

THE TALL TALE TRADITION AND THE TELLER:  
A BIOGRAPHICAL-CONTEXTUAL STUDY OF A STORYTELLER,  
ROBERT COFFIL OF BLOMIDON, NOVA SCOTIA  
PART II

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

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The Tall Tale Tradition and the Teller:  
A Biographical-Contextual Study of a Storyteller,  
Robert Coffin of Blomidon, Nova Scotia

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#### ABSTRACT

The tall tale has been extensively collected and studied in North America, yet this work has tended to focus on the tale itself and on the tall tale heroes, men no longer living who are remembered by later generations as having been notable storytellers and whose first person stories of impossible exaggeration are now told in the third person by others. Rarely has the study of the tall tale focused on a living narrator or on the social context in which the tale is told. The intention of this thesis is to examine the tall tale and other personal experience narrative in terms of both text (i.e., the tale itself) and context (i.e., the social milieu of storytelling), with particular reference to one storyteller, Robert Coffil of Blomidon, Nova Scotia. Thus, the tales of Robert Coffil are included and analyzed, but so too is an extensive, orally recorded life history. Special attention is given to the complex interrelationships between Coffil's stories and storytelling and his world view, as reflected in the life history.

The first section of this thesis (Chapters I-IV) consists mainly of an examination of the existing literature, both in the area of the tall tale and in the area of life history and biographical studies in folklore and anthropology. The second section is devoted

to tape transcription of the collected material, and is divided into two parts. Chapter V, the life history, attempts a complete, chronological ordering of Coffil's own account of his life with some guidelines as to the collection and presentation of such autobiographical material. Chapter VI consists of the more traditional collection of the tales themselves. Variant tellings by Coffil of many of the sixty texts are included, and introductory sections and headnotes offer discussion of creativity and the sources of the stories, as well as comparative annotation. The final section (Chapters VII-IX) is a unit of analysis and synthesis, in which the situations of storytelling are discussed and the aesthetic values of Coffil as a storyteller are considered. This sense of an aesthetic is found to include an appreciation of both context -- the appropriateness of tale to setting and, of course, to the teller himself -- and text -- that which in Coffil's eyes makes a good story.

A final evaluation of the subject suggests that he will probably not become a tall tale hero to future generations in his community because of his lack of egocentricity as a storyteller and because of his successes at various occupations during his life as a sailor and vessel owner, a truck driver, a woodsman, a fisherman, and a ship's pilot. From a methodological point of view, this thesis suggests that a more complete understanding of

...performance-oriented genres of folklore is possible  
by the intensive study of the individual in tradition.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I hate to fly in airplanes. Four years ago, when the Folklore Department at Memorial University of Newfoundland wanted to interview me as a prospective graduate student, I seriously considered not going for the interview because it meant an hour and a half plane flight. My wife, Karen, encouraged me to make the flight, which I did, and without her constant encouragement and belief in my ability over the past several years, this thesis would never have been completed, let alone begun. For this and much more, I wish to thank her.

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and thanks go to Robert Coffil of Blomidon, Nova Scotia,  
whose story this is. I have spent so much time listening  
to his voice on tape, and poring over his spoken words  
on paper, that I only hope that what is presented here  
is true, and truly reflects this good and remarkable man.

# T A B L E . . . O F . . . C O N T E N T S

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS		11
I. INTRODUCTION		1
II. TALL TALES AND TELLERS		9
III. ROBERT COFFIL: THE STORYTELLER AND HIS TRADITION		31
IV. COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS OF A LIFE HISTORY		57
1. Introduction		57
2. Biographical Studies in Anthropology and Folklore		64
3. Methodology and Analysis of a Life History		84
V. ROBERT COFFIL: THE FIRST SEVENTY YEARS		111
A Brief Chronology		111
1. The Early Years, 1903-1916		116
2. Out of School and Working, 1916-1923		134
3. Going to the States, 1923-1924		155
4. The Vessel Business and The Trucking Business, 1924-1939		167
5. The Merchant Navy and The Woods Camp, 1939-1947		196
6. Farming and Fish Dragging, 1947-1968		215
7. Up the Port Williams River, 1916-1973		229
Notes to Chapter V		263
VI. TEXTS		281
1. Introduction		281
2. Tall Tales		290
Adaptations and Inventions		301
Traditional Tales, Learned from Others		323
Tales Learned from His Brothers		338
3. Other Folktales		369
4. Practical Jokes and Tricks		378
The Woods Camp Stories		379
Clyde Smith Stories		395
5. Folk Legends, Beliefs, and Knowledge		422
VII. WHERE STORIES ARE TOLD		447
VIII. THE AESTHETIC OF A STORYTELLER		477

**IX. CONCLUSIONS**

1. Reputation
2. Repertoire
3. Autobiography

514

514

521

528

**TYPE AND MOTIF INDEX**

534

**LIST OF WORKS CITED**

539

## INTRODUCTION

This is a biographical-contextual study of one man, of how he has lived and learned, and of how he has reflected his culture and selected from it that which he found to be of particular worth. The man is Robert Góffil of Blomidon, Nova Scotia. He is seventy-one years old and has spent most of his life on the sea, working on Bay trading schooners with his father and older brother by the time he was thirteen, owning and captaining a two-masted vessel when he was twenty-one, fishing with his son for nineteen years, and today, piloting freighters in the Minas Basin. He is also a storyteller.

Folk narrative studies can focus either on the carriers of a folktale tradition or on the tradition itself, the tales and the culture which the tales reflect. These different approaches to the folktale are in part dictated by the folklorist's principal interest and in part by what he finds to be most important while he is collecting and after he has collected the material for the basis of his work. Any folktale study reflects to a considerable degree the bias of the scholar. Some folktale students are interested in the tales as traditional heirlooms, others are interested in storytelling as an ongoing process of communication and in creativity and

performance in a narrative tradition. From one bias the storyteller is the accidental caretaker of a time-honored tradition, from the other he is a vital creator and performer.

In the past few years, folklorists have eschewed the concept of the active bearer of tradition as a mere traditor in favor of more dynamic concepts which give the tradition-bearer his due as a creator and shaper of tradition. It is to this recent approach in folklore research that the present work is directed, with an added emphasis upon one storyteller and his life and storytelling milieu.

Robert Coffil's forte as a storyteller is humor of exaggeration, what the folklorist calls tall tales, what the folk in North America have variously categorized as whoppers, lies, exaggeration stories, tall stories, yarns, ad infinitum. Not one to make fine generic distinctions, Coffil calls them stories and leaves it at that. My work with Coffil began more than four years ago, in 1970, and the original intention was to arrive at a contextual definition of the tall tale and of the tall tale hero by the intensive study of one such storyteller. Thus, at the outset my primary interest was with the tale rather than the teller. Over the past four years, however, this focus has changed considerably, and this is the result of two divergent yet related conclusions made in the course of the research.

First, as the research progressed I became increasingly interested in Bob Coffil the man, and subsequently was less interested in the tales themselves. What began as a genre-inspired study has become as much if not more a man-inspired study. This resulted in part from the fact that for six months, from August, 1972, to February, 1973, my family and I lived next door to Coffil, a quarter mile up the road from his house in a one hundred fifty year old house once owned by a sea captain, and in that time I got to know Coffil quite well. The change in emphasis from the stories to the man also resulted from my realization that Coffil's set repertoire of tall tales is relatively limited. His repertoire of invention, however, of exaggerations he creates or adapts to fit specific social situations, is relatively unlimited. More often than not, he will forget these exaggerations in time and will not tell the same one twice simply because no two storytelling situations are exactly alike.

My focus also has shifted from the tales to the man because I found the man and his life to be even more interesting than the stories themselves, and most interesting are the complex interrelationships between his life, his world view, and the stories he tells. Quite apart from the fact that an individual is a sailor or farmer or politician or general, it is of value, on humanistic grounds alone, to know of his or her life. My prior academic background in literature doubtless was influential



on this somewhat subjective turn that the research has taken. In fact, my Master's thesis in American literature focused on James A. Herne's Shore Acres, a late nineteenth century drama with a coastal Maine setting much like that part of Kings County, Nova Scotia, where Coffil lives. The main character in the play is a fisherman-farmer who, in several ways, espouses a philosophy of life similar to that of Coffil.<sup>1</sup> The parallels between the two individuals and the two areas could be pursued indefinitely, but this is not the forum for such study; suffice it to say that I have tried throughout to keep that part of my ego that harbors a frustrated novelist in check, and an objective discussion of the significance of biographical studies to the study of folklore and of the methodology used in collecting and compiling the life history of Robert Coffil will be the focus of Chapter IV.

Related to this increased emphasis upon the storyteller-as opposed to the stories is my tentative conclusion that Coffil may not be made of the stuff of which folk heroes are made. Granted, a good part of the legend surrounding a tall tale hero like Gib Morgan of oil field fame or Abraham "Oregon" Smith, a renowned folk hero in Illinois and Indiana communities, accumulates

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<sup>1</sup>For a recent discussion of the genesis and setting of Herne's Shore Acres, see Richard S. Tallman, "James A. Herne and Lamoine, Maine," New England Quarterly, XLVI (1973), 94-105.

after his death. Indeed, later generations might well attribute tales and anecdotes to the local hero that were never told by him or about him during his lifetime. Thus, although Coffil's limited repertoire and his inclination to invent and later forget suggests that his potential as a folk hero is not great, it was only after compiling and analyzing a much longer life history than was originally planned that it became apparent that his personality is such that he does not need or seek to be the center of attention as a storyteller. Coffil is a competent storyteller and his oral artistry doubtless gives him a small amount of ego-satisfaction, but he has not sought center stage as a storyteller because storytelling is not that important to him. I strongly suspect that in this respect he is more representative of the majority of oral narrators in North America.

These changes in the direction and emphasis of the research have brought the present work more in line with recent folklore studies on context and performance and have also forced upon the researcher the role of armchair psychologist, a role he finds somewhat uncomfortable and from which he has shied away whenever possible. Although I have no firm grounding in the psychological literature, it is safe to assume nonetheless that any person living in the latter half of the twentieth century has been trained by his culture to view his fellow man in terms of certain precepts of psychology that have become part of

our daily lexicon because of the tremendous influence of such men as Sigmund Freud. The analysis of Robert Coffil's life history in terms of his personality and storytelling, then, is based simply on common sense and a knowledge of the subject derived from many hours of conversation and observation.

For these reasons, I find myself, a humanistic folklorist, aligned with contemporary folklorists who call themselves social scientists and behaviorists because I am fascinated by the idea that each person walking along a crowded sidewalk has had a lifetime of common and unique experiences, that each person in a social situation like storytelling brings to bear upon that situation at least part of his or her past experiences. Such literary works as Wright Morris's A Field of Vision and Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio have had as much influence on and are as germane to the present study as are G. W. von Sydow's theoretical writings or Stith Thompson's Motif-Index of Folk-Literature.

Furthermore, the changes in the direction the work has taken have shifted much of the analysis from tall tales to personal experience narratives in general. The tall tale, whether told in the first person or in the third person, is a special kind of personal experience narrative. Nonetheless, the tall tale remains at the core of this study, and in order to place Robert Coffil and his tales within the broader context of tall tale

telling, the intent of Chapter II is to survey the available literature on tall tales and tall tale heroes.

Following this review of the literature, Chapter III introduces Coffil more formally, includes a brief descriptive history and geography of the area, and then relates Coffil as a storyteller to the literature discussed in the previous chapter. Chapter IV, Collection and Analysis of a Life History, includes a detailed description of the fieldwork, the collector-informant relationship, the value and methodology of life history collection and presentation, and a review of the life history and folk autobiography in both anthropology and folklore. Analysis of Robert Coffil's life history as a tool to understanding his role as a storyteller is also included in this chapter.

The first four chapters of the present work stand as an introductory unit. Chapter V, Robert Coffil: The First Seventy Years, and Chapter VI, Texts, form another unit in which the orally collected data of Coffil's life and stories is presented. Notes to the narratives and historical elements in Chapter V are presented at the end of the chapter, and illuminate both Coffil's narration of his experiences and the value of the life history to regional and social historians. The life history itself is presented entirely in Coffil's own words, with brief editorial introduction to the different chronological sections within that life history. The chapter of texts is simply a tape-recorded collection of traditional and

personal narratives, with an introductory section to the collection itself, in which the sources of his stories and how he became a storyteller are discussed. There is also an introduction to each of the divisions within the collection, and head notes to each of the texts include comparative annotation as well as discussion of the text in relation to the storyteller's repertoire. Most of the stories are presented in at least two different tellings to indicate variation and stability.

The concluding three chapters in the present study form a final unit of analysis. Chapter VII, Where Stories Are Told, deals with both regional and occupational storytelling contexts, and includes a full description of Coffil's main rostrum for storytelling -- a general store near his home. Chapter VIII considers Coffil's sense of an aesthetic, with a view to discovering the extent to which he is a storyteller, and also compares Bob Coffil to his older brother John, who died eleven years ago and who is at least a fledgling tall tale hero in the folk memory. The final chapter summarizes the main points to be drawn from the study of Robert Coffil as both storyteller and man. It is pointed out that a contextual folklore study in the fullest sense of context must include an autobiographical picture of the individual in tradition.

## II

### TALL TALES AND TELLERS

The study of the folktale by definition is and has been concerned with traditional oral (and written) narratives, and it can be argued that the tales a man tells about himself are traditional but whether he is or not can only be determined some time after his death. The cliché about a man being a legend in his own time has not been readily applied by folklorists who have focused their attention on the traditional lore, the collectanea. The historic-geographic or comparative approach of folktale scholarship is based on the solid premise that folktales are old and persistent in tradition and that those who tell and listen to the tales are merely the current caretakers of a time-honored tradition. So it is with Robert Coffin. He is a caretaker of certain oral traditions, to be sure, and it is virtually impossible to say that he will or will not be a folk hero to later generations in his community; but, he is more than a mere caretaker of well-travelled tall tales, and it is interesting to consider his stories and storytelling in terms of the tall tale literature for North America, sprinkled as it is with tall tale heroes.

As noted in the preceding chapter, a shift in the emphasis of folklore scholarship from text to context

is quite recent. This shift is the result of the influence of cultural anthropologists who, for the greater part of the twentieth century, have based their findings on intensive fieldwork and observation of the many facets of a culture rather than on the comparative desk scholarship of early anthropologists like E. B. Tylor and Sir James Frazer. Folklorists, like anthropologists, are now interested in the functions of cultural material they collect and study.

Despite this change in the direction of folklore and folktale scholarship, the storyteller is ephemeral compared to the traditional stories he tells. The living tall tale hero, for instance, is a virtual nonentity because all the returns are not in. After his death his stories may take on the persona and creativity of another storyteller. People may remember the tales as his, but if the tales do remain active in a particular local tradition it is unlikely that they would be associated with him for more than a generation after his death. The living teller of tales and thus only potential tall tale hero also may very likely reveal the sources of his own egocentric tales to a friendly folklorist. One wonders, for example, how different William Hugh Jansen's study of Abraham "Oregon" Smith<sup>1</sup> might have been if he

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<sup>1</sup>William Hugh Jansen, "Abraham 'Oregon' Smith: Pioneer, Folk Hero, and Tale-Teller" (Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 1949).

had been able to interview the F&K hero in person.

Perhaps the most significant factor weighing against the study of a living teller of tall tales has been the quality and quantity of the tall tale itself. Probably everyone who has been interested in the tall tale and who has collected tall tales au naturel has been drawn to this minor genre of folktale because it is both so direct and so indirect, so realistic and so absurd. From an aesthetic standpoint, the tall tale is perhaps as satisfying and complete by itself as any other folklore genre, and this is especially so when the unadorned tales of a good teller are frozen on the printed page. That this is true can be seen in the plethora of tall tale publications directed toward a non-academic audience. One of the best and most important of these is Lowell Thomas's Tall Stories,<sup>2</sup> a collection of tales that were sent in by listeners to his nationally broadcast radio program in the United States in the late 1920's and early 1930's. More than a third of Ernest W. Baughman's 606-page Type and Motif Index of the Folktales of England and North America is taken up by "Tales of Lying" and "Humor of Lies and Exaggeration," but this does not indicate that the tall tale maintains such a dominant

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<sup>2</sup>Lowell Thomas, Tall Stories: The Rise and Triumph of the Great American Whopper (New York, 1931).



place in the oral narrative traditions of North America.<sup>3</sup> It only indicates the fascination this genre has held for folklore collectors and for popular writers who have adapted tall tale motifs to their work, and also that the tall tale is one of the easiest narrative genres to collect.

It is of little wonder, then, that literary critic Malcolm Cowley mistakenly generalizes about American oral traditions when he writes that "American folk tales usually end with a 'snapper' -- that is, after starting with the plausible, they progress through the barely possible to the flatly incredible, then wait for a laugh."<sup>4</sup> To most people in North America, the folktale or oral storytelling is synonymous with the Paul Bunyan stories of popular and children's literature.<sup>5</sup> To the literary critic, like Cowley, an understanding of the nature of oral narration usually begins and ends with Constance Rourke's analysis of American humor, which is largely based on the writing of nineteenth century local color humorists.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Ernest W. Baughman, Type and Motif Index of the Folktales of England and North America, Indiana University Folklore Series No. 20 (The Hague, 1966), pp. 51-63, 407-600. Only five of the tall tale motifs Baughman lists were reported only from England.

<sup>4</sup>Malcolm Cowley, "Editor's Introduction," in Sherwood Anderson, Winesburg, Ohio (New York, 1960), p. 6.

<sup>5</sup>See Daniel G. Hoffman, Paul Bunyan: Last of the Frontier Demigods (Philadelphia, 1952), for a thorough study of the popularization of Paul Bunyan and discussion of the extent to which the work of popular writers is removed from actual oral storytelling.

<sup>6</sup>See Constance Rourke, American Humor: A Study of the National Character (New York, 1931).

It is also not surprising that when Richard Dorson coined the term "fakelore" he had in mind the tall tale and its exploitation by popular writers,<sup>7</sup> nor that Dorson took literary historian Walter Blair to task on a nationally broadcast radio program for being the author of a prime example of tall tale-folk hero fakelore, Tall Tale America.<sup>8</sup> The tall tale has enjoyed and will continue to enjoy the admiration of both folklorists and popularizers.

The approach one takes in studying any folklore genre is dictated in part by the genre and tradition one is working with. A type of lore with a relatively fixed form, such as the riddle or traditional folksongs of unknown composition, places certain restrictions upon the gifted performer that are not apparent in the performance of traditions with less emphasis on rote memorization and more emphasis on improvisation and creativity. Other genres, like the local legend, function primarily as folk history or traditional education rather than as entertainment, and thus are less subject to analysis of performance and context.

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<sup>7</sup>Richard M. Dorson, "Folklore and Fake Lore," American Mercury, LXX (1950), 335-343. See also Richard M. Dorson, American Folklore and the Historian (Chicago, 1971), pp. 3-14.

<sup>8</sup>Richard M. Dorson, "The Academic Future of Folklore," Journal of American Folklore Supplement (May, 1972), p. 107.

No folklore genre adheres universally to one particular avenue of study. For instance, storytellers in the Kakasd region of Hungary<sup>9</sup> and in the West Indies<sup>10</sup> are at least nominally reciting traditional folktales, but with a good deal more creativity and dramaturgy than those who tell the same or similar stories in some other traditions where the long European Märchen are told. In Anglo-American storytelling tradition, the only generalization possible on creativity versus rote memorization is that the extent of variation will be variable from region to region and from storyteller to storyteller. Published collections of folktales have traditionally presented unified stories, and rarely include second or third versions of the same story, least of all from the same narrator as is the case in the present study, where different tellings of the same story by the same narrator are included. Further folktale studies like those of Linda Dégh in Hungary and Daniel Crowley in the Bahamas

<sup>9</sup>See Linda Dégh, Folktales and Society: Storytelling in a Hungarian Peasant Community, trans. Emily M. Schosberger (Bloomington, 1969). Also see Istvan Sandor, "Dramaturgy of Tale-Telling," Acta Ethnographica, XVI, Fasc. 3-4 (Budapest, 1967), 305-338.

<sup>10</sup>See, for example, Daniel J. Crowley, I Could Talk Old Story Good: Creativity in Bahamian Folklore (Berkeley, 1966); and Roger D. Abrahams and Richard Bauman, "Sense and Nonsense in St. Vincent: Speech Behavior and Decorum in a Caribbean Community," American Anthropologist, LXXIII (1971), 762-772. For an excellent description of Jamaican storytelling, see MacEdward Leach, "Problems of Collecting Oral Literature," Publications of the Modern Languages Association, LXXVII (1962), 335-336.

will probably continue to show how much traditional narrative is not as fixed as earlier text publications would indicate. This is but one contribution that can be made by studies that take into account the storytellers, the storytelling context, and the stories themselves. Crowley's study of Bahamian storytelling would further suggest that such creativity depends in large part on the interaction between the storyteller and his audience.

This concept of interaction, of give and take between raconteur and audience, can also be applied to the tall tale, and similarly, the tall tale tradition is probably subject to considerable variation from area to area, from liars' bench to liars' bench. For all the collecting and publishing of tall tales that has been done in North America, there is a virtual paucity of in-depth contextual studies and no thorough study of the tall tale has focused on an exceptional tale-teller still living, a man with at least the potential to become a folk hero to later generations. Jansen's unpublished doctoral dissertation on Abraham "Oregon" Smith and Richard Lunt's recent study<sup>11</sup> of Jones Tracy from Mount Desert Island, Maine, stand alone as carefully documented studies of tall tale heroes and their milieu. Mody Boatright's Gib Morgan<sup>12</sup>

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11C. Richard K. Lunt, "Jones Tracy: Tall-Tale Hero from Mount Desert Island," Northeast Folklore, X (1968), 1-74.

