

First Encounters: 1970s Back-to-the-land, Cape Breton, NS and Denman, Hornby and Lasqueti Islands, BC¹

Sharon Weaver, University of Guelph

A growing body of literature has begun to explore the curious phenomenon of the retreat to the rural regions of North America in the 1960s and 1970s by thousands of young people who were for the most part white, middle class, urban- or suburban-raised and often well educated.² Most of this literature is American and focuses primarily on the communal movement. Although there are few historical works on the back-to-the-land movement, a growing body of social science literature has explored the movement in both Canada and the United States. There are a number of excellent theses on the movement in Canada, the earliest of which was Terry A. Simmons' Ph.D. dissertation, a geographer's perspective on the Kootenays in British Columbia during the 1970s.³ The most comprehensive coverage from a social science perspective is by Jeffrey Jacob, who uses surveys and interviews to explore the Pacific Northwest of the United States and southern British Columbia from a sociological and environmental sustainability perspective.⁴ Writing from a religious and historical perspective, Rebecca Kneale Gould finds that the back-to-the-land movement for many Americans was motivated by a search for a form of spirituality in nature.⁵ To date, however, no studies have explored whether these migrants were received differently depending on where they settled. This paper, which is part of a larger study, attempts to address this by comparing small communities within the County of Victoria, Cape

¹ I would like to thank the many people, without whose contributions this paper would not have been possible, who welcomed me into their homes and gave me the gift of their time and their memories. Interviewing on the west coast was made possible by funds provided through the Canada Research Chair in Rural History, University of Guelph.

² Hugh Gardner, *The Children of Prosperity: Thirteen Modern American Communes* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978), 250.

³ Simmons, Terry Allen, "But We Must Cultivate Our Garden: 20th Century Pioneering in Rural British Columbia" [Ph.D. Dissertation] University of Minnesota, 1979. John Gordon Gower, "The Impact of Alternative Ideology on Landscape: The Back-To-The-Land Movement in the Slokan Valley," unpublished Master's Thesis, Department of Geography, University of British Columbia, 1990. Amish C. Morrell, "Imagining the Real: Theorizing Cultural Production and Social Difference in the Cape Breton Back-to-the-Land Community" unpublished Master's Thesis, Department of Anthropology, University of Toronto, 1999. Heather L. Holm, "Unintentional Community: Alternative community in the Annapolis Valley" unpublished Master's Thesis, Department of Anthropology, Acadia University, 1998.

⁴ Jacob, Jeffrey, *New Pioneers: The Back-to-the-land Movement and the Search for a Sustainable Future*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997.

⁵ Gould, Rebecca Kneale, *At Home in Nature: Modern Homesteading and Spiritual Practice in America*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.

Breton, Nova Scotia, with equally small communities off the east coast of Vancouver Island, British Columbia. To my surprise, despite similarities as island communities bracketing the country, there were significant differences in reception between the two coasts. Small differences were also evident between fishing and farming communities on Cape Breton Island, and among island communities on the west coast.

The salient factors in their differential reception were demography, coupled with settlement patterns, the culture of the host community, and the economy. Demographically, Cape Breton experienced a smaller influx of back-to-the-land settlers, and they were dispersed over a much larger region than the three west coast islands. The pattern of settlement in Cape Breton overlay the original land grants, in that the back-to-the-landers bought up abandoned farms that peppered the landscape, which typically ranged in size from 100 to 200 acres. The important factor was that the new settlers were completely interspersed with the local residents. In Middle River, for instance, a community of 150 people, about eight couples settled in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and along the North Shore back-to-the-land settlement patterns were only marginally denser. This stood in contrast to the west coast islands. The population on Lasqueti Island grew by fifty percent in the first few years of back-to-the-land settlement, from an original population of less than 100 in 1967-1968 to approximately 150 in 1970-1971. The rate of increase was lower on Denman and Hornby Islands, but back-to-the-land settlers were numerous enough to have a strong impact on the fabric of island life; on all three islands, short-term squatters further aggravated the situation.

Culturally, the back-to-the-landers in the small communities of western Cape Breton were absorbed into the long established local culture that had evolved over the course of a century and a half from its original Scottish Highland roots. This process of absorption was hastened by the Celtic Cultural revival that was happening at the same time, and was particularly vibrant in Cape Breton, where newcomer participation was welcomed. On Canada's west coast, in contrast, the numbers of back-to-the-land settlers gave them a degree of cultural autonomy that was experienced by the local residents as tantamount to an invasion. For this reason alone, reception given the new settlers was less than harmonious in the early years. Although this evolved over time, the pace of change varied greatly between the two coasts.

The economic structure of these islands in both Eastern and Western Canada was resource based and revolved around farming, fishing and forestry and a nascent tourist industry. Both coasts had also experienced a contraction of their communities as the young departed for the cities in pursuit of education and especially employment. Cape Breton lost so many young men who would normally have helped out in the fishery that there was a vacuum to be filled by the incoming back-to-the-landers. There was also work to be found cutting pulp wood

and later in silviculture. This work served as another point of integration between the newcomers and the local residents. The west coast islands were so small that such opportunities did not exist. Many of those who were unable to make their living as artisans had to earn additional income off-island, in tree planting, for instance, which could require leaving the island for months at a time. Neither of these pursuits encouraged integration between newcomers and local residents.

This is a history of one segment of a movement that captured the public imagination throughout the 1960s and 1970s, as (mostly) young people by the thousands left the cities behind in search of a place in the countryside.⁶ Although a small number of these back-to-the-land settlers started out living communally, and some on the west coast islands continue to hold land in common,⁷ this is not a history of communes. Instead, it is a history of people who arrived as couples in Cape Breton and on the three Gulf Islands. Like back-to-the-landers elsewhere, they settled in declining rural regions, taking up abandoned farms or raw land wherever the acreage was cheap.⁸ But if this economic factor was powerful, the underlying motivations were concern for the environment and a search for authenticity. These young and sometimes not-so-young seekers wanted to live as far from “civilization” as possible. Isolation precluded many modern conveniences, such as private telephone lines and even access to electricity, but this made the land more affordable.⁹ The back-to-the-land movement was a move from an urban environment that had been degraded by human industry, from a culture that seemed to value only that which could be commodified – one that in Joni Mitchell’s words “paved paradise and put up a parking lot” – to a rural environment that was perceived to be unspoiled. Their motivations mirrored those of Iris Keltz, who recalled in her memoir of life on a Northern New Mexico commune, that “[w]hile it may be said we are fleeing the deplorable conditions of contamination of the urban areas, both physical and spiritual, the real motivation seems to be a quest for a more natural way of life. Away from the plastic and putrefying conditions in the cities.”¹⁰

⁶ Communes – an estimated tens of thousands across the United States – were one manifestation of this movement. But few communes were able to survive the bickering, the lack of sanitation, the poverty, and the lack of privacy, and dissolved as a result. But the thirst for rural living had not abated; thus the back-to-the-land movement resulted.

⁷ In some literature this has been referred to as a form of communal living, notably the commune Libre, in Roberta Price, *Huerfano: A Memoir of Life in the Counterculture* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004).

⁸ Gardner, 240.

⁹ Gene Logsdon, *The Contrary Farmer* (White River Junction, Vermont: Chelsea Green, 1994), xiv.

¹⁰ Iris Keltz, *Scrapbook of a Taos Hippie: Tribal tales from the heart of a cultural revolution* (El Paso, Texas: Cinco Puntos Press, 2000), 21.

The back-to-the-land movement in the United States was closely linked to war resistance. Similarly, among the more than 50,000 war resisters who came to Canada, a significant minority was drawn back-to-the-land.¹¹ In fact, *Mother Earth News* in 1970 featured a number of articles on homesteading in British Columbia, Alberta, and Ontario, an indication that “the North” and Canada were characterized by some Americans as the ultimate back-to-the-land destination.¹²

My primary mode of research is oral history, supported by community newsletters, newspaper articles and other written work by or about the new homesteaders. More than 90 interviews that averaged an hour and a half in length were conducted. With two exceptions, all interviews were with the back-to-the-land participants. My original intent had been to interview both the back-to-the-landers and the original residents, but I soon realized that the two groups were not equally self-identifying. Back-to-the-landers, who were mostly between 20 and 30 years old at the time, settled in these rural locations as a wave of newcomers. The height of this movement occurred between 1968 and 1975 and continued, though in diminishing numbers, into the early 1980s. In 2003, when I first began to conduct interviews in Victoria County, Cape Breton, the participants had been living in the region for between 25 and 30 years and still retained their identity as back-to-the-landers. This made it quite simple to locate, with the help of an informant, an initial group willing to participate in the project, after which interviewees willingly suggested other participants. Original residents, on the other hand, were difficult to identify as a group. The locals with whom the new arrivals had their closest relationships were often in their 60s and 70s at the time of the back-to-the-land influx, and many were no longer living. As a result, the non-back-to-the-landers were an amorphous and difficult group to define. For these reasons I decided to limit my interviews to back-to-the-land participants and I hoped that by conducting multiple interviews I would learn the individual nuances that led each person to leave his or her home surroundings for an unknown place and life style, and at the same time find commonalities and shared experiences.

