

# The Resident Fishery

What role does the fishery play in the province today?

What are the best arguments for and against continuing the seal hunt today?



**3.35 Hard work**

Handlining from dories consisted of using a single line with one or more baited or lured hooks attached. Quick jerks of the line, called “jigging,” are an effective way to snag the fish on the hook.

## Introduction

The fisheries remained the main source of livelihood for residents throughout the nineteenth century. Although there were several types of fisheries, as a resident once stated in an 1879 newspaper: “(Those in) this isolated community have no choice of an occupation, and must pull upon a single line, and fish or die.”

## The Shore Fishery

After the migratory fishery ended at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Newfoundland fishery was conducted mainly in inshore waters using small boats. This shore fishery produced a lightly salted, hard-dried “shore” cure of fish that was preferred in foreign markets and had the advantage that no other nation produced it.

The fishery before the nineteenth century, both migratory and resident, had used hired servants to catch the fish and separate shore crews to cure it. However, the nineteenth century fishery used family members for both catching and curing. Hired hands augmented family labour in the boats where family alone could not crew them. These labourers usually received a share of the proceeds of the voyage – and hence were called **sharemen**.

## New Technology

Contrary to the image of the unchanging outpost, several innovations were introduced to the inshore fishery throughout the nineteenth century. New types of boats and fishing equipment were introduced, such as **dories** (of American origin) used in the bank fishery, and the use of the **long line** or **bultow** (of French origin) at mid-century.

The most important innovation in the shore fishery, however, was the **cod trap**. Invented in 1866 in Bonne Espérance, a small island (that belongs to Quebec) off the south coast of Labrador, it was widely used in the shore and Labrador fisheries by the 1890s. Although the cod trap caught more fish than **handlining**, the trap was expensive and needed bigger crews and boats to operate. Often family ties were used to acquire the gear and to form trap-fishing crews.

**3.36 Cod drying at A.H. Murray’s fishing premises, Water Street, St. John’s**

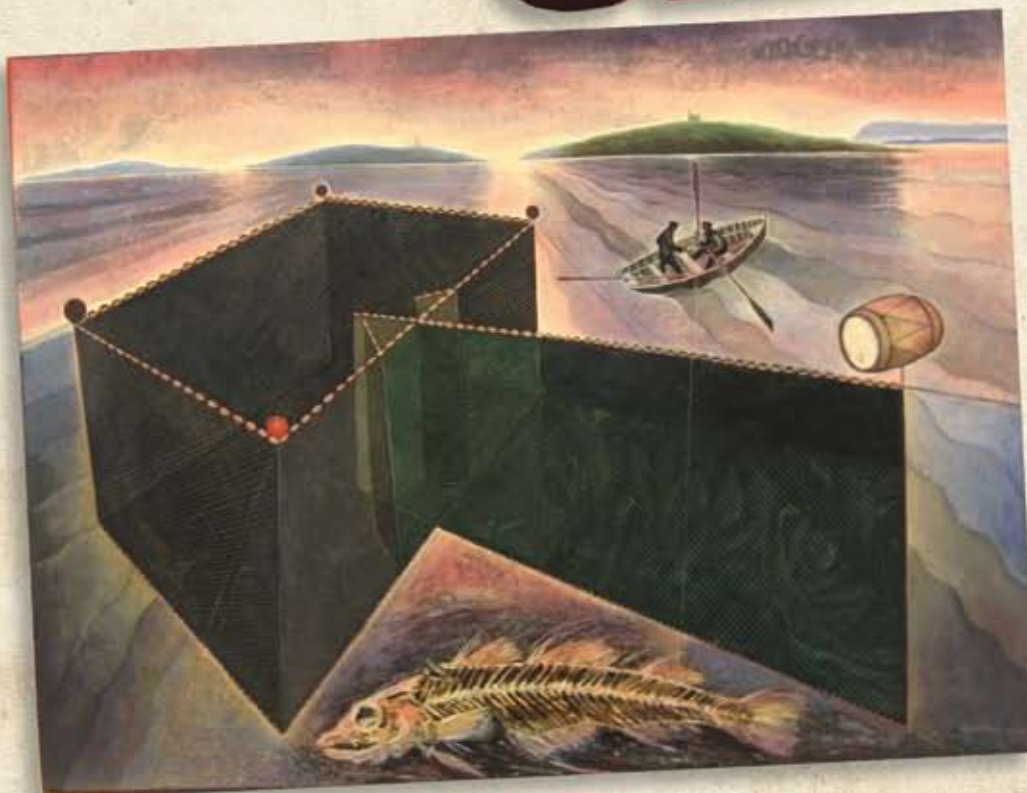






**3.37 Interior of a fishhouse**  
Most likely depicting the French fishery c. 1850

Occupations	Number Involved
Persons Engaged in Catching and Curing Fish	38 578 (1227)
Able-bodied Seamen and Fishermen in Colony and Dependencies	20 311 (576)
Mechanics	1 970
Farmers	1 552 (145)
Merchants and Traders	689 (3)
Persons Engaged in Lumbering	334
Clergymen or Ministers	77
Doctors and Lawyers	71



**3.38 Occupations of residents of the island of Newfoundland, 1857 Census**  
(above) Figures in brackets indicate numbers for French Shore.