12Mody C. Boatright, Gib Morgan, Minstrel of the Oil Fields, Publications of the Texas Folklore Society No. XX, 1945 (Dallas, 1965).

would be as valuable as the other two book-length studies but it lacks the scholarly documentation and control data that have come to be expected of folktale studies. Boatright, however, wrote for a popular rather than an academic audience.

An even more "popular" work is M. Jagendorf's The Marvelous Adventures of Johnny Darling.<sup>13</sup> Jagendorf, like Boatright, was of the school who felt that they could tell a story with more success than those from whom they collected it. The best telling of a story, by this thinking, is a reworked composite of the different versions collected from oral informants. As a consequence, the relationship between these written retellings and the oral narrations they are derived from is sometimes tenuous indeed. At the further end of the scale are the many "folk hero" books about Paul Bunyan, Pecos Bill, and the like that were written by a wide variety of writers, most of whom demonstrate no knowledge of authentic oral storytelling.<sup>14</sup> Others, notably Herbert Halpert and Jan Harold Brunvand, have collected and published tall tales with valuable contextual information and have noted the existence of tall tale heroes, men who were remembered

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<sup>13</sup>M. Jagendorf, The Marvelous Adventures of Johnny Darling (New York, 1949).

<sup>14</sup>For a good example of the misguided and unscholarly attitude of one author of "American folk hero" books, see James Cloyd Bowman's defense of his craft in "Bringing Folk Heroes to Children," New York Folklore Quarterly, XIII (1957), 208-214.

and memorialized for the tales they told.<sup>15</sup> Briefly, then, this is the North American literature of tall tales and tall tale heroes against which Robert Coffill is to be compared throughout this work. It should be noted that the literature being considered here is what can be called self-conscious, and does not include published texts and commentary from the nineteenth century and earlier.

It might appear unusual that no intensive biographical study of a living tale-teller has been undertaken until we realize that no folklore work of this nature had been done in North America until the past few years, and even now the published number of such biographical works can be counted on the fingers of one hand. Leonard W. Roberts' Up Cutshin and Down Greasy,<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Halpert's contextual-functional work on the tall tale and the tall tale hero can be found in the following articles: "John Darling, A New York Munchausen," Journal of American Folklore, LVII (1944), 97-106; "Tales of a Mississippi Soldier," Southern Folklore Quarterly, VIII (1944), 103-114; "Tall Tales and Other Yarns from Calgary, Alberta," California Folklore Quarterly, IV (1945), 29-49; and "Tales Told By Soldiers," ibid., 364-376. Halpert was also the first to present a scholarly consideration of Abraham "Oregon" Smith in an article he co-authored with Emma L. Robinson: "Oregon Smith, an Indiana Folk Hero," Southern Folklore Quarterly, VI (1942), 163-168. The most valuable of the more recent articles published on the tall tale hero is Jan Harold Brunvand's "Len Henry: North Idaho Munchausen," Northwest Folklore, I (1965), 11-19.

<sup>16</sup>Leonard W. Roberts, Up Cutshin and Down Greasy: Folkways of a Kentucky Mountain Family (Lexington, Kentucky, 1959).

published in 1959, was the first of its kind, as Roberts collected and edited the impressionistic experiences of two brothers, a singer and a storyteller. Despite the significance of this pioneering effort, it is entirely non-analytic and also somewhat patronizing.

Two other recently published works, both on singers, merit consideration in the present context. One goes little beyond Roberts in an attempt at analysis and is only biographical insofar as the singer relates the songs to herself and to different periods in her life.<sup>17</sup> The other, Henry Glassie's "'Take That Night Train to Selma': An Excursion to the Outskirts of Scholarship,"<sup>18</sup> is more psychological than biographical in its focus, as Glassie traces the development of an anti-Italian, anti-Negro song as it is being made by the songmaker-performer. The point to be drawn from Glassie's work is the difficulty of studying honestly and fully a performer and creator of folklore. Glassie has since regretted that he published his "Excursion" because of its very personal nature, and this even after having the subject of his study read it and approve of it.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Roger D. Abrahams, ed., A Singer and Her Songs: Almeda Riddle's Book of Ballads (Baton Rouge, 1970).

<sup>18</sup>Henry Glassie, "'Take That Night Train to Selma': An Excursion to the Outskirts of Scholarship," in Henry Glassie, Edward D. Ives, and John F. Szwed, Folksongs and Their Makers (Bowling Green, Ohio, 1971), pp. 1-58.

<sup>19</sup>Personal conversation with Henry Glassie in Washington D. C., November, 1971.

Anthropologists have been collecting and publishing detailed life histories for more than fifty years, and folklorists have occasionally presented biographical accounts of black musicians and storytellers.<sup>20</sup> In these instances, however, there has always been a cultural distance between the interviewer and the interviewee. Even with promises of anonymity, it can in some ways be more difficult to study a living performer or bearer of folk traditions than someone who has been dead for some years but who is still remembered as a good storyteller or songmaker. With the hero of story, song, or legend no longer living, there is no problem of stepping on his emotional toes, nor any great problem of the collector becoming overly patronizing in his written study of the individual. These can be barriers for a study based on a living bearer of tradition, especially if part of the scholarly intent is to understand what the folklore means to the individual and how he or she uses it.

Similarly, the friends and acquaintances of the tradition-bearer or the noted local performer will talk more willingly and candidly if he or she is no longer

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<sup>20</sup>See, for example, Richard M. Dorson, "The Life History of James Douglas Suggs," in Dorson, American Negro Folktales (New York, 1967), pp. 59-64. The best life history of a black musician, based in large part on Library of Congress recordings made by the author, is Alan Lomax's Mister Jelly Roll: The Fortunes of Jelly Roll Morton, New Orleans Creole and "Inventor of Jazz" (New York, 1950). For an impressionistic autobiography written by the subject himself, see William Broonzy, Big Bill Blues: William Broonzy's Story as told to Yannick Bruynoghe (New York, 1964).



living. They will not then be talking behind the person's back, and the danger of rapport-shattering repercussions cannot exist either for such secondary informants or for the collector in their relationships with the person being studied. It is partly for this reason that the scope of the present study has not included overt or tape-recorded interviews with those with whom the subject is in day-to-day contact. My frequent role as participant-observer has helped to make such interviewing unnecessary.

The most illuminating approach to a study of the tall tale is the tale cycle, the fact that the stories tend to gravitate toward one man who tells or told them about himself. This is also characteristic of personal legends and anecdotal stories which are told about strong men, witches, and the many kinds of wise and foolish characters, although such stories normally are not told by the legendary characters themselves. Basically, the tall tales that cluster about one man can be of two types: those told about himself and those told in the third person about others. To be remembered, the tall tale hero must have told a considerable number of stories about himself, and from all indications those Münchhausens who were most often the heroes of their own tales, like "Oregon" Smith and Gib Morgan, have the best chance of being remembered as yarners after their death. It would seem that the more egocentric tale-tellers almost had a

sense of history that the more communal tale-tellers lacked.

The communal yarn spinners, those who enjoyed the casual give and take of lie-swapping at the country store or other local loafing place, have not felt the need or found the opportunity to be the center attraction. Gib Morgan, for instance, exhibited a keen sense of his own historicity by being his own press agent. When he arrived in an area he would have a story announcing his arrival and latest exploits placed in the local trade paper of the oil industry. And the very fact that he travelled from place to place and was always the center of attention helped to spread his legend. One winter in his later years, after he had retired from active work in the oil fields, he was given free room and board by a storekeeper because his presence as a yarn spinner was good for business.<sup>21</sup>

Though such wandering as Gib Morgan did is unique, other tall tale heroes who were remembered some time after their deaths also had to be wanderers of sorts. Abraham "Oregon" Smith was remembered in both Indiana and Illinois because he did not settle for his whole life in one community, and his nickname indicates that he also spent part of his life in Oregon. In fact, both Morgan and Smith were exceedingly restless in their old age, the

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<sup>21</sup>Boatright, Gib Morgan, p. 42.

period of life when their reputations and repertoires were most likely to become fixed in the folk memory.<sup>22</sup>

Besides this proclivity for wandering helping to extend the fame of the tall teller, it also serves a more important function. The storyteller who follows his occupation from place to place, be it lumbering, fishing, or oil drilling, has the opportunity to add to his repertoire that the stay-at-home lacks.<sup>23</sup> Not only does he hear new stories and meet more storytellers, but also he adds to his own experiences, and such experiences are the cloth from which he tailors traditional stories to fit himself.

Another factor that has helped to traditionalize the tall tale hero has been his own insistence on the veracity of his tales. Warren Stanley Walker, writing of an Illinois tall tale hero named Daniel Stamps, noted this tendency on the part of the teller: "Most of these [tales] Stamps once told about himself as true accounts of adventures he had experienced and feats he had performed, and many are the folks who still remember the wrath incurred by disbelievers!"<sup>24</sup> Of one New York tale-teller,

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., pp. 27-32, 36-43; Jansen, "Abraham 'Oregon' Smith," pp. 111-138.

<sup>23</sup>See Dègh, Folktales and Society, pp. 80-81, and especially, pp. 168-171, where the importance of wandering in establishing a repertoire of stories is discussed.

<sup>24</sup>Warren Stanley Walker, "Dan'l Stamps: Tall Tale Hero of the River Country," Midwest Folklore, IV (1954), 153.

Henry Denny, it is written that "no questions must be asked or he would leave in high dudgeon, and if one ever referred later to a story he had told he would throw down whatever tools he happened to be using, if he were in the midst of farm work, and leave for the day."<sup>25</sup> How much of this character trait of the tall tale hero is true and not part of the hero's legend is difficult to discern, but even in Lunt's careful study of Jones Tracy we find a hint of this -- Tracy's long deer stories were serious though humorous business, and their truth was not to be doubted.<sup>26</sup> This emphasis upon the truth of his tales was also a notable characteristic of John Darling, a New York tale-teller about whom Herbert Halpert made an excellent<sup>s</sup> short study.<sup>27</sup> Halpert also found this "insistence that he spoke nothing but the truth" to be a characteristic of an Alberta tall tale hero, Dave McDougall, of whom one informant said that he had told the stories so often that he believed them himself.<sup>28</sup> This latter trait was also attributed to "Oregon" Smith

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<sup>25</sup>Chester A. Smith, "Henry Denny, Storyteller of the Highlands," New York Folklore Quarterly, V (1949), 60.

<sup>26</sup>Lunt, "Jones Tracy," p. 21. See also page 17.

<sup>27</sup>Halpert, "John Darling," pp. 98-99.

<sup>28</sup>Halpert, "Tall Tales and Other Yarns from Calgary, Alberta," pp. 31, 34.

by one of Jansen's informants.<sup>29</sup>

Jansen has noted the importance of truth in the tall telling of Abe Smith and has suggested a relationship between this and the supposed originality of the tale-teller, another generally recognized characteristic of the tall tale hero:

One other point remains to be made. Perhaps it is related to the illusion of truth for which Abe strove, but it has its independent significance. Like so many tellers of real folk tales, Abe always gave the impression that these were his stories; if they did not honestly happen, at least he had made them up. The fact was quite otherwise. In a few instances the stories were true; perhaps one or two were of Abe's invention; the brief whoppers were, of course, his coinage. But certainly the majority of his recitations were folktales. Yet Abe was successful in giving the impression that the stories were his original creations. Only in the instances of two stories did I encounter even in the modern age any doubt that these were Abe Smith stories; i.e., stories invented by him. Perhaps this should be the highest criterion of whether a folktale teller's technique is preeminently successful. If the criterion is accepted, Abe Smith's manner of telling tales was certainly the best that his region had ever witnessed.<sup>30</sup>

The extent to which Jansen's sources believed Abe Smith's stories to be original with him might indicate that those people from whom he collected were neither active nor passive participants in an ongoing tall tale tradition.

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<sup>29</sup>Jansen, "Abraham 'Oregon' Smith," p. 151. This same attribute, that the teller supposedly believed his own tales of exaggeration, was mentioned in a county history, in reference to Abe Smith, published more than a decade before Smith died. See ibid., p. 167.

<sup>30</sup>ibid., p. 173. See also William Hugh Jansen, "Lying Abe: A Tale-Teller and His Reputation," Hoosier Folklore, VII (1948), 124.

Had they been familiar with such storytelling from other places, it is likely that they would recognize the traditional nature of many of the stories. Nonetheless, the man who insists on the truth and originality of his stories and who also is the center attraction rather than just the best of several communal tale-tellers apparently has a better chance with posterity.

Originality or creativity, as Jansen has discussed, is a final characteristic of the tall tale hero, and this important quality has only been intimated by previous studies because the original, egocentric tellers were no longer around to be questioned. The process of recreation and even invention in the tall tale genre certainly must be considered, and can only be fully documented by studying a living tale-teller. Stith Thompson's monumental Motif-Index of Folk-Literature<sup>31</sup> probably has militated against the recognition of originality and invention in storytelling even more than Thompson himself would have wanted. Thompson defines the motif as "the smallest element in a tale having a power to persist in tradition," and the tale-type as "a traditional tale that has an independent existence."<sup>32</sup> Yet, when we realize that "By far the largest number of traditional types consist of these single motifs"<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup>Stith Thompson, Motif-Index of Folk-Literature, 6 vols. (Bloomington, 1955-58).

<sup>32</sup>Stith Thompson, The Folktale (New York, 1946), p. 415.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 416.

and that "The same simple motif may arise independently in different places,"<sup>34</sup> it becomes apparent that the tall tales themselves need not always be the products of monogenesis and diffusion. Certainly those collected tales that closely fit specific motifs in Thompson's index or in Baughman's companion volume for North America and England are traditional and are not repeatedly invented, yet even these are largely recreated and localized by the storyteller. Finally, anyone who has worked with Baughman's index to classify a field-recorded collection of tall tales has probably been struck by the large number of tales that at best can only be given general motif references.

Given a tall tale tradition and an ability to spin yarns, it is reasonable that the storyteller could invent or in large part recreate tales from general and well-travelled tall tale motifs. The possibilities are infinite. In a collection of Jonathanisms from antebellum American newspapers, C. Grant Loomis suggested that such epigrammatic hyperboles from this period illustrated the extent to which exaggeration was and is part of the American character. These brief, non-narrative exaggerations, like the one about a man so tall he had to stand on a ladder to tie his necktie, can be

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 383.

considered ficts to the more elaborate tall tale narratives.<sup>35</sup> If the exaggeration about the natural and man-made environment is part of the daily conversation in a community or group, the creation or adaptation of tall tale motifs is all the more probable. Originality, supposed or real, seems to be a trademark of those tall tale heroes who have been discovered, and even seems characteristic of the genre. Such an unlikely source as the state guidebook of Arkansas, though obviously ethnocentric in its bias, indicates this adaptability of the tall tale: "Similar yarns are to be heard all through the Southern mountains and, for that matter, throughout the United States. Countless Arkansans, however, seem to have been blessed with an ability to concoct variations of the standard stories ...."<sup>36</sup>

On Gib Morgan's originality, Mody Boatright wrote that "Gib Morgan did not create his tales from nothing. But when due allowance has been made for borrowing and

<sup>35</sup>C. Grant Loomis, "Jonathanisms: American Epigrammatic Hyperbole," Western Folklore, VI (1947), 211. C. W. von Sydow's term was not applied as an analogue by Loomis. For Sydow's terminological contributions to folk narrative scholarship, see Carl Wilhelm von Sydow, Selected Papers on Folklore, ed. Laurits Bødker (Copenhagen, 1948); pp. 60-88, 106-126. For a collection of epigrammatic hyperbole from oral sources, see Herbert Halpert, "A Pattern of Proverbial Exaggeration from West Kentucky," Midwest Folklore, I (1951), 41-47.

<sup>36</sup>Arkansas, a Guide to the State, compiled by the Federal Writers' Project (New York, 1941), p. 98. Quoted in Vance Randolph, We Always Lie To Strangers (New York, 1951), p. 12.



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adaptation, he remains the most fertile creator of comic folk tales known to America."<sup>37</sup> Jan Brunvand, who has made the most thorough short study of a tall tale hero, Len Henry of Idaho, stated that "For seventeen tales no specific motif or close parallel has been identified; several seem to be tales that Len made up at the spur of the moment."<sup>38</sup> Brunvand further explains and elaborates on this important point:

A close study of the 116 variants of these tales ... indicates at least that he probably did not always, as many informants thought, make up these stories or repeat them in exactly the same way. Len Henry was a local repository of many far-travelled tall tales which he retold in a personalized format when occasions arose; those that he invented were nearly all within the folktale tradition that had become his trademark. That he sometimes added and changed details from one performance to another is suggested by every tale for which there are variants.<sup>39</sup>

Variation and adaptation, originality and inventiveness, an open eye for the humorous and incongruous in everyday life, and a quick though droll wit that extends beyond the obviously traditional tall tale motifs: these are the characteristics of the tall tale teller. If he is to be immortalized for a generation or more after his death, he very likely insisted upon the truth and/or originality of his tales, and if he was part of a

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<sup>37</sup>Boatright, Gib Morgan, p. 5.

<sup>38</sup>Brunvand, "Len Henry," p. 15.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., p. 16.

yarn-swapping tradition, he at least was the best of his generation of liars, a giant among giants, and quite possibly had an outlet or rostrum that others of his generation lacked. Gib Morgan and Abe Smith seemingly cultivated their own fame: they sought loafing places where they could tell their stories and revelled in being the center of attention; they were not yarn-swappers. Jones Tracy, on the other hand, fortuitously had a rostrum thrust upon him when he moved to a house "with a two story dance hall-rooming house attached." This, as Lunt says, "was perhaps greatly responsible for the development of Jones' reputation as a famous tale teller and folk hero."<sup>40</sup>

Since Jones was sixty-two by 1918 (when he reopened the dance hall) and a cripple from arthritis, he didn't dance, but he did provide an attraction to the dances by his very presence. ... Jones stayed in the kitchen of the house in his rocking chair by the stove telling stories by the hour to anyone who would listen, and he never lacked an audience. Tired dancers, wall flowers, and connoisseurs of the storytelling art flocked downstairs from the second floor dance hall to the kitchen to hear old Mr. Tracy perform. Every week he had new stories and he never grew tired of telling them. A few years of this and Jones had been heard by many interested people, many of whom never forgot the old man's wit and the stories he told. His reputation spread so that he could not stop telling stories even if he had wanted to, particularly at the dances.<sup>41</sup>

For a teller of tall tales to be remembered, then, he must of course be an excellent storyteller in his own

<sup>40</sup>Lunt, "Jones Tracy," p. 10.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., p. 16.

right, and in addition he must have felt the need, at least late in his life, to be the center of attention in a group as a storyteller. He must create a context for his storytelling. He must find a rostrum that is his alone. He cannot wait for tall telling situations to occur. In the following chapter, Robert Coffil will be introduced more formally, and the relationship of Coffil and his stories to this tall tale literature will be considered.

### III

#### Robert Coffil: The Storyteller and His Tradition

I first met Robert Coffil on February 17, 1970, when I drove out to his house in Delhaven from the high school in Canning, Nova Scotia, where I was teaching at the time. The short, five-mile drive took me through the village of Canning, with a population of six hundred, past apple orchards and fields which yield potatoes and tobacco, to the roadside community of Pereau. In this part of Nova Scotia, each elongated group of houses along the paved secondary roads has its own name. Pereau is one of the largest of these unofficial communities. Delhaven, on the other hand, is one of the smallest; in fact, it is not to be found on any road maps and is not designated by any signs along the road. To reach it, one continues on the same road down a long hill beyond Pereau to the small valley of the Pereau River, actually a creek no more than a few feet wide. The Pereau is the most northerly and the smallest of the five Kings County rivers that flow east into the Minas Basin. At the mouth of this creek is a cross dyke, built in the 1820's to reclaim about fifty acres of land from the high tides of the Minas Basin. Today, the more important function of the dyke is as a road link between the small communities of Delhaven and Blomidon to the north and

the communities of Medford and Kingsport near the mouth of the Habitant or Canning River.

The Coffil house, a large, two-story farmhouse estimated by Robert Coffil to be over 150 years old, is situated on a hill overlooking the Minas Basin and its thirty to fifty foot tides. Directly behind the house is North Mountain, a 600-800 foot ridge that extends from Digby Gut, ninety miles to the west, to Cape Blomidon, three miles beyond where Coffil and his family live. At the top of Cape Blomidon is a recently opened provincial park, where the legendary hero of Micmac tradition, Glooscap, pitched his tent and transformed the landscape to what it is today.<sup>1</sup> The cross dyke on the Pereau River, though built by the English settlers, is the heritage of the earlier French Acadian presence in the area. The Acadians, before being deported in 1755, had built dykes along the Kings County rivers and reclaimed about four thousand acres of land for

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<sup>1</sup>For Micmac tales, including stories about Glooscap, see Silas Tertius Rand, Legends of the Micmacs (New York, 1894). This collection has been tapped by several authors of children's books about Glooscap. Rand, a Kings County native and lifelong missionary among the Micmacs, made one of the best tale collections for any of the North American Indian tribes, although his role as clergyman made his collection somewhat expurgated. His greatest achievement was a 40,000 word Micmac-English dictionary. The Micmacs did not have their own written language prior to Rand's linguistic work. For representative Glooscap tales from another Wabenaiki tribe, the Malecite of New Brunswick, see Edward D. Ives, ed., "Malecite and Passamaquoddy Tales," Northeast Folklore, VI (1964), 16-40.

farming. The acreage of dykeland has more than doubled since then with construction of dykes across three of the five tidal streams.<sup>2</sup> In all the time I have spent with Robert Coffil since this time when I first met him, he has never mentioned the previous Acadian history of the area; his only association to Glooscap is that this is the name of the elementary school in Canning.

