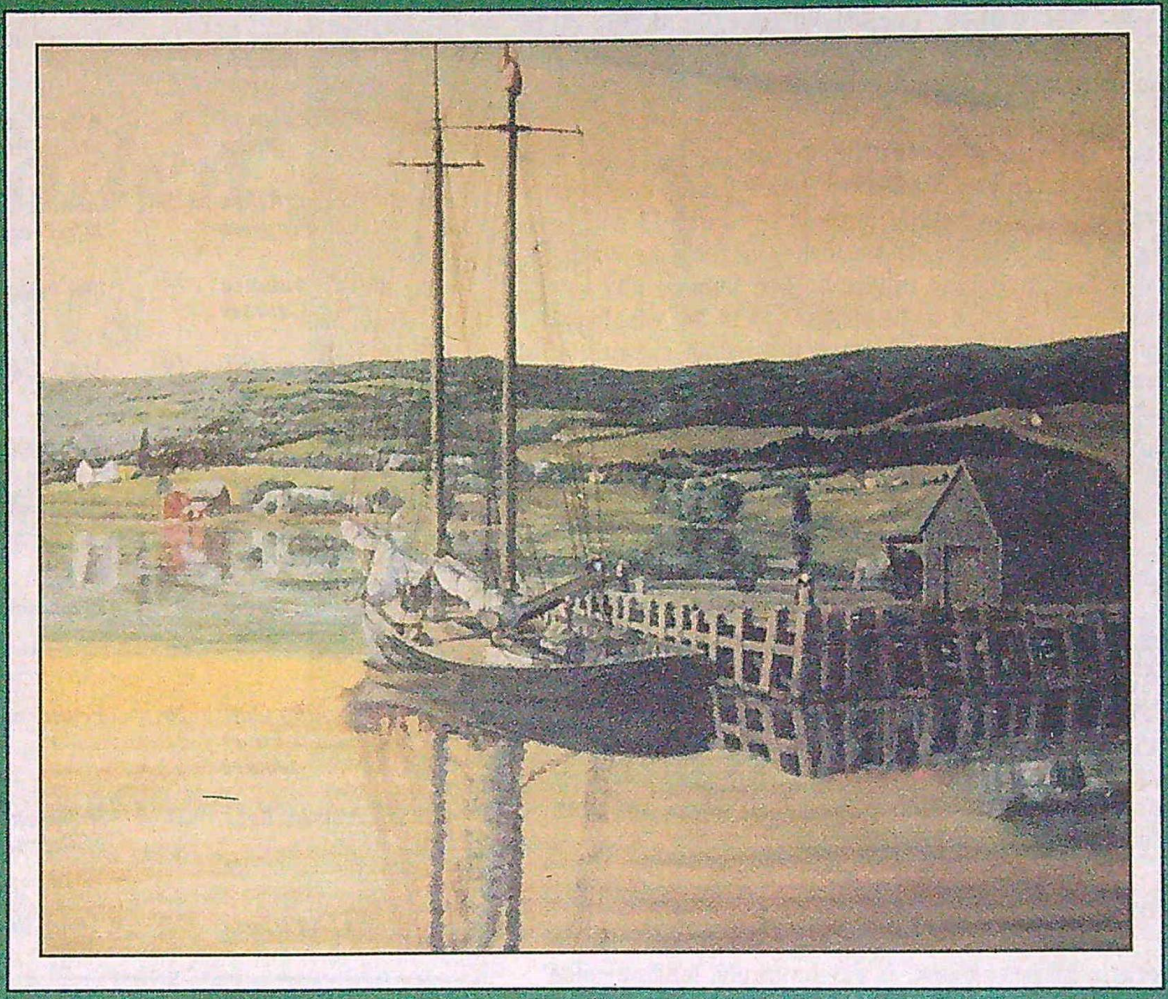
Partici-Paper

# Men, fish and wooden boats

## *A look at the marine history of Inverness County*



Inverness
County
Cape Breton
Nova Scotia
January/February 1996
Volume 17, No. 1

YEAR OF THE WOODEN BOAT
NOVA SCOTIA 1996

* Adult Ed Spring Programming
* OPEN DOORS for adult literacy
* Reaching out:
  new column by Francene Gillis
* Mabou-Hillsborough church
  to celebrate 175 years

*Partici-Paper* January/ February 1996, Volume 17, No. 1

## *from the Director's Desk . . .*

### Spring Programming

On site registration for the spring session of Recreation and Continuing Education courses will take place February 5 to the 9th. Check this issue for details on courses available in the various communities throughout the county.

