

## Uncle Peter Watkins' Story



Peter Watkins was born on May 8, 1922 in the small Newfoundland town of Comfort Cove. He was the youngest of five children born to John Wesley Watkins and Mary Elizabeth Watkins.

When Peter was just two years old the family decided to move to the small town of Cottles Island. During this time most people used the water as a means of transportation and this is how the Watkins family moved. After all of their belongings were put on a large boat, they too boarded and sailed to their new home.

On the boat there was a large bread box that John Watkins used to fill with food when he would go fishing. This is where two-year-old Peter spent the journey to his new home, in the bread box. He was so little only his eyes could see out over.

As the years went by Peter heard his brother Lloyd say many times, "There were a lot of people who sailed the Atlantic in boats by rowing, or by schooner, but Peter was the only one who sailed the Atlantic in a bread box."

As a young boy, Peter attended the Salvation Army school. School started at nine o'clock every morning, five days a week. In his school days, Peter lived near where the government wharf is now and the school was located where the Town Hall now stands. Without the distinguished roads that we have today this walk took about twenty minutes. He would walk to school with his three sisters and one brother. To get there on time they had to leave around eight thirty.

The school offered subjects such as arithmetic (known as sums), tables, drawing, reading, and spelling. In the younger grades history was also taught.

There were many years when the school was unable to find a teacher. When a new teacher was found the children were expected to pick up where they had left off. Peter along with many other children found this very frustrating. Even though the school offered up to grade eleven, with the lack of teachers in between the years, Peter finished school at the grade-four level.

Peter has many fond memories of his school days. When he went to school in the one-roomed school house there were long desks that sat five children. Each desk had a leaf to turn up and it could be kept up with a stick. Each day Peter would sit at his desk with one of his best friends.

Each morning the teacher would choose a student to read out of the Bible. On one particular morning, Peter's best friend was chosen to read. When he had some difficulty with his pronunciation, Peter burst into laughter. The teacher did not appreciate this and began thinking up his punishment. He lost all of his recess for a week and was made to write lines everyday after school.

There were only two lines the teacher would make the children write out as a punishment and Peter says he remembers those quite well! They were "All is not gold that glitters" and "Time and tide waits for no man". These two lines he will never forget.

In the one-roomed school house there was a pot-bellied stove. Each day each child was expected to bring a junk of wood to help feed the fire. If any child forgot to bring their contribution they were sent home to get it. When they left the school house they were given a certain amount of time to return. If they were late they would receive a punishment of some sort.

The little stove in the school room had a stove pipe leading to the outside through the ceiling. Sometimes to get a day off of school the children would go in the school house and begin to jump up and down to loosen the pipes and they would come crashing down. With no pipe the building would fill with smoke. School had to be closed until it was fixed. This could take anywhere from half a day to a full day. Then the culprits received their punishment.

Each year the school put off a Christmas concert for the community. A month before Christmas, children returned to school at night to practice their dialogues, singing and recitations.

After all of the children got through their parts they expected a visit from Santa Claus. The school house was prepared for his visit with a Christmas tree and various decorations such as paper bells. The children and their audience would join to sing Christmas songs while they patiently waited for him to come. "Jingle Bells" and "He's a Jolly Good Fellow" were well-known favorites at this time. Soon he arrived and put off a wonderful display for the crowd. Some people brought gifts for people to be given by Santa.

Sometimes tricks were put on the tree for people. One particular Christmas, an older man received a gift from Santa. It was only a little box. He opened up the box and a bo-bird flew out and was flying around the little one-roomed school house. The children had a great laugh watching the bird fly around with no one being able to catch it. They did catch it eventually and released it and he was happy to go.

After the excitement of Santa Claus, a table was set up and cake and syrup were served. Cake went for ten cents a piece and a glass of syrup went for ten cents. The syrup was mixed in galvanized water. There were two, one for red syrup and one for orange syrup.