While Robert Coffil has spent most of his life as a merchant seaman and fisherman, he is somewhat unusual in this respect for the area in which he lives. Kings County is the bread basket of Nova Scotia, leading the province in the production of vegetables, fruit, livestock, and poultry. Seventy-seven per cent of the fruit orchards in Nova Scotia are in Kings County.<sup>3</sup> Thus,

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<sup>2</sup>Andrew Hill Clark, Acadia: The Geography of Early Nova Scotia to 1760 (Madison, Wisconsin, 1968), pp. 235-236. See also Esther Clark Wright, Blomidon Rose (Windsor, Nova Scotia, 1972), p. 79. Mrs. Wright refers to 8500 acres at present, that is, the mid 1950's when the book was first published, but she gives no source for her information. It seems to be a fairly accurate estimate. There are 2400 acres of dykeland along the Canard River. The largest area of dykeland -- about 3500 acres -- is at Grand Pré, protected by Acadian-built running dykes at the mouths of the Cornwallis and Gaspereau Rivers. Running dykes, made of marsh mud and upland brush, follow the river channel and are built from six to ten feet above the top of the riverbank. A cross dyke is a dam, made of mud, brush, and rock, built across a river. A sluiceway with clapper-valve gates is constructed through the base of the cross dyke and lets the river flow into the sea but keeps the salt water from going upstream.

<sup>3</sup>Mabel G. Ferguson and Marion Schurman McLellan, A History and Geography of Kings County (Wolfville, Nova Scotia, 1968), p. 29.

despite its proximity to the sea, the area is land-oriented with agriculture as its principal industry. Those who do not farm find employment in the multitude of supporting or secondary industries and trades that are to be found wherever man lives by the land. For instance, although there are no fish processing plants in Kings County, there are scores of poultry plants and poultry farms, fruit and vegetable processing plants, and the like.

The purpose of my five-mile trip out to Delhaven was to pick up two students of mine whom I had earlier dropped off at Coffil's house with a large and quite unportable Panasonic tape recorder. The students were from a grade eleven English class of mine that was planning to publish a collection of tall tales, similar to the book of legends and beliefs one of my classes and I had made the previous year.<sup>4</sup> We had gotten Coffil's name and made the initial contact because in my first year at the high school one student had turned in a Bob Coffil tale, and then this second year of student collecting produced several John Coffil tales and another one attributed to Bob. The proposed tall tale book never did get completed, and I have discussed the problems

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<sup>4</sup>Richard S. Tallman, ed., Belief and Legend from Northern Kings County, Nova Scotia (Canning, Nova Scotia, 1969).

we encountered with this project elsewhere,<sup>5</sup> but the two student collectors, Paul Sheffield and Linda Legge, had succeeded in finding tales and a good teller well beyond my expectations on that gray February afternoon, the kind of late winter day in Nova Scotia with slush on the roads promising spring and a dark sky promising yet another storm.

When I went in to get the students, I introduced myself to Coffil, a large man with thinning white hair, and asked if he had been telling Paul and Linda some stories, with an inflection in my voice to suggest that stories are not necessarily the whole truth. He kind of grinned, and said, in what in time would become to me a familiar, nonchalantly matter-of-fact tone of voice, that yes, he supposed he might have told them one or two stories. In fact, they had recorded fourteen tall tales, one fool tale, and three personal experience narratives, two dealing with the supernatural and the third about an exaggeration he told at Don Forsythe's store near his home that he has since forgotten. This spoke well of both the collectors and the storyteller.

The next day, Paul and Linda devised an informant data sheet for Robert Coffil at my request. It was based on what I told the class about collecting stories and

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<sup>5</sup>See Richard S. Tallman, "Folklore in the Schools: Teaching, Collecting, and Publishing," New York Folklore Quarterly, XXVIII (1972), 181-182.



storytellers, and, like myself, was quite subjective. Yet, the questions on this data sheet that dealt with evaluating the storyteller, or, specifically, the teller of tall tales, form the basis for much of this work. These questions are: Did he insist the stories were true, or were they just stories he laughed about? Is he a good storyteller? What gestures or facial expressions did the storyteller use? Does he tell stories often or rarely? How long has he known the stories? Does he consider himself a storyteller or are they just some stories he happens to know?

Any seasoned questionnaire-maker or test-giver knows enough to add a parenthetical "explain" to each of his subjective questions and to give the person who must complete the questionnaire or test plenty of space in which to do the explaining. Paul and Linda did neither, and in retrospect I hardly blame them: this thesis can be at best a partial answer to those questions and to the questions which the students' questions call forth. Consider, for example, the question asking if he is a good storyteller. We have to define "story" before we can know what a "storyteller" is, and to judge whether the storyteller is a "good" one we must be familiar with a wide range of storytellers and storytelling contexts. In other words, a storyteller in what context, relative to what other storytellers?

If, language barriers aside, we were to take Robert Coffil to the Kakasd region of Hungary to tell his stories among the people of Linda Dégh's exhaustive and excellent folktale research, most if not all of his stories would be too brief to cause notice. Conversely, the Kakasd storyteller in Kings County, Nova Scotia, would not find an audience with enough patience or time to endure his or her narration, however dramatically and rhetorically effective it might be. More within the realm of possibility, how would Coffil fare as a narrator in folktale-rich pockets of tradition in the southeastern United States? Again, the question is not so much a question as it is a misunderstanding of storytelling traditions. The only tradition or traditions against which the storyteller can be evaluated are those which have nurtured him and which he, in turn, has nurtured by his own active or passive participation.

The broader tradition of tall tale telling, especially as it relates to the man whose reputation as a teller becomes fixed in the folk memory, has been considered in the previous chapter. More germane to an evaluation of Coffil as a storyteller, however, are the specific storytelling traditions and contexts that he has had access to and taken part in. In other words, what is/are the storytelling tradition(s) in the specific area of study -- the Minas Basin-Bay of Fundy communities

in Kings County, Nova Scotia -- and in the other places where Coffil has heard stories and told stories?

Determining this is not as simple as it may appear. Folklorists until quite recently were very much item-oriented, and sought the materials of folklore without asking informants about the situations in which the items were used or told and without trying to observe these items as they existed in natural storytelling situations. This emphasis upon items of folklore is now changing to an emphasis on context, yet an equal simplification of the complex study of folklore is likely if one is led to believe that the context for the performance of folklore is static rather than open-ended.<sup>6</sup> To be sure, for example, stories were told and songs were sung on Saturday nights in the lumbercamps during the heyday of the logging industry in North America, and as recently as the 1940's when Coffil worked at a woods camp on Cape Blomidon. But it would be fallacious to suppose that all bunkhouse socializing

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<sup>6</sup>For examples of this direction in North American folklore scholarship, see Americo Parés and Richard Bauman, eds., Toward New Perspectives in Folklore, Publications of the American Folklore Society, Bibliographical and Special Series Vol. XXIII (Austin, Texas, 1971). First published in Journal of American Folklore, LXXXIV, 331. References to essays in Parés and Bauman are, in all cases, given to citations to JAF. For a resumé of this trend toward contextual folklore studies, including other references, see Richard M. Dorson, ed., Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction (Chicago, 1972), pp. 45-47. Dorson characterizes the proponents of context as "the young Turks."

was genre-specific, that is, focused on singing and storytelling. Some contexts, some specific times and places, are more conducive to folklore performance than others and therefore are more genre-specific. Likewise, some groups of people are more performance-conscious than others.

Don Forsythe's general store, down the road a few hundred yards from Coffil's house, has anywhere from five to twenty men in it every night of the week, and without soliciting the performance of items a participant-observer can expect to hear a few stories on any given night. Most of these are personal experience narratives and are defined as stories because of the circumscribed way in which they begin and end. In the course of casual conversation a man might make his point with such a story, and might interject a comment like "Let me tell you ..." and then proceed with the story of his experience. Besides the interjection, a slightly raised voice and the chronologic or narrative framework of the man's talk indicate that a performance situation exists. All of this helps to focus the attention on him. The story ends, usually humorously, with comment from the teller and his listeners on the experience, relating the experience to the topic of conversation.

The level of performance is generally low, and much mere talk at the store is simply social conversation

rather than circumscribed narrative with beginning and ending. William Hugh Jansen's scheme for classifying folklore performance can be applied to this situation. By this scheme, the more the performance of an item or genre is the domain of a select few performers the greater the level of performance is.<sup>7</sup> Everyone at the store in Delhaven is free to talk and occasionally tells a story, so the level of these performances is relatively low. This would not be the case if only one or a very few of the men "held court" and actively told stories while the majority solely listened, but the men do not go to the store to tell or listen to stories; they go there to socialize with their peers and fellow workers, to talk about the weather and the crops, snowmobiles and hockey. This is a storytelling context, nonetheless, and the only rostrum Robert Coffil has except for the casual situations in which one might tell a story as he goes about the daily business of living.

Paul and Linda answered their question-- Does he consider himself a storyteller or are they just some stories he happens to know? -- by writing "just some stories." At the time this confused me. How could a man, like Coffil, reel off fourteen stories of a very

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<sup>7</sup>William Hugh Jansen, "Classifying Performance in the Study of Verbal Folklore," in W. Edson Richmond, ed., Studies in Folklore in Honor of Distinguished Service Professor Stith Thompson, Indiana University Folklore Series No. 9 (Bloomington, 1957), pp. 110-118.

specific and self-limiting narrative genre, the tall tale, without being a storyteller or seeing himself as a storyteller, a local raconteur? And several of the tales he told were first person narratives, told as his own personal experiences. Thus, to an extent Coffil fulfilled the definitional criterion for the tall tale and the tall tale hero which had been established by Gustav Henningsen, that the tall tale per se is a first person narrative and that lying tales told in the third person, about someone else, are not functionally equivalent to the first person tales.<sup>8</sup>

As my work with Robert Coffil has progressed, however, I have come to see that his evaluation of himself as a storyteller is relative to the tradition in which he has told his tales. Other men at the general store, farmers who have not travelled as Coffil has, might well characterize him as more of a storyteller than he would himself, because in the fifty-eight years that he has sailed in the Bay of Fundy and the Gulf of Maine he has heard more stories and storytellers and been in more storytelling situations than his general store peers of

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<sup>8</sup>Gustav Henningsen, "The Art of Perpendicular Lying," trans. Warren E. Roberts, Journal of the Folklore Institute, II (1967), 216. See also Susan Mullin, "Oregon's Huckleberry Finn: A Munchhausen Enters Tradition," Northwest Folklore, II (1966), 19. The collector's primary informant for the Finn tales clearly distinguished between the creative, first person stories that Finn told and his role as a repeater of the same stories in the third person.

relatively limited experience. Similarly, when our conversation has focused on the store as a place to tell stories, Coffil has seen himself as a storyteller; in other contexts, his concept of himself as a storyteller is less certain.

The limited experience and the static, small circle of friends has kept the farmers from becoming storytellers, and this has also made them less performance-conscious than Coffil. One cannot develop an active repertoire of traditional narrative material when he does not travel and partake in a variety of storytelling situations or when he is not in a milieu of socializing that is constantly rejuvenated by newcomers, outsiders, and strangers. A man perhaps could become a noted local raconteur if his social milieu, such as a general store or a blacksmith shop, was a center of activity for a large enough population, if it was, for example, a cross-roads store. A good illustration of such a man is Jones Tracy and his dance hall. Without such a rostrum, such a place for socializing, the potential storyteller's repertoire would either become stagnant and passive because he could not tell the same stories to the same men week after week, or he would be considered a bore because he did tell the same stories to the same men. Tall tales, especially, are not subject to repeated tellings to the same audience because their narrative

success depends upon an absurd exaggeration set in a realistic framework. If the audience has heard the same story from the same man before, they will not be momentarily fooled or surprised by the cunning absurdity of the narrative. Only a man with a forceful, dominating personality could tell the same tall tales repeatedly to the same audience, as Abe Smith apparently did.

Given a static social context such as that at the store near Coffil's house, another possibility for tall telling exists: that the narrator is sufficiently inventive to create new stories to fit specific situations as they arise. It is this, then, that makes Coffil a storyteller to himself and to his friends at the store. He is able to create and adapt stories to fit the present moment. He becomes, in this sense, a man of wit rather than a reciter of well-travelled traditional tales. He is a different kind of storyteller, different in this respect from his brother John who "held the throne" as a narrator and also somewhat different from the tall tale heroes discussed in the previous chapter.

The significance of creativity and adaptability to an understanding of the tall tale genre is a recurrent theme throughout the present work, and Coffil's creativity as a storyteller will be discussed from different points of view in Chapter VI, Texts, and Chapter VIII, The Aesthetic of a Storyteller. For the time being, it need



only be known that Coffil is a creative storyteller, a man of wit, and that, given his quiet strength of character, this was the only available option for him as a storyteller. He could not command attention as the storyteller at Don Forsythe's store because of his quiet, unassuming personality.

Besides the prerequisite experience and the advantageous rostrum needed for Robert Coffil to become a storyteller, his self-evaluation of his narrative ability rests in large part on his personality, his need or desire to see himself as a storyteller. Without this need on his part to be the center of attention, it will be difficult for Coffil the storyteller to become part of the folk memory in his local community.

It is axiomatic, I believe, that for any person to live at peace with himself he must feel his own importance and worth reflected in something that he is, does, or can do. Certainly, it need not be only one personal trait or ability that gives a man his sense of self, nor is it likely that the same characteristic or skill could sustain a person's self-esteem for his entire lifetime, but among the myriad possibilities can be listed occupational skill, physical appearance, athletic ability, and folklore performance. In other words, every man must have his own "ego trip" if he is to be happy with his lot in life.

This is especially applicable to folklore performance because, as anyone who has ever told a story or sung a song knows, it is an exhilarating feeling to be the center of attention in a group and to succeed in pleasing an audience. Furthermore, in a very real sense the folklore performer or the "star" informant in a folk community is a man of knowledge, an educated person. This is true whether the genre of expertise is ritualized or spontaneous storytelling or local history and legend or traditional remedies and cures. The knowledge or ability one has gotten from the culture is recognized and admired by the community.

In an evaluation of performance-oriented genres of folklore, the tall tale would rank at or near the top as an "ego trip" genre. By general definition, the tall tale is a first person narrative recounting the fabulous achievement, exploit, or experience of the narrator. It is a grossly exaggerated memorate or personal experience narrative, so exaggerated that the untruth of the situation is immediately apparent at the conclusion of the tale. The conclusion is similar to the punch line of a joke, in that it provokes laughter from the listeners, yet the tall tale differs from the joke because it is told, straight-faced, as a true experience, and because the narrator's self-esteem is served in two ways. First, like the joke, the tall tale

focuses attention on the teller and gets his audience to laugh with him, but because the tall tale is a personal narrative the attention is therefore more directly on the narrator. Second, and unlike the joke, the tall tale affords its teller a sense of superiority vis-à-vis his audience. In a subtle, unobtrusive way, he is able to laugh at his listeners in that instant when the reality he has created is shattered by the absurd climax. Especially is this the case when the tall tale genre is used by the teller to put one of the listeners in his place. The following Bob Coffil story about a story exemplifies this function of the tall tale.

Coffil directed this story toward a man from Yarmouth County in Don Forsythe's store one evening. This man, who had been bragging about the lobster fishing in the lower end of Nova Scotia when Coffil came into the store, had come from his home, more than one hundred miles to the southwest, to the Blomidon area for the fall harvest of apples and potatoes.

Well, he goes down there where the lobster fish are, down around the lower end of Nova Scotia. And he, he was up here a few days and I never knowed him. But I went over to the store and he was there, and of course he was talking about fishing and down around the lower end of Nova Scotia. And the boys here, Forrest Lyons and them, when I went in, of course they was looking for a story. They asked, he was telling about how big a lobsters they caught, and how many, and all this, and Forrest says, "What's the biggest lobster you ever seen?" That was me. And I says, "Well," I says, "the biggest one I ever caught was in the Bay of Pigs."

And I says, "I was fishing out of a twelve-foot skiff, and when I (chuckling), when I got him aboard the skiff, why, his tail hung over the stern of the skiff and his, his claws hung down over the bow." And he fired his hat right down on the floor and shook his head. But he thought he was in a bunch of farmers and no fishermen, you see. Of course I wasn't much of a fisherman, but still I'd been around Cape Sable a couple times. But he didn't like it 'cause he found somebody that had been around the same place he'd been, see.<sup>9</sup>

Robert Coffil's need to gratify his ego by putting men in their place and by being the center of attention with his humor of exaggeration is negligible. When he says, "Of course I wasn't much of a fisherman," he betrays his own modesty and understates his ability and experience. Seldom has his wit taken a vindictive turn, and rarely could it be said that he has consciously or forcefully created a context for his storytelling. Rather, he waits for a situation to occur and then adapts or creates a story to fit that situation. If the general store across the road from his house could be considered his rostrum, then too it is the rostrum of every farmer from Pereaue to Cape Blomidon who ever sat on the bench, warmed his feet by the wood stove, and talked about the crops or the weather, or the work boots he bought used for

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<sup>9</sup>Recorded interview with Robert Coffil, Sr., Delhaven, Nova Scotia, September 29, 1972. Original tapes and tape transcriptions are on deposit in the Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive. All further references to tape-recorded interviews with Coffil, all of which took place at his home, are cited as follows: Recorded interview, date of recording. See Chapter VI, Texts, no. 4, for discussion of this story.

three dollars and has worn for three years. Coffil's low profile, his lack of egocentricity as a tall teller, possibly weighs against his becoming a folk hero, remembered by later generations in the tall tales they might tell about him. As his life history will indicate, his sense of self has been fulfilled by his success at various jobs and by his obvious superiority over others in work situations.

Another factor working against his becoming a folk hero to the extent of an Abe Smith or a Gib Morgan is the very fact that his tall telling is oriented toward specific contexts. Bob Coffil has a set -- and quite limited -- repertoire of tall tales, but most of the stories he tells today are more or less spontaneous and are told to fit a particular situation. Because the situation can never be duplicated, the story will never be told again, and, judging from the available literature, Coffil's stories would have to be told repeatedly and have a narrative entity apart from any context of performance to become fixed in the folk memory.

In the many published collections of tall tales about locally famous tellers of the past, rare indeed is the tale that is remembered and told with a specific context. The tales stand alone, sans any situation in which the folk hero originally told them. Despite the originality and spontaneity attributed to storytelling

folk heroes like Gib Morgan,<sup>10</sup> it is safe to assume that the stories must have had their own existence and significance to the tellers quite apart from any storytelling situation. William Hugh Jansen suggests this when he writes of Abe Smith: "Abe's repertoire was not unlimited but was very well rehearsed. He did not contradict himself. He told relatively few stories, but he retold them frequently -- and people were willing to listen to those frequent repetitions, a very great compliment to the artist's skill, to the entertainer, if one will."<sup>11</sup> Coffil too is an entertainer in the art of telling exaggerated and untrue accounts of his own experiences, but his art is inextricably linked to the social context for its performance, and he also tells true personal experience narratives.

Coffil the storyteller certainly does not seek to be remembered as a tall tale hero; that, for him, would be ridiculous. However, he does try to entertain and amuse the others at the general store when the opportunity arises, and this he does with greater success than anyone else. For this reason, the case for Bob Coffil as a potential tall tale hero cannot be so easily closed, particularly because little is known about the folk memory and about the true extent to which the stories and memories

<sup>10</sup>Boatright, Gib Morgan, pp. 46-48.

<sup>11</sup>Jansen, "Abraham 'Oregon' Smith," p. 168.

of the tall tale heroes who have been studied were part of an active tradition of storytelling or even reminiscence.

A final point that makes it difficult to predict Coffil's potential as a tall tale hero is the impressive evidence of longevity that we have for the five tall tale heroes for whom satisfactory biographies have been compiled. With the single exception of Gib Morgan (1842-1909), they all lived well past the allotted three score and ten years that Coffil has now lived. The roster reads as follows: Abraham "Oregon" Smith (1796-1893), John Darling (1809-1893?), Len Henry (1852-1946), and Jones Tracy (1856-1939). Bob Coffil, at seventy-one years of age, is in good health and has an active mind and an excellent memory. If he were to live even to the average age of these five -- eighty-six years old -- and continue to tell stories, his chances of being remembered as a storyteller in his community would be good indeed. Another interesting facet beyond predictability is that three of these five tall tale heroes (Smith, Darling, and Morgan) were exceedingly restless and cantankerous in their last years, and at least one, John Darling, was thought to be insane by his contemporaries.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>For Smith, Morgan, Tracy, and Henry, see, respectively, the relevant works of Jansen, Boatright, Lunt, and Brunvand, cited above. For Darling, as well as the Halpert article, see Jagendorf, The Marvelous Adventures of Johnny Darling. Jagendorf briefly discusses John Darling's insanity on pp. 225-228.