### Nominations for volunteer awards

Nominations are now being accepted for Volunteer Week 1996. Nominations received by March 13 will be eligible to be chose to represent the County at provincial ceremonies in Halifax in April. The Municipality will honor volunteer the night of April 24 at the Municipal Building in Port Hood. See inside this issue for details on nominating a volunteer.

### Join the Winterfest fun!

Join the fun! Be WinterActive! Several communities in the county are planning special suppers, dances, and outdoor winter activities such as snowmobile rallies and skating parties. Something for all ages! Be sure to check this issue for a listing of some of the Winterfest activities scheduled. Upcoming events will also be listed in the local newspapers and the Recreation Report, aired every Thursday on CIGO and CJFX radio stations, will also report on upcoming events. Don't forget the Inverness County Winter Events brochure; it is a good source of information on Cape Breton West high school and West Island Senior hockey league games.

### Environmental projects

The Inverness County Recreation/Tourism Department has on hand an environmental funding guide which is a quick reference of available programs in the Atlantic Region. Deadlines for some projects are as early as February 28th. Check this issue for information.

### Wanted: model boat builders/ collectors

In this Year of the Wooden Boat, the Recreation/Tourism Department is currently gathering resource information on individuals in the county who are model boat builders or who may have a collection of such items. We would also like to hear from craftsmen who have built or refurbished boats as a hobby. You can reach our office at (902) 787-2274 or FAX (902) 787-3110. Or you may write to P.O. Box 179, Port Hood, Nova Scotia, BOE 2WO.

*Deadline for the March/April issue -- February 16*


| | | |
|---|---|---|
| *Men, fish & wooden boats* | 3 | Mary Anne Ducharme |
| *Winterfest Fun!* | 6 | Inverness County |
| *Environmental projects* | 7 | NSYCC |
| *Paintings by Peter Rankin* | 14 | *interview* |
| *A sure sign of spring* | 9 | *Adult Education programming* |
| *Wingfield's Progress* | 17 | *coming soon to Whycocomagh* |
| *St. John Ambulance Courses* | 18 | *in Cheticamp* |
| *Mabou Alive update* | 19 | *Mary Goodwin* |
| *Ancestors Unlimited* | 20 | *Jim St.Clair* |
| *Mabou-Hillsborough United Church Anniversary* | 21 | *Jim St.Clair* |
| *Open Doors a reality!* | 23 | *Francene Gillis* |
| *Reaching Out! a new Partici-Paper feature* | 26 | *Francene Gillis* |
| *Volunteer Nominations* | 27 | *Department of Recreation/Tourism* |
| *The Old House* | 31 | *Anne Clarke-Webber* |


*Partici-Paper* editor: Mary Anne Ducharme
R.R.#2 Whycocomagh, N.S. BOE 3MO
Phone: 902-945-2982

