This Newfoundland Site Tells Salt Fish Tales

By Jennifer Bain
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At Ryan Premises National Historic Site in Bonavista, Newfoundland and Labrador, Parks Canada staff use props to tell the story of salt fish and the fishing industry/Jennifer Bain

"Salt. Fish. Salt. Fish." Heritage presenter Richard Street is regaling a bus tour group at Ryan Premises National Historic Site with the story of how Newfoundland fishing families traditionally turned cod into salt fish for the global market.

Men headed out to sea in the morning and caught hundreds or thousands of fish within sight of land. When they returned in the afternoon, their families gathered on wooden fishing "stages" and pitched in to preserve the catch.

"You want to get this cod out of the heat and onto the salt as soon as possible, so there was no time to waste," Street explains. "Children, everybody, gathered round the splitting table."

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Heritage presenter Richard Street holds northern cod made of fabric during a talk at Ryan Premises/Jennifer Bain

Fish were carefully forked up out of the boat by the head. Knives came out to cut their throats and abdomens. The entrails were pulled out.

"Every step you see is a quick cut, not too deep," says Street, using wooden knives and large fabric cod with removable heads and guts to demonstrate. "Livers were separated and pushed into pails or barrels and put aside. In a week, that tissue matter would render down and become the raw oil. It was to their advantage to keep livers because the merchant would collect them later at the end of the summer or periodically." For a spell, cod liver oil was even worth 20 cents a gallon.

The gutted fish, meanwhile, were then turned over to the "header." Cheeks couldn't be sold but were saved and eaten. Heads were used as animal feed. The headless, gutted fish were then split down to their tails, opened up and the backbone removed. Finally, the split fish were washed and stacked between layers of salt and laid out on wooden "flakes" to dry in the sun — usually off and on for weeks depending on the weather.

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At Ryan Premises, a statue depicts a fisherman who has caught a single northern cod using the handline method of fishing/Jennifer Bain

"Salt. Fish. Salt. Fish. Face up, head to tail." Street even uses a bucket of salt to bring his fast-paced, half-hour demonstration alive.

The preserved fish was eventually graded, weighed and shipped around the world, the lowest quality going to the West Indies. The fishers eventually learned how much their catch was worth and whether it was enough to settle their accounts with merchants.

For more than five centuries, the fishery has influenced settlement, culture and economic development on Canada's east coast. Newfoundland and Labrador had three separate fisheries — international, inshore and Labrador — plus a seal hunt.

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In Bonavista, Ryan Premises protects a traditional Newfoundland mercantile of the salt fish era/Jennifer Bain

Here in the town of Bonavista on the northern tip of the Bonavista Peninsula, Ryan Premises preserves a traditional Newfoundland mercantile complex of the salt-fish era.

It was once the headquarters of James Ryan Ltd., a company that played a major role in the inshore fishery, Labrador fishery and seal hunt. Parks Canada began acquiring the oceanfront propeorty in 1991 and opened the six-acre site in 1997.

"It's kind of a unique Parks Canada location," Mackenzie Woodfine, visitor services team leader, tells me during a visit in August. "I would define us to be an immersive experience because you're going through buildings where this actually took place. You can smell the fish, you can hear the water and the stories, so it's immersive that way."

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While men fished for cod, families helped salt, dry and preserve it/Jennifer Bain

Exhibits, artifacts, videos, art and architecture help relay the fishery's history and impact.

"We try to touch on a few topics that not everyone talks about everywhere, like the role of women in the fisheries," says Woodfine. "Men were responsible for the quantity of fish but women were responsible for the quality."

Ryan Premises — open daily from June 1 to Oct. 11 this year — is a mostly self-guided site.

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Handlining cod, using a single line with one or more hooks, was considered an environmentally benign fishing method/Jennifer Bain

A 2007 management plan says the mercantile complex "typifies the nature and scale of operations used to process, grade, store and export saltfish and seal products in the late 19th and early 20th centuries." It protects a collection of heritage buildings and the surrounding cultural landscape on the shore of Bonavista Harbour.