¹¹ John Hagan, *Northern Passage: American Vietnam War Resisters in Canada* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), 241. James Dickerson, *North to Canada: Men and Women Against the Vietnam War* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1999), xiii. Dickerson estimates there were actually 500,000 war resisters, the largest number in history. Other estimates vary widely, but the fundamental point is that many went back-to-the-land. See also Renee G. Kasinsky, *Refugees from Militarism: Draft-Age Americans in Canada* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1967) and David S. Surrey, *Choice of Conscience: Vietnam Era Military and Draft Resisters in Canada* (New York: Praeger, 1982).

¹² “British Columbia: Paradise on the Pacific,” “Coastal British Columbia,” “Alberta’s Homestead Sales and Land Leases,” “Wild Foods of British Columbia,” “Back-to-the-land in Southern Ontario,” “Homesteading in the Kootenays,” *Mother Earth News*, Issues 3-5, 1970.

When I drove to the west coast and settled on Denman Island for three months while conducting interviews on Denman, Hornby and Lasqueti Islands, I learned that there had been a different settlement pattern of back-to-the-landers on these small islands, one that had a discernable impact on community life at the time. This made the non-back-to-the-land participants a definable group; however, for the sake of balance I decided to maintain my original interview criteria, with two exceptions that I was urged to pursue by my informants. This perspective necessarily frames what I can know about the history and what I can say about it.

The interviews themselves were fairly unstructured and conducted with open-ended questions, which, as Neil Sutherland suggests, could “often lead people ... to talk about things that really mattered to them.”¹³ Asked how they felt received by the local community, interviewees were left to define “local community.” This was uniformly interpreted as the full time residents in the community at the time of their arrival; however, those whose arrival occurred after the alternative community had been established sometimes referred to these communities separately. Although there were cottagers on the islands at this time, they did not figure prominently in the interviews. There were no First Nations peoples resident on these particular Gulf Islands at the time of the back-to-the-land influx, and although there was a First Nations Reservation at Nyanza, adjacent to Middle River, Cape Breton, there was no reference made to this community in the interviews.

The individuals that I interviewed were essentially preselected to be those with significant commitment to the back-to-the-land lifestyle, as I was interviewing only those who were still living in the communities that they had originally moved to. With an investment of that magnitude, few were likely to revisit their decision to move to their communities as a mistake. Whether there was a tendency to present a narrative of overcoming local adversity in social relations or to downplay tensions in accordance with current social relations cannot be determined, except through consistency across a number of interviews and by setting the interviews in the context of community newspapers where possible. “Whether written or oral, evidence must be convincing and verifiable,” cautions oral historian Donald A. Ritchie, and certainly some interviews had to be set aside, or used with caution.¹⁴ Despite these drawbacks, oral history allows the researcher access to material that would not otherwise be available. Furthermore, oral history is dynamic and challenging and brings the historian into new environments, communities and even the homes of the interviewees, context

¹³ Neil Sutherland, *Growing Up: Childhood in English Canada From the Great War to the Age of Television* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 20.

¹⁴ Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2003), 117.

unavailable in the archive, and in this case, context that is vital to the movement itself.

Who were the back-to-the-landers? For the most part, back-to-the-landers were of middle-class background, white and educated. In the words of Michael Taft, who in the 1980s researched Americans living in Cape Breton, back-to-the-landers were “a bunch of middle-class, fairly well-educated, cosmopolitans who had special interests in organic gardening, log buildings, crafts and politics.”¹⁵ Among those I interviewed, about 70 percent had spent at least a year at university or college and 10 percent had graduate degrees. On the east coast, about forty percent of the migrants were American whereas on the west coast, according to the information gleaned from interviews, the overwhelming numbers of first arrivals were American, though in time more Canadians arrived and stayed. Initial numbers are not readily available for two main reasons. First, my interview subjects are drawn from current demographics, those who have remained for more than thirty years. Second, there are no records of those who may have settled for one or two years and then moved on, whether they were Canadian or American. It was not unusual for Americans to visit friends, decide to stay for a year or two and then leave, or choose to remain and only then contact the Department of Immigration. Despite the strong Canadian participation, local residents on both coasts perceived their new neighbours to be predominantly American, and with that assumption went a further conjecture that they were wealthy.

Back-to-the-landers were in search of an alternative lifestyle, one that allowed greater contact with nature and a simpler, less complicated life, with more time for family and friends. They were interested in organic gardening, building their own house; they were anti-materialistic and were committed to reducing, re-using and recycling. Back-to-the-landers did not blend into the background of their new locations. Their appearance alone set them apart from the local residents. It would take some time for those used to the anonymity of city living to fully grasp the lack of privacy in the countryside, in spite of the fact that the rural regions of Canada are defined by their sparse population. In fact, it was the unexpected nature of the influx of young people and their curious appearance that ensured their notice. Terry Henderson, who lived down a long, bumpy un-serviced road off the power grid in Cape Breton, and who tended to prefer isolation, found that because his land had once been a working farm, “there were people that knew this area and had relatives who came from Big Hill and so a lot of these people were quite interested that there was somebody now living back here.” Not only did he receive visitors, but in fact they came bearing gifts;

¹⁵ Michael Taft, “Tracking the Cheshire Cat: Ethnic Americans and American Ethnicity on Cape Breton Island,” *Canadian Folklore Canadien* v. 13-1 (1991), 40.

the fixtures in his bathroom came from their generosity.¹⁶ While this lack of anonymity was also true of Denman and Hornby Islands on the west coast, the welcoming group was more likely to have been fellow back-to-the-landers. Lasqueti Island was the exception. Twenty kilometres in length, the island still has no car ferry service, only a passenger ferry at the north end, which meant there were few cars on the island. This made the south end ideal for those in search of isolation. As one islander noted, the ferry was the place where people got caught up with the local news, but for the small minority with their own boat, it could be years before they were known by or knew the islanders.

Those who arrived later, drawn by friends or family, or because they were attracted by the existing alternative community, experienced their new community in different ways than did the earlier arrivals. Much like immigrants everywhere, there was an immediate level of comfort to be found in a community of like-minded individuals. It was not uncommon for back-to-the-landers to look much as Richard Laskin remembered his appearance in 1975 living on Hornby Island, when he was in his mid forties: “We were in bangles and beads, I had long, long hair and a beard of course ... and we were very hippie.”¹⁷ However, appearance varied a little from region to region or even from island to island, according to Doug Hopwood’s recollection: “In those days you could go over to Parksville and everybody from Lasqueti was wearing those red plaid heavy cotton Chinese work shirts and gum boots and maybe wool fisherman’s pants and they could smell them from half a block away, so you could tell Lasqueti people in Parksville right away.”¹⁸ Although appearance seemed to indicate shared values, this assumption was not always accurate, as Leslie Dunsmore found to her dismay. “I arrived with a very innocent myth in my head that everybody who wore a headband and had wild hair and wore jingly things on their clothes and East Indian saris or whatever and walked barefoot, I thought they were all back-to-the-land people.” But to her surprise not all had left wing politics nor did all share her concern with the environment or growing organic food. Furthermore, they were certainly not all “trying to eke out a way to survive being poor.” She was shocked to learn that about half the back-to-the-land settlers on Denman had trust funds.¹⁹

While appearance was not fully indicative of values, one commonly shared belief was that society was suffering from over-consumption and it was time to reduce the mass production of throw-away items, and to reuse and recycle. “The rural impulse was,” in the words of Timothy Miller, “a part of the hippie

¹⁶ Terry Henderson, interviewed November 2, 2006, 7.

¹⁷ Richard Laskin, interviewed November 25, 2007, 7.

¹⁸ Doug Hopwood, interviewed January 5, 2008, 8.