To understand the tall tale tradition as it has existed in Coffil's time and in the places where he has participated in storytelling, it is necessary as well to consider this narrative genre in terms of certain other folklore genres: personal experience narratives, practical jokes, and catch tales. Only in this way can the tall tale be seen and defined in the full context of traditional behavior and narrative in the geographical area of study and in Coffil's repertoire.

Gerald Thomas, in his excellent study of the tall tale and translation of Philippe d'Alcricpe's La Nouvelle Fabrique (circa 1579), has demonstrated the similarities between the tall tale and other folklore genres containing exaggeration-humor by content analysis. In his study, Thomas discerns similarities in content and differences in function between the tall tale and the following genres: Märchen, Saints' legends, giant lore, nonsense tales, lying songs, children's lore, and folk speech.<sup>13</sup> Here, the focus is on other analytic genres of tradition that are more or less functionally equivalent to the tall tale.

Folklore genres which are functionally equivalent are those that are being used in a natural context for

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<sup>13</sup>Gerald Thomas, "An Analysis of the Tall Tale Genre with Particular Reference to Philippe d'Alcricpe's La Nouvelle Fabrique des Excellents Traits de Vérité (circa 1579); together with an Annotated Translation of the Work" (M.A. thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1970), pp. 46-70.



the same social or psychological reasons. For example, two types of folk narrative determined by folklorists to be different in content and structure would be functionally equivalent if the relationship created between the storyteller and his audience was the same during the narration of the two different analytic genres.<sup>14</sup>

The tall tale, as noted previously, is a special kind of memorate or personal experience narrative, an artful extension of a supposedly real experience. It is within local traditions of men telling stories of their true experiences to other men that the tall tale has existed and flourished. Functionally, the tall tale differs from the personal experience story because it is not true. In this sense, the tall tale is a particular kind of verbal practical joke. The purpose of a practical joke is to fool someone, to have fun at the expense of another person. Often, this is equally true with the tall tale. For instance, when Coffil told of the lobster he caught in the Bay of Pigs, everyone present in the store at that time enjoyed seeing the outsider from Yarmouth County put in his place, everyone except the outsider. By telling this story, Coffil was reaffirming a bond between himself and the local men; at the same

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<sup>14</sup>See Dan Ben-Amos, "Analytic Categories and Ethnic Genres," *Genre*, III (1969), 275-301, for an interesting discussion of folk taxonomy and generic classification done by the scholar-analyst.

time, the outsider was reminded that he was not really a part of this group.<sup>15</sup> The practical joke often functions in much the same way.

The functional difference between tall tale and practical joke is one of degree. The tall tale is a recognizably absurd exaggeration. If it is accepted as the truth or believed for a moment, this is because of the realistic setting and the deadpan delivery of the tale. A tall tale based on knowledge of an esoteric nature also might easily mislead someone who has never had access to such knowledge, even to the point where the listener might never know that he has been fooled.

The basis for "putting one over on him" in the practical joke does not rely so much on a well-contrived exaggeration. A tall tale goes well beyond the realm of possibility; a verbal practical joke does not. Rather, the practical joker suggests to the dupe something that quite possibly could be true and the dupe acts upon this suggestion. When Coffil suggested to a man at the lumbercamp on Cape Blomidon that the cook was going to put saltpeter in their tea, this was within the realm of possibility or belief. In fact, talk of saltpeter in

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<sup>15</sup>For an important essay on the effect in-group out-group attitudes have on folklore, see William Hugh Jansen, "The Esoteric-Exoteric Factor in Folklore," in Alan Dundes, ed., The Study of Folklore (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1965), pp. 43-51. First published in Fabula: Journal of Folktale Studies, II (1959), 205-211.

the food is predictable wherever groups of men are working and eating together. Coffil, however, knew that no such thing was to be done or was even contemplated, but by what he said and by his own actions in support of his joking statement about saltpeter in the tea, he fooled the dupe, who was going home after supper to spend Sunday with his wife. Consequently, the dupe was foolish enough to act on this misinformation by asking the cook not to put any saltpeter in his tea and thus was ridiculed. Notably, the dupe in a practical joke is most often an outsider as well.<sup>16</sup>

The practical joke can be verbal, but it is not a narrative. Only the story about a practical joke takes a narrative form. The tall tale, on the other hand, is a definitely structured narrative with a realistic setting given to an apparently true personal experience. The realism and truth are shattered by the absurd climax. The tall tale can fool an outsider or greenhorn; it can also be successful, on the esoteric level, that is, when told to in-group acquaintances, as a well-contrived bit of nonsense, or, more simply, as a joke.

It is not coincidental, then, that Robert Coffil, teller of tall tales, has also been a practical joker. In context, the two genres often are functionally equivalent. A man with the quickness of wit to adapt

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<sup>16</sup>See Chapter VI, Texts, no. 41, for Coffil's telling of this practical joke story.

or create a tall tale to fit a given situation may likely have the same capacity and inclination for playing practical jokes. John Coffil apparently played practical jokes too, as have other tall tale tellers in Kings County. A further bit of evidence is that Len Henry's brother Nobe, a local character in his own right, was also a practical joker.<sup>17</sup>

The catch tale is another specific type of tale that bears an affinity to the tall tale. These stories, as the term implies, are told to catch or fool the listener by forcing him to ask a particular question or make a specific comment, to which the teller responds with a ridiculous answer. The fact that Coffil enjoyed "catching" me with a catch tale<sup>18</sup> indicates a functional equivalence between the tall tale and the catch tale. The parallel existence of tall tales and catch tales in tradition is also supported by the literature on tall tale heroes. Len Henry, for example, included several catch tales in his repertoire,<sup>19</sup> and one of the most frequently reported tales attributed to tall tale heroes, motif X905.4. The liar: "I have no time to lie today"; lies nevertheless, is in fact a catch tale, as is another common story often attributed to tall tale tellers,

<sup>17</sup>Brunvand, "Len Henry," p. 17.

<sup>18</sup>See Chapter VI, Texts, no. 34.

<sup>19</sup>Brunvand, "Len Henry," p. 17.

motif Z13.2. Catch tale: teller is killed in his own story. Indeed, the success of tall telling often depends on the effective use of the dramatic pause to draw the listener into asking a question out loud or to himself. Another story Coffil told to the outsider from Yarmouth County, about a remarkable dory race, demonstrates the use of dramatic pause in the telling of tall tales.<sup>20</sup>

The tall tale, then, can be seen to have two functional equivalents in the broad storytelling tradition in the area of investigation and in Coffil's repertoire -- the practical joke and the catch tale. It is a special kind of personal experience story, and exists in traditions where men tell stories of their true and fabricated experiences. Robert Coffil is and has been an important participant in the tradition as it exists at a small general store and as it has existed in the lives of seafaring men aboard boats and along the shores of the Bay of Fundy. It is to his life and stories that we now turn.

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<sup>20</sup>See Chapter VI, Texts, no. 5.

## COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS OF A LIFE HISTORY

1. Introduction

In November, 1971, I presented a paper<sup>1</sup> at the annual meeting of the American Folklore Society in which I discussed some of my preliminary findings in my work with Robert Coffil and emphasized the need for studies of living storytellers whose forte is the tall tale. My point, then and now, is that the folklorist cannot begin to understand or define performance-oriented genres of folklore without first undertaking the study of the various contexts in which they are performed, and that the most intensive and valuable study of this kind must be a biographical-contextual study of the individual performer. With the tall tale, a contextual study obviously must focus on the individual teller of tall tales because of the tendency of storytellers to tell the tales about themselves.

Several important studies and collections have been made of folk heroes who were remembered by later generations, within limited local traditions, as having been tall tellers. As the tall tale heroes told the

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<sup>1</sup>Richard S. Tallman, "Tall Tales and Tellers: Toward a New Methodology," paper read at American Folklore Society annual meeting, November, 1971, Washington, D. C.

stories about themselves, their disciples tell them as third person narratives.<sup>2</sup> A study of a tall teller still living, one who might well become a tall tale hero to the next generation, would go far in answering questions of creativity, originality, and egocentricity -- all traits that have been associated with the teller of tall tales. Also, a biographical or life history approach to the study of one storyteller would bring us closer to an understanding of the contexts for performance and of the tradition of tall telling.

Thus was the present work originally formulated. Up to the time when I returned to the field in August, 1972, to complete the research for and the writing of this work, I had spent a total of four evenings with Bob Coffil, twice with a tape recorder, the other two times without. In these preliminary sessions I primarily recorded texts. In fact, a majority of what is included in Chapter VI; Texts, was first recorded at this time, including all but a few of the tall tales. In these first interviews, a few personal experience narratives also were recorded and many more were told without the benefit (or possible hindrance) of a tape recorder.

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<sup>2</sup>The propensity of later tellers to tell the stories of a folk hero in the third person might be, at least in part, the result of the folklorist consciously seeking tall tales about someone instead of observing the performance of these tales in natural contexts, where sometimes they still are told as first person narratives.

The personal experience narratives I recorded and took notes on prior to my latest sojourn in the field were more than enough to give me a good general outline of Coffil's life. My intention was to record the narratives Coffil previously told me, to fill in a couple gaps in his life as I knew it with whatever new material he might offer that I had not heard before, and then to focus on the specific storytelling contexts, past and present, as Coffil remembered them. This, as a whole, would be the life-history. Besides the long chapter of annotated texts, the remainder of the work would be several chapters of analysis in which I would discuss the various aspects of context and performance and show how Coffil's lifetime of experiences had helped to make him the storyteller he is and had brought him to the rostrum he enjoys as a raconteur. Finally, the not-too-startling conclusion would be that Robert Coffil is a bonafide tall tale hero in the making, that years from now people in the Blomidon area will be telling Bob Coffil stories.

It may well be, however, that Bob Coffil will never be a tall tale hero, and it took a much longer life history than was originally planned to find this out, plus the discovery that Coffil's repertoire is considerably less static than I earlier had believed and the realization that his aesthetic is neither text-centered



nor self-centered. In short, I learned that a man who is self-satisfied and who can justify his importance in other ways, as Coffil is and does, has no need to satisfy his ego by commanding attention with the telling of a particularly egocentric type of folktale. He might anyway, but the need is not there. Clyde Smith of Campobello Island, New Brunswick, who spent one winter fishing with Coffil, explained this well when he said, "Bob would tell you some jokes, as I say, he would fool and joke, but he was no man to brag on himself or anything."<sup>3</sup>

Recently, I lectured on folklore to the Women's Institute of Canning, and while I was describing briefly my current work and work I hope to complete in the future on other performers and creators of folklore, one woman asked me, assuming that as a folklorist I am representative of the breed, if folklorists generally are interested in "characters" and do most of their fieldwork and research with "characters." It was a good question, and after explaining the difference between active and passive bearers of tradition to a roomful of blank faces, I had to admit that in some instances the folklorist is primarily interested in the character or characters in a community. Especially in performance-oriented genres, the active

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<sup>3</sup>Recorded interview with Clyde Smith, Campobello Island, New Brunswick, May 1, 1973.

bearer of tradition, the performer as opposed to the listener, is something of a character. The folk might say of a tall teller, a tall tale herp, "He was quite a character." The same concept applies to the artist or performer at the popular and elite levels of culture. The baseball hero, the popular singer, the movie star, the opera soprano -- all of these are considered to be personalities or characters by the culture which supports them. They are allowed certain leeway in their public and private behavior; in some cases, eccentricity is even expected of them. This is equally true of the performer or character at the folk level of culture.

Robert Coffil is not a character in this pejorative sense. As Clyde Smith said, "he was no man to brag on himself or anything." Smith, on the other hand, is what we might call a character with some justification, although he is not a tall tale teller. Coffil's son Bobby explained, "He always had a big proposition on the go. He could hook good jobs, I'll tell you that, boy. He was smart."<sup>4</sup> At the end of one anecdote about Smith, Coffil added, "He was quite the lad.... Quite the lad."<sup>5</sup> Another time he said, "He was quite a character, yes he was."<sup>6</sup> Even by Smith's own testimony he is a character:

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<sup>4</sup>Recorded interview, May 17, 1970.

<sup>5</sup>Recorded interview, September 29, 1972. See Chapter VI, Texts, no. 43.

<sup>6</sup>Recorded interview, May 17, 1970.

"Everyone from around here knows Clyde Smith. I don't have much chance to be lonely, there's people down here visiting me all the time. They come to buy my smoked fish and they come to see me. Why yes, last Sunday I had twenty-one in this house."<sup>7</sup> Smith is an extrovert par excellence, and he likes to tell of his many fascinating experiences, whether in truth they were his to begin with or someone else's that he tells as his own.

<sup>7</sup> If there was a character in the Coffil family it was John, Bob's older brother and the one who initiated him into the art of tall telling. I had an idea that this was the case from the start -- in the two years that high school students collected folklore in the area, two stories attributed to Bob were turned in while more than two dozen variants of John Coffil stories appeared. Nonetheless, John died in 1963 and spent the last twenty years of his life in FARRSBORO, across the Minas Basin, so he had had the time to become part of the folk memory. He also had worked in woods camps in Kings County and Hants County, the next county to the east of Kings, during the 1930's, and got some stories around at this time, when his brother Bob was working as a self-employed truck driver. The territories of possible notoriety for the two brothers did not overlap; before John moved to FARRSBORO he lived on the mountain above

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<sup>7</sup>Field notes from Smith interview, May 1, 1973.

Blomidon, hunting and socializing with people living on Scotts Bay Road and in Scotts Bay. So, there was and is no reason to believe that Bob too might not become a tall tale hero. The two communities, though only ten miles apart, have traditionally been cut off from one another by the mountain and therefore could both support two different local heroes. What evidence there is against Bob's potential status as a local hero is to be found in his life history and in his attitude toward stories and storytelling.

Bob Coffil is an affable and soft-spoken man who has had about the normal range of ordinary and unusual experiences for a man of his age and occupations. In this sense he is a quite ordinary man. He is atypical, or at least a cut above the ordinary, in his ability to articulate these experiences. This is to be expected of a man who has always relished talk for its own sake and who has a reputation in his community as a storyteller.

A life history of a man like Coffil is of value on several accounts. Its intrinsic interest is as a human document, a chronicle of a man in culture. Also, the life history in this particular case offers a personal slant to a period of time in the Maritime provinces of Canada. This view that Coffil gives us in his story, of the region and of a period spanning all of the twentieth century and back into the late nineteenth century with

stories about his father and grandfather, is more panoramic than one might expect because he left school at an early age to begin working at various occupations and because of his excellent memory. Thus, his orally recorded autobiography should be of interest to the social and the regional historian as well as to the folklorist. Ultimately and primarily, the life history is valuable to the folklorist because, after all, this is a man who is the bearer and creator of a considerable corpus of folklore. It is interesting to know how one storyteller has lived and to see how he describes this life.

## 2. Biographical Studies in Anthropology and Folklore

The increased attention on the folk as opposed to the lore is a recent development in folkloristics, as I have noted before, but the collection and presentation of life history material has been a recognized aspect of anthropological science for the past half century.<sup>8</sup> Three

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<sup>8</sup>Three works which specifically consider the collection and presentation of life history material indicate this interest in anthropology: John Dollard, Criteria for the Life History (New Haven, Conn., 1935); Clyde Kluckhohn, "The Personal Document in Anthropological Science," in Louis Gottschalk, Clyde Kluckhohn, and Robert Angell, The Use of Personal Documents in History, Anthropology, and Sociology (New York, 1945), pp. 79-173; and L. L. Langness, The Life History in Anthropological Science (New York, 1965). No work of similar scope has been published for biographical or life history studies in folklore, although Kenneth S. Goldstein does emphasize the importance of personal history documents in A Guide for Field Workers in Folklore, Memoirs of the American Folklore Society Vol. LII (Hathboro, Pennsylvania, 1964), pp. 121-127.

different dates might be cited as the beginning of this conscious study by North American anthropologists, all of them in reference to publications by Paul Radin. In 1913, Radin published "Personal Reminiscences of a Winnebago Indian" in the Journal of American Folklore.<sup>9</sup> Seven years later, in 1920, this initial work had been expanded to become a short monograph, The Autobiography of a Winnebago Indian.<sup>10</sup> After these attempts in presenting the life history of one man, Radin published Crashing Thunder<sup>11</sup> in 1926, the culmination of his two preliminary forays into the study of culture through the study of the individual.

As L. L. Langness writes, Crashing Thunder "was a work of great influence and stimulated many other anthropologists to use biographical data."<sup>12</sup> In his work, however, Radin did not demonstrate an interest in the individual per se; rather, he believed that biographical data was a valuable and necessary supplement

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<sup>9</sup>Paul Radin, "Personal Reminiscences of a Winnebago Indian," Journal of American Folklore, XXVI (1913), 293-318.

<sup>10</sup>Paul Radin, The Autobiography of a Winnebago Indian, University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology Vol. XVI (Berkeley, 1920), pp. 381-473.

<sup>11</sup>Paul Radin, Crashing Thunder, The Autobiography of an American Indian (New York, 1926).

<sup>12</sup>Langness, The Life History in Anthropological Science, p. 8.

to more general ethnological description. In the monograph published in 1920, he wrote that his aim was "not to obtain autobiographical details about some definite personage, but to have some representative middle-aged individual of moderate ability describe his life in relation to the social group in which he had grown up . . . ." <sup>13</sup>

From the time of Radin's early work to the present, the collection of life history material has been an integral part of the fieldwork of cultural anthropologists, and many excellent life histories or autobiographies have appeared. The work of Radin was fragmentary and heavily documented, doubtless a necessary adjunct to his pioneering efforts and an indication of the accurate authenticity of his work. He did not over-edit his material.

By the late 1930's and early 1940's the presentation of life history material achieved a greater integration and sophistication, notably with Walter Dyk's Son of Old Man Hat (1938), <sup>14</sup> Clellan S. Ford's Smoke from Their Fires (1941), <sup>15</sup> and Leo W. Simmons' Sun Chief

<sup>13</sup>Radin, The Autobiography of a Winnebago Indian, p. 384.

<sup>14</sup>Walter Dyk, Son of Old Man Hat: A Navaho Autobiography, intro. Edward Sapir (New York, 1938).

<sup>15</sup>Clellan S. Ford, Smoke from Their Fires: The Life of a Kwakiutl Chief (New Haven, Conn., 1941).

(1942).<sup>16</sup> Life history studies, as well as providing in-depth ethnographic data, became humanistic documents which could stand alone as impressive records of man in culture. Their content also illustrated an interest in the psychological and idiosyncratic ramifications in the life of the individual. This tendency resulted from the influence of Edward Sapir, who incidentally provided an introduction to Dyk's Son of Old Man Hat. Langness explains this influence: "Sapir's most significant contribution was the bridging of disciplines. Employing aspects of psychology and psychiatry as well as anthropological techniques, he greatly influenced what is now called the culture-and-personality-school."<sup>17</sup>

Certainly the apex of life history collecting and publishing is the impressive work of Oscar Lewis. An anthropologist interested in the many causes and effects of the culture of poverty, Lewis has used various approaches to his work, from a model re-study of a Mexican village<sup>18</sup> to the impressionistic description of one day in the life of five families<sup>19</sup> to a presentation of the

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<sup>16</sup>Leo W. Simmons, Sun Chief, the Autobiography of a Hopi Indian (New Haven, Conn., 1942).

<sup>17</sup>Langness, The Life History in Anthropological Science, p. 8.

<sup>18</sup>Oscar Lewis, Life in a Mexican Village: Tepoztlan Revisited (Urbana, Illinois, 1951).

<sup>19</sup>Oscar Lewis, Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty (New York, 1959).



reactions of various family members to a death in the family.<sup>20</sup> His method of presentation is often that of the novelist, a methodology that has brought some criticism from his colleagues, yet the authenticity and detail of his work is beyond question, and Lewis's The Children of Sanchez,<sup>21</sup> the multiple autobiographies of a family of rural origin living in poverty in Mexico City, will be a literary classic as well as an important work in anthropology for years to come.

Of other recent works in anthropology which focus on the individual, probably the most significant are Carlos Castaneda's three books detailing his discipleship to a Sonora Indian sorcerer and man of knowledge.<sup>22</sup> Castaneda describes relationships, between himself and Don Juan and between himself and the hallucinogenic properties to which he is introduced, rather than a chronological life, but there is much in his work of interest to the student of life history materials and their collection. Taken as a whole, his work illustrates the intrinsic value and interest of the individual-

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<sup>20</sup>Oscar Lewis, A Death in the Sanchez Family (New York, 1969).

<sup>21</sup>Oscar Lewis, The Children of Sanchez: Autobiography of a Mexican Family (New York, 1961).

<sup>22</sup>Carlos Castaneda, The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge (New York, 1969); A Separate Reality: Further Conversations with Don Juan (New York, 1971); and Journey to Ixtlan: The Lessons of Don Juan (New York, 1972).

focused study. It is not without significance that both Castaneda and Lewis have enjoyed a hitherto unimagined popular success with their scholarly work.

