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# 2

## Commuting to Garden: Subsisting on Bell Island

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### INTRODUCTION

On a windy afternoon in August of 2015, Fred Parsons and his daughter Cheyenne showed us their greenhouse made of recycled lumber — the muffled sound of wind chimes fading as we moved away from their back porch. The greenhouse was filled with colours and smells of tomato, cucumber, carrot, beet, and mint. Outside, there were more plants, including green beans, rhubarb, strawberries, and raspberries. The year before, they had also cultivated potatoes and onions. In late summer and early fall, the two go berry picking. Their devotion to self-provisioning was evident in their thriving plants as well as winter preserves. Beyond their own tight-knit family unit, Fred, his wife Miranda, and Cheyenne are generous neighbours. When a friend fell ill and requested fresh blueberries, Fred picked five buckets for her in one day. As Fred put it, during the summer months “Every day I’m at this. Every day.”

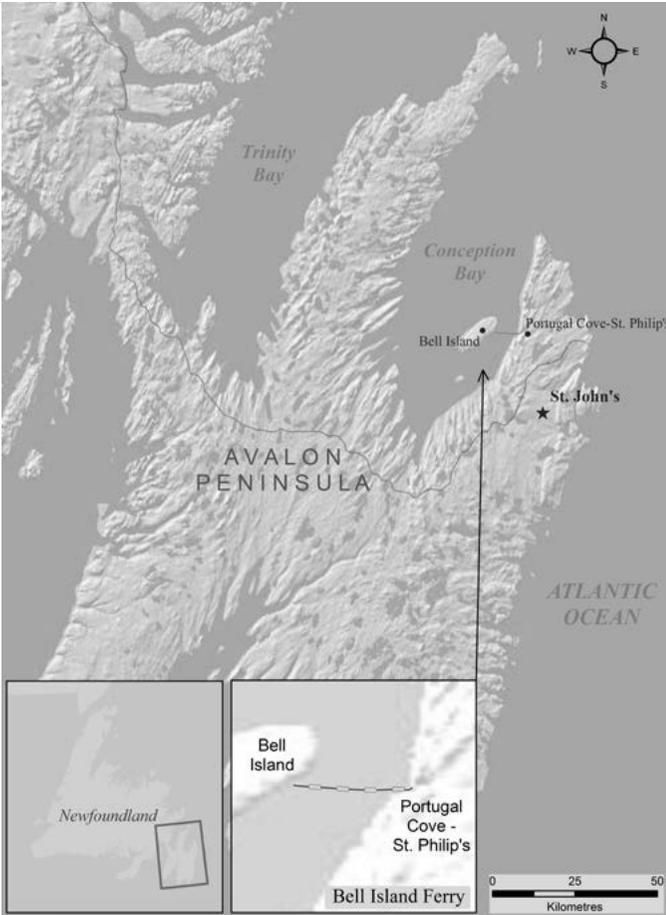
This chapter draws on ethnographic fieldwork with Bell Island residents, such as Fred Parsons, to explore the links between subsistence gardening, place attachment, and commuting mobilities in this part of Newfoundland and Labrador. The “mobility turn” perspective foregrounds “the movement of people, ideas, objects, and information” (Urry, 2010: 17) to counter earlier frameworks that overemphasized the boundedness of social units. In the Newfoundland context, the term “gardening” distinguishes between labour-intensive horticultural activities in smaller planted beds or greenhouses for

the purpose of self-provisioning essential for food security and intensive agricultural production of mainly commercial crops on larger expanses of land (e.g., Antler, 1977; Murray, 1979; Felt, Murphy, and Sinclair, 1995; Omohundro, 1985, 1994, 1995; Porter, 1983: 87). We are employing an approach central to humanistic ethnography of highlighting and honouring the experiences and thoughts of several individuals who represent a range of patterns, in this case a group of six adults<sup>1</sup> who were the children, in-laws, and relatives of men who worked in the Bell Island iron ore mines. These individuals embody different mobilities trajectories related to the post-closure period.

Located in Conception Bay across from the Avalon Peninsula, Bell Island is comprised of the municipality of Wabana and the unincorporated settlements of Lance Cove and Freshwater. An influx of workers seeking employment at six surface and submarine mines that operated at different times from the 1890s to 1966 led Bell Island to have one of the largest populations in Newfoundland by the mid-twentieth century (Martin, 2003; Neary, 1973: 111; Neary, 1975; Weir, 2006). However, when operations ceased at the last functioning iron ore mine in 1966, there was extensive permanent out-migration to places with manufacturing jobs such as Galt, Ontario (now part of Cambridge), mining areas such as Wabush, Labrador, and other parts of North America. As with most other areas of the province, Bell Island's current population is aging and not being replaced by incoming residents. The 2016 Census of Population registered under 2,500 inhabitants (Statistics Canada, 2017), many of whom commute to the Newfoundland mainland daily to work. To reach services in the St. John's area, Bell Islanders are reliant on public ferry transportation across the "Tickle" to the wharf in Portugal Cove.<sup>2</sup> They then travel by road in privately owned vehicles or taxis since there are currently no buses or other public transportation services in Bell Island or the municipality of Portugal Cove-St. Philips.



This chapter is organized in five remaining sections. We next outline our conceptual framework and then discuss our methods and introduce the six Bell Island gardeners who participated in the research. We subsequently summarize the historical context for gardening practices on Bell Island. This is followed by a three-part section where we discuss gardening as a place-making



**Figure 2.1.** Map of study area. Bell Island, Newfoundland and Labrador, showing ferry crossing to Portugal Cove. (Cartography by Myron King)

activity, in terms of people sharing strong memories of their own childhoods and their making of garden places in the present period. Next, we discuss the flows of people, things, capital, and information that are part of Bell Island gardening mobilities. We end with the chapter's conclusion.

## **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

Our argument is organized around an exploration of the interplay between place-making and mobilities in relation to subsistence gardening on Bell Island. We view gardening as one important way some Bell Islanders are remaking place in the wake of reverberations decades after an industrial closure. We thus consider the interconnections between food production

rooted in specific spaces and the geographical movements fed by and feeding into this activity (Tuan, 1977: 152–60), as places are “acted out” (Certeau, 1984: 97–98) or made (Casey, 1996; Feld and Basso, 1996; Pink, 2008a).

