

Intangible Cultural Heritage Update

News and notes on Newfoundland and Labrador's Intangible Cultural Heritage Program



Oct/Nov 2011
ISSN 1918-7408

ich@heritagefoundation.ca
Heritage Foundation of NL

In this issue

Page 1	Basket Makers Wanted
Page 2	Belbin's Grocery
Page 4	The Battery
Page 4	Tales of Town

Looking For Basket Makers

By Dale Jarvis, ICH Development Officer

Recently on CBC Radio Noon, there was a discussion of traditional crafts that may be dying out in Newfoundland and Labrador. One such craft that was mentioned was the art of basket making. Historically, there were many different types of baskets made in the province, each with their own history.

Over the next few months, the Intangible Cultural Heritage office will be looking for traditional basket makers, or people with memories of traditional baskets, where ever they can be found in the province.

There is a long history of basket making and weaving in Newfoundland and Labrador, starting with aboriginal basket making, and later European traditions. Baskets have been made from a variety of materials, including sea grass, tree root, birch and juniper.

To start, we are interested in two particular traditions. The first tradition is spruce root basket making, a type of basket making which was once common in Mi'kmaq communities across Atlantic Canada, and which has seen something of revival in recent years. The second tradition is that of mill lunch baskets, like the example shown above, once commonly made and used by mill workers in places like Grand Falls-Windsor.

While the focus, to start, will be on spruce root baskets and mill lunch baskets, we are interested in any living basket-makers. If you know someone who makes trout baskets, for example, or any other kind of hand-made basket, you can contact me at the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador by email at ich@heritagefoundation.ca or you can contact the office by phone toll-free at 1-888-739-1892 ext2. I'm interested in learning more about these traditions, and doing interviews with anyone willing!

(Photo source <http://tinyurl.com/7qtddgo>)

An Oral History of Belbin's Grocery

By *Melissa Squarey*

For Chris Belbin, being part of the 3rd generation of his family-run business is an important aspect of his life, and the life of his customers at Belbin's Grocery. Chris and his brother Bob run what is now one of the few local small business grocery stores in St. John's. For many, Belbin's is a staple in the cultural identity of St. John's. Belbin's Grocery isn't just another grocery store says Chris "We treat our customers like our extended family. If you go to a store where someone treats you nice then the customer is more likely to come back."

Belbin's was originally opened by Chris's grandfather after he developed arthritis and could no longer work as a store manager at Ayre and Sons, a local big business at the time. Upon retiring from Ayre and Sons, Chris's grandfather opened a small convenience store/grocery in the front room of his home on 85 Quidi Vidi Road, in September of 1943. There, his sons Edgar, Frasier, and Douglas expanded the business at the same location; it's nice to think that the business is still located on the homestead of the Belbin's.

In 1943 there were more than 12 local neighbourhood groceries in the Signal Hill, Quidi Vidi Road, Forest Road, and Battery. The first expansion of the business allowed Belbin's grocery to deliver groceries to customers by horse and buggy. The help of the horses also allowed the brothers to expand their reach in St. John's to Logy Bay and Lemarchant Road.

Chris believes that one of the reasons Belbin's expanded so quickly in the 40s is because of the customer service their clients received when they came to the store. Chris says "Back then you came into the store and you met with 1, 2, or 3 of the brothers while you were in the shop."

This personal service to the customer has always been a part of the Belbin's tradition. Chris tells a story about how great the service was by his father, Douglas and his uncles Edgar and Frasier. The story goes that a lady placed a phone order for potatoes for her supper one time. Chris says "I don't remember who it was but anyway I'm not sure if it was my father or Bob's father Edgar who actually too the potatoes and peeled them for the lady to save her that much more time when she got the order at her door." Chris explains;

That was the type of business they had run as opposed to the large supermarkets where you walked in and got your groceries. It's the same reason our customers come now, it's that there is always one of us in the store for questions or problems that can be answered immediately. You don't have to go to a head office somewhere. We also diversify our products, we have a large selection of meats, produce, vegetables, and specialty grocery items which includes our home cooked meals.

The home delivery is now done by a truck, instead of horse and buggy. Belbin's Grocery still takes phone-in orders but they've also expanded the technological side of the business by taking email and fax orders for groceries as well. Belbin's is a special service as I found out. In fact, the delivery man will take specialty instructions to put perishables in the refrigerator or deep freezer once delivered to an empty home. Chris says "We realized that people are now too busy to make time to call or come into the store for their groceries. So they email their list and the groceries are on the table when they get home."

With the expansions to the grocery over the years Belbin's has been able to keep up with the times and the local market to make a worthwhile business. Chris says that ordering specialty items has been one of the ways in which they've continued to re-invent the wheel at Belbin's Grocery "We've always asked our customers to tell us if they'd like a product stocked in the store and we'd do our best to bring it in for them."

