

Desperate Measures
*The Great Depression in
Newfoundland and Labrador*

Newfoundland and Labrador Adult Basic
Education Social History Series

A Joint Project of
The Writers' Alliance of
Newfoundland and Labrador
and Cabot College Literacy Office

In This Series...

Book 1 - Timelines of Newfoundland and Labrador

Book 2 - Facing the New Economy

Book 3 - Learning About the Past

Book 4 - Desperate Measures *The Great Depression in Newfoundland and Labrador*

Book 5 - Health and Hard Time

Book 6 - Multicultural History

Book 7 - Surviving in Rural Newfoundland

Book 8 - The Struggle for Work in the Great Depression

Book 9 - How Long do I Have to Wait?

Book 10 - William Pender *The Story of a Cooper*

Book 4: Desperate Measures

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Foreward

In 1994, the Writers' Alliance of Newfoundland and Labrador and Cabot College Literacy Office combined to produce a series of Newfoundland books on tape. Under the general title *Increasing Access to Newfoundland Literature*, the tapes and accompanying book *A Woman's Labour*, offered ABE Level 1 students and instructors, as well as the blind and the general public, an accessible and proven set of local literacy materials. The success of that project led to a second collaboration: the *Newfoundland and Labrador Adult Basic Education Social History Series*.

A major difference between the two projects is that while Newfoundland Books on Tape dealt with previously existing material, the essays in the *Social History Series* have been newly created by five professional writers. The prime objective, however, remains the same: to provide adult learners with meaningful literacy materials drawn from their own vibrant culture.

Topics in the series were chosen for their human and social interest and their importance in shaping who we are today. In addition to historical topics, current social and economic issues such as the closure of fish plants are also examined in an attempt to provide a contemporary perspective.

The five writers employed on the project carried out extensive research in public and university archives and libraries. Some also conducted personal interviews. Many of the essays contain new and fascinating historical research. Often the pieces deal with controversial subject matter: the Great Depression, Commission of Government, workfare, the erosion of social programs, poaching and the future of our rural communities. In an effort to dispel the notion that history is "dry and dull," the approach is fresh and provocative. The object is to inform, entertain and, in conjunction with the accompanying notes and questions, to effectively stimulate lively discussion among literacy students. Consequently, this series will also be of interest and practical use to the general public and, especially, to students.

The intended audience for the *Social History Series* is ABE Level 1 students. Because of the disparate subject matter, however, the essays are written in varying degrees of reading difficulty. In particular, students may need help with some of the quoted source material as this sometimes involves archaic syntax and vocabulary.

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The *Newfoundland and Labrador Adult Basic Education Social History Series* is a joint project of the Cabot College Literacy Office and the Writers' Alliance of Newfoundland and Labrador.

Dole and Desperate Measures
Life in the Great Depression in Newfoundland

by Carmelita McGrath



Credit: PANL.

A crowd masses in front of the Colonial Building during the riots of 1932. The riots resulted in damage to the building and injuries to both rioters and police. Sir Richard Squires, the Prime Minister, had to escape through the back door.

What Kind of Times Were These?

ABOUT FORTY MEN [CAME] TO ME IN STARVING CONDITION I CONSULTED RELIEVING OFFICER WHO INFORMS ME NOTHING CAN BE DONE THEIR ALLOWANCE WILL NOT BE DUE TILL EIGHTH AND NINTH FEBRUARY STOP IMPOSSIBLE THESE FAMILIES EXIST FOURTEEN DAYS WITHOUT FOOD STOP CAN ANY ARRANGEMENTS BE MADE HELP OUT SITUATION IF NOTHING I FEAR CONSEQUENCES.¹

The words above are a puzzle until we know more about where they came from. The writing seems strange. Who was starving? Where? When? Who sent the message? Who read it?

The words made up a message sent by telegram. They come from a time when there were few phones and no faxes. The telegram was sent on January 24, 1934 from a magistrate in Burgeo, Newfoundland. It was sent to the Minister of Justice in St. John's. The people who had no food were living in a time when many people were very poor. The telegram itself comes from a large file in the Provincial Archives of Newfoundland and Labrador. The file has many messages like the one above. We can look at them and ask: what kind of times were these?

Many people think of Newfoundland in the early 20th century as a peaceful place. Often, people talk about the "good old days." For many people, this still means the time before 1949, the year when Newfoundland became a province of Canada. This joining with Canada was called Confederation.

Newfoundland has many songs and stories that look back on the past as a peaceful time. These songs and stories tell of hard-working people making ends meet by living from the land and the sea.

This picture of peace and hard work tells only one part of the story of Newfoundland before Confederation. There were hard times, too. Before Confederation, Newfoundlanders fought in two world wars. There were years when the fishery was very poor, and people could not make ends meet no matter how hard they worked.

One of the most difficult times was the 1930s. During this time, there were economic problems worldwide. This was called the Great Depression. It started with a stock market crash in the United States in 1929. Newfoundland was hit very hard by the Great Depression. Many people were out of work or had very low wages. Hunger was a real problem for many people. More and more people were forced to apply for public relief. This was called the "dole." People had to apply to "relieving" or "relief" officers to get the dole. The dole was not money. It was an amount of food people could get from a local merchant or store-keeper. Many people said that you could not live on the dole. Often, people ran out of food before their next "relief order" would allow them to get more.

Most people hated the dole. They wanted work. They wanted to choose what they ate. Some people thought the government was not doing enough. As things got worse, some people felt they could not remain peaceful and quiet. In the 1930s, there were several

¹ Provincial Archives of Newfoundland and Labrador (PANL) GN13, Box 174, File 72: Telegrams to the Department of Justice, 1934.

times when people gathered to march and to riot. They took part in public protests. Unemployed people formed groups to try to get more work and better living conditions. Some people broke the law. Some stole rides on trains. There were raids on stores, and threats to raid more. Some people felt they would only be heard if they took part in violent action. Why?

The simple reason is that people were desperate. But that is not a full answer. In order to understand people's actions, we need to know more about the 1930s. We need to know how bad things were. We need to know how the government dealt with the Great Depression. We need to picture what life was like for the people who lived in these times.

Living on the Edge

Many people in Newfoundland and Labrador have always lived "on the edge." On one side of this edge is a certain amount of security. There is enough food, decent housing, heat and comfort. On the other side of the edge there is little security, hunger, poor housing, cold and discomfort. For many people in this province, it has always been hard to maintain a decent standard of living. People have tried many different things to stay on the safe side of the edge.

During the Great Depression, more and more people were pushed over the edge. Many more were in danger of crossing it. More and more people had to rely on public relief. As more people were forced to live on the dole, they came in contact with the issues and attitudes around it. People talked about who was responsible for feeding the poor. They wondered what people should be expected to live on. They asked whether the government was doing enough to help people. Some people thought that others were getting a better deal than they were.

The government saw another side of the issues. It had very little money to spend. Like our government today, it was in debt. There were people in government who had to decide the rate of relief, who got it, and how much. But no matter what need these people saw, there was a limit on what could be spent. The government felt that it had to keep relief low for two reasons: to keep costs down and to prevent relief from "becoming attractive." We hear some of the same points of view today about social assistance. People who speak for the government say that welfare or unemployment insurance should not be too attractive to people, because they might prefer it to work.

But why would public relief be attractive? In the 1930s, unemployment was high, wages were low. Some working people did not make enough to feed their families. This still happens today when people who work for the lowest wage do not make enough money to make ends meet.

In the 1930s, many people worked in the fishery, mining or forestry. In both mining and forestry, there were wage cuts and layoffs. The fishing industry was hit very hard. At the time, Newfoundland's biggest export to other parts of the world was dried cod. This cod was measured by the kental,² which is 112 pounds. In 1929, the export value of a kental or "quintal" of dried cod was over \$9.00. By 1932, the value of the same amount of fish was \$4.53, and the price kept on dropping.³

² This word is often spelled "quintal," which sounds the same as "kental."

³ *The Evening Telegram*, 15 February, 1932, p. 2.

If you were a fisherman living at the time, you would have seen little or no cash for your work in the fishery. The "truck system" was in place. Under this system, you sold your fish to a merchant in your community. The merchant bought your fish, and you got supplies from his store in exchange for it. The merchant supplied gear needed for the fishery. He also supplied household items and food. At the beginning of the fishing season, you got the supplies you needed on "credit" from the merchant. At the end of the fishing season, you sold your fish to the merchant. The merchant then took whatever you owed him out of the value of the fish. If there was any value left over after paying for the supplies you got on credit, you could use it like money to buy goods from the store. In this way, many people lived from year to year. There was often nothing left over after the debts were paid. Some people were always in debt to the merchant, year after year.

In the early 1930s, as the price of fish dropped, the fish you caught, salted and dried bought less and less of what you needed to live on. Your debt to the merchant would go up. Some people had debts so high that the merchant "cut them off," or told them that they could have no more supplies. Sometimes people lost things they owned to pay off debts. Some lost their fishing gear. Without it, they had to leave the fishery and try to find other sources of income. Some small merchants were also hit hard. Some found that they had to go out of business.

What would you do if you had to leave your work in the fishery and find another source of income? As many of us know, Newfoundlanders have always gone away to look for work when there is none at home. Before the 1930s, many people from Newfoundland went to Canada and the United States to look for work.

But the Depression of the 1930s was a worldwide crisis. In Canada and the United States, large numbers of people were unemployed. Many people in these countries took to the road. They travelled in search of work that was very scarce. There were many homeless people. Small towns made up of shacks grew up around North America. Many people were hungry. For Newfoundlanders, this meant that there were no jobs to go to in Canada and the United States.

So what would you do if you were a Newfoundlander in 1932? The summer fishery had been bad. You were in debt to the merchant. The merchant said you cannot get any more goods on credit. There are no jobs to go to anywhere else.

The only thing you could do was apply for public relief, the dole. This was something like social assistance. It was government aid given to people who were very poor or "destitute." The dole was a very small amount of support. The amount was based on what the government felt it could give, not on how much a person needed to survive.

How many people needed this support in the early 1930s? While different records give different numbers, between 1931 and 1933 as many as 90,000 people in Newfoundland were on the dole at one time.⁴ This was one-third of the whole population of the country. It included single people and whole families, men, women and children, the very old and the very young. It included people who had been poor for a long time and people who had never needed public relief before.

Today we have a Department of Social Services. In Newfoundland when the Depression began, the Public Charities Department handled public relief. It is hard to get an exact

⁴ PANL GN 14/1/A Finance, File 304, PANL GN 38, Box S6 1-1 File 2, and the Amulree Report.

account of how much relief people got. This is because the amount of relief was different from place to place, and from time to time. Local officials could make very different decisions about who got what. As more and more people needed assistance, the government tried to get more control over the rate. They tried to set one rate for everyone.

Living on "Six Cents a Day"

People who lived through the 1930s still talk about living on "six cents a day." This comes from one attempt to set a single rate of relief. This was done in the fall of 1931 and the winter of 1932.⁵ It was called the Magor ration after R.J. Magor, a man hired to cut costs in several areas of government. The Magor ration was made up of the items listed below.

- 25 lbs. of flour
- 1 qt. of molasses
- 3 3/4 lbs. fat back pork
- 2 lbs. beans
- 1 lb. split peas
- 2 lbs. corn meal
- 3/4 lb. cocoa

This was the most an adult could get for a month. A relief officer could decide to give a person less. Children got lower rations. In St. John's, vegetables were added to the list. In the outports, people were expected to grow their own. Some plans were made to provide milk for children. The cost of relief changed from place to place. But the government figured the Magor ration would cost about \$1.80 a month for people in the outports. This is where the idea of "six cents a day" comes from.

Whenever there is great hardship, and many people are poor and need public assistance, there is much talk about the issues. People ask: who is really poor? who really needs assistance? why can't they work for a living? Sometimes people are blamed for their poverty. Sometimes, both government officials and the public talk about those who "deserve" help, and those who don't deserve it. This idea of the "deserving" and the "undeserving" poor has been with us for a long time. Today we often hear talk about people on welfare "abusing the system." This kind of talk was just as common in the 1930s as it is today. Mr. Magor had a lot to say about abuse.

