

“Let’s Eat Grass for Flour & Get out of Debt”

The history of the rise of cooperatives in Newfoundland can be traced back to the late 18th Century. In 1895, Sir Wilfred Grenfell, the pioneer figure of cooperative movement in this province noticed that Red Bay residents are all packed up and ready to leave the settlement. That night Sir Grenfell called a meeting in the shore and met with the residents of Red Bay. Then he planned to set up the first cooperative store because he gained knowledge about cooperatives in England and Scotland. In this first ever attempt of cooperative in Newfoundland, 25 families joined together and their starting fund was \$85 cash.

The philosophy that inspired this Red Bay residents was to get out of debt and to have a communal voice to free themselves from merchants’ exploitative nature. With no money to get out of debt to the merchants where borrowing was an impossibility, therefore, each family vowed to work harder and to put every dollar possible into what became known as the “copper store.”

Their slogan was **“Let’s eat grass for flour and get out of debt.”**

The second cooperative store was started as Flower’s Cove on the south side of the straits of Belle Isle. Their local minister was very much interested in cooperative for his religious inspiration that interprets the love of God in service for happiness on earth and afterworld. And, the third co-op store was started in the small village of West St. Modeste. Over the next number of years, the cooperative movement prospered so well that a competent manager was brought in from the ‘South.’

Eventually, during his visit to England, Dr. Grenfell consulted with the Co-op headquarters as Manchester and there he discovered a new strategy of cooperative movement “patronage refunds”- refers to any profits in the co-op store should go to the purchasers. Another interesting idea was to set up a ‘stamp system’. The idea was to give stamp to all purchaser and members would use these stamps to register their dealings. There was a unique symbol printed on the stamp faces- “clasped hands”.

Alongside Dr. Grenfell, Father Stanislaus St. Croix, Parish Priest at Harbour Breton was another pioneering leader of cooperative movement in the South West coast of this province. During 1911-1943 he served a lot to spread and gather the community to develop co-op activities for addressing and serving the needs of these communities. But Govt. land settlement movement in 1935, construction of American bases in NL, young people’s interest to join the American base while leaving their own areas, and older people settlement in remote areas acted as the prime forces for fading out the interests and flourishing of cooperative activities in this province.



The founding members of the Red Bay Cooperative Society, 1896. Grenfell at centre, rear.

*Source: The Rooms Provincial Archives IGA 1-317.