The home cooked meals expansion of the store has been one of the most modern ideas that Belbin's has taken control of. About



12 years ago Bob and Chris were looking to expand the grocery. Bob had the idea that people were looking for quick prepared food alternatives due to busy lifestyles. Those busy people wanted meals that were filled with real healthy food ingredients. Chris explains “We started with 10-12 recipes made by Kitty Drake, the founder of our home cooked meals, today we have over 60 meals and 10-20 types of soups that people can pick up and heat for their convenience.”

It’s worthwhile to think of the things that this family-owned and operated business had had to go through in the almost 70 years it’s been open. Chris suggests that the two most important reasons why the local grocery survives are its customer service ,and loyalty to customer product base. Chris says “If you go into a store and someone treats you nice then 9 chances out of 10 you’ll go back.” He explains further;

The big difference between ourselves and the supermarkets is that we don’t want to move 1000 items of a specific product off our shelves every month. If we can carry it, the products we order can sit on the shelf to be sold at the customer’s convenience and we’ll continue to stock it. But, the big guys aren’t interested in that unless the product moves off the self in a frequent manner.

Chris Belbin still remembers his first day on the job at Belbin’s Grocery. He had previously worked in the carpentry profession so when his father asked him to pick up a milk order for the store on his first day he thought nothing of it.

I remember it was a Tuesday morning because the store was closed on Sunday and Monday’s back then. It was just after a long weekend and my father called me at home to pick up milk from the dairy in Mount Pearl. He said he wanted a couple of cases of 2% two-litres, a couple of skim, a couple of homogenized and then he said he’d like one of 1% one-litre, one of skim, and so on. Off I went, I marked it all down and came back to the store with the milk from the dairy. I remember I came into the store and Dad said to bring it in and put it in the cooler. I looked hard at him and said that the milk wasn’t going to fit in the cooler. Then he asked me how much milk I had gotten. Now what I had mistaken was that when he told me to get 1 of the one-litre was that he meant only one container but I had bought a whole case of it. At the time I had something like 20-25 cases of milk in the truck. Luckily, the dairy took some of it back and we got it all straightened away.

Chris is full of memories about the shop and the people that come through there. He says that 100% of the customers at Belbin’s Grocery are great people who treat them with the same respect as they are given when they enter the store. There’s a sense of community when you enter the store and it’s easily felt even for a new comer who’s never been there. It still has that homey feel of an old fashioned business with a large group of people who are dedicated to keeping it that way. Chris says “One time I could name 100% of the people who came in here, with the expansions though I can probably only name about 70% of them. I wish I could name them all but we’re so much bigger and have a larger influx of people coming through with the big oil.”

That’s what’s important to Chris, the customers. You can tell from the way he talks about them when you ask about Belbin’s. It’s not the store or his family that he mentions first, it’s the customers. So to all new customers that come into the store Chris says “Welcome Aboard! I can always tell when someone is new to the store so I always try to say hello and ask if they need a hand.”

What is the most important thing for Belbin’s Grocery at the moment? Chris says “We’ve come into the 21st century with our eyes open. Technology changes. Really we’re not just grocers anymore, you aren’t on the floor packing groceries and speaking to people like you used to. You spend more time on the computer, not talking to as many people as I’d like, but the thing is that you make time where you can.”

It’s clear that local grocery is not really about the food stocked on the shelves, the money made, or the building. Belbin’s Grocery and its staff are proudly serving people who come into the shop with the same service and caring of a community. This attitude is intangible, but it has been passed on for three generations with the possibility of more to come.



[HERE]SAY: A Story Map of Outer Battery launches Nov. 23rd.

[HERE]SAY is a collection of stories accessible to walkers using their mobile phones. Sidewalk signs display a phone number and 3-digit code. Pedestrians can dial the number on their mobile and hear a story about the very spot where they are standing.

Most maps provide a graphic layout of street grids and transit routes. [HERE]SAY is different: a story map, showing that landscape consists not only of streets and buildings, but of human experience -- what is often called the character of a place. Newfoundland is full of stories, and [HERE]SAY lifts the lid on them.

The initial [HERE]SAY exhibition A Story Map of Water Street has been operational since 2009 and won the 2011 Manning Award for Excellence in the Public Presentation of Historic Places.

In cooperation with the Outer Battery Neighbourhood Association, [HERE]SAY signs have now been erected along Outer Battery Road. At each sign, walkers can hear personal memories told by community residents. The area, leading to the North Head Trail, sees 84,000 visitors annually. The story map can also be accessed online at www.heresay.ca.



Join the creators **Wednesday, November 23 from 5.30-7.30pm**

for the public launch of A STORY MAP OF OUTER BATTERY at The Crow's Nest, just east of the War Memorial, halfway between Duckworth and Water Streets.

Working on History Tales of Town at Christmas

Wednesday, December 7th

7pm

The Rooms Theatre

Christmas in St. John's is a very special time. Join folklorist Dale Jarvis as he sits down to chat with long-time Christmas Parade Santa Bruce Templeton, and author Helen Porter about their memories of Christmas in St. John's.

Presented in collaboration with the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador's Intangible Cultural Heritage Program.

\$5 ticketed event, tickets free for Rooms members.