Place attachment is often particularly strong in areas characterized by extensive mobilities, including in contexts of migration and industrial closures (Clifford, 1997; Mah, 2012; Olwig, 2007; Stack, 1996; Winson and Leach, 2002). Place attachment involves people developing, through practices, emotional bonds to locations associated with specific sets of meanings, memories, social relationships, and activities across various spatial and temporal scales (Low and Altman, 1992). Place attachment, therefore, occurs as part of active, ongoing processes. Bonds between people and places are reinforced through a variety of activities; these often include unpaid social reproductive labour such as housecleaning, home renovations, and food conservation and preparation (Massey, 1994; Roseman, 2002). Keeping a clean, orderly, and pleasant home, for example, can be “a strategy for providing a highly mobile population with a sense of stability” (Jones, 1985, in Boland Ahrentzen, 1992: 124). So, too, can subsistence gardening. Like unpaid labour within the home, places and people’s attachments to them are often made and remade through gardening, whether on individually owned or leased plots or in community garden spaces (e.g., Halperin, 1990: 68–69, 81–82; Milbourne, 2012; Stocker and Barnett, 1998).

As Mah (2012: 153) found in her research on the strength of place attachment in different locations impacted by industries shutting down or being scaled back, “neither mobility nor fixity creates a sense of loss,” it is rather “limited [economic] choice.” David Ralph and Lynn A. Staeheli (2011: 524) have emphasized “the importance of understanding home as simultaneously mobile and sedentary, as localised and extensible.” They see home as being “like an accordion, in that it both stretches to expand outwards to distant and remote places, while also squeezing to embed people in their proximate and immediate locales and social relations” (see also Gustafson, 2001; Milbourne and Kitchen, 2014). Despite deeply questioning sedentary assumptions, leading thinkers in the “mobility turn” literature also emphasize the links between people’s mobilities and the locational, infrastructural places that enable and interact with them (e.g., Adey, 2010; Verstraete and Cresswell, 2003; Urry, 2003). The gardens of Bell Island can be understood as examples of the sort of material, institutional, and symbolic places-in-the-making

that have a dialectical relationship with the movements of those who tend to them. This perspective on gardens parallels Tornaghi's consideration of how urban agriculture can be viewed as both an important livelihood activity and a form of "place-making" (Tornaghi, 2014). We examine how the continuity and revitalization of subsistence gardening not only contribute to food security, but more broadly constitute one among a series of ways in which residents enact their commitment to Bell Island's history and current context. Like other routine activities that occur in specific locations, gardening provides a conduit for reinforcing people's emotional attachments to their own properties, kin, and the island as a whole. As part of this process, it strengthens existing local conceptualizations and generates new sets of meanings that define their individual and shared cultural identities as Bell Islanders.

The interdisciplinary field of mobility studies emerged in the early 1990s and focuses on a wide range of mobilities, including movements of people and objects through geographical space and information through virtual space (Cresswell, 2006; Urry, 2010). Both are central to gardening on Bell Island, as we illustrate below. We are following a feminist approach to mobilities, labour, and livelihood that highlights how wages and other cash remittances such as pensions and income support cannot be extricated from unpaid tasks such as subsistence gardening – tasks that allow individuals to reproduce themselves and other members of their households and communities daily, weekly, and annually as well as through the generations (Luxton, 2006: 36–37; Brodtkin Sacks, 1989; Roseman, Barber, and Neis, 2015). We are interested in the social reproduction of individual households, the community of Bell Island itself, and the broader kin and friendship networks that extend beyond. The unpaid labour of producing food for one's household and as gifts for extended family members and neighbours encompasses social reproduction at these various scales. As part of a commitment to remaining on the island in the wake of a devastating industrial closure, gardening is one example of residents' unpaid labour contributions to making and remaking Bell Island's place within the regional and global political economies (Tornaghi, 2014; Lefebvre, 1991).

In the mid-nineteenth century, the term "commuting" was employed in reference to American suburban dwellers using public transportation to reach their jobs in urban centres, which led to "the 'commutation' of their daily fares to lower prices, when purchasing tickets in monthly quantities"

(Muller, 2004: 64; Gregory et al., 2011). The term came to be used for various modes of transportation, from cars to bicycles, and for purposes other than reaching employment. Moreover, researchers highlighted how commuting journeys are often not one-purpose or one-stop trips (e.g., Hanson and Hanson, 1981; Hanson, 1985).

To highlight the various distances, itineraries, and travel modes related to gardening, the commuting mobilities in this case study involve commuting off-island to paid employment, commuting off-island to purchase tools and inputs used in gardening, and commuting locally within Bell Island as part of gardening. The idea of “commuting to garden” is empirically descriptive but also has broader metaphorical significance. Along with many of their neighbours, some of the six individuals portrayed here were continuing to commute and garden. If they and many of their neighbours had not begun commuting off-island to earn cash wages in the 1960s, they might not be living on Bell Island in the 2010s. However, as with the case of some of the gardeners discussed below, commuting by ferry and working full-time off-island creates extra challenges for keeping up the intensive work required for gardening. Some Bell Island gardeners delayed or constrained how much gardening they did earlier in life. Their years of commuting, in effect, allowed them to garden once retired or when their work schedules shifted from permanent and full-time to either temporary contracts or full retirement.

## **METHODS AND PARTICIPANTS**

Our primary research method was to ask participants to take us on audio tours of their gardens and to participate in semi-structured interviews about their gardening memories and work during and after these guided visits. Our adoption of this method of interviewing follows Sarah Pink’s use of “video tours” (Pink, 2006: 101). Each garden tour was documented using a digital audio recorder as our research participants showed us what they were growing in their gardens in 2015 and explained how they had built up their garden spaces, reflecting on links to earlier periods in their lives. This chapter also draws on participant observation that includes visiting, gardening work, and participation in community events. Two of the gardeners (George Hickey and Harriett Taylor) also took us on lengthy audio tours by car and explained pertinent information about Bell Island’s gardening and agricultural history, among other topics. Glenda Tedford also accompanied us on

a number of lengthy walking tours, during which she explained the island's history, including aspects related to food production. To study the history of gardening, we also consulted key sets of archival and secondary sources.

