

# Women in Labrador: A Personal Viewpoint

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*THEM DAYS* Labrador

Labrador, forming the eastern-most portion of the Canadian Shield, is roughly triangular in shape and is approximately 112,000 square miles, almost three times the size of the island of Newfoundland. In 1949 Labrador and Newfoundland joined Canada as the tenth province and, for the first time in their history, Labradorian men and women were allowed to vote. Today, Labrador has over 36,000 people - Inuit, Indian, mixed-bloods and white - all of whom are proud to call themselves Labradorians.

Writing about women in Labrador is not an easy thing to do. One cannot make a blanket statement and say that "Labrador women were this or that." Each person, each family, has its differences and it is impossible to generalize. Therefore, to make this presentation more manageable, I have decided to trace the women in my

family tree as a way of looking at the experience of women in Labrador.

I am a native Labradorian of Inuit, Indian and white descent, a Labrador Settler. What I know about my aboriginal ancestors is the same as everyone else who has read books and reports written by anthropologists and other such learned people. We are led to believe by these writers that females were the expendable members of their society. This seems very hard and cruel to us today, but who are we to pass judgement on the natives of Labrador before the white man came to their shores? The main concern of the people was survival, and survival in a nomadic lifestyle meant that all the members of a tribe or group had to be productive in their roles. What sense would it make to those people to keep an old person or a sickly person alive if it meant depriv-

ing the rest of the tribe of food, preventing them, perhaps, from moving to another part of the country where food was more plentiful. Maybe staying in one spot to wait for someone to die would mean that the game had passed on and it would take weeks to find more; it was a matter of life or death for the whole tribe. It was an accepted fact of life that if a person became a liability then that person was left to die. Apparently it was not unusual for girl babies to be born dead more often than boy babies, especially if a family had a girl or two already. Men, after all, were the hunters.

Women were only as valuable as their talents. A good seamstress was respected by everyone; she had no difficulty in getting a husband to provide for her. If one husband died, there was always another man willing to take her as his wife no matter how old she was, just as long as she was able to provide him with well-made clothing. Survival of a tribe also depended on being dressed to suit the weather and that was the woman's job.

One of my great great grandmothers was an Inuit from the Groswater Bay area in Labrador. She was left an orphan at an early age, so the tribe decided she was of no value to them and she should be put to death. And why not? She had no one to bargain for her and she was too young to have any proven skills that would make her a good wife. She was just another mouth to feed, *and* she might even be the cause of the bad luck that they were experiencing; to dispose of her was the only answer. However, one elderly couple took pity on her. One day when the men were away from the camp hunting, they helped her get away. Now, she could not have been as worthless as her people led themselves to believe, because she made her way along the shore, tying sticks together to cross rivers and streams. Some time after her escape, she saw two white men in a boat and she called out to them, her fear of strangers being over-ridden by her fear of being eaten alive by polar bears or wolves. The white

men took her to their cabin and allowed her to stay there and keep house for them. One of the men grew very fond of her and, after he had taught her how to say the Lord's Prayer in English, he married her. His name was Ambrose Brooks and he came from England in the late 1700s to escape the pressgangs who were taking men to serve in the wars between England and France.

Ambrose, being an Englishman, had ideas of "right" and "wrong" imposed on him by the class-structured society in which he had grown up; so when he married this young Inuit girl he took away her heathen name and called her Susan which was his mother's name. He laid down a few laws which would forbid her to continue any of the customs of her people which he felt were heathen customs. One of these was eating raw meat. When he would catch her eating raw meat he would beat her.

Ambrose [c1780-1859] and Susan [d c.1825] had three daughters, Elizabeth, Hannah and Lydia [1818-1907]. Elizabeth married a half-breed and they were tragically drowned together shortly after. Hannah and Lydia both married white men, two each in fact. I get the feeling from Lydia's writings that it was important to marry a white man, which would have been Ambrose's wish, since he clearly thought native people were several classes below him. But some of those white men were "nothing to write home about," as witnessed by Lydia's first marriage. When Lydia was sixteen years old, Bill Blake, a young settler, decided that she would be his wife even though Lydia made it perfectly clear that she had no intention of marrying him. A dance was held at Rigolet; Ambrose and Lydia were invited to stay with Bill Blake and his mother. Bill got Ambrose so drunk that he fell into a deep sleep. Mrs. Blake told Lydia to get into a dress as there was going to be a wedding. Poor Lydia had no way out so she was forced into a marriage with a man she despised. She bore five children for Bill Blake and then he died. Dan Campbell