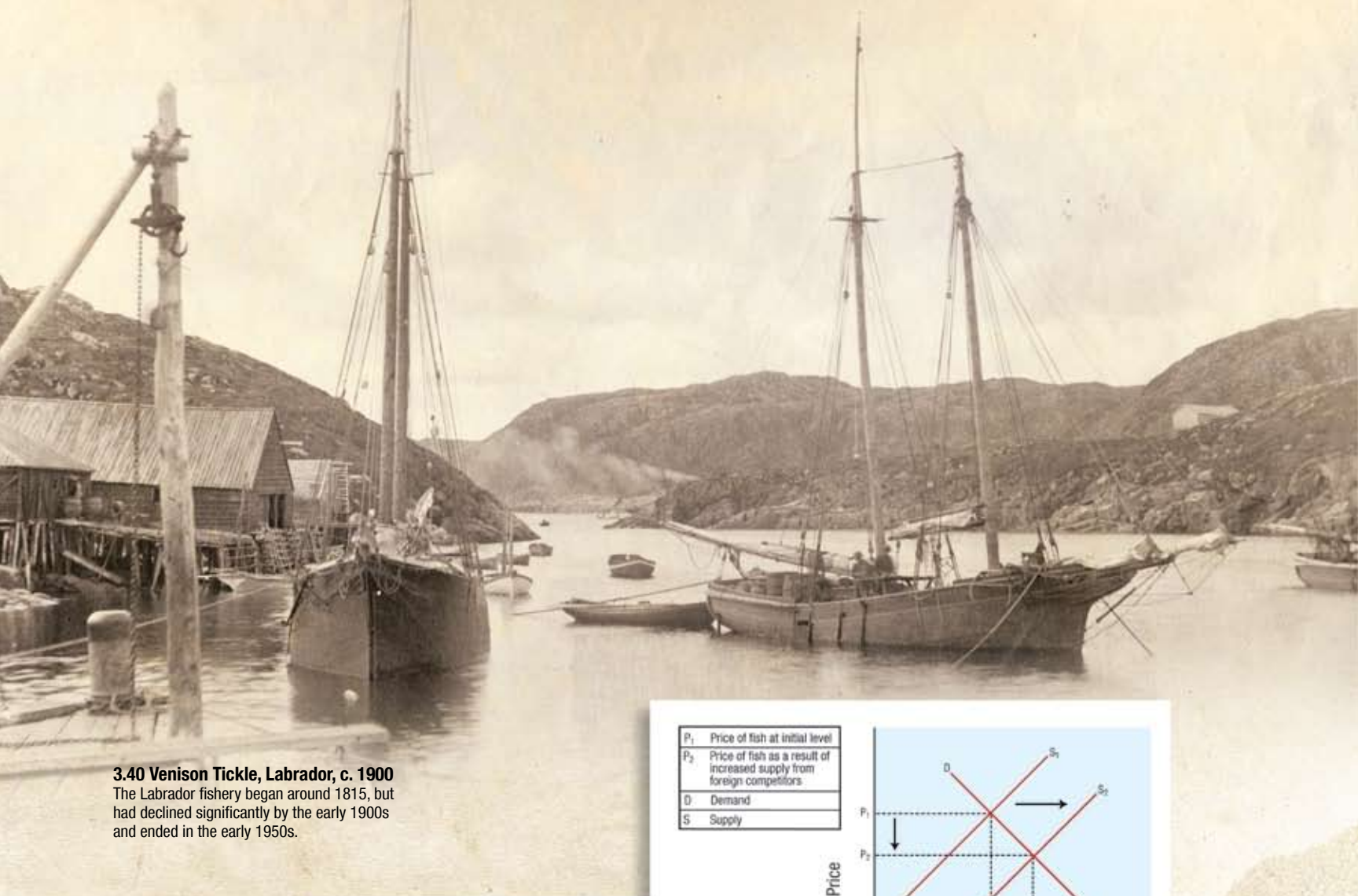
**3.39 Cod Trap on Bragg's Island,**  
artist David Blackwood, 1994  
The cod trap was a box of nets. Cod entered it by following a leader. Once inside, the cod found it difficult to get out.

### Experiencing The Arts

To see more of David Blackwood's work, turn to page 594.



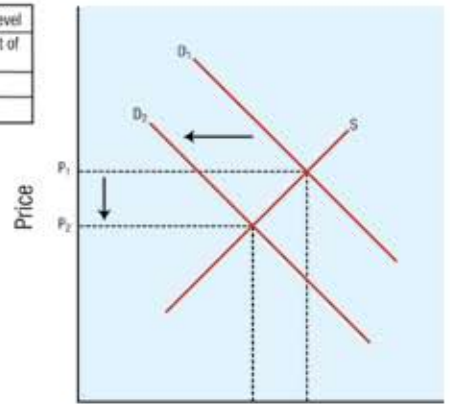




**3.40 Venison Tickle, Labrador, c. 1900**  
 The Labrador fishery began around 1815, but had declined significantly by the early 1900s and ended in the early 1950s.

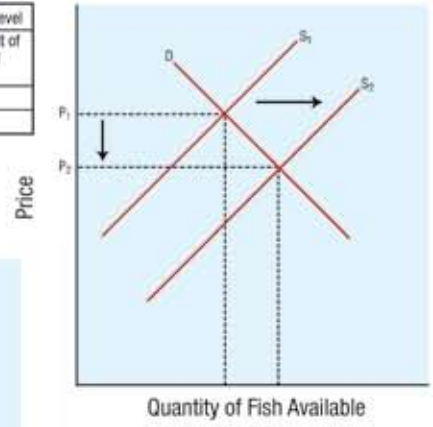
**3.41 Supply and demand**  
 The graph (right) shows the decline in the demand for fish when Britain no longer needed to maintain (and feed) a large army and navy. As a result there was less demand for fish ( $D_2$ ), forcing prices down ( $P_2$ ).

