

NEWFOUNDLAND SPRING SEALING DISASTERS TO 1914'

Shannon Ryan

The Newfoundland spring seal fishery began in the 1790s, when fishermen in small boats and schooners first ventured among the ice floes to hunt during March and April. The pelts included a rich layer of fat which produced valuable oil for Britain's ongoing industrialization, urbanization and commerce. The industry peaked in the 1840s, stabilized for about two decades, and began to decline during the 1860s. This decay accelerated during the 1880s and by the beginning of the twentieth century exports of seal oil and skins comprised only about five percent of Newfoundland's total exports, compared with thirty to forty percent at the apex.

The developments which added to the problems of the industry in general, and to the difficulties experienced by the men who went to the ice in particular, cannot be contained within a discussion devoted to marketing, investment and working conditions alone. Sealing was constrained because of the forces of nature and the environment in which it operated. It is thus necessary to examine the extent to which the spring seal fishery was subject to hazards above and beyond those normally associated with the sea.

There is a strong suggestion in Newfoundland literature that sealing was not only physically difficult but also unusually hazardous to lives and shipping. In 1905, for example, Levi G. Chafe, a noted local historian and compiler of sealing statistics, wrote that "there can be no doubt that one reason why the seal fishery developed and expanded very slowly was because it was realized that the enterprise could not be engaged in without great difficulty and risk."² Similarly, George Allan England dispassionately observed that "the seal hunt is without any question the greatest in the world, not only in number of mammals slaughtered but also in point of perils from ice, blizzards, fire, explosion, drowning~a whole catalogue of hardships that only Newfoundlanders...can possibly endure."³

While both Chafe and England are representative of the way twentieth-century Newfoundland historiography and literature have depicted the spring seal fishery, their observations are relatively similar to those of nineteenth-century observers. It was Governor Waldegrave (a perceptive official who predicted as early as 1799 that Newfoundland would become a colony) who first drew attention to the hardships of the fledgling seal fishery. Waldegrave had joined the Royal Navy in 1766 at the age of thirteen and was given his own command in 1775. His career in the navy was active and his experience in the rigours of life at sea second to none. Nonetheless, he was impressed by the dangers in this new industry, writing that "the late introduction of a valuable seal industry is no doubt an object that requires much weighty consideration, as even independent of the wealth it offers the very mode of taking these animals is of a nature to form the hardest race of men in the universe."⁴ Similarly, in 1804 Governor Gower noted that Newfoundland sealers were exposed "to the most imminent dangers...[and] it is certain that there is no employment so

***The Northern Mariner/Le Marin du nord*, III, No. 3 (July 1993), 15-48.**

well calculated to form hardy and intrepid seamen."⁵ In July 1805, he again reported on the "extreme hardships and dangers attending" the seal fishery.⁶ Thus, even in the context of early nineteenth-century maritime employment, the Newfoundland spring seal fishery was singled out.



Figure 1: Brigs leaving St. John's for the ice fields, c. 1860. Occasionally the harbour would freeze and it was necessary to cut a channel through the ice to assist the vessels to reach open water.

Source: Cater W. Andrews Collection, Centre for Newfoundland Studies, Memorial University of Newfoundland.

Reverend Lewis Anspach, the first of Newfoundland's nineteenth-century historians and a resident of Harbour Grace at the beginning of the century, was equally impressed by the conditions under which the seal fishery operated. He described the ice along Newfoundland's coast as:

The most formidable ramparts erected by military art, the dreadful cannonade of a besieged town, the terror of the most skilful and obstinate sea fight, requires less intrepidity and experience to encounter, than those enormous floating bulwarks and the united efforts of the elements which those seas, at that time [early spring], oppose to the mariner.

The ice "could whirl the ships about as in a whirlpool...[or] crush them to atoms," he observed.

The mere thought of such a situation, in a stormy and dark night, and on a sea covered with islands, mountains, fields, and fragments of ice in perpetual motion, is sufficient to strike the mind with horror; and yet such a situation the Newfoundland seal hunters court with as much ardour as vessels in other cases study to avoid it...It is impossible to conceive a greater degree of perseverance and intrepidity, than the people of Conception Bay in particular, display.⁷

These three contemporary observers—Waldegrave, Gower and Anspach—provide important evidence of the general perception that sealing was unusually dangerous to lives and shipping.

British sailing ships were not expected to operate in Newfoundland waters during the winter. Indeed, shipping had always returned to Britain, sailed to southern markets with cargoes of saltfish, or tied-up in port during these months. Navigating among ice floes was considered foolhardy at best, and shipping in and out of Newfoundland virtually ceased when ice was present. Not only Arctic floes but also harbour ice paralysed shipping, while at sea freezing spray made canvas practically unworkable. Yet with the advent of the seal fishery Newfoundland shipowners and fishermen began to challenge the ice in a way that their forebears and contemporaries had never done and never would, with the notable exception of British whalers in the Greenland Sea and Davis Straits—and these men tried to avoid entering the ice fields.

There is a place for the study of disasters in this industry. A good place to begin is by investigating whether it was as dangerous as writers from Waldegrave to England concluded and to what extent this danger was a factor in the history of the seal fishery. Moreover, such a study will help us better understand the industry.⁸ This will be done by examining the various reported disasters—big and small—in chronological order up to 1914, noting the changes in technology and other factors as the industry developed.



Figure 2: A Holloway photograph of sealers dressed in sou'westers and oil skins, and equipped with gaffs, ropes, knives, steels, lunch bags and flags—the latter to mark the ship's pans of pelts—awaiting the order to go over the side to begin the day's work.

Source: See figure 1.

As the examination of this topic proceeds it will become apparent that men and ships faced various dangers. Vessels were in constant danger of running ashore or striking rocks or icebergs, especially at night or in bad weather; such accidents could result in the deaths of many crew. Some ships were overwhelmed by storms and sank, with the loss of all hands. An additional peril was the possibility that any seal pelts in the hold would shift and capsize the vessel. Finally,

many ships were caught in the ice and crushed or swept over rocks and wrecked. However, in such cases the men left the ship and usually found safety on board other craft. The men not only suffered all the dangers confronting their vessels but also risked being swept overboard in storms. Moreover, they had to contend with conditions on the ice while in pursuit of the seals. Some simply disappeared through snow-covered gaps in the ice and many were injured or killed in incidents involving guns. In fact, many accidents resulted in injury or death. Second only to the sinking of a vessel, the greatest danger resulted from being lost on the ice and unable to rejoin the ships: to freeze to death slowly was a terrible way to die.



Figure 3: Sealers towing pelts on the ice. Depending on weight and ice conditions, a "tow" of pelts could number from two to six. Sometimes the men towed them to the vessel, but as ships became more powerful the pelts were piled at convenient points.

Source: See figure 1.

Early Disasters

One of the first references to ships wrecked in the seal fishery occurred in Governor Gower's report for 1804, in which he noted that "instances last spring [1804] occurred of Crews, who were taken off the wrecks of vessels that were crushed between the ice, and brought home, having procured other vessels and made a successful voyage." Twenty-five vessels were lost in 1804; the next year Gower gave this as the reason why the 1805 fleet had declined to 131 ships. Meanwhile, in 1805 two vessels from Conception Bay were lost but their crews were saved. In 1808 the sealing schooner *Myrtle* capsized; seven men drowned while an additional seven were saved. The next year a schooner belonging to Carbonear was lost but the crew was saved, and a Fogo schooner sank, although in the absence of any report to the contrary, the crew was probably saved as well. In 1810 ice conditions prevented the ships from reaching the herds, but in 1811 out of a fleet of 165 ships, twenty-five were lost and one crew member drowned. Between 1804 and 1811 there were at least two seasons during which twenty-five vessels were lost and in most years there were some disasters. While compared to the number of wrecks the loss of life was low, the hardships that the men experienced can only be inferred.⁹



Figure 4: Seal skimmers remove the fat from the skin. Seal skimmers were highly skilled and worked very quickly, often processing 450 young harps per day. They were often employed as butchers during most of the year because skinning required only a couple of weeks' work per year.

Source: See figure 1.

The War of 1812 diverted the governors' attention to problems of supplies, shipping, and naval matters; in addition, there was a decline in the "novelty" factor of the seal fishery. Consequently, the governors' reports contain little commentary and few statistics concerning the seal fishery. However, occasional references indicate continued losses. A report much later in the century stated that in 1814 the catch was very low and prices high, but that the fleet suffered "great damage and heavy losses."¹⁰

Disasters During Expansion

During the 1820s and 1830s sealing expanded, often despite disasters but generally in tandem with them. In 1820 there were "several losses [and] great damage." In 1823 there again was "great damage,"¹¹ including the loss of the Brigus schooner *Active*, which was on its way to the ice fields in a thick snowstorm when it ran ashore on the island of Baccalieu. Of a crew of thirty-two only four survived,¹² dealing a major blow to the small community. In 1825 there was "much damage" and in 1826 during a heavy gale the captain of the *Speedwell* and nine crew members were swept overboard to their deaths. As their vessel began to sink the remainder of the crew took to the small boats and were picked up by a nearby schooner. During that same storm the schooner *Belisarius*

went down. The crew took to the boats and after rowing for five days managed to reach King's Cove, Bonavista Bay. There were unusually heavy losses in 1829. One writer noted on 7 April that "many vessels have arrived with full cargoes, yet scarcely one has come in without the crew of some other which had been totally lost." The same writer listed some of the vessels from St. John's that were lost, including *Fanny* (Captain Maurice Cummings); *Lady Margaret* (Captain Piccot); *Visiter* (Captain T. Beck); and *Sally*, belonging to Hunters and Co. Also lost were the *Favourite* from Grates's Cove and supplied by Bulley, Job and Cross; *Carolina* from Bacon Cove (Captain John Gushue); *Experiment* from Brigus (Captain Sheehan); and an unnamed vessel from Mosquito (Captain Samuel Pike). On 21 April it was reported that the *Mayflower* was wrecked but the crew saved and a week later a further report informed the public that five ships from St. John's—the *Brothers*, *Highland Laddie*, *Envy*, *Nancy* and *Industry*—had been lost.¹³

The loss of the *Visiter* was due to an explosion of gunpowder, always a danger. On the night of 28 March one of the crew accidentally fired his gun. Although it contained only powder—and no shot—he left his powder horn open. When that exploded it triggered the explosion of the gunpowder in the ship's locker, blowing the deck and upper structure off the vessel. While the perpetrator of the accident was badly injured, the rest of the crew escaped onto the ice carrying their careless shipmate before the ship sank.¹⁴

In its 1829 *Annual Report* the local Chamber of Commerce described that year's seal fishery:

The season having been boisterous, numerous losses happened among the sealing vessels, consequently an unusually heavy charge has fallen upon those who are interested in the various Mutual Insurance Societies of this place and Conception Bay... The Chamber, admitting the disasters among shipping to be numerous, have the satisfaction to observe, considering the great number of men employed, [that] few lives have been lost in prosecuting the fishery.¹⁵

It seems that fifteen ships out of a fleet of about 300 were lost in 1829. Furthermore, it was reported that the Mutual Insurance Society of Conception Bay consisted of 106 vessels "in the seal fishery, nearly all first class, valued at £51,050 and insured for £49,800." Each was worth an average of £482 and insured for £470. It is obvious that many owners did not insure their vessels and experienced total losses when their craft sank (although this did not compare with the suffering of the widows and orphans of drowned fishermen left behind).¹⁶

In 1830 a new record was established for seals taken in one season, but several vessels, fully loaded with pelts, and their crews were lost when a gale on the night of 27 March apparently caught them in open water. One wreck drifted into Petty Harbour in early April and was salvaged by local fishermen. A St. John's newspaper gave a detailed account of the incident, obviously written by a correspondent with an intimate knowledge of ship terminology:

The following are all the particulars which are known relative to the wreck which has been found... off Petty Harbour. The strongest apprehensions are entertained that the vessel was the Schooner *Confidence*, belonging to Mr. John Piccot, which lately left this port [St. John's] on a sealing trip... On Thursday morning last, a large quantity of wreck was taken into Petty Harbour, which had been observed two days previously by some persons who thought it was a pilot boat at anchor a short distance inside the fishing ground at the south point of that Bay; but being again seen on the following day in the same situation, several persons were induced to go out. Upon their return the punts were laden with

what is judged to have been the whole of the standing-rigging, and nearly the whole of the running rigging and Blocks, of a vessel of about seventy tons, all nearly new; together with the two lower mast-heads and iron; the bowsprit (broken at the stem); topsail-yard and fore-yard (broken); several parts of the bends or wales, to which were attached the chains, bolts, and dead-eyes of both masts; the counterpiece, with iron traveller, mainsheet blocks and mainsheet, the cheek ends of both gaffs, and part of the main-topmast, to which was affixed the gaff-topsail (apparently quite new); a square-foresail, topsail, and a large quantity of sails cut and torn up... The whole of the above was entangled together; and part of the rigging had caught the bottom, a short distance from the shore, the broken spars appearing above water. It looked as though it had drifted across the Bay, from the Northward, but it is the opinion of several persons in Petty Harbour, that the vessel had struck upon the fishing-ground, at the *Motion*, while breaking. No other pieces of wreck have been seen in any part of that Bay. We regret to learn that the crews of the different punts cut up the whole of the sails and rigging into small pieces, and divided it among themselves as fast as they could clear it, so that in about an hour after they had gone on shore, scarcely a vestige was to be found. There was amongst the rest, a white linen shirt, with a cambric frill not marked; and a cotton shirt marked "J. P." From the appearance of the whole it could not have been washing on the shore any length of time, for it was scarcely chafed.¹⁷