By asking people to take us on “garden tours,” we reinforced the role of both gardening labour and narratives in the making and remaking of place (Tuan, 1991).<sup>3</sup> Through our questions, we elicited accounts of residents' memories of gardening from earlier periods in their lives and of their current gardening practices. The information relayed to us on these occasions parallels the kind of garden talk that Bell Island gardeners regularly share with kin and neighbours.

Two of the gardeners who participated in our study, Des McCarthy and Harriett Taylor, were long-term commuters who had travelled back and forth across the Tickle to work for many decades and were semi-retired at the time of the fieldwork. Des's garden in the West Mines area of the island sits next door to his childhood family home. In retirement, he expanded the size and range of his beds significantly, trying out new crops and techniques he learned about from talking to other gardeners, from reading, and from experimenting. In 2015, he grew a long list of vegetables including kale, multi-coloured Swiss chard, cauliflower, broccoli, and brussel sprouts. He also tended to fruit-bearing plants (rhubarb and strawberries), as well as cherry, pear, and apple trees. An enthusiastic cook, Des prepared many meals for his family using ingredients from the garden.

Also a career-long commuter, Harriett Taylor started to focus on vegetable gardening in retirement. When co-workers asked about her plans for retirement she answered, “gardening” — adding that she hoped to be a “green thumb on Bell Island.” At her retirement party she received an envelope from her colleagues. “I looked inside and there was a picture of a greenhouse from Costco. It was a real surprise.” But when post-tropical storm Leslie struck in September of 2012, it took down Harriett's new greenhouse. Together with her husband, Frank, they managed to salvage most of the structure and they rebuilt it the following year. In 2015, Harriett's greenhouse provided a warm, peaceful space where bright red tomatoes poked out from greenery — a mate for the lettuce, beets, and carrots that also grew there. Harriett regularly exchanged seeds, plants, and food within a close-knit network of extended family members and neighbours. They also gathered together to help with bottling and preserving.

Two additional gardeners, Fred Parsons and George Hickey, had also commuted off-island by ferry but over shorter periods. Along with many other Bell Islanders, when he was an adolescent, Fred worked in the Portugal Cove fish plant during capelin season. Fred was also mobile on the ocean and land in other jobs, including fish harvesting on his father's boats when he was young and later on vessels he and his brother owned, as well as employment in agriculture and carpentry. Fred's current gardening occurs in the greenhouse and beds adjacent to the home built by his grandfather, which Fred has lovingly renovated. Like many men, his grandfather came to Bell Island to work as a carpenter when the mines were operating. Fred attributes the centrality of subsistence gardening and preserving to his Bell Island upbringing. He grew up helping his parents manage the garden and livestock and he is now teaching his young daughter.

Like Fred, George did not commute by ferry for very long. Although he commuted across the Tickle for six years prior to retirement, most of his career was spent working in the hospital on Bell Island. George learned to garden roughly 50 years ago when, as a young boy, he worked for a Bell Island farmer. There, he learned lessons about food subsistence that were passed down to his four children, grandchildren, as well as other Bell Islanders when he was a volunteer with the Bell Island Development Association Farm Project (discussed below). When his children were young, he kept a large garden with potatoes, turnips, and cabbage — or, as he phrased it, “Your vegetables for a Sunday meal.” He also raised livestock including cattle, pigs, and chickens. In 2015, George's garden was much smaller than in the past, but he was still growing potatoes and keeping chickens. He shared plans for expansion in 2016 because, as he put it, “I kind of misses it a bit.”

The final two gardeners who participated in our study, Glenda Tedford and Dorothy Clemens, both held various wage jobs for many years in other parts of North America as well as on Bell Island. As a young girl growing up on The Front,<sup>4</sup> Glenda Tedford, formerly Bennett, remembers hearing about a downshift in her immediate family's gardening when her father started working in the mines. When the final mine closed in 1966, the Bennett family was just one of many out-migrant families to leave Bell Island for mainland Canada. In 2008, Glenda and her husband Bob retired back to Bell Island. Glenda's kitchen garden in 2015 consisted of two raised beds as well as a large planter box for herbs, built by her son. Glenda regularly grew vegetables,

including potatoes, asparagus, turnip tops, and cabbage. Having a kitchen garden reconnected Glenda with early childhood memories of her grandparents' farm and parents' gardens. Dorothy Clemens is a long-term resident of Lance Cove, having moved there with her Bell Island-born husband at the beginning of the 1980s. She grew up a "farmer's girl" on the outskirts of Galt, Ontario, where her father owned a small greenhouse and her parents also kept a kitchen garden and livestock, including chickens and pigs. Dorothy's husband, Gerald, worked for a few years as a fish harvester. Although Dorothy and Gerald used to maintain a larger garden on their property, as well as on Gerald's parents' land, they have more recently "scaled back." Even so, her 2015 greenhouse played host to impressive-looking tomatoes, green beans, a grapevine, lettuce, herbs such as basil, as well as an array of flowers. Other plants were found growing in outside beds. These comprised a large assortment of vegetables, including lettuces, onions, radish, tomatoes, potatoes, carrots, garlic; fruits such as strawberries, rhubarb, raspberries, as well as black and red currants; and flowers. "I really love my garden," Dorothy maintained. "I look forward to spring."

### **A HISTORY OF GARDENING ON BELL ISLAND**

Gardening, agriculture, and animal husbandry were central activities on Bell Island for centuries. Although the island's important mining history is often highlighted in writings about Bell Island and is very present in public representations of its past, islanders also emphasize the historical importance of other industries such as shipbuilding as well as the dominance of agrarian, fishing, and hunting activities.

Although we are not aware of any recorded archaeological surveys or excavations from the pre-colonial period, Bell Island would have almost certainly been a site for myriad subsistence activities by Indigenous populations. The island was used at least as early as the seventeenth century as a fishing station by mariners from England, Ireland, France, and the Channel Islands, as well as temporarily by settlers who later moved to places such as Bay de Verde (Hammond, 2004: 1–3). The first European considered to have been a permanent settler was the fisherman and farmer Gregory Normore from the Jersey Islands, who began living on Bell Island in the late eighteenth century together with his wife, Catherine Cook from Harbour Grace (Hammond, 2004: 3). Over the following centuries, alongside fish harvesting

and processing, seasonal travel to the seal hunt, shipbuilding, brick work, carpentry, commerce, and mining, vegetable cultivation and animal husbandry for commercial as well as subsistence purposes remained central features of Bell Island's economy and society (Coxworthy, 1985, 1996; Hammond, 2004; Neary, 1975: 211; Rennie, 1998; Weir, 2006). The endurance of a pattern of multiple forms of employment and self-provisioning through much of the twentieth century on Bell Island was not uncommon in the Newfoundland context (Neary, 1975: 206). As Cadigan notes, on the northeast coast, "As early as 1785, . . . subsistence agriculture became essentially a subsidization of the mercantile fishery" (Cadigan, 1992: 52).

