

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

The history of the rise of co-operatives in Newfoundland & Labrador can be traced back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1895, Sir Wilfred Grenfell, the pioneer figure of the co-operative movement in this province, noticed that Red Bay residents in Labrador were all packed up and ready to leave the settlement. That night, Sir Grenfell called a meeting and met with the residents of Red Bay. Due to his knowledge of co-operatives from England and Scotland, he planned to establish a co-operative store. In this first ever attempt at starting a co-operative in Newfoundland & Labrador, 25 families joined together and pooled together \$85 in starting capital.

The Red Bay residents were inspired to start a co-operative to get out of debt and to have a communal voice to free themselves from the merchants’ exploitative nature. Every family vowed to work harder and invest as much as 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 co-operative store was started in Flower’s Cove on the south side of the straits of Belle Isle. The local minister was very interested in co-operatives due to his religious beliefs. The third co-op store was started in the small village of West St. Modeste. Over the next few years, the co-operative movement prospered so well that a competent manager was brought in from the ‘South.’

Eventually, during his visit to England, Sir Grenfell consulted with co-operative experts in Manchester. He learned about a new strategy in the co-operative movement called “patronage refunds;” this refers to any profits in a co-op being redistributed to its members. Another interesting idea was to set up a ‘stamp system’. The idea was to give stamps to all members, and they would use these stamps to register their purchases. A unique symbol was printed on the stamp faces - “clasped hands”.

Alongside Sir Grenfell, Father Stanislaus St. Croix, the Parish Priest in Harbour Breton, was another pioneering leader of the co-operative movement of the province. From 1911-1943, Father St. Croix gathered the community to promote co-op activities to address the needs of these communities. However, due to the government land settlement movement in 1935 and the construction of American bases in Newfoundland & Labrador, many young people left their rural hometowns. Almost an entire generation left these remote areas, leaving the initial co-operative movement behind.



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

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