James Murphy, the local chronicler, also wrote about this wreck but not all the details match. Yet because Murphy fleshed out the incident his account is well worth repeating:

In 1830 there was another such [winter of] frost, the sealkillers were out at the ice, when the gales drove them south fifty miles or more to the outer edge of the [Grand] Banks in the strain of Cape Broyle. Picco of the Cove was out in the *True Blue*. He was a great "swoil" killer and had 5,500 that year. On March 29 the wind ceased and the vessels made sail to work to land. There was no light on Cape Spear in those days, the ice was loose, and that night it snowed and blew dreadfully. About daybreak it was worse, and the vessels were anxious. Bill Ryan in the *Caledonia* got in safely. 'Native' Walsh from the Beach got in also. Pat Mackey was in the *Devonport*, and after running for a good while, he hove her off to sea. There was no braver man than Mackey, but he knew when to stop. Picco was coming behind him and shouted, "Aren't you going to run in, Pat?" "No," replied Mackey, "I don't think it's safe." "'Tis safe enough for me," shouted Picco. "Good luck to you," returned Mackey. Picco missed the Cape, ran in, and took the land near Petty Harbour Motion. A blinding snowstorm was raging, and not a soul was saved. He had 30 of a crew, men and boys.¹⁸

By the end of 1830 many shipowners were putting their faith in bigger and stronger vessels to guard against losses and believed they were moving closer to the time they could send vessels to the front with greater assurance. This effort was praised by a contemporary:

The description of Vessels employed in this branch of our commerce has of late years been rapidly improving; and adventurous and hazardous as these Voyages have usually been, the perils incident to them will thus be considerably

diminished. We may, therefore [hope] that the disasters, a number of which we have to account in every succeeding spring, will bear corresponding proportion to the means which have been adopted to avoid them and that the owners will be reimbursed for the Capital which they will thus have laid out in the prosecution of so highly important a branch of the Newfoundland trade.¹⁹

This belief in man's ability to conquer the ice in the seas around Newfoundland persisted throughout many improvements in the building of sealing ships.

While the *Confidence* was lost at the end of a voyage, some vessels never made it to the ice. In 1831 a schooner was lost on the way to the front:

The new schooner *Azariah*, John Bonnell master, with a crew of twenty men and two boys, besides the master, sailed on the sealing voyage from Cupids, Port-de-Grave, about 7 P. M., on Wednesday the 16th instant [March]. She went down the bay with a smart wholesale breeze, at S. W. by S.; the weather was tolerably clear until midnight, so much so that the man at the helm, John Newall, could see both sides of the bay. At midnight some snow-showers came on; Newall was shortly after relieved at the helm, and went below. About half past 2 A. M., he was aroused by an alarming call for all hands; he sprang from his berth and ran upon deck, when he saw the land right over the foreyard; in a minute the vessel's bowsprit struck the cliff end on; the mainsail had been lowered, the other sails were full, the wind blowing a smart but fair breeze; the weather was thick and dark. The bowsprit presently broke off, and both fore and main masts then quickly fell with a tremendous crash, and so encumbered the deck, and hampered the pumps that it was impossible to get them out; the wind was increasing and the vessel crashing heavily against the cliff. It appeared now necessary for the crew to leap from the vessel to the rocks, to save their lives. Four men only, out of twenty-three, succeeded in the attempt. All the rest perished. At daylight these four saw the floating pieces of the schooner, and one only of all their companions, and he in the agonies of death feebly grasping a part of the broken bow of the vessel. In a few minutes his hands resigned their hold, and he sank under the whelming waters. They remained in the cliff until about 2 P. M. on Thursday, when they succeeded in clamouring up the precipices to the top of the Island (for it was Bacalieu [sic]). In the afternoon of the same day they saw a schooner, and hailed her, but without effect, she proceeded on up the bay; the weather was foggy. All Thursday night they passed without shelter or food, except what the fir boughs afforded for the one and the ground berries for the other. On Friday morning, the 18th instant, they were providentially discovered and taken off the Island by the crew of the Schooner *Joseph*, of Cupids, James Le Drow, master, then coming in with a trip of seals from the ice. At 3 P. M. of the same day, they were safely landed at Cupids. It appears from Newall's statement, that in going down the Bay, they steered too much to the northward, thick weather came on, and there was not that vigilant look out kept, which should under such circumstances be always strictly attended to. The vessel was lost in a small cove on the S. S. W. end of Bacalieu, where there is no beach, and the cliffs are steep and craggy. Several of the unfortunate men were married and have left large families to deplore their untimely fate.²⁰

For a small outpost like Cupids, this was a disaster that affected a relatively large proportion of families. Yet there is a certain casualness inherent in this account. There may have been a good reason to leave Cupids in the evening instead of waiting until daybreak, but it does seem that there was extreme carelessness involved in not keeping a better lookout and being unable to hold a reasonably accurate course sailing out of this wide bay with a "smart wholesale breeze." Human error was involved in many sealing disasters.

The loss of another vessel the same year was more representative of sealing losses. The schooner *Hope* from Carbonear, commanded by Captain Mallowney, was returning to that port with 3500 pelts when it encountered a heavy storm on the evening of 22 April and "while lying to in the heavy gale on the above evening, struck on a rock near one of the Wadham Islands, and almost immediately went to pieces, when the whole crew of twenty-five men (with the exception of one man who had been sent aloft to clear the topsail, to endeavour to clear the land) perished."²¹

Losses in 1833 were also considerable, if not so dramatically described. The season was poor because most ships missed the main "patch" of seals and were caught in a gale late in April as they pursued older animals in the water. The schooner *Union* from Trinity was found waterlogged, with masts cut away and men's bodies in the forecabin. The schooner *Olive Branch* from Greenspond was discovered bottom up. The schooner *Lark* from St. John's was presumed lost because the captain's box, containing the ship's papers, was found floating among some wreckage. The schooner *Robert Brine*, also from St. John's, was wrecked, but the crew was saved and taken into Bay Bulls. The schooner *Selina* from Carbonear was abandoned and the crew and cargo of 1700 seals brought into Bay Bulls by the St. John's schooner *Ann*. Finally, it was reported that the Trinity schooner *Anna* managed to make Bay Bulls despite the loss of its masts.²²

Ships were always in danger of running into reefs and cliffs, but if loaded they were most vulnerable if caught in a storm in the open sea because the seal pelts could shift in the hold and cause the vessel to capsize or list so badly that the crew would be forced to abandon it. No doubt there were many such cases because only gradually did owners learn to build stout pounds in the hold to keep the heavy pelts in place. In 1834 the *Caledonia* was returning to St. John's with 5000 seal pelts, taken in only fourteen days, when it encountered a severe gale, the cargo shifted, and the ship listed and began to leak. The captain and crew were forced to abandon it.²³ This problem was compounded when fat began to run to oil, as happened with several other vessels that year. The Chamber of Commerce regretted "the loss of many valuable lives and much property."

Three vessels are known to have been lost by the seals having melted in the hold, the pound boards having in consequence started by the shifting of the cargo in the first gale of wind, and the ship so becoming unmanageable. The vessels to which this accident happened were of the very best class, and being all commanded by experienced masters, were probably secured in the usual way; it is therefore evident that farther [sic] security is necessary in fixing the pounds, which will doubtless be attended to next season.²⁴

Obviously the crews of other ships were not as lucky as those on the *Caledonia*, who at least escaped with their lives.

During the remainder of the 1830s there were suggestions of other losses. In 1836 the weather during the seal fishery was "tempestuous" and icebergs were a constant threat; an undetermined number of ships and lives were lost. "Boisterous" weather in 1837 created some problems and, although there were no reports of losses, the brig *Dingwell* was seriously damaged and a schooner from Twillingate barely reached St. John's after losing its rudder. The following year the schooner *Trial* from Bay Bulls was wrecked but the crew was rescued by a Newfoundland

ship returning from Lisbon. The same year the brig *Terra Nova* was damaged in a storm and forced to abandon its voyage.²⁵ However, the last years of the 1830s were relatively free of disasters.

Disasters and Stagnation

During the 1840s the industry peaked and production stagnated. But this decade was marked by other problems as well, such as labour unrest, general economic depression, and the fire of 1846 in which most of St. John's burned. In 1840 the Carbonear brig *Active*, commanded by Captain McCarthy, struck an ice pan in a storm and sank. Two men climbed the rigging and as they reached the top gallant yard, it fortunately touched a pan of ice to which they leaped and survived to be picked up the next day.²⁶ The 1842 season was significant because of the efforts of some fishermen/sealers to gain concessions from shipowners. In voicing his support for the sealing crews J. V. Nugent, member of the Amalgamated Assembly, summarized poignantly the risks they faced.

In order, therefore, to arrive at the haunts of the seal at a time when the cubs are some three weeks old, for then are these animals easiest caught, and their fat is, at the same time, purer and in greater quantity than when they are more grown, the sealing vessels leave our southern ports about the first of March, and proceed to the northward to seek those ice-bergs and floating fields of ice, which by all other mariners are looked upon with terror and dismay, and, once coming up to the seals, they plunge into the midst of the ice. The intrepid seal-hunters now pour forth upon the expanse of ocean, and rush upon their prey far away from their vessel, bounding from mass to mass along the glassy surface of the frozen deep. Here you see one leap across a chasm where yawns the blue wave to engulf [sic] him. There, another, amid the mist, mistakes a mass of slob or soft snow for an ice-pan and is buried in the ocean, whence, sometimes, he is rescued from his peril by the timely aid of his associates, if they be near, at others, he sinks to rise no more. Anon comes the thick freezing snow-drift, that shuts out all ken of neighbouring objects, and the distant ship is lost. The bewildered sealers gather together, they try one course, then another, but in vain, no vessel appears: the guns fired from the vessel are unheard, the lights unseen: night comes on and with it hunger, and the blasting wind, and the smothering snow overwhelm the stoutest, and many, very many, yielding to fatigue and mental misery, sink into despondency, and the widow's wail and the orphans' cry, are the only record of the dreary~of the dreadful death of the sealer... But, even when death, in its most fearful form, puts not a sudden period to the sufferings of the sealer, the toils, and hardships, and perils of this voyage are indescribable; while he has nought to sustain him, nought to buoy him up, but the fond hope of being able, by the produce of his industry, to realize a temporary provision for an affectionate wife and children.

Yet it was not only the sealers who took risks. So too did the merchants who sponsored the voyages. "The merchants adventurously contribute the outfit, consisting of the vessel with all her materials fully equipped and victualled," wrote Nugent. Nonetheless, the perils were not evenly apportioned:

We shall take for instance one vessel of about 120 tons. In her success is involved the success of *one* merchant—he may gain £1,000 or more, if the

voyage prosper. In her success is involved the success of some *thirty* fishermen—they may gain each from £20 to £30 if the voyage succeeds. The merchant to run the chance of gaining £1,000 has risked a capital of perhaps £2,000. The sealer to gain from £20 to £30 has devoted an incredible amount of toil and suffering—he has risked all—his life. If the voyage fails, the merchant has still his ship, & c, he has suffered an actual loss of the provisions consumed on the occasion. If the voyage be unsuccessful the poor man returns with the loss of his labour, penniless. If the vessel founder, or be dashed to pieces in the ice, the insurance officer relieves this *one* merchant by compensating him for his actual loss. If the vessel founder, *thirty* valuable lives are lost—*thirty* widows, and perhaps *one hundred* orphans shriek their curses upon a fishery that brought upon them miseries that cannot be compensated—the grave of all their hopes—the dawn of every misfortune.²⁷

Here Nugent reminded his audience of the sailor's traditional fear of ice. He then went much further than any other prominent commentator of this period to describe the dangers to lives and capital. He was convinced that the risks to the men far outweighed those of the shipowners and that the latter benefited most from a successful voyage.

The "Bonavista Bay Spring" of 1843 was particularly disastrous. One report from St. John's claimed that "about 20 vessels were wrecked" and "many poor fellows engaged in the hazardous enterprise have unfortunately lost their lives." Another pointed out that "we have to lament the destruction of upwards of 20 sail of craft of a superior description, and a great and appalling loss of human life, together with an incalculable amount of human suffering sustained by those who escaped from shipwreck." A third report, this time from Carbonear, recorded the loss of the schooners *Charlotte* and *Ambrose* from that port; *Rebecca*, *Dart*, *Relief*, *Mary*, *Trial* and *John* from Harbour Grace; and the *Despatch* from Spaniard's Bay. In all these cases the crews were saved.²⁸ Another report this same year described in detail the loss of fifteen men from one of the Carbonear vessels.