In different historical periods, governments have recognized and even encouraged commercial agriculture in Newfoundland to boost the availability of local food supplies and to promote economic diversification. For example, when 30-year leases for agricultural production in the vicinity of St. John's were first allowed in 1813, a registry indicated that approximately 1,000 acres were under cultivation illegally (Shaw, Drummond, and Murray, 1956: 25). Much of the arable area around St. John's came to be farmed (Murray, 2002).

Records from 1814 show that some early nineteenth-century agricultural activity on Bell Island was on rented land (Hammond, 2004: 9, 10, 41). By 1836, the census indicated that 359 people lived on Bell Island, 260 acres were owned, and 148 acres were being cultivated. These efforts to produce food for humans and livestock included 6,570 "bushels of potatoes" a year, 152 "tons of hay," and 120 "Meat Cattle" (Hammond, 2004: 11). By 1891, just a few years before mining began, Bell Island's population was 709. A late nineteenth-century account by Reverend Lloyd Rees provides a vivid portrait of farming homesteads in Lance Cove where "Everyone had a strawberry patch, a row or two of gooseberry and black current [*sic*] trees, and a few drills of 'small seed'" (Rees in Hammond, 2004: 14). Bell Island produce was well known in St. John's, as can be seen in newspaper accounts such as this one from the *Evening Telegram* in 1897: "The finest potatoes which came to the city these months past came from Bell Isle this morning." It was "[t]he farming and fishing family of John and Jabez Butler [that] sold their rights to the land to the Nova Scotia Steel Company, which started a mine in 1894" (Cadigan, 2009: 162; Martin, 2003: 53–54).



**Figure 2.2.** Bell Island. Houses and gardens, the Beach, c. 1904. (Geography Collection, Historical Photographs of Newfoundland and Labrador, Centre for Newfoundland Studies)

Many Bell Island men from fishing and farming families began working in the mines to supplement the livelihood that they and other members of their households continued to pursue with these other activities. Similarly, it was not unusual for residents whose households were established on the island only because of mining jobs to harvest wild seafood, hunt birds, and to pick berries as well as plant basic subsistence crops such as potatoes, turnips, and cabbage and to raise livestock. This economic mix was also practised by the families of miners who commuted weekly to work in the mines from homes in other communities, mainly from other parts of Conception Bay. Although the iron ore mines of Bell Island provided industrial employment, the work was seasonal for much of its history and layoffs occurred at various junctures. Even when miners had more steady shifts throughout the year, aside from engineers and executive staff, the wages of the men and boys who worked underground and of the few women who worked in the offices and in other functions were insufficient to fully support themselves and their families (Weir, 2006; also Martin, 2003).

The extent and purpose of food production on Bell Island have shifted over time, depending on both general and individual households' circumstances. For example, as authors such as Bown (n.d.) and Sheppard (2011: 50) point out, during the Great Depression, despite Dominion Steel and Coal Corporation's announced intention in 1930 to expand operations, two of the four mines were closed down completely. Meanwhile, work in the remaining two changed from full- to part-time, with operations being restricted to only two days each week. This pushed many mining families to turn to fishing and agriculture: "In order to survive, Bell Islanders returned to their agricultural heritage, growing crops to sell on the mainland or catching the resources of the sea around them" (Sheppard, 2011: 50). Sheppard cites Bown's report about 1934 indicating that "12,000 barrels of potatoes were grown and 66,000 gallons of milk were produced on the island" (Sheppard, 2011: 50; Bown, n.d.). Martin (2003: 58) notes:

Those miners lucky enough to retain their jobs worked for a fraction of the normal salary and spent their spare time tending vegetable plots on land leased without fee from DOSCO. Unemployed miners compensated for lost pay by catching seals, seabirds and rabbits.

Like our research participants' accounts, Kay Coxworthy's collections of rich narratives about Bell Island contain descriptions that underscore the centrality of food production. In 1985, for example, Howard Dyer recounted: "Everyone I knew had a small farm — we had one ourselves. We had pigs, hens, a few cows and a horse. I remember in the Fall of the year, digging sixty or more barrels of potatoes and lots of turnip and cabbage to be used by our family during the winter" (Coxworthy 1985: 92). Luke Roberts Jr. described how gardening often preceded work in mining for male children:

most families were large, so a man had to do his shift at the mines and then tend his garden, because they needed a lot of vegetables to feed them during the winter and spring . . . they had no automatic equipment then, it was all done by hand. So a man might keep his sons home, after grade eight, to work in the

garden, because he knew that once a boy reached a certain age, he would go to work in the mines anyway. (Coxworthy, 1996: 52)

Bonds between kin and neighbours were strengthened through the necessity of shared food production, as Rosemarie Farrell explained about growing up in West Mines: “living next door were her father’s brother Uncle Matt, Aunt Catherine and their children . . . the families were close, the brothers shared a vegetable garden and all of the kids would get together with their parents to plant and harvest the crops” (Coxworthy, 1996: 94).

By the mid-twentieth century, while Bell Island farmers and gardeners still supplied many of the local food needs, many families purchased staples as well as vegetables from producers or stores, with some coming from farms in the areas around St. John’s (Murray, 2002: 156, 158). Various efforts encouraged agriculture and animal husbandry after the mines closed. These included the Bell Island Development Association Farm Project that provided employment and organized a community pasture as well as vegetable planting and storage (Bell Island Development Association, 1986, 1993; Bell Island Economic Development Committee, 1990). In recent years, Tourism Bell Island instituted a small community garden, planted garden boxes to supply the Keeper’s Café located in the former lighthouse keeper’s house, and began to grow vegetables and flowers in a greenhouse established and formerly used by the Operation Sunshine Garden Centre (Tourism Bell Island, 2015).

