

## FINAL VOYAGES

HODGE'S COVE  
BLACK CHRISTMAS

Christmas 1976 was shaping up to be the usual season of holiday merriment for the small Trinity Bay community of Hodge's Cove located about a two-hour drive from St. John's.

In fact, for the family of 21-year old Willis Thomas, it was going to be an extra special Christmas. Willis had been working in Labrador City for the previous four years and this was going to be his first Christmas home since he started working up north.

But there was another reason for celebration that

year — Willis was also home to become engaged. The wedding was to take place a month later. His fiancé was three months pregnant with their baby expected to arrive in late spring, 1977.

In an interview with CBC's Land and Sea program, Willis' sister, Patsy, said the whole family were excited about having her brother home and with the engagement and upcoming wedding planning, this would be a Christmas like none other.

Patsy was right — it would be a Christmas like no other. But not the joyous occasion she had expected.



LEFT: MOORING COVE POINT WHERE HEDLEY DROVER HAS SECURED A LINE TO HIS COD NETS IN THE FALL OF 1976. MOORING COVE WAS GIVEN ITS NAME BECAUSE SCHOONERS AND OTHER VESSELS WOULD OFTEN MOORED THERE IN BAD WEATHER. VERY DEEP WATER JUST A FEW FEET FROM THE SHORE MADE IT POSSIBLE TO ENJOY THE SAFETY OF BEING CLOSE TO LAND IN CASE OF TROUBLE BUT ALSO THE HILLS OFFERED SHELTER FROM STRONG NORTHERLY WINDS

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Willis' dad, Cyril Thomas, loved a game of cards and on Thursday night, Dec. 23, several men gathered at the Thomas house for a chat and a few hands of cards. Willis was one of them; his friend Hedley Drover was another along with Hedley's good friend Wes (Willis) Peddle.

Late in the evening, Willis decided to open a bottle of rum to offer a drink to his father and friends.

"It's handy enough to Christmas to have a little drink now boys, you never know if we'll ever get chance again to have another one together again," Willis said, without knowing how prophetic his words would be.

While sipping their drinks, Hedley mentioned that he might "go across the Arm to Mooring Cove"

and check his cod net the next morning. Wes suggested that he would probably join him and perhaps they could also have a look at Wes' herring net while they were out there. Willis, who was always there to lend a helping hand, said that he'd like to go with his friends and invited them to go in his small speedboat.

When Wes Peddle looked out his window on Christmas Eve morning, he soon changed his mind about going out in boat that day. It was a grey, overcast and damp morning with fairly strong winds and occasional drizzle. He assumed that Hedley wouldn't bother checking on his cod net because it would not be comfortable in a small 16-foot open boat so Wes told his wife Audrey that he would go in the woods and cut some firewood instead.

Unlike Wes, 45-year old Hedley Drover was not deterred by the weather conditions that morning.

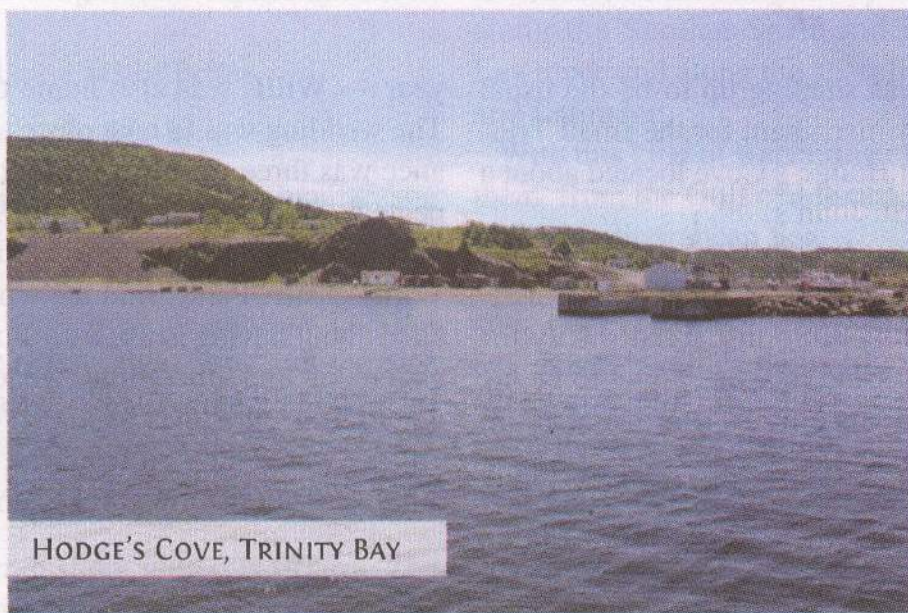
Christmas was traditionally a time of community visiting in rural Newfoundland communities and no visit would be complete unless the host offered a

