

ORAL NARRATIVES OF THE 1929 NEWFOUNDLAND  
TIDAL WAVE:  
NARRATIVE FUNCTIONS, GENDER ROLES AND  
COMMODIFICATION

LYNN ANNE MARIE MATTE







Oral Narratives of the 1929 Newfoundland Tidal Wave: Narrative  
Functions, Gender Roles and Commodification.

by

© Lynn Anne Marie Matte

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## **Abstract**

Known in the vernacular as the Tidal Wave, the November 18<sup>th</sup>, 1929 tsunami that struck the Burin Peninsula of Newfoundland is a pivotal point in the history of the region and its people. Stories of the event circulate in oral tradition, in narrative and song, as well as being recorded by the media and the popular press. Tidal Wave narratives offer insight into how its survivors remember and describe their communities, families and themselves before and after the disaster. The rapid technological advances of the twentieth century have distanced today's generation from the lifestyle and social structure that their grandparents experienced. The similarities and differences between the oral and written accounts of the Tidal Wave afford the opportunity to explore how individual and community or regional identities are constructed. Collective identity is conveyed through marketing strategies and public displays. Individual identity is relayed through gender and social roles within the larger social structures of the family and the community. Stories and images of the Tidal Wave have been commodified and sold as representative of Newfoundland culture. Narratives of the Tidal Wave continue to exist in oral tradition as legend and as part of family and regional folklore.

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## **List of Abbreviations**

CFA – Come From Away (Non-Newfoundlander)  
CNS – Centre for Newfoundland Studies  
Coll – Collection  
LAMM – Lynn Anne Marie Matte  
MF – Manuscript File  
MG – Manuscript Group  
Ms – Manuscript  
MUNFLA – Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive  
PC – Postcard  
SW – Sheila Walsh  
TCH – Trans Canada Highway  
THS – Trinity Historical Society

# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.1 Definitions and Theoretical Perspective

### *1.1.1 Oral Narratives and Personal Experience Narratives*

Since this thesis includes personal experience narratives of the 1929 Tidal Wave on Newfoundland's South Coast, it is necessary to address how this type of narrative should be understood here. A subcategory of the oral narrative is the personal experience narrative, which specifically indicates that the teller lived the event being retold. Sandra Stahl has described personal experience stories as "first-person narratives usually composed orally by the tellers and based on real incidents in their lives" (1983: 268).

This study examines personal experience narratives of the Tidal Wave but also looks at narratives of the event that are repeated by those who did not experience it first-hand, for instance accounts told by the descendants of survivors and songs that circulate in oral tradition. Second-hand Tidal Wave narratives fall under the category of legend, which Linda Dégh has loosely defined as "a story that reports on a true occurrence, personally experienced by someone in the real world" (1991: 15). Bascom has referred to the legend as "the counterpart in verbal tradition of written history" (1965b: 5). Although written history looks to oral accounts of an event to formulate its version of what occurred, written items are regarded as having an authority not afforded to oral accounts because a written account is constant. Every time a person looks to a written account it is exactly the same as it was the last time it was consulted and as such it is viewed as immutable. I compare newspaper accounts of the Tidal Wave, as well as items published by the popular press, written accounts, with the oral accounts. "Oral narrative" refers to

any verbal account of the Tidal Wave, whether it be spoken or sung, and regardless of first-hand experience of the event. This comparison demonstrates how information flows between the vernacular and popular culture accounts.

Philip Hiscock has discussed the crystallization of vernacular performances through the medium of print in his article “Legend and *blason populaire* in three Newfoundland Treasure Songs” (2002b). Peter Narváez and Martin Laba have also discussed the “folklore-popular culture continuum” and noted that “small group and mass contexts of communication interface and parallel each other in critical ways” (1986: 5). The fluid movement of information from popular culture into the vernacular and vice versa demonstrates that what is often viewed as traditional is malleable and can be adapted to suit the changing needs and attitudes of individuals and societies. Information found in print form can have a crystallizing effect that limits the variations of a particular legend or song because the print version may be viewed as “correct,” as more authentic or as the original, authoritative form of the text. Vernacular narratives may call into question what has been documented by print sources or may provide supplementary details or corroboration. It is therefore necessary to consider the effect of oral narratives on print culture and vice versa.

### *1.1.2 Disaster*

Narratives of disaster can be categorized by the event that is the catalyst for the narrative. In order to use such a system of categorization it is important to first define the term “disaster.” The online Encarta dictionary helps shed light on what is meant by

“disaster”: “damaging or destructive event: an event that causes serious loss, destruction, hardship, unhappiness or death.” It becomes apparent that disaster is a subjective experience and is determined by how people react to an event.

Experiences of hardship or unhappiness are directly influenced by one’s personal experience of, and reaction to, a situation. Two people may be involved in a given incident but react differently, thereby making it a disaster to one and not to the other. Disasters can be experienced on a micro and macro level. An example of a micro level disaster could be a fatal single vehicle accident which is a disaster to the friends and family of the persons in the vehicle, as well as to the driver and passengers. Although we may not be directly affected as individuals, the general public will consider a tornado, oil spill, volcanic eruption, genocide, earthquake, war, industrial accident, hurricane or tsunami to be a disaster, regardless of whether the damage is to property or natural environment, humans or wildlife. When an event is recognized as a disaster by people beyond those directly affected by it, it is a macro level disaster.

The Tidal Wave that struck at approximately 7 PM on November 18<sup>th</sup>, 1929 directly affected only several thousand people who were living in isolated outport communities, yet it has currency as a disaster on a macro level: on November 25, 1929, the Evening Telegram described the event as a “national disaster” (6).<sup>1</sup> Photographs of the destruction caused by the event were published in the New York Times. Newspaper reports of the tragedy aided in the collection of donations of money and supplies from

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<sup>1</sup> During the era of responsible government, 1855 to 1933, Newfoundland was a self-governing country. The nation referred to in the 1929 newspaper article is Newfoundland.



across Newfoundland as well as from Canada, the United States and Britain (Jones 1975: 35). International newspaper coverage and donations clearly show that the Tidal Wave was a macro level disaster and that the fate of its victims was of interest to a diverse audience.

### *1.1.3 Identity*

Narratives of the Tidal Wave can be studied in a number of different ways. The majority of research that has been undertaken with these narratives relates directly to the field of oral history. Historian John Tosh describes oral history as “the first-hand recollections of people interviewed by a historian” and oral tradition as “the narratives and descriptions of people and events in the past which have been handed down by word of mouth over several generations” (1999: 193). According to Tosh, “oral sources have an inescapable element of hindsight about them” (1999: 194) and for that reason cannot be treated in the same manner as contemporaneously written records of events. While historians recognize that oral history can shed light on recent social history, Tosh contends that oral tradition is “practically extinct in highly industrialized countries” (1999: 193). Folklorists have been collecting material that supports the continued existence of oral tradition and have been working with historians in an effort to ensure to interdisciplinary communication.<sup>2</sup> Alessandro Portelli, as quoted in Jeffrey and Edwall, has argued that

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<sup>2</sup> For an example of the interdisciplinary approach to oral history see Rosenberg 1975.

Oral sources are credible but with a *different* credibility. The importance of oral testimony may lie not in its adherence to fact, but rather in its departure from it, as imagination, symbolism and desire emerge. (1994: 8)

Evidence presented in this thesis challenges the assumption that oral tradition loses currency in industrialized societies by demonstrating how individuals and communities are accessing oral accounts of the 1929 Tidal Wave to articulate identity.

Jeff Todd Titon has referred to life story as “a self-contained fiction” so as to “distinguish it sharply from its historical kin: biography, oral history, and the personal history” (1980: 276). Titon referred to the narrative as life story rather than history because “story is a literature of the imagination; history, though it be imaginative, drives toward fact” (1980: 278). He further argued that the chief concern of the life storyteller is “to affirm his identity and to account for it” (1980: 290). Unlike traditional historians, folklorists are concerned with more than the truth of what occurred in the past; we are interested in how the teller perceives the experience and how the experience and the teller shape each other in the retelling.

Sandra Stahl asserts that personal narratives are a way for us to enjoy intimacy with people outside of our normal socializing groups (1989: 38). This sense of intimacy results not only from shared cultural codes that facilitate the listeners’ ability to understand the nuances of the story, but also from “the shared activity of exploring the teller’s world, the teller’s identity” (1989: x). Such exchanges give people the opportunity to “come very close to seeing each other’s reality” (1989: x) and in doing so gain an understanding of the events that have shaped the teller into the person speaking in that moment.

The folklorist shares the historian's concern over the element of contemporary social comment present in oral history. Rather than condemning the presence of such social comment, the folklorist seeks to understand the constant reshaping of the past to suit the conditions of the present. Philip Hiscock has examined how legends "tell us about tellers" and "respond to the changing, current needs of their tellers" (2002a: 196). In repeating a personal narrative the teller imbues the story with new meaning during each telling and is afforded a way to explore his or her identity which is constantly being reshaped and negotiated (Stahl 1989: xi).

#### *1.1.4 Storytelling Rights and Entitlement*

The question of storytelling rights was raised early on in my research of the Tidal Wave. One of my participants was delighted that I was about to tackle this topic specifically because she was disappointed with how the event had been portrayed in a recent publication. My participant was clear about her opinion of the published work and wanted to be sure that my approach to the material would not be similar. The book in question, Maura Hanrahan's Tsunami: The Newfoundland Tidal Wave Disaster, was written by a Newfoundlander with "family roots on the Burin Peninsula,"<sup>3</sup> an insider, yet not everyone felt that her representation of the event and its aftermath was adequate. Several other participants asked me if I had read Hanrahan's publication and were quite pleased with the book and the amount of research that it represented.

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<sup>3</sup> Tidespoint books website: <http://www.tidespoint.com/books/tsunami.shtml>

At one point a complete stranger confronted me because he felt that my status as a CFA (Come From Away, meaning a non-Newfoundlander) would be extremely detrimental to my attempts to document narratives of the event. I personally found that most people were pleasantly surprised that someone with absolutely no familial links to the area was so genuinely interested in the topic, and almost everyone I approached went out of their way to help me in my endeavor. While my status as a non-Newfoundlander may very well be detrimental to the success of my project, my enthusiasm for the topic and my sincere interest in the narratives of a group of people who are in their senior years seems to have tipped the balance in my favour. As Amy Shuman notes, “the central issue involved in retellings is entitlement” (1986: 151). By entrusting me with their narratives my participants have granted me entitlement to retell their stories. With that entitlement comes the responsibility to faithfully represent their narratives. As a folklorist I am interested not only in the stories the narratives recount but also in the context in which they are told, and in the social and cultural messages embedded within the accounts.

## **1.2 Literature Review**

### *1.2.1 Untellability*

According to Elaine Lawless, narratives of violence often contain disruptions, silences or seeming voids in the story: she refers to these narrative gaps as instances of untellability. While Lawless’s research deals specifically with women’s experiences of violence her theory of multiple messages can be applied to all disaster narratives that exhibit instances of untellability. The multiple messages of a narrative derive from the

disruptions, which are the direct influence of the narrator, who exists in the present, on how events in the past are remembered and articulated.

I would like to propose that both images are available to us through the gaps and the ruptures of narratives of disaster; the *essence* of the event we recognize as *the disaster*, which may, in fact loom as largely unarticulated in its horror but evoked in the silences, as well as the *now*... But the *now* that is also discernable in these stories, in the gap, might suggest another story, a more personal story the narrator hopes to convey. (2001: 63, italics in original)

The narrator has progressed through time since the event and has evolved and changed in that time. Generally, experiences of disaster of any kind place people in a position of powerlessness (Andersen 1974; Lawless 2001). When telling a disaster narrative the speaker may no longer be in a position of powerlessness and could shy away from describing herself as powerless, even in the past tense, because she has worked to remove herself from that role (Lawless 2001: 63).

### *1.2.2 Psychological Studies*

Folklorists have taken several approaches to studying disaster narratives, but by no means is folklore the only discipline to show interest in this topic. Dominick LaCapra, a professor of history and researcher of Holocaust narratives, adapts “psychoanalytic concepts to historical analysis as well as sociocultural and political critique in elucidating trauma and its aftereffects in culture and in people” (2001: ix). In his chapter “Holocaust Testimonies: Attending to the Victim’s Voice,” LaCapra specifically addresses the role of personal experience narrative in “the attempt to understand experience and its aftermath, including the role of memory and its lapses, in coming to terms with – or denying and

repressing – the past” (2001: 87). From a historical perspective, questions of veracity and fallibility are raised, which would be interesting to a folklorist but not as a means of dismissing the narrative as historically inaccurate.

LaCapra, like Lawless, also points to the duality of the narrator:

In memory as an aspect of working through the past, one is both back there and here at the same time, and one is able to distinguish between (not dichotomize) the two. In other words, one remembers – perhaps to some extent still compulsively reliving or being possessed by – what happened then without losing a sense of existing and acting now. This duality (or double inscription) of being is essential for memory as a component of working over and through problems. At least in one operative dimension of the self, one can say to oneself or to others: “I remember what it was like back then, but I am here now, and there is a difference between the two.” (LaCapra 2001: 90)

While Lawless is concerned with how this duality functions to send messages that are not audibly articulated, LaCapra’s focus switches to questioning what is missed in the articulated narrative by focussing one’s attention on what is not being said. LaCapra also takes into consideration the limitations of the researcher and how long or how much trauma the listener can cope with before he or she “shuts down” (2001: 92). “Shutting down” refers to the point at which the listener becomes desensitized by the horrors being described and is no longer able to emotionally engage with the teller’s story. Although this chapter of LaCapra’s book is meant to be a discussion of testimonies and the voices of those who have experienced disaster, he does not include a single excerpt from one such testimony. While interesting questions pertaining to listener response, objectivity and the historical role of testimony are raised, this particular approach to narrative falls short of an understanding of what the narratives represent and how they function for the narrator and in the broader social arena.

### *1.2.3 Conflicting Approaches to Disaster Narratives*

Lawrence L. Langer, a professor emeritus of English of Simmons College in Boston, organizes his book Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory by chapters titled with different forms of memory and self, such as “Deep Memory: The Buried Self” and “Unheroic Memory: The Diminished Self.” His work urges the reader not to “underestimate the sympathetic power of the imagination” (Langer 1991: xv), suggesting, contrary to Maurice Blanchot’s theory that “[t]he disaster unexperienced... is what escapes the very possibility of experience” (Lawless 2001: 60), that personal experience narratives of disaster can inspire the listener to a sympathetic comprehension of the disaster via imagination. As with LaCapra, Langer addresses concerns of the accuracy of memory: “Factual errors do occur from time to time, as do simple lapses [of memory]; but they seem trivial in comparison to the complex layers of memory that give birth to the versions of the self that we shall be studying” (1991: xv). Regardless of one’s ability to imagine the horror of such an experience, this empathy does not make the experience part of one’s self; it would not ordinarily vicariously become a piece of the fabric that constitutes a person. While Langer includes some excerpts of narrative, his book focuses on paraphrasing what has been said and reaching generalizations about the holocaust experience.

An interesting counterpoint to Langer’s book is Witness: Voices from the Holocaust by Joshua Greene and Shiva Kumar. This work is almost entirely transcriptions of personal experience narratives. Each chapter, divided by narrative

theme, is prefaced by a short introduction followed by two to ten narrative excerpts. Interspersed between the narratives are photographs and biographies of some of the narrators. The final chapter describes the Yale University Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, which houses thousands of hours of holocaust testimonials. The editors state:

It is our wish to document the tragedy and to show it in its full human detail. But we do not try to make historians of the survivors. We listen to them, accompany them, try to free their memories, and see each person as more than a victim: as someone who faces those traumas again, an eyewitness who testifies in public. What emerges most powerfully in these narratives is the psychological and emotional milieu, the personal thoughts, the everyday texture of living and dying that tends to escape academic historians. (Greene and Kumar 2000: 253)

Here we have access to disaster narratives, albeit truncated, but Greene and Kumar's work lacks analysis. An exceptional job has been done of allowing the narrator to speak, and the choice of chapter organization appears to be an effort to express the similarities and differences of each individual experience. The editors have left the door open wide for other researchers to examine what those similarities and differences may mean and their function in disaster narratives.

#### *1.2.4 Sociological Approaches*

Social-psychological researchers James Taylor, Louis Zurcher and William Key say they have written about the 1966 Topeka, Kansas Tornado, in order to address questions that "focus on systematic relationships in disaster; they cut across specialization and particular scholarly disciplines; and hopefully their answers can bring



new knowledge and insight” (1970: x). The authors’ approach is narrative based but the attention of the study focuses on behavioural reaction to crisis:

People found themselves cast precipitously into new roles... They reacted in new ways, and their reactions led to new forms of social functioning. The result, for a brief moment, was a kind of community coherence seldom encountered outside of war, or the transcendental states of mass religious excitement. For a while the city became a different organism and functioned by different rules. It is this newness, this ephemeral process of adaptation and recovery, which forms the topic of the following chapters. (Taylor et al. 1970: 17).

While the authors try to situate the voices of the narrators through socioeconomic details, the format of their study strives to maintain the anonymity of the participants. Overall this effort is alienating for the reader because it is dehumanizing. The use of pseudonyms would have helped to at least maintain a sense of continuity since the narratives are edited and used in pieces where their content fits with the subject of a given chapter in the book. This makes it impossible for the reader to determine which excerpts belong to the same narrator. Since this is a behavioural account of individual and community responses to a disaster the narratives have not been examined from a folkloric perspective, leaving room for additional research on these texts.

Kai Erikson examines the changes in individual and community behaviour in the aftermath of the 1972 Buffalo Creek, West Virginia flood. Unlike Taylor, Zurcher and Key’s experience of “post-disaster Utopia” (1970: 68), Erikson describes a “loss of communality” (1976: 186) as a result of the stress of the disaster and the destruction that it wrought on the community, both physically and mentally.

A year after the flood, Erikson’s research began as a consultant for a legal firm that was filing suit on behalf of several hundred flood survivors. In his introduction

Erikson admits that this particular study reverses the normal order of sociological research by focussing on individual human experience rather than seeking to use individual experiences to support a "larger *generalization*" (1976: 12, italics in original). He sums up his efforts as being an interdisciplinary look at the disaster narratives that he has collected:

It is clinical in the sense that it tries to trace the source of a singular set of traumatic disturbances. It is historical in the sense that it was written by a person whose intellectual reflexes were tuned in that tradition and deals with the most sociological of all topics – the community. (Erikson 1976: 13)

Due to the legal dimension of Erikson's research the narrators are identified by their real names and as such it is possible to follow the thread of their narrative across the chapters of the book. This work provides lengthy narrative excerpts as well as sociological and psychological analysis. As with Witness: Voices from the Holocaust, folklorists have the opportunity to apply their own theoretical questions to the narratives contained in Erikson's book in order to illuminate further messages contained within the accounts.

#### *1.2.5 Folkloristic Approaches*

Diane Goldstein argues that there are three "really significant components of the distinctiveness of [folklorists'] skills and training" (1993: 19). While her article "Not Just a 'Glorified Anthropologist'" is written from an applied medical perspective her categories can be applied to highlight the unique ways that folklorists deal with personal experience narratives. The three categories that Goldstein chooses to showcase the unique skills of a folklorist are genre, transmission and tradition. Goldstein notes: "Genre

choices suggest issues of authority, distance and direction, identity, stereotype, connections between topic and attitude, areas of tension, taboo, pride, and expectations” (1993: 19). By recognizing the messages that are implicit to genre choices, a folklorist is better able to understand what the speaker is trying to communicate.

Folklorists recognize that “oral and written channels of information shape information in ways that... [are] chosen on the basis of [their] positive or practical characteristics” (Goldstein 1993: 21). Further, “we also recognize how transmission methods affect time economy, acceptance, flexibility, authority, and accuracy” (Goldstein 1993: 20-21). It is not enough to simply study what is being said; the packages that people use to shape their narratives also convey information and are an intrinsic part of the message that is being relayed.

Goldstein argues that if “we think about tradition as [contemporary] social process rather than rooted in time” then “we can think of tradition as the seemingly universal need to recreate aspects of experience and as the various ways that we keep the past alive in the present” (1993: 22). Folklorists’ grasp of these three concepts allows them to communicate effectively; to truly hear what is being said and to phrase their own messages in a way that will ensure that they in turn are being heard (Goldstein 1993: 22).

These categories, when applied to personal experience narrative, will help the folklorist negotiate what is being said and what is not being said, who is able to say what and to whom, how speakers choose to phrase their messages and how cultural context and worldview affect all of the choices being made.

David M. Andersen examines the Los Angeles earthquake of 1971 from a folkloristic perspective. Andersen describes the role of rumour and gossip in presaging the event for almost two years. He states that the rumours hit circulation highs and lows in the intervening time period, but he does not choose to then tell us about foreknowledge narratives told after the earthquake. Instead, he notes how individualized most of the stories of the experience were and shifts his focus to “a number of stories [that] were and are widely told and retold with embellishments added as time goes on” (Andersen 1974: 333). By choosing to examine the widely told stories Andersen is focussing on disaster legends rather than personal experience narratives. He does note that this choice of genre serves a function:

No amount of broken furniture or shattered antique crystal will succeed in impressing upon the listener the precise human panic like the naked man story. It is one way of saying that the shaking was so violent and terrifying people forgot even their natural inhibitions. (Andersen 1974: 334)

The naked man story, one of the most popular stories told in the wake of the earthquake, conveys how unusual the earthquake was and provides a very graphic image. The naked man who finds himself standing out of doors amongst a crowd of his clothed neighbours stands out in the same way that the day of the earthquake does from weeks, months and years of unremarkable days. Andersen notes other genres employed to deal with a disaster situation, including jokes, the reference to warning signs, such as abnormal weather and animal behaviour, and explanations for what caused the quake. A number of these narratives reflect beliefs such as “creatures far down the evolutionary chain are, paradoxically, more sensitive to major disruptions in nature” (Andersen 1974: 334),

cannibalistic canines, the wrath of God and “environmental and ecological explanations” (1974: 335) for the natural disaster.

Interestingly, Andersen notes that The Los Angeles Times ran an article called “Hungry Dogs in Valley Turn to Cannibalism,” a story that is based in contemporary legend, yet he later states that “the outpouring of information by the media has done much to dissipate the word of mouth superstition and ‘naïve’ explanations” (Andersen 1974: 336). It is generally accepted that not everything one reads in the newspaper or sees on the evening news is exactly true and I would argue that we use media as yet another way to pass along our superstitions and “‘naïve’ explanations.” To this effect, Linda Dégh has stated that, “supported by media technology, the social interaction which serves as a generator of folklore displays a more expedient mode of repetition and variation in the modern world than ever before” (1991: 13). While Andersen’s scope of inquiry is quite narrow he does manage to address the category of genre and to note that the narrative choice to share a legend (a story that is told as true but not in the first person, for instance something that happened to a friend) rather than a personal experience narrative serves a function by providing a deeper message than that contained solely in the words being communicated. The naked man story is told as true, yet the truth of the story is not really relevant to the message being conveyed. The story is a reflection of the power of the disaster situation and how that power completely disrupts the normal order of city life.

In her review of the documentary film In the Eye of the Hurricane: Women's Stories of Reconstruction,<sup>4</sup> dealing with stories of 1989's hurricane Hugo, Gail

Matthews-DeNatale argues that:

the chaotic experience of natural disaster is a cultural experience unto itself that generates situational narratives, stories with motifs that are derived from the liminality of the situation, as opposed to echoing the structured narratives of the 'normal' world (Matthews-DeNatale 1994: 324).

She notes that the personal experience narratives in the video have very similar structures in their beginnings but that they become more and more individualized as the narratives proceed. For example, the stories begin with "a commonality of experience" (Matthews-DeNatale 1994: 323) as the women describe events leading up to and surrounding the devastation of their village. The stories become disparate when the women discuss the rebuilding of lives and homes. The disaster itself was a unifying experience because the hurricane affected everyone equally, regardless of race, class and gender. Rebuilding on the other hand, was not an equal process:

informants refer to political and social conflicts... some felt that relief supplies were inequitably distributed, and McClellanville became embroiled in a school/town integration conflict about one year after the storm that was so openly divisive that it was reported in the *New York Times*. (Matthews-DeNatale 1994: 324)

Matthews-DeNatale suggests that disaster narratives are a unique category specifically because of the liminality of the situation, the near-death experience, and that they will exhibit motifs that reflect this unique cultural experience.

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<sup>4</sup> See Ward (1991) for film details.

Disaster narratives are not a new phenomenon and patterns can be seen in human reaction to crisis by comparing narratives from numerous disasters. Marcia Gaudet begins her article “The Earthquake Angel: Contemporary Legend on the New Madrid Fault” by discussing a ballad of the 1811-1812 New Madrid earthquakes which states that the wrath of God is being visited upon the people of Louisiana because of their sinful ways. This message appears in David Andersen’s account of narratives relating to the 1971 Los Angeles earthquake. Another common theme is that earthquake warnings caused near-hysteria on both occasions as well. Again, abnormal animal behaviour and weather anomalies are cited as warnings. Gaudet’s example of the earthquake angel legend is not tied to an actual disaster; instead the legend relates to a prediction of natural disaster that never actually occurred. Her explanation for the popularity of the legend includes a local distrust of scientists and university professors as well as a strong belief in portents and providential interpretation (Gaudet 1993: 127-128).

As William Clements argues, “ultimately it does not matter whether or not folklore is true. It reveals attitudinal truth even when factual data is imprecise” (1986: 128). The specificity of the earthquake prediction brought forward by “folk beliefs and rumors of portents” (Clements 1986: 122) led to a sense of physical threat where “people have no power at all to intervene or to change the course of the threatened event through their actions” (Clements 1986: 126). The combination of these two factors led to a need for “assurances of some higher power looking out for the people” (Clements 1986: 126). Although no actual disaster occurred, the situation surrounding the predicted quake closely reflects narratives that are told after a disaster has occurred, highlighting a belief

in, and a need to believe in, warning signs. Gaudet argues that if scientists and intellectuals were more closely in tune with the genres used by local people to express folk beliefs, especially those of impending natural disaster, they would have a higher level of success in communicating their predictions and convincing people to be prepared for a possible emergency.

In her “Reflections on Earthquake Narratives,” Regina Bendix echoes the sentiments of Taylor, Zurcher and Key’s idea of post-disaster Utopia with the “positive mental effects an earthquake has on those who experience it immediately” (Bendix 1990: 332). I would argue that only those who are not touched by death during a disaster experience this period of euphoria. Those who do witness carnage or are touched by it some way may feel a sense of elation at their own survival but it is tinged by feelings of guilt for having survived while others perished. Erikson provides numerous examples of flood survivors who were haunted by their disaster experience for years following the event:

I heard somebody holler at me, and I turned around and saw Mrs. Constable. She lived up there above us. Her husband was a wheelchair patient, got hurt in the Lorado mines, and they had four kids. She had a little baby in her arms and she was hollering, “Hey Wilbur, come and help me; if you can’t help me, come get my baby.” Well, there was a railroad gone between me and her and I couldn’t go back and help her. I blame myself a whole lot for that yet. She had her baby in her arms and looked as though she was going to throw it to me. Well, I never thought to go help that lady. I was thinking about my own family. They all six got drowned in that house. She was standing in water up to her waist, and they all got drowned. (Erikson 1976: 140)

For those who are not faced with such horrific experiences, Bendix argues that:

a natural disaster is a wonderful opportunity for the human need of making oneself useful: finally there is a chance to act, to straighten things out, to



organize and to help those who submit to anguish or who are physically and materially hurt – all of which is in the service of (re-) creating what we consider “order.” Thus while an earthquake disrupts order, it also initiates an invigorating liminal phase between pre- and post-quake normalcy. (Bendix 1990: 332)

Bendix notes the function of personal experience narratives of disaster as a medium for regaining order from chaos. She suggests that the structure provided by framing the experience in narrative makes the experience meaningful (Bendix 1990: 333). The structures that people use, such as a linear concept of time, to narrate a disaster experience are direct reflections of our cultural conditioning. Bendix further argues that:

while disaster ultimately implies death of at least a few, and hence the end of sociability and culture for them, those who remain thrust themselves into vigorous affirmation of life, and words strung together, eventually finding narrative cohesion, are the first symbolic evidence of our escape from death (Bendix 1990: 336).

