"I, old Lydie Campbell: a Labrador Woman of National Historic Significance"

This is the second season of Field Notes, written weekly while the author is conducting archaeological research at St. Michael’s Bay as part of the multi-disciplinary research project "Understanding the Past to Build the Future" (www.mun.ca/lairn/doc/index.html) which examines early Inuit presence in southern Labrador.

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"I, old Lydie Campbell, 75 years old. I puts on my outdoor clothes, takes my game bag and food and matches, in case it is needed, and off I goes over the bay, over ice and snow for about two miles and more, gets three rabbits some days out of twenty or more rabbit snare all my own chopping down. It looks pretty to see them hung up in what we calls Hoists. And you say, well done old woman."

These words were written by Lydia Campbell in 1894 and they form part of her remarkable account of early Labrador life. "Sketches of Labrador Life by a Labrador Woman." In 2009, the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada designated Lydia Campbell (1818-1905) as a person of national historic significance. As one of Labrador’s best known and most cherished historical figures, "Aunt Lydie" was honoured for her chronicles as well as for her role as a cultural mediator in the changing social landscape of the early 19th century. In the words of her biographer Dr. Anne Hart in the Dictionary of Canadian Biography, "this ‘quaint old lady’ was held in high regard as a notable matriarch and transmitter of Labrador memories." Through her writing and through the oral traditions that have been passed down through hundreds of her descendants, Campbell has long been an iconic figure and a touchstone to Labrador’s Inuit and English-Scottish past.

Born Lydia Brooks on 1 November 1818 along the shore of Double Mer inlet in Grosvenor Bay, she represents the first generation of Labradorians of British and Inuit parentage. Her mother was an Inuk whom we know only as Susan. Her father was an Englishman named Ambrose Brooks who came to Grosvenor Bay in 1800 to escape British press gangs. The youngest of three daughters, Lydia grew up speaking English and Inuktitut. Susan passed vital Inuit skills to her daughters that included trapping, shooting, and fishing as well as medical knowledge and the preparation of skin-clothing and country foods. Ambrose Brooks, the son of a minister, taught his daughters to read English using the few texts in his possession, which were the Bible and the Church of England Common Book of Prayer. Brooks was one of the earliest Europeans south of the Moravian stations to teach his children to read. He also instilled in them a Christian faith that remained a source of strength for Lydia throughout her long life.

Campbell married twice. At the age of 16 she was married against her wishes to another mixed-blood Labradorian named William Blake, Jr., whose father had come to Labrador in the 1790s. With Blake she had five children, one of whom, Thomas, continued the family line. After Blake’s death in 1845, she lived alone with her children for three years. In 1848, she married Daniel Campbell who had come to Labrador in 1844 from South Ronaldsay, Orkney, to work a five-year contract as cooper for the Hudson’s Bay Company at Rigolet. The two were married by the newly arrived factor, Donald A. Smith (later Lord Strathcona) whom they befriended over the course of his 21 years in Labrador. They had six children, two of whom, Margaret and John, continued his occupation, and two additional to her biological children and in the tradition of many Labrador families, Lydie and Daniel also raised a number of Inu- ed children. The first was an Inuk named Lemuol George, who died tragically when he was ten. The second, Hugh Parris, was taken in when Lydie and Daniel were in their 70s. Hugh took the Campbell name and has a number of descendants. Lydie Campbell’s many descendants live throughout Labrador and her extensive family tree has been compiled by Patty Way of Cartwright, Labrador.

Over the course of her life, Lydie became somewhat of a legend among the people of Grosvenor Bay for her endurance and her many skills. Along with her sister Hannah, she was part of a small group of first-generation Labradorians of mixed descent who passed on their education to their children. This led to a phenomenon known as by visiting clergyman Arthur Charles Waghorne asked her to write an account of her life, which he published in 13 short installments in the Victoria, British Columbia, newspaper. John’s, Campbell had previously written an account of her life for a Reverend A.A. Adams, “but he lost it.” “Sydney Muriel of a Labrador Woman” reflects the distinctive style of her home-grown education and early Labrador English. In the early days, she used to write by someone born and raised in Labrador and remains an important source of historical information on family life, settlement, culture, customs, and beliefs. It was followed by daughter Margaret Bailey’s Labrador Memories: Reflections of Mulligan, written about 1918 and covering the years as far back as 1846. "Sketches" was published by Them Days in 1980.

Lydia Campbell is representative of other Inuit and part-Inuit families that lived on what Canada’s North were the key to the success of colonial efforts. They gave European newcomers a foothold and a long- ing to hardy culture through their knowledge and skills. It was women such as Campbell who taught their European partners how to build appropriate boats, to hunt, fish, and travel. Daniel Campbell, for instance, “did not know much about trapping,” wrote their daughter Dora. He instructed his "my mother used to go with him to set the traps.”

Campbell was sought out by several church representatives at a time when the Moravian, Wesleyan Methodist, Anglican, and Roman Catholic churches all considered setting up missions in the area. The missionaries were sent to her because of her well-known piety but especially because she was considered an Elder and a representative voice. At his first Sabbath service in Grosvenor Bay in 1902, Methodist Reverend Arminius Young wisely followed Campbell’s advice. "Now, my dear friend, if you would help us, him, “you must go out into the kitchen and talk to the people as the other ministers used to do... If you don’t, you don’t.”

One of Labrador’s best known historical figures, Lydia Campbell’s writing and the stories that are still told about her have given the people of Labrador the courage to say Inuit, Innu, and European roots some of their history, in turn affirming self-identification to place through knowledge about the past.