snack to his/her guests. Not only that, several of Hedley's nine children were still living at home and with a family to feed every day along with expected company during the upcoming Christmas holiday season, a few dozen codfish fillets in the freezer would make things a lot nicer for the holiday festivities at the Drover household.

Still, Hedley didn't appear to be in a hurry to leave Hodge's Cove to go to his net that Christmas Eve

morning. His son Dennis remembers Hedley splitting firewood and bringing it in the house to dry.

Dennis was a typical 11-year-old boy who loved a game of hockey and recalls that he was rounding up hockey sticks and other things to have a game of street hockey with



HODGE'S COVE, TRINITY BAY

his buddies on the wharf not far from their house. Like all children his age, Dennis was full of wonderment and excitement about anticipated Christmas presents that would be under the tree the next morning. Perhaps there might be a piece of hockey equipment or if he was really lucky, the Mastermind game he'd asked Santa for that year.

But Christmas morning would not be a time for opening gifts in the Drover household.

When Hedley finished chopping wood, he contacted his young friend Willis Thomas to see if Willis' offer to join him still stood. Willis agreed and again suggested they could go in his little speedboat. The two men later met at the beach and after deciding that the wind and seas were still not too bad, they two men prepared to go across Southwest Arm to haul Hedley's two gillnets at Mooring Cove Point. After all, it was only a mile across the Arm and they would be back home again in an hour.

Like Willis Thomas, Cal (Calvin) Drover also



worked in Labrador City in 1976 and he too was home in Hodge's Cove to spend Christmas with his dad, Hedley, and mom Beulah, along with several siblings and other family members.

Cal remembers being on the beach when his dad and Willis climbed into the small boat. In fact, Willis tried coaxing Cal into joining them.

"He was saying 'come on Cal, we won't be long,' but I didn't feel like going and said I'd probably go in the woods and get some wood for Christmas," Cal recalled.

"Nah, come on - we'll be back in a little while and then tonight we'll have a few drinks," Willis implored.

But Cal had his decision made.

"OK then, if you're not comin' then shove us off will you," Hedley said to his son.

Cal obliged and pushed the small boat away from the beach and looked at his father as the two men set out to haul the net.

Cal would be the last person to see to his dad and Willis alive.

Meanwhile, back in Hodge's Cove, everything was proceeding as any other Christmas Eve. Women were baking cookies and treats and putting the last touches on the household decorations for the holiday season; men were working on getting firewood and putting up the last outdoor Christmas lights.

By midday, several hours after Willis and Hedley said they would be back home, the winds had significantly increased and concerns about the two men started to grow. Hedley's wife, Beulah, kept glancing out her pantry window to see if there was any sign of a speedboat coming in the small harbour.

With her anxiety increasing with every passing minute, Beulah went to the Thomas residence to see if they had heard from Willis. Willis' mother, Ethel Thomas, said she hadn't heard anything from her son and that she too was getting worried. Both women then decided to contact other people to see if anyone knew anything about Willis and Hedley's whereabouts.