However, as occurred in other parts of Newfoundland and Labrador, despite the continuing operation of some commercial farms and gardens on the island, there has been a major decline in food cultivation and animal husbandry, and the population of Bell Island as a whole has become increasingly reliant on imported food purchased from stores (e.g., Kindl, 1999: 137; Food Security Network of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2014; Whitaker, 1963).

We now return to the six gardeners’ accounts. The section is divided into three parts. The first highlights our research participants’ memories of earlier gardening experiences and the second turns to the place-making that continues to occur through their current gardening activities. The third part details the diverse mobilities patterns associated with gardening.

## **GARDENING MEMORIES, PLACE-MAKING, AND MOBILITIES**

### **Gardening Memories**

As is the case for other Bell Island residents, gardening for our six participants involves both producing food and being connected with the past. During the garden tours, we asked about childhood memories of gardening and discovered that the majority were raised in families that maintained a garden as well as livestock. There were both commonalities and diversity in their memories of childhood gardening. Most referenced the significance of the garden and livestock for their family's food security. As Fred Parsons put it, "I wasn't reared up with a silver spoon or nothin', but I always had a bite to eat." Harriett Taylor remembered her parents sharing a garden with her grandparents: "Kept two families going, hey? For sure." Glenda Tedford recalled how important gardens and livestock were when the ice came into the bay:

It was harder to get supplies because in winter the ice used to move in regularly; like in the bay. I have a picture, my brother does, of my dad pulling a sled with supplies on it across the ice in the bay. So it was harder to get supplies — so people had to be more self-sufficient. A lot of families were large.

Although George Hickey's family did not grow vegetables, he learned about vegetable cultivation from a local farmer. A few years later, when his father was laid off from the mines and went to work on the other side of Newfoundland in Port aux Basques, George recounted the centrality of both his wages and access to food from the farm where he worked: "I know for seven weeks we were waiting on a cheque. We lived off of my five dollars, plus all the vegetables and milk." Similarly, Des McCarthy started his first vegetable garden as a newlywed living with his in-laws. Although his father had maintained a garden in his youth, he "rarely spent a summer home" due to various activities (such as cadets), as well as paid labour. As an adult, it was his father-in-law who taught him how to plant and maintain a garden. He explained:

Teresita's father had a little garden. When we first got married we stayed with them for a year, year and a half or so, and I put a little garden in. That was the first time I ever had a vegetable

garden. I must say that grew well. He had me started on beet, potato, carrot – that was it. That was it.

For those whose families had gardens on Bell Island, all referenced childhood gardening and other subsistence chores. As Fred recalled, “We used to have to take turns, go out and clean up the pigs, wash ’em, and everything.” Much like Fred, Dorothy explained that everyone in her family in Ontario had garden chores: “It was a family thing. We all pitched in – Dad was fair. I mean everyone had a little job to do, right? Every family is like that.” Des echoed her thoughts: “Everybody had their chores. Doesn’t matter, you know, if you got two or three girls or two or three boys. They’re all out there [in the garden]. They all got to do their duties. They all have their duties.” In contrast, Glenda felt that birth order determined her relatively lesser chore-load in the garden: “I remember going around throwing scratch at the hens,” she said, “But being the second youngest, the older ones were doing it [the chores].” Glenda’s large family of 12 was not unusual on Bell Island in the mid-twentieth century.

In speaking about their chores in relation to their siblings, the interviewees also highlighted the many hours of hard work their parents and grandparents put into food production. This was always alongside many other paid and unpaid work obligations. As Des put it, “The women tended to be doing the wash, the dishes, stuff like that. While the guys were out there weeding or trenching. But the later years, it was kind of unisex.” This statement mirrors patterns found by other researchers looking at the division of household labour, particularly in relation to food provisioning, within the broader Newfoundland context (Murray, 1979; Felt, Murphy, and Sinclair, 1995; Pocius, 1991; Porter, 1988; Sinclair, 2002). The oral histories in our Bell Island study suggest that, while there may have been a primary parent or grandparent gardener, the related tasks were managed regardless of age or gender. So even in families where there was a “point person” for gardening, many others helped out. This would have been particularly prevalent within island families – such as Glenda’s grandparents’ – who had large amounts of land and numerous responsibilities related to agriculture as well as taking care of livestock. As she explained: “My grandparents had their hay – they used to get it by the old graveyard up over the Beach Hill. That one. They had gardens and animals and really were quite self-sufficient. So it’s always been there – although I was so young I didn’t get to appreciate it or anything.”

Among our research participants, the extent to which specific individuals in their families were involved in gardening varied over their lifetimes. As was the case in other mining households on Bell Island, Glenda recalled: “I remember Dad used to work double shifts, if he’d ever get them. So when you came home from that you didn’t really want to be out gardening. You just didn’t have the energy or the time and lots of times you didn’t have the daylight to do it.” When her father began working in the mines, Glenda’s parents scaled down their garden and shifted responsibilities, despite having once maintained large amounts of land and livestock with her grandparents. Glenda’s mother then kept a smaller kitchen garden. Similarly, Harriett’s parents also shared a larger garden and livestock with her grandparents. But Harriett’s mother moved into the role of primary gardener when her father was laid off from the mines and became increasingly mobile for work. As she described, “Well my mother kept a garden then because Dad was working. Where he was not home because he was on the boats, sailing and things like that.” In retirement, however, her father planted “a nice patch behind the house” with potatoes, beets, onions, and dahlias.

We now turn from these vivid memories of gardening in the past to an analysis of how the six Bell Islanders who participated in this research performed place-making through gardening in outside beds and greenhouses near their homes, as well as through various mobilities that took them to and from these food production spaces.

### **Place-making through Gardening**

To return to the opening story, like people’s homes, businesses, and places of study and worship, Fred’s greenhouse and neighbouring garden beds are examples of places being made and remade in a mobile world (Casey, 1996; Feld and Basso, 1996; Pink, 2008b; Tuan, 1977). Such gardening spaces have been built and are cultivated through various levels of mobilities both on and off Bell Island. Indeed, these gardens are often the starting or ending points in the journeys of mobile gardeners. Harriett, for example, often started a summer morning in her greenhouse, watering and tending to plants before using the ferry to commute to work across the Tickle on the Newfoundland mainland. Likely because we were not, by any means, the first to be shown people’s gardens, the garden tours we were taken on constituted eloquent combinations of gesture and narration (Pink, 2006). The six profiled

gardeners described the spaces where they carry out gardening activities, placing an emphasis on strength, recycled materials, security, and their own feelings of satisfaction from working in the garden.