$P_1$	Price of fish at initial level
$P_2$	Price of fish as a result of lower demand
D	Demand
S	Supply



The graph (far right) shows the effect of additional fish being brought to market by foreign competitors re-entering the marketplace. A new supply of fish ( $S_2$ ) is available, again forcing prices down ( $P_2$ ).

$P_1$	Price of fish at initial level
$P_2$	Price of fish as a result of increased supply from foreign competitors
D	Demand
S	Supply



**3.42 Falling prices**  
 With a decrease in demand and an increase in supply, the value of saltfish reached an all time low in the 1850s.

## Labrador Fishery

In the early 1800s, there occurred one of the few booms in the fishery that the province has known. This boom was caused by the need to provision armies during the Napoleonic Wars and the War of 1812. However, when Britain's conflicts with America and France ended, the demand for fish fell, as did the price. The price fell even further when foreign competitors re-entered the market. After 1815 the markets collapsed.

### PRICES OF NEWFOUNDLAND SALTFISH

1801	.....	1.13	£ /quintal
1813	.....	1.60	"
1816	.....	0.75	"
1850	.....	0.50	"
1860	.....	0.95	"

*Newfoundland changed from the pound to the dollar in 1865.*



*\*During the Napoleonic Wars and the War of 1812, some fishers had resorted to fishing on the Northern Peninsula. They were forced to leave when the French returned to the "French Shore" after 1815, and consequently went to Labrador.\**

In addition, depletion of cod stocks began to be a problem in Newfoundland in the 1800s as a rising population caught larger volumes of fish. Cod became scarce in areas where people had been fishing the longest, such as Conception, Trinity, and Bonavista Bays. Some fishers compensated for this by fishing farther from shore – moving from fishing grounds within the island's large bays to those on outer headland areas. Eventually, this search for more cod led fishers north.\*

By the 1820s, increasing numbers of fishers began migrating from Newfoundland to Labrador to fish during the summer. This fishery served two purposes: it provided a use for sealing vessels in the off-season; and it allowed fishers from bays where the cod stocks were depleted to still earn a living. However, only those who possessed schooners, jack boats, or bully boats were able to travel north. As these fishers had to spend weeks or even months away from home, some brought their families with them for company and to help cure the catch.

*The coast of Labrador was returned to Newfoundland in 1809. See page 79, chapter one.*



**3.43 A bully boat**  
Bonne Bay, 1909



The Labrador fishery consisted of two groups: **stationers** and **floaters**. Fishers who set up living quarters on shore and fished each day in small boats were known as stationers. Floaters lived and fished (usually with **seines** and handlines) on board their vessels and sailed up and down the Labrador coast, often travelling further north than stationers.

Floaters packed their fish in salt and brought it back to Newfoundland at the end of each season to be dried, while stationers salted and cured their fish on shore shortly after catching it. Both methods had drawbacks. Labrador's damp weather often resulted in a poorer cure for stationers, while floaters risked damaging their catch during the long voyage home. Generally, the Labrador fishery produced an inferior product which fetched a lower market price, but the catches were usually larger.

Over time, some Labrador fishers decided to remain on the Labrador coast. They settled mostly around the Labrador Straits and in southeastern Labrador, where various merchant firms operated, such as the highly successful Job Brothers and Company, which operated from c. 1750 to 1967.



**3.45 Using what's available**  
Sod-covered dwellings were common in Labrador due to a lack of timber in some areas.

#### **3.44 At home in the Big Land**

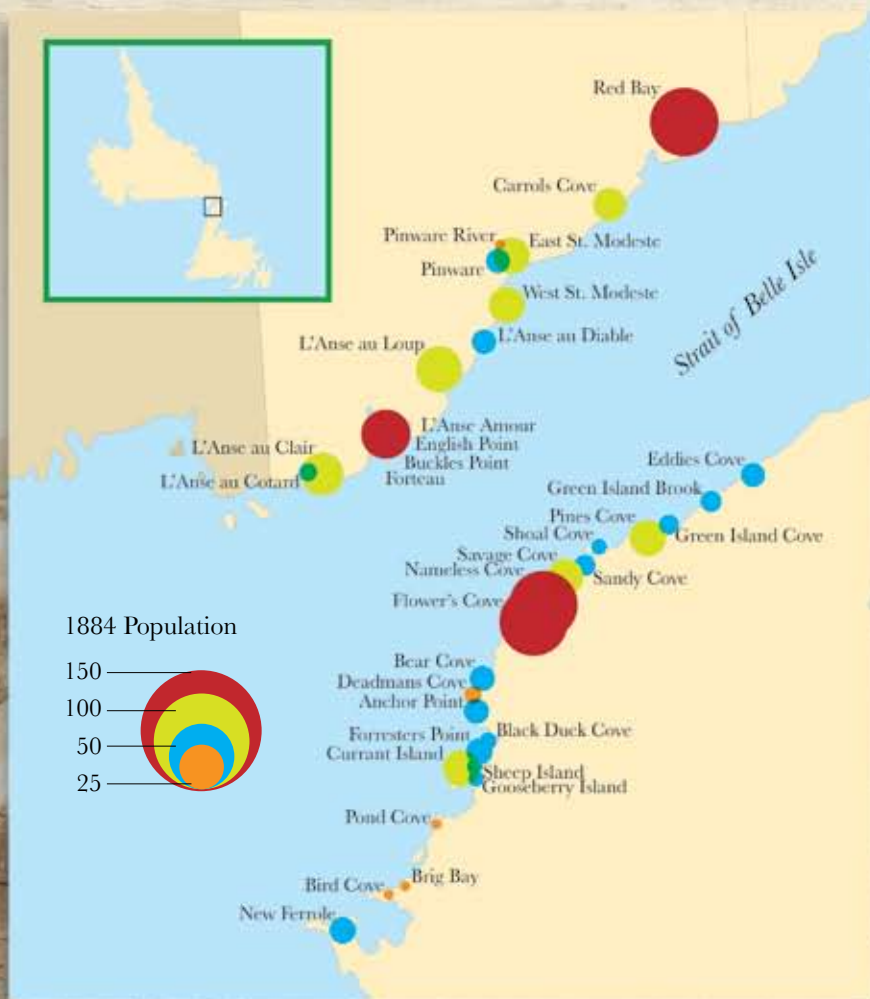
Labrador livyer's dwelling, c. 1930. This was likely the family's residence by the sea. Note that children look healthy, robust, and well-clad, despite the poor dwelling appearance.