The newspapers of the day were quick to report what Mr. Magor said. On January 12, 1932, *The Evening Telegram* had a long article about people on the dole. In it, Mr. Magor warned that some people asking for relief didn't really need it. He complained that some people were not willing to work in return for relief. He said that men who would not work for relief should be cut off. He also warned people who tried to get relief, but could get along without it. They would be prosecuted "to the limit of the law."

But the warning went further. Something else might happen. Magor said that relief might be cut off to whole communities unless people reported others who got relief but might not need it. In other words, people could be punished for abuses. But they could also be punished for not telling on others. This worried people. It was the kind of thing that could turn neighbour against neighbour.

⁵ *The Evening Telegram*, 6 January 1932, p. 12.

Magor also tried to shame people. He said that people who took the dole but could live without it were "taking food out of the mouths of the needy which include women and children."

Picture of a Newfoundland Winter

When the ration amounts were made public, another long Newfoundland winter was setting in. The winters in Newfoundland have always been hard. Even today, many people dread the winter. In winter, we need extra clothes and more heat in our homes. In the 1930s, many people did not have enough heat or clothing in the winter. Food often ran out. People were hungry. Poor and desperate, some people said they would do whatever they had to get what they needed. In some cases, that meant raiding the merchants' stores when relief supplies ran out.

On January 2, 1932, The Evening Telegram printed the story of what happened in Spaniard's Bay on New Year's Eve. On that day, about 50 people from Spaniard's Bay went to Bay Roberts. They said their dole rations had run out. They made a threat: they would break in and take what they needed from the store of Captain John Parsons, unless something was done for them. The people in Bay Roberts said they would not put up with any "disorderly actions." The authorities were called. The government agreed to give the Spaniard's Bay people three days of rations. The situation blew over, and they went home. Captain Parsons' store was left alone.

On the very same page of the paper, there is a story about another threat to raid a store. The ship *Sagona* had arrived in Curling from Labrador on Christmas Eve. It reported that food supplies were very low on the Labrador coast. Around the St. Modeste area, a number of men had let it be known that they were going to Red Bay to break into the store for food.

A single newspaper can tell many stories. On the page that tells about people ready to raid stores, there is a story about the New Year's celebrations at the Newfoundland Hotel. This story tells of the food, the decorations, the music. Everything is praised. Everything was of "a particularly high order."

There must have been many parties to celebrate Christmas, 1931 and New Year's, 1932. The social notes in the newspapers tell of some of them. The newspaper ads urged women to buy party dresses for \$8.99, and stores had "specials" on foods for the season, such as dried fruits, almonds and walnuts.

The letters to the papers showed many concerns and issues. People wrote to complain that the dole rations in the outports were lower than they were in St. John's. Others wrote to suggest make-work projects; everyone could think of a road that needed repair. Some wrote to urge the government to resign, since it could not solve the country's problems.

The times were as mixed as the newspaper stories and letters. New Year's Eve balls existed alongside terrible poverty. Some people had plenty. Others did not have enough. Some had nothing. Many people just hoped that they would not be next to lose their jobs. While some people bought fruit and nuts for cakes, others ran out of their dole rations and said they'd get food even if they had to break in to get it. At the Casino Theatre, ticket sales for "The Black Flag" would go to help "the city poor." And the mayor of St. John's was on the radio to tell how he planned to make things better.

Mayor Howlett's Appeal

As the new year of 1932 began, it seemed that many in St. John's would have a tough time getting through it. Mayor Howlett said he had been going around the city, talking to people in their homes, and he wanted the public to know how some people were living. On January 5, 1932, the mayor broadcast an appeal on the VOWR radio station, asking people with jobs to help those who didn't have them. In his talk, he decided to appeal to people's feelings by showing them what it was like in two St. John's households. Here is part of the story he told, as it was printed in *The Evening Telegram* the next day.

John A., widower, and six young children live in the first one. John's youngest child is three years old. Its mother died three years ago this winter. Cause of death: malnutrition. John, a decent, sober labourer, has never been steadily employed. Got work when and where he could, but it was impossible for him to ever get ahead of the game. As long as his wife lived, the children were fairly well clothed. Food was always a problem; fuel not so bad; old board and boxes helped in the summer, and during the winter the odd ton of coal from one of the charitable organizations, with what he could get on a slide, when he dared, for fear of losing a few hours' work, take a chance to go for it in the woods...

Neighbours tell me these children were always clean and the house was the same while the mother lived. Today: Come up the rickety stairs, no, it's not very clean. There's only one room for the whole family now. There are two chairs and a broken box. You'll have to stand. One table. A stove lashed together with wire. The snow has melted and dripped through the roof. Two panes of glass are missing and rags stuffed in their place doing their best to keep out the wind and cold. On a propped up couch, two hollow-eyed, emaciated children are lying: their legs are naked, their feet the same. The thinnest of torn and worn cotton dresses cover their bodies incompletely. The oldest girl is trying to wash the baby, who has only the clothes of a six months' baby to cover her. Two small boys are hugging each other in a tumble down cot in the corner, trying to give and take the heat of their bodies. There is no coal, or wood either, for two days. What about food? There are a few crusts of bread left by neighbours not much better off. What can we do? Even a few more days of this and a cemetery will solve the problem for one or two of these kids, if you and I don't do something. Let's do it and do it quickly. Come on out of here and let's see another home.

John's was that of what we call the ordinary poor. Nature and lack of education never gave John much chance to improve his condition.

Let's go into a different kind of home. This one lacks the squalor of the first. Things are nice and clean here. Surely cleanliness is not an index of poverty. There are only three people here: an aged couple (the man blind) and an invalid daughter, helpless for fourteen years with arthritis. A son died five years ago. He had a thousand dollars life insurance. It kept the three of them for oh so long, until six weeks ago in fact. There are two beds here, but not very soft to rest old and bedridden bones on: and the bedclothes, patched and repatched, are so thin. All in this house are praying for one thing-Death. Yes, perhaps death would be kind to them; but what of you and I now we are here? Food-there is none. Fuel? A chair leg is sticking out of the stove. A table has gone that way, and a trunk. Good day, folks, we will get you fixed up somehow.⁶

⁶ *The Evening Telegram*, 6 January 1932, p. 3.

Give to a worthy cause....

As the need for public relief increased in the winter of 1932, ads like these appeared in St. John's newspapers. Images of hungry, sad women and children were used to urge people to give money to the Civic Relief Fund.

Give to a worthy cause

Would you save a destitute family from suffering? Would you help to lessen the worry and distress that face scores of families this winter? Will you be a Good Samaritan and do a little to help deserving humanity and ease the burden of care and suffering? Every little bit contributed to The Mayor's Civic Relief Fund to aid the deserving poor of this community will help. It will keep little children from going shivering to bed...It will help to supply warmth and comfort to careworn mothers and families that, through no fault of their own, have been unable to provide for their needs.

Give to this worthy cause! Give as much as you possibly can! The people who will be benefited are deserving of every aid that can be given them. They are the unfortunates whom economic conditions have forced into unaccustomed poverty. You may be more lucky than they...you may have a job and the means of earning a living and providing for your needs and comforts. Will you share a little of your good fortune with them? They MUST be helped! Everyone must do his share. Make your contribution as generous as you can. Every donation to this charitable fund will go a long way toward minimizing hardships that otherwise will be unbearable to many.



**Credit: *The Evening Telegram*,
February 16, 1932.**

It is clear that the Mayor was trying to appeal to people's emotions. Perhaps he felt that if he showed such pictures, people would not be able to say no. He then went on to explain how the Civic Relief Committee's plan would work. People with permanent jobs were asked to give one day's pay per month. A worker would tell his employer he wanted to do this, and the employer would take the money out of his pay and send it to the Committee. Mayor Howlett said that, in some companies, everyone had already "signed up" to do this.

Mayor Howlett also wanted people to know that anyone who asked for relief would be checked out. Only those who could show they were in need would get relief. Able-bodied men would work for their relief. They would fix up parks and roads, and build new streets.

The Mayor urged people to give to the Relief Committee, instead of giving to people who begged at doors and in the street. He said: "Too many of these cases that give us a hard luck story at the door are frauds as can be proven by dozens of people."

As always in the 1930s, the fear that people might get help they did not deserve was never far from the minds of the people with power.

Riots and Reports - A Time of Change

One of the people trying to keep power and control in 1932 was Sir Richard Squires, the Prime Minister. He was not very popular. When he opened the House of Assembly on March 30, there were police on horses and on foot, in case of trouble.⁷ The next day, 250 unemployed people marched to the House of Assembly. They asked for an increase in the dole. They wanted something done for people who were kicked out of their homes because they could not pay rent. They asked for jobs.

By this time, there were many meetings of unemployed people. They wanted changes. Other people wanted changes, too. Some merchants wanted to get rid of the Squires government. Both the merchants and the unemployed took part in a "parade" to the House of Assembly on April 5. The parade turned into a riot. There were struggles between people in the crowd and police. Some people broke into the Colonial Building. A piano was hauled into Bannerman Park. Sir Richard Squires had to escape through the back door. That night, stores in St. John's were looted. People stole liquor and many people got drunk.

Many different kinds of people took part in this riot. Some were angry about everything, and ready to show it. It could not be blamed on the unemployed committee. The march was led by politicians and businessmen. But some people did blame the unemployed. And some people were afraid that things would get worse. The police began to keep a close eye on people.

Sir Richard Squires escaped the rioters, but his government did not escape for long. In June, Squires was voted out of office. A new government led by F.C. Alderdice took over.

There was more violence as the year went on. There was another riot in St. John's in July. Around the bay, marches, "disturbances" and threats to take action were reported in the summer and fall. In Carbonear, the relief committee members were brought by force to the Court House to hear the demands of the unemployed. A train was held up on the tracks.

The most common kind of action that year was a "raid," or a threat of a raid. To demand more dole, or an increase in the ration, people would threaten to raid a store. Sometimes, the raid went ahead. But often the threat was enough. People had learned that the threat of a raid would often get them the food they needed. It seemed that people could not get what they wanted to solve their larger problems. But, if they could not get jobs and incomes, at least they knew that the threat of a raid might keep them from starving.

⁷ Much of the discussion here relies on the essay "Riots, Raids and Relief" by James Overton in *Violence and Public Anxiety*, ISER Books, 1992. Also newspaper reports.

Fears of the rioting and public looting grew during the spring of 1935. Businesses were quick to offer a solution-insure your property against public anger and unrest.

WE WRITE
RIOT INSURANCE
and
FIRE INSURANCE
Phoenix Insurance Company
of Hartford
J. B. MITCHELL & SON, LTD.,
CHIEF AGENTS.

TEN WINDOWS BROKEN
Friday night were insured by this company and already our glazier, Mr. Adam G. Barnes, has taken the necessary measurements and called to England for replacements.
Your windows are your Silent Salesmen.
If not already insured, you should
Protect Them Without Delay.
U. S. Fidelity & Guaranty Co.
J. J. LACEY, Resident Manager.
may11.21.a.m

Credit: *The Evening Telegram*, May 13, 1935.

In 1933, there were reports of people starving in many parts of Newfoundland. Some merchants would not supply men for the fishery. They were afraid they would not be paid back. But the government tried to cut the dole in the fishing season. Each side wanted the other to be responsible for food and other supplies. This meant that some people could not look to either source for help. This is one reason for the reports of people starving.

One thing was clear by this time. The situation in Newfoundland was out of control.

During this time, a British Commission (called the Amulree Commission) was looking at Newfoundland. Its job was to advise on how Newfoundland should be run in the near future. In 1933, there were many ideas about this. Some people thought that Newfoundland needed a dictator. Some thought that people on the dole should not be allowed to vote.