Wes Peddle didn't share the women's fear at first.

When he came home from the woods about noon time, his wife Audrey mentioned that Hedley and

Willis had gone out in boat and were overdue. Wes knew Hedley very well and suggested that his friend probably went to nearby Hatchet Cove after hauling his nets and was likely enjoying a Christmas Eve drink with friends there. By early afternoon, Beulah couldn't just look out the window any longer; she had to do something. She called and asked Wes if he would consider going across the Arm to see if there was any sign of her husband and Willis. It was windy and seas were getting rough but Wes said he would take a look.

Minutes after leaving Hodge's Cove harbour, Wes Peddle had plenty reason to think that Beulah and Ethel's fears were more than justified.

*Join us next month for Pt II of "Hodge's Cove's Black Christmas." ±*

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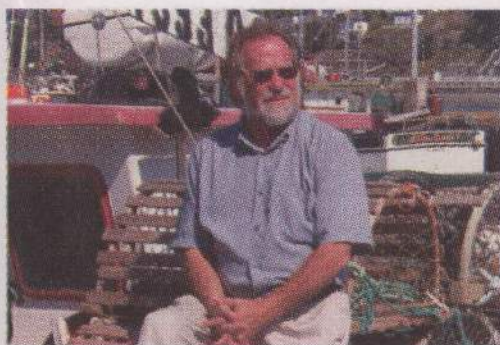
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## HODGE'S COVE'S BLACK CHRISTMAS - PT II

### FINAL VOYAGES

*On Christmas Eve morning, 1976, Hedley Drover and his friend Willis Thomas left their home in Hodge's Cove to check Hedley's cod nets located about a mile across Southwest Arm in Trinity Bay. As winds and seas increased throughout the day, so did fears among their families back home. The day that was supposed to be a joyous and festive occasion turned out to be the blackest day in the history of the small Newfoundland community.*

At the request of family members of the missing men, Wes Peddle contacted his friend Walter Drover and the two men ventured out from Hodge's Cove in Walt's boat to search for Willis and Hedley. The morning showers had turned into a steady rain-fall accompanied by a strong southeasterly wind so "Uncle" Walt, as he was known to Wes and most others, decided to go to a nearby community to top up his fuel tank in case they ran into conditions that would mean taking longer than expected to get back home.

Coming out of Hatchet Cove, they narrowly escaped being added to the list of "missing persons" themselves that afternoon.

"We nearly capsized," Wes says, explaining that a couple of large waves nearly tossed their boat bow over stern.

Uncle Walt was back aft on the motor so Wes quickly moved forward from where he was sitting in the middle of the boat to the front to provide more weight in the bow. That would help stabilize the vessel until Walt could maneuver the speedboat to a better angle against the seas and wind. What Wes calls "a bit of a fright" was enough to convince the two men that it was too dangerous to continue searching for their two friends so they decided to cautiously guide the boat through the rough seas back to Hodge's Cove.

With Wes and Uncle Walt's arrival back home,

fears for the two missing men heightened. Uncle Walt's boat was a sturdy 18-ft speedboat with a 20hp engine and if that one almost capsized, how could a smaller 16-ft punt/speedboat survive those conditions, they thought.

Hodge's Cove's black Christmas started that evening — literally. While an entire community waited and worried, hardly anyone felt festive enough to turn on Christmas lights. The small Trinity Bay town looked like any other dreary night in winter - not the brightly lit and happy place of a normal Christmas Eve.