### 3.46 Early settlement goes north

As the Labrador fishery grew, so too did Labrador's population. The buildings in this visual represent a merchant's establishment. William Grey was a Church of England priest who spent many years in Newfoundland and Labrador. His description of this scene, which he drew in 1857, is as follows: "St. Francis Harbour. Here we shall find, perhaps, the best garden on Labrador, and the first church [of England] built on this [south] coast. It was consecrated by the Bishop of Newfoundland, 1853."



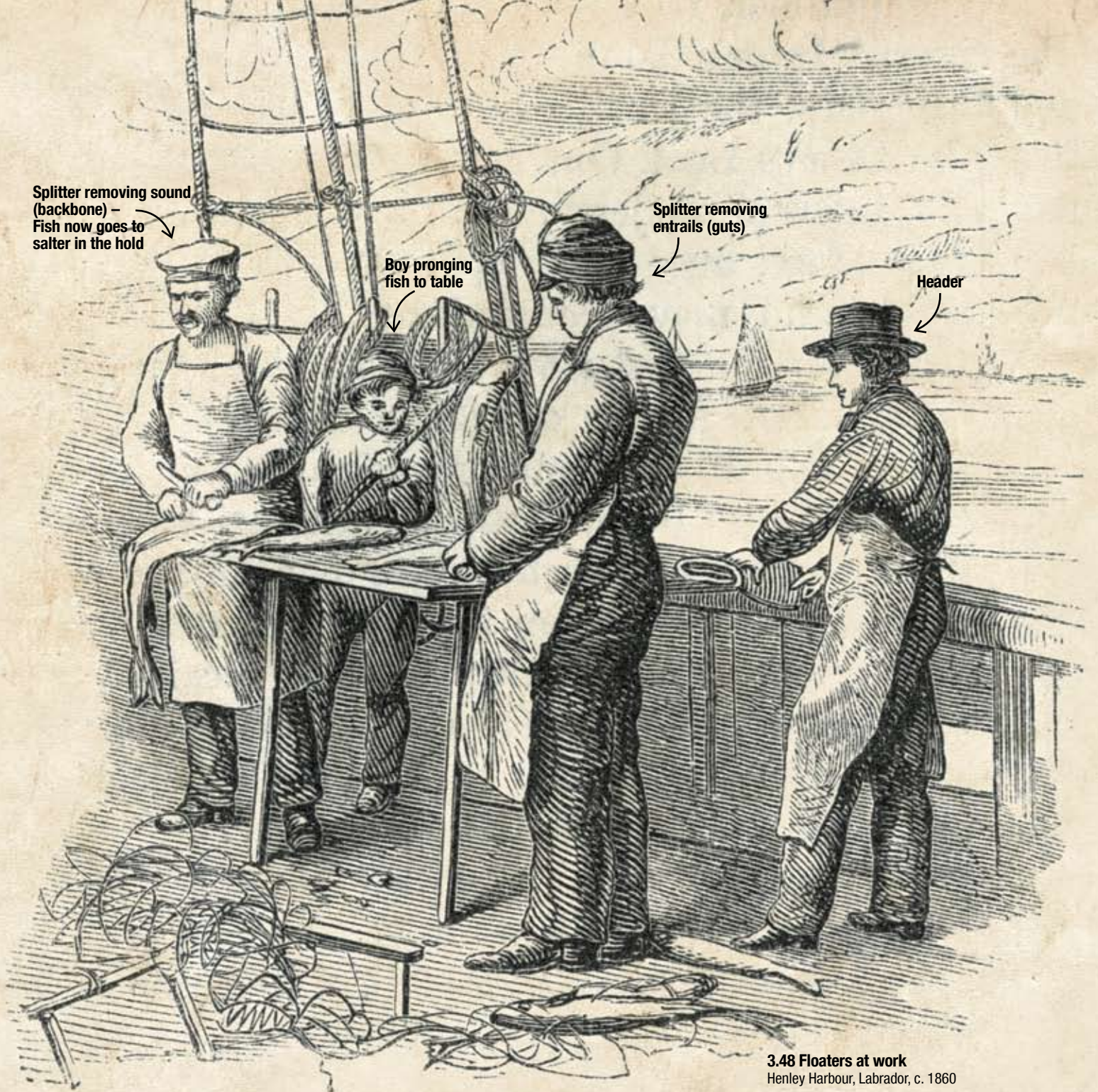
### 3.47 Settlement in the Straits, 1884

(Based on information from "The Demographic and Mercantile Bases of Initial Permanent Settlement in the Strait of Belle Isle" by Patricia A. Thornton in *The Peopling of Newfoundland: Essays in Historical Geography*, Ed. John J. Mannion. ISER, MUN, 1977.)