¹⁹ Leslie Dunsmore, interviewed December 11, 2007, 6.

preference for the natural over the artificial, the organic over the plastic.”²⁰ In fact, all three western islands now have recycling depots and a “free store” where people can recycle clothes, books, games, and other household items. Environmental concerns were important for most, but even those who were not as conscious about it when they arrived often changed due to the influence of others. It was not unusual on the west coast to build and furnish homes with found materials. Cultivating a garden was fundamental. Hand tools and older ways to accomplish a task were part of the desire for greater independence from fossil fuel use. The 1973 oil embargo contributed to the feeling that consumer society was on the brink of collapse and acted as further impetus to learn to live without the conveniences of indoor plumbing or electricity and instead use kerosene lamps for light, to use wood stoves for heat, and to make do with an outhouse.²¹ This in turn created a close link with the older generation who were consulted for their knowledge, such as when it was best to plant, how to work the fields and woods with horses, how to milk a cow or goat, butcher a deer or pig, or how to find water. Back-to-the-landers were in search of work that mattered; work that at the end of the day could be measured as a tangible achievement, like a freezer full of food, firewood stacked for the winter, an owner-built home, furnished with hand made items or found objects in a bid to reduce consumerism. Said one, “I think it was a disease that a whole bunch of us got. From where or what I have no idea but we wanted to do it ourselves and we wanted to do it by hand and we wanted to do it with the least money possible and it was just something that everybody shared.”²² Remote rural living, on the other hand, had its own learning curve and those who stayed on the land soon realized that a degree of pragmatism was necessary. On the east coast, a chainsaw was a must for building and firewood. On the west coast, the sheer size and magnificence of the trees inspired a sense of reverence for the forests, such that many back-to-the-land participants protested the industrial approach to wood harvesting. In fact, they were dubbed “the tree-hugger hippies” by one local land owner. However, they still needed heat and if they did not own a woodlot and chainsaw they had to buy wood from someone who did.

²⁰ Timothy Miller, *The Hippies and American Values* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 93.

²¹ David E. Shi, *The Simple Life: Plain Living and High Thinking in American Culture* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1985), 264.

²² Phyllis Fabbi, interviewed November 5, 2007, 5.

Cape Breton

*The drama of the Cape Breton landscape can be overwhelming. Farms precariously perched on mountainsides that plunge into the ocean, and fertile river valleys that wind their way slowly to sea.*²³

Victoria County, Cape Breton is made up of small villages and hamlets, some of which are not much more than a place name along the highway. The population was thinly scattered across the vast distances of the county, which was as the crow flies about 100 kilometres north to south and 30 kilometres east to west, with an extensive coastline.²⁴ The largest village, Baddeck, the county seat, had a population of 831 in 1971. The rural regions were supported by a mixed subsistence economy of fishing, farming, and forestry, mostly pulp wood production. Like so much of rural Canada, the young were moving to the cities in search of employment. Victoria County's population has declined steadily over the century from a high of 10,571 in 1901 to 7,823 in 1971.²⁵ In fact from 1961 to 1971 the number of farms on Cape Breton Island had fallen from 1,975 to 640.²⁶ As a result, the county was peppered with abandoned farms and raw land, well-described by historians Jim and Pat Lotz:

The abandoned farm houses with gaping, empty windows, the collapsed barns, and the fields invaded by young trees are common sights on Cape Breton Island, even along the main highways. [T]he melancholy sight of land being lost to cultivation and of people quitting the land for the city contributes to the feeling of uncertainty about the future of the island.²⁷

For the newcomer, however, it was not always evident which land or farm was actually for sale, as there were few "for sale" signs. One soon learned that a little sleuthing was sometimes necessary, even if it was just locating the neighbouring farmer for a chat. This was the best way to learn what land or nearby farm might be available. Larry Mikol's experience in North River in 1971 was typical: "We came down this hill, saw the farm that sits at the bottom of the

²³ Amish C. Morrell, "Imagining the Real: Theorizing Cultural Production and Social Difference in the Cape Breton Back-to-the-Land Community" unpublished Master's Thesis, Department of Anthropology, University of Toronto, 1999, 11.

²⁴ George Geddie Patterson, James W. MacDonald, W. James MacDonald, *Patterson's History of Victoria County, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia*; with related papers, (Sydney, N.S.: Cape Breton University Press, 1978), 2.

²⁵ Jim and Pat Lotz, *Cape Breton Island* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Stackpole Books, 1974), 120.

²⁶ Jim and Pat Lotz, *Cape Breton Island*, 94.

²⁷ Jim and Pat Lotz, *Cape Breton Island*, 93.

hill and ... it was all grown up in trees but you could see a little roof back there. And I went up to the neighbours and asked if it was for sale and she said, yup it was and here's the phone number."²⁸ That very day he and his wife drove to Sydney to meet the owner and negotiate a price. A price was agreed upon then and there; the landowner asked how much money Larry had, he said \$3000, and the landowner said fine. With a handshake the price was established, and each then had time to meet their obligations: Larry to gather the cash and the landowner to recover the title as he had just let it go for taxes, which was not atypical. The ready availability of land and relatively low cost meant that though some back-to-the-landers initially rented, most in the Cape Breton region purchased a piece of land within the first year or two. The implications of this to the region were twofold: the local population was assured the newcomers were serious about living there, and the newcomers had a stake in the well-being of the community.

The influx of newcomers was significant to the region, but because the population was so thinly scattered the newcomers were easily absorbed into the existing communities. Marion Thompson, who settled in Indian Brook in 1973, described the way she and others have become integral to the fabric of the community: "We're woven into the community; we're the thread [of] another colour; it's a come-from-away colour, but it's part of the blanket."²⁹ The back-to-the-landers clearly added a new cultural dimension to the region, but they wanted to become a part of the pre-existing web of community life. Cape Breton culture itself – with the Scottish Highland traditions of music, dancing, Gaelic singing, story-telling, milling frolics, and weaving, and especially the fiddle playing and kitchen parties – was attractive to the newcomers. Historian John Reid, in his survey of the 1970s in Atlantic Canada, noted that "in this decade cultural resources assumed great importance," no place more so than in Cape Breton.³⁰ The first Glendale Fiddler's Festival, which was to become a biennial event, was held in a farmer's field on July 6-8, 1973 where over 130 fiddlers gathered and performed to an audience of 10,000 people.³¹ The festival arose in response to a CBC television production that had aired a year earlier, the *Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler*, in which it was argued that due to the increased influence of rock and roll music and electronic media generally, and the loss of Cape Breton youth to the west (or simply their loss of interest), the Cape Breton fiddling tradition

²⁸ Larry Mikol, interviewed November 9, 2006, 3.

²⁹ Marion Thompson, interviewed March 4, 2003, 6.

³⁰ John Reid, "The 1970s: Sharpening the Sceptical Edge", in E.R. Forbes and D.A. Muise, eds., *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation* (Toronto and Fredericton: University of Toronto and Acadiensis Press, 1993), 495.

³¹ Marie Thompson, "The Myth of the Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler: The Role of a CBC Film in the Cape Breton Fiddle Revival," *Acadiensis*, vol. 35:2 (Spring 2006), 22.

was about to die. Marie Thompson, independent scholar and currently a CBC journalist, has argued that this obviously touched a nerve, and Cape Breton fiddlers came out of their closets to prove their tradition was alive, well, and thriving.³² Frank MacInnis, one of the festival organizers, argued that “[t]he biggest doubt was all these kitchen fiddlers that never played in public before ... Would they be willing to get up on a stage and perform?”³³

Back-to-the-landers found themselves in the middle of this revival and played an active part as either celebrants or participants. Otis Tomas, who was living in the Smokey Mountains of North Carolina when he first took up the fiddle, was drawn to Cape Breton when he learned of its music scene, and “how they had this culture of fiddle music that was unlike anything in North America or anywhere.” Otis’s first point of contact with the island was that weekend in 1973 at the Glendale Fiddler’s Festival, where he incidentally met his future wife, Deanne Cox, also an American.³⁴ Both the music and Deanne kept Otis in Cape Breton and together they became immersed in the traditional music of the island. They even spent a summer touring the island in a horse-drawn buggy stopping at community halls along the way to play and meet other musicians. Deanne found the people and the culture uncommonly warm and attractive, so much so that it became an important element in her decision to stay in Cape Breton. “I found them really joyous, it was obvious they loved where they lived and were proud of it.”³⁵ Once settled on their own land they played host to many Cape Breton kitchen parties at their home. “Music was ubiquitous and associated with relaxation and revelry” noted Marie Thompson, and some of the best Cape Breton Scottish style performers were drawn from the Irish and French descendants on the island as well as from the Mi’kmaq community.³⁶

The new settlers in the region, drawn from a counterculture that included elements of folk and blue-grass music revivalism, dovetailed well with the local music culture. Not only fiddle music, but also bagpiping, singing, step dancing, comedy and theatre were popular means of cultural expression; later in the decade this was showcased in the production of *The Rise and Follies of Cape Breton*. Excited by the local culture and trained in theatre, Bev Brett settled in North River and quickly tapped into this rich culture to form a theatre group known as the St. Anne’s Bay Players, made up of equal parts local and come-from-away talent. Ronald Caplan, another back-to-the-land settler from the United States, began *Cape Breton’s Magazine* in 1971, in which he featured stories and interviews drawn from the long time residents. Back-to-the-landers celebrated the

³² Thompson, “The Myth of the Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler,” 6.

³³ Thompson, “The Myth of the Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler,” 20.