Why then do so many of the people from the Buffalo Creek flood find themselves having suicidal thoughts and withdrawing from any social situation? To explain this Erikson describes a “loss of communality” as a result of the people being “wrenched out of their communities, torn from the human surround in which they had been so deeply enmeshed” (1976: 186). Erikson describes communities where the sense of family went beyond one’s own household and included all those who lived in the village. As a result of this social arrangement the people of Buffalo Creek were readily able to adapt their neighbourly tendencies to new social situations such as moving to a new community or having new neighbours move in around one’s home (Erikson 1976: 191). When the flood devastated the communities of Buffalo Creek it caused a loss of identity among the people that were displaced:

The difficulty is that when you invest so much of yourself in that kind of social arrangement you become absorbed by it, almost captive to it, and the large collectivity around you becomes an extension of your own personality, an extension of your own flesh. This means that not only are you diminished as a person when that surrounding tissue is stripped away, but that you are no longer able to reclaim as your own the emotional resources you invested in it. (Erikson 1976: 191)

Erikson is suggesting that the people of Buffalo Creek lost more than their material possessions and lives: they also lost their culture. The survivors were unable to recover from the horrific experience because there was no opportunity to access their social networks in an attempt to regain a sense of normalcy. As a result of the loss of communality, people were unable to regain order from chaos by structuring their experiences in narrative. Without the opportunity to rebuild as a social group, it was not possible for individuals to reclaim a sense of stability and belonging.

In “The Incomprehensible Catastrophe,” Amos Funkenstein expands on the notion of lost identity in Holocaust narratives. Funkenstein sees narrative as directly tied to one’s sense of self and argues that

most inmates of concentrations - and death-camps *had* no narrative to remember later. The Nazis robbed them of their identity, of their capacity to construct a narrative, of investing the events of their lives with meaning and purpose.” (1993: 24, italics in original)

When one is touched by a disaster in such a pervasive way that it can steal away one’s very identity, the sense of post-disaster utopia cannot be attained through sharing personal experience narratives with others. In these extreme cases of trauma a deeper level of healing is required to reestablish a sense of normalcy and logic to the world around.

After the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster, rumours, jokes, counter-hegemonic narratives, and a sense of unity between disparate groups that had a shared experience proliferated. Larisa Fialkova suggests that “the aim of humour was to relax tension and to gain some power over the situation – in fantasy, if not in reality” (2001: 195). According to Fialkova the survivors of the explosion were trying to gain power over their individual situations as well as call into question “the official stance on nuclear safety” (2001: 198). A marked distrust of government officials, much like that described in Gaudet’s article, highlights the lack of trust in those who are charged with the care and safety of the people as well as the need to find a replacement safety net. The people of Chernobyl turned to each other and to vernacular knowledge to fill the gap left by untrustworthy officials.

Bill Ellis also addresses the role of humour in responding to disaster in “Making the Big Apple Crumble: The Role of Humor in Constructing a Global Response to Disaster.” Ellis argues that “the raw, obscene burlesques and the more reflexive humor that followed interacted to help all the world’s citizens adjust to a new landscape, revealed in the space opened up when we saw part of the Big Apple crumble” (2002: 13.v). The article claims that the use of humour was widespread in trying to deal with the disaster, including the use of black humour among emergency workers at Ground Zero (Ellis 2002: 1.i). Unlike personal experience narratives, humour is not a means of articulating one’s experience of the disaster. Humour does help to fill the folkloric role of assigning blame for what has happened as well as to alleviate anxieties caused by the events (Ellis 2002: 1.i, 1.iii). Although my study focuses on personal experience narratives it is important to note the role of rumours, jokes, legends and beliefs when

coping with disaster so that they can be properly analyzed when they appear within the framework of personal experience narrative.

Another challenge to personal experience narratives of disaster arises out of the intermittent need for those narratives to fit a legal or bureaucratic model in order to gain some sort of service for those that have been affected by the event. Erikson began collecting narratives of the Buffalo Creek flood for the purposes of a lawsuit. Elaine Lawless addresses reshaping of abuse narratives that takes place within a women's shelter, and Amy Shuman and Carol Bohmer discuss the restructuring of narratives told by refugees seeking asylum status in the United States.

Erikson does not directly address how his purpose for collecting the narratives affected the way the narrators chose to tell their stories. He does however mention that litigation of the disaster was a large part of the lives of the survivors since he notes the following result when the case closed:

The time had come to seek new housing, to make overdue decisions, to put the many pieces of a shattered life back together. A painful period of suspension was over, but that put people in the position of no longer being able to act as if their fates were hanging on an attorney's competence, a judge's sense of fairness, or a jury's compassion. So it was a cruel time as well as a comforting one, for the fact is that many of the people in the school auditorium had not really decided how to use their new resources. (Erikson 1976: 248)

Essentially, Erikson is saying that his informants had become complacent in their role as victim as a result of their participation in the legal process. The survivors were compensated for their financial losses and emotional injuries. In order to present a properly horrific picture of the mental anguish caused by the flood the survivors needed to provide testimony of the gruesome nature of the experience. They were interviewed by

sociologists and asked to articulate these horrors as well as being asked to repeat them on the witness stand. It was in the best financial interest of the survivors to make the experience sound as disturbing as possible. This is not an attempt to trivialize the magnitude of the terror that they endured but rather a reflection on how they were made to dwell on that horror and relive it in order to gain compensation for their suffering.

Lawless discusses how women are told to reframe their stories of experienced violence so that they will be palatable to the legal system: “She must leave out some of these raw truths; she must be careful how much she reveals; she must develop a story, a simple story, that does not reveal what living like this is really like” (2001: 47). The abused woman must remove all traces of having had any agency herself. She must not admit to verbally threatening her abuser’s life, nor admit to taking steps to try and give herself an opportunity for self-defense. In the eyes of the law she must appear completely defenseless; a woman who has any agency may find herself being charged with criminal acts. The need to make one’s narrative fit within the expected framework of the legal system inevitably alters that narrative. In order to gain access to protection or compensation offered by the legal system the narrators must not concern themselves with the truth of the event but rather with the specific details that will win over a judge, jury or prosecutor.

Shuman and Bohmer discuss this same reframing of narrative made even more difficult by “cultural differences, bureaucratic demands, and the challenges presented by any representation of trauma” (2004: 394). Again, people are told to recast their stories so

that they fit into the limited mold that a bureaucratic system has deemed appropriate for a specific type of traumatic experience. Shuman and Bohmer state:

our research describes the application process itself as a cultural performance in which applicants, B.C.I.S. [Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services] officials, lawyers, and others who assist in the process (such as ourselves) renegotiate identities and reconfigure differing conceptions of trauma, of suffering, and, especially, of what asylum means. (Shuman and Bohmer 2004: 410)

In legal processes, messages that would be conveyed by the structure of a personal experience narrative are lost as the story is reshaped to fit prescribed boundaries.

Narrators are stripped of their agency and made to fit their experience into a predetermined box that will hopefully gain them access to services or justice but at the same time denies them the right to tell their story.

Yet another medium that truncates or alters the personal experience narrative is the news report. Russell Frank, while acknowledging the editing undertaken by newspaper reporters, suggests that “the stories retain their power” (2003: 172). Frank proceeds to apply Labov and Waletzky’s structural analysis (1967) to the abbreviated personal experience narratives of the Prieta Loma earthquake found in the San Francisco Chronicle. He finds that the narratives do include Labov and Waltezky’s structural units such as an orientation, complicating action, resolution, evaluation and coda (Frank 2001: 171-172). But what has proving the model accomplished? Has it proved that these truncated narratives are folklore? What Frank has truly proven is that even newspaper reporters understand the structure necessary to telling a good story in North American culture. For folklorists it is not enough to simply collect disaster narratives in their entirety, it is necessary to examine those narratives, locate the patterns and disparities,

identify the presence of other folkloric genres and explore the additional messages hidden within the text and context of the narrative event, what is said and what is not, who it can be said to, how and when.

While those who survive a shared disaster experience certainly have a moment in history in common, not all survivors will react to the event in the same manner. The extent to which the disaster affects each person's life will have a direct correlation to how each person is able to cope with the crisis. Generally, survivors who felt they had some form of agency during the catastrophe will experience fewer negative effects (Taylor et al. 1970). There are, of course, exceptions since guilt is sometimes associated with an action that is later determined to be detrimental.

Garry Cranford has published the narratives of six women who survived the 1929 Newfoundland tsunami. These narratives appear in two books. The narrative of one of the women appears in each book, although the redactions are not identical. The six women's ages ranged from five to twenty-three when they experienced the tidal wave. In Chapter Four I compare these narratives with each other as well as with those of a man who was twenty-five at the time of the disaster and another woman who was seven years old. All of the narrators recounted their experiences as senior citizens over the age of seventy-five.

An examination of the two published examples of Mary McKenna's narrative quickly reveals that Cranford has edited the texts for publication. The changes are mainly slight, but it is apparent that chunks of the story have been omitted. From my own interviewing experience, I would hazard to guess that some of the narrative that has been

left out is information of an explanatory nature that describes the lay of the land or other community specific details that the narrator included in an effort to better describe exactly how the earthquake and the ensuing water affected her locality.

### 1.3 Methodology

While touring Government House,<sup>5</sup> during the 2004 “Doors Open” Day<sup>6</sup> in St. John’s, I stumbled across a copy of a then-new book entitled Tsunami: the Newfoundland Tidal Wave Disaster by Maura Hanrahan. I was intrigued, having not known that Newfoundland had experienced this particular brand of natural disaster. This research project began as part of a coursework assignment in October 2004 where I was asked to create a mock thesis proposal. While my interest in the Tidal Wave<sup>7</sup> was genuine, I was not sure at that time that I would pursue the topic for my Folklore master’s thesis. While visiting family in Ontario I received an email from a classmate who had been speaking with a family friend, Sheila Walsh, who was keen on speaking to me about the Tidal Wave. Sheila’s interest in the topic stems from her parents who survived the event. Having learned that there were people around with personal ties to the event and who supported my research, I began seriously to pursue the topic in January 2005, when I first interviewed Sheila.

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<sup>5</sup> Government House was built in 1831 to house the Lieutenant-Governor of the province and continues to serve that function to this day. For more information see <<http://www.heritage.nf.ca/govhouse/govhouse/default.html>>.

<sup>6</sup> “Doors Open” is a yearly event that allows people to access buildings that are normally closed to the public or that usually charge a fee. For more information see <<http://www.doorsopendays.com/>>.

<sup>7</sup> Although the technical term for the disaster is *tsunami* its vernacular name is the Tidal Wave.



Over the course of the following eighteen months, I interviewed five more people and located thirteen unpublished accounts of the Tidal Wave. Two of the five interviews were conducted on the Burin Peninsula of Newfoundland during a weeklong field research trip. While I was on the Burin Peninsula I stayed with the Piercey family in Fortune: this location facilitated my travel to several other communities on the Peninsula during the course of my stay. The opportunity to visit communities affected by the Tidal Wave was invaluable to my research for several reasons. Any description of the event is directly affected by the geography of the community the story originates from. Also, the event is still an important part of the history of the area; stories of the disaster continue to be told by those who experienced the event as well as members of succeeding generations.

Michelle Rowsell and Noella King, curators of the Burin Heritage Museum and the Lamaline Heritage Museum respectively, allowed me access to their heritage museums during the off-season so that I could see how the Tidal Wave is being used for educational and tourism purposes in Lamaline and Burin.

The Burin Heritage Museum has an especially large collection of photographs relating to the Tidal Wave and a three-dimensional model of a community that is moments away from being engulfed by a threatening wave. A community member and historian, Wayne Hollett, has compiled a book of newspaper and magazine clippings pertaining to the event which is kept in the museum to enable public access to the materials. In the summer of 2005, Ms. Rowsell organized a narrative session with author Maura Hanrahan where Hanrahan and community members were able to share their

stories of The Tidal Wave. The success of such an event substantiates the claims that narratives of the event are alive and well in the area and that there is an awareness of this piece of history at the community level.

Alan Ruffman, a Halifax geophysicist who has done research on the physical effect of the tsunami (1997), has provided the Lamaline Heritage Museum with a specimen of earth that shows the silt deposited by the succession of three waves as well as the layers of typical earth above and below the waves' deposit.

Several children's "Heritage Projects" that focus on the event are on display in the Burin Heritage Museum. Every year students in Grades Four through Nine put together projects celebrating Canadian history and culture; these are later presented to the public. Each school holds its own "Heritage Fair" and then has the opportunity to select representatives to send to the regional level. Each province and territory may then send regional representatives to a national weeklong camp. The province of Newfoundland and Labrador has participated in the program since 1997 (Histor!ca Fairs: 2004). All projects must include written research done by students but can range in format from a piece of poetry to a cartoon to a video. All of the Tidal Wave projects that I saw were tabletop displays.

In Lamaline's Museum, another "Heritage Project" can be viewed along with books and newspaper clippings. Figure 3.1, an image of the 2001 "Heritage Project" of ten-year-old Michael Bradbury depicts the typical format of the tabletop displays.

Although I had been given several leads, before I left St. John's, on people who remembered the Tidal Wave, the people that I was able to interview while on the Burin

Peninsula were located by asking around in the communities during my trip. In keeping with the advice of Bruce Jackson in his book Fieldwork (1987),<sup>8</sup> I was “ready for surprises and... ready to welcome the unexpected” (18). In the course of my field research I made use of “contacts,” acquaintances who introduced me to participants, in order to locate participants as well as “cold-canvassing” when a good interview opportunity arose without the presence of a contact (Jackson 1987: 44–45). Jackson’s chapter “Rapport” (1987: 68–78) was particularly relevant to my fieldwork; in it Jackson addresses the possible advantages of interviewing strangers rather than friends. For this project my status as an outsider, which I was constantly conscious of, may have worked to my advantage. Jackson quotes Edward Ives (1995) on “stranger value.” This concept was of particular importance to me because I am not from Newfoundland. As a result of my outsider status, my participants did not expect me to know a great deal about the geography of the province nor of the fishing economy that dominated the landscape at the time of The Tidal Wave. In order to avoid appearing totally ignorant of local history, I learned as much about the event as I could before venturing into the field, as suggested by Jackson (1987: 23). As a result of my efforts to familiarize myself with life in outport Newfoundland in the early twentieth century, I was able to converse intelligently with others about the lifestyle that existed at the time of, and was altered by, the Tidal Wave.

All of the interviews I conducted began with only two people in the room.

Although two spouses of my participants eventually joined us, they only did so once I

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<sup>8</sup> Additional fieldwork and interviewing resources consulted for this project included Agar 1996; Back 1956; Goldstein 1974 and Goodall 2000.

had begun to pack up my recording equipment. As a result, the frames of the interviews only included two people. Erving Goffman has stated that when a past event is being described the speaker must use a different footing from that used for conversational interaction (1981: 151). During interviews my participants used the footing of “a narrator whose extended pauses and utterance completions [were] not to be understood as signals that [they were] ready to give up the floor” (Goffman 1981: 152). The spouses of participants entered the room used for interviewing after the footing of the narrator was no longer being used by the participant. This shift in footing indicated that the interview was over and that conversational interaction was appropriate.

I approached Vincent Mallay after asking at the reception desk of a retirement home in Marystown if anyone living there might recall the event, and he agreed to be recorded on the spot. A friend of Mrs. Piercey’s, my landlady, recommended Lillian Noseworthy to me; she agreed to be interviewed, although not recorded, in her apartment in Grand Bank the day following my inquiring telephone call.

I was able to interview Vivian Wiseman in her St. John’s residence in November of 2005 thanks to her granddaughter, Kim Churchill, who could recall hearing her grandmother talk about the Tidal Wave. Although Wiseman is not from the Burin Peninsula it is extremely interesting to note that communities farther afield were affected and that the narratives are being retold. Nancy Hillier<sup>9</sup> was interviewed in her home in St. John’s and Gus (Augustus) Etchegary was interviewed in his home in St. Philip’s.

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<sup>9</sup> Name was changed at the request of the participant.

Whenever possible, interviews were recorded and field notes were taken. On several occasions technical difficulties were encountered and an improvement in recording quality has been noted with my increased experience. I made a number of technical errors during the course of this project. I attempted to record without turning on the microphone, attempted to record while having the microphone plugged into a headphone jack, and also attempted to record with the microphone sitting directly beside the fan on my laptop, which I used as my recording device on several occasions.

#### **1.4 Approach**

From the outset I had several goals in mind for this thesis. In collecting narratives of the 1929 Tidal Wave it was my hope to record personal experience narratives of the disaster while it was still possible to locate people who had lived the event. By collecting narratives I have made it possible to compare those that I recorded with the archived accounts that I have located. This comparison of narratives of the same event collected at different points in time facilitates my ability to note what remains constant about the accounts and what has changed. Noting changes and similarities allows me to comment on the different functions that the narratives serve depending on the goals of the narrator, the context of the account, and how the audience interprets or understands the narrative.

Embedded within the narratives is information about traditional folkways of outport Newfoundland during the late 1920s. Folklore that is contemporary with the recitation of the narrative is also present. While most of the archived narratives that I have located were collected from people who were adults at the time of the Tidal Wave,

the narratives I have personally collected are all from people who were children at the time; most were between four and seven years of age and the eldest was fourteen at the time. By examining narratives told by those who have childhood memories and those who have adult memories of the event, expected societal roles for each group begin to emerge, as do gender roles. An examination of the performance context of some of the interviews elicits patterns of the use of space and performance styles of differing groups. Observations about how the narratives are used by those who experienced the event as well as oral tradition bearers demonstrates what a pivotal moment the event was for the majority of the affected communities and how it continues to shape how those communities perceive themselves socially, physically and economically.

Disaster narrative research to date has often focussed on genres other than that of personal experience narrative such as rumour, legend and joke cycles. Researchers that have dealt with personal experience narratives have most often focussed on similarities that they have noted. I have tried to portray the previous research as well as to challenge that research by demonstrating the anomalies in the pattern and trying to explain why they are there. Disaster experiences are very individual and personal yet we attempt to articulate them within a recognizable cultural framework in order to convey a sense of the event to an audience. Gender roles and power structures are built into the narratives because we are all products of our social and cultural training. Disaster narratives can reinforce and challenge these systems.

## **Chapter 2: 75 Years Later: The Documentary Record**

Documentation of the 1929 Tidal Wave began in the immediate aftermath of the event and continues to be published and archived today. This chapter will summarize and explore the documentation and photographic collections housed in the Provincial Archives of Newfoundland and Labrador, the Centre for Newfoundland Studies and the Trinity Historical Society Archives. Contemporary newspaper reports as well as commemorative pieces published in newspapers, quarterlies and monthlies will be examined to show how the function of the narratives has shifted over time. Heritage museums in several of the communities affected by the Tidal Wave house Heritage Projects created by local school children that focus on the disaster. These projects show that Tidal Wave narratives have currency with subsequent generations and that they are being adapted to communicate information on behalf of those who did not experience the event first-hand.

I have divided this chapter by the different types of documentation I located. The archival information has been divided by written and photographic documentation. Each photographic collection is designated by the name of the collection and includes information on where the collections are housed. Printed information has been classified by print format and genre, such as books, scientific research and newspaper articles.

## 2.1 Historical Record of the Tidal Wave

Documentation of the 1929 Tidal Wave can be found in a number of different locations. This chapter will explore the available written record of the Tidal Wave. The bulk of the primary sources available can be accessed via the resources at the Provincial Archive where the records of the South Coast Disaster Committee are housed. The Provincial Archive also houses a collection of the S.H. Parsons postcards of the disaster. The Centre for Newfoundland Studies contains this collection as well as housing several more images aside from the Parsons postcards. A further four images explored in this thesis are housed by the Trinity Historical Society Archives.

### *2.1.1 Historical Summary of Events*

In the course of a few moments the lives of several thousand people living on the Burin Peninsula of Newfoundland were changed forever. An event known in the vernacular as the Tidal Wave swept coastal communities over a span of sixty miles affecting forty communities with a combined population of approximately 10,000 (Baker 2003: 12). The force of the water that struck at approximately 7 PM on November 18<sup>th</sup>, 1929 swept away homes, stores, boats, stages and flakes. It caused an estimated \$1,000,000 in damage and claimed 27 lives (“South Coast Disaster.” MG636: box 1, file 1).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ruffman *et al.* (unpublished manuscript) and Ruffman (2005) argued that the actual total number of deaths caused by the 1929 tsunami is 28.



While the earthquake that precipitated the tsunami was felt throughout Newfoundland, and as far afield as Montreal and Boston, news of the devastation wrought on the Burin Peninsula did not reach St. John's, the capital, until three days later, due to damaged submarine telegraph cables. During those three days the communities were forced to care for their own by sharing shelter, food, clothing and medical care among those who were in need. The government, once notified of the calamity, was quick to respond with emergency relief supplies and medical professionals. The voyage of the S.S. Meigle, the ship dispatched by government with supplies such as clothing, food and medical aid, addressed the immediate concerns of those left destitute by the event ("Relief Expedition" 1929: 1-3), and all involved realized that a long-term rebuilding fund would be necessary. The South Coast Disaster Committee was established with

the doctrine that the Committee would act as a Rehabilitation Committee and not as Insurance Underwriters; that where structural damage and loss appeared or where fishery appliances were lost, there the funds of the Committee should be expended in rehabilitation without respect of ownership; that reconstruction and rehabilitation should only proceed within the lines of utility and that reconstruction must proceed as speedily as possible. ("South Coast Disaster." Memorandum, 3 February 1930. MG 636: Box 4A)

As such, the Committee issued funds only to repair damaged homes, stages, flakes, dories and essential fishing equipment; no cash settlements were given for loss of supplies such as food, clothing, coal or firewood. The items not covered by the Committee funds were given out in the immediate response to the disaster as well as throughout the following months by Magistrate Hollett, the local governmental representative and the head of the South Coast Disaster Committee, and his staff. Donations to help the victims of the Tidal

Wave totaled more than \$250,000 and money was received from across Newfoundland and from as far afield as Canada, the US and the UK (Richer 2005: F7).

Although no lives were lost on the French Islands of St. Pierre and Miquelon, considerable damage occurred on Île aux Marins<sup>11</sup> (formerly known as Île aux Chiens), including the total gutting of the local bakery. Joseph Leheunen composed a diary entry of his experience of the event eight days after it occurred. Dr. Scott Jamieson interviewed Leheunen in 1989 and his rendering of accounts was nearly identical to his original journal entry. Leheunen's account, translated by Dr. Jamieson, appeared in the Newfoundland Quarterly in the spring of 1992 (16–18).

Contemporary newspaper coverage of the event over the following weeks focused on reports sent via telegram to the city of St. John's since the emergency mission of the S.S. Meigle left no room for newspaper reporters to get onboard:

#### An Incomprehensible Refusal

The story of the awful tragedy on Burin Peninsula has stirred the world – a fact that is evident from the numerous demands from everywhere for further and fuller particulars. Unfortunately, owing to the dislocation of the lines it has not been possible to secure the details necessary for comprehensive review of the whole [*sic*] situation, and the press has been further handicapped by the incomprehensible and, we should imagine, the unprecedented refusal of the authorities to allow a news representative to accompany the relief ship Meigle. The official answer to The Telegram's request was, "It would be inexpedient". The obvious reply to that is that the authorities would be in a serious quandary if they could not rely upon the co-operation of the press and the public which it serves in such a crisis.

The obstacle imposed to the free functioning of the press has not only had a local effect – it has interfered with the services that supply the news to the world at large. ("An Incomprehensible" 1929: 1)

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<sup>11</sup> For a glimpse of life on Île aux Marins in the early Twentieth Century see Enguehard 2002.

Interestingly, the Daily News wrote:

The Government has been ready in action and the rapid dispatch of the relief ship was well engineered and carried out. The Daily News has nothing but approval for the prompt response made to the urgent necessities of the unfortunate sufferers in the dispatch of the Meigle last night. (“When Our Heads Are Bowed” 1929: 2)

The accusations of one newspaper paired with the praise of another may reflect the political affiliations of the papers, but they also highlight the tension caused by the Tidal Wave. The competing need to provide support and supplies to the destitute and the desire for up-to-date information from the affected area were heightened by the initial delay in reports from the South Coast pertaining to the Tidal Wave. Without doubt, the press was instrumental in securing the level of funds donated to the relief of those left destitute by the Tidal Wave. While it may have served the immediate needs of the victims to ship them medical professionals, food and clothing, it is unlikely that the addition of a media representative would have diminished the supplies that could be transported onboard the ship.

Scholarly literature on the event is somewhat sparse. Alan Ruffman, a geophysicist, has collected oral narratives of the event in order to determine the height of the waves as they swept across the communities. Garry Cranford and Maura Hanrahan have used oral histories of the event as popular history accounts. Both Cranford and Ruffman are featured as experts on the topic in a television documentary created by Partners in Motion of Harmony Entertainment Management Inc., a Saskatchewan based documentary company. The production is part of a series called Disasters of the Century;

episode eighteen is called “Communities Under Siege” and features the 1958 Springhill Mine disaster, and the 1929 Grand Banks tsunami.

According to the historical record as it is presented by Natural Resources Canada:

On November 18, 1929 at 5:02pm Newfoundland time, a major earthquake occurred approximately 250 km south of Newfoundland along the southern edge of the Grand Banks. This magnitude 7.2 tremor was felt as far away as New York and Montreal... The earthquake triggered a large submarine slump which ruptured 12 transatlantic cables in multiple places and generated a tsunami... Approximately 2 ½ hours after the earthquake the tsunami struck the southern end of the Burin Peninsula in Newfoundland as three main pulses, causing local sea levels to rise between 2 and 7 metres. At the heads of several of the long narrow bays on the Burin Peninsula the momentum of the tsunami carried water as high as 27 metres. This giant sea wave claimed a total of 29<sup>12</sup> lives... This represents Canada’s largest documented loss of life directly related to an earthquake... Total property losses were estimated at more than \$1 million 1929 dollars. (Halchuk 2004)

The bare bones of what occurred can be located in a myriad of published sources but these documents do not shed any light on what the experience of those people involved was like. Although not all of the facts contained in the personal experience narratives of the disaster match exactly, for example the earthquake is recorded as having occurred at different times between four and five in the evening, these accounts of the Tidal Wave offer the opportunity to gain a better understanding of what the experience was like and how people reacted and adapted to such a dramatic incident.

The exact details of the experience vary from community to community based on how differently each was affected in loss of property and life. The historical facts of

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<sup>12</sup> This report claims that an additional life was lost on Cape Breton Island (my note). Ruffman *et al.* (unpublished) have refuted the death of the Cape Breton man as a result of the 1929 Tidal Wave.

the event mean very little to someone who watched their family home being carried out to sea. It is equally important to document the human experience of such a colossal force of nature. The stories of this event remain vital today because they are a part of a living tradition that continues to adapt and be reworked with the progression of time. The event belongs not only to those who lived through it but also to the communities that it affected and to those who repeat the stories of their predecessors.

The event is remembered and commemorated by the press as well as on a more local level. As noted earlier, several of the affected communities on the Burin Peninsula have Heritage Museums house photographs and narratives of the event as well as numerous grade school projects that document the memories of grandparents who survived the Tidal Wave. These projects are undertaken for the schools' Heritage Fair and, while the creation of a heritage display is mandatory, the specific topic of the Tidal Wave is a choice made by the students.