**“... fishing stations [are] busy with men and women during the fishing season ... ‘flakes’ of poles or brush strew every level rock, covered with codfish drying in the sun.”**

– Charles Hallock, American author of the *Fishing Tourist*, published in 1873





**3.48 Floaters at work**  
Henley Harbour, Labrador, c. 1860

By the mid-1860s, the catch rate for the cod fishery on Labrador's south coast began to decline. This may have been largely due to the pressure on the stocks by Newfoundland fishers, as well as American and Canadian fishers. To compensate for declining catches, some fishers began using more efficient gear, particularly cod traps, while others travelled further north to find new fishing grounds. The northward expansion, coupled with the use of new gear, for a time resulted in larger catches and allowed the colony to maintain or increase its exports. Some historians argue that this pattern masked the fact that older fishing grounds had been over-exploited.

Another factor that contributed to the decline of the Labrador fishery was the introduction of steamships in the

1870s. By the mid-1880s, fish from Iceland and Norway arrived at markets earlier than fish from Labrador. In their haste to beat the competition, shippers began to load steamers with fish at Labrador and send it directly to market. This meant that fish was often imperfectly cured and more difficult to sell.

In the beginning many stationers travelled to Labrador as passengers on schooners, and some continued to do this throughout the life of the Labrador fishery. In the late nineteenth century, however, the government hired steamships to take stationers northward. These stationers took their families, boats, fishing gear, lumber, firewood, household goods, and even livestock. Many went from places like Carbonear, Harbour Grace, and St. John's.



**3.49 A popular American fishing station: Henley Harbour, Labrador, 1860**

American fishers were given rights to fish off Labrador under the 1783 Treaty of Paris, and by 1803 were conducting a large fishery there. This was interrupted by the War of 1812, but they were back again by 1818. They continued to fish there until the 1860s, when they turned their attention to the Grand Banks. Fishers from England and Nova Scotia also frequently fished in Labrador.



*A great jealousy exists between the Guernsey\* adventurers, who occupy the western side of this bay, and the English families established upon the opposite shore. The latter stigmatize the former as cheats and swindlers; whilst the former represent the latter to be notoriously knavish in all their dealings. The fact is, that they are only envious of each other's gains; and the Guernsey people, by being the most industrious, are generally the most calumniated. The vessels of these thriving islanders are slightly built, and calculated to make speedy voyages: so that by hurrying out to NEWFOUNDLAND as early in the year as possible, they quickly procure cargoes of cod; and as speedily recrossing the Atlantic, they by this means succeed in getting the first of the Spanish and Portuguese markets, whereby they obtain a high price for their fish, and incur the resentment of those who are less expeditious in their mercantile speculations. There are, in all, about eighteen boats constantly employed at Forteau. During the fishing season, the English reside in Labrador all the winter; but the Guernseymen quit it in the autumn, and return thither again in the spring.*

*\*Part of the Channel Islands located between England and France*

**3.50 An account of the Labrador fishery**

From *Voyage of His Majesty's ship Rosamond to Newfoundland and the southern coast of Labrador* by Edward Chappell (1818)



The first transatlantic steamship voyage was in 1819, but major improvements to steamships were made in the 1850s.

## FROM CONCEPTION BAY TO ST. JOHN'S

Until the late 1800s, the seal fishery was centred in Conception Bay – primarily in Harbour Grace, Carbonear, and Brigus. This fishery brought prosperity to this region and, in some areas, was more important than the shore fishery.

This began to change around the 1870s. Wealthier St. John's merchants began acquiring steamships for transporting cargo, but soon recognized their potential value for the seal fishery. These vessels were more efficient and, over time, began to displace wooden sailing ships. However, merchants in other areas lacked the capital to make these investments. As a result, the economy of Conception Bay declined. By 1900, St. John's firms controlled the entire sealing industry and men from the outports had to make their way to the capital if they wanted to find a berth on a sealing ship.

*"When Mr. Walter Grieve sent the first sealing steamer to the ice it was a poor day for Newfoundland. The only consolation we can lay to our hearts is that steam was inevitable; it was sure to come, sooner or later ... Politics and steam have done more than any other cause to ruin the middle class, the well-to-do dealers that once abounded in the out-ports."*

– D.W. Prowse, historian

## Seal Fishery

The commercial seal fishery began in the eighteenth century. In the beginning, English settlers caught seals, mainly harp seals, by nets\* whenever the animals passed near to shore, or caught them by going out on the ice. They sometimes used small boats to hunt seals that were floating on ice pans near the shore. The best places for catching seals as they migrated were along the south Labrador coast, the Strait of Belle Isle, and the Newfoundland coast north of Twillingate. As a result, sealing encouraged permanent settlement in these areas because it offered a means of winter income.

Residents in southeastern Newfoundland became attracted to the profitable seal fishery at the end of the eighteenth century. As the Avalon Peninsula was off the route of the seal migrations, the only way to participate was to travel north and find the seals. In 1793, the first schooners sailed to the ice from St. John's, marking a turning point in the seal fishery. These schooners were the same ones used in the cod fishery.

In the 1800s the seal fishery came to rival the cod fishery in importance. At its peak in the 1830s and 1840s, it employed upwards of 14 000 men and comprised about a third of all exports by value (salt cod made up most of the rest). The most valuable product from seals was their oil.

