

A Daughter of Labrador

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Une femme du Labrador exprime sa nostalgie des jours où tous les membres de la famille travaillaient ensemble.

When you look back on the family unit in Labrador about twenty years ago, it is difficult to separate the mother and daughter roles. Families worked together, and as in every other part of the world (there are exceptions, of course), they were generally a very compact unit.

In my very young years, my father was a fisherman/trapper, which meant that for five, six or even seven months of the year, he was away on his trapline. In his absence my mother was both father and mother for us and in order to survive the children had to pull their weight. When you belong to a large family you learn to pull your weight early and without too much complaining. Maybe I'm not the one to be writing about mothers and daughters because I was next to the oldest in a family of five girls and one boy, so I became the second son, first really because my brother is five years younger than I am. I learned to do housework — well — good enough to get by. I had to take my turn doing dishes, darning socks, making beds and mixing bread. I could even cook in a pinch, but then so could the boys. My main chores were hauling water, getting wood and helping with the fish, and for two summers I had my own salmon net.

I'm having great difficulty here because as I write this I see that there is no real difference between what the males and females did. Women generally looked after the house and children, but the men did too when it was necessary. Men did the outdoor jobs and provided for the family, but so did the women when they had to. If there was any real difference it was probably that the men earned the money by fishing and trapping. Any money the women earned was usually from craft work, berry-picking and in some cases smoking trout and salmon. Smoking fish was considered more the woman's job because she was around to tend the smoke. My mother didn't do as much work at the fishery as some of the other women did because she wasn't very strong physically, and had been hospitalized a number of times with tuberculosis. The whole family was involved with drying cod fish, but I was the only one of the girls in our family who worked at this stage as a full-time worker. The others were called in if the need arose. I remem-



Mary Ashini (mother) and Josephine Abraham (daughter) with Josephine's daughter. North West River, Labrador, 1978.

ber hearing Dad ask my mother if she thought I would be able to stick with it for the whole summer. Mom's answer was, 'She can do anything a boy can do, if not 'better.' So I became a cut-throat with a fishing crew.

One of the happiest memories I have is of Dad singing to us in the kitchen while the mid-wife and her helper were in the bedroom with Mom, finding us a little brother or sister. The first one I remember is the night my brother was born. It was on December the 28th and our great-aunt poked her head out around the bedroom door to tell us that the jannies* had thrown a little brother in through the window for us.

We were well-trained in how to manage. Our Mom spent a great deal of time in hospital. When my oldest sister was twelve and I was eleven, Mom went in the hospital for two years and six months. It never even occurred to us that we might have to leave home and be shared out among different relatives, we could manage. At times it was rough because no matter how much you can do at that age there are times when you'd like to forget

*Jannies and mummies of outport Newfoundland and Labrador are people young and old who, through the Twelve Days of Christmas, dress up to change their appearance as well as disguise their voices and change their behaviour, as they go from house to house entertaining while others try to guess their identity.

that you're responsible for the running of the home and looking after four small children. Rose and I each took two children that we would be responsible for. There were times when I missed Mom so much my throat would ache for hours and I'd wonder if perhaps I might just die I needed her so bad, but something would happen — the little ones would start fighting, or the bread would burn and you'd be off again being a pre-mature adult.

One of my duties was to ration the family allowance. Each month one or two of us would get whatever they needed most, perhaps rubber boots or underwear, and the others had to wait their turn. I'd get treats for the rest, candy and soft drinks, with the money that was left over. One time there was a beautiful candy-stripe sweater in the store and I really wanted it, but it wasn't my turn to get something. I got it anyway. I got a really hard time from the others when I got home, and my oldest sister still reminds me of it. I didn't like the sweater so much after they gave me such a rough time. I never did it again. Twice Mom came home for a day. We were so excited. The house was all cleaned and supposedly spotless, but I'm sure Mom hid her true feelings when she looked around and told us how proud of us she was. One of the sad things about that period of our lives was that my oldest sister had to quit school. Maybe we should have split the time between us, but I would never have been able to do the job she did in caring for us. There are happy memories from those days as well. Memories of six kids sitting in front of the stove with the grate open, telling stories about what we could see in the fire brands and flames. It wasn't always like that; there were times when we'd fight like a team of dogs, but there were also times when we were close.

I'd like to think that the family feeling still exists the way it did when I was a kid, on the coast of Labrador anyway. I expect it's harder today with people tied to wage employment and with the cost of living so high that both parents have to work, and the kids too in a lot of cases. It's a different type of work, each going off in a different direction. The old way of working was the family all pulling together. The family feeling is still there but with a difference. People today seem to be more self-centred, a reflection of 'civilized' urban values which are spreading out and swallowing up the rest of us.