GORDON BANTON

If there is any doubt about the hard work of years ago that we so often hear about, then just take the time to talk with someone like Gordon Banton. He grew up in the resettled community of St. Jones Without in Trinity Bay at a time when boyhood was much too short, the teenage years were almost non-existent and manhood came much too quickly.

Gordon Banton

There were many hours of work that saw very little return, yet year in and year out there was always enough to survive and raise a family. The skills of a fisherman, a farmer, a carpenter and a woodcutter were vital for the young men of Newfoundland to learn. Gordon learned and used them well. Now almost eighty years old, he can reflect on a lifetime of hard work and think about how things have changed. Following are some brief stories, as told by him, about a lifestyle that went unchanged for many years, but now is probably gone forever.

Fishing at the Age of Eight

"I was about eight years old when I went fishing first. I used to get aboard the boat with my father. When I got ahold of a fish, he would haul it up for me. I couldn't haul it up myself; I was too small. When I got older, my father would tie a line of trawl along with his line. I claimed whatever was caught on that trawl. A common practice for showing ownership when fishing with the handline or trawl was to cut the tails of the codfish. When we went in, we picked out the ones with the tail cut. They would be mine."

Hard Work for a Boy

"When my father was away fishing on the southern shore, I got a punt - a small rowboat with two oars. I was no more than twelve years of age then. Me and another feller would row down to Gooseberry Cove to get bait and come back up. Then we would row twelve miles to Copper Island and put in the day there handlining for

fish. When we got home, we probably only had six or seven fish. By the end of summer, we may have had two or three quintals. That's how hard it was to get along then."

The First Voyage

"When the time came, my father took me with him and we went to the southern shore. That year the fish was scarce there. We got three barrels of salted cod. When it came time to go, we had spent the three or four dollars we had. We didn't have a cent of money left. Of course there wasn't much money on the go then. A little steamer towed us to St. John's. We had three barrels of fish and nowhere to stay. We were on the wharf when we met a girl from

A skiff

back home. Her father had a schooner. When he heard we had no place to stay, he told us to stay aboard the schooner. That was very good of him. We went aboard the schooner and the hold was pretty near full with dried fish. The forecastle, or sailor's quarters, was barred up. This was to be the last voyage for this schooner, so it wasn't in good shape. Anyway, we got a sail and spread it over the fish. That's where we had our bed for three or four days until we got the fish out. On the way home, Uncle Simmy towed us with his schooner. We came upon a southwest gale crossing the mouth of Trinity Bay. We thought we were going to lose the skiff. For his help, we gave Uncle Simmy one of our three barrels of fish. We got home alright, but I didn't have a copper."

Getting the Nets Ready

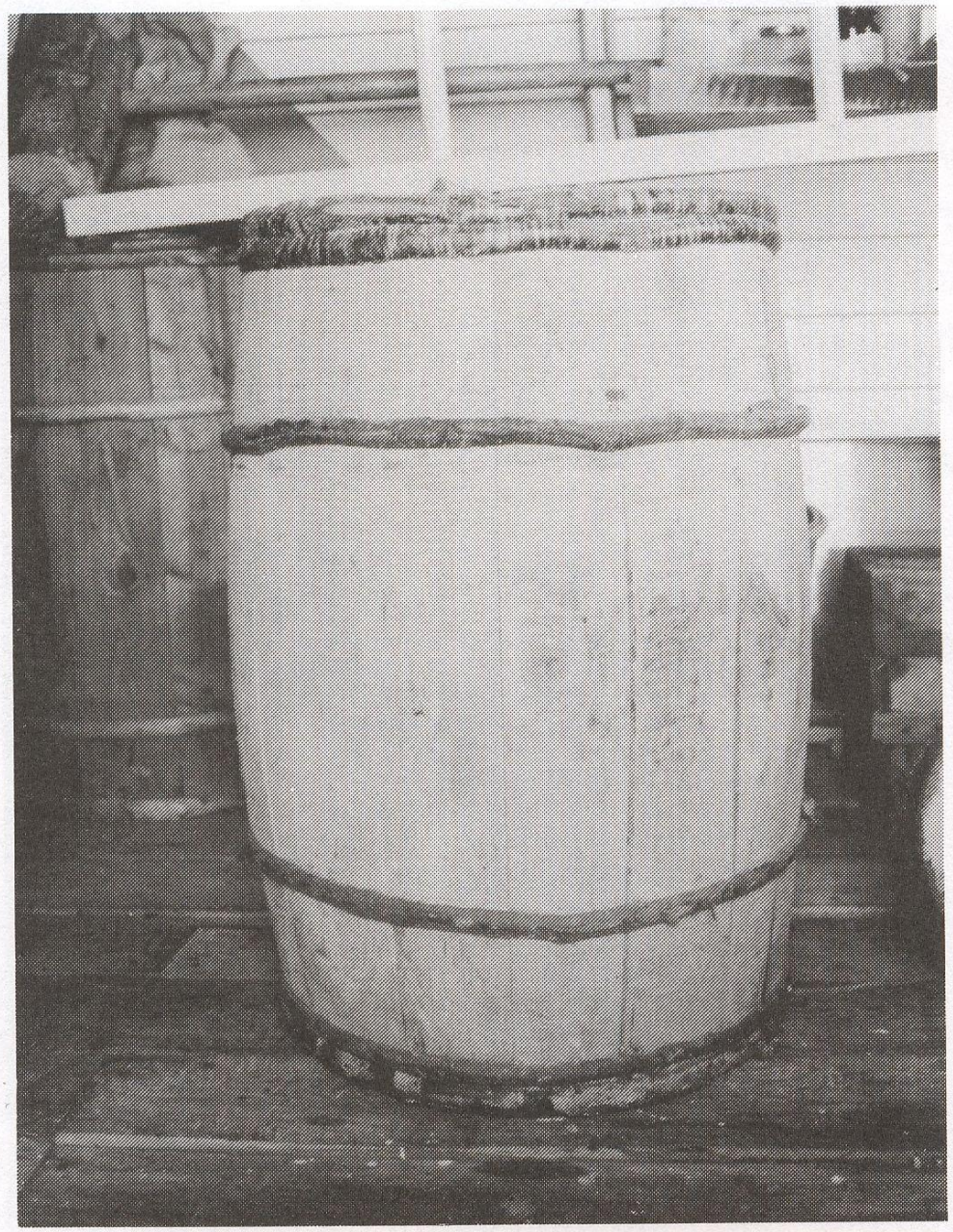
"We had to knit our nets and our cod traps. We had to knit it all with the proper kind of twine. Nets and traps were made out of cotton twine then. It's not like it is now where you'd go and buy a web to mend your net.