Folklore in North America is a late-comer in showing an interest in the individual because of the traditional emphasis in the study on the lore as opposed to the folk. This has not been the case in central and eastern Europe. By the latter half of the nineteenth century, Russian folklorists interested in the social milieu of stories and storytellers were focusing their attention on individual narrators, to the extent that Mark Azadowski<sup>j</sup> could publish, in 1926, a survey of this Russian approach and demonstrate its values with reference to his own work with Siberian storytellers. The researcher, Azadowski<sup>j</sup> pointed out, is able to reach conclusions on storytelling style and variation that are unattainable in folklore work that does not begin with the individual tradition bearer.<sup>23</sup> Published in German, Azadowski<sup>j</sup>'s work revealed a hitherto rarely attempted approach outside of Russia, and folklorists in other European countries followed the lead and began to collect complete repertoires

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<sup>23</sup>Mark Azadowski<sup>j</sup>, Eine sibirische Märchenerzählerin, Folklore Fellows Communications No. 68 (Helsinki, 1926). For discussions of the work of Azadowski<sup>j</sup> and other Russian folklorists who concentrated on individual narrators, see Thompson, The Folktale, pp. 451-453; and Y. M. Sokolov, Russian Folklore, trans. Catherine Ruth Smith (Hatboro, Pennsylvania, 1966), pp. 128, 132, 403-417.

of narrators and biographical sketches which paid particular attention to the peasant background of these rural performers of folklore.<sup>24</sup>

The historic-geographic approach to folktale study held such sway in northern and western Europe and in North America that Azadowski's influence was never felt. Yet, there have been a good number of folk autobiographies written from within a tradition. Wherever people are interested in and aware of local history and seemingly unique traditions, the likelihood is good that someone has written his own story for publication or for purely personal reasons. Local histories written by local residents also sometimes contain life history material. Not surprisingly, because of their historical and folklore traditions, several of these autobiographies and personal reminiscences come from Scotland and Ireland.

Peig Sayers' An Old Woman's Reflections<sup>25</sup> and Angus MacLellan's The Furrow Behind Me<sup>26</sup> are representative of the type. Much personal description of the folkways

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<sup>24</sup>See Dégh, Folktales and Society, pp. 45-61, 165-186, for a thorough survey of this literature. Dégh's study is an excellent example of such a work that does consider the stories, the storytellers, and the story-telling milieu.

<sup>25</sup>Peig Sayers, An Old Woman's Reflections, trans. Seamus Ennis (London, 1962).

<sup>26</sup>Angus MacLellan, The Furrow Behind Me: The Autobiography of a Hebridean Crofter, trans. John Lorne Campbell (London, 1962).

of a community or region is to be found in these volumes, both of which were recorded from noted storytellers by folklore collectors. They do not, however, emphasize any particular facet of culture and do not contain material of a highly personal nature. In fact, Peig Sayers' Reflections includes practically no personal data, only the experiences of others as they were told to her or as she observed them. She is never in the foreground of the narrative as Angus MacLellan is. Also lacking in these works are objective analysis by the researcher from outside, documentation and comparative annotation, and discussion of methodology and purpose. The same shortcomings are apparent in the several autobiographies from this Gaelic-speaking region written by those within the tradition without a scholarly collector-editor as intermediary.

Flora Thompson's introspective trilogy on rural life in England in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Lark Rise to Candleford,<sup>27</sup> initially focuses on the community as a whole, but is still largely an autobiographical account of a rural life faced with the onslaught of the industrial revolution. The author's professional status as a writer and her distance in time from the years when she was a child and a young woman

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<sup>27</sup>Flora Thompson, Lark Rise to Candleford: A Trilogy (London, 1948). First published in three volumes: 1938, 1941, 1942.

make her work more objective and analytic than the strictly folk autobiographies. Similarly, Eric Cross's The Tailor and Ansty,<sup>28</sup> a personal account of an Irish peasant and his wife, offers a charming picture of rural life and includes description of personal idiosyncrasies that might go unnoticed if the couple were writing or dictating their own story. But here, too, no explanation of methodology or of the relationship between Cross and his subjects is given. The Tailor and Ansty is more a work of literature than of culture, and makes no attempt at chronology. The couple are seen, for the most part, in the present moment.

For North America, the most significant work written from within the tradition is Jean Ritchie's Singing Family of the Cumberlands.<sup>29</sup> It differs from the above-mentioned works because its focus is specifically on a folklore genre -- folksong -- and its importance to the life of a Kentucky mountain family. To a lesser extent, Jean Ritchie presents her life story from birth until her late teens. As an active participant in the folksong revival in the United States, the author probably places too much emphasis on singing as opposed to other social and family activities, and, predictably, provides

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<sup>28</sup>Eric Cross, The Tailor and Ansty (New York, 1964). First published in 1942.

<sup>29</sup>Jean Ritchie, Singing Family of the Cumberlands (New York, 1955).

no objective analysis or description of methodology. The same is true, to a lesser extent, of Leonard Roberts' Up Cutshin and Down Greasy, discussed briefly in Chapter II.

Besides Roberts' work, the only published volume in folklore that presents an orally recorded life history of one performer is Roger D. Abrahams' A Singer and Her Songs: Almeda Riddle's Book of Ballads. This work has not been subjected to any rigorous methodology, and no attempt has been made to put the singer's life history into any but the loosest of chronologies. In fact, the collection and presentation of a performer's life history was not the intent: "I stressed to her that I was not concerned as much with the details of her life as the way in which she represents the way in which good singers function (or used to function) in rural American communities."<sup>30</sup> As Abrahams notes, however, the book as it stands is a sort of compromise between the more rigorous life history he envisioned and Granny Riddle's desire to publish a collection of songs.

This "folk-autobiography," as Abrahams calls it, has no comparative ethnographic annotation to point out similarities and differences between Granny Riddle's Arkansas folkways and those in other Anglo-American communities. Likewise, there is no historical documentation. The 144-page life history, which is larded out

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<sup>30</sup>Abrahams, A Singer and Her Songs, p. 148.

with the texts and tunes of fifty-two songs, includes only five brief explanatory footnotes. The editor explains in an "Afterword" that anthropologists have compiled a significant literature of life history materials but that they "have tended to bury the interviewed individuals in the machinery of their analysis." An exception to this rule is Oscar Lewis, but with his work "we don't know when the informant's voice ends and the editorial hand begins."<sup>31</sup> We don't know with this work either. Of Abrahams' editorial hand we know very little, in fact, nothing beyond his bare statement: "I have edited a great deal, while trying to keep her speech cadences in the prose. There is nothing here which Granny did not say, but the order, the syntax, and, occasionally, the grammar have been somewhat regularized."<sup>32</sup>

A Singer and Her Songs is an interesting contribution to Anglo-American folksong scholarship, though it must be remembered that Almeda Riddle of the folk-festival circuit is atypical in her conscious espousal of an aesthetic. However, this book does not present the life history of an individual and then attempt to relate that life to the fact that the individual became, in her community, a recognized performer. And much of the value

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 149.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

of life history material to the study of folklore is lost in the lack of methodology and documentation.

The most recent work in American folklore that focuses on the individual tradition bearer is a study of an Indiana storyteller done by Donald Allport Bird and James R. Dow.<sup>33</sup> The storyteller, whose forte was memorate and grisly local history, was apparently not active in any local storytelling tradition when the collection was done, if in fact he ever was. The study includes a short, orally recorded life history, forty-one texts, and an analysis of the storyteller's repertoire in terms of personality and life history. Bird and Dow also provide sufficient introductory material on the purpose and methodology of their work.

Although this is the best lengthy study done on a living storyteller in North America,<sup>34</sup> it nonetheless does have some shortcomings. Lacking, for example, is a convincing discussion of the contexts for performance and of the storytelling tradition of which the storyteller may or may not have been a part, and the concluding analysis, though interesting and worthwhile, is segmented

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<sup>33</sup>Donald Allport Bird and James R. Dow, "Benjamin Kuhn: Life and Narratives of a Hoosier Farmer," Indiana Folklore, V (1972), 143-263.

<sup>34</sup>Compare, for example, Chuck Perdue, "'I Swear to God. It's the Truth If I Ever Told It!': John and Cora Jackson's Folktales from the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia," Keystone Folklore Quarterly, XIV (1969), 1-54.



into too many small divisions. The work has no organic unity, and one is left with the feeling that the authors thought it necessary to consider separately the many different facets of the storyteller and his stories, with the result being that the reader gets no real feeling for the man himself. This, to be sure, is the greatest difficulty in presenting a biographical study of a living folklore informant, or, for that matter, such unity is difficult to achieve with any individual-focused work in folklore. The point exists in such work where unity of organization and purpose either is, or is not sacrificed for the sake of detailed scholarship.<sup>35</sup> As a model exercise which demonstrates the various facets to be studied when dealing with a narrator and his repertoire, the work of Bird and Dow is exemplary. The real shortcoming is that not enough is said about too many segmented aspects of the storyteller and his art.

None of these aforementioned shortcomings in methodology and organization are apparent in the biographical studies done by and under the supervision of folklorist Edward D. Ives. These studies, to date, all have dealt with individuals from New England-Maritimes tradition of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Besides

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<sup>35</sup>Alan Lomax's Mister Jelly Roll is a fine example of such a work, which has an organic unity yet lacks detailed documentation and description of methodology.

Richard Lunt's excellent monograph on Jones Tracy, a monograph on a legendary trickster supposed to have been in allegiance with the devil was also prepared under Ives' direction.<sup>36</sup> Ives' own publications include biographical studies of a lumberwoods satiric songmaker<sup>37</sup> and a farmer-poet from Prince Edward Island.<sup>38</sup> A forthcoming work, on ballad maker Joe Scott who followed the logging trade of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, is expected to be a culmination of his previous two works on Larry Gorman and Lawrence Doyle, at least judging from his previously published accounts of Scott.<sup>39</sup> And after Joe Scott, Ives plans to move from songmakers to George Magoon, a legendary moose poacher of local fame in northern Maine.

Two significant contributions to folklore theory are apparent from a study of Ives' work. First, an understanding of genre and tradition in folklore is best

<sup>36</sup>Roger E. Mitchell, "George Knox: From Man to Legend," Northeast Folklore, XI (1969), 1-71.

<sup>37</sup>Edward D. Ives, Larry Gorman: The Man Who Made the Songs, Indiana University Folklore Series No. 19 (Bloomington, 1964).

<sup>38</sup>Edward D. Ives, Lawrence Doyle: The Farmer-Poet of Prince Edward Island (Orono, Maine, 1971).

<sup>39</sup>See Edward D. Ives, "'Ben Deane' and Joe Scott: A Ballad and its Probable Author," Journal of American Folklore, LXXII (1959), 53-66; and Edward D. Ives, "A Man and His Song: Joe Scott and 'The Plain Golden Band'," in Glassie, Ives, and Szwed, Folksongs and Their Makers, pp. 69-146.

served by the intensive study of one individual. General studies of geographic regions or of folklore genres may offer a broader range of insights on folk culture. Much of this, however, is also to be gained by the biographical study, as well as more detailed and specific insights into a particular culture and a particular tradition. Second, and implicit in all of Ives' work, is a very personal methodology of collection and presentation which allows the reader to join with Ives in his biographical search. With the exception of Roberts' Up Outshin and Down Greasy, a folklorist has not shown to such an extent how his research progressed since Harold W. Thompson's Body, Boots and Britches, first published in 1939. Thompson "left up the scaffolding on a chapter concerned with the tall tales, where I let you know how the stories were obtained and how one folk-hero led to another."<sup>40</sup> Ives' personal method helps to show how the research progressed; it also makes the published account of that research more interesting.<sup>41</sup> It is a methodology of collection, analysis, and synthesis, of little separation between the field and the analyst's desk. Any folklore study based on fieldwork requires revision

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<sup>40</sup>Harold W. Thompson, Body, Boots and Britches: Folktales, Ballads and Speech from Country New York (New York, 1962), pp. 15-16..

<sup>41</sup>D. K. Wilgus notes this attribute of Ives' personal style in his review of Lawrence Doyle: Journal of American Folklore, LXXXVI (1973), 194.

and reanalysis after its first writing; the biographical approach of Ives implies a return to the field to fill in the gaps and solve the problems which arise as the work progresses. Ives has been working on Joe Scott and his songs for more than fifteen years, notwithstanding the interventions of Larry Gorman and Lawrence Doyle; one can well imagine how many returns to the field this has meant.

Probably the closest in spirit to the present life history of Robert Coffin is a Northeast Folklore monograph edited by Ives and David C. Smith, "Fleetwood Pride, 1864-1960: The Autobiography of a Maine Woodsman."<sup>42</sup> Pride wrote a surprisingly unself-conscious autobiography of the first half of his life several years before Ives interviewed him and happened upon the unfinished work. Unfortunately, Pride died after only two sessions of interviewing, so the autobiography remains fragmentary and incomplete. Yet, it is important as an oral history document -- Pride was never a professed performer or creator of folklore -- and Ives' rigorous editorial standard applied to the written and orally collected

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<sup>42</sup>Edward D. Ives and David C. Smith, eds., "Fleetwood Pride, 1864-1960: The Autobiography of a Maine Woodsman," Northeast Folklore, IX (1967), 1-60.

parts of Pride's story add to its value.<sup>43</sup> Copious notes by the editors provide background information of both an historical and a folkloric nature. In this manner, the biography itself is given a contextual framework.

Despite the paucity of book-length biographical studies in folklore, an interest in the individual tradition bearer and in a biographical approach predates the work of the past few years. Recognized folk heroes, such as the tall tale heroes studied by Boatright and Jansen, have interested folklorists for a long time, and Jansen's dissertation on Abe Smith includes a lengthy and factual biography based in large part on legal documents such as records of court cases and land deeds.<sup>44</sup> The picture of Smith's life drawn from this recorded evidence of the man's existence is expectedly one-sided; we see only the public man. In another chapter, however, Jansen presents a more personal picture of Abe Smith as people remembered him. The biography of Abraham Smith, combined with the tales and other memories of a man who

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<sup>43</sup>See *ibid.*, pp. 7-8, for an explanation of this standard of editing. See also, for example, Helen Creighton and Edward D. Ives, eds., "Eight Folktales from Miramichi as told by Wilmot MacDonald," Northeast Folklore, IV (1962), 9-10. The best account of Ives' field methods and editorial criteria is his most recent work, A Manual for Field Workers (Orono, Maine, 1973). For field methods, see pp. 1-22; for tape transcription and editing, pp. 25-32.

<sup>44</sup>Jansen, "Abraham 'Oregon' Smith," pp. 1-138.

died fifty years before Jansen began his research, is a significant contribution to American folklore scholarship. Unfortunately, it has never been published. Herbert Halpert, noted previously as having published articles on locally renowned tall tale heroes, also was among the first to show an interest in folklore performers and to illustrate the value of biographical and contextual data to an understanding of folklore traditions. Among the most important articles of Halpert's that consider the individual in tradition are his "Tales of a Mississippi Soldier" and "The Folksinger Speaks."<sup>45</sup>

A few other works in American folklore that have included interesting biographical data deserve mention, not only for their intrinsic value but also to indicate that some collectors demonstrated an early awareness of the importance of the individual to folk tradition. William Roy MacKenzie, a student of George Lyman Kittredge's at Harvard, collected Nova Scotia folksongs in the 1910's and published an account of his collecting experiences nine years prior to publication of the song collection itself. In this work, The Quest of the Ballad, MacKenzie places his informants in the foreground of his narrative

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<sup>45</sup>Herbert Halpert, "The Folksinger Speaks," Hoosier Folklore Bulletin, III (1944), 29-35, 48-55. See also the following Halpert articles: "Indiana Storyteller," ibid., I (1942), 43-61; and "A Michigan Lumberjack Singer," ibid., pp. 81-84.

and includes both biographical data and description of performance.<sup>46</sup> John A. Lomax, the dean of American folksong collectors and also a student of Kittredge's, wrote an uneven but nonetheless worthwhile account of his many years as a collector that, like MacKenzie's work, includes several personal sketches and discussions of performance.<sup>47</sup>

Lomax's son Alan, who often worked with his father in the field, published in 1950 an excellent interpretive biography-autobiography of Jelly Roll Morton, the New Orleans jazz musician and composer. As noted previously, much of the content of this work was taken from Library of Congress recordings Alan Lomax made in the late 1930's with Morton, who sat at a piano telling of his life and playing his music. As well as the orally recorded autobiography collected from the self-styled originator of jazz, Lomax also incorporates interviews he had with several people who knew Morton well and provides lengthy transitional sections in the work which delineate the mood and culture of the places and periods in Morton's life. This is an important work, and one that has not been adequately recognized.

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<sup>46</sup>William Roy MacKenzie, The Quest of the Ballad (Princeton, New Jersey, 1919). See especially pp. 42-84. Also see William Roy MacKenzie, Ballads and Sea Songs from Nova Scotia (Cambridge, Mass., 1928).

<sup>47</sup>John A. Lomax, Adventures of a Ballad Hunter (New York, 1947).

It is interesting that these early indications of the importance of the individual in tradition have been in terms of singers and musicians, probably because the singer in a community is more recognizably a personality and performer and because of the early emphasis in American folklore scholarship on folksong collecting. Two other works of note are B. A. Botkin's The American Play-Party Song (1937) and George Korson's Minstrels of the Mine Patch (1938), both of which include appendices with valuable autobiographical and biographical material. In Botkin's study, an appendix titled "Social Status and Customs of the Play-Party" contains sixteen interviews with informants who tell of their attitudes toward the play-party and their personal experiences at play-parties when they were still a common form of entertainment.<sup>48</sup> Korson's work concludes with "Biographical Sketches of Traditional Bards and Minstrels," the songmakers and singers from whom his collection was made.<sup>49</sup>

A final work that gives attention to the tradition bearer is Byron Arnold's Folksongs of Alabama (1950). Arnold, a music teacher in the public schools and later at the University of Alabama, recognized that he was breaking with a tradition in folksong scholarship when

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<sup>48</sup>B. A. Botkin, The American Play-Party Song (New York, 1963), pp. 361-381.

<sup>49</sup>George Korson, Minstrels of the Mine Patch (Hatboro, Pennsylvania, 1964), pp. 289-302.



he organized the collection by singers rather than by broad song categories as in the Child-and-other collections. His explanation of this organization, which included presenting a singer's repertoire roughly in the order it was sung to him, probably goes far in explaining much of the earlier work in North American folklore that focused on the individual before it became fashionable to do so. Arnold writes, "I was so much interested in the singers themselves as personalities and in the wide range of material in their singing, that in organizing this book I have grouped each singer's songs and included a biography with the songs. Most of these biographies were sent to me upon request in the form of letters.<sup>50</sup>

### 3. Methodology and Analysis of a Life History

The present life history of Robert Coffil is related to this wide variety of biographical studies in several ways. Like the anthropological life histories, an attempt has been made to compile a detailed picture of a man in culture and to present it in his own words. The editor's role has been to fit the detailed description of a life into a chronologic framework; to provide introductory comments and transitions, in all cases indicating clearly where the words are mine and not Coffil's; and to annotate

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<sup>50</sup>Byron Arnold, Folksongs of Alabama (University, Alabama, 1950), p. vii. I am grateful to Herbert Halpert for bringing this work to my attention.

historical references, narrative elements, and other parts of the life history of intrinsic folkloric value. In this latter instance the life history is more akin to biographical studies in folklore than to the anthropological life histories.

The principal intent of life historians in anthropology has been quite broad: to compile a detailed ethnographic account of an individual in culture, with personal revelations on the individual's role in the family, in secret societies, in the community, and as a representative member of his or her sex. The life history is correlative to the general ethnography of a small, homogeneous culture or tribe, although a few anthropological life histories have dealt with specialists within a culture, such as recognized craftsmen.

The intent with this life history and the other chapters which relate to it either directly or indirectly is not so all encompassing. One particular aspect of culture -- folklore -- has been the primary concern of my work with Robert Coffil since its inception. And within the general study of folklore, the attention is on storytelling throughout. Taking this one step further, the stories are personal experience narratives and tall tales. Because of the personal nature of much of the narrative material collected from Coffil, the long chapter of texts that follows the life history can best be

considered as a second part to the life history.

Several methods of collection have been used in gathering material for this study. I have visited fourteen rural general stores in the Cornwallis District of Kings County and have spent more than one hundred hours as a participant-observer at one of them, Don Forsythe's store in Delhaven. This is where most of the loafing and much of the socializing and storytelling in Coffil's community takes place. Some of the time Coffil was present, much of the time he was not, and occasionally he was conspicuous by his absence. "We need Bob Coffil here now," Don Forsythe would say when someone's boastful talk got out of hand, implying that if Bob were present he would have a story to put the braggart or liar in his place, to shut him up. A few times I left my notebook in my car, and, if something important happened or was said, I went outside to the car to jot down notes; more often, I merely typed up an account of what occurred; at the store as soon as I returned home.

Whenever I was in the Coffil home I was a casual observer of relationships within the extended family, which includes the Coffils' son and daughter-in-law and their two sons as well as Coffil and his wife. Similarly, a considerable amount of time has been spent in casual conversation with Coffil, at the store, in his home, at the mailboxes near the store, and at the many other

times and places we happened to meet as neighbors in the community. As noted previously, I lived practically next door to Coffil for six months of the year I spent in the field. Coffil and his family were fully aware of the purpose of the research; the men at the store knew me as a former high school teacher in Canning who was a graduate student in university now back in the area writing his thesis or a book. They did not know the exact nature of my work, although Don Forsythe and his family knew it had something to do with the store and with storytelling.