The Commission saw that about one-third of Newfoundlanders had no jobs at all. It concluded that the situation was desperate. Extreme measures had to be taken. In many places, people feared starvation. When there is a shortage of good food, it is easy for people to get diseases. Tuberculosis (TB) was a big problem, and it spread easily among people in poor health. Other diseases that come from a poor diet affected many people. Many children did not go to school-often because they didn't have clothes or shoes. And many people lived in houses which they could not afford to heat or repair.

Late in 1933, the Commission made its report. It said that Newfoundland should give up self-government for a while. As it turned out, the poor would not be the only ones in Newfoundland to lose the vote. In February, 1934, Newfoundland gave up its right to

govern itself. It would now be run by a Commission of Government. There would be no voting, no elections. The Commission's six members were appointed. Three of them came from Newfoundland; three came from Great Britain.

The new government had a Department of Public Health and Welfare. Its Commissioner was J. C. Puddester, a Newfoundlander. When Puddester took over, he faced a problem that had gone from bad to worse in the past three years.

Putting Food on the Table-1934

In 1934, the Commission of Government looked hard for ways to provide more food on a limited amount of money. It found ways to get large amounts of basic foods, like flour and tea, at the lowest prices possible. The government also tried to include more kinds of foods on the relief order. Until this time, people on the dole could get only a few types of food each month-flour, tea, molasses, pork, salt beef and yeast. If you could not grow your own vegetables, or if you ran out of them, you would have a very poor diet.

The new ration tried to give people a better diet. Still, it would have been hard to stay healthy and not be hungry on it. Here is a sample relief order for a family of five in 1934. It includes the prices of all the items on the list.

- 105 lbs. flour- 3 cents a lb.
- 1 lb. tea-45 cents a lb.
- 10 lbs. sugar-6 cents a lb.
- 4 lbs. butter-20 cents a lb.
- 6 lbs. pork-12 cents a lb.
- 6 lbs. corned beef-11cents a lb.
- 3 lbs. split peas-6 cents a lb.
- 3 lbs. beans-6 cents a lb.
- 4 lbs. rice-6 cents a lb.
- 7 lbs. rolled oats-6 cents a lb.
- 5 tins milk- 11cents a tin
- 1 box yeast- 10 cents a box
- 1 bar soap-8 cents a bar
- 1 bag salt- 5 cents a bag
- 1 gallon kerosene- 33 cents a gallon

This was how a family of five could live on a total of \$8.51 each month.⁸ Of course, people were never given money to buy things. They could only get what was on the list. They had no choice about what they could get to eat.

The flour was a special problem. The government had brought in brown flour. It had nutrients added to it. It was supposed to be better for you than white flour. Women complained that they could not bake with it. The flour was rough and grainy, and the bread was heavy, or "dunch." A recipe was sent out to show women how to bake with the flour, but many people were not happy with it. They wanted to make bread the way they always had. For some people, brown bread was just another example of how people had no control over their lives.

⁸ PANL GN 38 Box S6 1-1, File 2: Relief orders and related material.

Many people thought that they should have the right to choose their own groceries. They saw this as a basic freedom. They felt that the government should not be telling people what to eat. The members of unemployed groups were against such controls. They wrote government to complain.

One such letter was sent to the Commission of Government on March 2, 1935. It is described as being from "a committee of the unemployed."⁹ The very first request on the letter was that people on relief be able to choose their own food. The government's answer did not leave much room to discuss the issue. Next to the request, a member of the government wrote a single word—no.

Faces of Unemployment - Outport and City

During the Depression, people in all kinds and sizes of communities were in desperate need. But there were differences between life in the outports and the city. One thing that was different was how unemployment *looked*.

In the outports, most people had some land of their own. They could grow crops and keep animals. All of this takes a great deal of work. People could keep busy and help to feed themselves, unless they became too hungry or sick to work.

In St. John's, things were different. The unemployed were more visible. St. John's at the time was only what we now think of as downtown—a place of narrow streets and lanes and tiny yards. Most people had little or no land, so they could not grow crops or raise animals. Many would not have known how to do these things.

With no work and no land, the unemployed of St. John's had little to do. Many hung out at the wharves and piers along the harbour, around warehouses and on street corners. These were places where they had found work in the past. Perhaps they felt they might find work there again; perhaps they simply had nowhere else to go.

Other people who lived in the city had to notice all these unemployed men. Perhaps some people felt sorry for them. Others might have thought they were lazy; sometimes, we hear people described as "lazy" today, if they are standing around and not working. Some other people might have seen the unemployed as a threat. Desperate people sometimes do desperate things. Could these unemployed men be a danger to others?

This idea of danger took on a real face in the riots and outbreaks of 1932. The image of danger became even stronger in 1934 and 1935, as the Unemployed Committee in St. John's struggled to become a voice for all those who had no work. This committee tried to make links with other groups outside St. John's. It wanted the unemployed to have a say in their own lives. The group organized many protests against the dole. In 1934, this group gained a strong new voice. Pierce Power was a young, unemployed labourer.¹⁰ He was a fine speaker.

All through the fall of 1934 and the winter of 1935, this group made protests and brought requests to government. Each time, the government gave in to some small demand, but

⁹ PANL GN 38 S6 1-1, File 2.

¹⁰ For a full discussion of this time and these events, see *Pierce Power and the Riot of 1935* by Kathryn Welbourn, in this book.

changed nothing else. For example, the group organized a march in February, 1935. They wanted a 50% increase in the dole, and coal and clothing. About 1000 people marched. The government gave its answer to their demands after a few days. It would add cabbage and turnips to the dole order.

By giving little things, the government tried to prevent a large riot. It would not give in to demands, but it would give enough to quiet things down.

The large riot happened anyway. On May 10, 1935 a parade of 1000 marched to the Colonial Building. The police moved to stop the leaders from going in. Then people threw rocks, and the police charged. The peaceful march changed to a violent clash. Several people were injured.

That night the unemployed met again. There was a lot of anger. A crowd formed and moved down Water Street, breaking windows. Some were arrested. The next day, Pierce Power and three other leaders of the unemployed were arrested.

In court, the leaders were found not guilty, but the group cut back its activities. Perhaps they knew they were being too closely watched. Perhaps they had lost hope. Despite all their efforts, the government never accepted their right to speak for the unemployed.

Plans, Programs and Schemes

There were many ideas about what to do about the unemployed. People in business and in politics, and also community leaders, all came up with ideas. Many people talked about getting the unemployed back to work. This would help people be more independent. It would also keep them from meeting and taking part in protests.

One idea was to provide people with land if they had none. Out of this idea came plans for land settlement projects. People at the time often referred to such plans as "schemes." The idea of land settlement was to help people set up farms and build communities. They would get plots of land, build houses, grow crops, raise animals. This would provide food, improve health, raise people's spirits and get them off the dole.

Land settlement schemes were tried in several places. The most well known one was in Markland.¹¹ It was started in 1934. Over the next few years, over 200 families moved there. Many had no experience with farming or rural life. They had to learn many new skills. In spite of this, for a while it seemed that Markland would be a success. But it ran into problems.

Markland was run by trustees—people who made decisions about how the community would be run. Money came from the government. The trustees and the government made all the decisions. Some of the settlers did not even know if they could leave if they wanted. People did not really form a community, because they felt they did not have a say in their own lives.

There were other efforts to get people to move to rural areas. Some of these efforts were aimed at people who lived in St. John's but had property outside the city. In 1934, Jean

¹¹ For a full discussion, see *The Markland Experiment* by Janet McNaughton, in book 8 of this series.

Muir, the head of the City Welfare Bureau, sent a list to the government.¹² On it were the names of 41 people with property in the outports. Some had only land; others had land and houses. Mrs. Muir did not seem to think that widows or old people should be made to go back. But, by the names of several men with houses, she wrote, "should be made to return," or "should be made return or no relief."

Other projects seemed to have the goal of simply getting the unemployed off the streets. The St. John's Community Centre was this kind of project. The Centre did not stay open for long. But it did leave reports that tell about some of the things that went on there.¹³ The Centre made its first report in January, 1936. The report said that 475 men were members at the Centre. They took part in many different activities. Some activities were physical, such as basketball and swimming. Some people played cards. There were also classes for learning new skills. Some men were learning boot and shoe repair, and others were learning navigation. Sixty men were learning how to read and write.

Readers may be able to think of programs today which are a bit like the ones the St. John's Community Centre offered. And just as people do today, the organizers at the Centre asked the members for their comments. These comments were put in the reports to show that the Centre was doing well. Here's what one participant said:

If this place were closed I would not know what to do with myself. I had no place to go but hang about the streets and it was hard to keep out of mischief.

Another participant said:

I am so interested in my navigation that I have given up gym and basketball.

Some people said that the Centre had a "settling effect" on the men who went there. In other words, it kept them out of trouble. It kept them from thinking about being poor and unemployed. And it kept them too busy to think about committing crimes. You can see this "settling effect" idea in the record of what a policeman thought about the Centre.

An officer of the law is amazed with the difference in their behaviour. Speaking of two persons in particular, one who has been at the Lakeside [the jail] told him he has been attending the school and was going to do better and was determined never to have to go down there again. The other, whom they had a lot of trouble with, being very saucy and abusive, now greets the officers so differently, just like any ordinary citizen.

The St. John's Community Centre was in some ways like other projects set up for the unemployed. It had two goals: to keep the men out of trouble, and to find them something useful to do. We still have projects with these goals today. But today, people would be more likely to take computer training than shoe repair.

¹² PANL GN 38 S6, 1-1, File 2.

¹³ PANL GN 38 Box S-61-1, File 46.



Credit: PANL, Brooks Album.

Fishermen spread split codfish to dry, Ferryland, 1938. Women often did this work too. Although many families caught and cured large amounts of fish during the 1930s, low fish prices or a bad season could push a family into deep poverty.

Dole Inspectors and Telling Tales on the Neighbours

One way to get people off the dole was to give them something else to do. Another way was to prove they didn't need it. Today, there are still people living who tell about hiding potatoes in trunks, and sending children off to hide food in the meadow—the dole inspector was coming. Such stories sound wild until you read the records. Some relief inspectors would leave no stone unturned.

One such inspector was R.J. Quinlan. In 1935, Quinlan went to the Ferryland area to see if people were on the dole who should not be getting it. He sent a detailed report to the government.¹⁴ Quinlan had harsh words for the local Constable and Magistrate. He said they could not have been doing their jobs. Checking out one family that had been reported as starving, he wrote:

...if these officers had to go down into Ryan's cellar before they O.K.'d his statutory declaration¹⁵ they would find about forty barrels of potatoes and a good stock of vegetables. They would also find six barrels of fish or more including two barrels of capelin and a stock of groceries and provisions. I am informed about \$100.00 worth...

Quinlan found out that the family had killed a cow and sold the meat. Going on to other houses, he wrote of those who lived with parents who had pensions, how much land people had, and how many barrels of potatoes they'd dug in the fall. He wrote of those who "had not got one stick of wood to their door" and who "sleep all day and visit by night." He recorded the names of people whose families had money in the past, and of those who could not need help because they'd built new porches.

¹⁴ PANL GN 38 S6 1-1, File 2: Inspector's report from R.J. Quinlan.

¹⁵ A statutory declaration was a statement you had to make in order to get the dole. You had to swear that you did not have anything else to live on.

Proudly, he claimed:

I am also informed by several applicants that I am the first man that took any statements from them and searched their houses.

Mr. Quinlan said he got some of his information about people from their neighbours.

People often say that hard times bring out the best in people. But hard times can also bring out the worst in people. When times are hard, people may look around at their neighbours and their communities. Some people might think that other people have it too easy, or that they are getting things they do not deserve. Perhaps this is one reason why people during the Depression were sometimes willing to report on their neighbours.

In some cases, people wanted to do even more. For example, in April, 1936, a Mr. Coffin of Joe Batts Arm wrote to W. R. Howley. Mr. Howley was the Commissioner of Justice in Newfoundland. Mr. Coffin wanted to be a relief officer. Mr. Coffin had asked for this job before, but he didn't get it. Now he was upset. He thought that there were too many people getting relief, and he thought they had it too good. Mr. Coffin said that if he were the relief officer, he could save the government a lot of money. He wrote about what he saw as two kinds of people. Here is a part of his letter:

The people that are suffering most to-day are those that have never received dole but have made their own living by hard toil and honest dealings. This class of people now are reduced to the lowest standard of living and are absolutely in need of the very necessities of life and are suffering for want of clothing, boots, shoes, and rubbers etc. and are not by any means living as well as these people on the dole, and as a consequence of this state of affairs these people will very soon cry for vengeance.