³⁴ Otis A. Tomas, interviewed November 8, 2006, 1.

³⁵ Deanne Cox, interviewed March, 2003, 1.

³⁶ Thompson, “The Myth of the Vanishing Cape Breton Fiddler,” 8-9.

richness of the Cape Breton way of life and were keen to learn the local history and partake of their vibrant culture. They in turn found a ready welcome to the region.

The consensus of the back-to-the-landers was that wherever they settled there always seemed to be someone nearby who took a particular interest in their welfare. For some, the relationship began with the person who sold them the land, as in the case of John Roberts and his wife Marion Thompson, who settled on the North Shore in Indian Brook. John recalled the vendors were like second parents to them, always ready to loan them tools or even help them build.³⁷ As Marion remembered, while spending four months living in a tent “we could go there [to the vendor’s house] any time of the day or night and have tea and fresh biscuits” and such generosity “extended all up and down the shore.”³⁸ Nearby neighbours were curious about the newcomers and were often the first ones to make contact. It was most often the men who would show up to meet the newcomers, and whether the new landowners lived in a tent, the back of a pickup truck, a shack or a half-built house, the men would be happy to share a cup of tea and often extend an invitation to return the favour.

Ruth and Aaron Schneider had a similar experience. As Ruth explained, “so being the first ones up here, we were *very* lucky, in terms of this community being curious and welcoming and coming out to see who we were and what we needed; mostly the older people.”³⁹ Coming predominantly from large urban areas in either Canada or the United States, where one could live in the same apartment building and never exchange more than a nod, newcomers had not anticipated this reception. Adam, who grew up in Montreal, explained that the unexpected warmth and welcome in the North Shore region caused the newcomers to respond in kind.

I mean everybody was very grateful. Everybody *wanted* to be part of the community – they didn’t want to be, myself included, we didn’t want to be distinct from the local community, so everybody tried to fit in as best they could. Older people in particular were quite excited to see us doing some of the things that had been kind of left behind, like having animals or gardens or any of that. So they were very helpful and had lots of advice and we were only too glad to get it.⁴⁰

Candy Christiano and her husband, both of whom grew up on Long Island, had been looking for land in Maine but there they felt much less welcome and

³⁷ John Roberts, interviewed August, 2003, 2.

³⁸ Marion Thompson, interviewed March 4, 2003, 5.

³⁹ Ruth Schneider, interviewed November 5, 2006, 1.

⁴⁰ Adam, a pseudonym, interviewed October 29, 2006, 3.

detected an undercurrent of, as she described it, “a redneck kind of influence” directed at them. But when they moved onto their property in Middle River, three kilometres up an un-serviced road:

Everybody here seemed to be a character – they were saying, you’re going to go live out there!?! and all that stuff – but opened their hearts and opened their Sunday afternoon doors. And listened to our stories, and laughed with us, and gave us all advice.⁴¹

Marion Thompson felt there was a genuine openness toward the newcomers:

They were curious about us and we were curious about them and we respected them very much and we knew they had survived here for a long time and they had done without, the way we did without, in the early years, without running water, without electricity, blah-blah-blah and we saw what they had accomplished.⁴²

But she also pointed out that although they were treated with such warmth and politeness to their face, the newcomers were not without their detractors in the community:

I can remember one of the young women trying to tell us that the older people that lived here weren't all that great and we were romanticizing them and really, sometimes they said really nasty things about us. [Laughter] And it was like, I don't care. [Laughter] They invite us *in*; they give us tea and biscuits.⁴³

Whatever was said behind their backs, Marion argued, was not important. Of course people made fun of them and laughed at them but they were always treated with respect, they were picked up hitchhiking, “There were no taunts of, why don't you go get your hair cut. I mean there was none of that kind of redneck ... thinking. People here knew how to get along and be friendly and polite. That was all we needed.”⁴⁴

The economy of the North Shore, which encompasses a number of small communities north of Baddeck, was historically based on the sea, and fishing

⁴¹ Candy Christiano, interviewed March, 2003, 5.

⁴² Marion Thompson, interviewed March 4, 2003, 5.

⁴³ Marion Thompson, interviewed March 4, 2003, 5.

⁴⁴ Marion Thompson, interviewed March 4, 2003, 5.

continued to be an important source of income when the newcomers arrived.⁴⁵ Many of the back-to-the-land men found work as fishermen's helpers, and as John Roberts maintained, "by working with the local people who'd always lived here that just makes a common bond" between the new arrivals and the men of the community. There were also ample opportunities to join local work crews building a bridge for the Department of Highways or clearing the power lines, and this allowed the newcomers to get to know the local men on an equal footing. Fred Lawrence settled further north, in Meat Cove and later Bay St. Lawrence.⁴⁶ His experiences were somewhat different because he was able to buy a fishing license from a retired fisherman. As he explained it: "That's the only way you can get in, when someone retires, you can take his place. His son didn't want the job so he passed it on to me for a sum of money."⁴⁷ The main reason Fred was able to fit in to such a remote, and traditional fishing community, despite looking and acting every bit the hippie – "long hair, ear-ring, smoked pot" – was that on the one hand he had the skills to fish, because he had fished in Maine, and on the other hand, the young people were gone. "When I first came here most of the young people were gone; they'd gone to where the jobs were, to Toronto, or Hamilton or Lynn Lake or British Columbia and stuff."⁴⁸ Fred speculated further on his reception in the community, arguing that although "they seemed very receptive ... they're also the highlanders; they're very reserved, overly courteous and they'll always tell you what they think you want to hear."⁴⁹ Ruth Schneider also commented on this particular trait. Her husband Aaron discovered that whenever he would tell his neighbours what he was about to do, they would nod their head and say "Oh yeah", but it was only when he "learned to say 'was that a good idea?', would they say 'well, now you could do it that way, but you know you might be able to do...'" and then they'd tell you exactly how it ought to be done!"⁵⁰

The economy of the regions closer to Baddeck, including Middle River, was more farm and forestry based. Fishing-based communities, explained John Roberts, worked from a single harbour which, though fishing was independent work, brought people together in the same location each day. Furthermore, because of the inherent danger of the work, fishers kept an eye on each other while on the water. Reflecting further on the issue, John suggested,

⁴⁵ Population figures drawn from the 1971 census were Indian Brook, 54, Tarbot, 70, North Shore 41, Wreck Cove, 66.

⁴⁶ Population for Bay St. Lawrence in 1971 was 150, but this may also have included the nearby community of Meat Cove.

⁴⁷ Fred Lawrence, interviewed November 7, 2006, 1.

⁴⁸ Fred Lawrence, interviewed November 7, 2006, 4.

⁴⁹ Fred Lawrence, interviewed November 7, 2006, 2.

⁵⁰ Ruth Schneider, interviewed November 5, 2006, 9.

If we'd ... moved here and lived like we do now – I don't work at something along with everybody else, ... [he is an artisan in leatherwork], things would have been different, but fishing and going on jobs like clearing the power lines with a power saw, 6 or 8 fellas, or building a bridge for the department of highways ... put you with a different mix every job you did, you wouldn't be working with the same guys ... So you got to know different people ... It just gives you that commonness that happens and ... you stop in and have lunch or stop to have a cup of tea or something, so it means that even though you came from somewhere else, you didn't grow up here, that you're really no different ... And yeah that certainly helped integrate us in the local community ... and ... it wouldn't have to be fishing, but any kind of common work that you do with other people.⁵¹

Farming communities were not structured in the same way, so that there was no equivalent opportunity to meet with a group of farmers each and every morning. Consequently, getting to know the community of Middle River took much more time even though its population in 1971 was only 150. Opportunities for work in Middle River could nonetheless be found in the local sawmill, driving the school bus or cutting pulp wood on your own land for the mill in Port Hawkesbury. Some of the women were able to find work in Baddeck in gift shops, as waitresses, nurse's aids at the local senior's home, or as guides for the Bell Museum. Most of the work in Baddeck was seasonally based and put the newcomers in competition with local students in need of summer jobs. This perhaps accounts for the two informants who perceived a certain resistance and anti-Americanism. Jim Morrow, who settled in Middle River and looked like a hippie, as most back-to-the-landers did in those days, recalled an incident at the local community hall at which "[a local man] was passed out at the local dance; he looked up at me and said 'when did they start letting people like YOU out here?'"⁵² Aside from such incidents, most people felt warmly received. Candy Christiano remembered the outpouring of support they received when their log cabin burnt down their first winter in Middle River; one farmer took them into his house until spring when they were able to start building again, and the community collected about \$3000 to help them rebuild.

⁵¹ John Roberts, interviewed August, 2003, 4.

⁵² Jim Morrow, interviewed August, 2003, 7.