In the spring of the year, we would bark our nets. Old cotton twine turned white and barking the nets would blacken them and prevent rot. We'd get two big bark pots and a 100-pound sack of bark. The pots would hold 40 gallons of water. A fire was lit underneath the water-filled pots, or drums as some called them. The bark would be added and it would mix with the hot water. Some people used tar. Once the water was black, the white nets would be dipped into the pots and when they were taken out, they'd be black. After the nets were barked, they were put out in the meadow to dry."

Bark pot

Making Hoops

"Barrels were held together with long narrow strips of birch that was made into a circle and joined at the ends. These rings were called hoops. Everybody made them because it was a good way to make extra money, so it became a part of our livelihood. The hoops were sold to the merchants who used them on the barrels for packing fish. We sometimes used them on barrels ourselves, but most were sold. There were twelve hoops in a bundle. We got ten cents a bundle."



Barrel held together with hoops

Becoming a Skipper

"Uncle Adam had an old schooner, so I asked my father about buying her. He didn't think she was worth the bother. I decided to get this schooner anyway. The schooner was six hundred dollars, so I asked my brother, Fred, to help me out. He said he'd give me two hundred dollars. My father also promised me two hundred dollars, not thinking that I was going to bother with it. The next morning I went to Clarenville to get declared a skipper. You weren't

allowed to take a schooner out unless you had this clearance. When I went there, the man said to me 'Sonny, you seem pretty young to go skipper.' I said, 'Yes sir, but I'll be getting older.' I was only sixteen or seventeen then."

Salmon Fishing

"We used to do good with the salmon nets. We used to split the salmon in the backs, salt them and put them in pork barrels. We'd get sixty dollars for a barrel of salmon. That was a good price."

Ring Seining

"There were a lot of changes in the fishery. Ring seining was a new practice. A man came over from Scotland to show us how to work this seine. We were the first crew to use this type of seine around our bay and among the first crews in Newfoundland. It was used to catch fish other than cod. That fall we brought in a lot of mackerel using this type of seine. We would load and go, fill the longliner with mackerel and head for the wharf."

My First 12-Gauge Shotgun

"I had a 12-gauge when I was around twelve years old. I got my first 12-gauge from St. John's. It was a 36-inch barrel, heavy duty. I had a fortune. I paid for it with two hundred bundles of drum hoops. Two hundred bundles was worth twenty dollars then. That was a lot of work to pay for that gun.

Uncle Mark, Eli and myself went out seal hunting one morning with that gun. Uncle Mark was the gunner and Eli and myself rowed the boat. The gun was lodged down in the boat and Uncle Mark struck it with his leg, pushing it back. When it came back, the gun fired off.

We knew nothing until there was a hole through the punt and the gun was in three pieces."

Partridge Hunting

"There were thousands of partridges. When I was young, we used to go out alongshore. They would be up along the hills wherever you look. You could kill dozens of them, but you wouldn't kill more than you wanted because there weren't any freezers to put them in. There were no restrictions on them then."

Duck Hunting

"We would go duck hunting in the fall when there was time to spare. Of course, there wasn't much time. We hardly took time to eat. March would be the best time for ducks. We'd be hunting sea ducks for hours and even days. There were thousands of them."

The Power of the Musket

"My grandfather had a musket that he left to me. One day myself and my uncle went turr hunting. First he had to blow it off. He put the iron rod down and forgot about it. He fired the gun and when I looked I could see the iron rod enter the water. I didn't say anything. He loaded it again and asked 'Where's the rod?' I told him it was half a mile off and on the bottom of the bay.

The first time I ever shot from a musket, I was shooting at some pigeons. I was up against a rock and I put the gun up to my shoulder. When I shot, I thought my arm was gone. I never shot out of it anymore."