came to Labrador about that time, or shortly after, as a Hudson's Bay Company servant and when he had served his time he decided to stay in Labrador. He married Lydia and she taught him all there was to know about trapping, fishing and any other skills necessary to survive in Labrador in those days. Lydia had eight children for Dan Campbell. Lydia's account of her life after marrying Dan Campbell shows that they were happy together.<sup>2</sup>

In talking to some of the oldest residents of Labrador, it comes across very clearly that it was important for white men to marry white women. Daughters of white fathers were expected to marry white men, if at all possible, or at least half-breeds. As far as white men were concerned they would prefer to marry white women, native women being acceptable only if they were the last resort. Flora Baikie tells of an Englishman who was so determined to marry the only white girl for miles around that he persuaded the Justice of the Peace to marry him to a little girl,

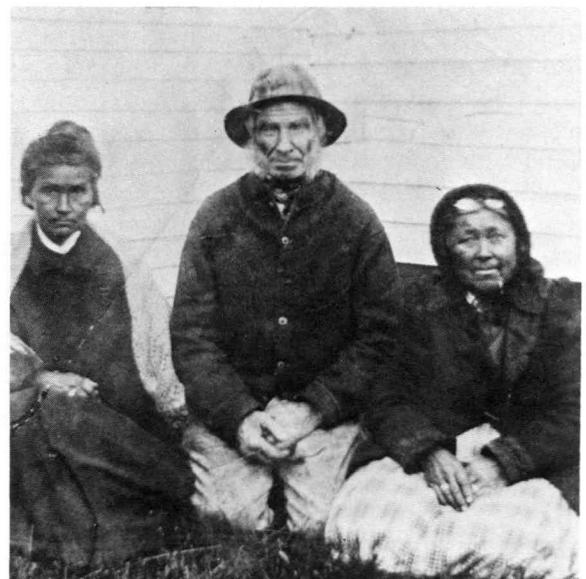
promising not to sleep with her until she was twelve years old. He was afraid that if he waited until she was of marriageable age that someone else would beat him to her.<sup>3</sup>

Life was often difficult for women. Lydia states in her writings that the white men would have been happy together with their native wives if it was not for the despised rum that the merchants brought to the coast.

By the time Lydia had married, the lifestyle was more settled than in her mother's young years, which were spent following the game according to the seasons. From Lydia's time to my late teens, most families in eastern, central and northern Labrador had three homes, one for the salmon season, one for the cod season and a winter home. And by the time Lydia's children were settling in homes of their own, the trappers were getting plentiful enough that it was becoming necessary to go further and further away to get fur. Lydia's daughter, Margaret, (d. 1940)

*MARGARET (CAMPBELL) BAIKIE AND  
HER PARENTS DON CAMPBELL AND  
LYDIA CAMPBELL, about 1890.*

*(Photo courtesy of Flora Baikie, THEM DAYS)*



[d.1940], writes about how she went to Grand Lake to keep house for her half-brother Thomas Blake.<sup>4</sup> Being his house-keeper did not mean doing only the household chores, she also had her own trap-line and kept the pot in partridges and rabbits. This was no different than most women in Labrador at that time and for a good many years to follow. I can remember seeing women who could handle the dog team as well as any man, and could shoot even better. Women were well able to keep the household going in the absence of their men-folk.

By my grandmother's time [1874-1942], men were going even further into the bush and staying for three, four and even five months at a time. Elizabeth Goudie writes about having to finish building a porch on her house because her husband was not able to get it done before he left home at the end of September.<sup>5</sup> There are numerous such stories all over Labrador. Martha Pardy of Sandwich Bay was a better carpenter than her husband and made things even when he was around. There was no such thing in Labrador then, and even when I was growing up, there was no equivalent of a hardware store that sold furniture, window, doors and the like. If you wanted a house, boat, komatik, table, bed or whatever, you made it yourself, or you might very likely have to do without. Right up until I left home twenty-two years ago, we never had a store-bought table in our home, and with good reason. Even after we could buy them, we kept our home-made ones since they didn't get wiggly in the legs the way store-bought tables get.