## **2.2 Archived Photographs**

Photographic documentation of the destructive force of the Tidal Wave is a graphic reminder of the power and unpredictability of nature. The New York Times published a "Rotogravure Picture Section" of the Tidal Wave in December of 1929. The international interest in this seemingly incredible occurrence on the Burin Peninsula demonstrates how Newfoundland's Atlantic neighbours were equally shocked by the event. North Atlantic coastal communities did not consider themselves at risk of such a disaster, were universally unprepared for it, and were unanimously disturbed by the Tidal

Wave because it could just as easily have struck their shores. As a result of the lack of media presence non-journalistic photographers undertook the visual documentation of the devastation. Postcards created from photographs taken by S.H. Parsons and Sons were made available for purchase within months of the disaster.<sup>13</sup> Several of Parsons's images appeared in an issue of the New York Times in December of 1929. It is interesting to compare what the community members have documented with the images documented by a professional photographer with no direct ties to the damage or suffering.

### *2.2.1 Parsons's Postcard Collection*

The following are five images photographed by Parsons:

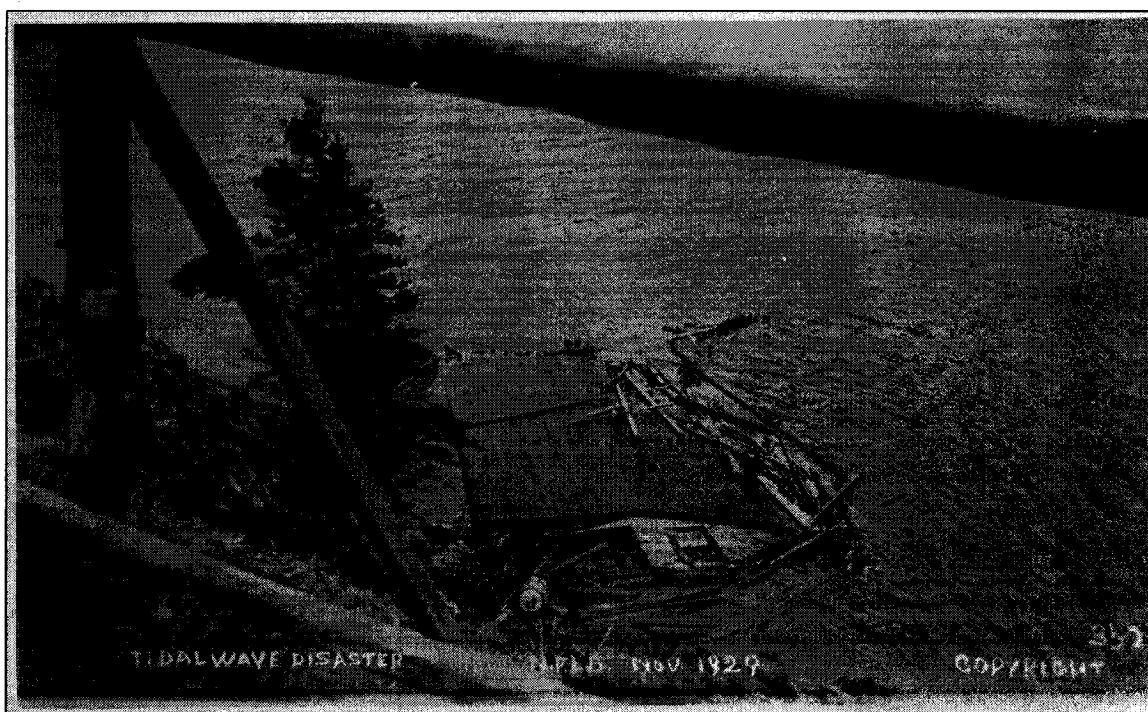


Figure 2.01, destroyed house. A2-146, The Rooms Corporation, Provincial Archives of Newfoundland and Labrador.

<sup>13</sup> Parsons's business was being run by his four children in 1929. For a biography of S.H. Parsons see Sheppard's (1993) entry in the Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador.

Figures 2.01, 2.02, 2.03, and 2.04 were among the images featured in the New York Times in December of 1929. The images reproduced in this thesis are courtesy of The Rooms Corporation and are digitally scanned copies of Parsons's postcards. The Provincial Archives at The Rooms and the Centre for Newfoundland Studies at Memorial University of Newfoundland house identical collections of ten Parsons postcards. The "Rotogravure" in the New York Times placed this caption next to the image of a flattened saltbox house (figure 2.01): "The grave of a mother and her three children: the wreckage of a house on the shoreline at Burin, in which four persons were drowned in the Great Tidal Wave which swept over the village without warning" (1929: RP22). The voyeuristic act of gawking at a terrible accident is conveyed by this image since we are led to believe that the bodies of a mother and three children were pulled from the wreckage of this home.

Parsons's images all appear to have been photographed in the vicinity of the outport of Burin and its surrounding island communities. Figure 2.02 shows several of the islands visible from the shore of Burin, two sunken schooners and a man in a dory picking salvage from the floating debris. The New York Times described this image as "a bleak coast devastated by sudden disaster: Port of Burin, with two schooners lying on the bottom with only their masts showing above the water" ("Rotogravure" 1929: RP22). Parsons's image communicates a sense of isolation and desolation. The frame contains a single man surrounded by debris, uninhabited coastline and two sunken ships. Not a single visual clue of the community that the debris is from is captured in the image.

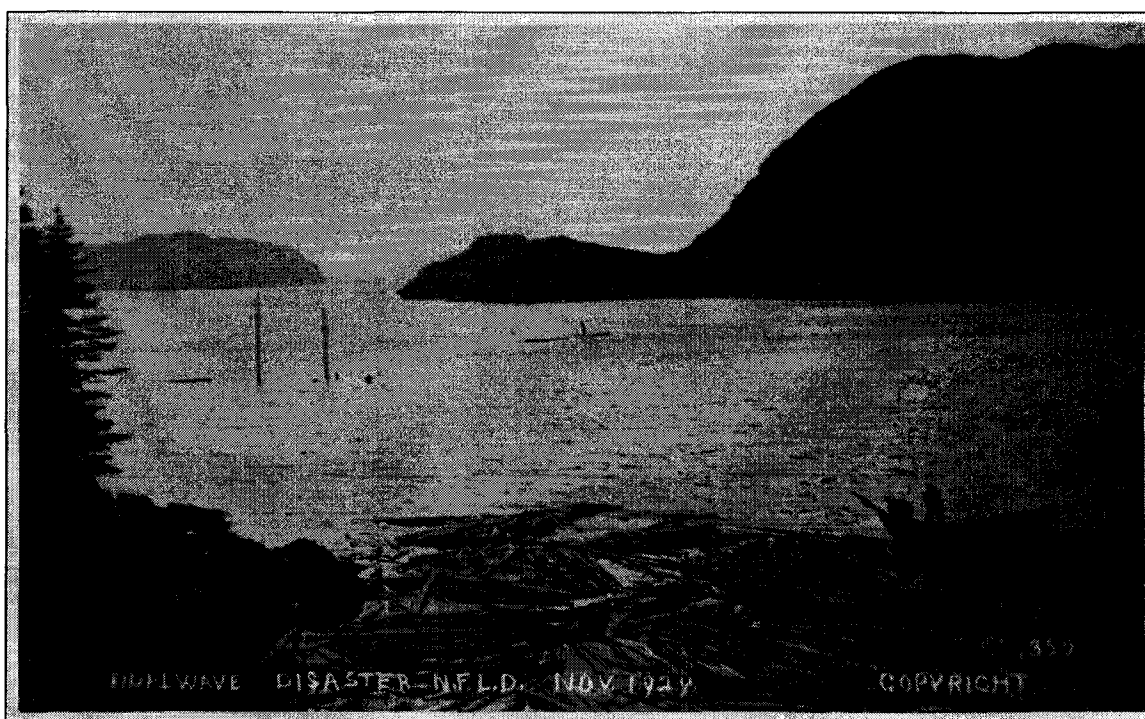


Figure 2.02, A2-147, sunken schooners. The Rooms Corporation, Provincial Archives of Newfoundland and Labrador.



Figure 2.03, standing house and debris. A2-148, The Rooms Corporation, Provincial Archives of Newfoundland and Labrador.



The caption the New York Times “Rotogravure” affixed to figure 2.03 is especially sensational: “the lone survivor of a village on the coastline at Burin: the only house left standing after the Tidal Wave had rolled over the shore for an area of 100 miles” (1929: RP22). While this house may have been the only one left standing in its community, it certainly was not the only house left standing within 100 miles of shoreline. Less than 25 miles away in the community of St. Lawrence Gus Etchegary’s home was untouched by the waters of the Tidal Wave (Etchegary 2006). The image alone depicts an appalling level of destruction, but the newspaper increased the shock value of the image by suggesting that the viewer is seeing the only home left standing along an extensive section of coastline.

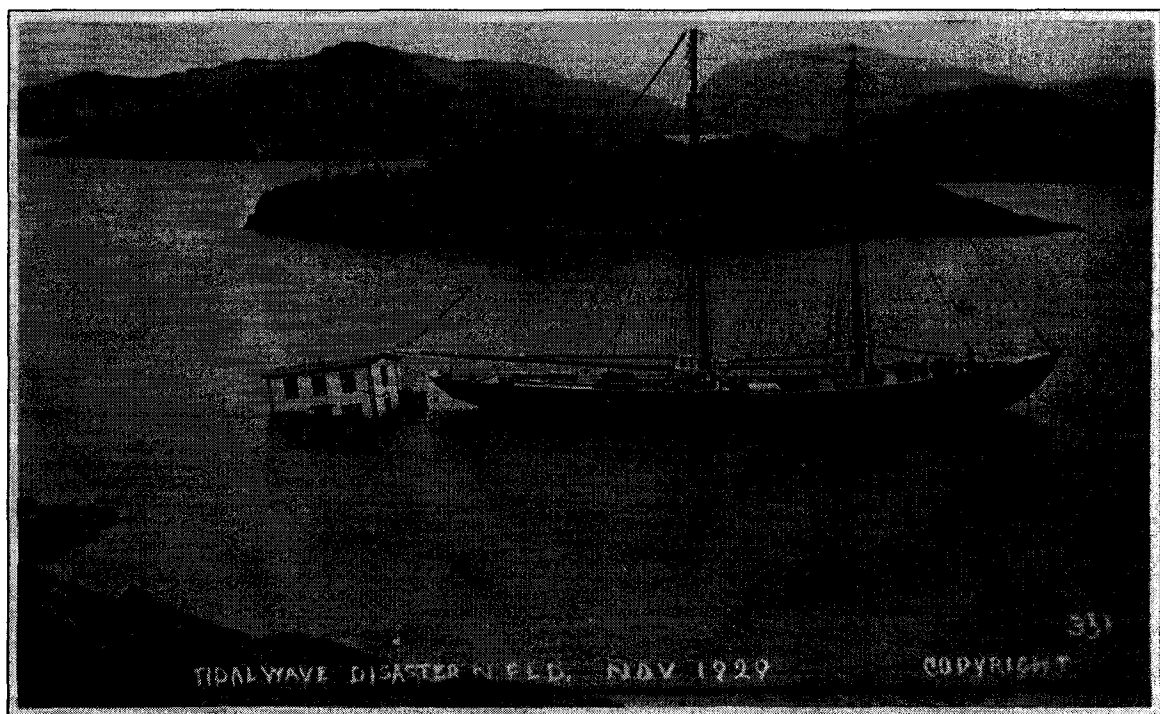


Figure 2.04, schooner towing house. A2-149, The Rooms Corporation, Provincial Archives of Newfoundland and Labrador.

Figure 2.04 is arguably the most well known visual depiction of the Tidal Wave. In response to my request to reproduce this image I was told by the Archives' reproducing photographer, Buchheit, an authority on local historical photographs: "It is a great image; most evocative of the batch" (Buchheit 2006). The New York Times of 1929 appears to have been in agreement with this assessment of the image since it occupies only slightly less than half of the entire space used for the "Rotogravure." The image is readily available on the Internet, and is featured on the cover of Hanrahan's book Tsunami. The New York Times caption that attends this image is as follows:

one strange after-effect of a great upheaval on the bottom of the ocean: a schooner towing a house which was washed five miles from its foundation by the great Tidal Wave which swept the coast of Newfoundland after a great earthquake 150 miles or more out in the Atlantic" ("Rotogravure" 1929: RP22).

I found it especially interesting to discover that this image was that most associated with the Tidal Wave because when I first saw it I thought it was a Resettlement<sup>14</sup> image. As Scott Walden stated, "During the 1960s you could look out over the ocean in Newfoundland and see houses floating by. Natural disasters weren't the cause; governments were" (2003: 13). Walden further noted the manner in which many of the houses were relocated: "resourceful Newfoundlanders often winched [their homes] down to the shoreline, attached empty oil drums to the foundations, and then towed them by

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<sup>14</sup> Resettlement was a joint federal and provincial government initiative from the 1950s to the 1970s to centralize the population of Newfoundland. Many families relocated from isolated outports to larger towns. For a visually stunning examination of resettlement see Walden, Places Lost. Images and information are also available on the "Resettlement: 'No Great Future'" website at <<http://www.mun.ca/mha/resettlement/index.html>>. Recently, posters of houses being towed in the 1960s have been sold at "Heritage Shops" and other tourist sites.

fishing boat to their new communities” (Walden 2003: 13). Little or no debris is visible in this picture and no hint of the truly destructive nature of the event is present since the house in the photograph is whole and appears to be, for the most part, undamaged. The next image, figure 2.05, although not as visually interesting as the preceding ones, documents the destructive affect of the Tidal Wave. The sight of jagged and chaotic pieces of lumber strewn along the shoreline all the way up to the foundation of the road that skirts the top right of the image frame conveys a sense of the force of the Tidal Wave and just how far-reaching it was. The iconic value of the schooner towing the house to shore is undoubtedly due to the hope the image conveys. Although a great deal was lost in the Tidal Wave the house being towed back to shore shows that not all was lost and that an opportunity to rebuild was at hand.

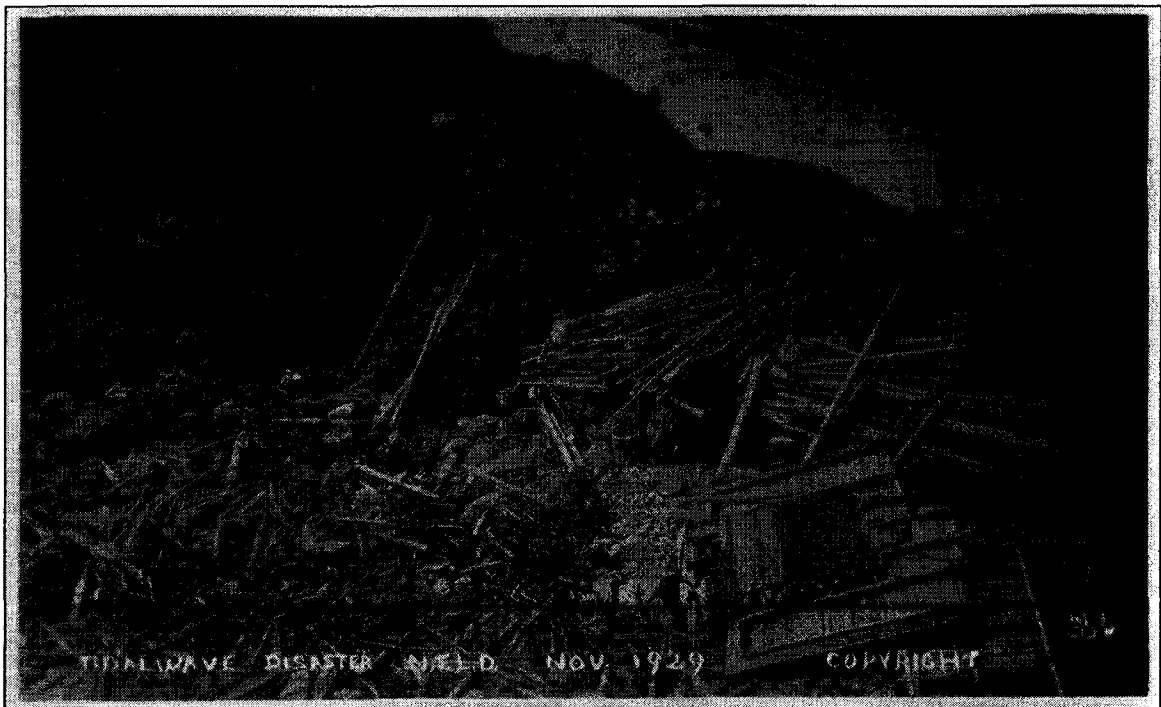


Figure 2.05, debris along shoreline. A2-150, The Rooms Corporation, Provincial Archives of Newfoundland and Labrador.

### *2.2.2 Trinity Historical Society Archives Collection*

A collection of four images is housed in the Trinity Historical Society Archives Collection. Project Coordinator Jim Miller was kind enough to forward digital copies of the images to me via email. The photographers are unknown and according to the Trinity Historical Society's archival designations they are postcards rather than photographs. All four of the postcards have the words "Tidal Wave Disaster, Newfoundland 1929. Rights Reserved HMM" written on them. I was unable to identify who HMM might be, but the images are not part of the S.H. Parsons collection. The first image, figure 2.06, was taken in Lord's Cove and depicts buildings that have been moved and damaged by the Tidal Wave. The house in the center has been lifted from its foundation and deposited in a nearby pond. The photograph also shows the snowfall that began to accumulate shortly after the Tidal Wave struck the South Coast.



Figure 2.06, house in pond. THS-PC103, Trinity Historical Society Archives Collection.



Figure 2.07, cow and damaged buildings. THS-PC104, Trinity Historical Society Archives Collection.

Figure 2.07, taken in Taylor's Bay, also documents the snow that fell after the Tidal Wave struck. Unlike the Parsons photographs, figures 2.06 and 2.07 document the damage done to private dwellings and outbuildings. Figure 2.07 records the collapse of a shed as well as the noticeable tilt of the home beside the shed, which was lifted off of its foundation by the force of the water. The cow that is wandering freely next to the remains of the home and shed highlights the lack of shelter as a result of the disaster.

Figure 2.08 is of Point Au Gaul and while it is difficult to note any damage in the photograph, the image gives the viewer a good impression of just how exposed the community was to the sea and how those with homes farther back from the water had the added advantage of being situated at a higher elevation.

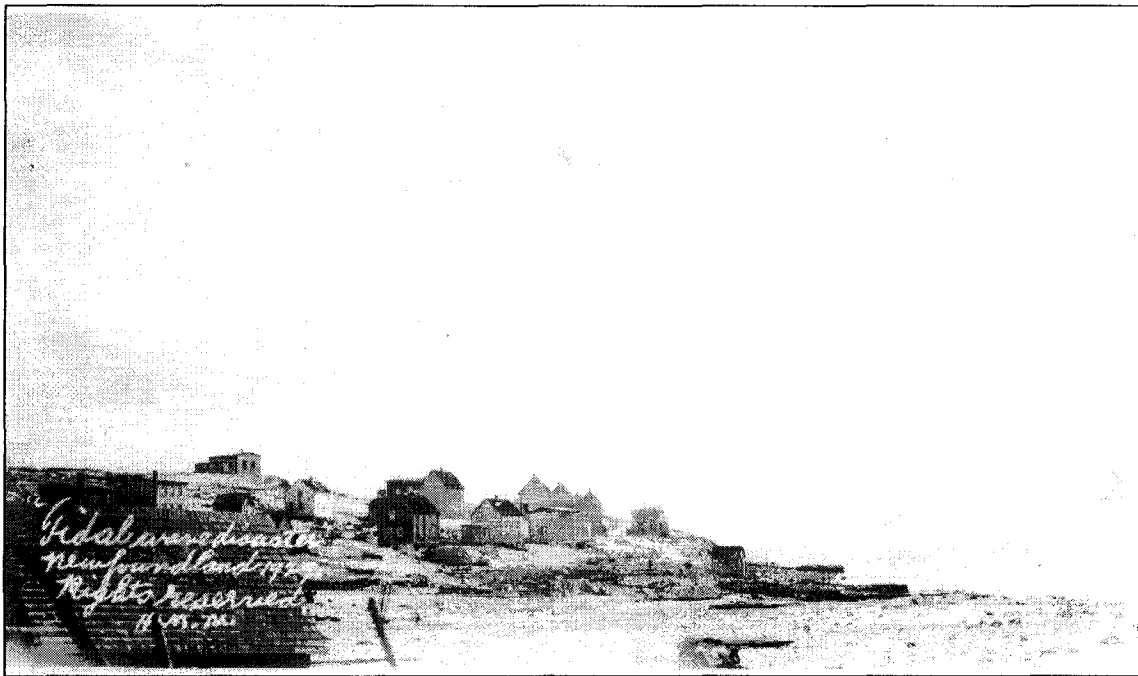


Figure 2.08, Point au Gaul. THS-PC102, Trinity Historical Society Archives Collection.



Figure 2.09, remnant of building. THS-PC101, Trinity Historical Society Archives Collection.

Figure 2.09 was also taken in Point Au Gaul, unlike figure 2.08, this image clearly shows the destructive force of the Tidal Wave. The image depicts what is locally known as the Back Cove, an area that is quite flat and open to the ocean. Snow is also evident in this image and damage to privately owned property is being documented.

### *2.2.3 Centre for Newfoundland Studies Archival Collection*

Another five images are housed in the Centre for Newfoundland Studies (CNS) at Memorial University of Newfoundland. Three are located in MF-334 and the remaining two are in Collection 137. MF-334 is the Kelly Collection. Matilda Kelly was born in Lamaline in 1908 and moved to Point Au Gaul in 1927 to take up a teaching post. She was living there when the Tidal Wave struck and her collection includes three images of the event not included in the Provincial Archive Parsons postcard series. According to the Centre for Newfoundland Studies finding aid for MF-334,

there are a number of well-known images of the destruction of the damage caused to the people and communities of the Burin Peninsula by the tidal wave... The three images which form this collection are not as common as some others, but they were part of a number which were printed as postcards and made available for sale. (Riggs 1997)

The three images in the Kelly collection are not included in either of the sets of ten postcards housed in the Centre for Newfoundland Studies and the Provincial Archives of Newfoundland and Labrador. Although the finding aid for the Kelly collection lists the images as postcards, the Kelly images that the public can access at the CNS are not printed as postcards. The sets of ten Parsons images are printed on cardstock with the typical delineation of space for a message and an address marked on the reverse sides.

The Kelly collection images do not have these typical postcard features; the reverse side of the images is completely blank.

The Geography Collection, Coll 137, is a compilation of black and white photographs. The collection was created by an initiative from the Department of Geography and depicts houses, churches, public buildings, ships, railways, communities and special events. The photographs are of Newfoundland and Labrador and date from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.



Figure 2.10, view of wreckage in the harbour. MF-334, 1.03, Centre for Newfoundland Studies.

Figure 2.10 documents the extent of the damage incurred by the Tidal Wave at Port au Bras. While most homes were at a high enough elevation to escape the destructive force of the incoming water, extensive damage was done to the stages, flakes and wharves of the community, leaving the harbour strewn with shattered bits of lumber. The



blanket of snow that is masking any debris that may have been deposited on the shore magnifies the sense of devastation projected by this image. The tonal contrast of the dark water and debris against the white of the land highlights the worst of the damage.

Figures 2.11 and 2.12 depict images similar to those portrayed by the Trinity Historical Society photographs. Figure 2.11 was taken in Burin North and shows a closely cropped image of a house that has been lifted off its foundation and tipped to one side. Figure 2.12 depicts the now-empty space where Bartlett's Shop stood before the Tidal Wave. It is noted on the reverse side of the image that Bartlett's shop was lifted off of its foundation and carried inland by the force of the wave.

The two images relating to the Tidal Wave in CNS Collection 137 illustrate the relief efforts that took place in St. John's to aid those left destitute by the disaster. Figures 2.11 and 2.12 are both described as "Burin Relief Supplies, Tidal Wave 1929, horses and carts in front of the Fleischmann Company, Atwater Kent, Duckworth Street" (White and Jamieson 1999) by Memorial University's Centre for Newfoundland Studies. The two photographs show horses and carts but figure 2.12 has more motorized vehicles than horse-drawn carts and boasts a large banner that says "Burin Relief." The photographs are a visual testament to the national response of Newfoundlanders to the crisis of the Tidal Wave. The government and private citizens made donations to help their fellow countrymen in the wake of the disaster.



Figure 2.11, horse-drawn supplies. Coll 137, 2.01.043, Centre for Newfoundland Studies.



Figure 2.12, loading of Burin relief supplies. Coll 137, 2.01.044, Centre for Newfoundland Studies

Images depicting the impact of the Tidal Wave and of the human efforts to redress the destruction it caused were, and still are, used to corroborate and illustrate the narratives told about the event. The sale of the Parsons images as postcards demonstrates the level of interest the crisis experienced beyond the boundaries of the communities that were directly affected. As a professional photographic agency it was only in the interests of S.H. Parsons and Sons to photograph the event if there was an economic gain to be made from the images. Sending a photographer to the stricken area from St. John's would have been costly and time consuming. The photo spread in the New York Times and the sale of postcards demonstrates that there was money to be made from the Tidal Wave.

A noticeable shift in focus can be seen between the professional and the non-journalistic efforts to visually document the Tidal Wave. Parsons's images capture views looking out from the shore to the seemingly calm ocean which is littered with debris from the violence of the Tidal Wave. The non-journalistic photographs look inwards, towards the communities and the ruined homes, most often specifically focussing one particular home rather than the destruction on a community level. The two photographs of the relief effort in St. John's document the level of support the victims received as well as the name of one of the charitable businesses and the faces of those who helped with the relief efforts. Regardless of the focus of the image, all of the Tidal Wave photographs speak to the severity of the damage caused by the event and the amount of work that was need to rebuild the homes and communities touched by the disaster.

## 2.3 Publications on the Tidal Wave

### 2.3.1 Books

More than seventy-five years after the event, the 1929 Tidal Wave continues to live on in oral tradition. Those who lived through the disaster recount personal experience narratives, although their accounts of events also often include stories of the experiences of others. These narratives are repeated by members of succeeding generations who value the accounts and invest them with personal significance. The stories are drawn on by the media on a yearly basis to commemorate the anniversary of the disaster, as such they appear edited in print, edited for television broadcast, and in at least one television documentary.

In 1999 Garry Cranford published the book Not Too Long Ago with the St. John's Seniors Resource Centre; "The stories in Not Too Long Ago were collected from seniors across the province, primarily through taped interviews, supplemented by written submissions. The reading style is as varied as the storyteller, and edited as little as possible, in an effort to retain the original flavour of the conversation..." (Cranford 1999: 3). Two of the five narratives included are reprinted in Cranford's book Our Lives (2000a), although they have been edited slightly from the versions published in Not Too Long Ago. This work is also available in its entirety online through the National Adult Literacy Database.<sup>15</sup>

Maura Hanrahan published stories of the disaster in 2004 under the title Tsunami: The Newfoundland Tidal Wave Disaster. This work is based on oral history accounts of

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<sup>15</sup> See <<http://www.nald.ca/index.htm>>.

the event but is not a presentation of the words of those who lived through it; the work is an historical fiction. The people and events are real but the dialogue and descriptions are from the imagination of the author.

Garry Cranford has also published Tidal Wave: A List of Victims and Survivors (2000b) which summarizes the individually submitted declarations of losses suffered due to the Tidal Wave, as well as the monetary compensation provided by the South Coast Disaster Committee. The work is organized alphabetically by community and then by family name. The information contained in this work is taken from the records of the Provincial Archive and is meant to make that information more widely accessible.

