in a fish store and have a dance, my God, they'd screw up their nose at you pretty quick.<sup>10</sup>

In contrast with the hall times, kitchen and store times were seldom planned more than a few hours in advance, and emphasis was on the informal. Open drinking, singing, reciting, and yarning were important activities. People generally attended in casual or work clothes. The accordion was the chief musical instrument, but if one were not available someone would "sing a set" of tunes, a practice unheard of at the formal hall time. The lively square dance predominated and the slower Virginia Reel and American Eight were seldom danced. Food was seldom served and there was no admission fee. In the earlier period, wedding times were often held informally in a kitchen or sometimes a large store, and everyone in the community was invited.

An additional type of informal time would sometimes occur when several men had a time in the forecastle of a boat which was tied up for the winter.

See, if we're gonna have this time, we'd gather up certain fellers able to sing a song. Now, there's our night see... twas common to do it in the Ticks. Old Johnnie Marshall had a boat there and Garge Albert Hollett had a boat there moored up for the Winter.... Well, we'd gather up some potatoes, turnips, beef and pork and have a bottle of rum or so, get aboard a one of these boats, get a fire in, get this big feed on — seven or eight fellers, you know what I mean. And you'd have a game of cards first and you'd end up singin' songs... You'd sing a song in your turn... and you'd get so much liquor in ... nothin' to hurt, just to make you happy ... And then you'd get the feed and eat him and go ashore and go home.<sup>11</sup>

Although times in general functioned to maintain community solidarity and cohesion, they could also serve as instruments of conflict. Imagine a time in the kitchen of

Mack Masters, a noted local singer, in the Ticks, during fall 1935. Word had spread during the late day or early evening that there was going to be a time at Mack's that night. Men and women arrived after supper about eight o'clock. The etiquette of the situation required that a singer be coaxed before he would sing. After the first dance, several drinks, and some conversation, one of the men called on a singer to sing by saying something like "Time for a song, Joe," or "Give us a song, Mack." The singer was expected to refuse claiming, "Sure, I don't know no songs," or "Sure, I can't sing." After more talk and drink, the request was again made and the same reply usually followed. Usually after the third time, he sang. This process of requesting made the audience an integral part of the situation and also served to demonstrate to the community that the singer thought he was "no better than anyone else." If, as the evening progressed and more liquor was consumed, a person sang without being coaxed, liquor was the excuse. If a singer present from another community began singing without being asked, such action could be meant and taken as an unspoken challenge to a singer from Harbour Buffett to "match" the song or "sing one better."

While a person sang, members of the audience commented throughout. At kitchen times when only Harbour Buffett people were present such comments were usually ones of approval and encouragement, such as "Good man, Mack," between the stanzas or at the end of the song. However, if at informal times when people from other communities were present those supporting the singer said something like "That's a hard song to sing or beat," it might be meant and taken as a challenge to the singer from another community to respond by singing a harder one. For example, I have an account of a man from Long Harbour being slighted by a Harbour Buffett man in the course of unloading salt from the merchant's vessel during the course of the work day. That night he utilized the singing context to make such a comment in order to get back at the man.

The audience was given a cue that the song was coming to an end. The last word or words of the song were spoken. Sometimes the singer sang the song to the end incorporating a spoken comment almost as part of the song, thereby maintaining some control of the situation. Another device used by singers to create, foster, or change a relationship with another singer or member of the audience was the practice of holding a person's hand while he sang. To refuse to hold the hand of a man while he sang was an unmistakable expression of unfriendliness.

Competition could be ended in a number of ways. An approving comment from the rival singer or his supporters was taken as an invitation to end. No one, of course, was publicly declared the winner since no one openly admitted that such competition had taken place, but singers and audience were aware of the outcome. A singer might end such competition by taking the hand of his competitor as he started singing a song. Indeed, near the end of the evening,

singers and audience might all join hands while they sang together.

Many of the times, especially kitchen times, ended with the sharing of food. Sometimes this was a "scoff", which in the early days often consisted of a hen or two and vegetables "bucked" (or stolen) from neighbours; at other occasions the meal was simply a "lunch," consisting of a cup of tea, bread, cookies, and buns.