On the other hand those who have been receiving the dole for the past number of years are well fed and clothed as they spend their earnings for the best kind of clothing, boots, shoes, rubbers etc., and live in luxuries, and have always got the money to go and buy just what article they may need. It must certainly be borne in mind that not all the people on the dole are guilty of spending their earnings in this kind of a manner.

The writer possesses some very valuable information and will be glad to impart it to you or to any member of the Govt.—providing that you or they will guarantee to keep my name strictly confidential.¹⁶

We learn in other parts of the letter that this man's business was not doing well. He described himself as a "lame man." He may have had other reasons for writing what he did.

Of course, not everyone felt this way. Another letter to the government, written a year later, tells a different story. A Mrs. Porter wrote from Bear Cove.¹⁷

¹⁶ PANL GN 38 S6 1-1, File 2: Letter from Mr. Coffin to W.R. Howley.

¹⁷ PANL GN 38 S6 1-1 File 2: Letter from Mrs. M.O. Porter to J.C. Puddester.

She felt that the government did not have a fair idea of how people were living, or what was causing their problems. She said many people in her area were destitute. She blamed the merchants for some of this. She wrote of high prices, and prices that were very different from those in other places. She wanted the government to know that people could not get a fair return for their work.

Then if work is provided in the woods by one of the Merchants, it does not matter how many dollars a man has cleared, he cannot get a cent [in] cash.

She said that as long as people were paid in goods, and the merchants set the prices, people could not make a living. Mrs. Porter asked:

Cannot something be done to let the people have a chance to live? They are not lazy and are only too willing to come any distance for a day's work. How long can people live without payment? I had a woman walk nine miles, eighteen miles from her home here and back, to sell 2 dozen eggs to buy a pair of stockings the other day.

In the 1930s, people looked around them and saw many different things. Some saw abuse of the dole and laziness. Others saw hardship and injustice. And while citizens and government drew their own conclusions, some people fell through the cracks.

Tragedy and the Making of News

On May 14, 1935, the *Daily Herald* of London published an article about a very sad event that happened in Newfoundland. The story was titled "Newfoundland Victims Of Poverty, How Girl and Baby Died, Family's Ordeal in Hut." Written by "Our Special Correspondent," the story told of what happened to a family in Howley in 1935.

Further examples of the appalling conditions under which the unemployed are living in Newfoundland are still being revealed despite Government influence to hide the facts.

In many isolated settlements along Newfoundland's 6,000-mile coastline the physical stamina of the people is cracking.

The subsistence allowance is six cents a day... and many of the unemployed have become ragged and weakened, and may easily become victims of diseases bred by hunger.

EYE-WITNESS STORY

One of the most pitiable stories of destitution, involving the death of a girl of nine and that of a new-born baby, is told to me by an eye-witness who helped to bury the victims.

The deaths occurred at Howley on the west coast of Newfoundland, about 50 miles from East Cornerbrook.

In a wretched hut an unemployed man lived on relief with his wife and six children.

All the family except the father fell ill. Neighbours state that the illnesses were caused through hunger and privation. All were suffering from dysentery.

HELPLESS ON FLOOR

A week ago a neighbour's son visited the home and there saw the nine- year-old girl lying helpless on the floor, while the father was staggering about the house helping the other members of the family.

A neighbour then went to the house and found the girl dead. Her body was lying in rags. The mother was in bed with a baby born prematurely.

Another girl of nine was dying beside the semi-conscious mother in the same bed. Two other girls aged two years and four years, and two boys, aged six and eight, were helplessly ill. They were crouched in boxes on the floor.

A doctor was called from New Lake, took the new-born infant home and spent the night trying to save its life, but failed.

The writer of the story was, most likely, J.T. Meaney. He was the correspondent the British United Press. Meaney did not like the Commission of Government, and he wrote articles that showed the government in a bad light. Some people felt that his only goal was to create what we call today a "media sensation."

Meaney's story stirred up talk. The media, the public and the government wanted to know what had happened. What were the facts of this story? Were conditions so bad in Newfoundland that people could die in this way?

The government wrote its own report about the deaths.¹⁸ The report said that the family of mother and father and six children were not on relief. The father was asked to make a statement to the police. He said:

My family were fairly well fed during the winter and had a fair amount of clothes. I was working in the woods the first part of the winter and came home about the last of February. Since then I have been working on times around Howley.

The father did not seem to think that his family would become so ill.

In 1935, medical help was not easy to come by. The family was already very ill when the doctor, Dr. Parsons, was called to see them. On May 9, he asked that the mother and a son be taken to hospital. On May 10, when they went to hospital, a daughter went with them. She, too, had become very sick. But it was too late to save them. The mother and her two children died on May 15. On that day, the family's one-year-old child was brought to the hospital; she died the next day.

There had been other deaths earlier in May. When Dr. Parsons was called to the home on May 2, he found that the mother and all the children were suffering from influenza, what we call "the flu." The doctor said they also had mild "enteritis"—meaning that the

¹⁸ PANL GN 38 S6 1-1, File 2: Report by H.M. Mosdell, June 4, 1935. The newspaper clipping was attached to the report.

intestines were inflamed. The enteritis got worse very quickly. On May 6, the mother gave birth to a premature girl who died within a day. The eight-year-old girl the newspaper article talked about also died on that day. A boy of six died the following night.

The doctor wanted to know what had happened. It was found that all of the family members who died were suffering from pneumonia. But why had the enteritis gotten so bad? Dr. Parsons found out that the family had been taking a mixture of sulphur and molasses every day for the whole week before medical help arrived. This mixture is an old home remedy used to "clean out the system." Here, it clearly did not work. It may have made the family weaker and sicker than they were already.

This story is indeed tragic. Today, with public health care, most people see a doctor as soon as an illness seems serious. People take their children to doctors when they get ill. Pregnant women have regular check-ups. Few people die from a flu that just gets worse and worse. And few people today would turn to sulphur and molasses as a cure.

The reporter who sent the story to the *Daily Herald* in London might be seen as trying to tell—and sell—a "sensational" story. He may have done this to hurt the government. But he was right about some things. In the 1930s, poverty, hunger and lack of medical care left many people helpless against disease. They were, as he said, "weakened." Unemployment and low wages left many people without enough good food. Perhaps the people in this family were not strong enough to fight an illness. There were few doctors, and usually you had to pay them. It was common at that time to try to cure illness at home. Often people would not call a doctor unless home cures had failed. This meant that medical care often came too late.

We will never know all the details of what happened to the family in Howley. But their story shows how tragedy could happen in Newfoundland at a time when poverty was widespread, and help hard to come by.

The problem of medical care was not a new one. It was hard to get medical care in many small places, even harder if you had no money. A person could not go to a hospital on his or her own. A memo sent to the Commission of Government in August, 1935 tells of the problem of getting medical help in Harbour Buffett:

...no one could get to the hospital without a medical certificate. The people cannot get it. They have not a cent with which to pay the Doctor.¹⁹

It's an Ill Wind that Blows no Good

By the late 1930s, the Great Depression had begun to lift in some parts of the world. But, in Newfoundland, things were not getting better. The number of people on relief would go down for a while, then rise again when work was scarce or pay was poor. Fish prices improved a little, but not enough to make the kind of changes needed. Work in the woods was scarce.

¹⁹ PANL GN 38 S6 1-1, File 2: Memo from the Secretary for Natural Resources

But perhaps the worst thing was that the Depression had now gone on for so many years. After such a long time, many people had lost hope that things would get better. And many people were getting more and more angry. There were protests and threats of violence. The Government feared that law and order would break down. It prepared a report to identify where trouble might break out.²⁰ The police waited. While they waited, they kept track of those who might be trouble-makers. Reports continued to tell people in Britain how bad things were in Newfoundland. It seemed that tension was still building.

When the tension broke in Newfoundland, it was not with a huge riot or some other local event. And what took Newfoundland out of its hard times was not a government plan or a bright new industry. Instead, the event that saved Newfoundlanders from the Great Depression was the Second World War.

When Britain declared war on Germany in 1939, Newfoundland got a chance of new prosperity. War requires many products and raw materials. It takes industries and labour to fight a war. It takes those who are ready and willing to fight.

Newfoundland had many men who were ready to go and fight, and many more ready to stay and work. Many of them had not made a decent living in many years. They had been waiting for something-anything-that would allow them to work for a living and get off the dole. The war gave them this chance.

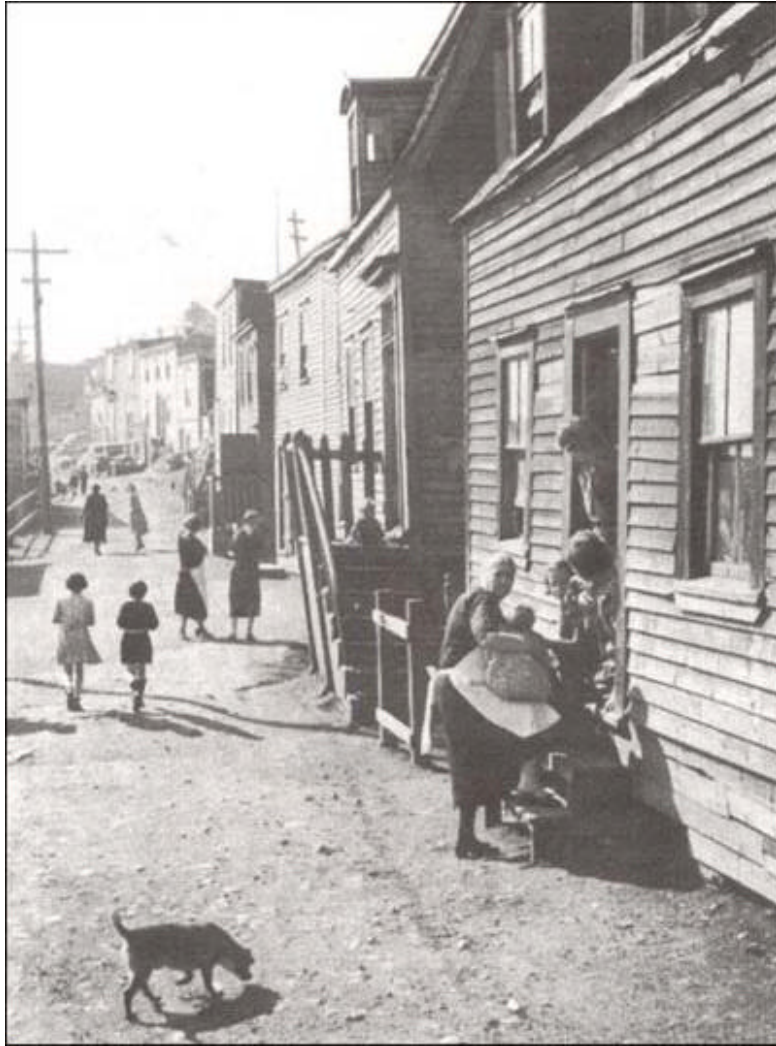
Military bases brought some of the brightest hopes. On the edge of the Atlantic, Newfoundland was in an important location. Troops moved in and bases were built. This created many new jobs at good wages. The money from outside brought new life to the Newfoundland economy.

Could it Happen Again?

The Second World War ended the Depression in Newfoundland. But memories of those hard times stayed. When the war ended, some people wondered if hard times like the 1930s would come again.

Things never got quite that bad again. In 1949, Newfoundland joined Canada. It became part of a larger country that had already begun to build what we now call the "social safety net." This is made up of services and programs that help people in need. This net grew stronger in the 1950s and 1960s. As Canadians, Newfoundlanders could get pensions, family allowances and unemployment insurance. Public medical care was in place. The new elected government of Newfoundland worked to build better social services. The government would now decide how much help people got by looking at what they needed to live on. The changing dole rates and quick decisions of the 1930s were replaced by something more planned and stable.