It is impossible to describe the gloom which has been cast over this town [Carbonear] and neighbourhood by the mournful intelligence obtained from a part of the crew of the schooner *Princess* of this port, who arrived here overland from Trinity Bay on Monday evening last. They state that on the afternoon of Saturday the 1st inst. [April] the *Princess*, Meagle [Captain], with two other sealing vessels viz., the *Mary* of St. John's and *Ocean* belonging to Bonavista, were driving in the ice along the southern shore of the above named bay, the Salvage Rocks lying to the leeward but at some considerable distance, and the wind blowing a stiff gale from the E.N.E. Shortly before midnight the ice commenced running fast, so that by halfpast 12 o'clock, A. M. the *Princess* was in the midst of the breakers, and there being no prospect of saving her, she was immediately abandoned, the crew making the best of their way seaward. The unfortunate men, however, had not proceeded one hundred yards when a tremendous sea broke in among the ice scattering it in all directions, by which disastrous and fatal occurrence there is every reason to fear that fifteen of our hardy and enterprising seal hunters were buried in the waves. The remainder of the crew continued upon the ice till day break, when they landed at Silly Cove with much difficulty. The vessel in the course of the night having been driven almost miraculously over the reef, was boarded by eight of the survivors and the

following morning, the rest returned home with the melancholy tidings. The other two vessels above named were also abandoned; but it is expected that one of them—the *Mary*—will be preserved; the other is a wreck; crews of both, saved.²⁹

This is the earliest first-hand description of what could happen when a vessel was caught in "running ice." As Anspach observed earlier in the century, such ice "could whirl about as in a whirlpool."³⁰ The report also vividly describes the terrible situation in which the men found themselves and the great difficulty involved in escaping in the darkness over running ice during a gale. The chances of survival were slim and it is remarkable that the other two crews managed to escape with their lives. The hardship involved in trying to survive on that heaving ice with the waves breaking over them while soaked to the skin and freezing is almost impossible to imagine. In all, "losses amongst the shipping [in 1843] were unprecedentedly great."³¹

Although "heavy pans of sunken ice or small icebergs" did a "good deal of damage" in 1844 during the "Spring of the Growlers," there does not appear to have been any loss of life.³² According to Chafe, there were a number of serious losses of lives and vessels in 1845. He lists the barque *Ringwood* under Captain Henry Norman with all hands; the brig *Peerless* with Captain John Nagle and forty men; the brig *Elizabeth Margaret* with the captain and fifteen men (only one man survived by climbing into the rigging); and the brig *Mary* of Harbour Grace (with all the crew who were out in boats, although six who had been left aboard survived).³³

In 1846, referred to by Chafe as the "Spring of the Great Fire," losses increased. In the first place the Conception Bay and St. John's sealing fleets had great difficulty clearing their frozen harbours, and it was after 26 March before they were able to leave for the ice. This was a harbinger of things to come. One report states that the *Rebecca*, *Mary*, *Louise Stuart*, *Elizabeth*, *Swan* and *William L. Black*—all from St. John's—as well as the *Tyro* from Harbour Grace, the *Amy Ann* from Greenspond and the *John and William* from Trinity were lost.³⁴ A letter from Magistrate Sweetland in Bonavista to James Crowdy, the Colonial Secretary, described the situation involving some of these shipwrecks.

On Saturday last, the 4th inst. [April], the Masters and Crews of the *Louise Stuart*, Stanton [Captain], thirty-six men, and that of the *Elizabeth*, Nurse [Captain], twenty-nine men, both of St. John's, were cast on shore here having lost their vessels the previous night upon the shoal of Old Harry, North and East of Cape Bonavista. The *Louise Stuart's* crew [was] in a most destitute condition, having after the loss of their vessel been swept on the ice by the force of the current amongst the shoals of the Flowers Point, where they lost eight or nine of their number, together with their punts, clothing, etc., by the sea breaking upon them, and... they... were literally naked when they arrived at my dwelling. In the course of the same day the *Elizabeth's* came in... pretty nearly in the same state; and on Monday were followed by the crew of the *Amy Ann*, of Greenspond, twenty-five in number, but bringing in with them their clothing. To alleviate the distress of the two first cases, the Magistrates advised providing lodgings for the invalids amongst them, and placing the remainder in such untenanted dwellings as could be obtained, and there subsisted [sic] until they could be shipped off for St. John's, and the purchasing of such articles of clothing as could be procured here and in the neighbourhood for them.

Sweetland went on to explain that he had to arrange transportation to St. John's for the crews and that his neighbours were looking after the shipwrecked crews of the *Rebecca*, *Mary* and *Tyro*. These men at least had managed to save their supplies. He also suggested that the Newfoundland government build in Bonavista "an asylum for distressed shipwrecked seamen, for there is scarcely a season but some two or three crews are cast ashore at this place." Finally, he concluded by warning that the loss of sealing vessels in 1846 "will be fearfully great."³⁵ In May of that year it was reported that:

There has not been within our recollection a sealing adventure attended with so many unfortunate and disastrous consequences, as that of the present year... [and] the average of vessels lost exhibits a material increase over that of any late years, and the loss of human life has been by no means inconsiderable.³⁶

Other reports identify additional losses that spring. The crew of the brig *Charles* from Carbonear had to be rescued from their leaking vessel by the *Mayflower* and were "so exhausted and frost burnt" that they could not get into the boat without the assistance of the men from the *Mayflower*. The brig *Waterlily* was lost in Bonavista Bay and its crew brought into Bay Bulls by the *Corfe Mullen*. The *Sir John Harvey* also sank but the crew was rescued. Losses were high and there was a "material increase" in the average size of vessels lost. For example, the *Waterlily* was ninety-six tons burthen and carried a crew of thirty-eight; the *Louise Stuart* was 140 tons with forty men; the *Elizabeth* measured 120 tons and a crew of forty; the *William L. Black* was 147 tons and thirty-nine men; and the 140-ton *Sir John Harvey* had a compliment of forty crew. The size of the average sealing ship had been increasing since the beginning of the century (and would continue); by 1846 the average size of sealing ships clearing St. John's was ninety-three tons and the average crew size was thirty-two. It is therefore apparent that some of the largest and newest vessels were among those lost.³⁷

The 1846 seal fishery was a watershed for the St. John's industry in that investment reached its peak. In 1846 the St. John's-based industry consisted of forty-four suppliers with 141 vessels of a total tonnage of 13,165 and 4470 crew.³⁸ The number of those sending ships to the ice declined to thirty-seven and the number of vessels to ninety-six in 1847 and the St. John's sail sealing fleet never recovered. Conception Bay suffered a setback as well: its fleet declined from 186 vessels and 5733 men in 1846 to 156 vessels and 5042 men in 1847. Conception Bay, however, recovered significantly and by the mid-1850s its fleet numbered over 190 somewhat larger vessels carrying nearly 8000 men.

In 1847 there were a number of failed voyages and one vessel had to be abandoned, but the most serious disaster was the loss of the Harbour Grace schooner *Margaret* off Greenspond with the captain and twenty of the crew. Chafe also reports that the brig *Hibernian* [sic], under Captain Hugh Nagle, was driven on the rocks near Hant's Harbour and half the crew was lost.³⁹

At least three more craft from Harbour Grace—the *Mary Francis*, *Friends* and *Success*—were lost in 1849, and one—the *Margaret Ellen*—from Cupids. The loss of the *Mary Francis* was described in detail by a local correspondent:

One of the most miraculous escapes that we remember to have heard of for a number of years, was that of the crew of the Schooner *Mary Francis* of this port [Harbour Grace], Mr. Henry Webber, master, lost on the night of the 12th ult. [April]. The situation of the vessel at the time of the accident was about 120 miles to the eastward of the Grey Islands. The night was tempestuous, with heavy rain, and a long ranging [sic] swell running among the ice-bergs. About

half past two o'clock a.m., all hands being on deck, the schooner received a tremendous blow under water, from a large shelving piece of ice, which took her about midships. Immediately she began to sink, and in less than two minutes her top gallant mast heads had disappeared beneath the surface, the crew having had barely time to leap (many of them half naked) upon a small pan of ice, which was heaving up and down with the sea, and was scarcely sufficient to keep them above water. They now perceived that only two punts had been saved from the vessel, but while deliberating upon the course to be pursued under such circumstances, two others were observed to float up from the bottom, together with a number of oars and what is more strange, a binnacle compass. Thus provided, Mr. Webber, with his usual coolness and self-possession, ordered the boats to be bailed out, and stepping into the foremost one himself, led the way through the tumbling ice-bergs for a considerable distance, the rain still falling in torrents, and the wind and sea increasing every moment. At day break they observed a schooner to leeward, just in the act of loosing her canvas, and having succeeded after much difficulty in making themselves heard, they finally got on board, and were distributed about among a number of other vessels which tendered their assistance. Had the disaster taken place a few moments later, or had the wreck floated but two yards further astern on receiving the concussion, every soul on board must have inevitably perished.

Again one can see how vulnerable the ships were, how quickly they could sink, and the difficult and narrow escapes experienced by some crews. In this instance a number of crew members from the *Mary Francis* wrote to a Harbour Grace newspaper thanking the captains and crews who came to their assistance:

Mr. Abram Northcott, of the schooner *Liberator*, the Messrs. Taylor master of the *Ann*, *Princess Royal*, and *John Martin*; Mr. E. Dwyer, and Mr. Thos. Thistle, masters of the *Sir Howard Douglas*, and *Echo*, of Carbonear, and the crews of these vessels respectively, for the kind, humane, and generous treatment they experienced from them after their shipwreck. They would also beg leave to express their admiration of the noble conduct of Capt. Michael Fitzgerald of the *Haidee*, and of Capt. Williams of the *Herald* (the former of this port [Harbour Grace], and the latter of St. John's), in tendering their aid and assistance on the unfortunate occasion.⁴⁰

The sealers willingly assisted each other despite the competitive nature of the seal fishery. Moreover, with several hundred ships operating in a defined area the chances were excellent that a shipwrecked crew would be rescued once the men had managed to get safely into boats or onto firm ice. In 1849, for example, the *Sarah Jane* from Brigus was lost but the crew was brought into port by the *Hare*, which had abandoned the seal fishery early because of an outbreak of smallpox on board.⁴¹

"Spring of the Wadhams" and the 1850s

Although no one could have foreseen it, the 1850s was the final decade of hunting using only muscle and wind to propel the ships. It was a positive decade with the arrival of responsible government and a fair degree of economic success. This decade, along with the previous two,

became the "good old days" later in the century when the industry, which seemed to be holding its own with mother nature, found itself the victim of other forces.

The "Spring of the Wadhams" of 1852 began on an ominous note.⁴² In February five men were landed on the Funk Islands by Stephen March, a St. John's merchant, with instructions to engage in the seal fishery from shore. On 23 February, the captain of this small crew and three men went on the ice, leaving the cook ashore. About two hours later the cook observed seas rolling toward the island and signalled the others to return. These signals:

were for a little time unheeded by the unfortunate men, until at length one of them Thomas Beckett ran towards the island, and when within about fifteen fathoms caught the end of a rope, thrown from the shore by the cook, which he tied around his body. He was hauled ashore, but at the moment when his preservation seemed certain, a heavy breaker burst upon the two men washing the cook inshore into a pond, the receding water carrying the unfortunate Beckett out, and causing his destruction. In the meantime, the master and the two men that were with him made for the N. W. of the island, but here they were prevented from landing by the force of the sea rolling in towards the rock. The master asked the cook if he could not launch the punt, but the sea was breaking in too heavily; the soft ice around them was in a short time beaten to pieces and one huge wave bursting in upon the pan which held them in an instant dashed them out of life.⁴³

The cook was picked up by the *Coquette*, one of the first sealing ships to arrive back in port that spring.