West Coast Gulf Islands

British Columbia was a Mecca for the restless youth of the counterculture in the late 1960s and the 1970s and it was the destination for thousands of Americans opposed to the Vietnam War. Kitsilano, a neighbourhood in Vancouver, absorbed a large percentage of these “dropouts and draft dodgers” but the search for alternatives took many well beyond the city limits in search of a simpler lifestyle. Back-to-the-landers moved north and into the interior valleys to the east, to Vancouver Island, and to the Gulf Islands where they hoped to live in greater harmony with the natural world.⁵³

Geographically and demographically, the three west coast islands that are the focus of this study are small; Hornby, Denman and Lasqueti range in size from 11.5 to 20 to 26 square miles, respectively. The 1971 census indicated that Hornby had a population of 163, Denman stood at about 250 residents while Lasqueti, the largest of the three had 96 fulltime residents. The population on all three was made up of original families who had settled there in the mid to late nineteenth century, many of whom owned large tracts of land. All three islands had a mixed economy of farming, fishing and logging. Although the back-to-the-land settlers experienced a warm welcome by a minority of residents on each of the islands, what seemed to stand out in the early years of their influx was the indifference and outright hostility directed at them by the majority. The appearance and lifestyle of the new arrivals posed a threat to the islanders’ way of life which, on occasion, erupted in anger and outright violence between the two groups in the early years of the so-called “hippie invasion.” Lifestyle issues that created the most trouble on all three islands were nude swimming,⁵⁴ dope, social activities, squatting and disregard for private property. Also controversial were issues of land use, such as logging and subdivision. Coincidentally, in 1969, W.A.C. Bennett’s Social Credit government imposed a freeze on island subdivisions due to the impending overpopulation of the islands, beyond their perceived carrying capacity. In 1972 the Islands Trust Act was initiated, and implemented in 1974 shortly after the New Democratic Party came to power. Each island was subject to a freeze from further subdivision into parcels smaller than 10 acres, until a community plan was developed. This was locally known as the 10-acre freeze.⁵⁵ According to a planning study done on Denman Island in 1971, a majority of residents were pleased with the halt placed on small lot

⁵³ Jean Barman, *The West beyond the West: A History of British Columbia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 314-15.

⁵⁴ One of the anonymous readers suggested that surely there was nude swimming in Cape Breton as well, but in fact, if not the cold, then the black flies were sufficient deterrent.

⁵⁵ Carol Martin Quinn, interviewed January 23, 2008. Carol was an Island Trustee for Hornby Island for 17 years.

subdivision, and from my research the findings would also hold true for Hornby and Lasqueti Islands. However, the larger landholders, according to the survey, felt that subdivision was a realistic future strategy for dealing with higher land taxes but at the same time they “wanted to avoid the worst for their properties – small lot subdivisions and hippies.”⁵⁶ The newly arrived back-to-the-landers favoured limits on subdivision and controls over land use and were vocal about their position, which exacerbated tensions between groups on Denman and Lasqueti islands.

Though close geographically, the three islands differed remarkably in their response to this unexpected intrusion on their rural idyll. As Greg Halseth has argued in his examination of change in the countryside “individuals are still important” in rural areas and key individuals can play significant roles in shaping a society.⁵⁷ Because these communities were small, but especially because they were bounded by water, a quote from David Guterson’s novel *Snow Falling on Cedars* (although set on a fictional island in the Puget Sound region of Washington), captures well the observations of a newcomer to a small community: “There was no blending into an anonymous background, no neighbouring society to shift toward.”⁵⁸ On the east coast it was always possible to drive to a different community any time of day or night to visit other like-minded individuals without having to wait for a ferry. This mobility was not possible on the small west coast islands, reliant on infrequent ferry service.

Denman Island

*An island is a difference of opinion surrounded by water and it’s definitely that!*⁵⁹

Denman Island is 12 miles long and 3 miles wide. It has two lakes, Chickadee Lake and Graham Lake, each about 35 acres in size.⁶⁰ The island was first settled by Euro-Canadians in 1874 and was initially known as “Little Orkney” due to the preponderance of early settlers from those islands in Northern Scotland.⁶¹ At the time, the forests were more of an impediment to settlers than an

⁵⁶ Robin Sharpe, Planning Director, *Denman Island Planning Study 1971*, Regional District of Comox-Strathcona Planning Department, 12.

⁵⁷ Greg Halseth, *Cottage Country in Transition: A Social Geography of Change and Contention in the Rural-Recreational Countryside* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1998) 225.

⁵⁸ David Guterson, *Snow Falling on Cedars* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995) 439.

⁵⁹ Des Kennedy, interviewed January 26, 2008, 7.

⁶⁰ Robin Sharpe, Planning Director, *Denman Island Planning Study 1971*, Regional District of Comox-Strathcona Planning Department, 6.

⁶¹ Winifred A. Isbister, *My Ain Folk* (Comox Valley, B.C.: E.W. Bickle Ltd., 1976) 5.

asset. The enormity of the trees made early house building difficult; many of the logs were much too large to handle and had to be burned. Although the lumber industry was crucial to island development, it did not begin in earnest until the turn of the century when it had become more feasible to handle such logs. Agriculture had been equally crucial to the island's economy. Denman is reputed to have the best agricultural land of the Gulf Islands and access to Vancouver Island markets is only a two mile trip across Baynes Channel.⁶² Following the Second World War farming declined for a variety of reasons, including a drop in rainfall during the growing season, rising taxes, transportation problems and the trend toward large-scale agriculture.⁶³ However, as late as 1976 beef cattle and sheep were still actively farmed on the island.⁶⁴ The Island Planning Study of 1971 reported that a large part of the island was then under tree farm management, and went on to argue that "logging would remain a significant industry but not an important source of income for islanders."⁶⁵ Many of the islanders at mid-century had enjoyed a fair level of self-sufficiency, and supported themselves with income from a variety of sources including "farming, shellfish, timber, contracting, investment and pensions."⁶⁶ Winifred Isbister, local historian, captured the feel of the island: "The mixed wooded and pastoral countryside with old homesteads with gabled farmhouses, large barns and sheds, cultivated fields and snake fences gives much of the island a strong rural and picturesque quality."⁶⁷

Beginning in 1968, and accelerating thereafter, the island population, long in decline, began to grow; young people, in search of what planners described as a "new non-urban lifestyle"⁶⁸ began to arrive by twos, by sixes, by tens and as many as fifteen at once. Carmen Saunders remembered arriving in a group of fifteen, most of whom made their living as a political theatre troupe known as Manfrog. At first they lived together communally, gardening and growing all their vegetables. Carmen remembered that they wanted to get "totally away from society [but they] became extremely disliked on Denman Island."⁶⁹ Thus began the "hippie invasion" as many later referred to it. Des Kennedy explained: "We were a pretty bizarre looking bunch ... the men had wild hair and big beards and they arrived en masse, in the span of a few years." Up to that point "there was nobody like that here and then all of a sudden there were several hundred of us

⁶² Isbister, *My Ain Folk*, 5.

⁶³ Robin Sharpe, Planning Director, Denman Island Planning Study 1971, Regional District of Comox-Strathcona Planning Department, 5.

⁶⁴ Isbister, *My Ain Folk*, 45.

⁶⁵ Sharpe, *Denman Island Planning Study 1971*, 5.

⁶⁶ Sharpe, *Denman Island Planning Study 1971*, 5.

⁶⁷ Isbister, *My Ain Folk*, 5.

⁶⁸ Sharpe, *Denman Island Planning Study 1971*, 5.

⁶⁹ Carmen Saunders, interviewed November 28, 2007, 1.

here.”⁷⁰ Because the land on the Gulf Islands was relatively expensive, and because of the ten acre freeze, group purchases were common. Juan Barker, who arrived as part of the theatre troupe, reflected on their impact: “We were changing their way of life and their kids liked hanging out with us because we played music together and smoked dope together and all these other things that were really confusing for them.”⁷¹ Nude swimming became a serious bone of contention between the “hippies” and those with more traditional values. As Kennedy argued, the issue of nude swimming was a “kind of flash point for a lot of people.”⁷² One long-time resident, whose family had moved to the island in 1875, remembered that “Chickadee Lake [was] the one place where I used to swim, where all of us swam when we were teenagers and ... these guys are wandering around stripped naked, and their docks hanging down, you know, I don’t think there’s anything pretty about that, at all!” He remembered having to go up to the lake to bring his girls home when he first found out about the nude swimming.⁷³ Not surprisingly, when island residents were surveyed, in 1971 and asked how they felt about their island, they reported that among their major dislikes were “hippies.”⁷⁴

Logging was another polarizing issue on Denman Island. Back-to-the-landers felt they had stumbled upon a paradise; the population was sparse, most of the “roads were dirt and it was quiet, really, really quiet and there was all manner of wildlife.”⁷⁵ For Juan it was “the spiritual aspect of living in nature” that had the greatest impact on him.⁷⁶ Patti Willis as well remembered that first summer after she had travelled up from California; she “just walked the woods and it felt like a religious experience.”⁷⁷ Des Kennedy, who had spent “eight years in a series of monastic seminaries in the Eastern United States studying for the priesthood,” felt strongly about logging, and as editor of a newsletter, *The Denman Rag and Bone*, he had a monthly platform from which to argue his position. This newsletter was intended for all residents of Denman Island and in fact many Hornby Islanders read it as well. Its stated intention was to foster dialogue on matters of importance to islanders, but although everyone was invited to participate, and many did, it raised the ire of some islanders. As Patti Willis noted, “some of us had, like Des, very strident political opinions in those days and just put some other folks off with them, but we came from that urban tradition.”⁷⁸ In the May 1974 first issue of the

⁷⁰ Des Kennedy, interviewed January 26, 2008, 3.