²⁰ PANL GN 38 S4-4-3, File 3: Memo on the Police Situation in Relation to the Possibility of Civil Disturbance, June 24, 1938.



Credit: PANL, Gustav Anderson Collection.

Street scene, St. John's, circa 1939. The Second World War brought new work and money into the Newfoundland economy and changed the face of many towns. At this time, much work in housing, water and sanitation needed to be done to improve living conditions.

Readers will note that some of the programs that make up the social safety net have been taken away or changed. There is no longer a family allowance. There have been many changes to UI. And some people think that we can't afford medical care. This reminds us that improvements in people's lives can be taken from them. If we did not have a social safety net, could something like the Great Depression happen again?

People thought about this when the northern cod moratorium brought a stop to the fishery. If programs had not been in place to help people, what might have happened? The word "dole" is still a part of our language. It came up in an interview with a fisherwoman in 1989, 50 years after the Depression.

We're having a good enough season this year, but there's only one bad summer's fishery between most of us here and the dole.²¹

This woman could not have remembered the Depression. She wasn't even born then. But her parents lived through the 1930s. Through their stories, she learned how hard things can get. She uses the word "dole" to mean what you have to live on when you can't make a living from your work.

Depression Memories

The Great Depression left its mark on Newfoundland in many ways. It left many people sick or weak. Many people lost much of what they had worked for. The "dirty thirties" comes up again and again in songs, books, and in the stories people still tell. And many older adults in Newfoundland today still will not eat brown bread or drink black tea. These things remind them not of "the good old days," but of the hardest times of their lives.



Credit: PANL

Living conditions, Blackhead Road, 1938. This is what police found when they investigated the death of a baby "in desperate circumstances." Tragedies that resulted from long-term hunger and poverty happened more often as the Depression wore on.

²¹ From an interview conducted by C. McGrath for the Women's Economic Lives Project, 1989.

Topics for Discussion

1. Poverty in Newfoundland and Labrador, past and present.
2. Difficulties of making a living, and how people fall into poverty.
3. Social programs and social assistance, past and present.
4. How governments, past and present, deal with: the long-term problem of poverty, special situations, like the Great Depression.
5. Decision-making and control: who makes the decisions, and how this affects lives.
6. Protest and public action.
7. Human rights as they relate to welfare and security.

Questions for Discussion

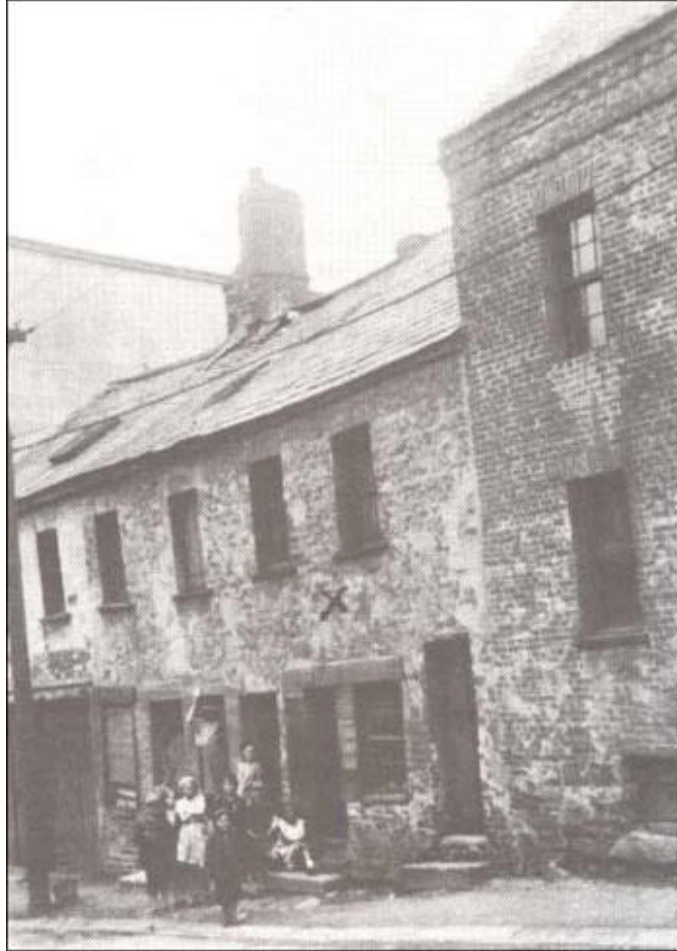
1. What was the Great Depression? When and where did it happen? Why was Newfoundland hit so hard by the Great Depression?
2. What was the "dole?" Why did so many people need it in the 1930s? Who could get it? What do we have in place of the dole today?
3. In the 1930s, many people who were working could not make enough income to feed their families. What were some reasons for this? Are there people today who work but who cannot make enough to live on?
4. What was the "truck system?" What role did the merchant play in this system? What role did fishing families play?
5. In the 1930s, the government worried about people "abusing" the dole. Why do you think they were worried about this? What things did they do to stop abuses?
6. Many different people have been blamed for the riot at the Colonial Building in 1932. List some of the different groups involved. Who do you think was responsible for the riot?
7. In the 1930s, hungry people sometimes "raided" or threatened to raid merchants' stores to get food. What was a raid? Why do you think people took this action? What did they hope to get out of it?
8. During the Depression years, many people were in poor health. What are some of the reasons for this?
9. What happened to end the Great Depression in Newfoundland?
10. Do you think that something like the Great Depression could happen again? Why or why not?

Projects

1. Find in this essay the items on the dole ration for 1934 (\$8.51 for a family of five). Find the cost of these items today. How much would the same dole ration be in today's prices? Could a family live on this?
2. This essay has talked about many attitudes towards people who are poor. Make a list of these attitudes. Which attitudes do we still hear today?
3. Choose one of the newspaper ads or pictures that go with this essay. Talk about, or write, what it tells you about the way things were at the time it was printed.

Pierce Power and the Riot of 1935

by Kathryn Welbourn



Credit: City of St. John's Archives.

Downtown housing in the 1930s. This picture was taken by city workers as part of a project to record housing in St. John's.

The 'Razor Slasher'

On Christmas night, 1936, Pierce Power, a young worker from the southside of St. John's, slashed **Newfoundland Constabulary constable** Michael Walsh. He used an open-blade razor. The razor split the officer's tongue. It gashed the corners of his mouth. It sliced open both cheeks. Power also slashed Walsh in the throat. He cut him once more on the top of his left wrist, close to a main artery. The Constabulary officer's neck was cut on the left side a quarter of an inch deep. The razor had just missed his **jugular vein**.

The Evening Telegram called it "a dastardly assault... one of the most savage attacks ever made on a policeman in St. John's." Power was charged with three counts of wounding. A special jury was called. The trial was heard by the Supreme Court from

January 22 to 24. The courtroom was full. **Spectators** spilled out onto the courthouse steps and into the street. It was not a simple case. The police said Power attacked for no reason. The defense said the police caused the attack.

This was not a chance meeting. Constable Michael Walsh and Pierce Power knew each other very well. They lived on the same street. The 27-year-old worker had been "targeted for arrest and **harassment**" by the constabulary since 1934.¹ The "Razor Slasher," as Power was called by *The Evening Telegram*, had been **brutally** beaten by police in the past.

It all began in August 1934 when Pierce Power joined a St. John's labor group called the Unemployed Committee. Its aim was to protest the condition of the poor and unemployed in the city. It also demanded changes to the hated dole (social welfare). The Unemployed Committee became the only labour group to oppose the government of the day.²

Power was a **passionate** speaker and a natural leader. He was a working man, and people trusted him. He was quickly voted in as committee chairman.

Power began making speeches to the unemployed men and women of St. John's. He organized protests against the government. For this he was said to be a dangerous man by the police and by the government. They called him an **agitator**.³ They watched his every move.

The Naked, the Hungry and the Homeless

Who wasn't hungry in Newfoundland in 1934? At least one third of the population was out of work. Thousands of children stayed home from school because they had no shoes or proper clothing. Diseases—such as **tuberculosis**—caused by poor housing, lack of coal and hunger were common.⁴ The government was flooded with telegrams calling for help. People were starving in the outports. Whole communities had nothing to eat and no way of getting any food. Sometimes men stole what they needed for their families. They **threatened** government **officials**. They broke into local stores. Small groups blocked roads in protest. Poorly paid woodsmen jumped trains and headed for home in despair. Their wages were so small they had no choice but to steal a ride.⁵ The telegrams warned of further problems. People begged for help.

¹ Andrew Mooney, former constabulary officer. Taken from the notes of Mike Power, great nephew of Pierce Power.

² The Commission of Government had wide support in Newfoundland in the mid 1930s. Many people believed allowing Britain to take over the government was the only way to save Newfoundland from poverty and bankruptcy. Merchants supported the Commission of Government's economic plans. One of the commission's main policies was to get rid of Newfoundland's debts—a policy businessmen continue to support today. Unions and other groups of poor and needy people wanted changes to their living and working conditions. But they hoped to get what they needed by co-operating with the commission, not by opposing it.

³ An agitator is someone who stirs up trouble about political issues—someone who gets people upset with government policy and encourages people to protest.

⁴ See Janet McNaughton's essay "God took our Little Darlings," in book 5

⁵ See Ed Kavanagh's essay "Those Eighty-eight Unfortunates," in book 8.

In St. John's the newspapers reported a dozen cases of unemployed men being arrested and thrown in jail for living on the street. Families were thrown out of their homes because they could not pay their rent. Landlords smashed windows and took off doors, freezing out tenants who refused to leave. Children sold stolen bottles of rum on the street to feed themselves. The St. John's penitentiary was full. Many men were convicted of cheating on the dole, poaching rabbits and moose, and stealing food, clothing and liquor.

Who wasn't angry in 1934? The Great Depression and a failing fishery had caused thousands of people to be laid off.⁶ Factories closed. Fish merchants didn't want to give their fishermen the supplies they needed. They hoped the government would do it. The Newfoundland government had nearly gone **bankrupt** in 1931. To help cut spending, the government reduced welfare to the poor and unemployed. In St. John's the ration went from about six cents a day to five cents. It took a protest by the unemployed and an attack on Prime Minister Sir Richard Squires, to get it raised again. Rumors of **misuse** of funds and a **riot** at the prime minister's office in 1932, forced the Squires government out. The riot was led by Water Street merchants and Tory politicians. But it was blamed on the city's unemployed. The Squires government was replaced with a Tory government for a short time.

That new government cut dole **rations** again. The minister of justice thought about taking the right to vote away from Newfoundlanders on the dole. One hundred extra policemen were hired to keep the poor and unemployed under control. In St. John's, officers checked up on people on the dole and handled complaints about cheaters.

By 1933 the Newfoundland government was broke again. In December it voted to hand the **Dominion** of Newfoundland over to Britain. **Democracy** was ended until the country's **finances** improved and the budget was balanced.

In February, 1934, a six-member commission was appointed to run the country. Three members were Newfoundlanders. Three were from Britain. The Commission of Government promised to help the hungry and sick people of Newfoundland. Even the government's own reports said the dole rations were not enough to keep people from starving. The Commission raised the dole rates slightly. Orange juice and cod liver oil programs were set up for children. But that was it. Conditions were not really improved. In fact, it had become harder to get the dole. Public welfare still did not include rent or clothing. The Commission of Government did not offer people enough work to help them get the cash they needed for those necessities. Instead, the government tried to bring in a workfare program. Able-bodied men had to work to get their dole rations of beans, molasses, brown flour and coal. Men found themselves shoveling snow for food in front of stores and factories. Sometimes they worked in front of stores where they used to have jobs.

By August the poor people of St. John's were becoming frightened. How could they get through another winter on the dole? It was in this time of hunger and anger that the Unemployed Committee of 1934 and 1935 arose. The unemployed people of St. John's chose a young hot-head with a gift for public speaking to lead them.