It soon became apparent that this tragedy was only the forerunner of a disastrous season. In early April there was a major gale; the first concrete evidence that the sealing fleet had been affected was received from the *Pursuit*, which arrived in St. John's on 7 April to report that a crew member had been swept overboard in a storm. At the same time the *Billow* arrived with the loss of a man under similar circumstances. Both vessels also reported that the *Henrietta* and the *Mary* had gone down but that the crews had been rescued. Within a week there was confirmation that the storm had taken a heavy toll and that the *Western Trader*, *Ajax*, *Vesta*, *Elizabeth*, *Placid* and *Christianna* had been lost. Soon it was announced that the *Argyle* had lost five crew and that the *Helen* had also sunk. The *Dash* and the *Caledonia* were abandoned by their crews but boarded and brought into St. John's by men from Lawrence O'Brien's vessel, the *Kingaloch*. Also the *Gleener* from Greenspond found the *Imauna* abandoned off Cape Freels and brought it into St. John's. The weather continued stormy and more vessels arrived with reports of losses, rescued crews or abandoned ships. The *Gannet* brought in the crew of the *Christianna*; the *Gem* was brought in by crew from the *Oresta*; the crew of the *Helen* arrived in St. John's overland from Bay Bulls; the captain and crew of the *Caledonia* were rescued by the *William*, which itself was being brought into port by crew members from the *Escape*; the *Rake* then picked up some of the crew members from the *Dash*, while the remainder of the *Dash's* crew was rescued by the *Funchel*. Other arrivals reported that the *Sally*, *Jessie Louis*, *Britannia*, *Fortitude*, *Cornelia*, *Hope* and *Corfe Mullen*—all from Conception Bay—were lost.⁴⁴

Reports indicate that conditions were chaotic. Not only was there considerable loss of life and property but also the number of abandoned vessels brought led to charges, counter-charges and law suits for a considerable time. One report stated that "many vessels with valuable cargoes of seals, being driven towards the breakers, were abandoned by their crews, who made for the shore. Several of these derelicts have been taken possession of by other vessels and brought into

Conception Bay, etc." These conditions "created the deepest excitement, alarm and grief throughout the city [St. John's]" and forced the government to take action. The House of Assembly was convened by the speaker and sent an address to the governor requesting that three vessels from St. John's and two from Conception Bay be despatched to the north to bring home shipwrecked crews. The first to complete its mission, the *Coquette*—which earlier rescued the cook from the Funk Islands—landed 100 shipwrecked men at Catalina and brought 250 more to St. John's.⁴⁵

It appears that most losses resulted from a combination of two factors. Prior to the gale the wind had been easterly and the seal herd was on ice packed against the northern shores in shallow water. The vessels worked their ways among the floes; when the gale struck the ice moved, carrying the helpless vessels over reefs and rocks. Reports do not agree on the exact number of losses and no complete picture was ever assembled. However, the latest estimate, made at the end of May when the damage had been assessed, concluded that there was a "loss of between 50 and 60 sealing vessels in the northeast gales between the 5th and 12th of April." It also claimed that ninety men perished and "upwards of 1000 shipwrecked sealers are stated to have sought shelter at various points about Pinchard's Island and Bonavista Bay."⁴⁶ While the exact figures will never be known there is no doubt that the 1852 season, in absolute terms, was the most disastrous to that time. Given the number of vessels lost and men involved, the fact that "only" ninety died suggests that the level of ice knowledge and skill possessed by the average sealer must have been extensive.

The legal cases involving the "abandoned" versus "deserted" vessels continued for some time and the evidence presented provides additional information on the hardships endured by the men. The case involving the *Kingalock* and the *Dash* is one such example. The men sent from the former to take possession of the latter—while the storm was in progress—reported that they had great difficulty crossing the rolling, running, loose ice; that sometimes they fell in; spray and water washed over them or they were forced to crawl over thin pieces of ice; and that only by perseverance were they able to board the *Dash*. They found the ship partly filled with water, seal pelts scattered, and everything in a generally chaotic state. They reported that the conditions were too bad to contemplate returning to their own ship even if they had wished. They then managed to unfurl and hoist the frozen sails, narrowly avoided the rocks, ice pans and icebergs, and made their way to St. John's. This type of hazardous enterprise was repeated a number of times during this season.⁴⁷ Nonetheless, Newfoundland was able to absorb these losses. Investment continued and even increased a little, encouraged, no doubt, by the fact that seal oil prices in London had risen steadily from £25 5s per tun in 1848 to £37 3s in 1850, and future conditions looked promising (and in the short-term this promise was fulfilled.)

There were a number of losses and deaths during the remainder of the 1850s but nothing to compare with 1852. The *Hornet* from Harbour Grace lost a man from Bryant's Cove in 1853. William Hamond from the brig *Mary* of St. John's died from tetanus after his gun exploded in his hand. A punt was picked up off Catalina in 1854 with five men from Grate's Cove, one of whom had died and three more who were severely frostbitten. In 1855 the brig *Mary* ran down one of its own boats and six men drowned. In 1857 the *John & Maria* was lost off Cape Broyle with twenty-four of its thirty men, the most serious loss since 1852.⁴⁸

"Green Bay Spring" and the Decline of Sail

The next decade began optimistically when in 1860 "out of about 300 vessels engaged in that voyage during the past season only two or three casualties occurred... without any loss of life." And in 1861 only one man was killed, when a punt fell on him.⁴⁹ However, major disasters were soon to follow, at least in terms of shipping.

The "Green Bay Spring" of 1862 was a disastrous season. By 12 April the following losses were reported: *Eliza* (Captain Winsor), *Ronana* (Jackman), *Margaret* (Cummins), *Hunter* (Pike), *Rosebud* (Dawe), *Melrose* (Pike), *Emily Tobin* (White), *Christina* (Parsons), *Alma* (Norman), *Victoria* (Agerton), *Hope* (Andrews), *Jura* (Snelgrove), *Elizabeth Margaret* (Power), *Mary Anne Rossiter* (Winsor) and *G. M. Johnson* (Lynch). The *Emily Tobin*, *Christina*, *Jura* and *Elizabeth Margaret* belonged to Punton and Munn of Harbour Grace and the *Melrose* to Ridley and Sons of that town; the rest were owned in St. John's. Other losses were recorded later, including the *William Stairs*, *Jessie Brown*, *Caroline*, *Elizabeth Jane*, *Alma* [another Alma], *Hope* and *Prince Edward*. Then the *Balaclava* was reported abandoned and the *Livingstone* leaking badly in Trinity Bay.⁵⁰ It was a peculiar year because many ships became jammed in the ice and were abandoned swiftly (and safely) by their crews, who in almost all cases set their ships on fire, reportedly to eliminate them as a danger to shipping. Still, there was considerable suspicion that they were burned to guarantee they could not be salvaged and that the owners would at least receive some insurance.

The loss of the *Caroline* was more widely reported and discussed than the others. It was a 139-ton brig and carried sixty-eight men, all of whom escaped to shore, but not before setting fire to the vessel. They explained that they considered it a menace to shipping and therefore burned it and all their provisions as well. One newspaper hoped that the men could prove they could not save any provisions without endangering their own lives. The crew acted "very thoughtlessly (to say the least) in not securing even a few biscuits for their own sustenance." The same newspaper reported later in more detail:

We have already noted the lamentable loss of shipping engaged in the seal fishery this spring. Some of them are reported to have been fired from prudential motives—the protection of life and property at sea which might at any moment be imperilled by collision. This is all very well as long as it can be shown that prudence was the prevailing impulse. It is feared, however, that certain parties are guilty of having, in a more wanton and unjustifiable manner, violated the strongest sections of the maritime law and it remains for the underwriters to institute the strictest investigation touching the loss of vessels this spring. It is thought that the loss to underwriters will be little short of £25,000 and that the aggregate loss to the owners of the sealing fleet will scarcely be short of £100,000.⁵¹

Ten years earlier there had been no reports of abandoned ships being set on fire and many of successful salvages, yet in 1862 it was the reverse: only the *Elizabeth Jane* was found abandoned and brought to port by part of the crew of the *Sea Flower*.⁵² All others were burned.

But 1862 was significant for another reason: it was the beginning of the decline in the seal fishery. The St. John's sealing fleet, which is the most completely documented, comprised ninety-nine vessels of 12,342 tons and employed 4542 men in 1859. In 1863 it had declined to thirty-nine craft of 4706 tons and 2004 men. The fleet in Conception Bay numbered 152 vessels of 18,644 tons and 7416 men in 1861; in 1863 the numbers were 113 vessels, 14,073 tons and 5836 men. The other ports experienced similar declines.⁵³

The sealing fleet thus had been considerably reduced by 1864 when disaster struck again. That spring the fleet sailed northwest under favourable winds through loose ice. Then on 5 April a storm blew in from the northeast, driving the ice into the area around Green Bay. At least twenty-six—another report says thirty—vessels were crushed; nearly all the others were jammed in the ice until well into May. One reporter wrote:

As for the result of the voyage [i. e. catch], it is beyond comparison the most disastrous within living memory. The number of vessels fitted out for this Spring's fishery was small; and of these we are already informed of the loss of thirty. This would have been a very large proportion of casualties, had the whole outfit been equal to that of former years; but at present, it presses upon our Sealing interest with double severity.⁵⁴

Chafe recorded later that 1500 shipwrecked sealers—among them Captain Edward White, a leading captain of this period—were landed at Greenspond. The government sent the S. S. *Wolfm* late May to bring relief to the ships still in White Bay, but it suffered damage and had to return to St. John's. The brig *Coquette* was despatched to Greenspond with provisions and gradually the shipwrecked sealers and the remaining ships made their way home. Again, as in 1862, there are no reports of loss of life but economically it was a disastrous spring for both losses and catch, the latter of which was the lowest for about fifty years.⁵⁵

In 1863 two steamships were brought to Newfoundland to take part in the seal fishery and quickly proved their superiority to sailing vessels. Thereafter, as sailing ships were lost at the ice, they were not replaced and the old fleet declined rapidly. Although few lives were lost during the early years of the decade, injuries to both lives and ships increased towards the end. In 1868 the brig *Eclipse* from Harbour Grace was severely damaged and the *Fanny Bloomer* and *Nautilus* were lost, as well as four small vessels from northern ports. And on the S. S. *Nimrod* a sealer was killed when a punt fell on him. The Chamber of Commerce reported that the seal fishery had been disastrous because unusually stormy weather prevailed during the season.⁵⁶

The sailing fleet continued to suffer losses. In 1869 the *Elfreda* of Harbour Grace sank in Conception Bay with seven crew. In 1870 the *Jane* of St. John's and at least six other vessels were lost in the Greenspond area, while off the southwest coast of the island three vessels and a total of twenty-nine men were lost. It is not known whether these numbers include the schooner *Moonlight* from Rose Blanche, which belonged to Benjamin Rose and was lost with its crew of ten. It was reported from Channel, the principle port on the southwest coast, that:

some of the wives of the lost have suffered so much that their minds are deranged... It is sincerely hoped that our Government will do something for us in this our time of need and sore affliction. I trust it will assist the poor starving widows and orphans who are ruined, as their only means of support has been taken away from them.⁵⁷

The following year a disaster of a different type occurred when thirty or forty sealers, homeward bound by sailing vessel from St. John's to Old Perlican, drowned off Cape St. Francis when the craft sank. Besides the sealers the ship carried other passengers and the captain and crew; there were no survivors. It has been assumed that the ship struck a rock or an iceberg.⁵⁸

The following year was uneventful but 1872 was another disastrous year, as the sailing fleet was decimated and many lives lost. The *Eneas MacIntyre*, *Mary Joyce*, *Greyhound*, *Seaflower*, *Cecilia*, *Dolphin* and *Glencoe* were all lost, but with no loss of life. Other incidents, however, bred casualties. The *Gertrude* had four of its crew washed overboard and the *Velocipede* went down with some loss of life. Other losses were even more serious. The brig *Huntsman* from Bay Roberts "was literally smashed to pieces by the ice" near Battle Harbour and sank with its captain, Robert Dawe, his son and forty crew. The remaining seventeen members were saved by the *Rescue*, commanded by Dawe's brother, but only three escaped without broken limbs. The *Dundannah* from St. John's, commanded by William Jenkins and carrying thirty-one sealers, disappeared without a

trace. The same thing happened to the *Village Belle* from Brigus, under John Antle, carrying eighteen men. When the four men lost from the *Gertrude* and those who perished on the *Velocipede* are added, at least 100 men died sealing in 1872. The magistrate in Brigus reported that ten men from that town were married and left thirty children behind. He led the appeal which raised £836 to help the families of the men lost on the *Huntsman* and £211 for the thirty families dependent on the men lost on the *Dundannah* and *Velocipede*. Apparently the loss of the *Village Belle*, *Huntsman* and *Dundannah* left "more than sixty-one poor wornen... widows and upwards of 250 children fatherless, [and] many of these... utterly unprovided for." The events of 1872 were picked up, distorted and recounted by "New York sensation mongers," who described a "dreadful series of catastrophes which occurred to the sealing fleet... forty vessels including four steamships... total wrecks having been dashed to pieces amid huge icebergs... and out of four thousand human souls only 175 have been accounted for."⁵⁹ Although exaggerating the toll of lives, this was the first report to suggest that the international community was interested in the harsh conditions of the seal fishery.

The sailing fleet continued to decline but there were only scattered losses until 1878, when a number of disasters again occurred. The *Glengarry* from Harbour Grace and the *Brighton*, *Ecliptic*, *Silver Stream*, *Stella Jessie*, and *Cyrus* from St. John's were crushed in the ice in Green Bay and sank. In all, over fourteen vessels and at least "several lives" were lost that year. The Governor, in his address to the legislature in February 1879, remarked upon the "unusually large loss of property in sailing craft" during the 1878 seal fishery. A report stated that fourteen craft were lost, most crushed in White Bay, although one was lost in a gale.⁶⁰

Nonetheless, the sailing fleet did not disappear entirely from sealing because small schooner owners, especially those on the southwest coast, began to enter the fishery towards the end of the century. Still, there continued to be occasional losses. Indeed, as late as 1914 the St. John's schooner *Georgina* lost its captain and six men overboard in a storm while at the seal fishery.⁶¹ Not long after, schooners began to be fitted with auxiliary engines and a few, especially from northern ports, continued to try their luck at the seal fishery each year. However, after the losses of 1878 sailing vessels surrendered their role to the sealing steamers.