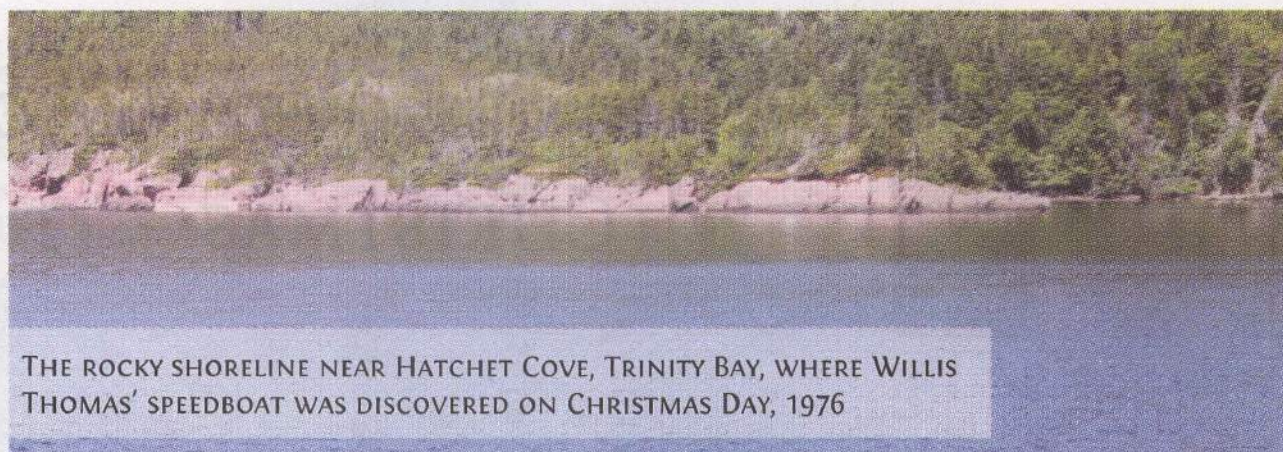
Dennis Drover still gets emotional when he talks about the events of Christmas, 1976.




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THE ROCKY SHORELINE NEAR HATCHET COVE, TRINITY BAY, WHERE WILLIS THOMAS' SPEEDBOAT WAS DISCOVERED ON CHRISTMAS DAY, 1976

At 11 years of age, he was old enough to understand from the somber but anxious conversations of the adults that something was terribly wrong. Although 36 years has passed, tears still well up when Dennis recalls when the younger Drover children were preparing for bed that night. What was supposed to be a night of wide-eyed excitement, waiting for morning's first light to see what Santa Claus had brought had turned into a sickening feeling that was all consuming.

His younger sister Lisa, who was just nine, asked Dennis if he thought their dad and Willis were going to be all right. It was Christmas Eve and Dennis wanted to say something positive to calm his little sister's fears but even though he tried, the proper words were hard to find because his mind was in such turmoil that talking about his dad was almost impossible.

"I'll never forget that moment as long as I live," Dennis says softly, his voice trembling with still raw emotion.

At dawn on Christmas morning, nearly every man in Hodge's Cove was on the beach preparing to untie their boats and search for Hedley and Willis — among them, Wes and Uncle Walt. The winds had abated considerably overnight and the rain had stopped. The cresting seas had also subsided considerably but there was still a fairly large sea swell running after the bad weather on Christmas Eve.

"It was a fair day," Wes says.

Just as he and Walt were about to leave Hodge's Cove, Cyril Stringer stopped by to ask if he could join them.

"Uncle Walt asked Cyril if he was sure about that because Cyril was Willis Thomas' first cousin as well as a close friend and Uncle Walt worried that if the worst happened, Cyril might be affected or something," Wes remembers.

But Cyril insisted that he would be fine no matter what and that he really wanted to help.

Boats of various sizes and descriptions — speedboats, longliners and pleasure craft — were soon steaming across Southwest Arm on Christmas morning. While everyone on the boats and back home in

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Hodge's Cove homes prayed that Hedley Drover and Willis Thomas would be found alive and well, there was also a pall of dread hanging over them.

"We went across the Arm to Hatchet Cove area first and then worked our way back down the shore from there," Wes explains. "When we got down a bit further, someone called out from another boat that there was a half-sunk speedboat stuck in a crevice in the rocks. So Uncle Walt got our boat as close to the rocks as he could — there was a big swell — and I jumped and Cyril jumped and we ran down around the rocks to where the boat was and when we got down a bit closer, I could see this black thing lying in the bottom of the boat."