Ryan acquired the property in 1869 for his fishery empire headquarters. He used the credit system, forcing fishers to use their catch to pay for advances of gear and provisions. The enterprise expanded along the northeast coast of Newfoundland and west to Labrador, helping Bonavista grow into a fishing community and regional supply center.

Ryan moved to St. John's in 1909. The business lasted until 1978. Right now, there are five buildings to explore and a large wooden flake to see outside on the grass.

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Parks Canada's Mackenzie Woodfine stands by a recreated mercantile at Ryan Premises. Fishers were once forced to buy on credit and pay their debts in cod/Jennifer Bain

The "Retail Shop" houses the Historic Sites Association Gift Shop. The "Retail Store" is where you will find the orientation center (with the "Cod, Seals and Survivors" exhibit) and the Bonavista Museum. Both buildings date back to 1869.

Most of the other buildings were constructed between 1874 and 1890. The "Fish Store" and "Salt Store" house permanent exhibits and temporary art displays. Across the street from everything is the Proprietor's House, where Woodfine is particularly fond of a "masonry cellar" that preserved crops through winter but was inside the home instead of separate like all the root cellars that still dot the landscape here and in nearby Elliston (the "root cellar capital of the world").

The buildings exemplify Newfoundland vernacular architecture of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They feature simple wooden post and beam construction and have wooden clapboard exteriors and wooden roof shingles.

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Ryan Premises can't bring in fresh cod and show how to salt and preserve it, so this 2018 photo was taken at a private fishing stage on Fogo Island/Jennifer Bain

Weeks after Canada announces a major change to the commercial cod fishery, I wander through the buildings to learn why Atlantic cod is the most important fish in the sea.

Once cod is split, salted, dried and properly stored, it can last a long time without spoiling — even in tropical climates. It has long been an important source of protein, first for people in Portugal, Spain, France, Italy and Greece, and then for people in parts of South America and the Caribbean.

But a cod moratorium — imposed on July 2, 1992 — banned industrial cod harvesting in the waters surrounding the province. The cod population, interpretive signage reminds me, had become severely depleted due to advances in fishing technology, overfishing and environmental changes.

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At Ryan Premises, artist Ben J. Ploughman's \

"Further fishing risked totally destroying the resource," I read. "While many hoped the moratorium would be a short-term measure to allow fish stocks to recover, it instead marked the end of a way of life that had lasted for over three centuries. While the focus of the fishery shifted to other species, such as crab and shrimp, they would never provide the same level of consistent employment as cod had once done."

Thirty-two years later, Newfoundlanders and Labradorians are still hurting.

In June, the federal government announced "the historic return of the commercial northern cod fishery," noting scientifc assessments have put it in the "cautious zone" since 2016. This aligns with other Canadian groundfish stocks that are in the same zone. The total allowable catch for 2024 will be 18,000 tonnes, which critics were quick to point out is just 5,000 more tonnes than in 2023.

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These days, Newfoundlanders often purchase \

Meanwhile, this year's popular recreational groundfish fishery (aka the "food fishery") runs for 39 days between June and September. People can catch five groundfish (including cod) per day, while boats with three or more people fishing can take home 15.

Back at Ryan Premises, a bus tour visitor asks Street whether we can taste salt fish. The answer, unfortunately, is no. It has to be boiled and transformed into something delicious like fish cakes, which are pan-fried pucks of cod and potatoes, sometimes gussied up with dried savory and onions.

Street passes around a photo album that shows pictures of popular salt fish dishes. We're encouraged to order fish cakes in local restaurants or buy salt fish trimmings from the grocery store and make our own. As I explore the province this summer, I order fish cakes whenever possible, now with a new appreciation for the gruelling work that goes into making this seemingly simple dish possible.

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During salt fish talks at Ryan Premises, this photo album is passed around so visitors can see some of the ways to cook dried cod/Jennifer Bain

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