Early Steamer Losses

From the introduction of the first two steamers in 1863, their numbers grew steadily. By 1878 there were twenty-one operating out of St. John's and three from Harbour Grace. Although steamers could prosecute the seal fishery more efficiently than sailing vessels, they were not invulnerable. The *Wolf*, one of the first two steamers brought to Newfoundland, became the earliest casualty when it sank in 1871 after being struck by an iceberg while jammed in the ice; the crew escaped. In 1872, both the *Bloodhound* from St. John's and the *Retriever* from Harbour Grace sank during a storm. Murphy described these losses and the crew rescues:

During a dark night the *Bloodhound* struck upon an island of ice, and was so much damaged that it was with the greatest difficulty that she was kept afloat until morning, when the crew had to take to the ice as she was in a sinking condition. Half an hour after the *Bloodhound* went down the men made their way over the ice to the *Retriever*, which was about two miles off, but on arriving they found that she had got her quibus from the same ice monster, and was sinking rapidly. Fortunately the men, about 308 in number, were not many miles from Battle Harbour. Two other shipwrecked crews [presumably from sailing vessels] arrived shortly after. After being there a few days they saw the steamer *Nimrod*

at a distance, but failed to attract her attention by signals or by firing guns. At length they discovered an old rusty cannon lying about and, as a last resort, dragged it to the top of a hill, put in a tremendous charge, and applied a match. The gun flew into a thousand pieces, fortunately without killing anyone. The captain of the *Nimrod* [Peter Cummins] saw the flash, came near enough to send men over the ice, and on learning what happened, went for another steamer called the *Mastiff*, and between them they took off the shipwrecked crews and carried them to their homes.

That same year the *Hector* had to abandon the seal fishery after being badly damaged.⁶² The industry thus exacted a toll on steamers as well as sailing craft.

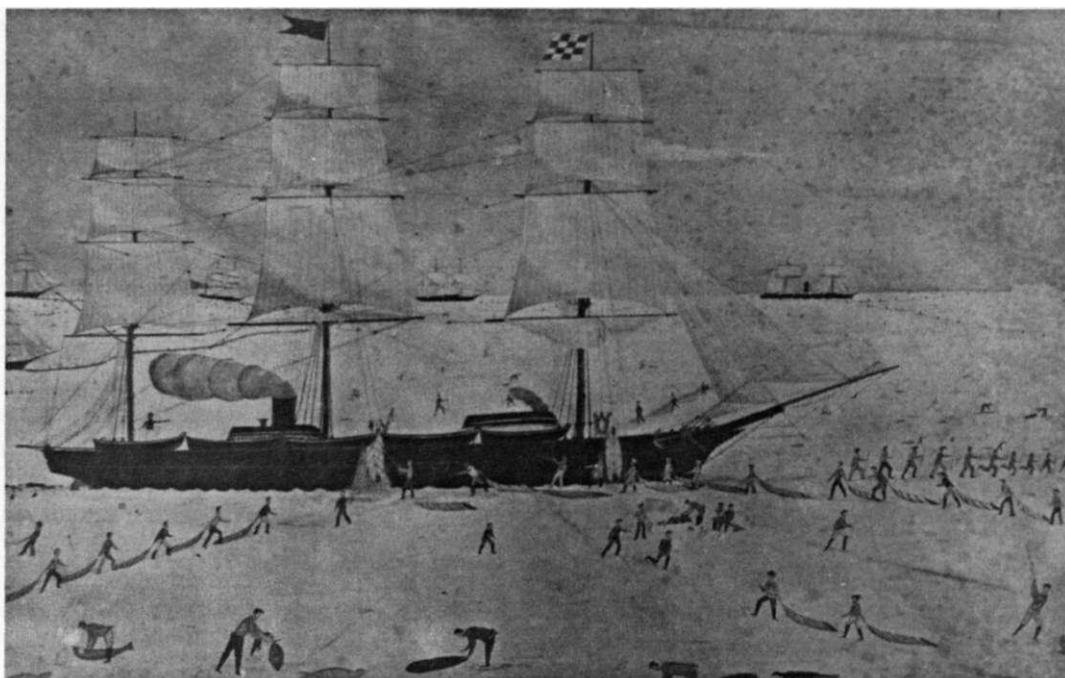


Figure 5: The S.S. *Retriever*, 238 net tons and fifty nominal horsepower (nhp), was one of the first wooden walls to be employed at the seal fishery. Owned by Ridley and Sons, Harbour Grace, it went to the ice for seven springs, beginning in 1866 when its crew earned a record \$303 each. Because of its low horsepower it depended on sail as well as steam; even then it could make little headway through the ice. Here men are hauling pelts to the ship. In 1872, *Retriever* sank while sealing but no lives were lost.

Source: See figure 1.

In 1874 the first losses of life on sealing steamers occurred when the *Tigress* was racked by a massive explosion; its boilers burst, scalding to death twenty-one men, including two engineers. The steamer was commanded by Isaac Bartlett from Bay Roberts, which explains the ten dead from that port. Jobs as firemen and "coal trimmers" were highly sought after and Bartlett probably was instrumental in obtaining these posts for his neighbours. That same year S.S. *Osprey* sank in a gale, but the crew was saved. In 1875 S.S. *Ariel* and *Tigress* were lost. In 1876 the *Hawk* was the first steamer to sink "after being crushed in the ice—both sides stove in." The *Micmac* sank in 1878 when "a large pan of ice went right through her engine room." On 6 January 1882 S.S. *Lion*, under Captain Patrick Fowlow, was lost while proceeding from St. John's to Trinity to

prepare for the seal fishery. It was a calm, moonlit night when the steamer disappeared with "all hands." Its loss is a mystery but was probably caused by a boiler explosion. No wreckage, however, was ever found. In 1884 S. S. *Tiger*, Captain Thomas Dawe, was lost in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, "the sea completely burying her," but the crew were saved.⁶³

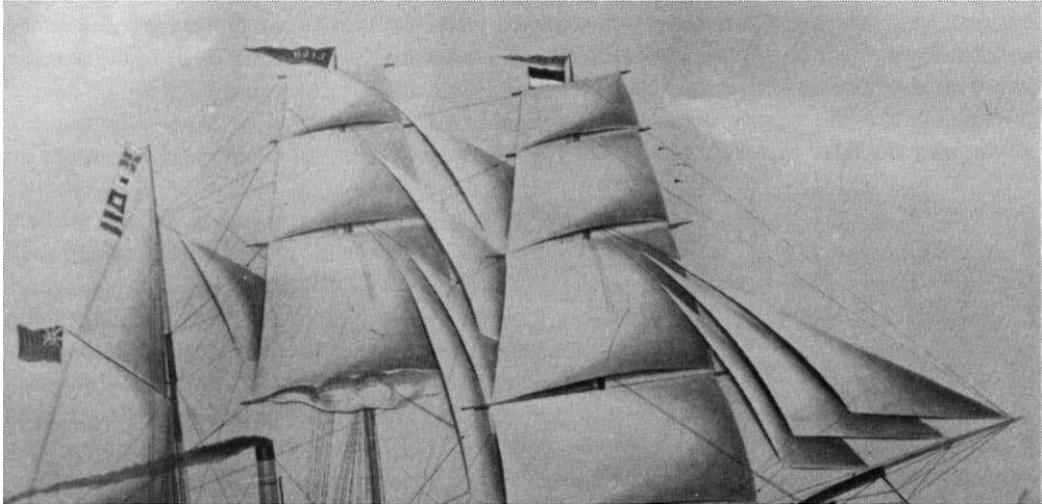


Figure 6: The S.S. *Lion*, 292 net tons and seventy-five nhp, was another of the early full-rigged steam sealers. Owned by Walter Grieve and Co., it was employed in the seal fishery for fifteen seasons. Grieve was one of the leading anti-confederates in the successful 1869 campaign against confederation with Canada. Consequently, while at the ice in 1870, the *Lion* flew a pennant with the words—"No Confederation." While en route from St. John's to Trinity on the calm moonlit night of 6 January 1882, the *Lion* disappeared without a trace.

Source: See figure 1.

Loss of life in the early steam seal fishery was rare, partly through good fortune, in that vessels crushed by the ice floes tended to be so located that men could escape onto the ice. Nevertheless, the men were subject to the same risks while on the ice as those from the older sailing vessels. The sad case of a sealer who drowned while dragging his tow of pelts to the vessel thus comes as no surprise.

Capt Wm Knee on the *Falcon* lost one man. On the 4th instant, while all hands were busy on the ice, two of the men met with a mishap, involving the death of one of them—a poor fellow named Joseph Parsons, belonging to Greenspond. They were on their way to the ship with a "tow" of seals each when a spot of thin black ice over which they were passing gave way and both fell through. Some of their shipmates observed them as they went down and hastened to the rescue but their efforts were only partially successful. One of the men was hauled out of the water in a much-exhausted state and taken on board, but the other poor fellow—Parsons—had already disappeared beneath the broken slob, leaving his cap and tow of seals to mark the place where his life of honest manly labour

terminated. We are not surprised to learn that "many a tear of genuine regret" was brushed away from the soiled and sun burnt faces of the *Falcon's* hardy crew as they gathered round the treacherous spot.⁶⁴

While on board the men faced other risks, some of which seem foolhardy today. In 1894 two men, Boatswain Brett and George Toms, died lingering deaths after an explosion while they were "warming dynamite in the Galley."⁶⁵ In all, twenty-five wooden steamers were lost between 1871 and 1898, but with comparatively little loss of life because most were lost in tight ice either by being crushed or swept over rocks and shoals.

Greenland Disaster and Further Losses

In 1898, however, a disaster occurred in which forty-eight men were lost in a storm while away from the *Greenland*. The fleet had steamed past Cape Freels and reached heavy ice and seals off the Funk Islands. They began killing on 13 March, but two days later a heavy storm caught many on the ice. Fortunately, no lives were lost. On Sunday, 20 March, the ships lay along the outer edge of heavy ice, on which seals could be seen. At daybreak on Monday Captain Barbour put off one watch under James Gaulton and then steamed two miles to put off the other three watches under Jesse Knee, Nathaniel House and James Norris. By the time the last men disembarked the weather began to look threatening and the *Greenland* steamed back and picked up Gaulton's watch. When it turned to retrace its track, the ice had swung about in a thick and tight sheet, forming an impassable barrier. To make matters more desperate, the ice sheet had created a wide lake on the other side which was equally impassable to the men stranded in the distance. If the weather had not deteriorated, boats could have been dragged across the ice to the lake to ferry the men across. Instead, a furious blizzard struck. Apparently the men split up into seven or eight groups and tried to reach the ship without success. On Tuesday the storm abated and most survivors were taken on board, but another storm stopped the rescue efforts until Wednesday morning, when six more survivors were found. Subsequently, statements that the *Greenland* had a full load of pelts stolen by another ship, which prolonged the trip and put the crew at danger, were widely circulated and believed. Captain Abram Kean, commanding another ship in the vicinity of the *Greenland*, felt he was unjustly accused and reacted in the local media to that effect.

Besides the dead, many were injured and three or four had limbs amputated in St. John's, where the *Greenland* was met by relatives. Most of the dead—twenty-nine—came from Bonavista Bay and five from St. John's; only twenty-five of the bodies were ever recovered. The tragedy for some surviving friends and relatives was accentuated by the part played by fate. Archibald Courage and three others had fully intended to go in S.S. *Mastiff* but had changed their minds; all four died. William Voisey of Quidi Vidi was well known as an athlete and had won many a race; he had gone as a stowaway. Two Newtrys from Carbonear also stowed away and Alfred died. James Maher of Quidi Vidi had taken his father's ticket and gone to see for himself what the seal fishery was like. There were reports that dying men had their clothing taken before they completely expired but that was never investigated; indeed the sealers were removed to their homes away from St. John's as quickly as possible after the *Greenland* docked and their evidence was never taken. Meanwhile, eighteen coffins were set up in the reading room of the Seaman's Home, while those belonging nearby were taken home immediately. It was reported that "many in reading the names recognize those of friends while one poor woman, Miss Norris, could be sympathized with for two brothers and four cousins were amongst the deceased, and only two bodies were recovered." In all it was a terrible experience, although it does not seem to have discouraged any significant number of men from sealing. In fact, one survivor, a young man named George Tuff, would play a fateful

role in the later and worse disaster which befell the S.S. *Newfoundland*?" The "Greenland Disaster" became a turning point for Newfoundland society. For the first time people expressed their concern publicly over the risk to lives in the seal fishery. They were no longer satisfied with the view that disasters were "Acts of God" for which no mortal was to blame. While the government dithered because it feared to upset the shipowners, during these depressed years various governors took an interest in the men's well-being and a local newspaper, the *Evening Telegram*, championed their cause as well. The vessel owners were made more aware of their responsibilities. Meanwhile, 1898 also saw the loss of S.S. *Mastiff*, which sank in a terrible gale on 14 March. Two large sheets of ice driven by the wind and sea nipped the vessel amidships and passed through it. The crew barely escaped onto the ice at 10 pm with almost nothing but their clothes. After a night in the freezing storm the men were rescued by the *Walrus* and *Neptune*.⁶⁷