At first, Wes was convinced that the "black thing" was a body but as he walked slowly closer, he realized that it was Willis' black Mercury outboard motor. There was no sign of Willis or Hedley.

With this new development, Uncle Walt, Wes and Cyril got together with several of the men in the other boats and discussed what to do next. Wes and Cyril made several observations that were very relevant clues as to what might have happened to Hedley and Willis. Those observations provided guidance for the steps to follow.

The first observation was that the men had time to remove the engine from the boat's counter and place it on the bottom of the small speedboat. That told them it wasn't a hard collision against the rocks. Secondly, the boat was intact with one exception. A piece of the boats planking towards the bow had been punctured. Also the cap of the gas can was still in the boat but the tank itself was nowhere to be seen. For seasoned fishermen and men who practically grew up on the water in Newfoundland, that second observation offered a glimmer of hope in their initial homespun investigation.

In the days when life-jackets were hardly ever found onboard small boats, the searchers knew that an empty gas tank was sometimes used as a flotation device when vessels sank. Hedley could swim and Willis was an excellent swimmer so Uncle Walt and the others determined that if the two men managed to get out of the boat and away from the slippery freezing rocks alive and then cling to the empty gas

can for buoyancy, it just might be possible they could have made it to a beach and safety.

Somewhat encouraged by this development and knowing that Hedley, particularly, was a very experienced woodsman, the searchers dared to hope that the two missing men might have made it to shore and had walked into the woods. Hedley would have known that there was a road not far beyond their location that would have taken him/them toward Hatchet Cove not far away.

With all those factors in mind, the men decided that Uncle Walt, Wes and Cyril would go back to Hodge's Cove to contact the RCMP to see if there was a tracking dog available to conduct a land search. The others would stay in the vicinity of where Willis' boat was found and continue to search the shoreline.

*- Join us next month for Pt III of Hodge's Cove Black Christmas ±*

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## HODGE'S COVE'S BLACK CHRISTMAS - PT III

### FINAL VOYAGES

*Last month we told you that the search for Willis Thomas and Hedley Drover had turned grim. Someone discovered Willis' small speedboat half sunk and wedged into the rocks near Mooring Cove Point across Southwest Arm from Hodge's Cove. That was a bad turn of events but the searchers still held out hope that Willis and Hedley had made it to shore and could be huddled safely in the woods. But, they also understood that it was possible that they would be searching for bodies in the water.*

As Wes Peddle and Uncle Walt Drover headed back to Hodge's Cove to contact the RCMP, other boats continued searching in the vicinity of Mooring Cove on Christmas Day where Willis' little speedboat was found half submerged.

When Wes and Uncle Walt arrived back in their community, they contacted the RCMP with an update on finding Willis' punt. During the conversation, Wes explained that because both Hedley and Willis could swim, it might be possible they made it to shore and tried walking to safety. Hedley was an experienced hunter and woodsman and if he made to shore, Wes and Uncle Walt reasoned that the two would have a good chance at surviving, even in winter. Wes asked the officer if he would consider getting a tracking dog and search the area woods in the vicinity where the boat was found.

The officer agreed and said he'd be along shortly. Approximately a half hour later, Wes met with the policeman on the beach in Hodge's Cove and continued to discuss strategy for a search. "But all of a sudden, I noticed that some boats were leaving Moor-

ing Cove and coming across the Arm and I looked at the cop and said, 'hang on a minute, there's a couple of boats headed this way and they wouldn't be doing that unless there's something going on.'"