When dances were held in fish stores, the fishing gear was moved aside or outside the store during the dance. Similarly, when times were held in kitchens, the interior was sometimes altered. For instance, the hooked mats (or rugs), which covered the kitchen floor instead of store-bought canvas during the early period, were removed. Also, the kitchen stove which occupied space necessary for dancing was often taken outside the house, to be replaced immediately following the time.<sup>12</sup>

Little has been written on this kind of social interaction. As Abrahams has pointed out:

very few actual studies of the goings on at special times in these special places are to be discovered... we know very little about the situation of creativity and community comment in such public places of gathering, to say nothing of the more private occasions in which men and women, old and young, are brought together in any symbolic landscape to interact, play, perform, ceremonialize, and make fun. Is this because folklorists have not taken the time to sit and observe in such places long enough to be able to write the rules for these occasions.<sup>13</sup>

This paper considers some of those aspects in one Newfoundland outport community. The subject bears further investigation.

## NOTES

1. For representative descriptions in the Irish tradition, see Hugh Brody, *Iniskillane: Change and Decline in the West of Ireland* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974); Estyn Evans, *Irish Folk Ways* (New York: Devin-Adair Company, 1951); Seán O'Suilleabhain, *Irish Wake Amusements* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1967); Michael Murphy, *Tyrone Folk Quest* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1973); John Messenger, *Inis Beag: Isle of Ireland* (Toronto: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1969).

2. J.F. Campbell, *Popular Tales of the West Highlands*, Vol. 1 (London: A. Gardner, 1890), iv-vii, xx, Alexander Carmichael, "Introduction," *Carmina Gadelica*, Vol. 1 (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1899), xix, xxxvi. See also Colin MacDonald, *Croft and Ceilidh* (Edinburgh: Moray Press, 1947); I.F. Grant, *Highland Folk Ways* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), 139-40; Margaret Fay Shaw, *Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1955); Charles W. Dunn, *Highland Settler: A Portrait of the Scottish Gael in Nova Scotia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1953), 45; Margaret Bennett Knight, *Folkways and Religion of the Quebec Hebridean Homes*, National Museum of Man Mercury Series, Canadian Centre for Folk Culture Studies, Paper 34, (Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1980), 45-144; Margaret Bennet Knight, "Some Aspects of the Scottish Gaelic Traditions of the Codroy Valley, Newfoundland" (M.A. thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1975), 114-65; Alexander MacDonal, *Story and Song From Loch Ness-side, Being Principally Sketches of Olden-Time Life in the Valley of the Great Glenn of Scotland with Particular References to Glenmoriston and Vicinity* (Inverness: Northern Counties Newspaper and Printing and Publishing Company, 1914), 205-324; Ada Goodrich-Freer, *Outer Isles* (Westminster: Archibald Constable and Co., 1902), 61-81.
3. See Arnold van Gennep, *Manuel de folklore français contemporain*, Tome III (Paris: Picard, 1937). He also lists the major works which place emphasis on the *veillée*: Louis Marin, *Les contes traditionnels en Lorraine* (Paris, 1964); Gerald Thomas, "Stories, Storytelling and Storytellers in Newfoundland's French Tradition: A Study of the Narrative Art of Four French Newfoundlanders" (Ph.D. diss., Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1977); Alexander Bovet and Oliver Perrin, *Bretz-Izel, ou vie des Bretons de l'Armorique* (2nd ed., 1844; reprint, Paris: Tehou, 1970), especially "La veillee," 223-26; Daniel Fabre and Jacques Lacroix, *La tradition orale du conte occitan* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1973-74), especially vol. 1, chap. 6, "L'activité narrative"; Lawrence Wylie, *Village in the Vaucluse* (2nd ed., Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 274-77; Horace Miner, *St. Denis: A French-Canadian Parish* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1939).
4. Alessandro Falassi, *Folklore by the Fireside: Text and Context in the Tuscan Veglia* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1980).
5. Dell Hymes, "Breakthrough into Performance," in *Folklore: Performance and Communication*, ed. Dan Ben Amos and Kenneth S. Goldstein (Paris: Mouton, 1975), 11-74. See also Roger Abrahams, "Foreword," to Falassi, *Folklore by the Fireside*, xii.
6. See also Victor Butler, *The Little Nord Easter: Reminiscences of a Placentia Bayman*, ed. Wilfred W. Wareham (St. John's: Breakwater Books, 1980), 79.
7. Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive (MUNFLA), Tape 70-8/C674.
8. MUNFLA, Tape 70-8/F634.
9. MUNFLA, Tape 70-8/F654.
10. MUNFLA, Tape 70-8/F665.
11. MUNFLA, Tape 72-13/F1000.
12. See Butler, *Little Nord Easter*, 115.
13. Abrahams, "Foreword," xi.