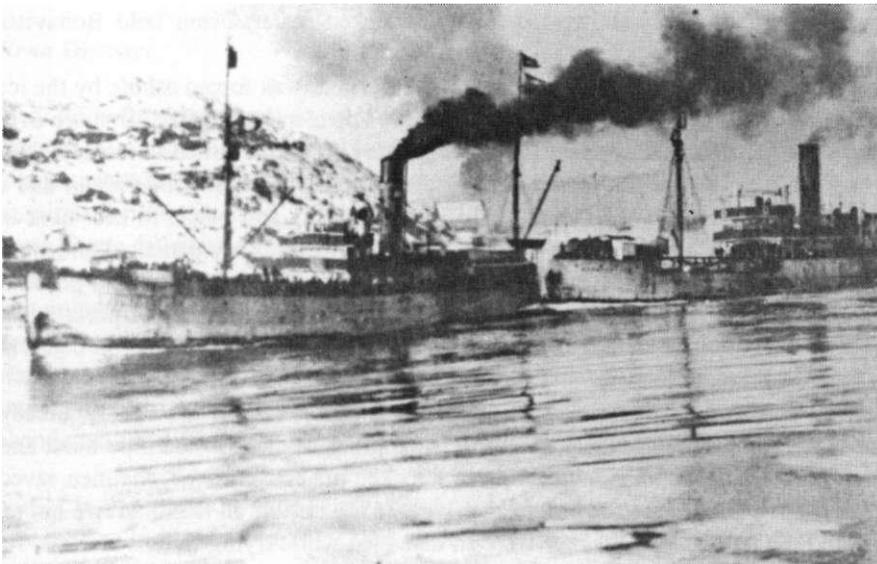


Figure 7: An Ern Maunder photograph of two steel sealers colliding in St. John's harbour while racing through the narrows. The S.S. *Beothic*, 471 net tons and 328 nhp, cut across the bow of the S.S. *Bonaventure*, 461 net tons and 350 nhp, and was rammed in the stern. The *Beothic* had to be repaired in New York, but the *Bonaventure* continued to the ice and had a successful season. Steel steamers were introduced to the seal fishery in 1906; by 1914, according to Levi Chafe Newfoundland had "the finest fleet of Sealers and Ice-Breakers in the World." The annual four to six-week hunt could not support such expensive steamers and in 1915-1916, both the *Beothic* and *Bellaventure* were sold to Russia as icebreakers.

Source: See figure 1.

In reaction to the outcry over the *Greenland*, sealing firms began to pay more attention to the recruitment of officers and "master watches," who were responsible on the ice. Then the *Hope* was lost in 1901 when it became jammed in the ice, was forced ashore on Byron Island and gradually went to pieces.⁶⁸ Meanwhile, the introduction of iron steamers in 1906 forced the captains of wooden steamers to drive their ships and men harder to obtain a proportionate share of the

declining herds. This was counter-productive: between 1907 and 1910 eight more wooden craft were lost, followed by two more in 1913-1914, although the crews were all saved.

The S.S. *Greenland* experienced a broken shaft in 1907. While most of the men were taken off, the captain and a few crew stayed aboard to try to get sail on the vessel. But it drifted helplessly among the floes and began to leak. Finally the S.S. *Newfoundland* came upon it and took off the remainder of the crew. A local correspondent wrote that "the S.S. *Greenland*... has gone to the bottom and many mariners say this is the best possible thing that could have happened to this "voodooed" ship... She has been burned to the water's edge, riots have occurred on board her several times, she has been on the rocks and her crew were frozen on another occasion."⁶⁹ When the crews of the *Greenland* and the S.S. *Algerine* (which had been unsuccessful at the hunt) went to the railway station, expecting a train to take them to their local stations at government expense because they had no money, they were disappointed. The train had been cancelled but neither the men nor the station personnel were notified. The men eventually were told to leave; when they refused, the police were called. The sealers ended up sleeping on the floor of the fire hall. The *Daily News* reported that the sealers had caused unnecessary trouble. A reply in a rival newspaper, the *Evening Telegram*, took the form of a ballad signed "Bay Man" to attack the editor of the *Daily News* "For the mean and shabby way/He treated the shipwrecked sealers/From bold Bonavista Bay."⁷⁰

That same year S.S. *Leopard*, under Captain Robert Bartlett, was forced ashore by the ice at Blackhead just outside St. John's while enroute to the Gulf. The men had to flee for shore over loose slob ice at one in the morning; they spent the night on the cliff and returned to retrieve their clothes the following morning before the vessel went to the bottom. The S.S. *Bloodhound* had a narrow escape as well. It became jammed in the ice in Bonavista Bay and began to keel over in a storm. To many of the crew it looked as if the vessel would roll over; they panicked and went onto the ice with their more important belongings. When morning arrived there was "a peculiar assortment of goods lying there." Included among these items were several pieces of pork, a bag of bread, some molasses and a bottle of rum. "There was no thought of life belts, put on board at the request of the Board of Trade."⁷¹

The following year S.S. *Grand Lake* was picking up seals to add to the 19,000 already on board when the exhaust pipe became choked. While attempting to clear it, the pipe burst and the "mishap was as bad as if one of the planks had been knocked off her bottom." The men saved what they could and escaped onto the ice as the steamer went to the bottom in less than two hours. That same spring both S.S. *Walrus* and *Panther* were so damaged while trying to butt through the ice that their bows caved in and they sank. In 1909 S.S. *Vanguard's* main shaft broke and the vessel drifted helplessly in the ice. When it began to leak badly the crew escaped to nearby steamers. Similarly, S.S. *Virginia Lake* was crushed in the ice that same year. First it lost its main shaft; then as the ice came together, the aft part of the ship was lifted out of the water and the stern post and rudder were carried away. As the ship settled in the loosening ice it began to leak badly and the men were forced to abandon it; some boarded S.S. *Bellaventure* while the remainder walked to the nearby mainland.⁷²

The details of the 1910 loss of S.S. *Iceland* are scarce, although the steamer was honoured in a local ballad that stressed it was the last of the fleet to sail from Harbour Grace.

In good old days in Harbour Grace,
When it was in its bloom,
John Munn & Co. rallied out supplies
And made the fishery boom.

But all the steamers now are gone,
 The *Iceland* is the last
 That links the present harder times
 With the good old days that's past.

Farewell to the good ship *Iceland*,
 The wealth she brought was great;
 Although she's gone to Davy Jones,
 Thank God her crew are safe.⁷³

On its way to the Gulf in 1913, S. S. *Labrador* sprang a leak while butting through miles of slob ice in heavy seas. As it began to fill with water the captain headed for land. One fire was put out by the inflow of water, but engineers and stokers worked in water up to their waists for thirty hours while the vessel struggled to reach St. Mary's Bay, where it was run ashore in Branch. Although the ship was a wreck, all the men were saved.⁷⁴ In 1914 the little S. S. *Kite* went to the bottom as well. Fortunately, the loss of these steamers caused no casualties.

Erna Disaster

Such good fortune did not ensue from a disaster in 1912 which is usually overlooked because the steamer involved was enroute to Newfoundland from Scotland to take part in the spring hunt when it disappeared with all hands. That winter Baine Johnston despatched a crew to bring its newly-acquired *Erna* to St. John's and advertised that it would be ready for the seal hunt in the spring. Berths were distributed through the merchants who dealt with the company (and probably through others as well, although that cannot be ascertained). In any event, the sealers with tickets came to the city and everybody awaited the arrival of the steamer. When 12 March, the date on which the vessel was expected, arrived approximately 150 men were housed by the company in one of its warehouses with two stoves for heat. As the days passed without any word from the steamer, few were willing to entertain the thought that it might have been lost with all hands. Hope was not abandoned until 23 April, fifty-four days after its departure from Scotland on 1 March.

S. S. *Erna* was built in Greenock in 1890 and had been bought by Murray and Crawford, part of Baine Johnston, for £14,500. On board when it went down were thirty-three crew and three passengers. The loss of the *Erna* was made more tragic by the fact that many of the crew had gone to Scotland primarily for a visit while work was slow at Baine Johnston's premises. Consequently, their positions on the vessel were not necessarily those they normally performed. Jacob Winsor, who served as third officer, was to take charge as sealing captain when the vessel went to the ice; Caleb Winsor, who was listed as a seaman, was his brother. It is not known how many dependents were left as widows and orphans but five of the ten stokers were married and one left ten children; Jacob Winsor left a wife and four children; and Peter Jackman left a wife and five children. This was the capital's worst sealing disaster to that time in terms of the number of lives lost and family members affected.⁷⁵

While it might seem that over time more care would be taken to prevent loss of life, this was offset by the increased pressure on captains to make voyages profitable. The sealing fleet numbered twenty-five steamers in 1906; by 1914 this had been reduced to twenty. The competition for seals was also shared by the second hands and the master watches, as well as by the men who were dependent upon them for their berths. Thus, the disasters of 1914 appear with hindsight almost inevitable.

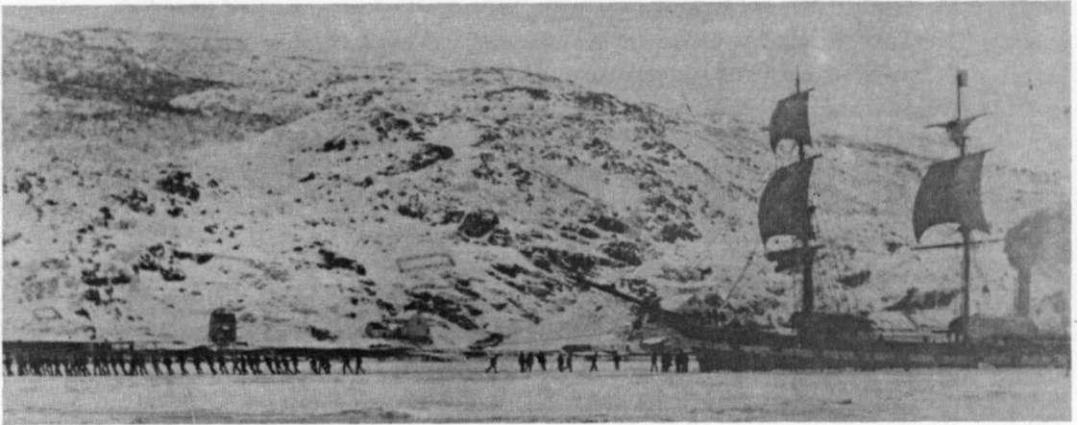
Southern Cross Disaster

Figure 8: Even the low-powered steamers occasionally needed help when leaving St. John's for the ice fields. The steamer in this Holloway photograph has been identified as the *Southern Cross*, 277 net tons and 100 nhp. In Newfoundland's worst sealing disaster, the *Southern Cross* sank in a storm while returning from the ice in 1914, taking the lives of Captain George Clarke and 172 men.

Source: See figure 1.

In that year S.S. *Southern Cross* sank while returning from the seal fishery in the Gulf of St. Lawrence with a full cargo. The captain, George Clarke, was anxious for the recognition and small prize awarded to the first arrival in St. John's. A total of 173 lives were lost when the steamer tried to reach the capital in a raging storm rather than seek shelter. No wreckage or debris was ever found and no one knows what happened during the vessel's final hours. Oral tradition attributes the disaster to rotten pound boards, which gave out in the heavy seas, allowing the cargo to shift and capsize the steamer.⁷⁶ As with the *Erna* the people of Newfoundland could not bring themselves to accept the loss of the *Southern Cross*. This attitude was reinforced by the dreadful news on 2 April that over fifty men belonging to the *Newfoundland* had been found dead or dying on the ice. The following day this bad news was made even worse when it was confirmed that in fact over seventy men had died in this disaster.⁷⁷ Thus, the tragedy unfolding on the front actually prevented society from accepting that an even worse tragedy had already occurred. On 30 March a wireless operator at St. Pierre reported that a sealing steamer had passed; from the description it could only have been the S.S. *Southern Cross*. The following day it passed the coastal steamer *Portia* near Cape Pine and was obviously on its way to Cape Race despite the storm which convinced the *Portia's* captain to take shelter in St. Mary's Bay. The *Southern Cross* was never seen again. On 3 April a local newspaper reported hopefully:

Nothing has been heard of the *Southern Cross* since she was reported off Cape Pine on Tuesday last, and the general opinion is that she was driven far off to sea. Various reports were afloat in the city last night, one in particular that she had passed Cape Race yesterday afternoon, but upon making enquiries this and the other reports were unfortunately found to be untrue... At 5:30 yesterday the Anglo [Anglo-American Telegraph Company] got in touch with Cape Race and learned that she had not passed the Cape, neither was she at Trepassey. A message from Capt. Connors of the *Portia* said she was not in St. Mary's Bay. A wireless message was sent by the government to the U.S. patrol steamer

Senaca, which is in the vicinity of Cape Race, asking her to search for the *Cross*. The S.S. *Kyle* will also leave tonight to make a diligent search for her and it is hoped that something will soon be heard from the overdue ship, as anxiety for her safety is increasing hourly. If she has been driven off to sea, which is the general opinion expressed by experienced seamen, it would take her some days to make land again. The ship is heavily laden and cannot steam at a great speed.⁷⁸

No trace of the ship or its 173 men was ever found.