Sure enough, he was right - there was a new development and it was not good news. Wes' father in law, Azariah King, arrived at the wharf in his 35ft long-

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MOORING COVE (SOUTHWEST ARM) WHERE HEDLEY DROVER'S BODY WAS FOUND ON THE SHORELINE

liner and announced that they had found Willis' body. He later explained that searchers were scouring the waters off Mooring Cove Point when someone saw something yellow on the bottom about seven or eight feet underwater. It was Willis in his yellow rubber clothes in a kneeling position. It looked as if he had been trying to crawl along the rocky ledge to the surface but couldn't make it. One of the men lowered a cod jigger and retrieved the body.

During the course of getting the update from Azariah, the police officer asked Wes if he thought they should go and search for Hedley. "I looked out and saw all the boats coming towards us and I knew then that they had found Hedley," Wes says. "I looked at the officer and told him that 'no, there would be no need for us too look for Hedley because

they have him - the men in those boats would not all be coming home otherwise.'"

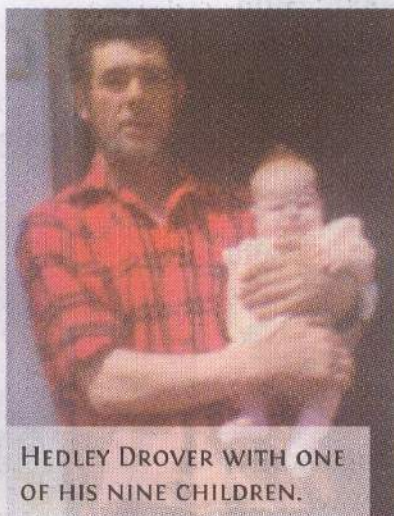
A few minutes later, the first of the boats arrived with the sad news that they had indeed found Hedley's

body in Mooring Cove, half in the water and half on the beach. An empty gas tank was also found nearby.

Meanwhile, 11-year old Dennis Drover was struggling with how to deal with everything that Christmas morning.

"I got up and there were people everywhere. I still had that sick feeling from the night before and could hear some of what they were saying and I couldn't stand it - I just had to get away from there. So, I took my skates and hockey stick and left and

went to one my friend's house but his house was up on a bank that overlooked the harbour where you



HEDLEY DROVER WITH ONE OF HIS NINE CHILDREN.



could see everything going on down there and I didn't want to see that so I went to another friend's place. My friend's mom told me to come in and that she's get me some breakfast - something to eat. A while later, my friend's father said he'd go and see if there was any news - a little while later, he came back and took my friend and me to a back room in the house where he sat me down and he told me they had found my father's body."

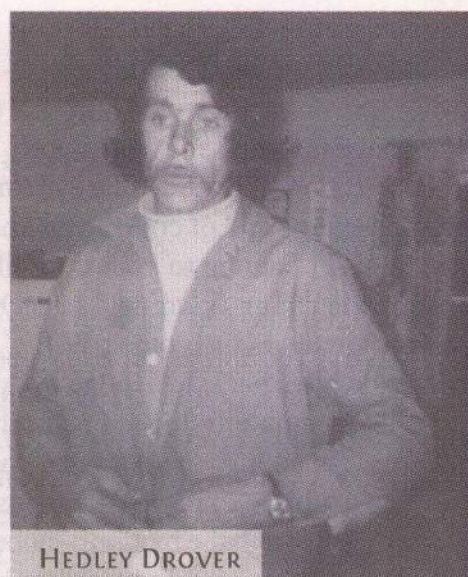
Dennis still gets overwhelmed with emotion when he remembers that day. Sitting with us in **Navigator** offices in July 2013, it was difficult for him to talk about it even though 36 years had passed. Composing himself as much as he could, he talked about his reaction after being told on Christmas Day that his dad was dead. "I don't know what I was thinking to be honest but I had to do something. I remember taking my hockey stuff and skates and went in on the pond and played hockey until I finally realized that I had to go home. After that, many of the hours and even days are somewhat blurred for Dennis. He knew he couldn't bring himself go to the funeral and withdrew into his own personal space for some time. In fact, that withdrawal has lasted to some extent for years.