Since my return to the field for a year in August, 1972 --having previously interviewed Coffil on four different occasions, twice with a tape recorder -- we have had four recording sessions and on several other occasions I have met with him for the expressed purpose of gathering material for my work. A few notes were taken during the recorded and unrecorded interviews, although most of the time I made notes after I went home. Personal interviews which bear directly on the present study were also held with nine other people -- a total of fifteen interviews. A tape recorder was used with only three of these informants, those who are not in direct contact with Coffil or who do not know him. I was not seeking life history data about Coffil from these informants, but I chose not to use the tape recorder because I wanted

no personal repercussions, as discussed in Chapter II, to come from these interviews.

From the six recording sessions with Coffil have come sixteen tapes with a total elapsed time of a little over ten hours. These tapes comprise the bulk of what is included in the life history and in the texts. Generally speaking, the collection of stories, especially tall tales, preceded the collection of context and background information on the stories; the collection of contextual data preceded the collection of life history material; the collection of non-specific life history material preceded the collection of more highly personal and sensitive biographical data. The order in which this mass of material has been collected was dictated in part by the order in which I sought it, in part by the order in which Coffil chose to tell it to me. It was improbable, for instance, that Coffil would offer the more personal data early in our relationship, and equally improbable that I would ask for it.

What is presented in the life history represents something less than half of what Coffil has told me about his life. Much that has been left out concerns his opinions about the fishermen in Kingsport, who he feels lack experience. Also omitted are more extended descriptions of personal experiences and work practices, especially related to the period of his trucking business

in the late 1920's and 1930's and to his recent and current work as the pilot for freighters going into and out of Port Williams. Although the entire life history is in Coffil's own words, it has been compressed, not only by the omission of further, less interesting accounts of his life, but also by the omission of my questions and some false starts. I feel these omissions are necessary to give a continuity to the life history which is, as it is presented, a record of a man's life to be read. The two most extreme examples of editing and piecing together are to be found on pages 127-130 and pages 193-195. Notes to these sections and to the entire life history explain the extent of my editing and include many of the questions I asked which elicited specific responses.

No man can be expected to tell a long, involved history of his life in chronological sequence. The process of the mind is such that an experience from twenty years ago might immediately suggest other, similar or dissimilar experiences from other periods in a person's life. This does not mean, however, that the interviews with Coffil were rambling and disjointed. During each interview, he stayed on one period of his life and kept to a remarkably rigid chronology until his memories of that time had been exhausted. In the next interview, after I had transcribed the tapes from the previous interview, there predictably were questions that I asked

to clarify specific points. The answers to these questions were often included in retellings of the same incidents, and because the formal recording sessions were well-spaced in time, these retellings were equally as spontaneous and often included new material and entire new stories for a particular period.

An example that the life history is not a heavily edited compilation of disjointed and non-chronological reminiscences can be seen in pages 141-153, all of which was recorded, in this order and without interruption, on September 29, 1972, except for the one tall tale in this section, recorded April 25, 1973. Other examples of how Coffil kept to a particular period of his life can be found on pages 172-189, recorded June 14, 1973, though here the order of stories has been rearranged chronologically, and pages 230-256, all of which was recorded on April 25, 1973, with much of it also having been recorded on January 11, 1973. The notes to these sections and for the entire life history further explain what editing has been done.

The greater portion of what is included in the life history was told to me at least twice. In some instances, the same descriptions and experiences were collected three times. This is the result of my method of collecting. During each recording session with Coffil, at least twice as much time was spent without recording

as with recording. It is sometimes hard and gruelling work for a fieldworker and his informant, collectively, to sort out the personal details of the informant's life, with all the unspoken associations and connotations that each detail encompasses. Casual conversation and interviewing proceeded better without a tape recorder at times, and more often we simply needed a rest from the subtle pressure that recording creates. This was especially true because both of us were well aware of what the end result of our work together would be -- a personal document on a man's life, his stories, and his storytelling, a document that might eventually be published.

Very little of the interviewing was directed, except when I sought specific data on stories and storytelling. In collecting the life history material I usually asked a fairly general question that received a specific and detailed response, often in the form of a personal experience narrative. More often than not, Coffil told stories and offered non-narrative descriptions that I neither asked for nor expected. What was told but not put on tape during a given session provided a basis and a starting point for the next recorded interview. Other times, material that was not recorded was written up immediately after the session because its spontaneity could not be duplicated another time. The time span



between our recording sessions was dictated by this method of collecting: were I to record something Coffil told me only a short time before it would be less detailed and more self-conscious because of his awareness that he had told me the same thing only a few days ago. The extended periods of time between recording sessions also allowed me to transcribe the tapes from the previous session and relate them to the developing patterns of the life history and the storytelling.<sup>51</sup>

When I went to see Bob Coffil on April 25, 1973, I had finished compiling a life history about half its present length. My intent, at that time, was to clarify a problem I had encountered with the chronology of his life and to fill in one brief gap in the narrative. What resulted, from that session and the session of June 14, 1973, was a life history twice its intended length. When I gave him a copy of the completed life history to read for errors and for material he felt to be too personal to be included -- only two minor abridge-

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<sup>51</sup>Tape recorded interviews with Robert Coffil were on the following dates: February 17, 1970; May 17, 1970; June 10, 1970; September 29, 1972; January 11, 1973; April 25, 1973; and June 14, 1973. The February 17, 1970, interview with Coffil was done by two high school students of mine; from that recording has come no data included in the life history.

The need for extended lapses in time between the non-recorded and recorded tellings of a story became apparent from the first two sessions I had with Coffil, in May and June of 1970. See Chapter V, note 33, for an explanation of the fragmented form of a story recorded three weeks after it was first told to the fieldworker.

ments came from this proofreading -- Coffil said, "You know, I've been thinking about it, and I don't imagine I've told half of what there is to tell."<sup>52</sup> This is, of course, true, not because Coffil consciously refrained from telling me of other experiences but because of my field methods and the limited period of time I had to complete the work.

What was sought and not sought in the collection of the life history is reflected in the life history itself. My emphasis, during the course of the fieldwork, was on occupational data, that is, descriptions of Coffil's life as a sailor, a truck driver, a logger, a fisherman, and a ship's pilot. Ultimately, his evaluation of himself is intrinsically related to his various occupations having to do with ships and sailing. In only two instances did I specifically seek information of a strictly personal nature about relationships within his family. Once, I asked if he had a difficult time because he was the youngest child in a large family; another time, I asked if he quit the vessel business and began trucking so he could be closer to his wife and family. These were the only two times I asked questions like those that are of primary importance to the life historian in anthropology. With another informant and

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<sup>52</sup>Field notes, June 28, 1973.

a more intimate relationship between the fieldworker and that other informant, my questions perhaps would be more pointed. My purpose, however, was not to compile the La Vida<sup>53</sup> of Kings County, Nova Scotia.

Bob Coffil is extraordinary in the extent to which he is and has been adjusted to himself and to life. His family life has been harmonious, as have been most of his associations with friends and acquaintances. In his life history, therefore, there is no reference to sex and no indication of his attitude toward women. In fact, the profanity is limited to a meager sprinkling of "hell" and "goddamn," with only one scatological four-letter word which surprised me so much when I transcribed the tape that I am not sure that he did indeed use it. But this is the way Coffil is. He does not, for example, drink or smoke. His repertoire is also tempered by the kind of man he is. He tells what appear to be abridged versions of the two possibly obscene tall tales he learned from his brother John,<sup>54</sup> and one of John Coffil's favorite stories, a rather grotesque tall tale about a man going

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<sup>53</sup>Oscar Lewis, La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty--San Juan and New York (New York, 1966). This book quickly became a bestseller, at least in part because of the detailed accounts of personal encounters and sexual experiences of the family members who, because of their poverty, became involved in prostitution and multiple marriage.

<sup>54</sup>See Chapter VI, Texts, nos. 26 and 31.

through a stone crusher and then being put back together, was never collected from Coffil.

g. The nature of the interviewing, for the most part being quite non-directed, produces a first-person account of a life that more clearly reflects the interests and aspirations of its narrator. Similarly, my shying away from the temptation to record the opinions and accounts of other people has made the life history more subjective yet more reliable as a personal document.<sup>55</sup> Although Coffil enjoys traditional and spontaneous humor of exaggeration, he is a remarkably honest man and is not inclined to exaggerate his true experiences, either for additional humor or as a means of self-ingratiation.

Because Coffil has said nothing about certain aspects of his life, this does not necessarily mean that these facets are of no importance. For instance, the only mention of religion throughout the course of the fieldwork was about a church in Corner Brook, Newfoundland, which was blown from one side of the harbor across the water to the other side during a storm. Because the church members liked the new location of their church, they left it there. Coffil's mother was a very devout Baptist, and he, like his father, is a religious but generally non-churchgoing man because his work often

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<sup>55</sup>An exception here is the tape recorded interview with Clyde Smith of Campobello Island, New Brunswick.

made church attendance impossible. "It wouldn't seem quite right, you know, to show up at church now when I never went before."<sup>56</sup> Nonetheless, a religious ethic with at least a basis in organized Protestantism has certainly played a part in making Coffil an honest man with himself and in his dealings with others.

As a storyteller and as a man of his time, what can be said about Robert Coffil and his own telling of his life? It has been noted already that Coffil is an average and typical man of his time and place. He is different from his neighbors and peers, the men who frequent Don Forsythe's store, because he is not a farmer and because of his reputation among them for being a storyteller. Even as a storyteller, however, he is perhaps less gregarious and more soft-spoken than most of these other men. His storytelling style is notable for its understatement, a characteristic that helps to create an illusion of truth in his stories.

Two of Coffil's stories, one about his father hitting a man with his fist, another included in the texts (no. 47) about Clyde Smith tricking a man, present a stereotypic view of the Jew, at least to the extent that one is a merchant who wants to cut corners and the other wants to make some quick money in the Smith story by buying and selling junk, the point of which being

that Smith was the only person ever to "get ahead of a Jew." The stereotype of the Jew is centuries old; Coffil, in these two stories, merely reflects the age-old stereotype. Seen within the broad context of the life history and the repertoire of texts, the stories are insignificant and do not indicate any unusual or overt prejudice on Coffil's part. In fact, in the geographic region in which Coffil has spent his life working there are very few Jewish people, and it is only natural that a Jew would be identified by others and by himself as a Jew.

The same is true with Coffil's use of the word "nigger." There are relatively few blacks in Kings County and in the other areas where Coffil has been, and until the fairly recent awareness of its racist tendencies by the white population in the northern United States and Canada, "nigger" was an accepted term for "Negro" with little derogatory connotation for many whites. One time, when Coffil was talking about the hard physical labor involved in truck driving, he said that someone once told him that every truck should come equipped with a nigger, to help with the loading and unloading, and then justified his use of the word by explaining that when he worked in the States in the early 1920's the few blacks that he was in contact with in work situations humorously called each other "nigger" when they wanted a black friend to

help with some physical task.<sup>57</sup> No generalizations regarding overt prejudice can be drawn from the three references to "niggers" in the life history and the texts, and again, this use of a derogatory stereotype is of little or no consequence when seen in the larger context of Coffil's story. It only indicates how typical he is, and even my mention of these two examples of stereotyping tends to overemphasize them. As a younger member of a culture oriented more toward the written word, I am more self-conscious of prejudice than Coffil is.

The narrator of the life history, obviously, is a man whose culture has been oriented toward and transmitted by the spoken word rather than the written word. As a result, his attitude toward formal education is worth noting. He quit school at the beginning of grade six, and occasionally since then has regretted that he did not continue or resume his education. As Coffil explains in his story, "If I had it to do over again I'd stuck to the schooling I think. If I could've got, if I had had grade eleven. I guess you have to have grade eleven in order to really get to be a skipper of a big ship, for navigation.... I think I'd like it in bigger vessels." He further comments, "Once get in a rut that way, why, it's, it's hard to tell what you want to do."

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<sup>57</sup>Field notes, September 13, 1972.

But Coffil could change, and this attitude toward formal education remained with him. When he was forty-four years old he quit freighting on the sea, tried farming and didn't like it, and then began fishing with his son. In the first years that they fished, Coffil and his son went to five government-sponsored fishing schools to learn all they could about their new occupation, and consequently, were quick-to-learn and successful fishermen. Coffil's awareness of the value of education, however, is tempered by a recognition of the importance of common sense. An illustration of his attitude that common sense and experience are often better than formal education is to be found in Chapter VI, Texts, no. 60.

Two aspects of the life history especially offer an insight to the understanding of Robert Coffil as a storyteller. First, there is an overwhelming emphasis upon humorous incidents, and even experiences which would not have been amusing at the time are viewed with retrospective humor. Second, there is a frequent emphasis upon himself as the master of any situation. This is understated and unconscious, but it is still an important conclusion to be drawn from the life history.

A good example of both these points is the description of his difficulties with a Greek freighter he piloted into and out of Port Williams. After boarding the ship to take it into Port Williams, Coffil had



several arguments with the captain. In each instance, the captain backed down by eventually conceding that Coffil knew what he was talking about. When he took the ship out of Port Williams, he was forced to knock off a corner of the wharf because of heavy ice in the river. Finally, he sailed through a storm down the Bay of Fundy to Digby, where he left the freighter and boarded the pilot boat that had come out to pick him up and take him to shore. A near gale-force wind with mountainous seas threatened to swamp the disabled pilot boat, and it was several hours later before he and the other two men were towed into Digby by a larger boat that came out in the storm in answer to their distress signal.

This last incident would have been a harrowing experience for any man, and certainly would make a heroic personal experience narrative. But of his multitude of trials with the Greek freighter and its captain -- who incidentally failed to stand by when he was told that the engine on the pilot boat was not working -- Coffil has classified these various experiences so that his description of the troubles with the Greek captain going into Port Williams takes a definite narrative form and is told as a lengthy and humorous story. This was recorded twice, without being asked for. His telling of the incident in the storm off Digby is brief, lacks detail, and has no narrative structure. I asked Coffil twice about this

last incident, and what is presented in the life history is a composite made in large part from short answers to my questions and comments.

This personal ordering of one's experiences is not done on a conscious level, but it is done nonetheless. And it indicates quite clearly how a man evaluates himself and his experiences, in this case, not as a hero but as a man who is most often right and who most often succeeds in conflicts with others. Particular details, seen in retrospect, make the experience a humorous one. Also, as a storyteller, as a man who can organize his experiences into effective personal narratives, Coffil tells this part of the series of episodes with the Greek freighter as a story with considerable dialogue. Such argumentative conversation, for Coffil, helps to make a story what it is. Description of heroism and peril on the high seas does not. It might make good newspaper copy, as it did,<sup>58</sup> but it is not something to tell as a story, especially when understatement and humor are at the core of the storyteller's style.

Besides omitting considerable detail about Coffil's present life, such as work he has done and thinks of doing to maintain his 150-year old farmhouse, certain decisions have been made regarding what to include in the

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<sup>58</sup>Halifax Chronicle-Herald, January 2, 1973, p. 9. See Chapter V, note 49, for a copy of the newspaper article describing this incident.

life history, what to include in the texts, and what to include in the chapter on storytelling contexts. When I first planned a life history, my intention was to include most of the collected data on storytelling. It would, in this way, be similar to Roberts' Up Outshin and Down Greasy and Abrahams' A Singer and Her Songs, both of which include the informants' attitudes toward their folklore traditions. This original concept changed, however, when it became apparent that most of the data on storytelling situations throughout Coffil's life was in the form of short answers to my questions, not in extended descriptions, or was imbedded in tale texts. To try to fit this into the life history would have made it more fragmentary than it now is.

Furthermore, the primary goal in compiling the life history has been to present a storyteller's life -- for its own value and interest -- in his own words. My role, as editor, has been to place Bob Coffil's impressionistic story within a rigorous chronology. The chronological presentation of a living folklore informant's life, in his or her own words, has, to my knowledge, never been attempted previously in North American folklore scholarship. Notably, the works of Roberts and Abrahams do not follow a strict chronology, although both contain valuable biographical detail.

My insistence on the primacy of the chronology forced revisions that occasionally tested the patience of my own literary aesthetic: a brilliant editorial transition between two parts of the narrative, the latter of which was not in its proper chronological place, had to be omitted; likewise, one of Coffil's better personal experience narratives was split asunder so a few pages of additional material, which belonged chronologically between the two parts of the story, could be included. This is the only narrative that has been divided for the sake of chronology or for any other reason.<sup>59</sup> Such a necessarily slavish attention to chronology ruled out the inclusion of contextual description on storytelling.

Personal experience narratives and anecdotes are to be found in both the life history and the texts. Certain guidelines were followed in deciding which stories should go in which section of the present work. Because the first phase of my fieldwork concentrated on the collection of texts, Coffil recognized this interest on my part and tended to tell stories that he more clearly identifies as stories during this period prior to August, 1972. Most of these, accordingly, are in the chapter of texts, including all the tall tales. A few of these stories are in the life history because of their direct

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<sup>59</sup>See Chapter V, pp. 230-234, and note 47.

relation to specific times of Coffil's life. Other personal experience narratives, like the practical joke stories from the woods camp on Cape Blomidon where he worked in the early 1940's, are in the texts rather than the life history because of their narrative value -- e.g., Coffil first told the woods camp-saw mill stories the third time I saw him, in September, 1970, when I did not have a tape recorder -- and because the subsequent discussion and analysis would burden the life history and could not be buried in notes. Legends and anecdotes are, for the most part, in the texts, although a few have been included in the life history because they provided background information and did not put a strain on the chronology.

In annotating narrative elements in the life history, my purpose has been twofold. First, to give the reader an idea of how much or how little editing of the oral material has been done, I explain in these annotations exactly what changes have been made in the tape transcription of a narrative. This relates to my conviction that recorded oral material can be presented honestly with relatively little editorial tampering. Second, these notes provide a forum for my random comments on Coffil's storytelling and on the situations in which particular items were recorded. In both cases, the annotations are another way in which I try to show how

my work has progressed and how it has been done.

Not all of the stories in the life history have been annotated in this manner, but most of them have been. In all cases, the narratives that are annotated were told to me at least once as definitely structured stories, usually beginning with an introductory comment by Coffil like "I don't know if I told you about ..." or "One time ..." Most of these, in listening to the tapes stand out as stories because of Coffil's clearer enunciation and slightly raised voice level. Also, the general lack of conversation, that is, my questions and his answers, indicates that a story is being told. Coffil has told all of these stories before, so they can be considered part of his repertoire.

Twenty-six narratives in the life history are fully annotated as described above, with reference to published accounts of historical incidents when such accounts could be found. Of these twenty-six, sixteen are personal experience narratives with Coffil as a principal actor in the event or events described. Eight are anecdotes, that is, personal experience narratives with someone else as the main actor. These are stories Coffil tells about his father, grandfather, and other men. When two of these incidents occurred, Coffil was present as an observer but was not an active participant. One family legend, so-called because the emphasis is on

a thing (a bomb hidden on his father's boat by saboteurs) rather than on any one individual, is to be found in the life history, as is one tall tale, another telling of which is included in the texts. In addition, four whoppers or brief statements of exaggeration without a narrative framework are in the life history.

The notes which discuss narrative and historical material in the life history are included in a separate section at the end of the life-history itself. To include them as footnotes in effect would break the continuity of Coffil's narrative. References to other parts of the life history or to the chapter of texts, on the other hand, are included in footnotes.

The life history, in its entirety, has been made from transcriptions of tape recordings, with the following exceptions. (1) Editorial introductions, transitions, and comments are enclosed in square brackets. (2) Passages that have been written from notes taken when I was not using a tape recorder and that have been presented, as closely as possible, in the way in which they were spoken, are enclosed in single slash marks or virgules. (3) Words and phrases that were unclear on tape have been approximated and are placed in parentheses, as are indications of when the speaker and listener(s) laughed or chuckled. (4) Words, phrases, and passages that are in parentheses and underscored or italicized

have been inserted to clarify points in the transcription and to provide brief transitions where they were needed. This material is presented as if Coffil spoke it.

In editing the tape transcriptions and ordering the material to fit the chronology of Coffil's life, I have avoided the use of ellipses (...) to indicate false starts, shifts from one sequence of recording to another, pauses, and the like. Such uses of ellipses would place an undue burden on the life history which, although recorded orally, must be presented and read on the printed page. Generally speaking, however, the extent of these possible uses of ellipses is shown in the annotations to particular narratives in the life history.

Finally, how should the life history be read? Although it is in essence an oral document, it is after all captured, as it were, on the printed page. This change from the spoken word to the written word necessitates certain changes and omissions. A principal change is in dialect, and in all but a few instances I have tried to avoid the temptation to indicate Coffil's pronunciation and instead have opted for standard spelling. To present oral material in dialect places an undue emphasis on the quaint and the unusual, especially when all people exhibit regional and idiosyncratic speech traits. The only non-standard spelling I have followed



throughout is with "feller" as opposed to "fellow." Coffil's pronunciation here is so regular that to spell it otherwise would be to present a different word. In a very few instances I have kept Coffil's pronunciation of specific words ("git" for "get"; "me" for "my") because the emphasis he placed on this pronunciation and the context in which it was spoken are inseparable. His pronunciation of "git," for example, is more emphatic and measured than his pronunciation of "get." The former is used primarily in dialogue, as when he asks or commands someone to "git" something.