Additionally, several local history books, three written by area residents, include references to the Tidal Wave (Farrell 2001; Hillier 1998; Pumphrey 1985; Senior Citizens 1977). The History of Burin, written by its Senior Citizens, contains an eight-page account of the event that includes primary documents and photographs of the destruction. Ena Farrell Edwards and Rosalie Hillier both record their own experiences of the event as well as information passed on about the Tidal Wave by family members. Ron Pumphrey's publication on residents of the Burin Peninsula simply mentions the age of prominent citizens at the time of the tsunami, which he refers to as "the famous tidal wave" (Pumphrey 1985: 6). Pumphrey's simple reference to the event implies that he expects his readers to already know enough about the Tidal Wave that further explanation is not required.

Pumphrey was not the only author to make such an assumption. Frances Marshall, author of Out of the Past, Into the Present (1967), makes passing mention of the Tidal

Wave on two separate occasions: “The Tidal Wave of 1929 changed the pond and since that time it seemed to have become more shallow...” (Marshall 1967: 13) and “Its rugged terrain, added I would think, to the bull dog tenacity of its early settlers who clung by their toe holds on the cliffs when there was nothing left but the will to hold on, after storms and such a disaster as the tidal wave of November 1929” (Marshall 1967: 21). The second mention of the Tidal Wave attributes the residents of the affected communities with a tremendous capacity for withstanding obstacles to their livelihood and survival. This character trait has become embedded in the notion of local identity as a point of pride.

A final publication, The Burin Peninsula (1980: 2), includes a reference to the 1929 Tidal Wave. It cites some bare figures relating to the event such as the time of the wave, the height of the wave, the number of lives lost and the adverse effect on the fishery. No sources are cited for this information and because of the general nature of the paragraph, not all of the information applies to all of the communities that experienced the Tidal Wave, although the paragraph implies that the experience was universal for the affected areas.

### *2.3.2 Scientific Research*

Alan Ruffman, a Halifax geophysicist, has also made use of the oral history of the Tidal Wave. Ruffman has published a number of articles on the topic from a geological perspective: for example, in one he discusses the layer of sediment left by the Tidal Wave

and uses this information in conjunction with oral history accounts to try and determine the height and velocity of the waves (Ruffman 1996).

One month after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, Deborah Inkpen interviewed Dr. Michael Staveley regarding his research on the 1929 tsunami for Memorial University's official weekly newspaper, the Gazette. Dr. Staveley's 1990s research of the event stemmed from the off-shore oil interests of the Federal Government Department of Energy, Mines, and Resources.<sup>16</sup> In order to determine the stability of the ocean floor and the likelihood of a reoccurrence Dr. Staveley and his research team "looked at diaries, written accounts, books and newspapers" (Inkpen 2005: 9). Vernacular accounts of the Tidal Wave, as well as media sources, provided data necessary for making a scientific recommendation on the viability of drilling for oil.

### *2.3.3 In the News*

On January 8, 2005, the Globe and Mail published a piece claiming that "the plight of the Asia's tsunami victims strike a special chord on Newfoundland's Burin Peninsula.... Older residents remember the day they, too, learned how cruel the sea can be to the shore" (Richer 2005: F7). The author, Shawna Richer notes that news coverage of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami brought back memories of the Tidal Wave to those who had experienced the disaster. Margaret (Rennie) Saint states that she continues to be traumatized by the Tidal Wave three-quarters of a century later: "It's still very scary for

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<sup>16</sup> Phase 2 of Staveley and Adams's report to the Federal Government includes a section dedicated to archival holdings pertaining to the 1929 Tidal Wave (Adams 1985).

me to think about. I still can't sleep unless I have a light on somewhere. I still sometimes have nightmares.... It brings back bad memories" (Richer 2005: F7). The article quotes Maura Hanrahan and Alan Ruffman and reprints images of the event from the Provincial Archives and the Centre for Newfoundland Studies. Richer has made use of a first-hand account, a scientific resource, an author for the popular press, as well as contemporary newspaper coverage to recreate the devastation of the Tidal Wave. The focus of the article is on the larger repercussions rather than the individual or community experience of the event.

The earliest contemporary newspaper reports, written before reports from the Burin Peninsula reached St. John's, merely listed titles noting the advent of the earthquake. The Western Star published a piece entitled "Earthquake Felt Here Monday" (1929: 5) that listed the most noticeable affect of which was the swaying of telephone poles. "Earthquake Shock was Felt Throughout Nfld. Maritimes and New England States," published in the Evening Telegram, noted that "there was no serious damage" (1929:1). The Daily News informed readers that the "Lights in Gen. Hospital Extinguished by Shock," and stated that "No serious damage was done" (1929: 1). On the 19<sup>th</sup> of November the Evening Telegram reported "Tidal Wave causes Considerable Damage at Long Harbour" ("Yesterday's Earthquake Tremors" 1929: 6). News of the plight of the communities on the Burin Peninsula did not reach St. John's until several days after the event. On November 21<sup>st</sup>, 1929 the Evening Telegram reported that "the report received by wireless... of the disaster... comes so unexpectedly and is of so wide-sweeping a character as to seem almost incredible" ("The South Coast Disaster" 1929: 2).



Newspaper reports about the earthquake, published before news of the Tidal Wave reached those outside the affected area, focus on scientific reports and conjecture about the epicenter of the earthquake. The Daily News reported that “Dalhousie scientists are inclined to agree with the indications of the Harvard and Yale seismographs that the earthquake was centered underwater somewhere off the North Atlantic” (“Lights in Gen. Hospital” 1929: 1). These reports also include a number of speculations about what caused the earth tremor: “Boilers were generally blamed” (“Lights in Gen. Hospital” 1929: 1), and “a rumor was current that disaster had overtaken Bell Island mines” (“Yesterday’s Earthquake” 1929: 6). The tone and focus of the media coverage shifted drastically once reports from the Burin Peninsula began to arrive in St. John’s.

The Daily News reflected on this change and noted that it extended beyond the media coverage of the event:

Recovered from the somewhat unique and rather alarming earth shock of Monday the matter had become, with most people, one to joke about, since the occurrence seemed to have passed off without any untoward incident; when suddenly the country was plunged from light levity into a realization that gaunt tragedy of unusual proportions had been enacted close at home. The very genuine expression of sympathy on every lip yesterday, when shortly after noon the first reports of the disastrous effects of the tidal wave on the Burin Peninsula came in, gave a very practical evidence of the way in which that tragedy and distress had touched every heart. (“When Our Heads Are Bowed” 1929: 2)

Newspaper headlines and the record of donations support the claim that the Tidal Wave had an effect on the lives of people beyond the destitute communities. The Western Star wrote of the “Appalling Disaster on the South Coast” (1929: 1), the Evening Telegram claimed that the Tidal Wave as “A Disaster That Only a Community Effort Can Meet” (1929: 2), and the Daily News reported that “Known Dead Total Twenty-Seven” (1929:

1). Now that news of the devastation visited upon the South Coast was available to the press eyewitness accounts were sought and published, rather than the dry facts of scientific inquiry into the cause and magnitude of the quake that preceded the tsunami.

The Western Star published first-hand information from Mr. Bartlett, a shop owner, who is quoted as having said, “The scene could not be described”<sup>17</sup> (“Thrilling Tale” 1929: 2). The Evening Telegram printed “Father Miller’s Graphic Account” on November 23<sup>rd</sup> (“Deeds of Heroism” 1929: 6) and a tribute to the work of Nurse Cherry as written by Rev. Father Sullivan on November 29<sup>th</sup> (“Rev. Father Sullivan Relates” 1929: 6). The newspapers used the eyewitness stories not only because they created sensational headlines, such as “Brave Girl Operator Tries to Warn Burin” (“Deeds of Heroism” 1929: 6), and sold newspapers but because newspaper coverage of the event was imperative to the effort to raise funds for the relief of those who suffered losses as a result of the tragedy (“Activities Both Here” 1929; “Corner Brook Organizes” 1929).

An article entitled “A National Matter” published in the Evening Telegram succinctly suggests that the rehabilitation of the destitute areas of the Burin Peninsula is in the hands of the people of Newfoundland. The article states:

It cannot be too strongly stressed that the calamity is a national one.... What is required is a real earnest and self-sacrificing effort by the community to put one section of it on its feet again. It is the rallying of reinforcements to a part of the line which has been weakened, the strengthening of which is of vital necessity to the whole. (“National Matter” 1929: 6)

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<sup>17</sup> Further discussion of untellability can be found in Chapter 4 of this thesis.

The very language of the article suggests how those who have been stricken by the disaster are not anonymous to the rest of the population of the island and that it is the duty of all Newfoundlanders to band together in order to help their suffering brethren. It closely echoes language used during the First World War to strengthen the Allied Forces against the Germans. Only ten years after the end of WWI and before the advent of WWII, this language was still highly effective and appealed to people's sense of patriotism and belief in the need for unity in the face of adversity. The papers were very careful to differentiate between the Tidal Wave victims and those who typically rely on charity to survive. The Daily News describes the afflicted as follows:

a few weeks ago these hardy and independent people had no thought of appealing to the Government for help. They are not the type who use the flimsiest excuse to live at the expense of the country.... If money can be found for the unemployed, many of whom make no effort to find work, it can be found for those who are willing to work but, because of unavoidable misfortune, have been deprived of the means by which they earn their livelihood." ("Need is Great" 1929: 1)

Tallies of donations made from communities across Newfoundland were printed next to lists of donations from abroad as well as articles about especially generous gifts in order to create the sensation of a contest and thereby stimulate further donations.

#### 2.3.4 *Songs*

I have located three songs that deal with the 1929 Tidal Wave. The first was written by Johnny Burke, St. John's song-maker and broadside publisher, and published very soon after the disaster, in December of 1929.<sup>18</sup> MacEdward Leach collected a

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<sup>18</sup> For more information on Johnny Burke see Mercer 1974.

second song from Gerald Aylward of Cape Broyle in 1950. The third song was written and recorded much more recently by Rosalee Peppard; the lyrics of the song are based on the narratives of Maisie (Walsh) Knox, a Tidal Wave survivor (“Rosalee Peppard” 2002). I was able to locate one recording of Johnny Burke’s broadside in the Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive. Mary Anne Counsel sang the piece a cappella for Eric West in the summer of 1978. Although Counsel recalled most of the lyrics of Burke’s song some differences are present and she occasionally experienced some difficulty in remembering the words. Below are the lyrics as published by Burke and those sung by Mary Anne Counsel:

Johnny Burke’s lyrics to “Terrible Disaster on the South West Coast”

Attention now good people,  
And hark to what I say,  
About this sad disaster  
That we record to-day;  
That happened on the Western Coast  
Around that rugged shore,  
Where families were swept away  
To see their friends no more.

Last Monday week just after four  
They heard a rumbling noise,  
But used to storms on that wild coast  
It gave them no surprise;  
When suddenly an earthquake shock  
And then a tidal wave,  
When six and twenty precious souls  
Soon met a watery grave.

The tidal wave with fearful force,  
Full fifteen feet or more,  
The Fishermen’s snug little homes  
Was swept from off the shore  
Poor helpless women on that day

Mary Anne Counsel’s lyrics as sung for Eric West

Attention all good people,  
All come listen unto me,  
About the sad disaster  
That we record today;  
That happened on the Western Coast  
Around that rugged shore,  
Where families were swept away  
To see their friends no more.

Last Monday week just after four  
They heard a rumbling noise,  
But used to storms on that wild coast  
It gave them no surprise  
When suddenly an earthquake shook  
And then a tidal wave,  
When six and twenty precious souls  
Soon met a watery grave

The tidal wave with fearful force  
Went fifteen feet or more,  
The fishermen’s snug little homes  
Were swept from off that shore  
Their boats and nets and stages

All paralyzed with fear,  
To save their homes and families,  
And children they love dear.

In parts of Burin on that coast  
And also Lamaline,  
The place is strewn with wreckage  
And scarce a house is seen.  
Their boats and nets and stages  
And all their fishing gear,  
Was carried away by this tidal wave  
And soon did disappear.

And when the sad news reached the town,  
And soon flashed o'er the wire,  
They quickly sent the "Meigle"  
With food they did require.  
No blankets, quilts or bedding  
Could these poor creatures save,  
Their homes and all their savings  
Swept by this tidal wave.

Then Arlie Marks and Company  
Though strangers in our land,  
The first to hold a concert  
And gave a helping hand;  
To these poor souls in sore distress,  
A find donation gave,  
Who suffered most severely  
By that fearful tidal wave.

Donations soon came pouring in  
From every one in town,  
The poor man with his dollar  
Did freely put it down;  
The merchants grand donations gave  
To head the list did start,  
Outsiders, friends and strangers  
Gave with a generous heart.

Success in this world's goods they'll have,  
And God's blessing fall for sure,  
On those who give out freely  
To assist the hungry poor.

And all their fishing gear  
Was carried away by the tidal wave  
And soon did disappear.

Parts of Burin on that coast  
And also Lamaline  
The places strewn with wreckedness  
And scarce a house is seen.  
Poor helpless women on that day  
They were paralyzed with fear  
To see their homes and families  
And children they loved dear.

Then Errol Marks and Company  
Though strangers in our land  
Was the first to hold a concert  
And give a helping hand  
To those poor soul in so distress  
A grand donation gave  
Who suffered most severely by  
That fateful tidal wave.

Success in this world is good to have  
And great fortunes fall for sure  
On those who give out freely  
To help the hungry poor  
For Newfoundland was always known  
And always did its share  
And she never let a Christian die  
When she had a crust to spare.  
(West 1978, C78-236 transcribed by  
LAMM)

For Newfoundland was always known  
And always did its share,  
And never let a Christian die  
When she had a crust to share.  
(Burke 1929: 1)

When she finished singing, Counsel stated that there was another verse to the song which she was unable to remember. Several of the lyrical differences between the two versions of the song lead me to believe that Counsel probably learned to sing the song aurally rather than from a printed copy. A few examples that suggest she learned the song orally include the pronunciation of “Arlie Marks” as “Errol Marks” as well as her use of the word “wreckedness” instead of “wreckage.” Counsel did not simply sing the song for West, she prefaced her performance with information about her own experience of the event. After her song, Counsel recounted a story of a woman and three children who were drowned in their house in a neighbouring community. For further discussion of Tidal Wave narrative themes see Chapter Four of this thesis.

The Burke broadside, like Counsel’s rendition, touches on a number of the themes that recur in the spoken narratives of the Tidal Wave. Burke’s lyrics note that the residents of the Burin Peninsula were accustomed to harsh, unpredictable weather: “They heard a rumbling noise, / But used to storms on that wild coast / It gave them no surprise” (1929: 1). The song also makes mention of the Newfoundlander’s sense of charity: “And when the sad news reached the town... / They quickly sent the “Meigle” / With food they did require”, “Donations soon came pouring in / From every one in town” and “For Newfoundland was always known / And always did its share, / And never let a Christian Die / When she had a crust to spare” (Burke 1929: 1). It is implied that the qualities of

hardiness and charity as highlighted in the song extend to Newfoundlanders as a group, suggesting a national character that one could be proud of.

Before the broadside appeared in Burke's Popular Songs, it was distributed individually as a lone broadside. An indication of when the single broadside was distributed can be found at the start of the second verse: "Last Monday week" (Burke 1929: 1) suggesting a maximum time span of two weeks after the Tidal Wave. This information also gives a good indication of how quickly people responded to the request for help since donations were being received from near and far and a benefit concert had already been organized and held in such a short period of time.

The second song, entitled "Tidal Wave at Burin," was collected by MacEdward Leach in Cape Broyle in 1950. Although it is a ballad it does not appear in Paul Mercer's Newfoundland Songs and Ballads in Print 1842–1974 because it was never published and only circulated in oral tradition. The song is distinct from Burke's broadside. The lyrics and a sound clip are now available on the Internet ("Tidal Wave at Burin" 2004). Gerald Aylward performed the song a cappella for MacEdward Leach. The song begins by stating that the event took place on the 18<sup>th</sup> of November and that the weather was extremely pleasant. The third verse states that the disaster began between four and five o'clock in the evening with a "rumbling noise like thunder" ("Tidal Wave at Burin" 2004). The fourth verse makes note of the "awful roar and noise" ("Tidal Wave at Burin" 2004) which accompanied the inundation of water. The eighth verse makes reference to those who were "smothered in the waters / And sixteen precious loved ones have met a watery grave" ("Tidal Wave at Burin" 2004). Noting the total dead as sixteen does not

shed any light on the identity of the composer as no one community suffered such a great loss of life. The losses of at least three communities would have to be combined to reach a total of sixteen people. The song offers closure for the dead as well as the living. For those who died the song offers the words “God rest them one and all... no doubt they’ll be rewarded / When they go before their maker on the judgement hall of God” (“Tidal Wave at Burin” 2004). The living are cited as also suffering: “They all got their losses and some a darn sight more” (“Tidal Wave at Burin” 2004). The final verse reveals that the composer was a victim of the Tidal Wave and that he felt the compensation for his losses was inadequate:

So now a verse of closure from myself that great composer  
I did not get my issue and a half a thousand due  
My land without an acre that got torn up by the quaker  
I leave that to my maker and I think now that will do (“Tidal Wave at Burin” 2004)

Aylward, who sang for Leach, was born in 1917 and would have been in his early teens at the time of the disaster. Although he is not from the Burin Peninsula, he may have been related to Patrick Aylward of St. Lawrence who only received \$500 on his claim of \$1000 for the oil factory he lost to the Tidal Wave (Cranford 2000b: 188). If Patrick Aylward of St. Lawrence were the composer of “Tidal Wave at Burin” the above mentioned claim would explain the line “I did not get my issue and a half a thousand due” (2004).

The third song that I have located pertaining to the 1929 Tidal Wave was not composed by a contemporary of the disaster, but rather by a woman who was fascinated by her mother-in-law’s stories of the event. Since the song is a second-hand narrative and



a form of family folklore, my discussion of the piece can be found in Chapter Three of this thesis. The creation of two contemporary Tidal Wave songs, as well as the recordings of the two songs being performed by people other than the composers, is an indication of the impact the event had on the entire population of Newfoundland. News of the event and concern for those affected by it spread across the island and involvement in the relief efforts allowed the rest of the population to show the Burin Peninsula that the Tidal Wave was a national concern. The performance of ballads pertaining to the disaster twenty and nearly fifty years afterwards is a clear testament to the importance of the event on a scale greater than those who were affected at first hand.

#### *2.3.5 Commemoration by the Press*

While the daily and weekly newspapers had the advantage of covering the developments relating to the Tidal Wave and the relief efforts as they were taking place, a number of publications, such as monthlies, quarterlies and compilation books, have since competed with newspapers in printing commemorative material of the event. The Newfoundland Quarterly first published about the Tidal Wave in December of 1929 with a follow-up piece in the April 1930 issue (“Severed Cables”). Over the intervening years, print and broadcast media have regularly featured articles on the event, generally as an anniversary marker, and have included eyewitness testimony.

In January of 1975 Gerald Jones published an overview of the earthquake and tsunami, tracing the relief mission of the S.S. Meigle and the efforts of the South Coast Disaster Committee. The concluding lines of his piece read: “The completely unexpected

earthquake of 1929 has gone down in Newfoundland History as the South Coast Disaster of 1929 and has left its mark on Newfoundland and its people. The wound has healed, but not without leaving a scar” (Jones 1975: 40).

Janet Looker’s piece “The Tsunami” published in 2000 makes use of eyewitness accounts of the Tidal Wave, as well as bizarre and miraculous repeated stories of the event. In 1929 Newfoundland was still twenty years away from joining the Canadian Confederation, despite this fact Looker’s piece is published in a work entitled Disaster Canada. This appropriation of Newfoundland history as Canadian history would probably not even be noticed by most Canadians but it would certainly raise a few eyebrows amongst Newfoundlanders, who seem to be a bit more conscious of their nation’s (Newfoundland’s) history than the average Canadian is of the process by which Canada added to its confederacy.

Shawna Richer’s 2005 article, which has already been discussed, combines narratives of Tidal Wave survivors, collected in 2005, with newspaper coverage written at the time of the event, as well as statements from someone who has written about the tidal wave based on the narratives of survivors. This unique blending of narratives, contemporary newspaper coverage, survivor narratives told three-quarters of a century after the event, and the thoughts of someone who remolds and repeats the narratives of survivors, provides an excellent jumping-off point for a discussion of how Tidal Wave narratives are used by the press. Richer’s 2005 piece on the 1929 Tidal Wave, sparked by the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, quotes at length from a piece published by the Daily News in 1929. Richer uses the quote to demonstrate the way “Newfoundlanders were

troubled by the way in which the sea was able... to extend its wrath on shore” (2005: F7).

The section Richer quotes reads as follows:

The catastrophes of seafaring life we understand. As a seafaring people we have matched our lives and wits against old ocean. In the pursuit of their calling as sailors and fishermen, our men dare the ocean’s moods; but that in well-found craft where the odds are evenly matched. But in this case women and children and aged people, housed in dwellings that had sheltered generations, and proof against winter’s blasts and ocean’s spray, were suddenly engulfed and defenseless lives obliterated. (“When our Heads” 1929: 2)

This return to a piece written at the time of the Tidal Wave does more than reflect the newfound wariness of the sea that stretched beyond the section of coastline devastated by the Tidal Wave. The piece makes specific reference to the social and economic makeup of the affected communities. Families consisted of several generations living in the same home or in homes near to each other within the same community or neighbouring communities. The majority of the homes swept by the disaster were homes that had seen the birth and death of several generations and withstood the extreme weather conditions of life on the edge of the North Atlantic.

The fishery drove the economy. Family members who were not out fishing were responsible for looking after gardens, livestock and the household. Premature death was not unheard of in the communities of the Burin Peninsula, their remote location made it difficult to obtain medical attention. As Richer suggests, Newfoundlanders felt they had enough knowledge of the sea and sturdy enough equipment to go out on the water. They also felt that their homes, stages, flakes and stores were built well enough to withstand gale force winds and the fiercest of winter storms. Their lives were lived in balance with the ocean and based on a respect for the power of all of the natural elements that tested

their ability to survive. A sense of pride in accomplishment exudes from the description of how Newfoundlanders had adapted to the challenging conditions of the environment around them. The 1929 Tidal Wave shifted the delicate balance that the South Coast communities had achieved, devastating many and forcing all to reevaluate their relationship with the environment around them.

## **2.4 Summary**

Primary documentation of the Tidal Wave includes the records of the South Coast Disaster Committee as well as contemporary newspaper coverage and photography. In more recent years the written record has begun to include the narratives of Tidal Wave survivors. The media's commemorative efforts have recorded narratives of the event and stimulated discussion of the experience amongst survivors and their descendants. Joseph Leheunen of Île aux Marins claimed to have written down his Tidal Wave experience only days after the disaster and his oral account of the event recorded years later very closely mirrored his journal entry. The similarity of the written and spoken accounts of the Tidal Wave suggest that a crystallization occurs when an experience is recorded. Authority is granted to the recorded version of the narrative and looked to in order to correct any following versions of the story.

The recent reissuing of one of S.H. Parsons and Sons's postcard of a schooner towing a house that was swept out to sea by the Tidal Wave has both acknowledged the images power and aided the image in achieving status as an icon of the event. Unlike the other images of the Tidal Wave, Figure 2.04 presents an image of hope and suggests that

what has been lost may be regained. The widespread sale of the Parsons postcard three-quarters of a century after the Tidal Wave indicates that the event continues to be meaningful to a wide audience and that it has been acknowledged as a unique piece of the history of Newfoundland.

With such a high level of press coverage and media attention, the residents of the affected areas cannot help but realize that this unusual piece of their history is valuable to numerous groups for many different reasons. The scientific value of the event is tied to the potential for developing an early detection and warning system and is the impetus for governmental interest, but this event appeals to a wider audience on a much more fundamental level. It captures our imaginations and epitomizes the theme of man versus nature.

### Chapter 3: Identities

The myriad of social relations that one person experiences in a lifetime ensures that all people have multiple identities, which are determined by a given social setting. A woman can be both her parent's daughter and the mother of her own children. Her social relationship with both her parents and her children will affect how she interacts with these two groups of people, and how she is perceived by each. Similarly, a person's personal experiences, as well as their ties to specific cultural groups will affect how that person conceives of him or herself and how he or she attempts to articulate that self to others.

In his 1994 article "The Arts, Artifacts, and Artifices of Identity," Elliot Oring argued that "the question of identity has long been at the heart of the folkloristic project" (213). He further stated that "*the very definition of the term folklore has been little more than an effort to privilege an array of cultural materials in relation to a concept of identity*" (Oring 1994: 213, italics in original). This chapter discusses how oral narratives of the 1929 Tidal Wave are used for the articulation of personal and group identities. The event has become a symbol for the region and is used by the tourism industry as a way to communicate not only the history of the area, but also the character of the people that live in the area. Alan Dundes contended that folklore "is clearly one of the most important, perhaps, *the* most important, sources for the articulation and perpetuation of a group's symbols" (1983: 240). Gerald Pocius has summarized how folklore is used to articulate identity: "Identity systems are constructed from the repertoire of the culture under

question, taking aspects of that culture and imbuing them with certain symbolic values in which they come to stand for the essence of the entire culture” (1996). Stories of the Tidal Wave reflect on the relationship of area residents with their surrounding environment as well as the close-knit social structures of the communities, their unity in the face of adversity and generosity to those in need.

Anthony P. Cohen has defined identity as “the way(s) in which a person is, or wishes to be known by certain others” (1993: 195). Tidal Wave narratives have been used to try to convey personal identity as well as group identity. Mark Workman has noted that a number of scholars, including Titon and Bauman, have observed privileged moments that are “points of experience from which present and future identity derives” (1992: 100). Tidal Wave narratives can be considered to be stories of a significant or critical occurrence that has had an impact on the lives of those who experienced it, as well as those who have interacted with Tidal Wave survivors on an intimate level.

### **3.1 Embedded Messages**

#### *3.1.1 The Functions of Tidal Wave Narratives*

As Sandra Dolby Stahl argues, “the values or attitudes reflected in [personal narratives] are culturally shared and thus traditional” (1989:13). Just as cultural attitudes and values change over time, so too do the values and attitudes reflected in the narratives of the Tidal Wave. These changes occur not just between generations of storytellers but can also be present in the way one person tells his or her story over a period of time. Stahl has stated that “the narrator tests personal values — practical, moral, social, aesthetic —

with every story repetition” (1983: 274). Although the same speaker does not repeat the narratives examined here at different stages in life, we can infer from Stahl’s research that each of these narratives reflects the speaker’s personal values at the time of the telling.

Of the six people that I interviewed, four were women and two were men. One of my participants was the child of survivors but had not actually experienced the event herself. Of the fifteen archived accounts that I located in the Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive six of the narrators were male and nine were female. Two of the female narrators were sisters and were the children of survivors but were not yet born at the time of the Tidal Wave.

Narratives of the Tidal Wave can be used to serve all four of Bascom’s functions of folklore: amusement, validation of culture, education and the maintenance of conformity (1965: 291–294). Stahl stresses that “the overall function of the personal narrative is to allow for the discovery of the teller’s identity” rather than that of “an entire culture” (1989: 21). Interestingly, Elliot Oring has noted that personal and collective identity are interrelated:

*collective identity* has meaning only as it refers to an *intersection* of personal identities and has no existence apart from the psyches of particular individuals. Nevertheless it may be conceptually distinguished for the purposes of analysis and discussion, and it may be important to do so, as so much of personal identity is predicated upon the introjection of the common and collective. (Oring 1994: 212, italics in original)

While I agree that narratives of the 1929 Tidal Wave reflect directly on how each narrator attempts to portray him or herself to the audience, I believe that these narratives also



reflect more widely on the culture of the immediate community, and that these narratives have been appropriated for the propagation of cultural identity on a larger scale.