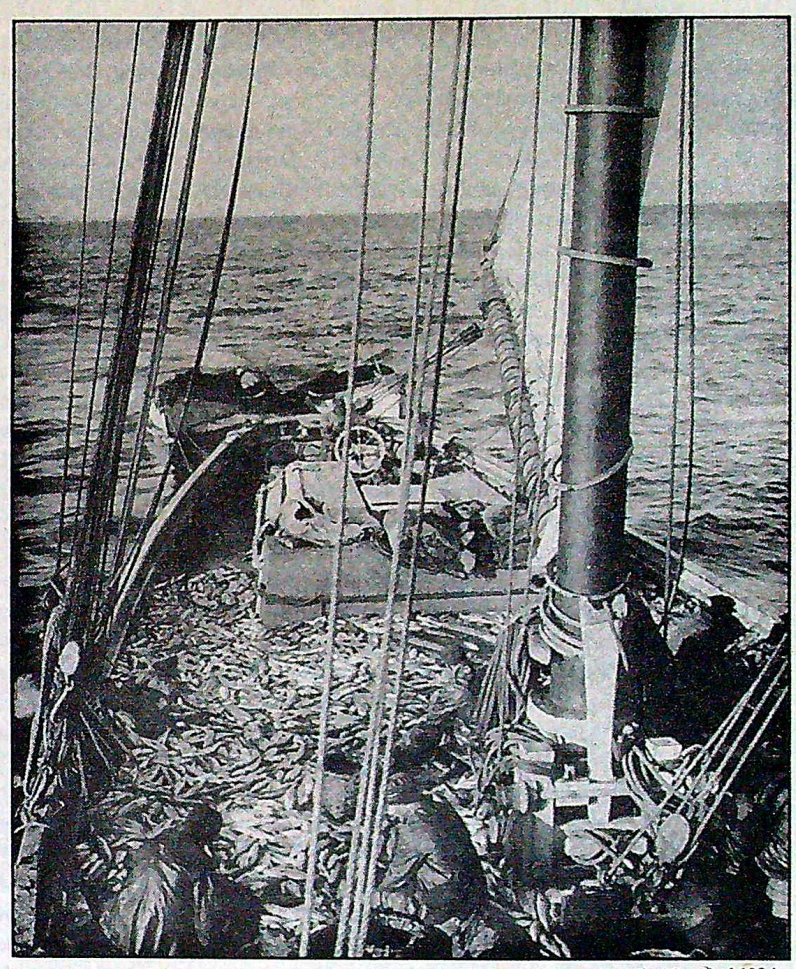
*Partici-Paper* is published six times a year by the Inverness County Department of Recreation and Tourism, John Cotton Director, Box 179, Municipal Building, Port Hood, N.S. BOE 2WO. Phone: 902-787-2274. Contributions of information, articles, photos, etc. are welcome. This publication is a service for the residents of Inverness County. Other subscribers: $5.40 per year, Canadian; and $6.78 per year, U.S. Please send payment for subscriptions to the Recreation Department.

Printed by *The Pictou Advocate*.

# *Men, fish & wooden boats*

**a look at the marine heritage of Inverness County**

**by Mary Anne Ducharme**



From *Men, Fish,& Boats, the pictorial story of the North Atlantic Fishermen* by Alfred Stanford,1934.

## Part I: The power of cod

Cape Breton and Newfoundland are the geographical front doors of Canada. By sea, our ports are nearer to Europe than any others on the Atlantic seaboard and adventurous men and women have long come to this wild and savage country to fish. They came claiming for themselves two inalienable rights: the freedom to worship God, and the freedom to fish for cod.,

Sacred was salt fish as our first currency, and the basis of all sea trade and traffic from the beginning. Cod was responsible for boom times and bust, and if our economy is shipwrecked now, cod is partly behind it. Cod-driven battles with the elements, harrowing survivals and tragedies, rum runners, smugglers, and privateers are all part of the real marine heritage of Inverness County. Add to this mixture our close proximity to epic struggles for power in the times of Louisbourg, the Acadian Expulsions, and World War II and any misconception that our history is dull must be tossed overboard. We are, indeed, a sea people. Coastal trade and fishing dominated our culture, economy and psychology until well into this century.

Alfred Stanford in his 1934 book *Men, Fish, and Boats*, gives us an idea of what good times were for the fishermen: "Down in the fo'c's'le of the fishing schooner, when the stove is red hot and the air is thick with tobacco smoke, the men wedge themselves in on the worn bunk edges-- and tall tales start. In the hours of the watch below when one anecdote prompts another and the jug of Nelson's blood-- thick red rum-- makes the rounds, the clowns of the fleet, the heroes, the sail carriers -- all are duly remembered." *continued page 4*

These sea yarns found expression in books dealing with life at sea. For instance, the cook in *Captains Courageous* was a descendant of one of the black slaves who was promised freedom by the English if he joined against the Americans during the War of 1812. Somehow he came to Whycocomagh and raised a family there, for Kipling describes his son (or perhaps grandson) in this way: "He was a coal black Celt with second sight, who came from the innards of Cape Breton and spoke Gaelic." Not far across the channel, at East Bay, was the home of the nefarious Captain Alexander MacLean of *Sea Wolf* fame.