Most of the seal oil and pelts were exported to England, where there was a great demand. Seal oil was used for lighting homes and wharfs, streetlights, lighthouses, in soap manufacturing, and as a lubricant. Seal skins were used to make upholstery, gloves, boots, jackets, hats, and other items.

Despite its value, the seal hunt was a risky enterprise for all concerned. Ship owners sometimes lost their vessels and frequently failed to make any profit because they did not get enough pelts in one season, although one good year in the seal hunt could undo the effects of several bad ones. For sealers, the hunt meant danger on the ice floes, squalid conditions aboard ship, and little pay. However, this improved slightly after a sealers' strike in 1832 ensured they were paid in cash instead of credit.

By the 1850s, yields began to decrease because herds were in decline. The prices for seal oil also fell in the 1870s as petroleum alternatives were developed. Thereafter, the economic importance of sealing declined and by 1914 the industry made up only five per cent of the colony's exports – a dramatic drop from the 30 to 40 per cent during the first half of the nineteenth century.

\*Seal hunting is sometimes referred to as a "fishery" because of this early use of nets.

### 3.51 Back from the front

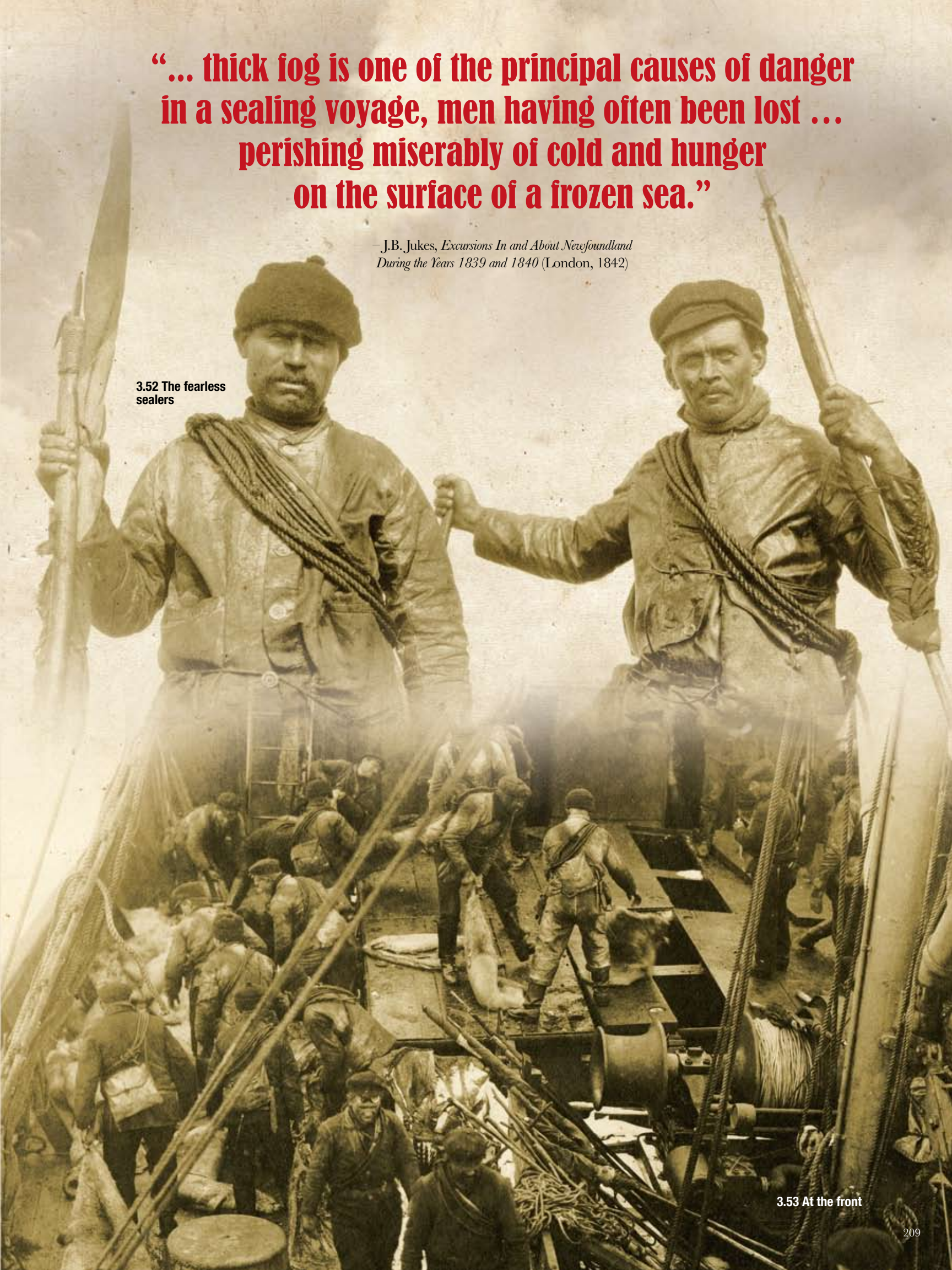
Unloading seals from the SS *Adventure* at Job Brothers & Co's premises in St. John's, 1906. The SS *Adventure* was one of the first steamships used in the seal hunt.



**“... thick fog is one of the principal causes of danger  
in a sealing voyage, men having often been lost ...  
perishing miserably of cold and hunger  
on the surface of a frozen sea.”**

— J.B. Jukes, *Excursions In and About Newfoundland  
During the Years 1839 and 1840* (London, 1842)

3.52 The fearless  
sealers



3.53 At the front





### 3.54 Location, location, location

Burin emerged as a significant port, due to its geographic proximity to the Banks. This image is a view of Burin, c. 1910, from an early postcard.