Folklorists have long contended that the many-layered nuances of a text cannot be fully explored without looking to the context of the performance. Martin Lovelace has argued that the field of folklore should include “a holistic approach to the routines and styles of communication in particular communities” thereby shifting the focus from “the story to storytelling and the communicative competence which is a part of membership in a society” (1978: 212). Richard Dorson suggests that:

Oral traditional history... seeks out the topics and themes that the folk wish to talk about, the personal and immediate history with which they are concerned. We have no way of knowing in advance what are the contours of this history, except that they will bear no resemblance to federal government-structured elitist history. (Dorson 1972: 45).

While it is certainly likely that governmental and folk motives will differ where the historical record is concerned, it is possible that vernacular accounts of an event, such as the Tidal Wave, will incorporate at least portions of the elitist version of the story. Linda Dégh claims that “modern folk stories are influenced by the most important features of modern life, mobility and mass communications” (1972: 80). The media used vernacular accounts of the Tidal Wave, collected in its immediate aftermath, to disseminate information about the tragedy to an international audience. In turn, narratives collected since the publication of information about the event have been informed and influenced by media and popular history accounts. Several of my participants asked me if I had read Cranford’s and Hanrahan’s books on the Tidal Wave in order to gauge my knowledge of the event and the scholarship in existence, as well as to question me about my opinion of

the preexisting works. Such questions were used not only to gauge my understanding of the event and possible biases, but also to determine my level of familiarity with terms specifically relating to the fishery and life in outport Newfoundland in the early twentieth century. My answers to such questions may have directly affected how candid participants were about their own opinions of the existing research. I believe that by demonstrating that I had a working knowledge of the terminology required to describe the communities before and after the Tidal Wave I was able to gain the confidence of my participants and made it possible to forgo lengthy explanations of common terms such as stage, flake, dory and landwash.

An interesting example of the influence of mass communication on Tidal Wave narrative is the use of the term “roaration.” The word is cited in the Dictionary of Newfoundland English as a noun with the following description, “roaration: a deep prolonged noise” (Story et al. 1999). The term was noted by G.M. Story who heard it used in two Tidal Wave narratives that were aired on the provincial CBC television news program Here and Now (Kirwin 2006), which I have also viewed (“Tidal Wave” 1974). Two interviewees, a mother and son, who are shown on camera individually but who were in the same house as the mother interjects comments during the son’s interview, used the word. Several years later, in the 1980s, Mike Tucker interviewed John William Bonnell who also used the term in his narrative of the Tidal Wave of 1929. The term is used for the same purpose as it was used in the CBC program, to describe the sound of the approaching Tidal Wave: “at seven o’clock we hear the terrible roaring noise. Sounded way off, (?) a gale like a roaration” (Tucker 1982, C10348-9, transcribed by

LAMM). The term is not used by any of the other four interviewees on the CBC program, some of whom simply refer to the sound as a roar. Bonnell's is the only archived narrative to use the term and none of my participants used the term. Given the very limited use of the term it seems likely that Bonnell saw the CBC program and felt that "roaration" was an especially apt word to use to describe the sound of the Tidal Wave.

### *3.1.2 Community Use of Tidal Wave Narratives*

Heritage Newfoundland and Labrador is a provincial initiative to disseminate "information and analysis on the history, geography, population, culture, and society of Newfoundland and Labrador" ("Introduction" 1997). Every year grade school children are assigned cultural studies projects, commonly known as Heritage Projects. These projects are then displayed at the Newfoundland and Labrador Histor!ca<sup>19</sup> Fairs, which give children in Grades Four through Nine the opportunity to "celebrate Canadian history and culture through projects presented to the public, across Canada."<sup>20</sup>

School children in the area affected by the Tidal Wave regularly choose the event as the topic of their project. While Tidal Wave projects appear yearly on the Burin Peninsula, they are not unknown in other regions of the province; two were included in each showcase of 2001 and 2003 at the Western Newfoundland and Labrador Regional Fairs (Keeping 2006). The Burin Heritage House Museum, the Lamaline Community Museum and the Lawn Heritage Museum all house several of these projects, alongside

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<sup>19</sup> The program officially uses an exclamation point rather than the letter "i" in their name.

<sup>20</sup> For more information see <<http://www.heritage.k12.nf.ca/background.html#programme>>.

photographs and newspaper clippings, as part of their displays on the Tidal Wave. The narratives are used to educate students about their community and family history. Those narratives that make their way into the museums are then used to educate the wider public, including tourists visiting the area.

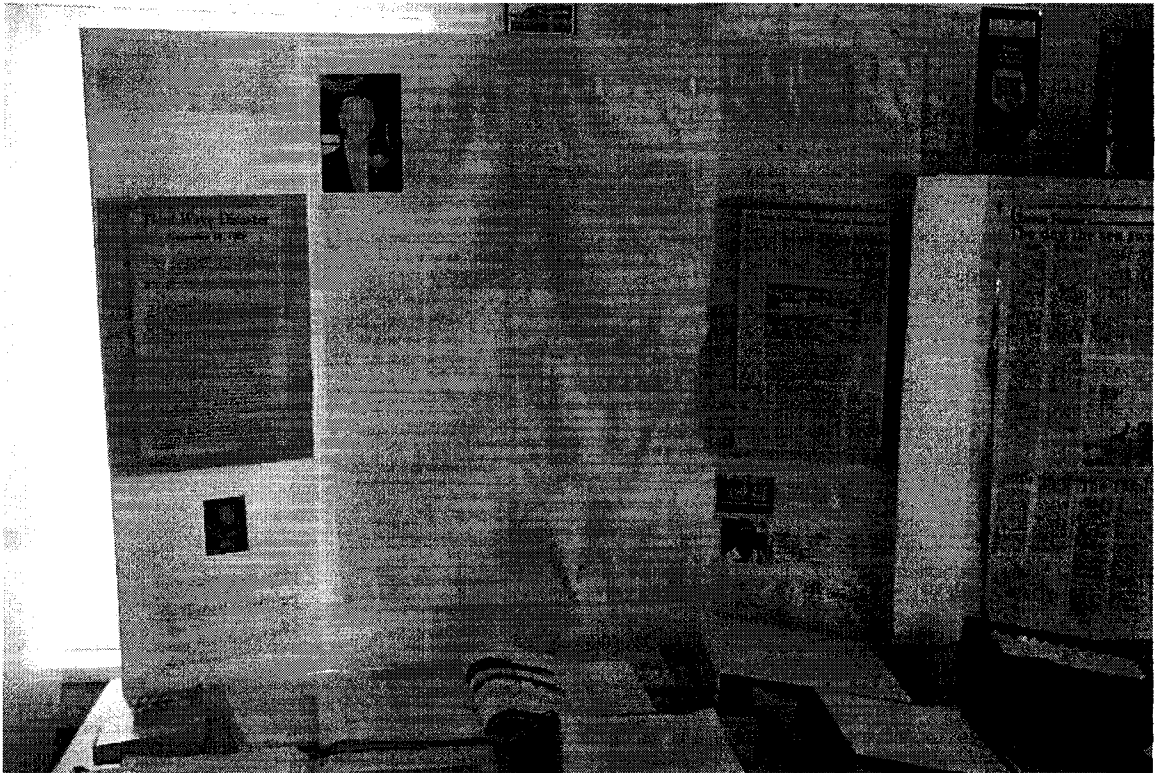


Figure 3.1, Heritage Fair Project, Lamaline Heritage Museum

One such project on display in the Lamaline Community Museum focuses on the oral narrative of the Michael Bradbury's great-grandfather, Martin Joseph Rennie, who survived the Tidal Wave. The importance of personal experience narrative is highlighted by the layout of the student's display. The centre panel takes up fully one half of the available space and is dedicated entirely to Rennie's account of the event. The side panels supplement Rennie's narrative with images of the gravesite of his mother and siblings

who did not survive the event, as well as newspaper clippings and some information on Rennie's sister Margaret who also survived the Tidal Wave.

First-hand accounts of the Tidal Wave continue to be shared with a wider audience than the family or community of survivors. Soon after the December 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the media began to report on Newfoundland's tsunami. Deanne Fleet's 30 December 2004 National article was posted on the CBC website (Fleet 2004) the following day with the title "South Coast disaster: Newfoundland's tsunami" under the heading "Indepth: Disaster in Asia." Fleet's written piece features the narratives of three Tidal Wave survivors and ends with a message to make donations to the Indian Ocean tsunami victims. One week after I interviewed Gus Etchegary about his recollections of the disaster, CBC Radio aired a new program on 6 March 2006 called "ByCatch." For the program, Ramona Dearing interviewed Etchegary about "what makes him tick" (Dearing 2006). In response to the question: "tell me one thing that they don't know about you that they might find surprising" (Dearing 2006), Etchegary tells Dearing of his memories of the Tidal Wave and of the Truxton and Pollux disaster.

### *3.1.3 Alteration of the Physical Landscape Below the Water*

In his book on the fluorspar mine of St. Lawrence, Elliot Leyton makes reference to the lasting effects of the Tidal Wave on the community: "for four years the cod virtually disappeared" (2004: 19). Narratives of the Tidal Wave reflect on how the communities have been shaped by the disaster physically and economically. Numerous reports mention drastic changes to the fishery, the prosperity of the communities and the

departure of families who felt their only chance for survival was to seek a living in a new location. The devastation of the Tidal Wave followed very quickly on the heels of the crash of the North American Stock Market and compounded the hardships of those who were already facing falling fish prices. John William Bonnell of Lamaline reported the following in an interview with Michael Tucker in the early 1980s:

We've never had good fishing there since. The next year, they tell me, you go back for years all the all the [*sic*] ground, what they call the bottom of the whole Atlantic, the curves were changed and it was all swept, all swept clean in the bottom, the bottom, even the kelp and everything, the environment there. It was all changed somewhere. And the water itself was a different water from what we're used to in Lamaline. Consequently the next year we didn't get fish and the water was, was filled with a corrosion of some kind. We called it a slime. It was filled with a slime; you put out your nets you'd have to take them up the next day. They'd be full of slime. And there, within the week, you know. This is the kind of a thing that happened (?) the eruption of the Tidal Wave may have had something to do with it, you know. But all the kelps and everything that was changed, was gone. Take years and years. I don't know, I don't know if it will ever be the same. (Tucker 1980, C10348-9, transcribed by LAMM)

Gus (Augustus) Etchegary agreed with Bonnell's assessment of the decline of the fishery in the wake of the Tidal Wave when I interviewed him in January 2006:

...the fact is that there was a shift in the ocean bottom... And for example, many of those fishermen were very successful fisherman and in the following year, for example, there was an abrupt change, for several reasons. The migratory pattern for the cod migrating to shore, for example, had been interrupted by the change in the ocean floor. To whatever extent I don't know, but certainly it had an impact. For some years thereafter there was a very serious decline in local catches made by fisherman in that general area. But particularly in the St. Lawrence, Lawn, Lamaline area, to such an extent that even though, you know as you, as this fellow... [Garry Cranford] indicated in his [book]... that there was some payment to those who were victims of this thing, it never did, you know, compensate them to any great extent and so on. So a lot of those people, a lot of them men who, you know, were providing a living for their families, it brought about an enormous change in the economic life of those people. And they wound

up, a lot of them, leaving, having to leave and take jobs in New York and Boston, fishing out of Lunenburg or out of Nova Scotia or out of other places in Newfoundland. (Etchegary 2006)

Walter Foote of Lamaline, interviewed by Kena Lake, also recalled the effect on the fishery during an interview in 1976:

And whatever it did to Lamaline, it took the bottom, all the fish suckers that the fish eat on the bottom, kelp and everything that was out on the bottom where there was a great place for fish. It took that all right off and it brought it all in. It was all hove up on the seashore and we were years and years and years before the fish came back, and I know that was the trouble because there was no food. All these little shellfish that the fish used to feed on used to come here and it wasn't there anymore. So the fish didn't come, and we had some pretty lean years afterwards. I remembers about it. It was useless to put out a trap; it was useless to put out trawls or anything for fish. It just didn't come. And I think that was the trouble. The Tidal Wave took everything. It swept everything with it. (Lake 1976, C2947, transcribed by LAMM)

The decline in the local fishing stocks would have made it even more difficult for those trying to rebuild their homes and lives in the wake of the Tidal Wave.

Although the economy of the area was based on the fishery, comments made about the decline in the fishing stock almost exclusively appear in the narratives of male speakers. While women participated in the fishery, their tasks were more likely to include curing and turning the fish while the men were responsible for catching the fish. Hilda Chaulk Murray describes the fishery in her Trinity Bay community, of Maberly, near Elliston:

No woman in Elliston went catching cod, but this was the only part of the operation in which she was not involved. On shore she might do any job, for in the preparation of fish for market, or home use, 'men's work' and 'women's work' might be interchangeable. The work a woman did depended on the size of the fishing crew and the men's attitude. With a large crew, the many tasks could be spread around, and she might have one specialized job; but with a small crew, she might be required to do

more of the jobs, even those generally thought of as being ‘men’s work’ because they required considerable strength or a particular skill.” (1979: 13)

The women of communities affected by the Tidal Wave were certainly as aware of the decline in the cod stock as their husbands, yet their narratives focus primarily on how the Tidal Wave affected the physical landscape of the shore rather than reflecting on the changes to the ocean floor that led to poor fishing conditions.

#### *3.1.4 Alteration of the Physical Landscape Above the Water*

Interestingly, the narratives of females reflect terrestrial rather than maritime changes to the physical landscape in the wake of the Tidal Wave; Jessie Brushett, when interviewed by Julie Irene Brushett, described the eventual exodus of people from her community:

For a few years everybody settled back down again and got back their belongings and that, but no one never felt the same about it. It didn’t look the same because everything had to be built up, and looked trag[ic]... so one and the other started to leave, and... took off of the island, but we... left before that happened. (Brushett 1980, C8826, transcribed by LAMM)

An unnamed man interviewed for a 1974 CBC television program called “Tidal Wave” reflected on the newfound wariness of the sea:

We [were] three or four winters... hauling houses... that’s all we [did] afterwards because everybody, all the fishermen lived right near the water. A fisherman in Lamaline and Point Au Gaul, Taylor’s Bay and Lawrence Cove and all around Lawn, and Lawn too, I guess, you know, he couldn’t get close enough to the water. He wanted to step out through the doorstep into salt water because they were all fishermen. But I can tell you what: they beg[a]n hauling houses on to high land after that... probably expecting another one... I never wants to see another one, no. No, I never wants to see another one, no. (“Tidal Wave” 1974 transcribed by LAMM)



Jessie Brushett's narrative reflects on how bleak the landscape of her community was after the Tidal Wave as well as noting the eventual extinction of what had once been a thriving outport community. The unidentified male narrator also mentions the relocation of homes and families but his language is quite different and reflects the labour involved in this shift from being as close to the shore as possible to having one's home out of the reach of another tsunami. The male narrative explains the reason for originally building so close to shore in terms of the most common male occupation, the fishery, while Jessie focuses her description on the reason for the relocation of homes.

### *3.1.5 Gender Roles of Women and Men Within the Narratives*

Gender roles emerge as a common thread in Tidal Wave narratives. Societal expectations and roles are present in Tidal Wave narratives and follow patterns that are not unique to Newfoundland outport life. Holbek (1986) and Thomas (1997) have noted that fairy tales function as a medium through which a society can convey the accepted and expected gender roles. The gender roles that are repeated in the narratives are similar, if not identical, to those of other North American settlements. Beverly J. Stoeltje describes the roles of men and women of the frontier, as found in written narratives, in her article entitled "A Helpmate for Man Indeed" (1975). Stoeltje notes three recognized male roles: the cowboy, the settler, and the bad man, as well as three female roles: the refined lady, the helpmate, and the bad woman (Stoeltje 1975: 27). The roles that most closely match those found in the majority of the Tidal Wave narratives are the settler and the helpmate.

Interestingly, many of the males who fished, participated in the seal hunt, or went out logging fit the settler and the cowboy categories in an interesting mix of qualities that are viewed as nearly complete opposites in the framework of the frontier. The cowboy “is characterized by his horse, membership in an all-male group, alcohol (whiskey), loneliness, contact with the raw elements and animals, mobility, honor, sometimes a pistol, sometimes a fiddle” (Stoeltje 1975: 27). The settlers were men “who established permanency in a region and usually started families” (Stoeltje 1975: 31). Though he is a member of an all-male group, the ocean fisherman is very much unlike someone who raises farm animals. The fisherman does not tend a penned stock of fish. Thus the fisherman straddles Stoeltje’s categories of cowboy and settler. He would often have to be away from his family for extended periods of time, and would thus be exposed to loneliness and forced to face the raw elements, such as the ocean and all types of weather.

Outport women, as described in the Tidal Wave narratives, fit well into Stoeltje’s category of helpmate. The preceding earthquake was noted around the time of the evening meal and several narratives mention that the woman of the household was preparing supper while supervising young children (Etchegary 2006, Hillier 2006, Wiseman 2005). Others noted alternate domestic duties such as spinning (West 1978), and milking the cow (O’Driscoll 1975: 5, MUNFLA 75-198). Stoeltje’s helpmate is characterized by her

strength and initiative exhibited in coping with the hardships and the demands of the life [she] led. Her strength was physical and emotional. She was able to carry out routine, everyday chores of milking, cooking, sewing, gardening, caring for chickens, childbearing and childrearing, caring for the sick, and generally acting as partner with her husband. Such

women were equally adept at handling emergency situations. (Stoeltje 1975: 32)

Stoeltje maintains that this category of woman “found identity by association with the cattleman-settler” (1975: 41). The women of the Tidal Wave narratives exhibit a similar skill set to that of Stoeltje’s frontier women. Both groups of women were expected to run the household with additional tasks being dictated by the professions of their husbands. Like the women of Murray’s Maberly and Elliston, the wives of Burin Peninsula fishermen were expected to look after the children and any livestock, run the household and help to salt and dry fish (Murray 1979: 12). Women who married merchants or politicians were also expected to run the household (Etchegary 2006), but most likely did so with the help of domestic staff and would not have had any responsibilities related to processing fish.

Stella Gladys Ryan describes the division of labour in an outport community during the 1920s and 30s as follows:

My father had a motor boat. But, he usually went down on the French shore or to the Labrador in schooner with a crew of men, including my three half-brothers. For many summers they went to a little fishing village called Croake [Croque], down on the French Shore, until he died at the age of fifty-four.

The women usually stayed at home and worked in the garden. Everyone had their own garden and grew lots of potatoes and turnips and cabbages and carrots and beets and things like that. If the family had a son, by the time he was ten or eleven, he went fishing with his father. The girls stayed at home and helped their mother. The work wasn’t very easy in the outports of Newfoundland. We would grow our own vegetables, summertime, and salt some fish like cod and caplin. (Ryan 1992: 4)

Similar divisions can be noted in Tidal Wave narratives, for example Sara Slaney of St. Lawrence stated that she was milking her cow when the earthquake began and

immediately returned her house to check on her children (O'Driscoll 1975: 5, MUNFLA 75-198). She further notes that "as soon as someone came to keep an eye on the children I runs up to see if my poor old mother was in the house above... but she was alright" (O'Driscoll 1975: 12, MUNFLA 75-198). In these few sentences Sara Slaney has shown that she was responsible for the wellbeing of the family cow, the children and older relatives. Her account also reveals that her husband was a fisherman and that after ensuring the safety of his children his next concern was his livelihood: "All the people were trying to save their boats, poor old dad (her husband) was in his boat and was swept in and out a dozen times" (O'Driscoll 1975: 8, MUNFLA 75-198).

Mary Anne Counsel states that she was spinning wool at the time of the earthquake (West 1978), Nancy Hillier recalls that her mother was "getting supper" (Hillier 2006), Gus Etchegary's sisters were also preparing supper (Etchegary 2006), and Vivian Wiseman recalls sitting down to a favourite meal, prepared by her mother, when the earthquake began (Wiseman 2005). Males were equally subject to expected roles and accounts of their activities help to highlight just how set the gender divisions of labour were: Vivian Wiseman's father was out on his schooner and as a result was unaware of the earthquake (Wiseman 2005), Gus Etchegary's father was overseeing production at his cod liver oil factory (Etchegary 2006), Pius Power's two older brothers and his father were "to the United States" in order to find work (Short 1979), Nancy Hillier's father used his fishing dory to rescue her sister when the water began to rise (Hillier 2006), and William Pittman "ran out of the house to try and save [his] dory and nets" (Ayers 1973: 25, MUNFLA 74-12). While Viviane Wiseman's community of Belleoram did not

experience any damage or loss of life, Bonnell's experience in Lamaline was quite different. Each of the narrators continued by describing how their respective harbours were emptied of water and the terror of seeing the water come rushing back in.

For Wiseman, the event had little effect on her life. She described the most notable change as follows:

And I remember, after the earthquake because, when the water rushed out of the harbour you could see all the rocks and everything and all the kelp that used to grow along the shore was gone. There was none there. And the next summer, because we played in the, what we used to call the landwash, in the coves underneath the houses, and myself and a friend of mine, and a couple of more girls, we all had a different rock which we claimed as ours. Mine was that spot and Joan, my friend, hers was that spot. So the next summer when we went down to start playing on our rocks, water warmed up, they were gone. And they were fairly large rocks, you know, they were gone, washed out. But that was the force of it. (Wiseman 2005, transcribed by LAMM)

For Bonnell the power of the event was much more immediate:

So, the water flowed in, and flowed right in over the roads and in over the country and up around houses and, and where the houses were down on the lower level they were lifted and shifted somewhere. And some were carried out into the harbour and out over the crop of the beach. Well that was a, that was a terrible evening. Everybody was, there was quite a turmoil on. People were rushing here and there, didn't know what do. Some took off for the country, run back, they didn't want to get caught in the, in the tide. Some thought the land was sinking. Some thought it was the end of the world. Well, this must be it, the end of the world. (Tucker 1982, C10348-9, transcribed by LAMM)

The excerpts paint an interesting picture of how each of the narrators saw themselves in relation to the world around them. The cultural contexts of the two communities were quite similar in that both were small fishing outports in rural Newfoundland. What is striking is the difference between the sense of agency of a young female child and that of an adult male. Although Bonnell finds himself in a more

threatening situation he still describes himself as an active participant in the event. He begins his agency by looking for a plausible explanation for the tremor and noise that turns out to be an earthquake. Bonnell notes the strange water levels in the harbour and walks out to a point of land to gain a better vantage point. He races back to his house and tells his wife to dress their child and get to safety after seeing the incoming water. After ensuring the safety of his family, he and the other men in the community went back to the shore to assess the damage and in the aftermath Bonnell helped to recover bodies and property from the ocean.

Wiseman, on the other hand, being female and a child of only seven describes herself as a spectator rather than an active participant. Her mother sends her older male cousin outside to see if a goat is causing the shaking of the house, not Wiseman.

We were having the sausages when all this started. First the vibrations of the house and dishes rattling and like people upstairs jumping up and down in their socks, I would say, didn't sound like they had their shoes on, like people jumping. And I told you my cousin was there, he was a young boy about twelve or thirteen, and Mom said, "Go out under the house Steve, and see if there's a goat." So Steve went out and looked and came back and said, "No, no goat." He was only gone a few seconds. By this time we could hear a roar. It was almost like an airplane in the distance, a roar. And Mom said, "Oh my, there's a plane going to land." So we all ran outside and jumped up on a rock, big boulder, and you could feel it moving under your feet. And right away my mother said, "Oh, tis an earthquake." Soon as she could feel the movement. And that was about it. It only lasted a few minutes, that's it. (Wiseman 2006, transcribed by LAMM)

While John William looks around for a large truck or airplane and Wiseman's mother suspects a trapped goat or an airplane, Wiseman describes the noise as similar to people in stocking feet jumping on the floor above her. A sense of awe and fear pervades Bonnell's description of the empty harbour:

So the harbour started to drain out and by six o'clock, it was getting close to dark then, by six o'clock, the harbour was dry, practically. You could walk out. I saw rocks in the harbour that I never saw before as a boy. And where we used to moor our boats that section was dry, there was, you know, where you moor a boat there at normal tide. So the harbour drained out, started to drain out. And it drained out for over an hour, six o'clock, seven, six. And then at seven o'clock we hear the terrible roaring noise. Sounded like way off, (?) a gale like a roaration. And it was getting close to dark then. (Tucker 1982, C10348-9, transcribed by LAMM)

Distinctions of age and gender played a part in what roles the figures in each of the narratives was allowed to assume. As Greenhill and Tye argue in their introduction to Undisciplined Women: Tradition and Culture in Canada,

Women rely on traditional culture for a variety of purposes, such as to express group solidarity... to make individual statements... or even to produce somatic effects. Women's folklore is not just a passive reflection of sociocultural norms but can be an active agent for social change. (1997: 9)

Indeed, some of the Tidal Wave narratives I have worked with highlight contradictions in the patriarchal ordering of outport society. The abnormal conditions created by the Tidal Wave forced many people to step outside of their normal roles in order to survive. The event created extreme circumstances that made it impossible for some people to fulfill what they saw as their duty, such as parents who were at a local meeting when their children were swept out to sea in their home. Regardless of the unusual circumstances, people who were unable to fulfill their role as protector experienced guilt as a result of the event. The community viewed the Tidal Wave as an abnormal situation and did not accuse members of failing to properly care for each other, but personal expectations were less forgiving and do not seem to have been modified by the uncharacteristic circumstances created by the tsunami. Sheila Walsh's father struggled with his Tidal

Wave experience because he failed the expected societal role of the male who shelters and protects his wife and family. Basil Walsh's inability to rescue three of his female relatives, and his wife's ability to survive being swept out to sea without her husband's help, caused Basil to seriously question his ability to live up to his own and societal expectations of what it meant to be a man.

My interpretation of Walsh's Tidal Wave narratives includes more personal information about the narrator than my analysis of any of the other participant's stories because I was able to meet in person with Sheila on three separate occasions. Her early involvement in my project and her close proximity to my place of residence allowed me to communicate with her over a longer period of time. As a result, we discussed a number of topics beyond simply her family history and involvement with the Tidal Wave. My interpretation of Sheila's use of her family's history and its significance in her own life is the result of our interactions. What was said and not said during our conversations is purely circumstantial and may have been interpreted differently by another field researcher. As Dennis Tedlock has stated, ethnographic research is "rooted in events and abandons an objectivity borrowed from the natural sciences in favor of the intersubjectivity that is the special condition of the social sciences" (1983: 300).

An empowering example of a person rejecting societal role expectations can be found in Sara Slaney's Tidal Wave narrative. Slaney described her own agency as well as the ineffectiveness of the attempted agency of several male community members. She described an experience where expected roles are subverted and her own actions came across as more effective than those of several male figures did. In telling Gary O'Driscoll



her experiences, she begins in *medias res* by stating that she was milking her cow.<sup>21</sup>

When the earthquake began she immediately left her chores to check on her family.

While she was making an effort to ensure her family was safe, her elderly, male neighbour was only capable of an ineffectual taunt: “You’re afraid aren’t you, the devil’s [*sic*] come at last!” (O’Driscoll 1975: 5, MUNFLA 75-198). While Slaney was able to ensure that her children and her elderly mother were safe from harm the males in Slaney’s narrative were not as successful at protecting their loved ones. A man she refers to as Uncle Joe was visiting Slaney, playing with her children, and reportedly had left his own three children alone in his house. When the Tidal Wave began he ran back to his home, getting caught in the rising water along the way, only to find that “his house and children were gone” (O’Driscoll 1975: 7, MUNFLA 75-198).