When you live under conditions which demand that you be self-sufficient, everyone had to be able to do their share, men, women and children, and that's the way it was in all of Labrador until about twenty-three years ago. You will still find women in Labrador who are able to turn their hands to anything. Bessie Flynn of Forteau is described by all who know her as being as good as any man at many tasks and a darned sight better than most.

In my early years my father went to the country in late fall and we would not see him again until late March or April. Word might drift back that someone had seen him, or someone spoke to someone who had talked to someone else who had seen him a month or so ago. Did the family curl up in a cocoon or hibernate until the breadwinner returned? Oh no, we just kept right on going, my Mom [Harriet Pardy Martin, b. 1916] was mother and father, and with the help of the children she kept everything shipshape while Dad was away. Sometime around the end of the 1940s, the price of fur dropped so low that it was no longer worth while to trap anymore, so Dad stayed at home. I say he stayed home but that does not mean that he was idle. He never stopped from four in the morning until about nine every night (except for Sunday), and if the weather was too bad to go in the woodpath, he'd help Mom about the house which I think she tolerated (he could make a real mess when he mixed bread).



HARRIET MARTIN, 1980  
(Photo by Doris Saunders, *THEM DAYS*)



DONALD MARTIN AND HIS PUPS PLUCK AND SPEED, about 1944.  
(Photo courtesy of Marcella Martin, *THEM DAYS*)

There were five girls and one boy in our family, so my role was that of the oldest son. I grew up cutting and splitting wood, hauling water, tending nets and whatever else a boy had to do to help his father. I loved every minute of it - well almost - I didn't like taking crabs and double-uglies out of the nets very much. But don't think being the "son" got me out of doing dishes, laundry and mixing bread, it didn't - I didn't have to do as much as the other girls but I did my share as did my little brother when he got old enough - and the girls did enough outside work that if anything happened to Dad or me, one of them could take over. We are all capable of surviving alone if we have to, thanks to the fact that in our family there were no "girls" and "boys" jobs from what I remember and from what I've been told by hundreds of old timers in Labrador, it was much the same with most families in Labrador. There were and are exceptions, of course; we wouldn't be normal if there weren't. There've been hen-pecked husbands, brow-beaten wives and neglected children but they were the exception rather than the rule.

Today we hear women talk about how they have to go out to help supplement the family income, and how they are still expected, by their husbands, to get home from work and do all the housework and cooking; that was not the traditional way of Labrador people, but that is rather a custom of the so-called civilized world. I have never been prevented from pursuing my dreams by my husband, although sometimes he lets me know in no uncertain terms that he thinks I'm nuts, but he supports me as I support him. I never once heard my father speak in a derogatory way to my mother (I don't mean they didn't have arguments but they never did anything to destroy each other's dignity). All I have heard and read about my grandparents and great-grandparents (except for Bill Blake) suggests that the women were treated as equals. And although Ambrose felt superior to Susan, he must have loved her dearly because when she died, Hannah and Lydia were still young enough to need a mother, but he never married again and every year for the rest of his life he lovingly tended her grave.

I have a great deal of pride in my heritage. I feel that I have a lot to be thankful for and I'm happy to be able to say "I am a woman of Labrador."

#### NOTES

1. Doris Saunders is editor of *Them Days* a quarterly magazine "dedicated to documenting and preserving the old ways and early days of Labrador." This presentation was originally given at the meetings of the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women, Halifax, Nova Scotia, November 1981.
2. "Sketches of Labrador Life by a Labrador Woman," St. John's, *Evening Herald*, December-February, 1894-95.
3. Flora Baikie, "I Likes to go Fishing," *Them Days*, Vol. I, No. 4 (June 1976), pp. 12-14.
4. Margaret Baikie's "*Reminiscences*".
5. Elizabeth Goudie, *Women of Labrador*, edited by David Zimmerly (Toronto: Peter Martin Associates, 1973).