

# Community is dying

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In Cape Breton, about 30 miles to the north of Cape Smokey, there is a small village called Meat Cove. Famous for being in the middle of one of the best hunting and fishing areas in Nova Scotia, this area became somewhat of a Mecca to Americans who sought to escape the urban sprawl.

This area, however, also bore a fair measure of infamy, for here, supposedly, were to be found some of the worst living conditions in the province of Nova Scotia. Tarpaper shacks with dirt floors and no windows made up a sizeable percentage of the dwellings. Unemployment and Welfare benefits were a way of life: quite often the only income for some families in a bad year. The squalor and poverty were painful to the eyes, and were agonizing to the conscience.

The people of Meat Cove descended from the Scots who landed off the "Hector". Their ancestors chose probably one of the most forbidding spots on the rugged North Coast of Cape Breton to live. Why they did this no one knows but this choice was to be one of the main contributing factors to the eventual demise of the community.

The people of Meat Cove were fishermen. Farming the rocky hillsides was inequitable, if not impossible. Consequently, the prosperity of the community depended on the catch for the year. More often than not, the catch was bad, forcing the community, as a whole to throw itself on the mercy of the welfare agencies, when they existed. In former years, starvation was not uncommon. As years went on, the situation worsened and more and more of the young people headed for the large urban centres to find work. Thus, begins the death of a way of life.

Up until the mid-1960's the community had been largely ignored by the rest of the world. People from the outside went there only to hunt or fish, and even this was rare, for it was not unheard of for a hunter to come out of the woods to find his car stripped, if still there at all. The presence of foreign plates on a car was known to help precipitate this action.

And then the tourists came. The fishermen awaited their boats for deep-sea fishing tours and sight-seeing trips to the Bird Islands. Many of the tourists were American and wealthy. Struck by the rugged beauty of the coast and the abundance of wide open space, many returned year after year, eventually buying land in the area to build a cabin. The residents of the area, though still resentful of the intruders, were exposed to and began to assimilate into their own, a different way of life.

Mark the second stage of the cultural death of this community.

The onslaught of the Americans did little to help the economy of the area. The increase in income from the tourist trade was soon to be offset by the inflated prices brought about by the tourists. Merchants, quick to see that Americans would pay more for food, raised their prices accordingly. Meanwhile, the natives struggled to make ends meet around the ever-increasing bulge of inflation.

Moreover, the willingness of the Americans to pay inflated prices for land drove the land value up at a skyrocketing rate. Property taxes rose, as a consequence, making it more difficult for the natives to keep what they already had. Usually,



Dal Photo/Walsh

Many rural communities in Nova Scotia are dependent upon fishing as the only method of bringing money into the community.

succumbing to the pressure of increasing property assessments, they sold out to the same people who were driving the land values skyward, thereby contributing to the vicious circle. This phenomenon was experienced throughout the island but was most harmful in this area.

As the community lost its lifeblood through the exodus of the people, those who remained were even further disadvantaged, for many depended upon the common strength of their neighbours and friends. The government, in its eternal wisdom, decided that the isolation was bad for the people here and embarked on a program of resettling them in larger communities where they could have access to the benefits available in larger, more diversified communities. The program has proven to be a disastrous failure. The "Black-Pointers", as they are commonly called, for the most part, didn't want to move and were unwelcome in the places to which they were taken. More importantly, they could no longer continue fishing as they had always done, for most were moved inland, away from the sea which had played the role of provider for so many years.

Witness, if you will, the third and final act of cultural execution.

Only a few remain in Meat Cove, except for the summer people who have their own boats now. Those remaining make a living out of the sea as best they can, supplementing this living with what they can get for the odd cord of pulp they cut and sell. A few still depend on the welfare agencies to help out in the ongoing struggle against the world.

There is a very real, terrible tragedy involved here. A community existed once where now stands

only some vacant shacks and a memory or two, bitter though they may be. The people here looked different and spoke with a strange, almost foreign dialect. Disparity was everywhere; law as we know it was almost unheard of. Inbreeding was prevalent and education was a difficult, if not completely impossible task. Truly, the picture was a dismal one.

But the people of Meat Cove were strong and independent: having little to do with and asking nothing from the world outside. Though they had little and lived a difficult life, they were content with the existence that they had built and maintained for themselves. That these people were exposed to the "better" ways of the outside world was an unfortunate accident. That they had these values forced upon them until they could no longer survive was an abominable crime.

The villagers of Meat Cove were punished. This punishment was for the crime of being different. Should the sentence for this crime be death? It terrifies me to think of this cruel and savage murder, for I see that such a fate is happening to many communities and as many ways of life. Meat Cove was a small village; death occurred quickly.

Look about you and see that a similar fate is in the offing for many communities, some very large, if we do not guard against this fate. We must realize that progress lies not in emulation of other cultures, but rather, in examining our own with regard to others and seeing, and learning from, their mistakes. Take a lesson from Kenzie MacNeil's "Johnstown Bogey" and chase away those elements which would have us submit to a way of life which is not our own.



Descendants of the Hector, long isolated and now lost to progress (Simm).