While Slaney was able to ensure the safety of her children and her elderly mother she described male efforts to rescue boats as uncontrolled and sometimes futile:

All the people were trying to save their boats, poor old dad (her husband) was in his boat and was swept in and out a dozen times; and there was one poor old fella [*sic*] who was floating around in a washing tub, he lost his boat and so he got in the washing tub, and it washed in and out of the harbour, in and out of the harbour, and all the boats got beat up. But one poor man got jammed between his boat and the wharf and died as a result of the injuries. (O’Driscoll 1975: 9, MUNFLA 75-198)

Unlike her male counterparts, Slaney was able to constructively save what was important to her. It is telling that she does not mention that everyone first tried to save their homes and families before trying to save their boats. Her descriptions of the men in her

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<sup>21</sup> Although the relationship between Sara Slaney and Gary O’Driscoll is not explicitly stated, the information sheet on Gary O’Driscoll included with the manuscript states that his mother’s maiden name was Slaney and it is therefore possible that Sara Slaney is his maternal grandmother.

community suggest that their main concern was their boats rather than their families and homes whereas she, a woman, placed priority on her family. Bengt Holbek noted distinct gender differences in his analysis of several thousand nineteenth-century Denmark tales. Specifically, Holbek found that female narrators told tales with female heroines much more often than males. Since female heroes appeared in 46% of women's tales and in only 12% of men's tales, Holbek hypothesized that "male narrators were not, apparently, much attracted by tales where heroines play the leading role" (1987: 168). Although many of the Tidal Wave narratives that I have worked with are personal experience narratives there still appears to be a propensity amongst narrators to describe a male as the active agent in the narrative, much like Holbek noted, regardless of the gender of the narrator. All of the male narrators described themselves as having agency. Few of the female narrators accorded themselves such a role; instead they often describe themselves as quite passive while male characters in their narratives take action. Every male narrator focused on his own actions and reactions while few female narrators did so.

A number of the female-told Tidal Wave narratives, although they are told in the first person, still do not cast the narrator as the lead character. While male narrators seem quite comfortable describing how they acted during the disaster, most of the female narrators describe themselves as having something happen to them rather than as someone who does something. The women describe the actions of others around them and overlook their own agency. If women are not capable of describing their own ability to act in their lives, it should not be surprising that they are capable of telling stories with female protagonists less than half of the time.

### *3.1.6 Gender Roles in Performance Context*

Distinct gender roles can be noted not only in the text of the narratives but also in their performance contexts. Returning once more to the 1974 CBC television program, a striking pattern of performance context emerges. Of the six narrators interviewed, only one is female. Three of the male speakers were videotaped outdoors in public space. A fourth male narrator was filmed in the community general store, which is also a public space. The final male participant was filmed seated at a dining room table. Although the home is a private space the dining area is often used to entertain guests when the occasion is formal. The mother of this man was the only female interviewed and she was filmed seated next to the kitchen stove. It is difficult to think of a more domestic setting than a woman in a kitchen.

Margaret Yocom has noted the male/female, public/private dichotomy of storytelling and states that: "Women's private storytelling sphere includes all those areas that feel not merely a woman's touch but also her dominant influence and control. In kitchen and dining rooms especially, women are the mistresses of many details that a careless or uncaring eye might overlook" (1985: 48). Yocom contends that women and men are not restricted to one sphere or the other but that:

the private sphere of women's personal experience narratives... is a mode of social interaction, a space where none need fear ridicule or embarrassment, where handwork often accompanies talk, where participants feel that they all share several bonds, where narratives emphasize those bonds, and where each participant is seen as equally capable of and willing to contribute personal information. Fieldworkers who would enter this sphere successfully need to be able to give of themselves, to share their own stories with others, and to participate in the

thoughts, struggles, sorrows, and joys of women of all ages. (Yocom 1985: 52)

In my own interviewing experience, women were much more likely to ask questions of a personal nature than male participants. A fairly universal question was to ask where I am from. More personal questions, asked only by women, included information about my family and my marital or dating status. As Yocom has noted, in order to successfully interview women it was necessary to be willing to give personal information in return for women's stories.

The mother and son narratives in the 1974 CBC broadcast directly reflect performance characteristics associated with gender. The audience is only aware that the man and woman being interviewed are son and mother because she interrupts his narration from off-screen to explain one of the details he mentions; from this interruption it becomes clear that his description of rescuing his mother and siblings is a continuation of her account of being swept out to sea in her house. Rosan Jordan and Susan Kalčík state that "performances that are characteristically male-oriented... are highly individualistic or competitive and take place in public or formalized arenas – the pub, the street corner" while women's folklore "is more collaborative and enacted in the privacy of the domestic sphere or as part of ordinary conversation" (1985: ix). It is not surprising then that the majority of female narratives describe whatever household chore was being undertaken when the earthquake that preceded the tsunami was felt, such as cooking or caring for children. The narratives told by males who were adults at the time of the disaster depict the actions undertaken as a result of the inundation of water, such as attempting to rescue family members and supplies.

My Tidal Wave interviews took place in a number of different locations within the homes of my participants. My youngest participant and I always sat at her kitchen table. We only ever ventured into her formal living room to look at photographs that were hung on the walls. Sitting at the kitchen table allowed us to spread maps, photographs, books and documents out around us. We always sat at a ninety-degree angle to each other and were quite close together. Vincent Mallay, my oldest participant, was living in a retirement home when I visited him and his only private space consisted of his bedroom. We also sat at a ninety-degree angle, he on his bed and I on the armchair directly beside the small nightstand at the head of his bed. The rest of my participants all led me to their front rooms. For some we sat on the same piece of furniture and for others we were on separate pieces creating a greater space between our persons. The front room exchanges were formal; Gerald Pocius has noted, “the visit of the stranger most appropriately occurred in the front room of the house, just as heated neighbourhood gossip flared around the blazing stove in the kitchen” (1982: 5). Participants were able to control the tenor of our conversations by the room they chose to stage the interview. Those who invited me into their living rooms were using a formal space, which sets up boundaries of propriety and etiquette that would not be present in a different space, such as the much less formal kitchen. Information shared in the living room is imbued with a sense of authority and truth, rumour or gossip was not included in these conversations.

My exchanges with Sheila Walsh were much more informal than my interviews that took place in front rooms. Often Walsh would ask me to stop my recording device so

that she could impart some tidbit of information that she did not want preserved for public posterity. Gerald Pocius has stated that

Interiors are not random arrays of objects; they are not static entities. Rather, they are dynamic interactions of both people and objects, governed by certain rules of daily life (1982: 5)

The choice of performance context for my Tidal Wave interviews was generally one made by my participants. Their choice of space for our exchanges reveals information about how they perceived my request for an interview. Interviews that took place in the front room were not viewed as social calls where those present were meant to enjoy each others' company (Butler 1990: 39–40); rather they were more of a performance of duty. Those who could still recall the Tidal Wave of 1929 were sharing their narratives for posterity, knowing that they were among a dwindling few who had lived through the event. Barbara Allen has argued that “a large part of the meaning of personal experience narratives seems to derive from their use in specific interactional settings” (1989: 243). Since at least some of the meaning of a narrative exchange derives from the setting, it is important to analyze and discuss the performance context in which the story was told.

Unfortunately, with many of the archived accounts it is impossible to reconstruct the context. Archived narratives that do provide at least some performance context, such as Etchegary 1969, enable the researcher to more fully explore the palimpsest of meanings contained in a single account. The three-way exchange between the son, Tony, his father, Anthony, and Anthony's wife demonstrates the importance of the role of the interviewer because “an audience always contributes to the creation of folklore” (Clements 1980: 111). In Gerald Pocius's study of an outport Newfoundland singer the

singer's wife (passive tradition bearer) is an integral part of the performance of her husband (active tradition bearer). The wife of the pair was noted to have a longer song repertoire than her husband and that her husband was able to rely on her if he forgot any of the lyrics (Pocius 1976: 116). Similarly, when Tony Etchegary prompted his father about the earthquake that preceded the Tidal Wave and Anthony Etchegary responded that he didn't recall such a thing, Anthony's wife quickly jumped in to verify that there had indeed been an earthquake (Etchegary 1969).

### *3.1.7 Gender Role Liminality of Young Boys*

The narratives of males who were young children at the time of the Tidal Wave show that boys occupied a liminal space because the boys did not clearly fit into markedly male or female roles. As very young children they were unable to help their male relatives with most work-related tasks and were often to be found underfoot in the household with their female relatives if they were not off at school. Several authors have described life in a variety of Newfoundland outports in the early twentieth century.<sup>22</sup>

Lind Barbour's description of Newtown, Bonavista North is congruent:

Although we used the term fisherman, fishing families would be more appropriate. Everyone in the fishing family, even young children, would be expected to help in some way. The mother of the household would divide her time between cooking in the kitchen and work in the fishing stage. Older girls looked after young children, helping with the cooking and in the curing of fish. Boys in early teens were expected to work like men, often included in the fishing crew. School was given second place. This resulted in only a small proportion of teenagers having the

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<sup>22</sup> For more information on growing up in an outport community in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century see Farrell 2001; Hillier 1998; Murray 1979; Penney Winsor 1998 and Ryan 1992.

opportunity to attend school for the high school grades. (Barbour 2002: 43)

Barbour notes the active roles of grown men and women and that of older girls and teenage boys but young children are described as passive and noted only as someone who needed looking after. Since it was the role of the women and older girls to look after the young children, male and female offspring spent their formative years within the domestic and feminine realm. This arrangement meant that girls were exposed to a great number of their expected roles from an extremely early age, whereas boys had to wait a number of years to begin learning how to fulfill their expected roles in the home and community.

Gus Etchegary was only five years old in November of 1929 but vividly recalls the events that immediately preceded the earthquake:

My two brothers were going to school and... my one sister was going to school and she had just come home. My other sister was the older one who had to look after the house and the family when my mother had died. They were preparing supper and we're sitting in the kitchen and the stove is over there and I'm, I remember this, I'm sitting down... and my two sisters are working at the counter and on the stove they were preparing fish and, meat or whatever, and fried potatoes, and they had fried potatoes... and they laid them on a plate and the plate... was sitting on a kettle, an iron kettle with the lid back, and it was sitting there with a cover on it keeping it warm and... what I remember distinctly was the plate on the stove, on the kettle, like this [hand gesture to suggest the object was bouncing up and down]... I had no idea what was going on. (Etchegary 2006)

Gus's narrative clearly describes how he occupied a liminal space and was not fully a part of the male or female worlds that he notices around him. As a result of his liminal status he is able to note details about the experience from both camps. The above



narrative focuses on the private and domestic, Gus's mental image of the earthquake is that of food dishes rattling on the kitchen stove.

Gus later notes that an hour or so after the earthquake the men of St. Lawrence "left and went down and began to examine what was going on." In the aftermath of the disaster gender division is yet again present in each of the narratives with women writing letters to government officials asking for clothing and bedding, and helping to care for the destitute and injured. Men, on the other hand, went out on the water to retrieve houses, supplies and the bodies of those who did not survive. All of the narratives document the accepted gender roles of the community at the time of the disaster. The narratives I recorded during my field research document that many of those gender divisions are still viewed as proper behaviour by the narrators recounting the events.

### **3.2 Family Folklore**

Many of the accounts of the Tidal Wave that I located in MUNFLA were collected by descendants of those who supplied the personal experience narratives of the disaster. Although the information was purposely collected for research purposes, the stories, in at least several instances, were stories that each narrator had recounted for the interviewer previously, in a spontaneous and natural context. The term papers submitted by the children and grandchildren of survivors are a form of second-hand narrative of the event, as is this thesis (Brushett 1980; Etchegary 1969; Hillier 1991; Lunnen 1982; Slaney 1980). Unlike this thesis, many of the archived accounts document the bestowal of family folklore from one generation to another. Family folklore is directly tied to a

person's sense of identity and can link families to wider communities that share similar cultural practices. Charles R. Frederick states that family folklore is a "vast repository of knowledge" and that "amidst this knowledge, most of which is unrecorded and passed on informally, are various items that serve to provide the family with a singular sense of identity" (1990: 171). The editors of A Celebration of American Family Folklore succinctly assert that family folklore "contains clues to our national character and insights into our family structure" (Zeitlin et al. 1982: 2). They also note that the retelling of family stories makes the past accessible even as it "is reshaped according to its needs and desires" (Zeitlin et al. 1982: 2), meaning that the story reflects the past as well as the present moment of the telling.

Of particular significance to the study of Tidal Wave narratives is the theme of disaster or survivor narratives. By telling stories of trauma or misfortune they "become institutionalized... family stories serve as a way of making the unexpected, the unforeseen, and the disastrous part of the smooth and routine functioning of the family" (Zeitlin et al. 1982: 19). Stories of survival convey a sense of accomplishment; the narrators have "earned the right to look back with laughter and nostalgia on their trials, and tell good stories from hard times" (Zeitlin et al. 1982: 19). Tidal Wave narratives often describe a personal change that is recognized by the community and the individual. The experience, and the challenges they faced, altered those who survived the event and its aftermath of destitution and, for many, homelessness. Surviving this ordeal changed the person on a fundamental level and as such the experience can be viewed as a rite of passage.

Mody Boatright has noted that “an event in a family saga has a relation to a social context and reflects a social value” (1958: 2). He further stated that “for a tale to enter the oral tradition and survive, it must afford emotional satisfaction to the hearers, that the tale and thus widen and continue its circulation” (Boatright 1958: 2). Tidal Wave narratives are repeated because they are interesting. The environmental phenomenon of an earthquake and a tsunami is extremely unusual for Newfoundland. The near-death experience that it created for many is thrilling when it is retold, thereby capturing the imagination of the audience. A great number of the items included in a Tidal Wave narrative create very visual descriptions of the event and create a sense of suspense and wonder. Boatright has suggested that in order for a story to “be a part of living folklore” it must be “both marvelous and believable” (1958: 13). Tidal Wave narratives retain their currency specifically because they are stories about an amazing event that actually took place and thus are credible. Gillian Bennett has noted that

Two sorts of information are potentially derivable from legend performances: information about events and information about the speakers; which, put together, create a third type of information: information about the world as the speaker sees it” (1996: 35–36).

Tidal Wave narratives are repeated as family folklore because the stories are meaningful to those that tell them. The audience is able to glean information about the speaker’s ancestors, but more importantly, information about how the speaker envisions his or her ancestors as well as the world around them is being shared.

### *3.2.1 Repeated Narratives*

Three of the accounts consulted for this research, the narratives of Sheila Walsh, Doreen Masters and Ellen Hillier, are recordings of children of Tidal Wave survivors, children that were born after the disaster. Similarly, Rosalee Peppard has written and recorded a song entitled “The Tidal Wave” based on the Tidal Wave narratives of Maisie Knox. The recordings of second-hand narratives are testimony to the value of the experience and that following generations find meaning in the descriptions and create new individual and personal meanings in their own retellings of the Tidal Wave.

Narratives of the 1929 Tidal Wave are more than oral historical records of an unusual occurrence and its aftermath. These accounts document facets of the economic and social life of a Newfoundland outport community in the early twentieth century. They also record the beliefs and concerns of the narrator that were attendant to when the account was told. An event that occurred over 75 years ago still reverberates in the present-day landscape of the affected area as well as the individual and collective memories of the people who live there.

Sheila Walsh, a descendant of the Walshes of Point Au Gaul Point has recounted her family’s Tidal Wave stories to me. Following the Tidal Wave her family relocated their home farther inland from its original foundation. Sheila’s mother and father were married in April of 1929 and were still settling into their new home, and married life, when the Tidal Wave struck their community. Sheila learned of the disaster from her mother and father, although her mother rarely spoke of the event because she found it difficult to do so. Sheila is the youngest of five children born to Basil and Judy Walsh,

and she spent a great deal of time and energy caring for Judy, her mother, in the latter years of her mother's life. When the roar of the approaching Tidal Wave was first audible in Point Au Gaul, the wave was not yet visible. Sheila's father, Basil went farther into the community to look for an explanation for the sound and thus away from the shoreline while her mother, Judy went next door to Basil's mother's house to check on the older relatives. Sheila's mother, Judy, her paternal grandmother, Mary Elizabeth and her great-aunt, Mary Ann Walsh were all swept out to sea, along with both the Walsh houses, when the first wave receded from Point Au Gaul. By the time Basil realized what was happening, the water was too high for him to return to his home or his mother's home. Mary Elizabeth and Mary Ann died at sea that night and their bodies were recovered within the next few days. Judy somehow survived the ordeal although she was found naked, bruised and delirious.

When Sheila recounts the events of the night of the Tidal Wave her stories are almost always from her mother's perspective even though her mother reportedly rarely discussed the event. When questioned about her father's experience Sheila replied that he never got over having left his wife and mother and that he always regretted his inability to rescue them from the waves. Although Basil was involved in searching for victims and survivors of the event Sheila focuses most on his skill as a jack-of-all-trades. Basil built the house that he and Judy moved into after their marriage. Although it was swept out to sea along with his parent's home, Basil's house, depicted in image SW-1, was towed back in from the ocean.



Figure 3.2, SW-1, Basil Walsh in front of his house after its relocation. Photograph in the personal collection of Sheila Walsh.

The house was placed on a new piece of land, farther from the shoreline than its original foundation. While it has since moved to several different communities on the Burin Peninsula, Basil's house is still standing today. Her father's skill as a carpenter and as a fisherman and farmer are all points of pride for Sheila. When she recounts his unending regret for his actions on the night of the crisis it is apparent that she believes her father was a protective and loving husband and son who was deeply scarred by his inability to act on the night of the disaster.

Judy, according to Sheila, remembered only scattered bits and pieces of the events of that night. After the house she was in was taken out to sea, the details of what happened next are as dark as the night on which the events took place. Judy was found

naked but alive, bruised and with kelp tangled in her hair. According to Sheila, almost all of her hair fell out when attempts were made to remove the kelp and Judy spent the first six months following the disaster on a regimen of brandy to help her cope with the traumatic experience. Judy's bumps and bruises healed long before her frayed nerves and battered psyche were able to recover from the shock of being dragged out to sea by an enormous wall of water. Sheila ties Judy's longevity and determination to survive in later life to her mother's Tidal Wave experience. Judy faced a number of health challenges in her senior years, including a stroke. Sheila attributes her mother's almost full recovery to a determination to live, much the same as the determination Judy exhibited by surviving being swept out to sea. Sheila sees determination as not only an integral part of her mother's identity, but also as an integral part of her own identity. Judy's determination is linked to her will to survive against enormous odds, which was first proven on the night of the Tidal Wave. Sheila's determination is a mirror of her mother's and as such is also tied to narratives of the Tidal Wave. It is interesting to note that Sheila has taken on aspects of her father's identity that are tied to Tidal Wave narratives alongside of aspects of her mother's identity.

Sheila has, in a way, helped her father to atone for leaving his wife on the night of the disaster by nursing her mother when she was next faced with a life-threatening situation. Thanks to Sheila's careful observation and continuing care, Judy received the necessary tests and medical treatment when she suffered a stroke in her later years of life. Sheila has adopted further aspects of her father's identity by being a self-employed trades person who is skilled at her craft and respected by other people in her field of work, as

her father was. Sheila's Tidal Wave narratives serve not only to shed light on who she believes her parents were and how they were shaped by their experience of the Tidal Wave but also how that family history has shaped Sheila as a person and how those narratives reflect the way she chooses to construct her own identity. The Walsh family's Tidal Wave narratives also serve an educational purpose and clearly project messages of the importance of family and looking after one's kin.

The two Bonnell sisters, Ellen Hillier and Doreen Masters, were born into a family that suffered great losses during the Tidal Wave. The two women include information about their father's failed attempt to rescue two young sons from the family home as well as an older daughter's good fortune in being pushed farther inland by the water rather than being dragged out to sea. Cranford's compilation Tidal Wave states that Hillier and Masters's father, Bertram Bonnell, was living with his father when the disaster occurred (2000b: 231). It is clear from the narratives of the sisters that the house the father was attempting to rescue the boys from was taken out to sea. Thus their grandfather lost his house, yet neither of the women ever mention the losses suffered by their grandfather. However, they each mention that their uncle Robert Bonnell lost his wife and his youngest child. It is clear from the women's stories that the greatest loss was the loss of life. The women were denied the opportunity to ever know the two brothers, the aunt or the cousin that were all taken by the Tidal Wave. Interestingly, Ellen does reflect a bit on property damage towards the end of her narrative:

They were all up in the church, that's where they lived four nights with everybody. And then they had to go because it was coming winter, this happened in November, and it was getting colder. So all the people couldn't live together in the church so my dad and mom and their



daughter, the only girl, the only child they had left then, moved to Fortune to live with my mother's sister. So they moved in with her and then the government came and helped everybody in the places where they lost their houses and their barns. And whatever they lost they give them so much towards it but Dad didn't get none because he didn't stay where he lost his house, so therefore he wasn't allowed to have any. So it took him a lot longer to get the money to go back and rebuild, but he did. And to this day I think the foundation is still up there. (Hillier 1991, MUNFLA 92-290 uncatalogued tape, transcribed by LAMM)

If Cranford's information is correct and Bertram Bonnell did not own his own home at the time of the Tidal Wave, he would not have been entitled to compensation for a dwelling place. Ellen's pride in her father's ability to independently save the money needed to provide his family with their own home is apparent in her narrative. The father's earlier inability to save his two sons from the Tidal Wave is juxtaposed with his success in building a new home for his growing family. Neither of the narratives blame the father for being unable to save the boys; rather he made a heroic, if doomed, effort and after surviving being swept out to sea along with the boys was still able to provide for rest of his family.

Rosalee Peppard recorded her song "The Tidal Wave" in 2001. On her website she contextualizes her song as follows:

During Christmas, I had the opportunity to listen to Maisie's wonderful stories about the 1929 Tidal Wave; a subject which in itself could yield an album of songs. Miracles such as: her future father-in-law throwing the blessed holy water against the wave which immediately subsided, saving his home and family; how 9 days after the tidal wave, Joshu dreamed exactly where on the strand he could find the body of his 12 year old daughter buried in the sand; and finally how against the tempest, 'Lotte went to look for Gran, thinking she might be in the cellar, not knowing she was safe. She waded through water and saw the spinning wheel blocking the cellar hatch. At that moment her precious crucifix, which she always kept in her apron pocket, fell in the water. Miraculously it caught the light of the full moon and appeared so magnified that Charlotte reached down

in the waist deep salt water grabbed it and clutched it to her heart knowing  
Gran was safe. ("Rosalee Peppard" 2002)

The website and the liner notes of her CD give Peppard the opportunity to include information about the Tidal Wave that did not make its way into the lyrics of her song. The items that do appear in the song closely parallel a number of the themes that are repeated in many of the Tidal Wave narratives that I have encountered. The song opens with information about when the event occurred and openly states that the disaster was a turning point in the life of the protagonist, Maisie Walsh: "how her life forever changed / The day of the tidal wave" (Peppard 2001). The song details events in chronological order and comments on the weather immediately preceding the disaster. After the earthquake a man referred to as "Uncle Joe the Madaleau" is attributed with predicting the impending inundation: "We'll be having a tidal wave" (Peppard 2001).<sup>23</sup> Unlike many accounts where the suggestion of a tidal wave is laughed at, Peppard writes that "no one knew what that might be / Though they were sure he'd know / For he had travelled on the sea" (2001). Peppard's song closely mirrors many of the narratives told by Tidal Wave survivors because it follows a linear pattern and includes the motif of an elderly community member predicting the approaching Tidal Wave.

When Sheila Walsh asked me if I was aware of Peppard's recording she described it as the song about apples on the table. The image that was striking to the Walsh women and to Peppard appears in the song as follows:

Well Point Aux Gaul was purged that night  
Of eight poor village souls  
Yet underneath a fallen roof

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<sup>23</sup> Madeleau appears to be a phonetic spelling of the French word *matelot*; a sailor.

Were apples in a bowl  
And everybody stopped and started  
At that which had been saved  
But Maisie laughed in wonder on  
The night of the tidal wave  
(Peppard 2001)

The very graphic image of apples nestled in a bowl in a house that has been collapsed and rent by the Tidal Wave captures the imagination of the listener and becomes a symbol for the whim of nature that saved some and denied a future to others. The image of the apples fits well with a number of other images provided by narratives that describe houses being lifted, carried out to sea and then returned to their foundations (Noseworthy 2006) or of lamps remaining in homes carried to sea thereby enabling those trapped inside to be rescued (Mallay 2006). The miraculous is a theme that permeates Tidal Wave narratives and reflects the social values of those who lived the experience.

Tidal Wave narratives perform a number of functions and serve not only to entertain and educate, but also to shed light on the people and the society who experienced the Tidal Wave as well as those who have followed after. Over time the narratives change to reflect the current values of the teller as well as the social, economic and political concerns that may have arisen during the intervening years since the event.

### **3.3 Commodification of the Tidal Wave**

#### *3.3.1 Tourism on the Burin Peninsula*

Tourism has become an important aspect of the economy of the entirety of Newfoundland. With the recent building fire and resulting closure of the FPI fish plant in Fortune, Burin Peninsula, area residents are acutely aware of the need to diversify the

local economy and tourism is one of the options being pursued. In the late 1980s the Canadian Federal and Newfoundland and Labrador Provincial governments jointly hired Marshall Macklin Monaghan and Omnifacts Research to create a regional tourism plan for the Burin Peninsula. The study aimed to identify existing tourism opportunities, the strengths and weaknesses of the existing tourism market, to identify the economic impact and feasibility of tourism initiatives and to develop a plan for future directions in tourism development for the area.

The report noted the Burin Peninsula's proximity to both the St. John's and the St. Pierre and Miquelon tourism markets and suggested that more could be done to draw visitors from those areas. The plan further stated that this could be accomplished through "Themed Development Packages" (Marshall et al. 1989: 5). The four suggested packages were Heritage, Marine, International and Natural Resources/Recreation. The report further stated that the fishery as well as shipbuilding and mining were the major economic forces on the Peninsula.

Of the recommendations made in the report several have noticeably been pursued. The Provincial Seaman's Museum, which falls under the previously mentioned program of the Marine Package, has been upgraded and showcases permanent as well as temporary exhibits to ensure that return visits are equally as interesting as the first. By far the most developed package is that based on Heritage. Roadside signs for the main highway on the Peninsula inform drivers that the route is known as "The Heritage Run." A Regional Visitor Information Centre is located at the junction of the Trans Canada Highway (TCH) and the Heritage Run. This booth provides tourism pamphlets for

travelers heading both east and west on the TCH as well as those heading south along the Heritage Run. Publications available free of charge at the information booth include provincial maps, a map of the Peninsula entitled “Welcome to the Heritage Run” that promotes local sites of interest and businesses, pamphlets for communities, museums, monuments, festivals, and the vacation packages to St. Pierre and Miquelon.

Mixed in amongst the travel destination pamphlets are a few advertisements for local handicrafts such as hooked mats, quilts, woodworking, crocheted items, knitted goods, pottery, jewelry made with polished flourspar. Other souvenir items include paintings, posters, a range of embroidered or silk-screened articles of clothing, postcards calendars and Christmas ornaments.

A 2002 marketing publication, The Heritage Run, Newfoundland and Labrador’s Burin Peninsula: Drop Down and Stay a Spell, introduces visitors and residents alike to the history of the area:

It began with the codfish... It drew Basque, French, Portuguese, Spanish and English fleets. Wars were fought. Pirates and Privateers invaded our shores. Pioneer men and women were drawn to the New World, first as seasonal inhabitants, then as settlers in fragile outposts, and finally as founders of the legendary Grand Banks Fishery. A new world was born on these shores. Powerful captains with able-bodied crews joined with merchants and tradesmen to form a unique society. They raised their families here, in a region we now call The Heritage Run... The legacy of these people is preserved in their faith, their stories, their songs, their dance, their dialect, and the cultural traditions, which remain as significant today as when their ancestors first landed hundreds of years ago. (The Heritage Run 2002; 2)

Both the 2002 booklet and the map of the Peninsula that I picked up at the tourist information booth in August 2006 subdivide the Heritage Run into four separate drives. The Mariner Drive covers highway 210 from the TCH to Marystown and includes

communities branching off from the main highway to the west. Captain Cook Drive includes Marystown and heads east to the communities of Burin Bay Arm and south to Corbin. The French Island Drive begins at Winterland, travels west to Garnish and then south-west to Point May. This drive includes the opportunity to take the ferry from Fortune to St. Pierre

The Captain Clarke Drive extends from Point May to Epworth and includes most of the coastline affected by the 1929 Tidal Wave. The communities of Burin Bay Arm and several others on the Captain Cook Drive were also affected. Both the map and pamphlet inform readers of the Miner's Museum at St. Lawrence and the former existence of the fluorspar mine, the tragedy of the USS Truxton and the USS Pollux as well as the rescue efforts of area residents, rum-running and smuggling<sup>24</sup> from St. Pierre and Miquelon, and the devastation of the Tidal Wave. The pamphlet notes that "an interpretive Tidal Wave exhibit is housed at the Greater Lamaline Area Development Association Building in Lamaline" (The Heritage Run 2002: 21-22) and that "the Heritage House [in Burin] is one of the province's best local museums... Across the way in the Old Bank of Nova Scotia building, Heritage II, there's a 1929 Tidal Wave exhibit" (The Heritage Run 2002; 15).