⁷¹ Juan Barker, interviewed November 28, 2007, 13-14.

⁷² Des Kennedy, interviewed January 26, 2008, 5.

⁷³ Rick Black, a pseudonym, interviewed January 25, 2008, 7.

⁷⁴ Sharpe, *Island Planning Study* 1971, 12.

⁷⁵ Juan Barker, interviewed November 28, 2007, 4.

⁷⁶ Juan Barker, interviewed November 28, 2007, 14.

⁷⁷ Patti Willis interviewed November 23, 2007, 1.

⁷⁸ Patti Willis, interviewed November 23, 2007, 10.

newsletter, following a lengthy discussion on the role played by tree worship in ancient beliefs and religions, Kennedy asked,

Do we need to cut all those trees down? Do our roads always need to be wider and wider? Do we have to batter and push and slash at everything living around us until we've destroyed it all? Perhaps no tree-spirit will descend and smite us for needlessly destroying living things; but if we destroy the tree of life, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, then we shall have destroyed the chance of ever becoming any better than we are now; and that, perhaps, is the worst punishment of all.⁷⁹

Rebecca Kneale Gould, who researched the spiritual aspect of the back-to-the-land movement in Maine, argued that "for homesteaders, among others, nature is conceptualized as sacred."⁸⁰ To be sure, not all back-to-the-landers felt this way, but it was not uncommon, and it spoke to the strength of feeling on the issue and the fear that all of nature was on the block for whatever it could buy. From the perspective of one long-time resident and other large land holders, logging was a way of life and an important source of income; but suddenly, "what we call tree-huggers, which all hippies seem to be ... protested logging of any shape or form on Denman Island – protested in front of logging trucks and everything."⁸¹

Denman Island inter-group relations were further exacerbated when a core of newcomers voiced their strong disapproval of small lot subdivision. They argued that not only could the ferry service not handle the additional traffic but also, more importantly, that the water table could not sustain the additional use. (The debate raged even though the 10-acre freeze was in effect, preventing land from being subdivided, because islanders knew this was a temporary measure.) Des Kennedy explained the situation as he saw it:

There was a sort of red-neck core group here that did not anticipate us showing up and ... were determined to make life as miserable as possible and one of them, years later, said to me "We wanted to drive you people off, we didn't want you here." They had thought they were going to get nice white, middle class, middle age, retired people ... and the other element to it was, myself and a number of others ... very quickly realized the islands were totally ripe for plucking by land speculators and developers and stuck our noses in

⁷⁹ D.K. Editorial, *The Denman Rag and Bone*, first issue, May 1974, 3.

⁸⁰ Rebecca Kneale Gould, *At Home in Nature: Modern Homesteading and Spiritual Practice in America*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 6.

⁸¹ Rick Black, a pseudonym, interviewed January 25, 2008, 2-3.

and said that's not what we want to have happen here. Well *that* was probably the major cause of friction, in the sense of who are you to tell us what to do?⁸²

Harlene Holm, who would become one of the Island's Trustees, concurred with Kennedy's assessment and added that it was the original large landowners, involved in small lot subdivision, who were particularly displeased at the arrival of the back-to-the-landers.

I think they had a vision that they would make money and have all these retirees, with their similar urban interests and instead they got these snotty nosed children ... in the work boots and the long skirts, and they were appalled by it and there was a whole kind of difficulty especially [with] one farm family who ran the island.⁸³

One landowner especially upset, according to Holm and others, was a farmer whose interests were inadvertently overlooked when, in 1971, a new local food co-op was established on the island in order to purchase food (organic when possible) and household articles at wholesale prices. This practice was occurring in alternative communities across the province. In 1972, the province-wide co-operatives formed a co-op wholesaler located in Vancouver (FED-UP CO-OP). This central body coordinated "the collective purchases of the outlying districts" and improved their ability "to supply a wide range of foodstuffs."⁸⁴ Volunteers in each community would take turns putting together an order and sending it to Vancouver where Fed-Up Co-op would fill the order. The volunteers would drive down to the Vancouver warehouse to pick up their order and spend an obligatory few days putting in work at the warehouse. The food would then be trucked back to a central point on the island, where members would pick up their order. By bringing in off-island produce every two months, the Denman Island co-op was effectively cutting off a local, longtime farmer from his long-time practice of supplying the island with vegetables.⁸⁵ This farmer was not only from one of the founding families on the island, but was also former head of the Ratepayers Association. This conflict eventually led to a "physical tussle" between "the hippies" and this very conservative and strong-willed farmer.⁸⁶ Once back-to-the-

⁸² Des Kennedy, interviewed January 26, 2008, 3.

⁸³ Harlene Holm, interviewed May 18, 2005, 3.

⁸⁴ The Denman Co-op, *The Denman Rag and Bone*, first issue, May 1974, 5.

⁸⁵ Winifred A. Isbister, *My Ain Folk*, 45.

⁸⁶ Leslie Dunsmore, interviewed December 11, 2007, 5.

lander Leslie Dunsmore realized the impact of their decision, she suggested a swap:

I said why don't you supply us with the corn and tomatoes? Then we won't order it on the truck ... That started to make a change but it was never enough to heal some of the hurt that went on.⁸⁷

Despite attempts over the intervening years to heal the rifts that had developed between the back-to-the-land settlers and the original island residents, not all could be put to rest. Another dispute developed over the need for a preschool. Originally, it was run by four mothers, one of whom was Carmen Saunders. "Whoever had the most children had to ... do the preschool, which at that time was me because I had two, so we ran our preschool out of our house."⁸⁸ As the number of young children grew it became necessary to find a more permanent location. The only available room at the time was a room in the community hall used by the seniors in the evenings for cribbage or bridge. The new island residents asked for use of the room during the day. According to Patti Willis, this suggestion was greeted with consternation: "What do you mean you don't take care of your children all day long? What do you mean you take them some place for part of the day? That was revolutionary in this setting."⁸⁹ Eventually, a compromise was reached but it was never fully satisfactory and the seniors "felt increasingly nudged out," according to Des Kennedy. "I think they just felt strangers in their own place."⁹⁰ The struggle over the preschool went on for years, and became so acrimonious that the seniors moved out and built their own place. Denman Island eventually acquired two community halls: one for the original islanders and one for the newcomers. Some of the original islanders never overcame their anger. "I know of one woman who refuses to ever set foot in the community hall – the old community hall – and to this day will not nod at me in the car or say hello – she's like 80 now. And she just absolutely hated all of us 30 years ago and still hates us now." Residents of Hornby and Lasqueti Islands, in referring to the difficulties they encountered as newcomers, are always quick to point out that issues on their islands "never got as bad as they did on Denman Island."

⁸⁷ Leslie Dunsmore, interviewed December 11, 2007, 5.

⁸⁸ Carmen Saunders, interviewed November 28, 2007, 5.

⁸⁹ Patti Willis, interviewed November 23, 2007, 10.

⁹⁰ Des Kennedy, interviewed January 26, 2008, 6.