## Bank Fishery

The original bank fishery was probably the oldest European fishery off our coast – engaged in by French, Spanish, Portuguese, and possibly English, from the early 1500s. The English fishery soon became a shore-based operation and remained well into the period of permanent settlement. An English bank fishery was begun off the southern Avalon Peninsula in the 1720s in response to failing inshore catches. It flourished up to the late 1780s, but then declined.

The Labrador, seal, and inshore fisheries showed signs of decline throughout the 1800s. The Newfoundland government, in an effort to stimulate the economy, offered subsidies encouraging fishers to again expand cod fishing to the Grand Banks. By the mid-1870s, fishers were arriving on the Banks in wooden schooners, sealing steamers, and other vessels ranging between 20 and 250 tons.

The bank fishery typically ran from March until October, but fishing schedules varied among different communities. Fishers living on the island's northeast coast, for example, often had to wait until April or May to leave because of ice. Vessels made three or four trips to the banks each season, and remained there for weeks before returning home.

After arriving on the banks, crews anchored their boats in

a favourable location and launched dories. These small boats carried two or three crew members who fished for cod using handlines, jiggers, or trawl lines. The fishers left the larger boat each morning, rowed to various fishing grounds, and returned several times throughout the day to unload their catch. They also gutted, split, and salted their own fish.

Fishers engaged in the bank fishery faced a number of dangers. Gales and rough weather threatened schooners and other banking vessels, while dory crews risked becoming lost in fog or storms. Large ocean liners also frequented the banks and could inadvertently capsize or run down dories and schooners in foggy weather. Living quarters were often cramped and any injured or ill crew members would usually have to wait until fish was brought to port to receive proper medical attention.

The bank fishery was profitable throughout the 1880s and peaked in 1889, when 4401 Newfoundland and Labrador fishers harvested more than 13 230 tons of cod. The bank fishery produced an inferior grade of fish. Already fetching lower market prices, the bank fishery was further devalued due to increased competition from Norway and Iceland. The industry declined into the 1900s and, by 1920, many communities had stopped participating in the bank fishery.





**3.55 A hard day's work**  
Fishing for cod on the banks from a dory.

**3.56 The Grand Banks**  
The Banks have been one of the world's richest fishing grounds.

**“You bully boys of Liverpool  
I’ll have you to beware,  
When you sail on them packet ships,  
no dungaree jumpers wear;  
But have a big monkey jacket  
all ready to your hand,  
For there blows some cold nor’westers  
on the Banks of Newfoundland.”**

– Excerpt from “The Banks Of Newfoundland”  
composed by Chief Justice Francis Forbes