Coping and eventually finding some sense of closure for Dennis will be covered in the next issue of Final Voyages.

Dennis was just one of many Hodge's Cove people who had to deal with a broken heart that Christmas. The Drover and Thomas families included literally, dozens of immediate family members — children, siblings, par-



WILLIS THOMAS



HEDLEY DROVER

ents, cousins etc. And of course, as in all small

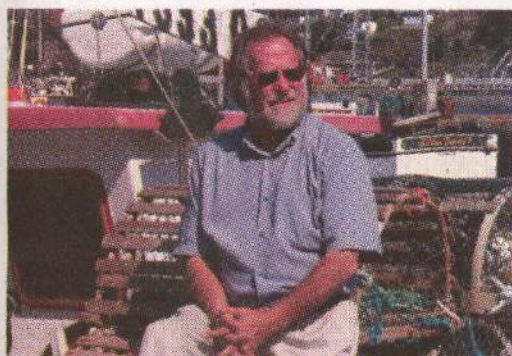
rural Newfoundland and Labrador communities, neighbours and friends were, more or less, extended family.

Willis Thomas' brother Doug, was working in Labrador City that year, as were several members from both Thomas and Drover families. Their relatives back home on the island decided to keep the news that Hedley and Willis were missing away from them at first. After all, it was Christmas Eve and everyone thought there would be a good chance to find both missing men alive and well on Christmas Day so there was no need to get everyone away from



DOUG THOMAS (WILLIS' BROTHER) AND WES PEDDLE (RIGHT) ON DOUG'S BOAT IN MOORING COVE SUMMER 2013.



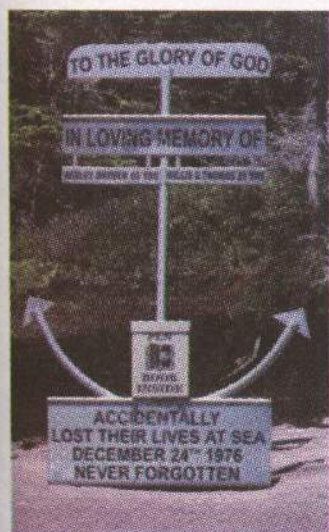


## FINAL VOYAGES

# HODGE'S COVE BLACK CHRISTMAS PT IV

## FINDING CLOSURE — THEN HEALING

*Last month we told you that the search for Willis Thomas and Hedley Drover ended in great sadness. The two Hodge's Cove men left home on Christmas Eve, 1976, to check Hedley's cod nets on the north side of Southwest Arm. High winds prevented a search when the two friends didn't return on Christmas Eve afternoon but when weather conditions improved on Christmas Day, it didn't take searchers long to discover both bodies. Hedley was half on the shore and half in the water while Willis was sighted in a kneeling position on the ocean floor just a few feet off Mooring Cove Point. An entire community was suddenly plunged into grief and mourning on what was supposed to be a most joyous and celebratory time of year.*



When a fisherman from a small rural community dies young and sudden, families are often left to endure severe hardship. Long after the normal grieving period passes, mere survival for many families is extremely difficult. In the Hodge's Cove tragedy, Willis Thomas left his mom and dad, along with six siblings but he also

left behind his common-law wife, Lorraine Pitcher, who was expecting their child the following spring. How would she cope? Hedley Drover left his wife and nine children, several of whom, were still living

at home. Without employment to provide an income, his widow Beulah faced a very scary future.

In June 1977, Lorraine gave birth to a beautiful daughter. Without Willis in her life, Lorraine, who was still a very young woman, was overwhelmed by the thoughts of raising a child on her own. Willis' brother Ron and his wife offered to adopt the baby, which everyone realized was a wonderful idea. That

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way the child would grow up in a good home and still be in the Thomas family. Now in her thirties, Lori is also a mom, living in Labrador City.