Ice cream was also served. The ice cream had to be prepared in plenty of time. It had to be stirred with a slice (big spoon). There was no electricity so it was all man power. It had to be stirred for hours so people would take turns. The ice cream was sold for five cents for one teaspoon in a little dish. Many families could not afford this because there were so many children in the family. Peter says it is much easier to get ten dollars now than it was to get five cents then. This was not dwelled upon. People were just as excited to have seen the entertainment. When the concert was over there was a 'bigger' feeling of Christmas in the air and people looked forward to mummering and visiting neighbours to get their "Christmas".

As mentioned before Peter had three sisters, their names were Beatrice, Violet, and Eliza. He also has one brother Lloyd. As the children got older it was expected of them to get married or find work. Beatrice and Violet moved to Buchans to find work. There they met their husbands and raised their families. When the mine closed in Buchans they moved to Argentia. Eliza stayed in Cottlesville and married a fisherman. Lloyd went to Brown's Arm to go farming but when it did not work out he returned to Cottlesville. There he started out fishing but then turned to cooking. He would cook on boats or in lumber camps.

Before he was married, Peter went up to Lewisporte to visit with his older brother, Lloyd who was a cook. It was just a short visit before he went into the woods to work. While he was there, there was a small boy who was sick. Peter was paying some attention to him and before he left, he gave him a hug and a kiss good bye.

As Peter was working in the woods he began to get a tingling in his throat. He continued working and tried to put it in the back of his mind. Soon his throat began to get really bad, so bad he didn't know if he would be able to continue working. He spoke to a friend about it and his friend told him to stay out of the woods. Peter wanted to continue working. So he tried to put it in the back of his mind again. However, his throat got so bad that he couldn't handle it anymore. He broke off some boughs so that he could lie down. After a while he started coughing and he was able to dislodge something in his throat. A short while after this incident he began to feel better. He came out of the woods that day and there was a message waiting for him. The message said that the little boy he was playing with had died of diphtheria and his twin sister was hospitalized with the same symptoms. The word soon came that she too had died. Peter believes that he too had had the disease but earlier when he worked in Argentia he had been given the vaccine for diphtheria. He firmly believes that is why he survived.

Peter can recall a number of times that illnesses came to the Cottlesville area. Peter knew of a woman from Cottlesville who was away in Corner Brook. She was on her way home on the train. John Pryor was on the same train. He knew who the woman was but she did not recognize him. She was acting very strange and was not able to identify herself. Uncle John knew something was wrong so he interceded and was able to communicate for her and get her as far as Lewisporte. When she didn't seem any better he took her under his wing, so to speak, and took her on the passenger boat and was able to bring her back home. She died a couple of days later. She was diagnosed with meningitis.

Tuberculosis was also a deadly disease that not many people survived. Peter's sister Eliza had tuberculosis and she was in bed for a long time. She was unable to do anything for two years. She survived it and will soon celebrate her 91<sup>st</sup> birthday.

With so many deaths, many families were left without a mother and father. Back in those days if a father died a family may be forced to split up among relatives. The mother would be unable to go to work because there would be no one to watch the children. The same thing may happen if a mother died because the father would need someone to watch the children while he was away. In most of these cases the surviving spouse would try to marry again. Many times two families would join to compensate one another. Then the new couple would have children together making the family even larger. This happened many times especially when a sickness struck the area.

Peter met and married Meta Wall from Bridgeport. They had five children together, three boys and two girls. They lived in Cottlesville in the area where the government wharf presently stands. This was not a choice area because when the water would rise, it sometimes got into the house. When their youngest daughter was two years old they moved over to Luke's Arm where they bought some land from Meta's great uncle.

Peter provided for his family as a fisherman. He fished for most of his life but when the fall would come, he would go in the lumber woods. His winter would be spent in the woods cutting timber and pulling wood with the help of a horse.

Meta stayed at home and cared for their five children and also for the animals. The children were given chores to help her out. There was a horse, sheep and hens. Harvey was responsible for the animals. He would get up in the morning, before school and go out to feed the animals. Dinner time while Harvey was in school, Meta would go up and give the animals a drink and let them out, if it was nice. Then when Harvey got home from school he would shovel out and prepare the animals for the night. Ted was responsible for the water, splits and the wood. He would have to bring water from the nearest well. At the time the nearest well was around where Junior Philpott lives now. If there was talk of a storm coming he would have to make sure that all the water barrels were full.