Newfoundland Disaster

The colony's suffering was not limited to this disaster, however, because when concern began to be expressed about the *Southern Cross*, a good deal of attention was diverted to the unfolding details of the disaster that had befallen the crew of the S.S. *Newfoundland*. The old wooden *Newfoundland*, under the command of Westbury Kean, had been having bad luck. The ice was tight and the vessel could not penetrate the floes as could the steel ships. To make matters worse the owners, Harvey and Company, had removed the wireless because the cost of the equipment and operator was not justified by the results the ship had achieved. Thus, Kean was unable to contact any of the other captains, which included his brother, Joseph, who commanded the second largest steel vessel, *Florizel*, and his father, Abram, who was in charge of the largest vessel of all, the *Stephano*. Although they were employed by competing firms, before leaving St. John's, Captain Abram had informed Westbury that he would raise after derrick on the *Stephano* as a signal for Westbury whenever the *Stephano* was among the whitecoats.⁷⁹

After a frustrating, time-consuming and unproductive two weeks the *Newfoundland* came to within hailing distance of the *Florizel* and Westbury told his brother of his poor luck; Captain Joe relayed the news to Captain Abram. Meanwhile, the steel fleet had been doing fairly well and were "cleaning" up the scattered patches as they came upon them, leaving nothing for the slow, under-powered wooden craft. Finally on 30 March the *Stephano* came upon the main "patch" and Captain Abram ordered the after derrick to be raised. At the time, the *Newfoundland* was jammed in the ice five to seven miles southeast of this spot (the actual distance remains in dispute).

The following morning Westbury sent his entire complement of officers and batsmen under the overall command of the second hand, George Tuff, in the direction of the *Stephano* with instructions to go aboard and take orders from Captain Abram. It was highly unusual to send the second hand onto the ice but the seals were so far away that Westbury was reluctant to allow the master watches to travel such a long distance and work away from his control. As a result, he decided to send Tuff along. It was obvious also that Westbury intended that his men should spend the night on the *Stephano* or the *Florizel*, according to master watch Thomas Dawson and others. It was never clear, however, whether George Tuff had heard this instruction. Instead, he apparently was aware only that he was to take orders from Captain Abram. When the men left the *Newfoundland* at about 7 a. m., Tuff ordered those who had been handling coal to rub their mitts on the ice pinnacles as a guide back to the ship. Soon there were indications that the weather was going to deteriorate. Thirty-four stragglers left the crew and returned to the *Newfoundland*, explaining to an angry Captain Westbury that they did not think it was a good idea to continue towards the *Stephano* in the circumstances; they got back on board at about 1:30 p. m.

The main party led by Tuff and containing all the officers reached the *Stephano* at 11:20 a. m. and were invited to help themselves to tea and hard bread. Some managed to obtain a cup of tea while others had to go without. While three master watches—Arthur Moulant, Jacob Bungay

and Sidney Jones—were invited into the officers' dining room for a meal of meat, potatoes and turnip hash, Dawson was forgotten and managed only to get a cup of tea, which he gave up to another man who needed it. Meanwhile, the *Stephano* was steaming towards a "patch" of seals, although it was never agreed in which direction the vessel proceeded. Captain Abram ordered Tuff and his men over the side at 11:50 a. m. with instructions to kill the fifteen hundred or so seals and return to their own vessel.

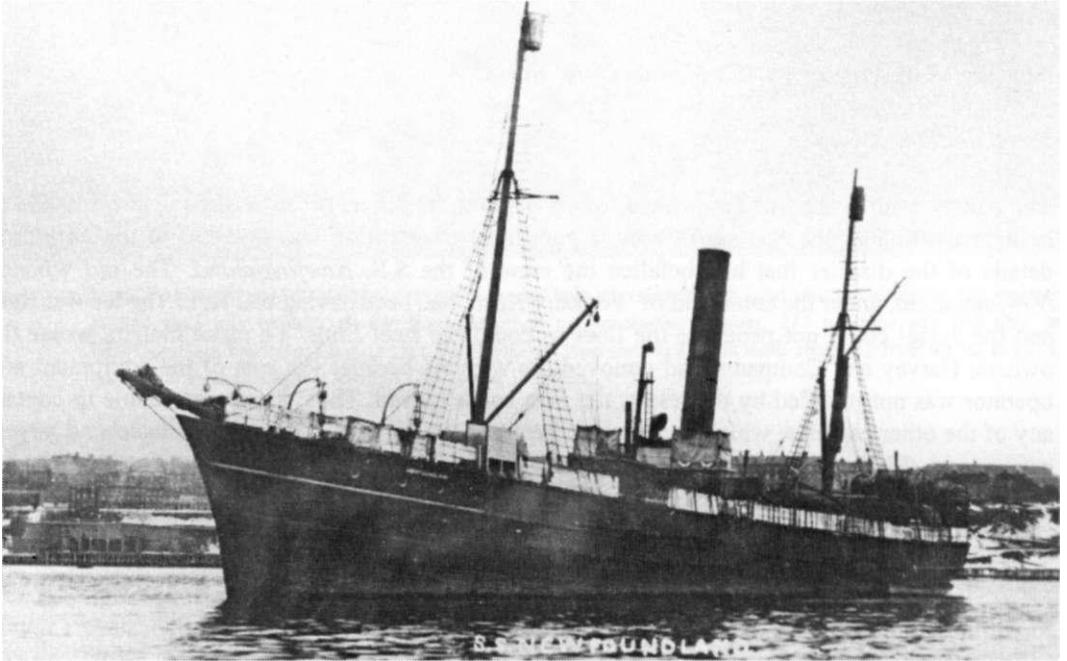


Figure 9: The S.S. *Newfoundland*, 568 tons and 130 nhp, was the largest wooden wall to engage in the seal fishery. It was a Nova Scotian sealer that usually operated out of St. John's because only in that port could seal pelts be processed. In 1904, it was purchased by Harvey and Co.; in 1914, many of its crew were caught on the ice in a snow storm from which seventy-eight died. Renamed the S.S. *Samuel Blandford* in 1916, the steamer was wrecked without loss of life the same year on rocks in St. Mary's Bay.

Source: See figure 1.

The 132 men of the *Newfoundland* found themselves on the ice with a storm coming on and unable to see their own ship, which they were expected to reach without really knowing where it was. Tuff insisted they obey Captain Abram's orders and walk in the opposite direction of the vessel to kill seals before returning to the *Newfoundland*. Some of the men objected, but Tuff ordered them all to follow until they came upon a few seals. By this time men like Dawson were beginning to have an effect on Tuff and at about 12:45 he ordered Dawson to take the lead and follow a course southeast by east. The intention was to cut across their morning trail which would not be hard to find if drifting snow had not covered it.

Meanwhile, the thirty-four men who had quit and were returning to the *Newfoundland* discovered that it was only by following the vessel's whistle that they were able to find the ship in the thickening storm around 1:00 or 1:30 p. m. The main party was far from the *Newfoundland* but tragically Captain Westbury was convinced that they were out of danger on board the *Stephano*. By all reports this was the beginning of the worst storm to hit Newfoundland that winter. At about 2:30 Dawson found the morning track and some of the flags the men had dropped because of their weight and clumsiness; they were now back on the heavy Arctic ice, away from the loose ice

where the seals were and through which the steel ships could move freely. It seemed that they would make their ship safely after all. Almost immediately, however, they came upon a flag belonging to the *Stephano* that they had passed that morning. The flag marked the spot where a few pelts had been left and was at least a four-hour walk from the *Newfoundland*. The author Cassie Brown, who has written a thorough study of the tragedy, suggests that had they stopped there and built shelters while they had light and strength, as well as pelts to burn and carcasses to eat, many lives might have been saved.⁸⁰ But Dawson led off again, ordering the men to zig back and forth over the ice in an effort to stay on track in the drifting snow and wheeling ice. Meanwhile, on board the *Newfoundland* the boatswain, John Tizzard, asked Captain Westbury if he should blow the whistle. The Captain saw no need for it but suggested that it be blown once or twice. Tizzard blew the whistle twice, possibly at 4:30 and 4:45; the lost men heard it and waited in vain for it to sound again.

At about the same time the track disappeared beneath the drifting snow and the men halted. Tuff ordered the watches to separate and choose large sturdy pans on which to build windbreaks. Moulard drove his men to pry up the blocks and build a wall that eventually extended about thirty feet, with short sides protruding at right angles. Dawson's strength had almost given out after breaking trail for hours through knee-deep snow, but he managed to force his men to build a shoulder-high shelter, as did Bungay, who was joined by Tuff. Jones was not able to get his men organized and most went to Dawson's pan, which became seriously overcrowded, making jumping and exercising difficult.

All this time the weather had been mild with an easterly wind. Then it began to rain and the men were soon drenched. As the rain passed, however, the wind shifted to the north and the temperature quickly dropped to well below freezing. The shelters, which had been constructed to block the easterly wind, were now exposed. Although the men managed to light fires, these only flickered for a short time, fuelled by the gaffs since there were no seal pelts available. With both feet wet, Dawson lay down and went to sleep.

By morning the dead and dying lay all over the ice. The day continued bitterly cold and windy but because Captain Westbury thought his men were on the *Stephano - ana* because he had no wireless-he did not realize the danger faced by his men and dispatched no search parties. The *Bellaventure* came close to the spot where the men huddled but did not see them; the *Stephano* did likewise. To make this horror story more terrible, when Tuff, John Hiscock and Richard McCarthy managed to cover about two miles in the direction of their ship and had only about two miles to go to reach it, the *Newfoundland* finally broke loose from the ice and steamed away from them.

The survivors crawled into nooks and crannies in the rafting ice and waited through another bitterly cold and windy night. In the morning Arthur Moulard, Tuff, Bungay and several others set out for the *Newfoundland*, which was jammed again. Captain Westbury had just climbed up to the barrel and was studying the *Stephano*, only two miles away, through his spyglass wondering why his men did not leave and return to their own ship. He swung his glass idly around and saw several men staggering toward him. At that moment he knew the worst. Sliding and stumbling down to the deck, he broke the news to the boatswain and the navigator, Captain Charles Green. At the same time he raised an improvised distress signal which was seen on the *Stephano* and led Captain Abram to despatch men to find out the trouble. When the survivors informed Westbury that his men had left the *Stephano* on Tuesday, the full horror of the situation was clear. John Hiscock, the second master watch under Dawson, was one of the first to board the *Newfoundland*, having seen his brother die and Dawson unable to walk. He told Westbury that had he blown the whistle or if his father had not put them out on the ice, the tragedy would have been prevented.⁸¹

Meanwhile the *Bellaventure*, under Captain Robert Randell, was still in the vicinity but on the other side of the disaster area; the second hand, Abram Parsons, spotted Benjamin Piercey and Jesse Collins in the distance making their way towards him. When the men were brought aboard and explained the tragedy, Captain Randell ordered his men out with blankets, food and drink to search for the *Newfoundland's* men because the ice was too heavy for the steamer to make much headway. By 6:00 p. m. Captain Randell's crew had taken aboard fifty-eight dead and thirty-five live sealers; the *Stephano* and *Florizel* had also collected a number. When John Keels died in St. John's from the effects of his experience it brought to seventy-eight the number who succumbed as a result of the *Newfoundland* disaster. The photographs of the bodies of these sealers made a deep impression on society and led to the establishment of an inquiry in which sealers as well as officers were questioned. A total of forty-four witnesses appeared. In the end a majority report concluded that Captain Abram Kean had to bear most of the blame but a minority report disputed this.



Figure 10: Homes of successful sealing captains were indicative of their wealth. The home of Captain William C. (Billy) Winsor in Wesleyville is one example.

Source: See figure 1.

Conditions after 1914 improved to some extent. Wireless equipment and an operator, for example, became mandatory on all sealing vessels. The report of the Commission of Enquiry made it clear that Newfoundland could no longer accept the dangers of the seal fishery as inevitable. The commissioners made recommendations which were incorporated into legislation. While government had passed legislation pertaining to the seal fishery as early as 1873, most regulations were aimed at conserving the stocks. In 1898 limits were placed on the number of men on each steamer; the

next year a law was passed to protect sealers' wages. Finally, at least in part due to the Commission's report, in 1916 a bill prohibited men from being on the ice after dark and provided for rocket signals, search parties, masters' and mates' certificates, medical officers, better food, compensation and other improvements. The seal fishery thus left the *laissez-faire* arena of the nineteenth century and entered an era in which men would be held accountable for the loss of human life resulting from "industrial accidents."

Conclusion

It is difficult to quantify the risk to men and ships in the seal fishery in the absence of studies of similar activities. But there was one unique hazard faced by sealers. Unlike other fisheries, Newfoundland sealing required ships to enter the ice. The walrus hunt in the Bering Straits, north Pacific fur sealing, and whaling voyages to Greenland and the Davis Straits all involved "fishing" from rocky islands or in the open seas—sometimes quite near the Arctic ice. The Newfoundland seal fishery, however, required ships operating in the leads of water in the ice. Getting jammed was a frequent occurrence and often led to a ship's demise, whether sail or steamer.