Hornby Island

*For me, Hornby Island was like coming home again, to a big family.*⁹¹

Hornby Island's history was not dissimilar to that of Denman Island, although reaching the island required traversing Denman and crossing the mile-wide Lambert Channel. The island is four miles by five miles and has a mountain rising to 1,090 feet, named Mount Geoffrey. The first Euro-Canadian settlers, George Ford and Henry Horatio Maude, arrived in 1869 and married First Nations women. By 1905, the population stood at 32, most having arrived from the British Isles to farm and ranch. Because farming could not fully sustain a family, the islanders fished, worked at odd jobs and paid off their taxes constructing and maintaining island roads. Logging became more intensive by 1910 but farming continued to be the mainstay of the Islanders through the 1920s. Most islanders had cattle and chickens, harvested hay and oats, and cultivated large gardens. Logging was the other mainstay, until the depression sent prices plummeting, but it was replaced, to some extent, by commercial fishing, which began at about that time.⁹²

Back-to-the-landers began arriving on Hornby in 1967. The first were like Heinz Laffin and Wayne Ngan, who came from Vancouver, where they had taught pottery at one of the city's arts schools. Inspired by the beauty of Hornby and attracted by the price of land there, they bought property and set up a potting studio.⁹³ Neither originally felt they were back-to-the-landers, but the community identified them as such, perhaps because both eventually married women who were a part of the back-to-the-land community. Two years later, when Jan Bevan and her husband Robear LeBaron arrived, they felt more warmly received by the recent, as she termed them, middle-class intellectuals (most of whom became crafts people: potters, sculptors, painters, weavers, and so on) than by the original residents. Beginning in 1970-71, there was a large influx of American Vietnam war resisters and draft dodgers, and as both Bevan and Laffin noted, that arrival did not go smoothly. "Some of the old timers or their children were known to drive around in pickup trucks with guns."⁹⁴ Furthermore, everyone who arrived in that general period was assumed to be an American war resister, Jan and her husband included. Heinz Laffin recalled some particularly raucous Ratepayers'

⁹¹ Nora Laffin, resident, quoted in Elizabeth Smith and David Gerow, *Hornby Island: The Ebb and Flow* (Campbell River, B.C.: Ptarmigan Press, 1988), 77.

⁹² Smith and Gerow, *Hornby Island*.

⁹³ Heinz Laffin, interviewed January 12, 2008, 2. Within two years, Wayne married and bought another property.

⁹⁴ Jan Bevan, interviewed January 11, 2008, 5.

Association meetings, at which only property owners were allowed to vote. Almost all of the new arrivals were without property at first, and, as on Denman Island, they wanted to change the association to the Residents and Ratepayers, but “there was a lot of resistance by the old timers. And there was one terrible meeting ... when there was a lot of yelling going on⁹⁵ and the old timers were afraid this meeting was stacked by the newcomers.”⁹⁶ Bevan remembered somewhat bitterly, “the ratepayers railroaded through a new constitution by which certain people were not permitted to be members,” and within a short time they received a letter stating that their membership had been revoked.⁹⁷ Although they did become property owners shortly thereafter, the experience left Bevan and her husband feeling alienated. Most of their first decade was spent cutting down trees, pulling up stumps, creating a farm out of a forest. The irony was that on the one hand this couple, through years of relentless work, most resembled the early island settlers as they carved out a farm from a piece of second growth forest by meeting the conditions required to alienate Crown Land. Yet appearances and lifestyle proved too great a barrier at the time. Looking back, Jan recalled that her husband Robear was probably the first person to swim nude at Little Tribune Bay, “and an *extremely* irate farmer came and chased him away, [yelling] ‘I have a daughter!’ So we were definitely seen as the invasion of the immoral.”⁹⁸

Richard Laskin and his wife Serena, sociologists who had been associated with the University of Chicago and then the University of Saskatchewan, suggested a more nuanced typology of American migrants: the war resisters and “the [westward] movement of young people, what I’ll call the Haight-Ashbury movement in the United States, to California where they had to stop so [they turned north to] Canada.” He argued that “both the American draft dodgers, and also the young hippies and the drugs and the marijuana and that kind of stuff ... [were] very, very destructive to the island conservative community.”⁹⁹ Laskin remembered an incident in the mid 1970s when he, his wife, and another couple were walking to the water but in choosing to skirt the road, walked across private property and “there was one of the old Savoie families, Frank saying ‘STOP!’ And he was levelling a rifle at us.”¹⁰⁰ Serena Laskin argued that at the time she and her husband did not believe in the existence of private property, and

⁹⁵ Raucous meetings on Denman Island led to the opposite outcome; in relatively short order the newcomers outnumbered the original land holders and secured voting rights for non-land owning residents. This fact may have contributed to the lasting resentment felt by some of the original residents.

⁹⁶ Heinz Laffin, interviewed January 12, 2008, 3.

⁹⁷ Jan Bevan, interviewed January 11, 2008, 8.

⁹⁸ Jan Bevan, interviewed January 11, 2008, 5.

⁹⁹ Richard Laskin, interviewed November 25, 2007, 6.

¹⁰⁰ Richard Laskin, interviewed November 25, 2007, 7.

furthermore, did not feel that they were harming anything, so they would disregard the signs and walk across property boundaries.¹⁰¹

On Hornby, in the early years of this influx, “transient” hippies would squat on the beach and build rudimentary shacks. This angered local residents, as Michael MacNamara explained: “The beach is everybody’s so the hippies would come and build these shacks on the beach and the guy who was running the lodge at the time was just obsessed about it; so he took his bulldozer down and cleaned up his beach.”¹⁰² Within a fairly short period, “the young people who were coming here on a sort of lark and weren’t committed to the back-to-the-land thing in any serious way, moved on.”¹⁰³ To the long-term residents, however, the back-to-the-landers and the transient hippies would have been indistinguishable.

Lasqueti Island

*There is that common thread of people who live like this, I don’t know what it is, isolationism that we like and the Maverick and wanting to be on the edge of society.*¹⁰⁴

Lasqueti Island is 13.5 miles long and 5 miles wide and is 10.5 miles from Vancouver Island. It has no car ferry and no hydroelectricity, the roads are unpaved, and the telephone cables have been placed underground. The island has managed to retain a unique rural flavour that allows residents to pursue an alternative lifestyle far from the urban hustle and bustle. The first Euro-Canadians to gain title to land on the island, in the late nineteenth century, were interested in sheep ranching. By the turn of the century many more settlers came to farm. Later the Rat Portage Logging Company and a salmon cannery at False Bay attracted more residents but both operations were closed by 1920. Cheap land and the ability to live by subsistence farming, augmented with fish and game, attracted some people struggling to make ends meet during the depression years. The next major infusion of new residents came in the 1950s, when, attracted by the “Green Gold” of the logging boom, workers poured in and “logging took over all aspects of Lasqueti life.” Within a decade, the boom had run its course and the island population was radically reduced, only to rebound in the 1970s as young people arrived from all parts of Canada and the United States. “These were the ‘back to nature’, ‘let’s save our planet’ groups as well as U.S. draft dodgers,” wrote Betty

¹⁰¹ Serena Laskin, interviewed December 12, 2007, 8.

¹⁰² Michael MacNamara, interviewed January 28, 2008, 3.

¹⁰³ Michael MacNamara, interviewed January 28, 2008, 4.

¹⁰⁴ Bonnie Olesko, interviewed December 21, 2007, 5.

Darwin and Patricia Forbes in their visitor's guide. Many, they suggested, were just drifters who "squatted, pillaged, and fortunately left."¹⁰⁵

Others, through hard work, have been able to realize their dreams. With the poor economic conditions on the island, they have been able to survive by working off the island for part of the time or by cultivating the most lucrative agricultural produce in Lasqueti's history, marijuana.¹⁰⁶

Karl Darwin, who grew up on Lasqueti, argued that the island went from being "nothing more than an impediment to navigation" to supporting a sudden invasion of hippies. He recalled them "squatting in hollow stumps and any abandoned shack that was around; then, as soon as it started to rain, [the] ferry was plugged and they were gone."¹⁰⁷ Although Karl's estimate of up to 400 arrivals may have been exaggerated, he makes the point that living on Lasqueti was not easy; it took commitment. Many of the hippies who arrived between 1969 and 1971 came in groups, known variously as the White Rock Hippies, the Portland Hippies and the Hollywood Hippies, and quickly increased the population to about 150.¹⁰⁸

Bonnie Olesko arrived with her husband in 1969, one of the Portland Hippies, and she felt they were greeted with a degree of distrust; "we were kind of looked on with a lot of suspicion by the locals because we looked like hippies. We were peace and love hippies, you know not let's drop tons of acid [though] there were a few in the crowd that were."¹⁰⁹ Christine Ferris arrived on Lasqueti in 1971 with a group from Los Angeles, the Hollywood Hippies, and her early experiences were quite positive. "A lot of them were really, really helpful and welcoming."¹¹⁰ She argued that relations with the local population were quite good at the beginning and only became tense later. Peter Johnston and his wife arrived in 1974, to become the new principal and teacher respectively, but they were both so intrigued with the back-to-the-land culture that they quit their jobs and joined the back-to-the-land community. In his capacity as principal for the

¹⁰⁵ Betty J. Darwin and Patricia J.M. Forbes, *So You Want to Know about Lasqueti Island: A Visitor's guide to its Past and Present*, (Parksville, B.C: s.n., 1988) and Elda Copley Mason, *Lasqueti Island History and Memory*.

¹⁰⁶ Betty J. Darwin and Patricia J.M. Forbes, *So You Want to Know about Lasqueti Island*, 4.

¹⁰⁷ Karl Darwin, interviewed December 18, 2007, 2.