Coffil's speech, generally, is slow and measured. He speaks in a quiet voice and at times tends to mumble and slur his words. Occasionally, he pronounces the final g in words ending in -ing; more often he does not. Other pronunciations include "agin" for "against," "tetch" for "touch," "thet" for "thought," "ay-tall" for "at all," "histe" for "hoist," "dee-strick" for "district," "onload" for "unload," "gonna" for "going to." In this last example, "gonna" is used in certain syntaxes, "going to" in others. For this reason, "going to" is sometimes written "gonna" to indicate the syntactical difference. Sometimes this difference is probably as much an indication of tiredness as it is of syntax, for when Coffil was uninterested in my questions or in what he was saying the words tended to be slurred and mumbled.

When telling a story, he enunciated more clearly and precisely.

His speech, then, is fairly representative of the area, except that he does speak more slowly than most other people, probably because as a storyteller he places greater value on words and on how they are spoken and organized. And, of course, Coffil's narration includes some esoteric terms and colloquialisms that he has acquired in his long life as a sailor, truck driver, and woodsman. These are glossed in the notes or, in parentheses, in the text.

Although presented in writing for anyone to read, all of what is included in the life history was told by one person, Robert Coffil, to another, the fieldworker. In a few instances, Coffil's wife and son were present; most of the time it was just the two of us. Thus, the life history might best be read as one man's personal account of his life as he tells it to another, forty years his junior, who is interested in that life as one human being to another. Such a relationship is traditional to an older way of life, and doubtless provided satisfaction for both of us.

No master-disciple relationship, however, exists between the two except in the loosest sense. The young man, the fieldworker, is in some ways envious of the richness of the elder man's life, but he knows that he

could never emulate that life. One is a man whose culture emphasizes the written word, the other is a man from an oral-oriented culture, and this man whose culture emphasized the spoken word wishes in retrospect that he had had the opportunity and the desire for more education. Thus, each of the two sees in the other something he has never had and never will have for himself -- for the one, a wide variety of experiences related to the sea and a more tradition-oriented life; for the other, a book-knowledge that ultimately could have extended his seafaring horizon and made him more successful to himself.

They sit together, with a tape recorder between them: at a kitchen table in a large kitchen, reminiscent of the time when the kitchen was the center of social activity in the home; or in a living room with silent television set and a photograph of the older man's parents on the wall; or on a glassed-in verandah overlooking the sea and the tides, with a scale model of an old sailing vessel on a table nearby. The older man speaks in a soft voice, grinning from time to time as he recounts his life; the younger man listens, occasionally asking a question and nodding his head in agreement or understanding, once in a while fidgeting with the tape recorder.

## ROBERT COFFIL: THE FIRST SEVENTY YEARS

A Brief Chronology

The purpose of this chronology is to give the reader a brief outline of the events in Robert Coffil's life. As the life history, upon which this chronology is based, has been collected entirely by word of mouth from Robert Coffil and is presented in his own words, some of the dates in the chronology can be considered only approximate. By internal evidence, however, it can be established that no date is more than two years off.

- 1903: Born in Blomidon, Kings County, Nova Scotia, on June 17. Father finishes building freight boat six days later.
- 1909: (Aet. 6) Father's freight boat destroyed at Kingsport wharf during a storm, and Uncle Will Coffil is killed in an attempt to save the boat.
- 1911: (Aet. 8) Father brings home dory, dams up pond in which brothers Bob and Alden row the dory, coal-tarred and named Blackface.
- 1912: (Aet. 9) Begins sailing with father and older brother John on the freight boat Annie Pearl during the summers, though he is not yet doing much work.

- 1915: (Aet. 12) Bomb, believed to have been left by saboteurs, is found on Annie Pearl as it lays in Great Village, N. S. Brothers Bob and Alden take father to see medium at movie theater in Saint John, N. B., to learn the truth of Grandfather Coffil's death.
- 1916: (Aet. 13) Leaves school at the beginning of sixth grade to help father and brother John load apples on vessel in Kingsport, never returns to school. Annie Pearl fills up with water at Mill Creek near the Coffil home on October 13, goes on The Hustler with father and John the rest of the fall, carrying apples from the Minas Basin to Saint John and Moncton, N. B. Gets paid \$35 from September to December.
- 1921: (Aet. 18) Misses opportunity to sail to Australia with Captain Bernie Lyons.
- 1923: (Aet. 20) Goes to New England to work, returns home in the fall and is with his father and John when father's last freight boat is left for junk at Fort Williams. Returns to Massachusetts in December.
- 1924: (Aet. 21) Works at various jobs in Boston area, notably as a striker (second man on truck to help load and unload) and truck driver for Mount Hope Finishing Company in North Dighton, Mass. Returns

- home in the fall and buys freight boat Edna Mae with his brother Alden, two years older than he is. Father and John frequently sail with them.
- 1925: (Aet. 22) Becomes captain of Edna Mae, carrying freight between Minas Basin in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick and New England.
- 1926: (Aet. 23) Buys first of five trucks and begins trucking business, which he continues for about the next twelve years.
- 1927: (Aet. 24) Marries Myrtle Rogers of Blomidon. Edna Mae, with Alden as captain, fills up with water crossing Bay of Fundy, is left in Beaver Harbour, N. B., as a total loss. Alden buys another boat and continues freighting.
- 1929: (Aet. 26) Daughter Shirley born.
- 1930: (Aet. 27) Father dies.
- 1931: (Aet. 28) Twin sons born, one of whom dies of pneumonia one month later. The other son, Robert, Jr., will grow up to begin fishing with his father seventeen years later.
- 1939: (Aet. 36) Quits trucking business after "twelve wasted years" and with Alden buys an old rumrunner, the Chaugamok, which they repair and rename the Shirley Aleta after their oldest daughters. Merchant navy, freighting during wartime. Carries coal to Black's Harbour, N. B., for next eight years.

- 1940: (Aet. 37) Works at woods camp and saw mill in Blomidon for three or four winters. Rebuilds skidway.
- 1942: (Aet. 39) Daughter Dorothy born.
- 1943: (Aet. 40) Pilots ship into Port Williams after the pilot has been killed when another ship was torpedoed off Western Head, on the South Shore of Nova Scotia.
- 1944: (Aet. 41) Pilots another vessel into Port Williams after spending the winter at camp and mill off New Ross Road.
- 1945: (Aet. 42) Runs power skow -- with drunken engineer -- for Bond Lumber Company while brother runs the Shirley Aleta.
- 1946: (Aet. 43) Buys house and farm in Delhaven, where he and family still live, after having lived several places between Blomidon and Canaling in the previous twenty years.
- 1947: (Aet. 44) Tries farming for one year after he and Alden sell Shirley Aleta and Alden begins boat-building in Farnsboro.
- 1948: (Aet. 45) Buys fish dragger, fishes with son Bobby for the next twenty years, mostly in the Minas Basin and the Bay of Fundy, though they will spend two or three summers off Prince Edward Island and the Magdalene Islands in the 1960's.

- 1952: (Aet. 49) Spends fall and winter fishing out of Wilson's Beach, Campobello Island, N. B., with Clyde Smith.
- 1963: (Aet. 60) His brother, John, dies, after fishing with him and son for previous four years.
- 1967: (Aet. 64) Becomes pilot for Port Williams and Hantsport, forty years after he first inquired about the job.
- 1968: (Aet. 65) Last of two fishing boats fills up in Minas Basin, is towed into Mill Creek and sold for salvage. Quits commercial fishing, but son Bobby continues -- on large trawlers out of Riverport, N. S.
- 1972: (Aet. 69) Takes Greek freighter into Port Williams at Christmas with various difficulties. He and two other men are left adrift off Digby on New Year's Eve during storm -- snow, fifty mile winds, eight-foot waves -- in small pilot boat after he takes Greek ship out of Port Williams. They are towed in several hours later, after Greek captain has not heeded their request to stand by.
- 1973: (Aet. 70) Passes seventieth birthday in good health, awaiting first ship of season and hand-lining for halibut in Minas Basin off Delhaven.



1. The Early Years, 1903-1916

/My father grew up over to Grand Pré. He lived there till about the time he was married and then he settled over here at Mill Creek, down toward Blomidon, about a mile from where I live now. I don't remember now just how it was, but I think I've got some German blood in me from my father's side. My mother was a Balsor, from over around Black Rock on the Bay of Fundy shore. They had eight children. There were four girls and four of us brothers. Dan, he was the oldest, and he never kept to the sea after they lost a ship called the Lone Star out in the mouth of the Bay of Fundy. I think that scared him and he never went after that. That was way before I went anywheres, but I can remember it. A government boat, a steamer called the Mount Temple, picked them up and took them in to Saint John.<sup>1</sup> John was on that trip too, and he was fourteen years older than I was, and he'd went quite a bit before I started going, and he went with us some too. He was the one that told the stories, and I guess probably that's what got me started. Then there was Alden, he was two years older, and then me. I was the youngest./

Well, I'll be, I was twenty-nine my last birthday. (Tallman: Twenty-nine your last birthday, huh?) Yeah, I'll be seventy. So what would that make it? There's a three to it. 1903 I think it was. The seventeenth of

June. /My father finished building a freight boat when I was six days old. He finished her six days after I was born. He launched it. She was only sixty or seventy feet. I remember that, remember him telling me that. That boat lasted six years. It was tied up at Kingsport wharf when a storm come up, and the wharf at Kingsport here is very unprotected. The boat was smashed to bits within hours. A brother of his got down on the boat during the storm to try and save her, but when he tried to get off on the wharf he went down between the vessel and the wharf and drowned, or, was crushed to death. It was so rough in there she come in and jammed into the wharf. Next day they found him up around the point./

I think there was a little difficulty at times (being the youngest). I think there was a little partiality showed, you know. I always thought he (Alden) got the best of it, some of the deals. Well, I was always running and going and I was a little harder on my shoes and one thing another than he was. He done some painting -- /I got one or two of his old paintings here yet/ -- and he was a little easier on his clothes, and he always got a pair of fine shoes and I got a coarse pair. I can remember that quite well. (laughing)

There was a concert in the school up there at Christmas time and of course we had these new shoes. There was one fine pair come, good pair of shoes, and

there was this big coarse pair of boots, and I wore the coarse boots 'cause I was hardest on my shoes. Well, now that's the way I took it. I don't know. I felt it, you know. I always felt that, and of course Myrtle (his wife) says I'm always prejudiced now, everything like that, and it might have been that, I don't know. Probably they couldn't get another pair like them or probably they didn't have money enough in them days, but one was a big coarse pair 'cause I think they said I was harder on my boots or something. I heard it talked over.

And another thing, they thought he couldn't stand as much as I could or something. He had something wrong with his lungs or something. When it come time to lug wood or anything, he was always (indisposed). I was the one that should've been babied (grinning), but I guess he was babied a little. With my mother, that was always that there was something the matter with his lungs. /But we got along good and had a good time, and he's still going strong over there in Farsboro./

When we was kids, my brother next to me, not John (but Alden), the feller that went with me so much, we was around home and father brought home a dory because we was wanting to get out in boats. So he picked up a dory down in what they call the Cedar Swamp here in the Bay and he brought it home and he dammed up a pond and put the boat into it.

I think we had, yeh, we had to, we tarred the bottom. Coal tar was all the go then. You couldn't buy paint 'cause there wasn't enough money around to buy paint, so we coal tarred her. There must have been some left over from the old vessels, /and because she was black like that we named her Blackface, and that old rowboat was our first vessel./ And we used that in there I don't know how long. It might've been a year and it might've been two years we had her in the pond there before we got out into the Bay. He thought we'd go out and go adrift was what he was scared of, and (so) he put us in the pond and told us not to take her out. And we used her, and then we started in going.

We wasn't too old when we had that boat. I don't know whether we'd started to go to school or not. But we loaded her and we unloaded her, with stuff, sand and everything we had then. We built wharves, of course, to go to. We had quite an experience right there, imagine, you know, for two kids.<sup>2</sup> And then we got her out, and the first long trip I think we took in her, they launched a vessel in Canning in the First World War. And we rowed her from down to Mill Creek there to Kingsport (a distance of three miles), and then we got to Canning from Kingsport. We walked up the road (two miles to Canning to see the vessel launched). Now that was a roundabout way, wasn't it? We rowed her with oars.

Well, then I went with father (on larger vessels). We started in going. We made trips before we done anything. I remember going to Saint John in a vessel he run for a feller in Kingsport, Jimmy D. Ells there. This old store there he happened to (own) and the big house right alongside of the church in Kingsport. J. D. Ells. And, I think it was the Fred Green, and we went over to Walton, I don't know what for there, and I remember coming down and going in to Parrsboro, but I don't know what he was going to load or anything. I can't remember that. I remember him having a toothache, and he was carrying sail on her pretty heavy, and the boy, my brother, older brother (John), took the sail off her, and he didn't like it much, when he took the sail off her. I remember that.

The next, about the next time, we made a trip to Saint John and got a load of freight in a vessel father owned. She was loaded with general cargo. We had everything in her, flour and feed and everything. My father got it and took it to Great Village, outside of Truro there. And that must have been in the First World War because, we went up on the shore, my brother (Alden) and I, we was only young then, and we went up ashore and when we come back they said they put a bomb aboard of her. Well, we'd never heard tell of a bomb then (because we had been up on shore). I didn't see it. My mother seen

it. She was with us in the vessel at the time.

There's a man come down aboard that night. Just about dark he come down and he wanted to know if he could look at the vessel and they said yes. And he come down and leaned over the rail and looked over the side of her. Right where he leaned over, there's where they found the bomb, under the rail kind of. He just leaned over the rail and reached down over, and then he got up and went right up on the wharf and went away. And there was another feller standing on the wharf and he went with him. It was the two together. They just looked around a few minutes on the stern of her and he leaned over the rail and looked down at the water and got up and went on the wharf.

Well, my brother (John) chucked it overboard. There was a big deep hole of water right there aside the vessel and he chucked it in that. Some of them looked under the rail (after the men left) and they claimed they seen two bright spots in there, and he just reached in and grabbed it, and there was a big pool over the rail, and he fired it down in the pool. There was another vessel loading lumber right astern, the two vessels were right together, and the captain in her said it was a bomb. They told him what it looked like and everything. But we wasn't too big then. We wasn't doing too much work. We was just on the trip, I guess.<sup>3</sup>

We was up there in Great Village (another time). Lots of things happen, you know, can happen that you'd think never could happen. Lots of people, of course if I tell anything around here the boys all think, they grin. But, we went in Great Village there, and we was laying in there and the Scott Act inspector come down. That was quite a long while ago when they had Scott Act inspectors looking after the liquor.<sup>4</sup> Somebody told him that we had a quart of alcohol aboard, and, I don't know, it might've been Jack, the young bugger, he might've got it going. But this inspector come down and he told him, he says, "I got a report that you got liquor aboard." 'Cause they was looking, every vessel they thought was carrying liquor at that time, which they wasn't. There might've been some. Father, of course, he come right out and he said, "Yes," he says, "there's a quart of alcohol here," he says, "but you ain't gonna get it." "Well," he says, "if there's a quart of alcohol," he says, "I'm going to have it. I'm going to seize it." He says, "You ain't going to seize it." He says, "You try and seize it." -He says, "Where is it?" He got pretty mad. Father says, "Up there in the compass, wood alcohol." I guess he was some dirty, he was some dirty about that. But he, anything like that, when they come down, made him awful mad 'cause he never took a drink. I'd never seen him take a drink all my going with him. Never, never

drank anything. It made him so mad when he said he had a report that he had liquor aboard.<sup>5</sup>

[Any man who earns his living freighting cargo by water must face a variety of officials and merchants, all of whom are not precisely on his side. Both Bob Coffil and his father had occasional tangles with the authorities. Two of his father's experiences are recorded here. Other similar incidents are to be found in later sections of the life history.]

His father (my grandfather) run a vessel carrying cordwood to Boston, and he was bringing back some flour and stuff, different stuff, and they seized her there in Horton. It was smuggling, bringing stuff in from the States without the duty being paid. And, he took the lifeboat -- just a small lifeboat probably fifteen feet long -- and took off, and he landed on Moose Island the first night. He spent the first night on Moose Island and then he went to Eastport, Maine (a trip of two hundred miles). He had a little sail on her and he sailed her down. It ain't hard to go. You can go clear to Boston in a boat that size, if you want to follow the coast right down. He worked there (in Eastport), I don't know whether it was a year or two years. I never found out just how long it was before he came back again. And I don't know how they got the vessel back. He (his father) must've paid it or something to get the vessel



clear. (When he did come back) it could have been a year or two years after that that he got married, or it could've been longer than that. I don't really know.

He figured that he (the customs officer) wasn't gonna let him have the boat. He was a young feller and he figured he'd have the boat, I suppose, and so he really stole the boat. But, they never done nothing to him 'cause they had the vessel there that would more than pay the bill I, suppose, if they had it, so they never paid no attention to it, near as I know. There could've been a fuss kicked up some, but they never done nothing to him or anything when he come back. I suppose his father paid whatever the fine was and that ended it. I could have found out all that stuff about it but I never realized that I'd ever want to tell it, 'cause he would have told me. But he never talked about it much. I never heard him say too much, but I heard him tell somebody or he told us something about taking the boat and going.<sup>6</sup>

I think he was quite easy-going. He never got mad easy but he got mad once in a while. He was quite strong, my father was. (One time) we was up there with a load of freight and he hit the Jew over in Five Islands. Well, that was in that old Annie Pearl and I was a kid then, but I was big enough to take notice of things. We loaded freight in Saint John for Jacob Resnick.

He had a store I think in Five Islands at that time, and I think he must have had one over in Parrsboro.<sup>7</sup> We had a carload of feed in her and a lot of other stuff, and we went in to Five Islands and the carload of feed was for Resnick. I think the shipper in Saint John told father, as near as I can remember, to make him pay for the carload of feed in the custom house and sign the bill of lading before he delivered the cargo. It was a carload of feed.

He come down on the wharf and he was all ready to unload there in Five Islands. He wanted the carload of feed and father wouldn't deliver it to him. I remember him telling him to go and pay for it down in the custom house, or at the bank, it could've been in the bank, and he'd deliver it to him. And he chewed and chewed and chewed, and the last I seen (was) father starting for the wharf, and it was about as high as my head. And I seen him going for the wharf and I knowed something was gonna happen (chuckling) so I made for the wharf too, and when I looked over the capstan, why, this Resnick was laying down on the other side of the wharf. He was just getting up. And I don't know whether he drove him clear across the wharf or whether he run and he caught him over there or not. Anyway, they got the thing straightened out and he give him the truckload of feed. I don't know whether somebody else got in as a go-between or not or

how it was done, but we unloaded the cargo there, all of it.

The day we got ready to come out, before the vessel got afloat, why, we seen these, well, there was a lot of lumber piles there. They was sawing lumber, a lot of lumber, at that time. We seen these men coming down and they'd go along and pick up a junk of plank there that had been broke in the winter where they was trucking it in there I suppose, and they all got these cudgels. I don't know what the crowd he (Resnick) had there thought they was gonna do. After we was all unloaded and everything, and the vessel was cleared out of the customs, why, they come down there and they got these clubs. I don't know, you'd think they had something in their mind they was gonna murder somebody to watch 'em marching around with these clubs over their shoulders. They looked like an army on patrol.

I think he got scared, afraid they was going to try and hold the vessel there or beat us up or something. The boat was afloat alongside of the vessel there, so he got down in the boat and he shoved her out clear of the vessel and he said, "Now," he says, "when she floats," he told my brother, John, I wasn't doing much then, he says, "put two slip lines on the wharf and put the sail on." There was quite a little breeze right out. And he says, "I'll come aboard soon as she gets away from the wharf."

So we did, and when we started to put the foresail on her there, why, Jackie took the axe and laid it over by the rail in case they grabbed on the line. They run to the wharf. Jack seen 'em coming, so he just took the axe. He didn't have time to slip them, he just cut it right off on the rail, the rope. I can see it yet. He cut the rope off and she moved out from the wharf and father come alongside and got aboard the vessel and we come out. And we come home, and there was nothing more. He went into Parrisboro that fall and he told me afterwards, or John told me, it cost him twenty dollars. They tied him up there and fined him twenty dollars for hitting Resnick. So I don't know how hard he hit him or anything, but I seen it. He got up and walked right off the wharf after he got up.<sup>8</sup>

[Just as Bob Coffil's father sailed in a small boat to Eastport, Maine, to work, so too did his grandfather some years later, after his wife had died. As he lives by the sea, so any sailor might die by the sea. This was to be the fate of Coffil's grandfather, at about the turn of the century.]

He worked in Eastport a winter or something like that, and he was on his way back home. It was just a big rowboat with a sail on it, as near as I know. She had a sail on her and she had oars in her. Of course, they went everywhere with a sail and boat then. If

there wasn't no wind (coming up the Bay of Fundy) he'd have to use the tide. He'd come as far as the tide would bring him on the flood tide and then probably he would anchor or go in close to the beach and anchor, unless there was a good breeze, a fair wind, and then he would probably stem the tide some. But, if it was calm he'd have to go in and anchor and wait.

He was going to, I don't know whether it was build a house for my father or he was gonna repair a vessel or build a house or something, and he was on his way home to do it when he went ashore down there in Quaco. Some calls it St. Martin's and some calls it Quaco. It's somewhere handy abreast of Fredericton. From Cape Spencer off of Saint John there, it's eighteen miles from there to Quaco up the shore. They found the boat on the beach and he was on the beach. I don't know whether his feet was in the water or something like that. And, (when he left Eastport) he had a chest of tools aboard and he should have had some money on him. They figured he should have had, 'cause he worked all winter down there and he was on his way home. And he (father) always figured that somebody had done it to him, what with the money he had and the tools (both missing).

