

Newfs are real 'chosen people'



by Glenn Wheeler

You'll find it listed in the Halifax phone book as "The Newfoundland Society of Nova Scotia" but don't expect seminars on Newfoundland folklore. It's a lounge on Inglis St.

There are swankier places. Some of the bulbs in the light fixtures need to be changed, and the black Newfoundland dog and red lettering on the sign outside are a little faded. But the people who go to "The Newfoundlander" every Saturday night don't care about that.

It's a chance to take a vicarious trip back to the beloved rock for hundreds of transplanted Haligonian Newfies. It's also part of a phenomenon. In Halifax, Galt, Toronto and numerous other places they've set up their clubs as soon as enough immigrants have been gathered together.

The sign at 5461 Inglis announces the place as a "home away from home for Newfoundlanders." The door is barred from the inside. I press the buzzer at the right and walk in from bright sunlight. I'm blind at first but when I become accustomed to the gloom, I see that two walls are lined with wooden maps of

Newfoundland that have a red light in their centers. The ceiling is of bare, brown-painted beams and is bordered by fishing nets. The building appears to have been converted from some other purpose. There are two heavy, warehouse-type doors and no windows. A genuine Newfoundland lobster pot with brightly colored lights strung through it hangs on the wall. At the far end there's a dance floor that is built to look like a dory.

There are but a dozen people here at 2 o'clock on a Friday afternoon. Ahead of the table where I sit are two men in business suits drinking rum and smoking cigarettes. Sitting across the table from them with his back to me is someone whose head is completely shaven except for an impeccably-groomed ridge of hair at the top. They look comfortable and talk about Chicago and mutual acquaintances.

I am joined by The Newfoundlander's manager. Marilyn Royston was born in Nova Scotia but her stepfather owns the place and he's a Trinity Bay man. She's shy, friendly, divorced and at work from 9 a.m. till one the next morning, Tuesday through Saturday inclusive.

Sipping a cup of coffee, Marilyn tells how she brought disco to The Newfoundlander a couple of years ago but had get rid of it shortly after. The patrons like balanced doses of country, Newfoundland and Irish music and that's what they get four nights a week.

"It was no go with disco," Marilyn says and complains that it's hard to find good groups—even in St. John's where she's gone to look several times.

Our conversation is continually interrupted. Everyone who leaves has to say goodbye, tell her what he'll be doing in the next few days and

when he'll be back to The Newfoundlander. Several people say hello as they come in.

Marilyn can't estimate the number of Newfoundlanders in Halifax. "Some people have parents who were born in Newfoundland and they figure that qualifies them for the distinction as well." She wonders if Ronnie might know and calls him over.

Ronnie is drinking rye and Coke. "You must be from Toronto to be drinkin' the like of that!" someone yells as he gets another one at the bar. He sits with us and a doorman who worked at The Newfoundlander five years ago when attending university sits next to Marilyn. Ronnie is delighted to have my undivided attention.

He says he grew up in the southwest Newfoundland community of St. Fintan's, drove a crane for the USAF at Port Harmon, went to fight for the Americans in Vietnam (Ronnie pronounces it Vietnam) and wound up with \$800 to his name. The rye fortifies the Texan-sounding drawl he's acquired somewhere along the way. "With my money, I brought ma-self a little truck and went to a small place called Fresno in California, U.S.A.," he intones. "I'm an owner operator now," he says proudly. He drives his own tractor trailer.

Despite his drawl, visit to Vietnam and the fact that he's living in "Canada" (i.e. on the mainland), Ronnie has no doubt where his home is and he loves things at The Newfoundlander.

"There's absolutely no place like it," he says. "You can eat salt fish and pork scraps here or you can have fish cakes if you want, the music is good and it's the next best thing to being in Newfoundland. It's the atmosphere," says Ronnie.

"You won't get thrown out if you get too tanked up.

Marilyn will call a cab—she'll pay for it if she has too—and you'll get home O.K. There's not many places like that. It's my home away from home." Does Ronnie's wife come here? "She wouldn't go nowhere else."

Marilyn smiles and tells us about a telephone call she got one morning two years ago from someone at the airport. "It was a young fellow who'd just arrived from Newfoundland to go to nautical school but only had enough money to get in from the airport on the bus." She drove to the Chateau Halifax, met him coming off the bus, took him to a friend's boarding house not far from The Newfoundlander and paid his board till he got on his feet. She hadn't known who he was but someone from Newfoundland had visited the lounge and told him to call Marilyn if he had any trouble in Halifax. She laughs but she's proud of the reputation The Newfoundlander has won her.

I ask Marilyn if she's getting tired of the job. "Oh, no. I love the job. I'm trying to buy the place from my stepfather," she says.

The next day is Saturday and I go back to The Newfoundlander that night. I'm surprised by the number of young people. The place is crowded by people aged anywhere from 20 to 70 years old. They're all talking, laughing and dancing.

Gilbert and Beatty are from Cape St. George on west Newfoundland's Port au Port Peninsula. They sit close to the dance floor with six others from the Cape, two of whom have brought their Haligonian boyfriends. Gilbert is a carpenter and came to the city about a month ago to look for work. Betty has been a stenographer at Dalhousie University for two years. They're going back to Cape St. George next August to get married but plan to live in Halifax. "Come on Gil. Let's dance," Betty says.

The three-piece band is called Willow Tree. They sing slow ones like "The Green Grass of Home" for waltzing and faster ones like "Go Johnny Go." The band is joined by Newfoundland's own Terry Walsh. The accordion player and singer is a great favorite of the crowd and between sets sells copies of his newly-released single.

The Cape St. George table is the liveliest tonight. They punctuate Terry Walsh's accordion music with shrill "heeee-haaaa's." They're up and down from the dance floor and for the jigs link arms with everyone on the floor. One of them has brought his spoons and clanks away from the side.

The red lights in the maps are glowing and the burnt-out bulbs in the light fixtures still haven't been changed. Newfoundlanders might have a bit of hick in them but they know where to go to have a good time.

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