But ice was hardly the only danger. Ships sank and crews perished in storms, and inclement weather could always overtake men on the ice. By and large the sealing crews were reasonably safe in tight ice because the very pressure that could crush a ship provided an ice haven for the crew. In the earlier period of the fishery, the large number of vessels pursuing seals enhanced the opportunities for crews to be rescued. But as the industry declined, however, the decreasing number of vessels meant that they were often far apart and unaware of problems outside their immediate vicinity, a condition which increased the risk to sealers.

On balance, the available evidence suggests that the Newfoundland seal fishery was a dangerous activity fully deserving of the reputation it had in the eyes of early nineteenth century observers like Waldegrave, Gower and Anspach, and which it retained when Chafe and England wrote at the beginning of this century. Yet while it was a hazardous fishery, the perils were accepted by Newfoundlanders until the beginning of the twentieth century, when a succession of particularly horrendous disasters finally shifted public opinion. Thereafter firms, captains and officers increasingly began to be held accountable for their actions.

Societal forces, pressures, divisions, commonalities and attitudes stand out in greater relief during disasters. Sealers were most vulnerable to disasters while on the ice away from the vessel. Engineers and firemen were most prone to scalding and even death in the engine rooms of the steamers. Everyone's life was at risk in storms. An examination of disasters, such as those discussed in this essay, can help readers appreciate the conditions under which men worked; the pressures applied by shipowners to officers and captains; and the generally ineffective societal response to the constant threat to lives and ships. Only after 1914 did Newfoundland society insist, somewhat belatedly, that safe procedures be followed on the ice.

NOTES

* Shannon Ryan is Professor of History at Memorial University of Newfoundland. Formerly a student of Gerry's, Shannon has been a colleague for twenty-two years.

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented to the annual meeting of the Canadian Historical Association in Victoria, B. C., 26-30 May 1990. I would like to thank Dr. David Zimmerman of the University of Victoria for

his comments on that occasion. My thanks also to the family of the late Dr. Cater W. Andrews and to Memorial University of Newfoundland for access to the Cater W. Andrews Collection. All photographs and prints in this paper are taken from the Andrews Collection and are used with the kind permission of the Centre for Newfoundland Studies at Memorial and the literary executors of the collection.

2. Levi G. Chafe, *Chafe's Sealing Book* (2nd ed., St. John's, 1905), 5.
3. George Allan England, *The Greatest Hunt in the World* (Montréal, 1969), 17. This was originally published in 1924 as *Vikings of the Ice*.
4. Public Record Office [hereafter PRO], Colonial Office [CO], series 194/23, fols. 478-79, "Report on the State of the Fishery," 22 October 1799.
5. PRO CO/194/45, fols. 28-29. Governor Gower's Report for 1804.
6. PRO CO/194/45, fol. 116. Gower to Camden, 18 July 1805.
7. Lewis Anspach, *History of Newfoundland* (London, 1918), 418-419, 421-422.
8. I use the term "disaster" in a general sense and do not try to distinguish disasters from "accidents" and "catastrophes." For a discussion of this point, see John C. Burnham, "A Neglected Field: The History of Natural Disasters," *AHA Perspectives* (April 1988), 22-24. *Webster's Dictionary* (1972), defines a disaster as "an adverse or unfortunate event; great and sudden misfortune; calamity." Levi G. Chafe, in his list of sealing "disasters" published in 1923, included the burning of a ship and the loss of three lives. The Newfoundland *Weekly Herald*, 9 May 1849, described the loss of a schooner and the subsequent hardship experienced by the crew—who were all saved—as a disaster. Because the loss of a single wage earner was generally disastrous for his family one can appreciate the difficulty in trying to define the term. This study is confined to an examination of disasters involving the spring sealing vessels and will not consider those that sometimes befell the fishermen (or "landsmen") who hunted from shore. An excellent paper on the study of disasters is Kenneth S. Coates and W.R. Morrison, "Towards a Methodology of Disasters: The Case of the *Princess Sophia*" (Unpublished paper presented to the annual meeting of the Canadian Historical Association, Victoria, British Columbia, May 1990.)
9. PRO CO 194/45, fol. 15, 28-29, 36, 46, 201, 205.
10. *Royal Gazette and Newfoundland Advertiser* [hereafter *Royal Gazette*], 29 April 1849.
11. *Ibid.*, 29 April 1849.
12. Chafe, *Chafe's Sealing Book* (3rd ed., St. John's, 1923), 39. This disaster, like a number of others in the same source, cannot be verified. Unless otherwise indicated all further references to *Chafe* are to this edition.
13. *Royal Gazette*, 7, 21 and 28 April 1829 and 29 April 1849; *Mercantile Journal*, 27 April 1826.
14. *Royal Gazette*, 7 April 1829. An explosion involving dynamite and blasting powder was also the cause of Newfoundland's last sealing disaster in 1931 in which the S.S. *Viking* blew up killing twenty-four men, including Varick Frissell and his American movie production team. Frissell had filmed the previous year while on S.S. *Ungava* and briefly on *Viking*. He returned in 1931 to obtain more dramatic footage and for that reason carried his own supply of powder (which was stored with the vessel's supply.) The movie was later released under the title *The Viking* and is an extraordinary audio-visual chronicle of the Newfoundland seal fishery of that time. Frissell's earlier documentary, *The Great Arctic Seal Hunt*, is a silent film with sub-titles but also very informative.
15. *Newfoundlander*, 6 August 1829.
16. *Ibid.*, 16 April 1829. By 1853 it was estimated that the average value of a sealing vessel was £1000, including vessels of all classes.
17. *Ibid.*, 8 April 1830.
18. James Murphy, *Old Sealing Days* (St. John's, 1916), 15-16. Contemporary newspapers did not mention Ryan or Mackey nor the *True Blue*; "Native" Walsh was the nickname of a St. John's merchant, William Walsh, who sided with the strikers in 1842 (*ibid.*, 9); the "strain of Cape Broyle" means that they were on the same latitude as Cape Broyle; and the *Newfoundlander*, 11 March 1830, reported that the *Confidence*, a vessel of seventy-seven tons burthen, under the command of John Piccot, went to the ice that year with twenty-six crew members. There were no lighthouses in Newfoundland (except Fort Amherst at the entrance to St. John's harbour), which made sealing particularly dangerous. The Cape Spear lighthouse opened in 1836.
19. *Public Ledger*, 15 February 1831.
20. *Newfoundlander*, 31 March 1831.
21. *Public Ledger*, 6 May 1831.
22. *Royal Gazette*, 30 April 1833.
23. *Ibid.*, 27 May 1834.
24. *Newfoundlander* 6 August 1834; *Annual Report of the Chamber of Commerce* (1834).
25. *Newfoundland Patriot*, 3 May 1836; *Royal Gazette*, 3 April 1838 and 24 April 1849; *Newfoundlander*, 6 and 20 April 1837. Although A. A. Parsons, "*Newfoundland*

Tragedy and the Loss of the *Southern Cross*, "Newfoundland Quarterly, XIV, No. 1 (July 1914), 1-6, claimed that fourteen vessels and over 300 men were lost at the seal fishery in 1838, this has been impossible to confirm.

26. *Chafe's Sealing Book*, 37.
27. Phillip Tocque, *Newfoundland As It Was and As It Is in 1877* (London, 1878), 304-306.
28. *Royal Gazette*, 18 April 1843; *Patriot*, 19 April 1843; *Carbonear Sentinel*, 18 April 1843.
29. *Conception Bay Herald*, 5 April 1843, quoted in *Royal Gazette*, 25 April 1843.
30. Anspach, *Newfoundland*, 419.
31. *Newfoundlander*, 13 April 1843.
32. *Ibid.*, 4 April 1844. *Chafe's Sealing Book*, 40, reports that it was known as the "Spring of the Growlers."
33. *Chafe's Sealing Book*, 37. Again one must emphasize that this report has not been substantiated.
34. *Ibid.*, 40; *Star*, 26 March 1846; *Newfoundlander*, 16 April 1846.
35. *Newfoundlander*, 20 April 1846.
36. *Ibid.*, 11 May 1846.
37. *Star*, 2 and 16 April 1846. *Newfoundlander*, 19 and 20 March and 11 May 1846.
38. *Newfoundlander*, 18 March 1847. The port sent a greater number of ships in 1832 but they were of lesser tonnage.
39. *Newfoundland Patriot*, 26 April 1847; *Times*, 21 April 1847; *Chafe's Sealing Book*, 37.
40. *Weekly Herald*, 9 May 1849.
41. *Newfoundlander*, 5 April 1849.
42. *Chafe's Sealing Book*, 41; Murphy, *Old Sealing Days*, 37.
43. *Newfoundlander*, 8 April 1852.
44. *Ibid.*, 8 and 15 April; *Public Ledger*, 16 April 1852; *Times*, 10, 17 and 21 April 1852.
45. *Royal Gazette*, 20 April 1852; *Times*, 17 April 1852; *Newfoundlander*, 3 May 1852.
46. *Times*, 28 April 1852; *Newfoundland Patriot*, 31 May 1852.
47. *Newfoundlander*, 1 September and 3 October 1853. The courts decided in favour of the crews that salvaged abandoned ships, although they were generally awarded reduced compensation because they left the area for St. John's so quickly.
48. *Chafe's Sealing Book*, 37; *Newfoundlander*, 9 March 1857.
49. *Royal Gazette*, 14 August 1860 and 16 April 1861.
50. *Times*, 12 April 1862; *Public Ledger*, 4 April 1862; *Royal Gazette*, 15 April 1862.
51. *Times*, 12 and 16 April 1862.
52. *Royal Gazette*, 22 April 1862.
53. *Public Ledger*, 25 March 1859.
54. *Royal Gazette*, 31 May 1864. See also *Chafe's Sealing Book*, 42.
55. *Chafe's Sealing Book*, 42; *Royal Gazette*, 24 May 1864.
56. *Royal Gazette*, 31 March, 28 April and 19 May 1868.
57. *Ibid.*, 20 April 1869; 26 April, 17 May and 21 June 1870.
58. *Newfoundlander*, 26 May 1871.
59. *Royal Gazette*, 26 March, 2 and 28 April, 3 September and 9 October 1872; *Newfoundlander*, 7 May, 7 June and 3 July 1872 and 17 January 1873; and *Times*, 8 May 1872.
60. *Newfoundlander*, 2 April 1878; *Royal Gazette*, 30 April 1878; *Patriot*, 29 April 1878.
61. *Chafe's Sealing Book*, 37.
62. *Newfoundlander*, 9 May 1871 and 12 April and 7 May 1872; *Chafe's Sealing Book*, 42; Murphy, *Old Sealing Days*, 53. The *Retriever* was one of two steamers owned by Ridley and Sons and its loss was no doubt a factor in the firm's almost immediate bankruptcy.
63. *Newfoundlander*, 10 April 1874 and 23 May 1876; *Times*, 11 April 1874; *Royal Gazette*, 23 April 1878; *Chafe's Sealing Book*, 43.

64. *Evening Telegram*, 12 April 1882.
65. *Ibid.*, 8 March 1894.
66. *Ibid.*, 18 April 1977; *Evening Herald*, 9 April 1898.
67. *Evening Herald*, 2 and 4 April 1898.
68. *Daily News*, 6 April 1901.
69. *Evening Herald*, 28 March-2 April 1907.
70. *Evening Telegram*, 3 April 1907.
71. *Evening Herald*, 7-11 March and 2 April 1907.
72. *Ibid.*, 8 and 13 April 1908 and 10 and 14 April 1909.
73. *Evening Telegram*, 11 April 1910.
74. *Ibid.*, 6 March 1913; *Evening Herald*, 10 March 1913.
75. See Memorial University of Newfoundland, Centre for Newfoundland Studies, Cater W. Andrews Collection 375, III, Alice L. Lacey to Dr. Cater W. Andrews, 19 September 1974. Peter Jackman had been second hand in the S.S. *Walrus* for five years prior to 1907 when the position of captain on this steamer became vacant. Although he applied for the post it went to Jacob Winsor, who was also lost on the *Erna*. It is likely that Peter Jackman had accepted the position of boatswain on the *Erna* because other work at Baine Johnston was slow; he was one of a number who applied for the various positions involved in taking the steamer to Newfoundland. It seems that a number of men with the company were simply sent to Scotland, while on the company's payroll, to carry out this task. See *Evening Telegram*, 9 February 1907.
76. Edward Russell of Riverhead, Harbour Grace, whose brother Jack was lost in the disaster, always maintained that those who sailed on the *Southern Cross* claimed that the pound boards were rotten. They then broke loose in the storm, the fat shifted to one side, and the ship rolled over.
77. *Evening Telegram*, 2 and 3 April 1914.
78. *Ibid.*, 3 April 1914.
79. For an excellent account of the *Newfoundland* disaster, see Cassie Brown with Harold Horwood, *Death on the Ice: The Great Newfoundland Sealing Disaster of 1914* (Toronto, 1972). Much of the present discussion is taken from this source.
80. *Ibid.*, 118 and 262.
81. "In the Matter of the Enquiry into Disasters at Seal Fishery of 1914: Evidence taken before the [Sealing] Commission" (November 30, 1914-January 13, 1915), 980 Misc., Cater W. Andrews Collection.