¹⁰⁸ Lawrence Fisher, "Introduction" to *Celebrating Our Writers: Lasqueti Island Arts Fest 2007*, edited by Kay Meierbachtol, 2. The Census gives the population in 1971 as 96; from all accounts it was likely that there were many unaccounted for young people squatting at the south end of the island.

¹⁰⁹ Bonnie Olesko, interviewed December 21, 2007, 2.

¹¹⁰ Christine Ferris, interviewed January 1, 2008, 4.

first two years, Johnston had had time to observe the larger community and its divisions and suggested that some of the problems between the newcomers and the original residents stemmed from development issues. For instance the original residents wanted hydro to come to the island, but the young people were against it, and this became a source of disagreement and resentment. The local residents felt they had struggled and worked hard and were looking forward to this comfort in their older age and then along came all these hippies who quickly outnumbered them and took over the island.¹¹¹ Doug Hopwood, whose wife was an Island Trustee for five years, argued that the issue of bringing electricity to the island as well as other divisive issues such as the desire for paved roads and a car ferry, were not much more than wishful thinking on the part of the residents. It eventually became clear, argued Hopwood, that neither B.C. Hydro nor the province had any intention of spending the millions of dollars required to bring electricity to the island, pave the roads, or support a car ferry. Nevertheless, this created a clash of cultures. The newcomers wanted the island to remain frozen in time; they valued the lack of development, the quiet of the country roads, and the magnificent forests. Elda Copley Mason, who left the island in the 1960s, returned for a visit in 1972 and found many troubling changes:

No, the Lasqueti that I visited in 1972 did not seem to be the same community as the one in which I had spent forty years of my life. I detected a change in the attitudes of many of the immigrants and young people. Many were drifters, looking only for an easy, uncomplicated life. Others contributed more to the community but wished no change; they expressed a desire for the Island to remain as it was without new development.¹¹²

Logging was another contentious development issue; back-to-the-landers were adamantly opposed to logging and, at least according to island lore, some sabotaged a logging truck that was being used on private land. As the saboteurs were never caught, it is unclear who actually caused the damage, but according to Karl Darwin there has been no significant logging on the island since the incident.¹¹³ Because the newcomers were so opposed to logging they would be obvious targets for blame. Perhaps most contentious of all was the growing of marijuana on Lasqueti. It became so significant that at harvest season every year the RCMP would raid the island. Karl Darwin recalled,

¹¹¹ Peter Johnston, interviewed December 20, 2007, 3.

¹¹² Elda Copley Mason, *Lasqueti Island History and Memory*, 100.

¹¹³ Karl Darwin, interviewed December 18, 2007, 4.

For a long time there was a lot of outdoor growing and the police used to come around in August and do their hack and slash and it was called the annual summer games; they'd have the cop boat down in False Bay, everybody goes to sit down in the pub there and watch!¹¹⁴

The original residents resented the fact that some made enough money to holiday in Mexico in the winter, something they could not afford to do. Furthermore, they felt the ten acre freeze and the bid to preserve Crown land on the island were “just so the people could grow pot,” suggested Sheila Ray. She felt there is still some resentment about it.¹¹⁵

Conclusion

The back-to-the-land movement involved thousands of people across North America who left the urban in search of the rural. A growing environmental awareness was at the root of this exodus. From the Maine coast, to the pueblos of New Mexico and the Oregon rain forests, and from the highlands of Cape Breton, to coastal British Columbia and every place in between, back-to-the-landers settled wherever they could find cheap land, beauty in abundance and a paucity of people. This move to the countryside, however, could take very different local courses.

Those who settled in Victoria County, Cape Breton were amazed at the warmth of their reception. Part of that may be explained by the cultural trait in this region of Cape Breton of exceptional politeness toward strangers. Back-to-the-landers living here argued that the local residents knew how to get along with others – although this did not preclude the possibility of criticism and mocking of the newcomers when unobserved. This region also included a long history of leaving; Cape Breton residents watched their communities shrink and spoke of the lights going out on the hillsides. This legacy may have predisposed Islanders to be more receptive and curious about newcomers. Furthermore the infusion of young folk helped to sustain declining rural communities. Coupled with their warm welcome was an intrigue on the part of the newcomers with the strong cultural traditions of the region including its local history, Gaelic background, story-telling, and music. Back-to-the-landers brought new energy to this rich culture. Working side by side with the local fishermen, or in work crews fixing the roads or clearing wood along the power lines, brought the men, homesteader and local, together in a shared task. This fellowship eased their acceptance into the community. As much as there was a Cape Breton experience, differences existed

¹¹⁴ Karl Darwin, interviewed December 18, 2007, 4.

¹¹⁵ Sheila Ray, interviewed December 20, 2007, 8.

between the communities based on the fishery and those based on farming. Fishing brought the men together on the wharf every morning and often again in the evening. Interaction doing a similar task, combined with the need to maintain awareness of each other's safety, had a bonding effect. The farming communities did not offer an equivalent work experience, and so the back-to-the-landers did not feel as well integrated into these communities.

Back-to-the-land settlers on the three west coast islands, with a few exceptions, were greeted with indifference at best, to outright hostility. The radically different approaches to lifestyle, the environment, and politics that existed between the newcomers and the original islanders became so fraught with tension that for the first few years there was little room for understanding and open, unemotional communication. Furthermore, both sides engaged in negative stereotyping: the original residents were characterized as red-necks and the newcomers were equally typified as dirty, dope-smoking hippies. Most of the newcomers had more formal education than the original residents and were comfortable with debating and written communication. On Denman Island, for example, they used *The Rag and Bone* to promote their worldview in opposition to their fellow island residents. While the latter were encouraged to participate, those more comfortable with the medium were favoured. Drugs and marijuana use, and particularly its cultivation on Lasqueti Island, created anger and resentment for the hard-working, conservative-minded original settlers. Public nudity was offensive to residents on all three islands and caused moral outrage as the residents feared the impact of these perceived immoral invaders on their children. The complex issues of land use and logging directly affected the original islanders' livelihood and possibility of future retirement, and for the newcomers the issues struck at the heart of their deeply held values that opposed increased development or logging of any kind. They feared it would not only threaten the carrying capacity of the islands' resources, but that it would destroy the beauty and rural spaciousness of the islands that they treasured. The newcomers' disregard for private property on all the islands, but especially Hornby, caused the local landowners to fear for their property rights.

The large numbers of migrants who arrived in the first five years of the 1970s overwhelmed the local residents and justifiably caused fear that their island life was about to change irrevocably. Richard Laskin, who had travelled across the United States researching the "youth movement," alluded above to the westward movement of young hippies, many of whom then came north to Canada, and Michael MacNamara also referred to the "transient hippies" on Hornby Island. It would have been difficult for the local residents on any of the islands to distinguish those who were "just passing through" from those who were serious about their commitment to the island. Sometimes there was indeed overlap; some back-to-the-landers, particularly on Lasqueti, admit to squatting for

long periods of time, only belatedly with permission from the land owner. John Gower, in his discussion of the alternative community in the Slocan Valley, also found this to be an issue. "By 1975 or 1976, most of the 'weekend hippies' and uncommitted drifters who contributed to this animosity moved on." Only then, he argued, was it clear who was serious about their commitment, and they then began to earn the respect of the locals.¹¹⁶

The wave of social changes brought by the sixties, including doubts about consumerism itself, coupled with the growing environmental movement of the 1970s caused enormous social upheaval that began in the large urban centres of the continent and reverberated outwards to the farthest reaches of the continent, even to the hamlets of Cape Breton on the east coast and to some of the smallest Gulf Islands on the west coast. Each particular location experienced this wave differently, depending on the specifics of its history, the local culture and the relationship of newcomers and established populations to the land. The fundamental difference in the encounter on the two coasts comes down to demographics. The density of settlement in Cape Breton was such that the locals did not feel an imminent threat to their time-worn patterns of life. They were intrigued by and wanted to support these young couples who were arriving and buying up long abandoned farms in their region. Mutual respect characterized their relations from the outset and left room for dialogue when divisive issues arose. The same wave of migrants that washed over the west coast caused the three small islands in question to experience this migration as tantamount to an invasion. The small and bounded nature of these places left no room to blend into an anonymous background. Smaller lots forced closer contact with large numbers of both serious settlers and untold numbers of drifters, indistinguishable at first to the local residents. Reaction on the part of many locals included fear for both their property and for the loss of their way of life. Fear caused polarization and stridency and a loss of mutual respect, with, at first, little room for dialogue. Long after the "first encounters" there would be grounds for community building in BC, though the legacy of discord would shape its fabric.

¹¹⁶ John Gordon Gower, "The Impact of Alternative Ideology on Landscape: The Back-To-The-Land Movement in the Slocan Valley," unpublished Master's Thesis, University of British Columbia, 1990, 8.