

“In Search of Fertile Grounds ...”

It is difficult to say when the first settlers arrived in Exploits but fishermen did extend their fishing north into Notre Dame Bay before 1713. The area was settled in the very early years by the English who were drawn to the island of Newfoundland due to the abundance of fish. For the most part, they re-settled from the Devonshire area of England. The fertile fishing grounds also attracted numerous fishermen from various other parts of Newfoundland in the summer time. In the beginning, Exploits was primarily used during the summer season.

In the year 1820, Thomas Smith surveyed a plan of Exploits Burnt Island Tickle on which a church was marked in the Lower Harbour. The building was still in use, albeit as a barn, some 130 years later. It was also during this period, for about five years, that Exploits became the home of the last known Beothuk or Red Indian, the aboriginal inhabitants of Newfoundland.

"Shanawdithit" (born about 1800), locally known as Nancy April, had allowed herself to be rescued from destitution by trappers following her father's drowning in April, 1823. The trappers brought her to the home of John Peyton Jr, where she stayed for five years as a servant. She was eventually taken to St. John's where she was cared for by Mr. Watt, surgeon of *HMS Grasshopper*. Tall and easily approachable, more was learned about the Beothuk from her than from any other of her people. In 1828 Shanawdithit moved to the home of William Cormack in St. John's and a few months later she was transferred to the home of James Simms, Newfoundland's Attorney General. In the spring of 1829 her health began to fail and she was placed in hospital where she died of tuberculosis (consumption) on June 6, 1829. She was buried in the Church of England Cemetery, South side, St. John's. Her grave is now lost, although a plaque nearby commemorates her life.

Although Shanawdithit was the last known Beothuk, other Beothuks probably survived for a while after her death. But with her burial, the Beothuk effectively became extinct as a race.[\[1\]](#)

In 1838 Exploits had a population of 256 of which 236 were Church of England, 10 Wesleyans (Methodists) and 8 Roman Catholics. The Wesleyans congregation began with three families and these three families helped build the Church of England church in the community. When a Wesleyan minister came for a service in 1841, the Anglicans would not permit him to provide a service in the church. As a result, the Wesleyans broke away and a short time later had built their own church. This church would soon provide the backdrop for the introduction of the *Lilly* name to Exploits.

During this time there were also two merchants in the community; John Peyton who had moved from Exploits to Twillingate in 1836 but still carried a business there and George Luff. By 1845, the local schoolhouse had an enrolment of only thirty-seven students. Although Exploits now boasted a population of 326 people, many children did not attend school in these early days. While it is not known when the first school was built, a school Master and Church layman by the name of William Mosdell was stationed there in 1823. It was he that married one of the local merchants, John Peyton Jr, and Eleanor Mahaney in February of that year, as no Church of England minister was stationed there that winter.

Exploits was indeed breathtaking to see in its beauty. Wooded hills interspersed with barren rocks, and with fishermen's wharves, fish-drying flakes and dwellings of various styles and colours lining the rugged shoreline from one end of the harbour to the other; a Harbour that once sheltered anywhere from twenty to forty sailing schooners on their way to and from the fishing grounds on the Labrador coast. Nearly every house boasted a fenced garden around it where would be grown an assortment of vegetables; vegetables that would be stored in a root cellar for the following winter. Life was always a struggle against the elements of time.

Whenever possible, the men usually planted and trenched the potatoes before sailing to the Labrador and then dug them after their return in the fall. The women were responsible for the curing of the fish. Unlike some communities, in Exploits there was very little class distinction among the residents. The merchants, fishermen and clergy were all of the same social status.

“The Lilly Name ...”

It was during the 1840's when the Lilly name was first introduced to the community of Exploits. William Henry Lilly, born in 1821 in Hampshire England, immigrated to the island and it would not be long before the name was well entrenched into the little town. He would wed Jane Hannah Sceviour, of Green Bay Exploits, in 1849 at the Wesleyan Chapel and their union would see five sons and four daughters introduced into the community. During the next 150 years, the Lilly name would help sustain the community as fishermen, carpenters, clergyman, planters, and light keepers, to name but a few. The families would also share the burden with the town of Exploits during times of global crisis, with a large number of sons and daughters enlisting during both World Wars.

“Schooner Builders ...”

During the mid 1800's, one of the leading merchants in the community, the Manuel family, fared very well in Exploits. The family also carried the responsibility as one of two main ship builders in the area, the other being the Sceviour family.

George Sceviour, brother-in-law to William Henry Lilly, was born in Exploits Harbour in 1836 and worked with his father from about the age of 12, learning how to build skiffs and schooners and how to sail to the Labrador. He would go into the bay in the winter months to find a good sheltered cove and build cabins for his workmen and himself. Sometimes their families would also accompany them. There he would cut and saw timber and planking and build schooner hulls from the models which he had prepared before leaving home. In the early spring there could be seen a flotilla of new schooner hulls loaded with extra spars and additional timber on their way to Exploits. There the spars would be set, the cabins completed, and the sails fitted to be ready to sail for the Labrador in June. A Church service was held and the Clergy would always bless the fleet before sailing. "Skipper Garge" first became a master of a vessel at the age of 20 and continued to sail each season to Labrador until the age of 70, never losing a vessel under his responsibility. His eldest four sons would sail with their father to Labrador until about 1900 when the four would build their own schooner in Brown's Arm. Named the "Carrie S.", they sailed her to Labrador from Exploits for nearly ten years.

The period between 1860 and 1910 appears to have been the most prosperous time on the Islands of Exploits. Both the inshore and the Labrador fishery were booming. Although Exploits participated mainly in the Labrador Fishery, the inshore fishery was also important and the highest value for fish was in that time period.

One of the oldest tombstones known in the Lower Harbour Cemetery can be found marked with a date of 1812. Further, when John Peyton Sr. who was born in 1747 in Christchurch, England died in August of 1827 at Upper Sandy Point, his body was carried by boat to Exploits and was buried in the Cemetery in the Lower Harbour. When his son, John Jr. died at Back Harbour, Twillingate in 1879 he was brought to Exploits and buried in the same grave with his father. A flat granite slab was placed on top of the grave, which can be seen to this day.

“Serving Members ... “

The following members of the Lilly family in Exploits are recorded as having served during the First and Second World Wars:

Paul Ulyssis Lilly World War I Army

Mary Telsie Lilly World War II RCAF

Gerald Harvey Lilly World War II Navy

Frank Russel Lilly World War II Forestry

Abraham James Lilly World War II RAF & Forestry

[1] *A History and Ethnography of the Beothuk*, Ingeborg Marshall, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996