As part of making place in and through food growing, the Bell Island gardeners spoke about the importance of building strong greenhouses, which are especially vulnerable in the coastal weather of a small island located in the waters of the North Atlantic. Structures must sustain year-round high winds, frequent tropical storms, and occasional hurricanes, as well as heavy winter snowfalls. Dorothy named her 2015 greenhouse “Igor” after the 2010 hurricane that “totally flattened” its predecessor. As noted earlier, Harriett’s brand new greenhouse — a retirement gift from her colleagues across the Tickle — was blown down into her neighbour’s garden after tropical storm Leslie. “It was just twisted metal,” Harriett described. “I was heartbroken.” Dorothy and Harriett both spoke about placing high importance on salvaging what they could from the wreckage — ultimately rebuilding stronger structures. But extreme weather is not the only risk to gardens on Bell Island. In comparing his 2015 garden to the previous year’s, Des recounted, “There is no comparison between last year and this year. Last year I had nothing. I grew everything, but the cows got in. That’s why you have the fence.” As Des told it, several escaped cows from a nearby pasture enjoyed a garden feast at the end of summer: “I heard a bang. They were finished, they were on their way. They were going for dessert somewhere, I don’t know,” he said laughing. “They had their main course here, let me tell ya.” Just as Des rebuilt a stronger fence around his garden, Harriett and her husband replaced the greenhouse’s aluminum uprights with a wooden frame: “So we recycled everything off of the original, except for the aluminum uprights which the panels were on. Now he’s just got them stapled to the wood.” Harriett’s greenhouse is now multi-purpose as it converts into a shed for firewood storage at the end of autumn.

The use of recycled materials in the gardens ranges from large structures to small knick-knacks — items obtained from Bell Island and across the Tickle. Fred described using recycled wood to rebuild his greenhouse in 2014 because of normal rotting over time: “This [greenhouse] come out of a place that was in a store — buddy tore it out and give me the lumber. I cleaned it up and made a greenhouse out of it. All recyclable lumber. Never went to the store and bought new stuff. All recyclable.” In Dorothy’s garden, her beds were lined with brick, rather than the more standard wooden frames found



**Figure 2.3.** Harriett Taylor's late summer harvest. (Photo by Diane Royal)

in most other island gardens. She explained, “I was going to get Gerald to make me some wooden frames, but then we had all the brick from the two chimneys off the old house roof and I said, ‘I can use the brick.’” She also pointed out an old bathtub – relocated during a renovation and mostly used to store recycled water.

Dorothy noted the recycled parts that serve both functional and decorative purposes. In her greenhouse, she used pieces of what were once dark-blue blinds on the greenhouse's exterior, as well as hangers and curtain rods to keep plants off the ground. Inside, she pointed out a cleverly trellised grapevine: “He's just growing up through and around – and old curtain rods to hold it up.” She added, “I like my ornaments too. I do all these things with bells. They are flea market finds. That's basically all they are.” Yet Dorothy's “flea market finds” personalize her greenhouse and garden in a way that highlights the aesthetic contribution that food growing, like interior home decoration, brings (see Pocius, 1991: 99). All six of the interviewees spoke about the multi-sensory appeal of their gardens, also a draw for visiting relatives and neighbours (Milbourne, 2012).



**Figure 2.4.** Dorothy Clemens's mid-summer gardening. (Photo by Diane Royal)

Another form of place-making using recycled elements is soil creation. Both Des and George described the process of making their own soil as both active and ongoing — a garden activity that takes many years to perfect. Although Des also spoke about commuting across the Tickle to occasionally purchase soil, he described how he also makes his own — primarily through composting. The soil in his 2015 garden had been created “over the years, and with lots of manure in it.” George, as well, described making garden soil using manure from his son’s Bell Island farm: “My young feller got sheep up there. I go up — I got a bike and trailer and that — I go up and get sheep manure.”

He uses a particular system of planting and manure management that he has honed over many years:

I make my drills and then I set the potatoes. Then I bury it in the manure. Then I put the clay over the manure. Some people put the manure in the drills, then the potato. But I'm different — I does stuff a little. Because my mind is, the manure on the potatoes. When it rains and everything, it washes all the juice over the potato. But if the potato is on top and it rains, it's still there. The manure is still beneath the potatoes. I do it that way. I don't know if it's right. I don't know if it's wrong. But I'm having success with it.



**Figure 2.5.** George Hickey's after-harvest potato plot in fall. (Photo by Diane Royal)

For several gardeners in our sample, their gardens served as a form of food security for their own and other households, both on and off Bell Island. In this chapter, we are following the 1996 World Food Summit's definition of food security as "when all people at all times have access to sufficient, safe, nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life" (WHO, 2015). This is particularly important on a small island where gardening can offer both an alternative and a higher-quality food source. As Fred described, gardening is a form of food security for his family of three: "We've been here weeks

without a boat. Still survived. Because, with me, I stock a lot of stuff. Like meats. I makes tomatoes, has me beet, has me potatoes. Has enough stuff to do me for a month or two, right? If the boat don't run you got stuff on hand so you won't go hungry." When Fred and his wife Miranda moved into his family home, from an apartment where they did not have access to gardening space, it dramatically changed their ability to develop some self-sufficiency through food production, preservation, and storage.



**Figure 2.6.** Fred Parsons: raising tomato seedlings to prepare for spring planting. (Photo by Sharon R. Roseman)

We also believe that the Bell Island gardeners who took us on tours are acting partly from a food sovereignty impulse. Like the concluding statement that came out of the FAO World Food Summit in 2002, the six gardeners we spoke with believe in their “right to food and to produce food” (La Vía Campesina, 2002). For example, although Glenda regularly purchases groceries on the island as well as across the Tickle, having a garden means she can also feed her family organic vegetables. As she described:

I'm very into organic or non-sprayed. Doesn't have to be totally certified organic, but I don't use any sprays on my garden. I haven't had it soil tested or anything; I'm not that extreme, but I just try and make it a bit better than you would in the grocery store. So that's a good part of the reason I started the garden.



