

THE ABBIE TABLE;
(from an article by by Morgan Murray)

Writer/actor Andy Jones worked with artist Peter Breckon and members of the “Growing Up, Up In Cove” collective to develop The Abbie Table Project.

The centerpiece of this ongoing project is a 10’ x 4’ table inscribed with the personal story of Abbie Ellis Whiffen and ‘illuminated’ by several dozen contributors.

Abbie’s story details the life of a Newfoundland family engaged in the salt fishery from the 1920s to the 1950s.

In this essay Morgan Murray reflects on the broader significance of Abbie’s story.

“The grandparents’ homesteads are long gone now as well as the flakes, stages, stables and sheds and most of the gardens are on the commons. There are fewer people there now, some of them having moved down harbour. But now they have electricity, paved roads, water and sewer, streetlights, telephones and almost everyone has a car or a pick-up truck.”

With this description of how Caplin Cove had changed since Abbie Whiffen’s (née Ellis) childhood, she sums up the great shift that Newfoundland has undergone over the past 50 years. Ms. Whiffen’s story, “**Growing Up, Up in Cove,**” the centerpiece of Andy Jones’ Abbie Table project, recounts growing up from the 1920s to the 1950s in a small house in a small cove in Trinity Bay in the twilight of the great salt fishery that had made and kept Newfoundland for more than 400 years.

We all know the story, or at least we should: Were it not for the sea teeming with cod, John Cabot may have had half a mind to turn the Matthew around and go looking for someplace a little less rocky, a little less windy, and a little warmer.

But the cod convinced him to land on the jagged rocky shore near Bonavista, and the cod convinced others to come, and others, like Abbie Whifen's grandparents, to stay.

The catching and processing—mostly salting—of cod and the way of life that went with it came to define this place, its people, and their culture.

Things began to change, though, with Confederation in 1949 and the various subsequent programs of modernization, development, and resettlement in the 1950s and 1960s. Electricity, paved roads, water and sewer, streetlights, telephones, cars, and trucks came as the cod and fishermen went (one away for good, the other away to the mainland for work).

This gradual decline turned to abrupt collapse with the announcement of the Cod Moratorium in 1992. Almost overnight 40,000 people were out of work, and the backbone of the province's economy and culture for more than four centuries had been broken once and for all.

This is all well-documented: the rich fishing past, the decline, the collapse, and even the recent recovery. Now there are shrimp, crab, and tourists to catch, oil in the off-shore, oil in Alberta, and power in the Lower Churchill.

The flakes, stages, stables, and sheds—the infrastructure of the salt fishery—have been converted into cozy vacation homes and quaint museums. But an entire generation of Newfoundlanders have grown up without a salt cod fishery. And while the story of tragedy and triumph has been mythologized and has become a point of pride, the details are being lost of how thousands of hardy people managed to not just survive, but earn a decent living from a rough sea and a hard rock.

Enter Andy Jones and The Abbie Table.

During the Q&A portion of a recent *Words in Edgewise* event where Andy had been sharing portions of Ms. Whiffen's very detailed story, he was asked why stories like this are important to remember and share. He replied: "Any story, any human story, about adaptation, and innovation, and creativity in whatever surroundings we are presented in, is very important for us to hear." Important for us to hear not merely to know, or remember, or revel in the quaintness of how Grandma managed to grow up without a computer. But

important for us to hear as a reminder of the courage and creativity that sustained people in a very difficult place to live.

And while the cod may have gone, and overall things have gotten easier since then, this courage and creativity remains an important example of how we may persist when things get difficult, and more importantly how we might make things better not just by tapping into the spirit of our hardy ancestors, but by tapping into the details of their lives as well.

As Andy points out, Ms. Whiffen's story of life at the Ellis house in Caplin Cove is both the quintessential Newfoundland story of life in the Salt Fishery, and the model for self-sufficiency that has become the defining feature of contemporary environmental and food movements, not to mention a potential saving grace for an island that is no less harsh.

For a place that survived quite well for several hundred years without roads or power lines to be suddenly knocked for a complete loop by Hurricane Igor, we might be well-advised to look back at the secrets that kept them going so well for so long.

The story of The Abbie Table begins, as many local stories do, on Duckworth Street in St. John's.

It was 1981 and Andy, a well-known actor of CODCO fame, ran into friend and sometime-collaborator Derek Pelley, a well-known musician of *Figgy Duff* fame who was in town to try and sell his house, the old Ellis House, in Caplin Cove. Andy ended up buying that house as a summer home, and the little old house, without electricity or running water, has been a beloved retreat for Andy's friends and family ever since.

Sometime later Andy received a call from Ms. Whiffen, a retired schoolteacher from Bonavista who had grown up in the Ellis House. She had just written "Growing Up, Up in Cove" in response to her granddaughter asking, "Grandma, how did you ever grow up without a computer?" and she was calling Andy to ask if he would like to read the story of what life had been like in the house he now owned.

Andy fell in love with the story and wanted to find a way to honour it and share it with his family, and he thought inscribing it on the surface of the family's picnic table in Caplin Cove would do just that.

When The Rooms Museum approached Andy in 2008 about doing a project that included art, artifact, and archive it was a perfect opportunity to begin The Abbie Table project in earnest, and later, with his residency at Eastern Edge, Andy was able to finish the table, enlisting the help of artist Peter Breckon, and dozens of others from Gerald Squires to Ms. Whiffen's grandchildren, to help "illuminate" the story on the table to keep the memory of it from fading.

As Ms. Whiffen writes in the final sentence of her story about the Ellis house, which could be in reference to the story of the island as a whole: "The house that got built in a hurry by the two brothers, while they were busy earning a living fishing and farming, is still there and in good condition."

And what has kept it in good condition is the care and attention paid to it by inheritors like Andy Jones.