Water was very precious back in those days. It had to be carried in buckets on a hoop. The water was found in various places. In the summer, when a lot of wells went dry, many people would walk to where the Ansteys lived and used that well. That well was known for never running dry. Other times they would travel in boat to Guys Cove and Rushy Cove Pond. This was hard work and for this reason water was precious.

One summer when Peter was gone Meta caught a cold and was in bed for two to three days. They ran out of water. There was nothing to drink. Their daughter, Annette, took a jug and went to the neighbour's house to get some water for her to drink. Giving away water was not done. Often water had to be spared along very efficiently. When the kettle was boiled on the stove it was removed to prevent too much from evaporating. This was the way they lived until they installed an artesian well. These were very expensive to put in back then. When it was all done and put through Peter tried it out for the first time. He turned on the tap, filled his glass, drank it and said "This is a \$3300 glass of water".

The children entertained themselves quite often. In the winter they would use the barrels that flour came in and take them apart and using the staves they would make sleds. These would make the "wonderful-good" riding slides. They would go skating using stock skates. These were homemade skates that would be tied to the bottom of the shoe with rope or line, whatever was available. Sometimes they would take the sled dogs and go riding. Copying on the copy pans was also a well known activity. In the summer time, swimming was the activity of choice. Wherever they could go swimming they would go. It was usually off of Uncle John Pryor's wharf.

The first radio ever to come to Cottlesville was owned by the late Cadiz Rideout. People used to gather at his house to listen to the battery-operated radio. To charge the radio a big windmill was set up outside the house. The static on the radio was horrible. Peter recalls it sounding like thunder.

One night he remembers being there when the broadcaster asked "How's the weather out there?". Uncle Cadiz told them that the broadcaster was talking to another man eighty miles out to sea. This was very hard to believe. On their way home they were discussing this and some of them thought Uncle Cadiz was trying to trick them. Now, Peter says "Our fellers (their sons) out there (on the ocean) 200 miles all over the place picks up the phone and we can talk to them".

Garbage collection was never heard of back then. A lot of garbage was burned. There was a special place to throw tins and other garbage that was unable to be burned. Many times garbage was also thrown down the hole in the outhouse. Food was never thrown away like this. Left-over food was given to the pigs and the dogs.

Animals were a big help for the family. A horse was used for riding and pulling wood. There were also cows, goats, sheep, hens and dogs. The cows and goats provided milk for the family. The sheep provided wool. Hens provided the eggs. The dogs were mainly used as sled dogs in the winter. In the summer, boats were used for transportation. Everyone had a punt. A few people had putt-putts.

Horse and boats were the main sources of transportation until the roads were built. When the roads were built people began to buy cars. Around this time, Peter was working in the woods like any normal year. One day as he was taking the limbs off of a tree, something sprang back and hit him in his right eye. He was taken to the hospital in St. John's where he remained for a month. Word was sent to Meta but she had no way of contacting him and since she was caring for the children she was unable to make the trip. Peter lay in the hospital bed on his back with both eyes covered. When he was able to return home he learned he had lost the sight of his right eye. For this reason he never tried for his driver license. Had he been driving before the accident he probably would have continued. He wanted Meta to go ahead and get her license but she didn't want to. Something she now regrets.

Looking back over the years, Peter is able to recall many things. The most dear to him is his life with Meta and the family they raised together. He speaks passionately about this.

"Today I'm 85 and she is 80 we look back, we have a beautiful life together. I'd do the same 'ol thing right over again... if we had to. There might be a few changes."

He believes a person should live one day at a time, never being afraid of hard work because it doesn't hurt anyone. Also, one should try to be as friendly and pleasant as you can. Hard work has always been very important to him as long as he had a good sense of humour to go with it. He looks back at Cottlesville as the beautiful place it was and is and acknowledges its friendly people that have lived here over the years. He wishes to encourage the residents of Cottlesville to keep up their friendliness and help maintain the town's cleanliness and beauty.