**Figure 2.7.** Glenda Tedford's potatoes in progress. (Photo by Sharon R. Roseman)

The gardeners in our study described feelings of satisfaction from having a garden. As Glenda noted, “I just like going out into the garden and seeing something grow. It’s just a nice feeling.” She added, “It’s so nice to pick potatoes because you just go under the soil and there’s so many. It’s like finding a treasure. It’s amazing, I love it. I love that part of the gardening.” But finding satisfaction in the garden is not only about “seeing something grow.” It’s also the full process of planning, planting, nurturing, and harvesting — all aspects of place-making. As Dorothy described, “It’s a passion to get out here and

clean up all the winter debris and start planning where I'm going to put this or that or the other thing. It's true." Des as well spoke about enjoying putting a lot of thought — including hours of research — into his garden. For all six of the interviewees in our study, the garden is a place of contentment. The derived satisfaction is, at least partially, due to the gardeners' hard work and immense dedication to the making of the garden space. The major effort of maintaining a vegetable garden was an aspect underscored by all six interviewees. In Dorothy's words, this involves "a lot of work; it's really a lot of work."

Some of the work that Dorothy and others identified involves not just the many hours of gardening labour but also the time, energy, and cost involved in moving to and from gardens in order to procure materials needed to grow food as well as to share food and information with others. We now turn to a discussion of the kind of mobilities associated with gardening on Bell Island.

### **Gardening Mobilities**

In contrast to the garden as a physical and symbolic aspect of home and a place-making "anchor," we also focus on the mobilities to and from people's gardens (Urry, 2010). As in the past, in addition to ferry-dependent commuting across the Tickle, there are many "local" mobilities on Bell Island itself. The six Bell Island gardeners highlighted here move between their gardens and other spaces on the island as well to locations across the Tickle. Although many Bell Islanders, like Des and Harriett, still sometimes commute to work, we also emphasize that the ferry is used for purposes of social reproduction — including tasks related to gardening (Roseman, Barber, and Neis, 2015). Some Bell Islanders frequently use the ferry to gather gardening supplies and to exchange information and island-grown food. We consider the variability among their multi-modal trips, as well as the ways in which things and capital, people and information, travel back and forth across the Tickle (Urry, 2010).

As is common among highly mobile populations, trips across the Tickle varied widely among the profiled gardeners. Of the six interviewees, three described making regular ferry trips — roughly once a week or more. They spoke about picking up gardening inputs while simultaneously managing other tasks of social reproduction, such as banking. Des and Glenda referred to including gardening supplies on their already existing "to do" lists: "I'm in town a couple times [a week] anyway," Des commented. Glenda explained

her strategic approach to commuting: “Whenever I go over, I always link stuff up. On my way back I’ll get the gardening stuff.” As well as occasionally crossing for gardening supplies, chiefly seeds, Harriett also described bringing garden-grown food and preserves across the Tickle for relatives.

Several of the gardeners spoke about bringing food, as well as plants, across the Tickle as a part of visiting practices occurring at increasingly broader mobility scales — related, in part, to out-migration from Bell Island to the Newfoundland mainland. Des described making plans to cross the Tickle to help his daughter, who grew up on Bell Island but now lives in Paradise, put in her first garden. He also spoke about gathering up garlic to get her started: “I got to get there next week because my daughter is starting a garden and I got to start that now — around the 20th of September. So she’ll grow some garlic over the winter.” Harriett also spoke about the importance of being able to share homegrown food and plants with relatives and friends, many of whom now live on the other side. Last year, for example, she got together with her island sister to bottle sauce using her garden’s tomatoes. They then shared it with their children who live across the Tickle.

Self-provisioning requires the purchase of many items, both on Bell Island and across the Tickle. In addition to smaller, individual items such as seeds, several interviewees described having to organize larger loads. Such shopping patterns are an additional form of mobility related to gardening. For the most part, the gardeners in our sample used their own vehicles or travelled with relatives and neighbours. Although Glenda usually makes supply trips across the Tickle in her car, she spoke about her husband Bob having to go get soil with their truck and trailer: “We get a truckload, or Bob will go bring his trailer over and get a load when we were putting in our gardens. So he’d bring his trailer over to town and get a load of soil at that place on Portugal Cove Road.” Although he mostly creates his own, Des also spoke about using his truck to haul soil back to Bell Island from across the Tickle — often a much bigger and more involved trip than when picking up seeds or plants.

Supplies, including gardening materials, also come over on the ferry to Bell Island, including those sold at local Bell Island stores. Fred especially described procuring most of his gardening supplies on Bell Island, rarely needing to cross the Tickle. Aside from the recycled lumber on his greenhouse, he spoke in detail about the process of buying the greenhouse’s

plastic covering, as well as other gardening items, locally. In the case of Harriett's original greenhouse, she explained how it was purchased in St. John's, "came in boxes," and was brought over on the ferry — delivered to her home by a local service. Although much of the gardening supplies are purchased on the Avalon Peninsula — mostly due to the prevalence of large nurseries — all of the gardeners expressed the crucial role that local, island options provide. One gardener's comment — "I get little things if I'm stuck for something" — was a prevalent description of island shopping patterns within our study.

As briefly noted above, the casual sharing of food across the Tickle and around the island is commonplace. On Bell Island, Dorothy spoke about exchanging vegetables and homemade food. Her husband still "shares some potatoes with his buddy up the road. So we usually trade back and forth." She added, "If I'm baking muffins there's half a dozen, I'll go down to the neighbour." Although Des described preparing warm lunches using food from the garden for his daughter who commuted from the mainland to Bell Island for work, he also spoke about the centrality of growing food to share with neighbours and friends. His next door neighbour always "gets a feed of broccoli," and a friend who bikes around the island for exercise makes frequent stops:

she'll come up and she'll grab — she's on the bike every day, right? — and she'll go and have a few strawberries. A little energy, whatever. And if she sees anything she likes, she'll call me and say, "you know your kale is going well" and I'll end up picking some kale for her.

As is common throughout Newfoundland and Labrador, in cases of illness or death, Bell Islanders have long provided food support. The story of Fred picking five buckets of blueberries for a sick friend is just one of many examples. As Harriett explained:

Even now, if somebody dies, if we know the family, we'll cook and send a pot of soup, or a pot of stew. Make a cake. Something they can have when they come home or if they have a large crowd. Something that can help them through so they don't have to cook. That's very common here.

