

Shoe Cove Traditions

*Based on oral history research by Elke Dettmer
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Among the first settlers in Shoe Cove in the early eighteenth century was the Diamond family, who are believed to have moved here from Conception Bay. At first they came to fish and built a small cabin for summer use. Eventually they moved over full time and built a permanent home at Diamond's Turn along Main Road. During the summers they still lived down in the valley at Shoe Cove, where they had their fish flakes, but they moved back up the hill during the winter.

Other families followed. These included the Walls, Kellys and Murrins. According to Pat Shea, the Murrins originally lived in Pouch Cove, then moved to Shoe Cove. By 1920 there were seventeen homes occupied by families with the following last names: Murrin, Furlong, Power, Wall, Diamond, Kelly, Knight and Penton.

Compared to Pouch Cove, families in Shoe Cove relied more on agriculture than on fishing. They raised cows, sheep, goats and horses, grew potatoes, made hay and during the winter they cut lumber. They fished for capelin which were used to fertilize their fields and meadows. They would bury the capelin in bog or clay, then spread it out in the Fall. Because of this, their hay grew five or six feet high.

Along with basic vegetable crops such as potatoes, turnips, carrots and parsnips, some grew cucumbers for pickles, as well as vegetable marrow and cauliflower. During the 1930s they kept cattle, made their own butter and were quite self-sufficient. They bought flour by the barrel.

Livestock were moved to the *grazing grounds* during the summer, an area that included the top of the hill south of Shoe Cove Beach. People would check on their animals occasionally and round them up in the fall. This was mainly the women's responsibility. Cows would have to be found and brought home for milking each night.

Before Confederation in 1949 farmers in Shoe Cove had good-sized farms and kept relatively large herds of livestock, according to folklore student Elizabeth Bishop, who studied barn construction in the Shoe Cove area. After Confederation, farming became less profitable because of competition, and the vegetable market declined as well. The Murrins were big time farmers, with extensive acreage, and up to the early 1990s, Richard Murrin was still growing vegetables for local sale.



Knight's stage in Shoe Cove,
c. 1955



Edward (Ned) Kelley on his fish flake in Shoe Cove c. 1940

According to James Furlong, life in Shoe Cove was hard for a family with seven children. James was a farmer and also a fisherman. He sold his fish to Gruchy's, fish merchants in Pouch Cove. The Murrins took their fish into St. John's to sell directly to customers; it took them about four hours to get to St. John's by horse and buggy.

People living in Shoe Cove also picked *bakeapples* and *raspberries*, especially after a large fire cleared the woods all the way to the Bauline Road and as far back as the Tolt. They would sell their berries in town. It might take them all day to pick a few tubs; raspberries sold for \$2 to \$2.50 for a large tub. Pat Shea, who had a truck, would buy berries from local pickers for 50 cents and then take them into St. John's to sell them to factories making jam or to foreign companies that boxed them and sent them to the mainland.

In the 1920s and 1930s, Shoe Cove was a busy place for fishing. There were thirteen boats and many stages and flakes. The Knights had a stage and a big flake for drying their fish. There was also a little shop there that refined *cod liver oil*.

The original footpath which zig-zagged down to the shore was replaced by a road built by Richard Murrin's grandfather around 1900 as a shortcut to his farm. At first the people of Shoe Cove would have to repair the road each year. Later the government provided a little money for repairs.



Jack Knight and Jack Murrin c. 1940

The Shoe Cove men trawled for fish, using *longlines* full of hooks, baited with capelin or squid. In crews of two or three they went out on the water before daylight, and again in the evening, to row for about an hour in flat-bottomed boats called *rodneys* or *punts*, to get to their fishing grounds two or three miles from shore. Later some of the boats had engines.

The fishing grounds were divided into *trawl berths* that were drawn by lot, before the season started, so that each crew had an equal chance to get a good berth. The fishing season began in June with fishing for capelin (to be used for bait and fertilizer), then came the cod fishery which lasted until November, or whenever the weather turned bad, forcing them to stop.

They would get up to three *quintals* ("cantals") of fish per day, which they headed, split, salted and dried. They fished mainly for their own use, in contrast to Pouch Cove, where

the cod trap fishery could yield as much as thirty to forty quintals per day from a trap, and required a separate shore crew, including women, to make dried salt cod.

The fish boats in Shoe Cove anchored off the beach, except when a storm was threatening. These boats were built locally, but some people were better at building than others. When the northeast wind came up, the sea would come into the cove and carry away stages and boats. It would also fill the cove with sand, which the men would have to clear out.

One well-known danger was a shoal at the entrance to the harbour known as the *Strawberry*. This was a big flat rock, three fathoms (about 18 feet) below the surface. After a northeast gale, with big seas rolling in, the boats would have to wait until the waves settled, then pass over it quickly.



Butt's and Knight's fish flakes in Shoe Cove c. 1940

One of the last people to fish out of Shoe Cove was Pat Shea, who lived in Pouch Cove. He fished there for fifteen years. When he started, the Knights were still fishing, the Furlongs were finishing, and the Murrins and Walls had already stopped. The Diamonds fished there until George Diamond was killed by lightning in 1932.

After the Second World War began in 1939, construction of the American bases and the Torbay Airport pulled a lot of people away to jobs in town.

The Shoe Cove Valley was a special place, particularly for children. They would follow the sheep as they grazed along the cliffs and play down at the beach. Especially remembered were the *boil-ups* when families would take food down to the Cove and build a fire there. Although life was hard, many of those who grew up through the years before the War remembered these years as good times when they felt happy and secure.

Shoe Cove had its own school that went up to Grade Eleven. The school was heated by a little cast iron pot-belly stove. The students would arrive at 9:30 AM carrying a few *junks* of wood for the school's stove. At 12:30 they would come home for dinner, and at 1:30 they would be back at school again, until 3:30. The one-room school held between forty and fifty children. There was only one teacher for all the students in the different grades.



The Knight's fish flakes in Shoe Cove c. 1940

For those who grew up and had lived there, Shoe Cove Valley was a home of fond memory. It was valued as a beautiful, special place, and many people returned there to swim or picnic.

All photos courtesy of Garry Knight.

Richard Murrin put it this way:

"When you come in from fishing, they used to boil the kettle, put on a big feed of fish, pick it out with a fishspoon made of wood, sit around the rock and eat it. People were strong, eat plenty of fish, a few potatoes. Roast the liver on an open fire, put a little bit of salt on it. That was grand, lovely, you could not eat anything nicer."