*Grand Banks*



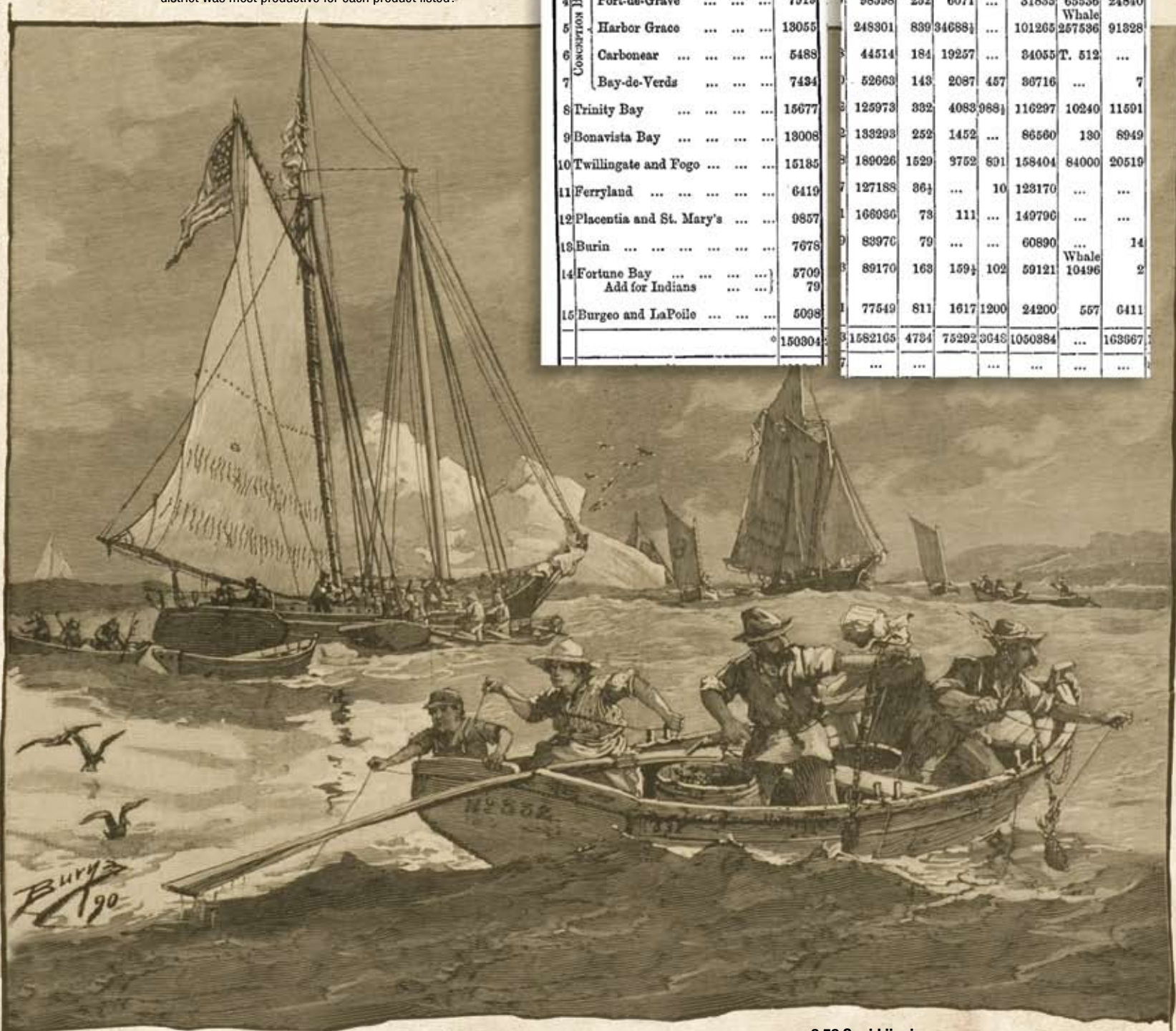
# Other Exports

Alongside cod and seal products, the sea provided Newfoundland and Labrador with a variety of other, but much less significant, exports. These included salmon, lobster, herring, capelin, and squid – many of which found markets in France, Canada, the United States, and Great Britain. Although profitable (herring exports, for example, fetched almost \$200 000 annually during the 1890s), the impacts of these products on Newfoundland and Labrador's export trade were negligible overall when compared to saltfish.

### 3.57 Fishing exports by district

from the Newfoundland and Labrador census of 1874. Which district was most productive for each product listed?

No.	ELECTORAL DISTRICTS & DIVISIONS.	No. of INHABITANTS.	FISHERIES.							
			PRODUCE.							
			Quantity of Cod fish cured.	Salmon caught and cured.	Herring cured.	other Fish cured.	Cod Oil—Gallons.	Seal Oil.	Seals.	
1	St. John's East ... ..	17811	41148	4	760	...	34757	...	...	
2	St. John's West ... ..	12763	42572	17	40	...	14112	...	...	
3	CONCEPTION BAY.	Harbor Main ... ..	7174	61258½	20½	1214½	...	17205½	g. 1080	6
4		Port-de-Grave ... ..	7919	98598	252	6071	...	31835	65536	24840
5		Harbor Grace ... ..	13055	249301	839	34688½	...	101265	257536	91328
6		Carbonear ... ..	5488	44514	184	19257	...	34055	T. 512	...
7		Bay-de-Verds ... ..	7434	52663	143	2087	457	36716	...	7
8	Trinity Bay ... ..	15677	125973	332	4083	368½	116297	10240	11591	
9	Bonavista Bay ... ..	13008	133293	252	1452	...	86560	130	8949	
10	Twillingate and Fogo ... ..	15135	189026	1529	9752	691	158404	84000	20519	
11	Ferryland ... ..	6419	127188	86½	...	10	123170	...	...	
12	Placentia and St. Mary's ... ..	9857	166036	73	111	...	149796	...	...	
13	Burin ... ..	7678	83970	79	...	...	60890	...	14	
14	Fortune Bay ... ..	5709	89170	163	159½	102	59121	Whale	10496	2
	Add for Indians ... ..	79								
15	Burgeo and LaPoile ... ..	5098	77549	811	1617	1200	24200	557	6411	
		150304	1582165	4734	75292	3045	1050384	...	163967	



3.58 Squid jigging  
from *Harpers Weekly*, July 19, 1890





### 3.59 Lobster factory

from *Harpers Weekly*, July 19, 1890

The introduction of canning technology was very important in making lobsters commercial. Lobsters were now caught, cooked, and canned. Canning factories were built in many communities and provided some employment for women. In the mid-20th century, refrigeration on ships allowed lobster to be shipped to market alive.

## Questions:

1. Compare the shore fishery, banks fishery, Labrador fishery, and seal fishery in terms of (a) where each fishery happened, (b) time of year, (c) how it was done (equipment, people involved), (d) dangers involved, and (e) reasons for decline. Organize your answer in a chart.
2. During the 1800s, several technologies were introduced to the fisheries. What impact did these innovations have on the respective fisheries? Who benefited the most? Who may have been disadvantaged by these changes?
3. Overfishing is a serious matter today, however, it is not a new phenomenon. What were the consequences of overfishing in the 1800s? How did this affect the life of the fisher?

## A LONG HISTORY OF TAKING FISH FROM THE SEA

The waters of Newfoundland and Labrador have been supplying fishers with their livelihood for centuries. Although cod was a mainstay of the fishery until 1992, other kinds of fisheries have developed over the years when cod stocks became low and/or as market demands changed.

### FIRST DATES OF CERTAIN COMMERCIAL FISHERIES

Species	Year
Cod	1500
Whaling	1530s*
Salmon	1705
Sealing	
Landsmen	1730s
Offshore	1793
Herring	1790s
Lobster	1870s
Squid	1930s**
Scallop	1960s
Redfish	1960s
Shark	1964***
Crab	1967
Shrimp	1970s
Aquaculture (salmon, steelhead trout, and blue mussels)	1980s

\*Whaling began with the Basques, but had virtually died out by 1580. In the nineteenth century, some merchants in Newfoundland ventured into small-scale commercial whaling. Cycles of whaling continued up to 1972, when it was banned by the Government of Canada.

\*\* Squid was taken long before the 1930s for use as bait.

\*\*\* This fishery ended in 1970 when high levels of mercury were found in sharks.