Beulah Drover was also distraught and overwhelmed facing an uncertain future without Hedley. In her state of high anxiety, worried about coping, Beulah accepted her son Carson's invitation to spend the winter with him and his wife in Labrador City. So, within a couple of weeks after Hedley's death, Beulah, along with her four youngest children, Dennis, Roxanne, Lisa and Roger, packed their bags and headed north. After living with Carson for a while, Beulah found a house of her own in Labrador City and moved in with the children.

For 11-year old Dennis Drover, the loss of his dad on Christmas then suddenly being uprooted and separated from his Hodge's Cove friends was extremely traumatic. At such a vulnerable age, he wasn't sure how to deal with it all. For years he compartmentalized his fears, his sadness and confusion by locking it away and not talking about it. While it might have seemed to others that Dennis had psychologically moved on, he knew that in fact, he had not even come close to finding closure. He might have stopped talking about the accident but he certainly hadn't stopped thinking about it. That's why in 2006, in conversation with Willis Thomas's brother Doug, Dennis

mentioned an idea that he'd been carrying in his mind for years. He suggested establishing a memorial at the site where his dad and Willis died. Doug instantly knew it was a great idea and both men shared their thoughts on what to do next.

"We both drew sketches of an anchor, without the other knowing what we

had done" Dennis says. So, with the basic concept determined, Doug, an excellent welder and handyman, along with his cousin and good friend, Ray Stringer, started working on a steel anchor monument while the Drover and Thomas family members discussed the wording that would be engraved on it.

In the summer of 2007, both families invited everyone in Hodge's Cove and area to join them for the unveiling. Dozens of people came and for Dennis Drover, a sense of closure was finally starting to seep in. He unlocked that secret compartment in his mind and began talking to everyone about his private suffering. After all those silent years, Dennis' emotions still overwhelm but now he wants to talk about the tragedy and he's grown to understand and accept that his overt expressions of emotions and tears are all part of the healing process.

Also part of Dennis Drover's healing is a touching story about a small BIC lighter. "The only gift I ever gave my father that I paid for with my own money, was a green BIC lighter — it was a Father's Day gift

RAY STRINGER



DOUG THOMAS



RIGHT: LORI THOMAS AT THE SITE OF THE MEMORIAL FOR HER DAD, WILLIS THOMAS







ALLISON AND DENNIS DROVER

than 30 years previous but still, it seemed to Dennis that his father Hedley was there on the beach with him that day and was sending a sign from beyond the grave that he approved of what his son was doing. Dennis kept the little green lighter and as an expression of how much that incident meant to him, Dennis has a tattoo inked on his right leg with the image of the BIC along with the larger image of the anchor and monument (See below photo).

The sudden loss of loved ones is never easy for families left behind and undoubtedly, there is an added dimension of sorrow when that loss occurs in Christ-

when I was very young," Dennis explains. As fate would have it, shortly before the monument unveiling, Dennis was walking along the beach of Mooring Cove one day very close to the spot where his dad's body was found. It was one of those solemn times when he was reflecting on everything that had transpired since Christmas 1976 and especially the events of the last few days preparing for the unveiling of a memorial. Although he was lost in deep contemplation, his quiet thoughts suddenly vanished when he saw something that brought tears to his eyes and

goose bumps on his flesh. There, lying on the beach was a green BIC lighter. Picking it up, Dennis knew that it was not likely to be the same lighter that he gave his dad on Father's Day more

mas. But, the Thomas' and Drovers of Hodge's Cove have found a way to get by and since the installation of the monument/memorial in 2007, both families have committed to coming home and gathering at the site every five years. The first reunion was in 2012 and plans are already underway for the next one in 2017.


Both families were drawn together in their common bond of sorrow and the monument has become the focal point of sharing their memories and fostering even stronger family ties.

BY JIM WELLMAN ±


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DENNIS,  
POINTING TO THE  
IMAGES TATTOOED  
ON HIS LEG





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