⁶ See Carmelita McGrath's essay "Desperate Measures" also in this book.

Pierce Power was a Southside Road boy. He was the second oldest of nine children. He had had some schooling at Holy Cross on Patrick Street. Pierce became aware of his talent for public speaking early. He took part in the school debating club. His father, Patrick Power, worked as a marine fireman. As a young man Pierce did too. When he could get the work he fed coal into the furnaces of steamships.

1934 he had just come back from Canada. The young man had worked for a while on road crews in British Columbia. The police said Power was sent back to Newfoundland for joining in some labour disputes. Power said he had only demanded the dole when he became unemployed. "[I was] only demanding a right to live," he said.⁷

All the Power boys had hot tempers. They took things very seriously. They didn't like to be pushed around. Most of them did like to drink and so did Pierce. But this did not take away from his appeal among the unemployed men and women of St. John's. Power was intelligent and **charismatic**.⁸ "He was broad shouldered and well-built-a ruggedly handsome man."⁹ He had a sharp wit. The 24-year-old laborer was unemployed. He was one of them.

The first meetings of the Unemployed Committee were held on August 9 at the parade grounds, near the edge of town. The meetings were called by well-known labour organizer James Kelly. About 300 people attended the evening meeting to elect the Committee. Kelly introduced the young man to the crowd. "(Power) was a great talker and made a speech to the unemployed which impressed them so much that they appointed him as their chairman and he led them in all their parades and protests [from then on]."¹⁰

The Police Files

From the start the police were ordered to follow the leaders of the new Unemployed Committee. The Commission of Government was afraid. It did not want another riot. The **commissioners** were on the lookout for any trouble. The right to vote was already gone. They could not outlaw public meetings. But they could police them. A special group of plain clothes officers was told to do the job.

Detective Mahoney and Constable Bennett were on duty at the first two meetings of the unemployed. They took notes. "Three hundred people were there, some spectators, some [important] citizens. I might as well add, sir, that the football and baseball fans helped to make up the crowd," Mahoney wrote in his first report to the chief of police, P.J. O'Neill. "Sir, it is our firm opinion that this organization will not keep together."¹¹

⁷ From a police report written by Detective Mahoney to the Chief of Police O.J. O'Neill on August 15, 1934.

⁸ Charisma is a special personal ability to get admirers and followers. Someone who is charismatic can become a popular leader.

⁹ From a telephone interview with former constabulary officer Otto Kelland on Nov. 15, 1995.

¹⁰ From a letter written by former constabulary officer Otto Kelland to Pierce Power's great nephew Mike Power in 1995.

¹¹ From Detective Mahoney's report to Police Chief O'Neill on August 9, 1934, notes taken from an Unemployed Committee meeting.

Mahoney took down the names of the six people elected to the Unemployed Committee, including Pierce Power. He noted that the group's goal was to bring the concerns of the unemployed to the Commission of Government. The officers were clearly not impressed by the Committee. But the next meeting on August 10 changed their minds.

About 1,000 men, women and children gathered at the parade grounds. The Committee **condemned** the relief system and made biting remarks about the Commission of Government. They showed the crowd a list of demands. The dole ration must be higher. Landlords must not be allowed to throw out poor people who could not pay their rent. Work must be created for the unemployed. The Committee also demanded the **resignation** of the head dole officer, Mrs. Muir. She was hated by the unemployed of St. John's. They said she was cruel to those who needed public welfare. She made sure as few people as possible could get the dole. The crowd clapped and cheered. They approved the demands. The Committee promised to give them to the Commission of Government.

The commissioner for justice was worried now. Trouble with the city's poor would make the Commission and the British government look bad. The chief of police, P.J. O'Neill, said he'd look after it. Power and the other members of the Unemployed Committee were followed by police almost every day. Their families and neighbors were questioned. Their words were taken down by undercover officers. They were written up in secret government reports. Everyone knew what the police were doing. They wanted to scare people away from the committee. But it did not always work.

"I followed Kelly and his gang down Duckworth Street... him and Smith pointed over at me several times and the crowd started to jeer me. I followed and the crowd started to hoot and jeer me," wrote an angry Constable Dwyer in a report to the chief of police.¹²

Snitches were hired to hang around with Power and his friends. They pumped them for information. The Unemployed Committee called them stool pigeons. One snitch sent handwritten notes to the chief of police almost every week and sometimes every day. He signed his notes "One X". Another informant called Pierce an agitator. "He is very clever. Anything he says or does the mob is right behind him," says a note written on August 15, 1934.

For Pierce Power, the constant police activity became a very personal matter. His younger brother Mike had been hired by the constabulary after the 1932 riot. Mike was a "good, steady, sober, reliable police officer." He worked at the East End station at the end of Duckworth Street. Mike didn't follow the Unemployed Committee. But Pierce's actions caused him "plenty of embarrassment." He told a fellow officer "he had one desire.., to get Pierce's head under his **baton**."¹³

The police hoped to find something they could use to break up the Committee. The Committee members knew this. Power pushed for action. But he warned the unemployed must stay within the law. "They are only waiting for you to start a riot so they can get at you and tear you to pieces," he said.¹⁴

¹² From Constable Allen Dwyer's surveillance report to Police Chief O'Neill, November 14, 1934.

¹³ From a letter written by Otto Kelland to Pierce Power's great-nephew Mike Power, 1995.

¹⁴ From Detective Mahoney's report to Police Chief O'Neill, September 6, 1934. Notes taken from a meeting of the Unemployed Committee.



This is a photograph of some members of the Power family when Pierce was a boy.
Pierce is the first boy on the right in the front.
His brother Mike is the small boy on the left of Mrs. Power.

Parades and Protest

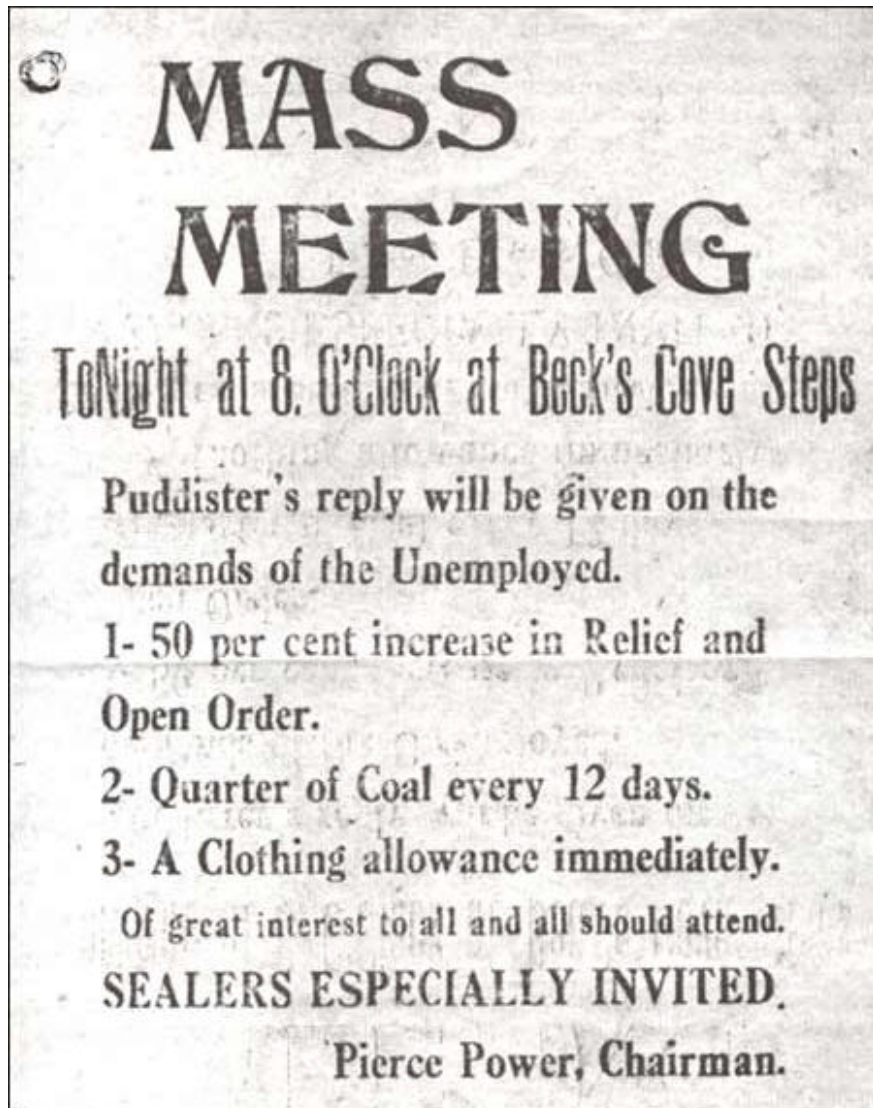
The Commission of Government refused all the Unemployed Committee's demands. But that didn't stop the group. By August 16 they had an office on Springdale Street and a small newspaper, *The Avalon Welfare and Protective Association Bulletin*. The paper reported that the commissioners said there was no real poverty in St. John's. Instead, they said some Newfoundlanders were just too lazy to work.

The Committee continued to add to their list of demands. They wanted more coal. They wanted to be able to choose the food they could get on their dole orders. They wanted to be able to choose which stores they shopped in. Merchants cheated the unemployed on the weight of their coal. They gave bad meat for their dole orders, while fresh rabbits hung in the stores. More complaints about the dole office and Mrs. Muir were brought up at every meeting. "She is a professor in the science of starvation," Power told a full house at the Majestic Theatre on August 15. "She will never be removed by the Commission of Government, she knows her job too well."

Power told the audience not to give up. They were just beginning. One hundred more people had been given the dole since they presented their demands to the Commission of Government. That was a start.

"It is the duty of every man, woman and child, unemployed and otherwise to fight for a

common cause," he told the crowd.¹⁵ Power believed political protest was the only way to improve the lives of the people of St. John's. He hoped that thousands of men and women from every walk of life would join his group. They needed to be strong to fight for their rights.



Sometimes fliers were used to announce the Unemployed meetings. You can see the hole in the corner of this one where it was nailed or tacked up in St. John's.

¹⁵ From Detective Mahoney's report to Police Chief O'Neill on August 15, 1934, notes taken from an unemployed meeting.

Two and three police watched each meeting now. Government employees tried to **bribe** members of the Committee to leave St. John's. They offered to sign them up for one of the government's new farming communities outside the city.¹⁶ The Committee members were angry, and refused these offers. But other problems did come up. James Kelly was accused of stealing money raised for the Unemployed Committee. He was arrested by police and taken to court. There were other problems within the Committee as well. Members argued over how to protest and what to ask for. Some thought Power was too radical. The membership of the Committee changed several times. But Pierce Power was always voted in as leader.

Throughout the summer and fall the Commission of Government would not meet with the Unemployed Committee. It promised some work, but nothing ever turned up. By January, Power was sure it was time for more than a few meetings. Action was needed.

On January 10, the unemployed marched down Duckworth Street. Pierce Power led them up Military Road and over to Government House to give their demands to the Commission of Government. Power picked up a ragged child and held him over his head. This is what we are fighting for, he told the angry crowd. The chief of police stopped them at the gate. Power was not let down. He called for another meeting that night.

About 1,500 gathered on the courthouse steps. "I am determined," Power told them. "I am chained like the slaves of old. You think you are free. You too are chained... I say that a man has no business to live when he cannot pose as a free man." The audience cheered the demands Power brought. These included getting rid of the dole flour. This was brown flour imported from Britain. It had been put on the dole rations because it was said to be healthy. But the flour did not rise properly. The people hated it. It was kept in cold storage. It went moldy by the time it was used.

Their second demand was that they be given cash instead of dole orders. They had to work for the dole now. It wasn't **charity**. They thought they should get cash to buy what they needed instead of being forced to take whatever the merchants decided to give them.