Information about gardening also freely flows on the island as well as back and forth across the Tickle. Several of the gardeners in our sample described gathering information from the owners and others working in nurseries on the Avalon Peninsula while purchasing inputs. A few, Glenda especially, spoke about getting advice from relatives who garden. These included her sister Doris, who also lived on the island, her sister Joan in St. John's, and her sister Leona, who lived in Aurora, Ontario, but spent part of her summers on Bell Island. Des and Harriett spoke about gardening as a topic of conversation at their places of employment across the Tickle in St. John's. For Harriett, gardening discussions in the workplace helped motivate her to make gardening a priority as she looked toward retirement.

Advice can also come from people who cross the Tickle from mainland Newfoundland and elsewhere to visit Bell Island. Glenda, through her small business and volunteer work, interacted with many tourists and island visitors. She described often conversing with them about gardening. The plastic cover on her garden, she explained, resulted from a visitor suggesting she put plastic over the newly planted seeds to provide protection and heat up the soil. She maintained, "Anyone that can give me any advice, I take advice from them." George recalled consulting with visiting mainland gardeners in the 1980s when he volunteered with the Bell Island Development Association. Information about gardening is also widely circulated around the island. George has been gardening for almost six decades and is frequently asked to share tips with his Bell Island relatives and neighbours. Harriett referenced visits to the gardens of her neighbours and relatives. "It peaks my interest; seeing what they've got out growing," she said. Des, in turn, described people coming over to ask him about his plants while he worked in the garden. This form of visiting and sharing of information was common among all six of our interviewees. Receiving and sharing information virtually was also routine. Several gardeners, especially Des and Glenda, spoke about searching the Internet when they had questions. As Des put it, "I Google everything." Harriett exchanged gardening tips with former colleagues over e-mail: "Usually I e-mail now since they're retired. I e-mail them or take a picture of something. And say to them, 'How do I get rid of this?' 'Have you seen this before? What's my problem here?' And they are good like that." Dorothy discussed listening to talk radio, sometimes even calling in: "I've got a lot of treasures from the CrossTalk [CBC] radio station," she chuckled.



**Figure 2.8.** Grumpy keeping an eye on things. (Photo by Desmond McCarthy)

The last two sections of this chapter have examined how gardeners such as the six individuals profiled in this chapter have kept alive the practice of subsistence gardening on Bell Island, a practice that contributes significantly to place-making and place attachment in and through food production and forms of gardening commuting.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has focused on six Bell Island gardeners whose lives have been filled with numerous obligations, including both waged and unwaged labour tasks. Among the activities that have competed for their attention, they have all dedicated significant effort and time to cultivating food during the short growing season. Like elsewhere, continuing or returning to subsistence production in rural spaces in particular can be seen as part of food security efforts, food sovereignty politics, and even broader processes of reclaiming rural histories and identities (Roseman, 2002, 2008).

As in other areas of the province, Bell Islanders have participated for centuries in food harvesting and production activities for both subsistence and

commercial purposes. For much of the 70-year period of the operation of the iron ore mines, many families living on and off Bell Island combined gardening with wage work in the mines. Although the boost to employment options represented by what became a large mining operation was welcomed on Bell Island and beyond, the wages that could be earned from most of these new jobs were not sufficient to support the often sizable families that were common in the early and mid-twentieth century. Therefore, our research participants and other Bell Islanders highlight how crucial it was to continue to have access to spaces where food could be grown and animals could be raised. It was also true that, in some households, mining employment and subsequent layoffs had a significant impact on the extent and nature of subsistence gardening in specific periods. In the latter decades of the twentieth century, reflecting a wider pattern of increased reliance on imported and commercial products, in combination with extensive out-migration and increased daily commuting, there was a decline in gardening on Bell Island. Bell Islanders did not, however, leave behind their memories of extensive gardening and farming — a core aspect of their history. Many, including the main research participants in our study, plan to continue to garden through their lives. Some have returned to more intensive gardening in recent years. Others described plans to expand their food production activities in the coming years.

On Bell Island, place-making through gardening is reinforced by the various associated mobilities, including the frequent movement of capital and things, people, and information. These mobilities involve travelling on foot, bicycle, and motorized vehicle around Bell Island itself, as well as crossing the Tickle by ferry to purchase gardening tools, seeds, and other inputs and to bring relatives homegrown products. Information about gardening similarly circulates both locally and throughout the Avalon Peninsula through visiting, the radio, the Internet, and analogue reading materials.

This research reinforces the point that the sense of security and feelings of attachment that come with continuous forms of place-making should not be viewed separately from the many mobilities that feed into these processes of commitment to place. Recent engagements with the “mobility turn” literature have explored this non-contradiction (e.g., Ralph and Staeheli, 2011: 524), an insight that has long been reinforced in foundational works by scholars representing a range of theoretical perspectives (e.g., Adey, 2010; Certeau, 1984; Clifford, 1997; Feld and Basso, 1996; Lippard, 1997; Urry, 2010: 253–70).

Bell Island has always constituted an interesting example of this conjunction, given its small island status and a shifting but always present reliance on marine mobilities to be connected to mainland Newfoundland and elsewhere. However, the challenges associated with striving to be firmly rooted in one's home space while living with myriad mobilities are particularly salient in cases of industrial closure. The use of the ferry for employment and social reproduction became increasingly fundamental after the final operating iron ore mine ceased production. This includes travel for the purpose of purchasing seeds, plants, tools, and other gardening inputs during or alongside commuting for employment as well as visits to kin for the purpose of food and meal sharing – mobilities that have contributed to strong extended family networks across the Tickle. As it always has been, producing food is a central aspect of Bell Islanders' commitment to place, history, and family – a commitment played out through the commuting mobilities that allow individuals such as Dorothy Clemens, George Hickey, Des McCarthy, Fred Parsons, Harriett Taylor, and Glenda Tedford to literally put down roots year after year.

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## **NOTES**

1. This is a sub-sample of our larger, ongoing study on Bell Island commuting. Participants were recruited from participant observation and snowball sampling.

2. The term “tickle” is used for various places in the province where there is a “narrow difficult strait” (Story, Kirwin, and Widdowson, 1999: 565).
3. Quantitative methods have also been used to study populations’ sense of place in different contexts (for example, see Cross et al., 2011).
4. “The Front” is a local place name referring to the area facing the “Tickle.”

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