The Burin Peninsula is being marketed as a place that maintains a strong link with its past, at least since the arrival of the Europeans. The literature makes the reader feel as though a visit to the area will, in some way, be a bit like stepping back in time to see what life was like several generations ago. This impression is strengthened by the suggestion

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<sup>24</sup> Wareham has also made note of the smuggling trade from St. Pierre and Miquelon (1982: 24).

that the area has somehow managed to escape the less appealing aspects of life in the twenty-first century. The following appears in a navy blue circle, separating it from the surrounding text and drawing the reader's eye to its message:

You are embarking on a tour of Newfoundland's rugged, untouched beauty, its roaring silent isolation, its most majestic and best kept secrets. 500 years of history, heritage and culture as unique and varied as our species of whales, eagles and seabirds. The Heritage Run is our way of letting you guide yourself through this untamed land without confusion... The breathtaking drive is a stunning visual adventure. Deep green barrens contrast regal rock outcroppings which jut out of the massive blue Atlantic. (Welcome to the Heritage Run 2006)

Although the marketing strategy focuses on the traditional and historical aspects of the area the Heritage Run Tourism Association has taken full advantage of recent technological advances and runs a website that contains significantly more information than their publications. The site includes information on local attractions as well as festivals and events. It also provides information about the Heritage Run Tourism Association, its mandate and history.

### *3.3.2 Marketing the Tidal Wave*

As a result of the media's commemorative efforts over the intervening years some aspects of the Tidal Wave have become crystallized in the public consciousness of Newfoundland. One such item is the image of a schooner towing a partially submerged house through a cove (Figure 2.05). S.H. Parsons and Sons's famous postcard has been resurrected by M & B Postcards and can be purchased in a myriad of different shops that

boast Newfoundland souvenirs.<sup>25</sup> The image may also be purchased as a print with matting, with or without a frame. Although the Tidal Wave was extremely destructive and smashed most of the homes that it washed out to sea, the image of the home being towed back to shore, still whole, is an icon that now represents the entire event.

As mentioned previously, Harmony Entertainment has produced an episode of its series Disasters of the Century which includes a segment on the 1929 Tidal Wave (“Communities Under Siege” 2004). This footage is available for purchase as is a video entitled Vanished in the Mist: Lost Newfoundland “Part III: The Tidal Waves: 1929 on” (c. 2000). Flanker Press has successfully marketed Hanrahan’s 2004 publication to the general populace, aided somewhat by the publicity afforded by the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami.

A number of the Heritage Museums located on the Burin Peninsula have incorporated exhibits on the Tidal Wave into their permanent collections. A visit to the Burin Heritage House will also provide visitors with information on a local sight-seeing boat tour that will take guests around to several of the islands in Burin harbour that housed settlements prior to the Tidal Wave. The majority of the harbour island-dwellers opted to rebuild their homes in Burin proper, just as many other communities built farther inland or on higher ground. The commodification of the Tidal Wave is similar to that of the “Newfie Bullet” as described by Peter Narváez (1986).

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<sup>25</sup> Brian Bursey of M & B Postcards was uncertain about the exact date, but he hazarded to guess that his company began producing the Tidal Wave postcard in 2002 or 2003. The company was located in St. John’s when it first began producing the postcard but has since relocated to Middle Cove, just north of the city.



The “Newfie Bullet” and the Tidal Wave are associated with a golden age in the history of Newfoundland. The two are used as symbols to represent a simpler life that is often associated with tight-knit communities, safety and a sense of belonging. The Tidal Wave, or rather the world immediately prior to the Tidal Wave is a nostalgic experience. Narváez stated that this experience “is sometimes criticized as being overly fanciful, excessively escapist and potentially dangerous” it can “also be understood as an adaptive mechanism to allay anxieties in times of rapid cultural change” (1986: 75). Considering that 1929 was a time when outport Newfoundland was enjoying a thriving fishery, before the North American Depression, the Second World War, Confederation with Canada, and the cod moratorium, it is not surprising that many Newfoundlanders might consider it to be a simpler world and a better time in the history of their island.

### **3.4 Summary**

This chapter has addressed the different ways that Tidal Wave narratives are used to create or convey identity. On an individual level some of the most important factors that help determine one’s sense of identity are one’s gender, kinship ties, ties to place and community membership. Narratives of the Tidal Wave include information about all of these factors. These determinants often influence the performance context of a narrative, and the context itself can communicate clues about how the performer wishes to be perceived.

The discussion of the liminality of young boys relies heavily on found narratives taken from printed memoirs and autobiographies of people who are from the same

generation as Tidal Wave survivors. The found narratives, in conjunction with Gus Etchegary's narrative, detail the different roles of family and community members in outport Newfoundland in the early-nineteenth century. Community attitudes and values regarding the roles of community members have a pervasive effect on how a person frames or creates his or her own identity in the community.

The commodification of the Tidal Wave is an effort to market what is unique about the region to the tourist population as well as to area residents. Tourism literature creates an image of the area, and a sense of the character of the people who live in the area. This image is meant to appeal to visitors as well as locals. Tourism on the Burin Peninsula includes aspects of life that were historically universal to all of Newfoundland, for example the fishery and a life dependent on the sea. It also utilizes elements that are unique to the region such as access to St. Pierre and Miquelon, the fluorspar mines and the 1929 Tidal Wave. Such aspects of the region's identity are a source of local pride and are used to provide the economy with tourist dollars.

## Chapter 4: Narratives

William Labov and Joshua Waletzky posit that narratives serve two functions, the first being referential, a way for the narrator to recount an experience, and the second evaluative, “determined by a stimulus in the social context in which the narrative occurs” (1967: 13). Labov and Waletzky contend that a narrative which lacks evaluation lacks significance and has no point (1967: 33). In the narrative examples used for the article those that lack evaluation are “narratives of vicarious experience” rather than of personal experience (Labov and Waletzky 1967: 33). Just as the narratives Labov and Waletzky collected were in response to a stimulus, the Tidal Wave narratives were also collected as the result of a direct stimulus. The narratives that I have collected were the direct result of a specific inquiry about the 1929 Tidal Wave. Although not all of the narratives of the event are of personal experience, the narrators always put forward an effort to explain the “relative importance of these events” (Labov and Waletzky 1967: 34) to the listener and thereby fulfill the function of evaluation.

Sandra Stahl has argued that “when people tell personal narratives, they offer their listeners an invitation to intimacy” (1989: 37). Since personal experience narratives create a sense of intimacy, it is not surprising that many of the people I interviewed also chose to tell me about their extended families, often referring to photographs located throughout their homes, nor is it surprising that a number chose to ask me questions that would be considered to be of a personal nature. Due to the personal nature of the information I was attempting to collect and the atmosphere of intimacy such an exchange

creates it is quite natural that my participants would then seek to learn something personal about me.<sup>26</sup>

My interpretation of the following narratives will shed nearly as much light on my own person as it will on those who have taken the time to tell me their stories. My own biases and frames of reference will colour the way that I interpret the words of others as well as how they chose to deliver those words. In some narratives references are made to items belonging to the local landscape which may or may not still exist but of which I am wholly ignorant as a result of my outsider status. Not only am I not from the Burin Peninsula, I am not a Newfoundlander. As such many allusions to the way of life in this particular area are outside all of my frames of reference, regardless of how many photographs I have seen of cod drying on flakes or of my recent visit to the locale. This lack of local knowledge is highlighted by the number of times that narrators asked me if I knew what a particular term refers to or if I knew the location of certain landmarks. During one of my earliest interviews a map was placed on the coffee table so that both the narrator and I could use it as a reference point since I lacked any emic knowledge of the locale.

#### **4.1 Narrative Patterns and Themes**

The narratives discussed in this thesis have been collected from several different sources. In 2005 and 2006 I had the opportunity to interview six participants, five of

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<sup>26</sup> Many fieldworkers have noted the need for the establishment of rapport (Goldstein 1974; Stone Sunstein & Chiseri-Strater 2002; Toelken 1996) at least partly through performance reciprocity (Greenleaf 2004; Wareham 1982).

whom had personal experience narratives of the Tidal Wave and one who was child and grandchild of people who had experienced the Tidal Wave. A number of narratives were located in the Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive. The archived narratives range from over half an hour of taped interview (Tucker 1982) to students' transcriptions of their interviews (O'Driscoll 1975; Pittman 1981).

#### *4.1.01 Narrative Context*

These personal experience narratives were all elicited during interviews where the narrators were specifically asked to recount memories of their Tidal Wave experience. While I cannot speak to the specifics of the interviews that I did not personally conduct, my own participant, Vivian Wiseman, was aware that I wished to interview her specifically because she remembered the Tidal Wave. When I arrived at her home she immediately launched into her narrative. She did not wait for my recording equipment to be set up nor for me to prompt her to begin. Vivian has shared her memories with family members, including her grandchildren, and as such her narrative has a very stable structure that she was able to repeat for me when I asked her to restate the start of her narrative so that I could record it.

While interviewing Sheila Walsh, the child and grandchild Tidal Wave victims, I learned that her mother, aunt and grandmother were swept out to sea and that only her mother survived. Her mother was found completely naked and shortly thereafter lost her hair from the stress of her experience. According to Sheila her mother never talked about her experience even though she lived to be well over eighty years of age — an excellent

example of untellability, a concept discussed folkloristically in recent years with regard to narratives with strong emotional value (Lawless 2001). She reported that her father always told her that he never forgave himself for being unable to protect her mother from such a horrific experience.

#### *4.1.02 Chronological Ordering*

Not all cultures view time in a linear fashion (Toelken 1996: 276). North American culture generally instills a doctrine of retelling events chronologically (Ewick and Silbey 1995: 208). If a narrator is unable to reconstruct past events in a straight time sequence the narrator's credibility is called into question. Narratives told in a courtroom context may have more dire outcomes than those spoken in an informal setting, but, regardless of audience, a narrator's credibility is always held under scrutiny and examined for any possibility of misinformation or confusion.

The majority of the narratives I have worked with for this project are structured chronologically. Of those that are chronological, nearly all begin with information detailing what the narrator was doing immediately preceding the earthquake, which occurred several hours before the Tidal Wave. Many of them then continue by recounting the experience of earthquake itself, regardless of whether the narrator recognized that the event was indeed an earthquake or not. The narratives vary in length depending on the speaker's storytelling abilities and how often they have told their Tidal Wave narrative prior to the account in question. Nancy Hillier gave the following account of the earthquake:

I was five and a half years old but I can remember Mom getting supper. It was around 5:00 or 5:30. She was frying fish and the pan on the stove starts jiggling because the house was shaking. The dishes in the cupboard was rattling and I was a little bit scared, not knowing what was going on. (Hillier 2006, transcribed by LAMM)

Pearl Hatfield's narrative (Cranford 1999: 45–46) began with her house being carried away by the first wave of the tsunami and it is not clear if this is because of editing or if that is where her memories of the experience began. Common reactions to the earthquake were confusion and fear.

Most of the narratives describe looking for some sort of explanation for the odd occurrence. As John William Bonnell told Michael Tucker in 1982,

And while we were having our lunch together, things started to tremble. We heard a tremor. And oh, dishes on the mantelpiece begin to jingle, sort of. First we thought, I looked out through the window, I thought there might be a big truck or something coming down. They used to come down and turn around right in front of our house; the road was fairly wide there. And there was a lane leading down to the beach and this was where the trucks would turn. So we looked out, see what was happening. And there wasn't any trucks there. And I noticed other people in their doorways looking around and I'd look up, we thought it might have been an airplane or something, flying overhead or, there wasn't, there couldn't (?) to be seen. Only a tremor. So it was over in a moment or two, that tremor, and we settled down, people start to gather out in the street. I wonder what was that? Did you hear anything? People were wondering. Well one old fellow said, "You know what? That could be, that could be there was a big plane supposed to go over here sometime today, going on their way to United States." He said, "It might have been her." You couldn't see anything. So we, there was one older man, I'll mention his name, we called him Uncle Joe Miller, and he was living in Point Au Gaul, that's about a mile, two miles below Lamaline, and he was born over in Malo in France, and Uncle Joe could remember something about tidal waves that happened over on that side of the Atlantic, and he said, he says, "That's sounds to me like it might be the beginning of a tidal wave." And people laughed at him. (Tucker 1982, C10348-9, transcribed by LAMM)

Vivian Wiseman recounted the following:

First the vibrations of the house and dishes rattling and like people upstairs jumping up and down in their socks, I would say, didn't sound like they had their shoes on, like people jumping. And I told you my cousin was there, he was a young boy about twelve or thirteen, and Mom said, "Go out under the house, Steve, and see if there's a goat." So Steve went out and looked and came back and said, "No, no goat." He was only gone a few seconds. By this time we could hear a roar. It was almost like an airplane in the distance, a roar. And Mom said, "Oh my, there's a plane going to land." So we all ran outside and jumped up on a rock, big boulder, and you could feel it moving under your feet. And right away my mother said, "Oh, tis an earthquake." Soon as she could feel the movement. And that was about it. It only lasted a few minutes, that's it. (Wiseman 2005, transcribed by LAMM)

This quote, used earlier in a discussion of gender roles within Tidal Wave narratives, is used here to illustrate some of the ways that people tried to make sense of the earthquake based on their previous experiences. Each of these narrators preceded their descriptions of the earthquake by situating themselves within the very normal context of their lives up to that moment. John William Bonnell describes working out on the stages and flakes drying fish to sell later that day and Vivian Wiseman gave a very thorough description of the supper she and her family had just sat down to eat.

The narratives begin with the mundane activity of their everyday lives that directly preceded the disastrous event. By situating themselves within their normal daily activities the narrators not only illustrate what sort of lives people led, but also create a stark juxtaposition to the chaos and force of the Tidal Wave. By including memories of the events leading up to the disaster the narrators are building credibility with their audience. They are not claiming to be extraordinary people but rather average individuals who were forced into an extraordinary experience and who reacted instinctually.



#### *4.1.03 Fear and Wonder*

Wiseman's description lacks the sense of fear that is apparent in many Tidal Wave narratives. One could argue that the lack of fear is a result of the age difference and Wiseman's ability to rely on the authority figure of her mother. I think a more convincing argument would be that Wiseman's narrative lacks the same sense of fear because as it turned out, there was nothing for her to be afraid of. Her community was not destroyed, she did not suffer and so this was not a negative experience for her. Bonnell on the other hand saw livelihoods, homes and families swept away and helped to retrieve the remnants of people's bodies and belonging from the wreckage. The experience for him was quite frightening.

Pearl Hatfield was five years old when she awoke to find her house adrift at sea:

I don't remember being scared. Mom was there, so naturally we figured Mom was going to look after us... I had nightmares for a long time after. In my dream I was always going up a hill and the water was only a few feet behind me. For years after. I was traumatized I guess. (Cranford 1999: 45-46).

Although Hatfield does not remember being frightened during the ordeal she most certainly found the experience frightening. Like Bonnell, the force of the disaster directly affected her and although her family and house miraculously survived she witnessed the destruction of the lives of many of her friends and neighbours.

#### *4.1.04 Cause and Effect*

Stemming directly from the earthquake portions of the Tidal Wave narratives are speculations as to the cause of the disturbance. Eight narrators offered up their thoughts, or thoughts that they overheard at the time, regarding what was causing the noise and trembling. Both the earthquake and the approaching waters of the Tidal Wave created sounds that were totally alien to the residents of the affected area. The possible explanations for the sounds are telling because they highlight just how unusual an occurrence the earthquake was for the Burin Peninsula. Without doubt, there are areas of the world where every man, woman and child is immediately aware that an earthquake is taking place. These areas are located near fault lines in the tectonic plates, and as such earthquakes are common occurrences. Societies in earthquake prone areas put together emergency response plans and alter their architecture according to the local environment. The people of the Burin Peninsula were aware of the perils of life as fishermen as well as how to deal with extreme storms and harsh winters, but they were not at all prepared for an earthquake, let alone a Tidal Wave.

Walter Foote and an unidentified male who was interviewed for the CBC program Here and Now likened the sound of the approaching Tidal Wave to the sound of a chimney pipe on fire:

At a quarter to seven that night there was a great roar. I know I was in this house here, and we thought the chimney was afire, and most of the people thought the same thing. There was a roar like it was going up the stovepipes. And my mother was here and said to me: "Did you put something in the stove?" And I said, "No, I never put nothing in the stove." She said "You must have put paper in because," she said, "the pipes is afire." (Lake 1976, C2947, transcribed by LAMM)

We heard an awful noise, a roar, and a lot of people thought that their pipes was afire. Their chimneys was afire. It was that kind of a roar, this was the Tidal Wave coming in, and I saw it with my own eyes. ("Tidal Wave" 1974, transcribed by LAMM)

Several more narrators looked for explanations that would fit the noise in to the general bustle of daily life in their communities. The sole woman interviewed for the 1974 CBC program "Tidal Wave" was surprised to discover that her children were not responsible for the disruption:

In the afternoon, well at five o'clock, my boys was out in the yard and they were playing. And they were making an awful noise, and I went to the window and called them. And I said, "Why are you making such noise?" And they said, "Mom, we weren't making any noise!" I didn't notice the tremor and this was the tremor. The dishes shook and everything. ("Tidal Wave" 1974, transcribed by LAMM)

John William Bonnell stated that he "thought there might be a truck or something coming down" (Tucker 1982, C10348-9, transcribed by LAMM). When he was unable to locate the truck in question he turned his attention skyward since he "thought it might have been an airplane or something flying overhead" (Tucker 1982, C10348-9, transcribed by LAMM), but again he was unable to locate the source of the disturbance. Vivian Wiseman's mother thought that the tremor in her household was being caused by one of the community goats. According to Vivian, goats wore yokes or had a piece of lumber tied to their horns. These contraptions were meant to keep the goats from fitting through the gaps in garden fences, since they were otherwise free to roam about the community. Vivian's mother believed the noise was the result of one such adorned goat that had managed to get itself stuck under the piers of her house, thus causing the noise and the trembling (Wiseman 2006).

Joseph Leheunen of Île aux Marins, a small island that is part of the French Territory of Saint-Pierre and Miquelon, contemplated a natural disaster of a different kind as the explanation for the disruption. The islands are less than twenty miles from the coast of the Burin Peninsula making it unsurprising that Tidal Wave narratives exist amongst the repertoires of Newfoundland's French neighbours. Leheunen wrote his account of the Tidal Wave in a journal eight days after the event and as such his narrative is very well polished:

Afterwards, I said to myself that it was probably some kind of volcanic eruption, in Martinique, maybe or Iceland, though that was a long way away. (Jamieson 1989, translated and transcribed by Jamieson)

Jessie Brushett's narrative reveals that ten years after the end of the First World War, Newfoundlanders were still concerned by the possibility of a naval attack. She described the reactions of the men in her community as follows:

They thought the Germans were coming in. I don't know what made them think that. All the men was all on the other side of the island and going with their guns and everything. They were going to get them somehow or other. (Brushett 1980, C8826, transcribed by LAMM).

She further states what she thought was causing the rising water levels: "I thought the island was sinking and so did all the rest of them, until the water went out the third time" (Brushett 1980, C8826, transcribed by LAMM).

Mary Anne Counsel described the sound of the earthquake as similar to that made by a chimney falling when Eric West interviewed her in the 1970s. She also recounts her immediate reaction to the sound of the approaching Tidal Wave which reveals a very different first impression:

I was learning how to spin wool, and I was doing it alright. I was spinning away this day and the wheel got harder and I couldn't get it to do nothing. I was casting and the wool was bursting as I would spin it. So I wished the devil would take the wheel and then I wouldn't have anything to do about spinning. And there was a woman sat on the chair, she said, "The devil will come and you'll get some fright." I said, yes, I would, so I'd gladly take it back, what I said. And then that evening, about five o'clock, or somewhere around that time, this big trembling come and the house was shivering. The dishes were dancing, the glasses rattling and I was frightened to death. I thought the devil was coming for the wheel. That's why I'll never forget it. I thought the devil was really coming. (West 1978, C78-236, transcribed by LAMM)

This excerpt shows how unusual the earthquake was and gives insight into the tangible nature of Counsel's religious beliefs. The devil was not an abstract symbol for evil but rather an actual being who had the ability to physically manifest himself and exert influence over those who had called upon him. Counsel's belief that the sound and tremor of the earthquake were the devil fits Stith Thompson's motif J1780, Things thought to be devils, ghosts, etc. Counsel's devil differs slightly from most found in the Motif Index (Thompson 1966) in that it is attributed to a phenomenon rather than a physical object. From the diverse explanations that jumped into people's minds when the earthquake began we are able to determine that this type of occurrence was extremely unusual, if not unheard of, for the majority of the people living on the Burin Peninsula in 1929. As such the event is quite distinct from other tragedies that have struck the area and stands out in the minds of those living in the region as a unique and bizarre piece of their history.

#### *4.1.05 Predictions of the Approaching Tidal Wave*

A striking theme present in Tidal Wave narratives is that of an elderly community member who predicted the approaching Tidal Wave. Of those that cite such a prediction, all of the accounts cite knowledgeable, older, male community members warning of the impending disaster except for one, which attributes the warning to an elderly woman.

Doreen (Bonnell) Masters, a second generation Tidal Wave narrator, stated:

This big tremor came about a couple of hours before it was an old woman, she used to live up in Nante's Cove, she said to my mother – my mother was on the way down from being up to another place three miles away from us – she said to Mom, "Lizzie," she said, "we're going to have some kind of an earthquake." And mom said, "What do you mean?" She said, "We're going to have a tidal wave." Somehow these old people knew that something was going to happen, right. (Hillier 1991, MUNFLA 92-290 uncatalogued tape, transcribed by LAMM)

Andrew Stickland quotes Joe Hodge, a man he described as educated, as saying "There's going to be a tidal wave" (Lambe 1991, MUNFLA 92-030 uncatalogued tape, transcribed by LAMM). Anthony Etchegary attributes Hardy Taylor, a man who had traveled overseas, with the warning, "You can pack your bags... you'll have water now after this" (Etchegary 1969, C570, transcribed by LAMM). John William Bonnell maintains that people laughed at Uncle Joe Miller when he said, "That sounds to me like it might be the beginning of a tidal wave" (Tucker 1982, C10348-9, transcribed by LAMM). Bonnell is careful to include the fact that Uncle Joe Miller "was born over in Malo in France, and Uncle Joe could remember something about tidal waves that happened over on that side of the Atlantic" (Tucker 1982, C10348-9, transcribed by LAMM).

Another French prediction occurred on Île aux Marins. Joseph Leheunen recalled that a school teacher named Monsieur Bonin said the following to him:

You know, there's something I'm worried about, but I don't want you to tell a soul, because that could... Anyway, I'm worried there might be a tidal wave. Because when there's an undersea earthquake," he said, "there is almost always a tidal wave to follow. And I think it was an underwater earthquake, so there's sure to be a tidal wave. So," he said, "look out for that wave! And sometimes there's a second one after that." (Jamieson 1989, translated and transcribed by Jamieson)

All of the Tidal Wave predictions fall under Stith Thompson's motif category M340, Unfavourable prophecies. More specifically, they could be classed as M340.5, Prediction of danger, or as M340.6, Prophecy of great misfortune. Motifs that make a fictional story interesting are no less effective when they occur in stories about reality.

#### *4.1.06 The Miraculous and Extraordinary*

The miraculous and the extraordinary are themes that clearly raise concerns regarding credibility. According to Dégh and Vázsony, legends "now focus more on paranormal, horrible, bizarre, and thus controversial encounters which demand, by their nature, statements of opinion from the members of legend-telling events" (1978: 253). The question of truth concerning legends is not as straightforward as it may at first appear. In order to explore this further, I will turn to one of the Tidal Wave legends I collected.

Vincent Mallay was fourteen years old at the time of the Tidal Wave and although his community was not affected he could recall hearing stories about the event. At the time of the earthquake that preceded the tsunami, Mallay was walking down a road and only became aware of the tremor when people started to run out of their homes, frightened by their rattling dishes. Mallay recounted two Tidal Wave narratives to me,

both of which were vicarious. The first is the story of a man who had been bed-ridden for two or more years and who managed to save himself from the approaching waves:

Well that was the only thing I know about it like that he, as a matter of fact I don't even know what his name was but as I say he lived right there on The Point and he was bed-ridden for two years or some better. When all, everybody kept rushing around out of the house that was trembling and everything else, he got out of bed and he walked. That's a nice little walk across there, about halfway up that hill before he collapsed. And he didn't die then, he just collapsed now as far as I know. The house was washed away off of the tip of Con they call there and, was his name Strang, was his name? I think it was Strang, something like that. Strang is a name from Lawn and St. Lawrence anyway, but I feel so inadequate, not to remember the name, you know? (Mallay 2006)

The important and revealing truth of this legend is not whether or not a bed-ridden man actually was able to climb a hill in order to escape the Tidal Wave, but rather the contemporary social comment that the story contains.

Mallay's legend is the only account I have pertaining to an elderly resident rescuing himself from impending doom. The legend is especially meaningful given that Mallay was in his nineties and residing in a retirement home when he was interviewed. Although he was not bedridden, his position in life was not unlike that of the man in his legend. Once he had exhausted his knowledge of Tidal Wave stories, Mallay told me that he had experienced three miracles in his lifetime. The first, and most vividly recalled, involved a rather dramatic near-death experience at sea where he too escaped an engulfing wave that, had it struck his vessel, surely would have killed all aboard. Mallay's personal experience narrative further links himself to the man in his Tidal Wave legend and infers that Mallay believes the legend he narrated to be true. His belief in the legend of the bed-ridden man may stem directly from his personal experiences with what



he describes as miracles. In his article on the legend of Sheila na Geira, Philip Hiscock argues that “the legend of Sheila tells us more about changing twentieth century anxieties than about seventeen- or eighteenth-century life” (2002a: 222). Just as the Sheila na Geira legend reflects the contemporary concerns of the tellers, so too Mallay’s legends reflect issues that were of importance to him at the time of the legend telling; an elderly man’s ability to overcome physical impediments to save his own life.

Mallay’s second narrative is of a house carried out to sea with children inside. Thanks to the light of a still-lit lamp, the children were rescued. Both of his narratives are vicarious and it is clear in the narrative above that Mallay feels he is not able to tell these stories well since they are not his own, meaning they are not personal experience narratives. He frequently made reference to his lack of knowledge on the Tidal Wave. While he felt that his knowledge of disaster was limited he told me that he had been interviewed for thesis research previously and had been very informative since the topic of that work was on self-taught learners, something very personal and integral to Mallay’s life.

Mallay also proceeded to narrate several personal experiences that he felt fit into the same category of story as the Tidal Wave narratives he had recounted. Although he was only able to remember two, Mallay told me that he had experienced three miracles in his life. This revelation and the recounting of two of those experiences provide Mallay’s Tidal Wave narratives with their evaluative function. Without Mallay’s personal experiences of miraculous occurrences the Tidal Wave narratives may not have caught his attention or held any significance. Once the audience is aware that Mallay believes in

miracles and that he had personally experienced several it becomes clear that the Tidal Wave narratives Mallay recalled are part of his repertoire because they fit into the category of miraculous narratives. Since he was not directly affected and was not faced with helping to rebuild a community ravaged by the Tidal Wave, Mallay was able to recall vignettes of the miraculous and stories of deliverance rather than of loss and suffering.