Their third demand was to stop landlords from putting people out on the Street if they couldn't pay their rent. "I know a case where a woman and six children were **evicted**. The doors and windows were taken down in order to force them to leave the house. That man whose family was evicted should be here tonight. But that is an old story in Newfoundland." Power told the crowd they must not be ashamed of their poverty. They must not stay home when they were treated unjustly. They must come out and try to change things.

Their fourth demand was for clothing. "This is not a **nudist** colony," Power proclaimed. The crowd laughed and urged him on.

The last demand was to get rid of some of the officials at the dole office, especially Mrs. Muir. "We go there because we are forced to do so," he said. "A man who is willing to work does not want dole. He is forced to get it. You are put through the third degree by her tongue. 'Where do you live? How many children do you have? What do you want to have children for?'"

¹⁶ For more information on government land settlement programs see Janet McNaughton's essay "The Markland Experiment," in book 8 of this series.

"If you are willing, I will lead you. I want hundreds more. I want women and children. I want you to come together," Power told them.¹⁷

The Commissioners refused to see Pierce Power. They did agree to meet with the other members of the committee. Matches to light the stove and baking powder to make the bread rise were added to the dole orders. They were given a little more coal. But the Commissioners continued to turn down all the Unemployed Committee's major requests. They refused to give the unemployed men and women of St. John's what they needed most-work.

The city was tense. The police believed there would be violence, perhaps even a riot. The Committee was openly angry in its comments about the Commission of Government, especially the commissioner in charge of health and welfare. John Puddister was a Newfoundlander. The unemployed believed he was more cruel towards them than were any of the British commissioners.

Detective Mahoney tried to help the situation. He looked into complaints about the dole office. In a report to the chief of police, Mahoney called the dole officers "over-bearing and officious... I feel that some of this trouble could be eliminated if the members of the relief office would use **diplomacy** and common courtesy. It doesn't cost the department a cent," Mahoney wrote in his January 16 report.

Mahoney had noticed Mrs. Muir did not always follow the rules. He told the story of Michael Peddle of Wickford Street. This man was refused his dole after Mrs. Muir found out he was in the unemployed parade.

"He did not get his relief on the 12th (of January) and when Sergeant Cahill visited him on the 13th he was in such a condition that he (Cahill) was obliged to give him a dollar from his own pocket. Peddle's child at the time was at some neighbour's home, as he had no food to give it," Mahoney wrote. The detective also admitted that some of the constabulary officers were too rough in their treatment of the unemployed. Mrs Muir was forced to resign. By that time the unemployed were determined to continue on until their other demands were met.

The Unemployed Committee held meetings all that winter. No one would rent them a hall. They met outdoors on the courthouse steps and at Beck's Cove. The police reported it had become difficult to take notes because it was so cold.

By February, Power was planning another parade. "We must get together and fight back. At this parade bring your women and children. Do not hide your misery in your homes. Come out and see justice done in this city. Never have I seen such misery and want. This state of affairs will continue unless we fight it and make a determined stand," Power told a crowd shivering on the court house steps on February 7.¹⁸

The justice commissioner, William Howley, tried to get around trouble by meeting with several members of the Committee. He wrote a letter to Puddester asking him to think

¹⁷ From Detective Mahoney's report to Police Chief O'Neill on January 11, 1935, notes taken from an unemployed meeting.

¹⁸ From Detective Mahoney's report to Police Chief O'Neill on Feb 7, 1935, notes taken from an unemployed meeting.

about some of their demands. "I am inclined to agree with the **contention** that the present allowance is **insufficient**. It is barely enough to keep body and soul together," he wrote on 14 February.¹⁹

But the commissioner for health and welfare didn't like Howley's butting in. John Puddester rejected the Unemployed Committee's claims and demands.

On February 25 the Unemployed Committee advertised another parade. Joseph Milley had been a member of the Committee almost from the start. He was also Pierce Power's friend. Police reported seeing Milley parading up and down Water and Duckworth Streets at 3 p.m. He had a dog with him and two boys. The dog pulled a sleigh with a banner on it. "Remember your rights tomorrow; 50 percent increase in dole; quarter ton of coal every ten days and clothing allowance," it read. One of the boys rang a bell so people would notice the display.

The next day about 1,000 people arrived at the grounds. Many had refused to work for their dole until their demands were heard by the commissioner for health and welfare. Power led them in a parade to the Colonial Building. They were met by the police. The crowd shouted for Power to go into the building and ignore the constabulary. Power as usual took the legal route. He got permission and then sent in a committee to meet with the commissioner. Several days later they got their answer. Cabbage and turnips had been added to the dole orders. Nothing else had changed. But Power was now sure that protests could bring change. They needed to stick together. They needed to keep protesting and pressuring the commissioners.

"You have secured an increase in dole. Why?... Is it their charitableness? No. The reason you got this increase is because you organized and looked for it," he told a crowd of men and women at Beck's Cove on 8 March.²⁰

Throughout the winter and into the spring the unemployed people of St. John's met outside in the cold. They listened to speeches and grew angry. Pierce Power was refused any work on the docks because of his protests. He and his Committee made plans.

The Riot of 1935

Spring had come to St. John's. The unemployed had survived on dole rations all winter. Their demand now was for money. They wanted to work for cash, not for dole orders.

On April 27 the snitch, One X, told the police that the Unemployed Committee planned to hold a parade on **Jubilee Day**. They had chosen May 6, the King's birthday, to make their demands known. He said they would carry banners reading "God save the King, but we want work." A photographer had promised to take pictures and send them to the British newspapers.

¹⁹ Letter to Health and Welfare Commissioner John Puddester from Justice Commissioner William Howley, February 14, 1935.

²⁰ From Detective Mahoney's report to Police Chief O'Neill on March 8, 1935, notes from an unemployed meeting.

The commissioners did not want to deal with this parade. They thought it would ruin an important holiday and make them look bad. The commissioner for natural resources, Sir John Hope Simpson, met with Power and several other members of the Committee on May 2. His answer was given over the radio the next day. Five hundred men would be put to work that summer. Their meeting with Simpson had been a great success. A parade was no longer needed.

On Jubilee Day Pierce Power was busy gathering the names of the men who needed the government work. Power tried to present his list of names to the police on May 7. He was told that the commissioners had changed their minds. Men who wanted work would have to sign up with the police, not with the Unemployed Committee.

Five thousand people crowded into Beck's Cove for a meeting that night. The police reported that the crowd and the Committee were angry. "There has been a great change in the unemployed and they now figure that the promise of putting five hundred men to work was merely a **ruse** so that they would not parade on Jubilee Day," Detective Mahoney wrote in his report that night.

Pierce believed the Commission of Government was pushing for a showdown with the unemployed. He thought they must hold another parade. They must not back down. "Someone in this town must make a sacrifice," he told the crowd. "We will only fight for bread, clothes, and freedom. You must be prepared, everyone of us."²¹ According to Mahoney, Power told the crowd to arm themselves with "picks, tools, pokers, and the devil knows what."²²

The next day a crowd of unemployed men and women marched to commissioner Puddester's office. They were followed by the city's uniformed police and plain clothes officers. The Unemployed Committee met with the commissioner. They demanded the right to officially speak for the unemployed men and women of St. John's. Puddester told them the other commissioners would have to agree. Later that day the Committee sent the commissioners a written statement of their demand.

The Commission's reply came out in the newspapers on May 9. The answer was no. Puddester had told the other commissioners the group was demanding too much. He said they wanted complete control of public works projects. This was not true. The Committee was outraged. They had been betrayed.

Hundreds of unemployed men and women gathered in Beck's Cove at 3 p.m. on May 10. Pierce Power told the crowd he had done all he could. He could do no more for them. "You have no boots, no clothes, no underclothing. Some of you are ashamed to come out of your houses on Sundays. You know where there are lots of these things," police reports claim Power told the crowd. Someone at the meeting yelled, "Let us do something. Let us have a parade."²³

Pierce Power and Joseph Milley wrapped a Union Jack flag around their shoulders. They led a thousand people to the Colonial Building. The crowd moved up the steps to enter the building. The police arrived. More than 100 officers faced the unemployed as they

²¹ From Detective Mahoney's report to Police Chief O'Neill on May 7, 1935, notes from an unemployed meeting.

²² From Detective Mahoney's report to Police Chief O'Neill on May 7, 1935.

²³ From Detective Mahoney's full report on the riot of May 10, 1935.

stood on the steps. They told the crowd to get back. No one moved. Someone in the crowd threw stones at the police. The officers charged.

Pierce Power was beaten over the head and shoulders with police batons. Police attacked Joseph Milley. They tried to handcuff George Wilkinson, a school teacher and another member of the Committee. He was beaten on the head and wrist with their batons.

The police chased the marchers off the government grounds. Many tried to jump the fence into Bannerman Park. The officers followed, beating anyone who came within their reach.

The protesters fought back by throwing stones. Several officers were hit on the head and in the face. Constable Simmons' teeth were smashed. *The Evening Telegram* reporter's camera was broken by police. Another newspaper reporter was hit over the head. He bled on the street.

The protesters did not have any weapons with them. Some of them broke up the fence in Bannerman Park. They fought hand to hand with police using the fence pickets as weapons. The police chased men and women down the streets of St. John's. Several women reported they were beaten in the rush. Small groups of men formed. They showered the officers with stones until they were beaten off and forced to return home.

At 8 p.m. a big crowd gathered at Beck's Cove. They were told Pierce Power had been beaten so badly he was at home in bed. George Wilkinson warned the crowd against more fighting. But the people were outraged about their treatment by the police. They shouted for revenge. "Put her up," someone cried.²⁴ The crowd rushed onto Water Street. Some of the men ran down Bowring's Cove. They grabbed handfuls of stones. They ran west, smashing windows as they went. By the time the crowd reached Springdale Street, twenty store windows had been broken. Men stole shoes, boots, clothing, and food from the window displays. Five truckloads of police arrived and cleared Water Street. Small groups of men ran down the back streets and threw stones at the police. The officers wore steel hats. They used their batons. The riot was over by 11 o'clock. The police watched the city all night.

On Saturday, May 11 four members of the Unemployed Committee were arrested. Pierce Power, Joseph Milley, George Wilkinson and Herbert Saunders were charged with causing a riot.

The trial began on May 27. The Crown called many witnesses against the Committee members. But by May 31 it was clear Pierce Power and the other members of the Committee had not told anyone to riot. They had done just the opposite. They had asked for calm. All four men were found not guilty. They were followed home from court by cheering crowds.

The Unemployed Committee did not meet for several months after the trial. When meetings were called again in August, most of the old members didn't show up. George

²⁴ From Detective Mahoney's full report on the riot of May 10, 1935.

Wilkinson had left Newfoundland, "his head beaten silly with billies."²⁵ Joseph Milley was asked to speak at a meeting on August 12. He refused. "What, and get the billy used on my head again? Nothin' cookin," he said.²⁶ And Pierce Power? He had gone away to work. The riot and the trial had been a great blow to the Unemployed Committee. The movement never really got back the strength it had before May 1935. Their peaceful and legal protests had been met with violence.

In 1936 Pierce Power was back in town. He began speaking at unemployed meetings. Power hoped to pick up the unemployed movement where he had left off before the riot. The police watched him closely. They started to follow him and write down his words again. Power was upset by this. He had been treated like a criminal for three years. He had been beaten by police. Pierce still believed political action was the only way to change the lives of the poor and unemployed of St. John's. But he had learned that such action involves the risk of violence at the hands of the authorities.

Pierce continued to call on the people of the city to protest for their rights. "Get yourselves together and make history. Don't let history make you. You make it. Start in to sweep poverty away," he told a crowd at Beck's Cove on 10 June.²⁷ Six months later Pierce was on trial again-this time for slashing constable Michael Walsh.

The Trial

The trial of Pierce Power was heard by the Supreme Court from January 22 to 24, 1937. The courtroom was packed. It was a sensational case. All the papers covered it. It was the talk of St. John's.