As communities took root along our western coast, virtually every decent harbour was frenetic with the comings and goings of wooden vessels laden with cargo, fish, and travellers.

For generations, Channel Islanders fished here, and they also engaged in occasional piracy to augment business capital. Charles Robin, born in 1745, on the Isle of Jersey, is one of earliest of the famed Robin family who had business along the Inverness County coast. The largest sailing ship known to be built in Cheticamp was the 1812 brig *Cape Breton* of 114 tonnes and it was co-owned by the Robin family and Philip Brouard.Their company (later known as Robin, Jones and Whitman), is predated only by the Hudson Bay Company in Canada, and it was formed to supply the local fishermen with necessities imported from Great Britain and the West Indies, and to market the fishermen's catch around the world. There was at times a serious loss of fish intended for export because the company had its early troubles with fishing posts being looted and fishing vessels being destroyed or captured. Unarmed fishing vessels were easy prey to privateers during the numerous wars between France and England, and even the American John Paul Jones is said to have engaged three Robin company ships in the Gut of Canso in 1776. There were also many injustices to the fishermen in the Robin family system with low prices paid for the catch and high prices charged at the company store.

A letter by a D.F. MacLean in the *Halifax Morning Herald* in February of 1886, reveals the importance of codfish. It reports that 12,000 quintals (one million, two hundred thousand kilograms) of codfish were exported from Cheticamp by the Robin Company in the past year, with principal markets in Spain, Italy, Brazil. In that village, the company owned 300 fishing boats, each manned by three fishermen, and along the coast 1,500 fishermen dealt with the firm. Gradually, however, the demand for salt and dried fish nearly vanished in favour of fresh and frozen products and the company ceased being involved in the fishing industry in 1964.

Port Hood, or "Justacorps," as the French named it, was important in the early marine history of this side of Cape Breton Island. It was once linked to an isthmus connecting to the point of land just north of Murphy's Pond. With its southern exposure, this made a harbour that was the most protected and safest along the entire western coast. The French used it in the eighteenth century for ship building and to cut stone from a quarry for Fortress Louisbourg.

In 1819, a massive storm tore out the center of the isthmus and erosion finished the job of destroying the safe anchorage. Port Hood island still had a small protected harbour, however, and in the mid nineteenth century, cod flakes were found near every wharf in the county, filling the air with the smell of fish and prosperity.

In our own century, H.A. Smith and Sons ran the first lobster cannery on the Inverness coast at Port Hood and soon lobsters boats laden with traps were bobbing out there in the water like so many wooden bathtubs. Lobster canneries dotted the coves and harbours of the county and the population of Port Hood Island swelled with young women who worked in the canneries. The factory girls came over to "the Mainland" of Port Hood on days off, to visit Joe Hart's store. They went back singing to the island with their five cents worth of candy. A large cookhouse down at the wharf supplied the meals for the workers, and this cookhouse later saved the lives of two fishermen -- but that story comes later.

In 1944, the last of the old Port Hood Island canneries was destroyed in a December gale. In 1963, another December gale destroyed most of the old wharves and fishing shacks along our coast. That storm helped erase the last traces of the era of wooden sailing ships.

In Margaree Harbour is the old schooner *Marian Elizabeth*, beached there almost forty years ago, and later turned into a museum by the May family. The *Marian Elizabeth* was built and launched in Lunenburg in 1918 by Smith and Rhuland who would build the *Bluenose* three years later. In its heyday in the 1920's she made two to three voyages a year to Lisbon, Portugal to unload part of the cargo of salt cod. Supplies of European rum were then laid in, hidden under the remaining fish, to be smuggled into ports in the "Boston States" during Prohibition. She was eventually caught red-handed by the Coast Guard and her bowsprit was shot off, effectively ending her rum-running activities. The *Marion Elizabeth* is the last of the Grand Banks fishing schooners to be built in Lunenburg, and she was the last ship of her kind to be built exclusively for wind-power -- all others following were constructed with engines.

The inland sea of Bras d'Or, and Lake Ainslie had

***continued page 5***