Karen Kennedy cites a miraculous occurrence in her 1978 manuscript based on the narratives of Mrs. Picco:

Mrs. Picco told us of how she watched the wave come right up to her very doorstep. Opening the door, she stood on her step and sprinkled holy water about the ground. The wave receded without ever coming any closer to her house. To this day Mrs. Picco attributes the saving of her house and the lives of her children to the grace of God. (Kennedy 1978: 12, MUNFLA 80-247)

A second example of the perceived power of religious objects appeared in Sara Slaney's narrative: "everyone left their home with rosary beads, statues, and pictures and were running to the chapel" (O'Driscoll 1975: 11, MUNFLA 75-198). In the face of such unconquerable odds many community members turned to their faith. Religious objects offered people something to focus on other than the chaos surrounding them and a ray of hope in an otherwise bleak situation.

#### *4.1.07 Transformative Event*

Those who were severely traumatized by the Tidal Wave were said to no longer be the same, or were referred to as changed in some way, and some were referred to as odd. Barbara Rieti discusses one role of fairy narratives as that of explaining mental and

physical conditions: changeling traditions “reflect the sad situation that occurs when, through mental or physical disease, a person is no longer ‘himself’” (Rieti 1993: 44).

Several individuals who were deeply affected by the Tidal Wave were said to have never been the same afterwards. Joseph Leheunen made mention of one such case:

There was a young woman who was married to a man from St. Pierre, named Fouchard. Some of her children live here, over on the Cap-à-l’aigle road. Well, one of them saw... her father and mother lost along with the house. So, she was traumatized by it all and she’s still a bit odd. People make fun of her. But it’s not funny, seeing your father and mother go... And there were other victims. (Jamieson 1989, translated and transcribed by Jamieson)

The troubling scene described above scene challenges some of the most cherished notions of the security of Western society. When this type of disaster occurs the opportunity arises to question the validity of all societal constructions of safety and support.

#### *4.1.08 Untellability*

Another example of the life-altering power of the Tidal Wave can be found in the narratives of Sheila Walsh. Sheila’s mother, Judy, was swept out to sea and was found hours later, naked, kelp tangled in her hair, and delirious. Sheila has noted that both her mother and her father, for the most part, refrained from discussing the Tidal Wave. In her work on women’s abuse narratives, Elaine Lawless has noted that

in many of their stories there is a point where acute violence enters and where the narrative appears to “break down,” where language and narrative becomes erratic, loses its coherence, and *resists failure* by deferring to silence in order to do the event justice... to name the evil, the violence, the abuser, is to continue to give it/him continued power in and over their lives (Lawless 2001: 64)

While narrating an event can sometimes be empowering for the speaker because it offers the opportunity for the narrator to take control of a situation that was uncontrollable at the time it occurred, it can also be debilitating because the narrator is not ready to face the experience again. Lawless's 'deference to silence,' or untellability, is useful here.

Doreen Masters stated that her father was disinclined to speak about the Tidal Wave:

I don't know where they found him. I never did find out. Dad would never talk about it. People couldn't get Dad to talk about it. Every year his nerves would get bad at the same time, of the Tidal Wave. (Hillier 1991, MUNFLA 92-290 uncatalogued tape, transcribed by LAMM)

In all of these examples the untellable stories revolve around the narrator's inability to help or rescue a loved one. Basil and Judy Walsh were unable to rescue Basil's mother and aunt, and Doreen's father was unable to save his two sons. With Tidal Wave narratives there is no opportunity for the narrator to change the outcome of the story; no matter how many times the tale is retold loved ones will die in a violent and terrifying manner. These narratives do not offer the speaker any opportunity to reclaim power through the act of retelling. As a result, those who were traumatized by the experience chose simply not to relive the experience in an effort to avoid the pain associated with the event.

#### *4.1.09 Survival*

While 27 people were lost the night of the Tidal Wave and many people lost friends and family, the majority of Tidal Wave stories focus on those that survived the experience. Although two of Doreen Masters's brothers died, her father and her older

sister, Bessie (Elizabeth), escaped similar fates even though they too were swept up in the waters of the tsunami. Sara Slaney noted that “the telegraph operator stayed in the office through the whole ordeal calling for help all over the world, and her office was afloat way out in the harbour, they picked her up the next morning” (O’Driscoll 1975: 14, MUNFLA 75-198). Pius Power stated that he rescued a child from the waters: “I caught one of the girls. One of the children was floating around the corner of the house when I was coming out through the door and I caught her, she had long hair” (Short 1979, C5552, transcribed by LAMM). Jessie Brushett attributes the saving of one of her sisters’ lives to the family dog<sup>27</sup>: “We had a big dog, a water dog, and he saved my sister – caught her by the dress and dragged her ashore” (Brushett 1980, C8826, transcribed by LAMM). Margaret Lawrence’s family escaped their family home:

My father went to the front door and couldn’t get it open, the water rushed in. Then he went to the back door and the water was coming back so by that time it was up to our knees in water. So he went upstairs. He said, “I’ll go up and break out a window and see if we can get out.” There was a porch out on the house, but it was on the other side of the house. So he went up and broke out the window and when he broke out the window the porch that was on the other side of the house was shifted and moved under that window. And we all got out, even the cat” (King 1987, C13926, transcribed by LAMM)

Considering that 10,000 people were affected yet only 27 casualties were reported, it is not unexpected that the majority of Tidal Wave narratives will contain tales of survival. These stories are inspiring in the same way that the stories of loss are heart-rending and seemingly unjust. Both types of narrative are important and are recognized at the

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<sup>27</sup> While the dog in this narrative fits the image of man’s best friend, in her work The Devil in Dog Form Barbara Allen Woods has noted numerous narratives where dogs are much more ominous creatures (1959).

community level. Mixed in with the miraculous and marvelous are the tragic and terrifying.

An oft-repeated motif, nearly always as a second-hand story, is that of the very graphic image of a house afloat on the ocean, clearly visible because of the still-lit kerosene lamp discernable through the windows. I have located no less than six accounts of just such a house and lamp. One such narrative as told by Vincent Mallay was mentioned earlier in this chapter, in section 4.1.4. Similar to Mallay's story of a family being rescued, John William Bonnell recounted the following information:

That house was carried out over the beach and out into the harbour, and being after dark now, this was seven o'clock the Tidal Wave flowed in, the harbour filled up. The baby was asleep in his cot and the lamp was on the table and Aunt May was in the house and some men went out, after the Tidal Waves was over, and got Aunt May out through the top the window and her child out of the house, and got it safely. (Tucker 1982, C10348-9, transcribed by LAMM)

The only first-person narrative that I located pertaining to the theme of the lit lamp was that told by an unnamed woman for the CBC program "Tidal Wave." She credits her ability to keep her children alive to the lamp:

I didn't know the house was gone but because there was nothing but a roaration, you know, there was a lot of noise. Door burst open, flooded level with the windows. Had three children in the water with me, picking one up over here, one up over under the table, one way over there, trying to keep them up off the ground. The lamp stayed on the table and the light never went out. I said, "The Lord keep the lamp burning," because if the lamp went out I couldn't see the children because poor Stanley was way over there and another one would be over there. I was going all the time back and forth saving the children. They kept going under the water because the water was going right rapid, see the water was going so rapid, it wasn't like it was still. ("Tidal Wave" 1974)

White light is often considered a sign of hope or salvation and is regularly used in religious iconography. In the above instances the lit lamps in the sea-swept homes are also symbols of hope and survival. Jessie Brushett's home, although unoccupied, was also spared:

We saved our house. Tipped it back in the bank and it was sculpins and everything into it. And we lost a good bit of stuff, all our clothes what was down below was gone and everything like that. But one thing that – you would never believe it lest you seen it – the table floated across the kitchen with the lamp lit on it, and he was still lit the next day, because there was no electric lights then, especially over on the island. (Brushett 1980, C8826, transcribed by LAMM)

Unfortunately, not all stories of houses taken out to sea with their lights still visible from shore are stories of survival or rescued homes. Margaret Lawrence's family was able to watch the destruction of their house in part because of the light that was visible in the window:

Then we saw another wave coming in, as big as a mountain, and it took the house and carried it out through. We could see the lamp lit in the window because the light was screwed on the wall them times, there was no electric lights. So that wave took the house and beat it right up on the rocks, and we was left with nothing. (King 1987, C13926, transcribed by LAMM)

Andrew Strickland related the following:

One went out in Lord's Cove, now that's a little place below us. That moved right out. There was a light on the table lit. The mother was drowned and three children in the house and the lamp was on the kitchen table when the house went out with the sea. Went on out and went on out in the middle of the harbour in Lord's Cove and the lamp was still lit on the table. It never upset. (Lambe 1991, MUNFLA 92-030 uncatalogued tape, transcribed by LAMM)

Sara Slaney recalled another fatal incident; "There was one poor old lady, Auntie's aunt, who was washed out to sea, and the last they see of her was her lamp in the window"

(O'Driscoll 1975: 9, MUNFLA 75-198). Stories of bottle of ink are an interesting juxtaposition to the very visual description of the lit lamps. The black of the ink appears as a binary opposite (Lévi-Strauss 1955) to the light of the lamps, rather than illuminating it covers or conceals, especially if spilled rather than used for writing. The following two narratives describe black ink, one where the ink is an omen of death and the other where the ink, ironically, symbolizes salvation. Karen Kennedy reported the following story of Mrs. Picco's:

An even stranger story is one to do with an inkwell. The family had gone to bed for the night and left an inkwell with the pen still in it, on a table. The wave came in, and swept the house out to sea. The family in their panic left the safety of their beds and tried to get out of the house, they were all drowned. When the wave receded it left the house on the beach in the same spot it had taken it from, so gently did it place it there that the bottle of ink was still upright on the table with the pen still in it just as it had been. It is sad to think that if the people had remained in their beds they may have lived to tell the tale. (Kennedy 1978: 12, MUNFLA 80-247)

The second ink narrative was told to me by Lillian Noseworthy and she referred to the incident as amazing. Bartlett's store was picked up by the force of the water, turned around and carried into the Meadow. The store was carried so gently by the water that nothing in the store was disturbed and a bottle of ink was still standing upright. Both buildings attributed with the undisturbed bottle of ink are devoid of human life, the store because no one lived there and the house because the family died trying to escape their home which was eventually returned to shore safely. Much like Maisie Knox's bowl of apples (Chapter Two), the lamp and the bottle of ink serve as very graphic, frozen images of order within the chaos of the Tidal Wave. Although the family in the house with the



inkbottle perished the house itself was saved and so all do serve as snippets that signify salvation in the face of terrible danger.

#### *4.1.10 Effect of Place*

The Tidal Wave had a markedly different effect on each community that it touched. The geography of each settlement had a large impact on how the surge of water looked and felt when it reached the shore and traveled beyond the high water mark and into the communities. Each narrative told from the perspective of an affected outport makes reference to the natural landscape of the community as well as to how the approaching water behaved when it reached the land. Yi-Fu Tuan has asserted that “natural environment and world view are closely related” and that world view “is necessarily constructed out of the salient elements of a people’s social and physical setting” (1974: 79). Many people living in the outports of Newfoundland in the early twentieth century could trace back their family history in the area for several generations (Butler 1975; Harris 2002; Penney Winsor 1998; Ryan 1992). Keith Basso has suggested that “as speakers communicate about the landscape and the kinds of dealings they have with it, they also communicate about themselves as social actors and the kinds of dealings they are having with one another” (1988: 101). A person’s comments regarding their surroundings, such as comments about how the Tidal Wave changed the physical appearance of communities, can provide information not only about the physical impact but about the social impact of the event.

A recurring motif within the Tidal Wave narratives is that of water, more specifically how the water was different during the event than at any other time. Lillian Noseworthy (2006) and Sara Slaney described the approaching inundation as being “mountains high” (O’Driscoll 1975: 10, MUNFLA 75-198). Pius Power described the water as “big old water, it was right full of steam and smoke was going right through the ceiling” (Short 1979, C5552; transcribed by LAMM). Walter Foote noticed something different about the water which he likened to “something [that] was boiling” (Lake 1976, C2947; transcribed by LAMM). Gus Etchegary reported that the harbour in St. Lawrence was shaped like a horseshoe and that “as it [the first wave] came into the harbour the wave went higher and higher and higher, and some people said it was thirty or forty feet and you could see it coming in” (2006). The intensity and height of the water was affected by the natural landscape of the approach to each of the communities.

In areas where the approach was wide and flat, such as Lamaline, Point Au Gaul and Taylor’s Bay, the wave was not as high as areas such as Lawn or St. Lawrence (see figures 4.1 through 4.3), and was described as having Foote’s “boiling” quality that was also noticed by an unnamed woman from Point Au Gaul: “the water was going right rapid see, the water was going so rapid. It wasn’t like it was still” (“Tidal Wave” 1974; transcribed by LAMM). Tony Etchegary prompted his father about a horse that “went across the dry bottom” of the harbour (1969, transcribed by LAMM) and Sara Slaney noted that “Tom Pike had a horse on the beach and it was torn loose and it could be seen walking in the harbour on the sand, because when the wave receded there was no water left in the harbour” (O’Driscoll 1975: 10, MUNFLA 75-198). The recession of the water

was noted in a number of communities, William Pittman from Lamaline stated that “the cove dried right out and we saw rocks that we hadn’t seen before” (Ayers 1973: 24, MUNFLA 74-12). Andrew Strickland recalled that “the water went right out completely, never a drop in Lamaline harbour” (Lambe 1991, MUNFLA 92-030 uncatalogued tape, transcribed by LAMM). Vivian Wiseman in the distant community of Belleoram noticed that “the water rushed out of the harbour [and] you could see all the rocks and everything and all the kelp that used to grow along the shore was gone” (2006).

Oral tradition maintains that people moved from the Burin Peninsula to the community of Lourdes on the Port au Port Peninsula on the West Coast of Newfoundland. Although I was unable to speak to anyone from Lourdes that had heard any Tidal Wave stories, information abounds about the establishment of Lourdes, formerly known as Clam Bank Cove, during the government resettlement program of the 1930s and 40s. Several communities, near Belleoram on the Connaigre Peninsula, provided settlers for Lourdes. According to a Folklore assignment completed by Carmelita Meaney in the Fall of 1976 “the main regions supplying settlers [to Lourdes] were Millers Passage, Harbour Breton and Sagona Island” (Meaney 1976: 12). Philomena Vallis and her husband were amongst the first settlers to move to Lourdes from Harbour Breton. According to Philomena, they moved because her husband “didn’t like banking sea, [fishing on the Grand Banks] and he sooner be working on the land” (Duffenais 1982: 6). The legend of Tidal Wave survivors relocating to the West Coast of Newfoundland marks one area where the written and oral records of the event are distinctly divergent.

## 4.2 Summary

A number of themes and motifs have been noted in Tidal Wave narratives. While the event is now presented as a piece of local history for tourist consumption it affected communities and individuals in unique ways, and individuals responded differently to the loss and trauma of the event. The most common similarity in the narratives was the use of chronological order to describe the events of November 18, 1929. This phenomenon is typical of North American worldview and signifies the author's attempt to present a narrative that appears truthful. For some the event was miraculous and entire families were spared an untimely death while others were swept out to sea and never seen again. A number of people were so deeply traumatized that they were described as being different or changed by the Tidal Wave. The distinct geographical features of each community altered the appearance, force and effect of the Tidal Wave, making it possible for the waves to have reached extraordinary heights in some areas while hardly reaching three feet above sea level in others. Common visual motifs such as a burning lamp visible in a floating house link the oral traditions of most affected communities. Many of the repeated elements of Tidal Wave narratives have qualities of the amazing and usual. These characteristics are considered to constitute a good story and as such they have circulated widely as legends told by Tidal Wave survivors in conjunction with their own experiences. Since the narratives contain elements of a good story and have the added appeal of describing local events, Tidal Wave narratives have been passed on, through oral tradition, to succeeding generations of Newfoundlanders.



Figure 4.1, Lamaline, January 2006. Photograph by LAMM.



Figure 4.2 Point Au Gaul, January 2006. Photograph by LAMM.



Figure 4.3 Lawn, January 2006. Photograph by LAMM.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

Disasters retain their place in oral history because of their impact on society. The 1929 Tidal Wave altered the physical and demographic makeup of numerous communities on the Burin Peninsula. Tidal Wave narratives have maintained their appeal for over three-quarters of a century because the narratives have historical and social significance that transcends the boundaries of time and place. Narratives of disaster, such as those relating to the 1929 Tidal Wave, provide fodder for the empathetic understanding of peoples facing a similar situation, such as those affected by the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. Anyone wishing to understand the physical and social structures of many of the communities on the Burin Peninsula would have an incomplete picture without information pertaining to the Tidal Wave. The Newfoundland-wide and international response to the call for aid in the wake of the tsunami has allowed a greater number of people to claim ties to the macro level disaster and to associate their families and communities with those that were devastated by the crisis.

Further evidence of the impact of the Tidal Wave includes the coining of a term, “roaration,” that specifically refers to the sound of the approaching water as documented in the Dictionary of Newfoundland English (Story et al. 1999) and in the composition of three songs dedicated to the event (Burke 1929; Peppard 2001; “Tidal Wave at Burin” 2004; West 1978). At least one of the songs circulated in oral tradition and was recorded in the field in the 1950s by MacEdward Leach (“Tidal Wave at Burin” 2004).

Donald Ward has argued that society latently recognizes “how important it is for one to formulate one’s harrowing plight in the form of a narrative and how significant it is for the individual ultimately to relate their ‘story’ to others” (1990: 63). The human impulse to know and be known drives us to share our stories, the ways in which we make sense of the world, and what happens to us while we are in it. For the field researcher, the act of collecting and interpreting information on a given subject is as much a personal journey as it is an exploration of the experiences and knowledge of others (Jackson and Ives 1996). The contributors to Jackson and Ives’s 1996 publication The World Observed describe “fieldwork insight” (1996: xi) and how they were able, as researchers, to come to a coherent understanding of the meaning of their collected material, how they reached their “epiphany.”

The fieldwork undertaken for this research project inevitably led to conversations dealing with more than simply the details of the Tidal Wave experience. Most of the participants that I spoke to shared a fair bit of information about their families and children as well as their parents and siblings. This shift in the conversation was the natural result of asking people to share a personal story about an event that had a large impact on their lives, their families, their friends or members of neighbouring communities. Tidal Wave narratives can be viewed as a single episode in the life stories of my participants, regardless of whether the Tidal Wave narrative was first or second-hand. Many children attribute a great deal of their sense of identity to their upbringing and parental influence, as such important events in a parent’s life are often viewed as having an impact on the life of the child, whether that influence is consciously recognized or not. Stahl has argued that personal experience narrative is used to create a sense of



intimacy between the teller and the audience (1989). The intimacy created by sharing a personal experience narrative has made this form of communication an intrinsic part of family folklore. Personal experience narratives of absent or deceased relatives are recounted as legends by descendants in order to educate younger generations about their forebears as well as to remind themselves of absent loved ones.

The close connections between the French Islands of St. Pierre and Miquelon and the communities of the Burin Peninsula, stemming from the shared natural resources of the fishery and numerous intermarriages, make the comparison of narratives from the two groups, Newfoundlanders and French colonists, an interesting endeavour. Although the two groups have distinct cultures, the similarities in their lifestyles in early-twentieth century make it unsurprising that the narrative formats employed by both groups show numerous similarities. The structural and motif parallels mark a significant congruence between the personal experience narrative traditions of both groups.

Archival photograph collections of the Tidal Wave have facilitated the commodification of the event and the ability to make stories of the disaster available to a wide audience through heritage shops and video recordings. Popular press publications have also enhanced the dispersion of knowledge about the Tidal Wave. Grade School heritage projects have helped to educate younger generations about the event as well as to remind parents and teachers about the details of the disaster. The Burin Heritage Museum has been granted funding to digitize its collection of Tidal Wave photographs in order to make the images available on the internet. Current initiatives to digitize archival photograph collections, including the collection of images housed at the Burin Heritage House, will also increase the profile of the event and make it accessible to a wider

audience than that found in the affected communities or the province of Newfoundland and Labrador. Narratives are told in order to serve the needs of the teller in the moment (Hiscock 2002a). Tidal Wave narratives told immediately after the event were used to help the victims make sense of their experiences and bond with each other. Narratives of the event told three-quarters of a century later have been told to create a sense of sympathy for past and present-day tsunami victims as well as to convey a sense of place and establish aspects of individual and regional identity.

Documenting the shifting functions of Tidal Wave narratives provides researchers with the opportunity to note how narratives are adapted by their tellers to suit the teller's understanding of the event at the time of the telling rather than at the time of the occurrence. Examining the narratives that have been collected during the intervening years illustrates the shifting concerns of community residents as well as societal roles that have changed or remained static. The economy of the Burin Peninsula has experienced cycles of boom and bust. Area residents have been able to look to the Tidal Wave narratives for examples of hardship that were overcome. The discovery of fluorspar in St. Lawrence created an economic boom and employment opportunities but also had devastating health repercussions for those who were exposed to dust from the mines for long periods of time. Stories of conditions in the St. Lawrence mines are also being used in tourism literature of the Burin Peninsula.

Although the fishery continued to operate, the depleted fish stock meant that the fishery was no longer able to sustain the same number of families. The introduction of mining to the area created new employment opportunities and required a completely different skill set from that of the fishery. Traditional information relating to the fishing

grounds around the Burin Peninsula had to be modified due to the changes to the ocean floor. Men who began working in the mines needed to adapt to very different working conditions and begin to collect knowledge about how to best go about their tasks. Over time this knowledge was passed from seasoned miners to the newer workers just as information about the fishing grounds would have been passed along. As such former fishing families replaced their knowledge of the traditional fishing grounds with similar life and time saving information pertaining to the mines.

Contrary to Tosh's hypothesis that oral tradition becomes "practically extinct in highly industrialized countries" (1999:193), narratives of the Tidal Wave prove that oral tradition remains a vital aspect of human communication in a modern community. Unlike the oral historical preoccupation with literal truth and corroboration of fact, the folkloristic approach to narrative focuses on personal truth and the creation and maintenance of personal identity that is transmitted through narrative. Just as each individual is unique, so too is each Tidal Wave narrative, although many share common themes and motifs. By examining the similarities and differences of Tidal Wave narratives this thesis has attempted to explore the ways that narrative is used to create and convey identity to a wider audience.

Identity, how we perceive ourselves and wish to be perceived by others, is tied to the groups that we belong to as well as our associations of time and place. Personal beliefs and those of the people that have been influential in our lives also play a large role in our conception of self. When meeting a new person it is common to ask questions such as where that person comes from and what their family background is. We ask these types of questions because we believe that we can infer information about the individual

based on his or her responses. We conceive of others as being influenced by their place of origin because we understand ourselves to be equally shaped by where we have lived. Exceptions to all rules exist and there are those who try to buck associations to place, often by moving away from the location. Many Newfoundlanders have a very strong sense of identity tied to place and are proud of the associations linked to being a Newfoundlander. Residents of the Burin Peninsula include important local events in their conception of place. The area has a history of bootlegging tied to the French Islands just off of their coastline (Wareham 1982: 24; Welcome to the Heritage Run 2006). Residents have also been called upon to help the crews of ships that have foundered just off shore and have gained a reputation for generosity and hospitality (Rowse 2006).

The narratives examined in this thesis demonstrated a pronounced pattern of gender and social roles both in 1929 outport society as well as in performance context. Tidal Wave narratives portray men as active agents while women filled a more passive role. Interestingly, young boys existed in a liminal category since they were unable to take on the expected roles of men but were also not placed in the same passive, domestic sphere as women and female children (Etchegary 2006). As stated earlier, there are exceptions to every rule and the narrative of Sara Slaney of St. Lawrence frames the speaker, a mother, as very active in her efforts to ensure the safety of her children and her elderly relatives (O'Driscoll 1975).

The Tidal Wave is another event in the history of the area that is used to define the people and the space. Although the event was tragic, narratives of the disaster also include many stories of miraculous happenings and the salvation of many who could have become victims. While much was lost, community members played an essential role

in the rebuilding of their homes as well as the rebuilding of neighbouring communities. Involvement in the rebuilding process brought people together and had a cathartic and empowering effect. Repairing and building homes allowed those who had experienced a sense of helplessness to regain a sense of agency and mastery over the world around them. Helping those who had suffered most strengthened the area's sense of community and created bonds of friendship and trust that surpassed those held previously.

The importance of the event continues to be recognized through local museums, publications, and the interest of school-age children. The Tidal Wave changed the layout of many of the communities and increased the population's awareness of the power and unpredictability of the ocean, the same ocean they relied upon for their livelihoods. Previously, the ocean was understood to be uncontrollable and was treated with respect, but its power was deemed to be limited to when men ventured out upon the waters. The Tidal Wave demanded a new level of respect and caution for the ocean because the boundaries of land and sea had been violently crossed and those who were most confident about where that boundary should be, those who built closest to the landwash, lost a great deal to the force of the waves.

## **5.1 Future Research**

There are a number of avenues for future research that stem from this project. One is a path that I hope to pursue in my PhD study of the Ocean Ranger disaster of 1982. In collecting narratives of a more recent event I hope to focus on the vernacular narratives of disaster as contrasted with the political, social, and cultural agendas that shape larger dominant discourse.

Further exploration of the commodification of disaster narratives could reveal cultural patterns of how we interpret and cope with devastating situations. The large number of public exhibits built internationally to commemorate disaster, such as Holocaust and war memorials, suggest that this avenue of research could yield a great deal of insight. Monitoring how first-person experiences are reshaped as they begin to only exist orally as contemporary legend could be beneficial for personal experience narrative and legend scholarship in that it would provide an opportunity to document how such a transition occurs and what sort of changes take place in order to accommodate the genre shift of a narrative.

Disaster narrative research is an area where a great deal of research is being pursued as a result of more recent events such as 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina. This area of study continues to reveal ways that people deal with grief, how they react to traumatic situations and how they cope with the aftermath. Although a disaster can affect thousands of people, each person's experience of the event is unique. Patterns and disparities in these experiences highlight what is common and what is individualized. Recognizing what links us and what makes us unique in a given situation can provide insight into how we reconcile our autonomy with our group affiliations.

The Tidal Wave, although commemorated every year by Newfoundland newspapers, was only featured in the national press as a result of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. Although Newfoundland was not part of the Dominion of Canada in 1929, newspaper reporters claimed that Canadians could empathize with the 2004 tsunami victims because of 1929 Tidal Wave. Claiming the 1929 Tidal Wave for all of Canada shows that such events are recognized as character building and are used to define

identity not only on a personal basis but also on a national level. Just as contemporary newspaper reports of the Tidal Wave asked the unaffected to donate to the destitute, the coverage of the 2004 tsunami was used as a spring board to try to garner financial aid for those left with nothing. The coverage was perhaps most effective because it carried the message that this type of disaster could affect Canadians and as such it was in Canada's best interest to help others so that, should the need arise, others might help Canadians in turn.

Those that still have memories of the Tidal Wave are now in their senior years. It will be very interesting to track stories of the 1929 Tidal Wave once it has completely entered the realm of legend and disappeared from living memory. The transition from memory to legend began almost instantly after the event since many people who were alive at the time did not experience it but heard and repeated the stories of those that witnessed the event. Three-quarters of a century later the process continues and those who did experience it first-hand have incorporated aspects of legends about the event into their own narratives. It will be interesting to monitor how the legend is transmitted and whether or not any aspects of the Tidal Wave become crystallized, or if the stories will remain malleable and take on regional characteristics and colourings.

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<sup>28</sup> Name has been changed at participant's request.

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