The police claimed they were called to the Southside by Power's next door neighbour, Mrs. Dillon. They were told Pierce had fought with people at the house. He had broken up the furniture. Three officers drove to the Power home at 429 Southside Road. It was about 7:45 on Christmas Night. Constable Bert Williams parked across the street. Constable Alec Spracklin and Constable Michael Walsh went into the house. Pierce wasn't home. They went next door to Mrs. Dillon's house. He wasn't there either.

The two constables walked up the road. They didn't see the young man anywhere, so they walked back. The officers were about to get into the police car when Power came towards them. Constable Spracklin said that Pierce had been drinking. He said that Walsh told Power to go home. Power stepped back a few feet and pulled the razor out of his pocket. He told the officers to get out of his way. Spracklin said that Power told Walsh, "I know you. If you come near me I will **disfigure** you. Any man, woman, or child who gets in my way I will rip them from neck to arse."²⁸ According to Spracklin, Power then told Walsh that he had the upper hand this time. Walsh tried to grab Power. He slipped on the ice and Power slashed at him with the razor. Spracklin-six feet tall and 220 pounds-jumped on Power. Walsh put the handcuffs on him.

²⁵ From Detective Mahoney's report to Police Chief O'Neill on August 19, 1935, notes on an unemployed meeting.

²⁶ From Detective Mahoney's report to Police Chief O'Neill on August 12, 1935, notes on an unemployed meeting.

²⁷ From Constable Cochrane's report to Police Chief O'Neill on June 10, 1936, notes from an unemployed meeting.

²⁸ From *The Evening Telegram*, January 22, 1937.

Constable Walsh said he remembered getting the razor away from Power. Walsh said he heard Power's sister say, "Don't hurt Pierce," when he put the handcuffs on.²⁹ Walsh didn't know how badly he'd been cut until he tried to move his tongue. He showed the jury his wounds. The officer would be scarred for life.

The defense had a very different story to tell. Pierce's father, Patrick, and several other witnesses, said that Pierce had had a few drinks at home on Christmas night. Then he went out visiting friends. When he got to Mrs. Dillon's house Pierce was drunk. Mrs. Dillon told Pierce to go home. It was Christmas. She'd seen enough drunk men for one night. But Pierce did not hurt anyone or break anything in the house. Power then went to Mrs. McGrath's house on the same street. Mrs. McGrath had known Pierce since the day he was born. She said that he was very drunk and had no shirt on. He was panting and out of breath. It was a cold night. Pierce was sweating and his head was steaming. Mrs. McGrath said she bathed his head in cold water and got him a shirt. Her husband went to his house to get Pierce's coat.

Patrick Power said that his son was mad drunk when he got home. He said the police followed Power up the steps to his house. Pierce waved his arms and backed towards the door. He told the police to leave him alone. He was going home to bed. Walsh kept moving towards Pierce. Pierce kept backing away. Pierce's lawyer, Mr. Ayre, said Walsh slipped. The two men fell together. Power was waving the razor. He cut the officer by accident as Walsh fell to the ground.

Walsh had caused the slashing by bullying Power at his own door. Ayre claimed Walsh was looking for a reason to get into it with Power that night. It would be a real "feather in the cap" of any officer who arrested the leader of the unemployed **demonstrations** that led to the riot of 1935.³⁰ Pierce had never been the same since he was beaten in the head by police at that riot. He became mad when he drank. He blanked out and didn't know what he was doing.

Pierce Power was the last to take the stand. The young man said he remembered having drinks at the homes of several friends. But he didn't remember going home or anything about the slashing. Pierce said he couldn't explain why he had the razor. When he woke up in the lock-up the day after Christmas, he didn't know why he was there. The jury reached their verdict forty-five minutes later. Guilty as charged.

Pierce Power was sentenced to five years in the **penitentiary**. Oddly, Constable Walsh went to jail as well. The officer's injuries made it hard for him to do his job as a cop on the street. Michael Walsh had a large family and needed to work. He was given a job at the penitentiary. Walsh started his new job as a prison guard about the same time that Power started serving his sentence. The two men served their time together.

²⁹ From *The Evening Telegram*, January 23, 1937.

³⁰ From *The Evening Telegram*, January 23, 1937.

According to the Power family history, Pierce was let out of jail three years later. To get out early, he had to agree to join the merchant marine service in the war. Power got out on December 24, 1940. He served as a marine fireman for six months. His ship, the *S.S. Kellwyn*, was torpedoed. Pierce Power died at sea. His body was never found. He has no grave or marker. But his name is written on the Halifax naval memorial in Nova Scotia, along with the names of about 2,000 other lost seamen. In 1994 his great nephew Mike Power asked for, and received, Pierce's service medals. Although he was the leader of an important labour movement, Pierce Power is not mentioned in any history books.

A Place in History

The message of Pierce Power is simple, but **profound**. All people have the right to be treated fairly and decently. If they are not, they have the right and the responsibility to try to change their condition. They must help improve the lives of their neighbours and friends. "If you show contentment with the life of a **serf** and if you are content with the **meagre** amount doled out, then you can stay home tomorrow. If you want to impress on these people your rights and if you want to work, you must parade. We don't intend to die peacefully in a land of plenty," he shouted at a meeting at Beck's Cove on February 25, 1935.³¹

Power told people not to be ashamed of their poverty, but to be angry about it. He believed and taught others to believe that action can cause change. He did not seek violence, but he lived in violent times. Power thought that the terrible conditions of the poor were a crime committed by the government against the people. It had to be challenged. "The Commission of Government is responsible today, just as much as **gangsters** that would shoot a man down on the street," he told a crowd gathered on the courthouse steps on February 3, 1935. "For every person that dies they are responsible for the death of that person, and they should be brought to account."³²

So why doesn't Pierce Power appear in Newfoundland history books? The Unemployed Committee was the only real opposition to the Commission of Government at that time. Their protests led to a riot, a sensational trial and, in the end, a jail sentence for their leader. Perhaps it is because Power was a common man and not a rich or famous person. But it might be something else.

The story of Pierce Power and the Unemployed Committee of 1934 and 1935 challenges a popular idea. Newfoundlanders are often said to be a hardy and long suffering people. This patience and calm is considered part of Newfoundland culture. It is highly praised.³³ The young worker from the Southside Road just doesn't fit in with that image. His life challenges those ideas. His words **mock** the picture of the good Newfoundlander. Pierce Power did not admire meekness. He would not have thought much of anyone who did.

³¹ From Detective Mahoney's report to Police Chief O'Neill on February 25, 1935, notes from an unemployed meeting.

³² From Detective Mahoney's report to Police Chief O'Neill on February 3, 1935.

³³ Memorial University sociologist Jim Overton has written about the Unemployed Committee of 1934 and 1935. In his essay "Riots, Raids and Relief" (*Violence and Public Anxiety, Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University, 1992*) Overton discusses the popular image of Newfoundlanders as passive, nonviolent people.

Note from the Author

The story of Pierce Power was hidden away in the Newfoundland **archives**. I found his story by looking up hundreds of police reports. These reports are kept in the Commission of Government justice section. They included the snitch letters, Detective Mahoney's reports on Pierce Power's speeches, and letters written by members of the Commission of Government.

The great nephew of Pierce Power is Mike Power. Mike had letters from several police officers. The officers had known Pierce and his brother Mike (a police officer) in the 1930's. These letters were used to find out more about Pierce Power's looks and personality. Newspaper articles from the *Daily News* and *The Evening Telegram* filled in the rest of the story.

Finding the story of Pierce Power was like solving a mystery. After all the clues were put together the tale became clear.

Word List

1. **Newfoundland constabulary:** police force in Newfoundland.
2. **constable:** policeman of low rank.
3. **jugular vein:** a vein in the neck which carries blood from the head.
4. **spectators:** people who look on or watch, an audience.
5. **harass:** to vex, bother or treat in a threatening manner.
6. **brutal:** cruel or mean.
7. **passionate:** moved by strong feelings.
8. **agitator:** person who stirs up the public about politics. Someone who encourages the public protest against governments and their policies.
9. **tuberculosis:** disease of the lungs.
10. **threaten:** when someone tells, shows or warns a person, or group that they intend to punish or harm them.
11. **officials:** people employed to represent a government, agency, or group.
12. **bankruptcy:** when a person, company or country has no cash and is unable to pay bills or borrow money, broke.
13. **misuse:** to use wrongly.
14. **riot:** when a crowd causes a disturbance or begins breaking the law.
15. **ration:** set amount of supplies.
16. **dominion:** like a country.
17. **democracy:** government by all the citizens, direct and representative.
18. **finances:** money matters.
19. **charismatic:** ability to inspire loyalty and devotion.
20. **commissioners:** officials appointed to run the government.
21. **condemned:** attacked.
22. **resign:** to quit or step down from a job or position.
23. **baton:** police stick or club.
24. **bribe:** money or other perks used to control a group or individuals behavior.
25. **charity:** money or supplies given to the poor.
26. **evicted:** thrown out or removed.
27. **nudist:** person who doesn't wear clothes.
28. **diplomacy:** tact.
29. **contention:** opinion or argument.
30. **insufficient:** not enough.
31. **Jubilee Day:** Celebration of the King's birthday.
32. **ruse:** trick

33. **disfigure:** deform
34. **demonstration:** protest.
35. **verdict:** decision of the jury.
36. **profound:** important, deep and lasting.
37. **serf:** peasant, slave.
38. **meagre:** tiny, small.
39. **gangsters:** criminals.
40. **mock:** make fun of, make a liar of.
41. **archives:** place where public records are kept or stored.
42. **penitentiary:** jail or prison.

Issues for Discussion

1. Political protest and social control.
2. Comparison of the social and political conditions of the depression of the 1930s with the recession of the 1990s.
3. Government responses to poverty.

Questions for Discussion

The Razor Slasher

1. Why was the courtroom full for the trial of Pierce Power? Would you have attended such a trial?
2. Even before the slashing, the government thought of Pierce Power as a dangerous man. Why?

The Naked the Hungry and the Homeless

1. This chapter discusses some telegrams sent to the Newfoundland government in the 1930s. Why were the telegrams sent? What conditions did they describe?
2. How did the different governments of the 1930s respond to the poverty and hardship experienced by many Newfoundlanders?
3. The 1990s have also been a time of high unemployment and recession. Compare government help for the poor and unemployed in the 1930s with government programs in the 1990s. How did these policies affect people's lives?

The Police Files

1. Police watched members of the Unemployed Committee. What did Detective Mahoney and Constable Bennett think of the first meeting of that group?
2. What did the Unemployed Committee want from government? What do you think of their demands?
3. Describe how the police tried to find out about members of the Unemployed Committee. How do you think Pierce Power felt about being watched? Do you

think following the Unemployed Committee members was a good idea? Why do you think the government wanted Pierce Power and his friends to be watched?

Parades and Protest

1. Why did Pierce Power decide to have a parade on January 10?
2. At a meeting of the unemployed, Pierce Power told the crowd, "I say that a man has no business to live when he cannot pose as a free man." What do you think he meant by this?
3. Detective Mahoney looked into some of the Unemployed Committee's complaints. What did he find?
4. Pierce Power became convinced that parades could help improve the conditions of the unemployed. What made him so sure?

The Riot of 1935

1. Why did Sir John Hope Simpson agree to meet with Pierce Power and the Unemployed Committee before Jubilee Day?
2. Why did the Unemployed Committee decide to hold a parade on May 10?
3. What caused the riot?
4. After the riot, the Unemployed Committee broke up. Why do you think they gave up their protests?
5. In 1936 Pierce Power told a crowd, "Get yourselves together and make history. Don't let history make you." What do you think he meant?

The Trial

1. The trial of Pierce Power was an exciting one. How did the story of the police differ from the story of the defence?
2. How would you describe Pierce Power's life and death? Do you think he was a hero or a trouble maker?

A Place in History

1. This chapter tries to explain and describe the life of Pierce Power. What do you think was the "message" of the young worker?
2. The author of this story thinks Pierce Power is not in any history books because he challenges a popular idea about Newfoundlanders. Discuss this idea and the author's claims.
3. What would Pierce Power be making speeches about if he were alive in Newfoundland today?