We was in Saint John there (one time when my brother and I were just kids) and we was up to the show. I think it was still movies (i.e., silent movies). It

must've been. And, the medium was there. I don't know whether we knowed she was what they call a medium or not, but we told him this woman was up there and that she'd answer any question (chuckling) he wanted to know, and we thought it was the right time for him to find out, so we asked him to go up and ask the medium what become of his father. And so he went up (with us to the show the next night). She come out between two shows or something and answered any questions that anybody in the audience wanted to ask. She come out on the stage there, and she was quite close. We wasn't too far back. She asked them if there was any questions that anyone wanted to ask about anything. He asked her and she come right out with it. She said, "Yes, he was drowned up to Quaco." I don't know how she knowed, now, because he never said a word, only just asked her what become of his father and how he died. She said that he went ashore in a boat on the beach at Quaco and drowned, I think she said, and there was no foul play. That's as near as I can remember what she told him, and he never said much after that about it. I never heard him say anything about it afterwards. From time to time before that he always had it in his mind that somebody done it.

She answered a lot of them there. I remember some feller asked her where his girl friend was, and she told him where she was, with another feller. She didn't tell

him who it was or anything. She said she was with some other to a dance, with so-and-so, and he jumped up and took and ran right out the aisle on the run. Ran right out the aisle. I can remember that now. That just come to me. I never thought of it since, but that's one thing she told one feller. That was a funny thing though. I don't believe they paid her anything. I don't remember. She might've had you pay her a quarter, but I don't remember him getting up or anyone paying her. She wasn't too old. I suppose she might've been thirty years old or something like that. The night before she answered the questions, why, she just answered them right back just as if she knowed. We wondered how she could do it, you know. I don't know whether he ever believed her or what. It kind of struck him, I think, you know, funny that she'd know he was in Quaco. And we wasn't very big, but we sit and wondered to ourselves how she would know that, 'cause we didn't know much about mediums at that time.<sup>9</sup>

I remember we used to go to Windsor here (to see shows too). They was carrying fertilizer out of that fertilizer mill there in that old Annie Pearl, and my other brother was there and we used to get him to take us down to the show. We called it a nicklette then, I think. I guess it was only a nickel to go in. They had a piano there and they was showing a show, and we'd go a second night and see the same picture 'cause it was

something new. He (father) didn't want to go. We'd tease him there for hours to take us over to the show, my brother and I there. Of course, we wasn't that old then. But that was something, a show like that, to see them pictures. Now a feller wouldn't go across the road to see it.

[Coffil went to the country school at Blomidon through grade five. In the fall of his sixth grade, he was taken out of school to work for his father and never returned. His memories of school are thus rather dim; the strongest of these memories are about playing hockey and about the teacher who organized the Blomidon hockey team. This teacher was the brother of Captain Bernie Lyons, who lived in the house where the fieldworker and his family lived during much of the time that the research was being done. Captain Bernie Lyons was to play a subtle but important part in Coffil's life. His brother, in Coffil's early years, was also influential, and the hockey playing continued for a few winters after Coffil had left school.]

He had a brother that was a school teacher. I went to school to him. In fact, he was about the only one that I ever learnt anything (from), but I learnt quite a bit from him. And, he got a hockey team going there. We had a hockey team here for two or three winters. We used to go to Canning and play, they had a



rink out there. They built a rink during that time, but we played on the ponds around at first. At that time, we walked to Canning, played hockey and skated an hour after the game, and turned around and walked back home in the winter time. I think if some of the hockey players would do that now they'd be better off. They found out so when they went to Russia, didn't they, what?<sup>10</sup>

I don't think (I was so good a hockey player). Probably for that time I was. There was no training or anything to it. There was no one to tell you how to play it. You just played it the way you thought you should play it. But, at first, we played on a pond over in Medford, with a team from Medford, and we used to beat them. And then we played, they got a rink built in Centreville and we used to be able to beat them once in a while. And there was a crowd of niggers got up a hockey team somewhere up above Centreville there, around them Gibson Woods, and they come down there. They was a hard bunch, and I forget whether we beat them or they beat us, but I know they was quite rugged. But we done very good.<sup>11</sup>

I got so, well Clinton Lyons and I, he lived down below here, and then he played center and I played right wing and my brother (Alden) played on the left wing. And him and I started, they had a special train used to

go from Canning to Windsor to hockey matches. And we went to Canning, and we always took our skates and boots<sup>12</sup> with us and a stick wherever we went. And when we got to Centreville, his brother made barrels in Centreville, and he had told us there was a Centreville team. Well, they got on the train at Centreville and they said they was going to Kentville to play hockey and they wanted us to stop in Kentville and play with them. So we stopped in Kentville and we played with them -- they was a man or two short or something. -- so we never got to Windsor. (chuckling) We stopped, we'd rather play hockey, than go watch it over to Windsor.

But (another time) I stayed, I had some relations that lived over there, Balsor, that lived over in Centreville at that time. I was coming home from down in Black Rock, and I happened to stop there, and I had my skates and boots with me. I stopped there and I spent a week with them. They wouldn't let me leave and they was playing hockey, and every time they'd get a team to play with and then we'd skate every afternoon. And every time there was no hockey going, why, we'd skate. So that suited me. There wasn't nothing doing here in the winter at that time.

And (when I finally left) I walked from Centreville right down the railroad to Canning and I never left the railroad track. I kept on coming out here to Pereau

Crossing where the warehouses is there. When I got to Pereau Crossing the wind was nor'east with snow and a regular damn blizzard, and I proceeded to start out. So I went into a house that was right there on the corner. And it was just as cold in the house as it was outdoors, I guess. The next morning, why, there was ice on the pillows and quilts where we'd been breathing. (chuckling) You could see your breath going up, so she was pretty balmy. I got up anyway and got my clothes on and I went home. The snow the next morning when I got up was that deep (about waist high).

I walked right down the railroad track and it wasn't bad walking on the railroad track from Centreville down. But that was quite a tramp, from up there in Centreville to (home, a distance of thirteen miles). But the roads, there wasn't no snowplows or anything then. You had to walk (on the railroad tracks). On the road it would be clear to your waist.

## 2. Out of School and Working, 1916-1923

[Coffil first started doing his share of the work on the sailing vessels when he was eleven or twelve years old, and at the age of thirteen he left school for good to work with his father and brother John.]

Well, when I first remember it, they come and took me out of school, and they was loading apples over in

Kingsport and there was just the two of them and they wanted somebody to hook apples on from up on the wharf, with a hook, and him (his father) and my brother (John) and I walked out to Kingsport, and I hooked the apples on. And I went that fall till they tied up Christmas time. And that's, that was about the first work I'd done. I wasn't too old. Probably not more than ten or twelve years old, I guess.

I never went back to school. I never went back. I was in grade six then, supposed to have been in grade six. I had started in grade six, and that was in the fall, so I didn't have much, have any of this school. Yep. (My Brother Alden,) he must have (stayed in school) 'cause we was both going to school. I don't know as he didn't want to go (work) or something, I suppose. I think I wanted to. I was glad to get rid of school, probably, at that time. I didn't know no better.

I went all that fall, and we lost that vessel.<sup>13</sup> We lost her down here to Mill Creek loaded with potatoes, and, then he (father) sailed a vessel called The Hustler. She was an old fishing vessel and he repaired her, refitted her. Captain Joe Winters had it, and they hired me to go in her. There was no wages set or anything at that time, so I went in at the first of September and when they tied her up right around Christmas time, why, he paid me off thirty-five dollars. I remember that. We were carrying

apples to Saint John and Moncton that fall.

And I, I'd never had a pair of long pants then. I never got around to get any long pants, so I went out and had a suit made to order here in Canning. And the feller that made it, he knowed just how much money I had some ways or another 'cause he charged me thirty-five dollars for the suit of clothes. I'll never forget that. (chuckling) I often wondered how he knew how much I had, and he must've had some sharp eyes 'cause he looked right through my pocket and he knowed I had thirty-five dollars and that's what he charged me for the suit. I guess it wasn't a bad suit of clothes, but I think at that time probably it might've been plenty of money for it. I've often thought about it since. Of course I had gone in, I had the money. When you get money, earning money quick that way, thirty-five dollars from September to Christmas (chuckling), why, you don't mind spending it. (laughter) But that shows you, gives you an idea of what the money was.

Anyway, money was pretty tight in them times, I think. It must've been, 'cause the old feller who owned her, when he paid us he said that "This feller wants his money and that feller wants his money, but," he says, "where in the hell is my money coming from?"<sup>14</sup>

But we, my brother (John) and I figured we pumped the Bay of Fundy through that old vessel that fall. And

that's a lot of water, wasn't it? (chuckling) But she did leak. She was old, and every time it got rough she did leak.<sup>15</sup>

We had a lot of shipping here (then). I've seen three and four three-masters laying out there (in the Basin), waiting for a brace of winds there to load lumber and get unloaded, hard coal and stuff. They built vessels in Hantsport and they repaired vessels in Kingsport. I got a picture here of the old shipyard in Kingsport with some square-rigged vessels in there. Yep. Oh, there was a lot of shipping at that time. There was a vessel carried coal steady from Parrsboro to Wolfville at that time. Every week, she'd make a trip about one trip a week over and they'd load her and then she'd come back. (It was a coal) company in Springhill and Parrsboro, and they had what they called the coal wharf and they loaded it (there). And they shipped coal down into Maine and they shipped the coal to everywhere around Nova Scotia, clear to Clark's Harbour on the lower end. We carried coal out of there eight years to New Brunswick to Connors's sardine factory there (in Black's Harbour) in the last freight boat we had (in the 1940's).

(Canning had a harbour too, and vessels went in there until) I don't know just how long ago it was they put that aboiteau across there (across the Habitant River below Canning). I suppose twenty years or more, thirty

probably. They put it across in the last thirty years some time. I just forget when because I was away so damn much.<sup>16</sup>

They used to take sailing vessels up in that river. We had a load of coal in that old Annie Pearl, that first vessel that my father had, and I tended the jib up there and I was looking up at the top of the wharf at the tub. They hoisted out with a horse and a tub. And, I'd watch the tub and let it swing in over the cart. They'd dump it in a cart and take it in and dump it somewhere. And, when I got home I was sick with the measles, and every since then, my right eye I couldn't see too good out of. When I was twenty I got so I couldn't shoot 'cause I couldn't see the outer sight on a rifle, and I got less than fifty percent vision in the right eye than what I got in the left eye. I shot off my left shoulder after that. I shifted over. They think it's hard to shift over but I shifted over quite easy. It bothered me for a few times but after while it just come natural to me.

(That same fall) we carried stone and brought it along over there (to Hortonville). That was when I first started going, on an old vessel called the Annie Pearl. She was built up in the Joggins, up handy to Amherst. And we carried stone (that) we wheelbarrowed on board on wheelbarrows over on Five Islands and carried into

Horton River at that railroad bridge and dumped them overboard when the tide was out there under the pier to build the bridge up to keep it from gullying there. Well, I got pretty well acquainted around the rivers here. I think after a while I got so I didn't mind the mosquitoes. I got used to them. But all them rivers was loaded with mosquitoes in the evening, especially if it was a little damp.

/Back then, the fellers on them sailing vessels was quite smart, and mean./ They said some fellers could draw a bucket of water and if they smelled codfish in it or anything they could tell right where they was (in the fog).<sup>17</sup> I never got that good, but in olden days they had a lot of things they done. Yeh, them fellers could, well, they'd run trawl on the Grand Banks there when they was trawling out of Boston and Gloucester, and one feller left his trawl there. He couldn't get it up and he left it there, one of his trawls. They had about twelve dories, I suppose, on the vessel. And he went back. After he got in and got unloaded he went back out, and when he got on the Bank he set out his dory, twelve dories or whatever he had aboard, and he told them to watch out for the trawl buoy, and the third dory he set out come right on top of the trawl buoy. So he wasn't far off, with no radar or nothing.



In them days all they had was a sextant to navigate with. They had no lorans<sup>18</sup> or no deck navigators or nothing like that. All they had was a compass, a chart, and a parallel rule, and a sextant. If they could get a sunny day so they could take, get the sun, why, they could figure out where they was. That's about all they had to use. Now they go adrift with a whole wheelhouse full of electronics.

There was some that was quite (mean). Well, there was some fellers, there was one old sea captain down on the South Shore here. He used to go south and sign a crew of niggers on and before he got back in to New York, why, he'd send them aloft and let her come up and shake them all off. It would save him paying them off in New York. And afterwards, it was after a while he got a boat and used to go down south in the winter, but he dasn't go into New York. He was scared of (being arrested). They told me he shipped quite a few crews overboard, shake 'em out of the rigging, and he didn't have to pay them off. He had quite a bit of money when he ended up, anyway. He lived down there on the South Shore. That wasn't too long ago 'cause I knowed of him. I'd seen him and talked to him. He was a hard old oudger. I had a chance to get his log book, but I never got it. I was going to get it and read it, but of course there wouldn't have been, he wouldn't put nothing like

that into it. That wouldn't have been written into it. I don't know how he just explained that. (He probably wrote in the log that) they fell overboard, I suppose, or were tossed overboard. The sea boarded her or something. But they said that's the way he got rid of them. But a lot of them old fellers, they hung a crew up by the thumbs and everything. They said there was one feller right here off of Parrsboro over here that hung a feller up by his thumbs. Yeh. But that was before my day.<sup>19</sup>

[Throughout his teens, when Coffil worked on sailing vessels with his father and his older brother John, he lived at home when he was not at sea. As well as the freighting business, there was also the occasional job in the Blomidon area. One time, for instance, he and John spent three months helping to build a wharf at Mill Creek near their home. Earl Bigelow, from Canning, was the boss.]

We built it out of logs and bolted it with iron bolts. We hewed the logs and bored the holes by hand and drove the iron in with a pinball. (Bigelow had) a big motorboat there and we went down to the Cape to load the skow with rock and brought it up and filled it (the wharf) full of rock. When we got it built, it was four times as strong as the one in Port Williams (that was rebuilt in 1972). We worked there about three months, I believe, but we built a lot of wharf.

They loaded potatoes there back at that time. They loaded a lot of potatoes and all the apples and stuff down here went by water then (after we built the Mill Creek wharf). There was no trucks here. At that time there was no trucks. They either had to haul with horses to Canning to the railroad station or to Kingsport to a boat there. There was a time before that they carried the potatoes up there in small vessels and loaded them in the steamers for Cuba. And they carried them from Hall's Harbour down on the shore around. (It was at this time that) we carried apples from down here over to Wolfville.

(The Perea River wharf was built) before I can remember. They loaded potatoes in there in a three-master in there for Havana, and I don't remember it but they told me about it, and they said when she was laying in there her bowsprit come in up over the road there. It was high enough so that teams went right in underneath it. I don't remember that, so it's been built a long while. It'll stay there for years yet, till it rots altogether, 'cause there's no sea in there to break it up. There's nothing to hurt it. It just sets there. (The wharf at Mill Creek) it's all gone to pieces (because it isn't protected there).

[During this period Coffil also hunted, as he would from time to time in years to come, but he was never

the avid hunter and trapper that his brother John was. All the tall tales about hunting in his repertoire have come from John. Fourteen years older than Bob Coffil, John lived at the top of the Stuart Mountain, about three miles from the Coffil home at Mill Creek on the Minas Basin.]

He used to hunt a lot and go in with the young fellers there. They'd go in with him hunting. He done quite a lot of fox hunting. He had a hound, always had a fox hound when he was home, as I remember. And he did, he got a lot of foxes and a lot of raccoons. He shot a few deer sometimes. (chuckling) He told about firing, he borrowed a rifle from a feller. And, he took it in there and he said there's a big moose laying down, he said, and he fired five shots at her. The moose got up and stretched his leg a-way out and then walked off. And he went over and here lay, here was the bullets laying flattened out. He said his hide was so tough that the bullets wouldn't go through it, flattened 'em out. But he said it didn't have enough power, the rifle didn't, to penetrate it so it flattened the bullets out. It was a pretty good story, all right. (chuckling) He took the gun right back and he never used it afterwards. It was an old thirty-eight fifty-five. No, he said she didn't have enough power. She wasn't any good.<sup>20</sup>

[Although Bob Coffil never told such exaggerated tales of hunting about himself, he nonetheless did have,

some unusual hunting experiences. He also has a clear idea why the hunting is not as good as it was fifty years ago: the animals have died from "lead poisoning."

There was quite a lot of deer here at that time and there was quite a lot of ducks around here too at that time. There was a big flock of ducks here on the river all the time. And they used to come up in the grain fields then, in the fall of the year, after they cut the grain. There was a lot of moose here down at the Cape at that time. I've seen as high as eight in there when I was up with another feller, and there was a lot of moose there but there ain't none there now. They're all gone. I guess they said that the disease killed them off but I think it was lead poisoning. Yeh. (chuckling) I think that killed the most of them probably, 'cause it was a small piece of woods and there was quite a lot of hunters.

There's a few (deer left), but they was plentiful. When I first moved up here (to the house in Delhaven in 1946), why you could go back there anytime and see five, six deer. Yeh. Back in next to the (mountain), when the orchard was there. Overhunted. Too many good rifles. When there wasn't (but) just a couple old shotguns of 'em down here and probably one or two rifles, why there was all kinds of deer here. And they're saying now that the deer is starving to death, but they're

crazy. The deer ain't starving to death, and the people ain't starving 'cause they're getting lots of deer meat. They're shooting them off. They got to be good shots and they got good rifles, and good ammunition. In them days, why, all you had was an old shotgun but they didn't shoot many! And there wasn't nobody to shoot practically. All these young fellers that go to high school and everything, they shoot, and they're shooting the damn deer off. They ain't starving to death.

Of course, at that time I wouldn't want to estimate how many deer was on this Cape, but you go down there in these orchards between here and Whitewaters at the Cape, down at the Cape, in the winter time, and there was paths just like a herd of sheep had come down. There was paths beat down two or three feet wide right down in the snow and there'd been deer all through them orchards everywhere, and that was just one night after another. And, there was lots of feed for them at that time. And now they're down to probably about ten deer on this whole territory between here and the Cape, probably fifteen I'd say, and they claim they're starving to death. There's enough feed up here, I suppose, to feed a thousand deer between here and the end of Cape Blomidon. Between the orchards and the apples and what not. They cut some timber out but it's still growing up. It's just about the same as it was. They've cleared a few pieces of land

out different places that was in bushes or something, but it (the landscape) just looks the same.<sup>21</sup>

They're gonna, there won't be any deer if they don't do something about it, and they're still keeping the fine off both kinds of deer, the does<sup>7</sup> and bucks. They never should have took the fine off the doe deer. They should keep the fine on to them, closed season on them. They should close it down for five years right now, the deer season here, 'cause we ain't got no deer. One or two deer, why we used to see deer going down to the salt water here once in a while when we first come up here, but you don't see none in the spring going down now. There ain't no deer.

There was a few things that happened now and again. There was one (deer) went out here and got in the water, and some of them got out there and they said they got it, but I don't know whether they ever got it or not. I think they did probably. (It went) down through here (at the beach a half mile from the house). They went out alongside of it in a boat.

I had some moose. I think I got one or two probably. But there was, one night -- I lived down to the shore at that time, that was way back before I was married -- I come out of the, we bought milk up the road in a house, and I just come out of the door when two moose come right down by the house there and they

went right down. There was a wharf there (at Mill Creek) at that time, and they went right out across the ice cakes. And, the next morning they must have turned and they come up and one went up by this wharf here (at Delhaven, the Pereau River wharf two miles up the shore) the next morning. But the other one never come up, and they blamed me for shooting it. Now, I don't know (laughing) what they blamed me for, why any more than anyone else, but they blamed me for shooting that other moose. He must have fell through the ice, I guess, somewhere. We did have a good rifle there, but I don't know who got him. Only one got up anyway. The other one must have drowned.

Any one of them was capable of shooting him, and if they couldn't shoot him, why of course, they had to blame me for it. But it was good, though, you know, they had never knowed where the moose went. I imagine that (laughing) it would've (tasted good). At that time there wasn't much meat around (laughing). No, I think he fell through the ice. But there was two fellers hunting him, hunting them two moose. The snow was quite deep in the woods and they was after 'em on snowshoes, and they chased 'em so much that day instead of shooting them. Why (chuckling), why they chased 'em right out of the woods off the Cape there and they come right out across there, running across the fields. They never got the other one, I don't think. I guess he got away.



It's a funny thing, now, my wife here was in the house that evening or the next evening, down the road (where I got the milk). We wasn't married then, and I hadn't even been going with her. And the feller in the house, he said, got to talking about this moose coming down, the two moose and going out, and they said that I shot it, and he said that the lame and the lazy was always provided for. She telled me after we was married about it. Well, they was all mad 'cause they didn't get the moose. He was drowned, that was all the matter was.<sup>22</sup>

(One time) I shot a moose in open season up there, in on the (Cape). That was way back quite a long while ago when we was working on the wharf. The fellow was Earl Bigelow, he was the boss on the wharf down there. We went in the night the season come on, I think. We stayed in the camp in there on the Jackson Mountain, and the next morning we started out and we got a moose in there. We stayed in the camp and the next morning we got out, and there's a kind of a swamp over about a half mile from where we was, and we started wandering over there and we got pretty near to there and we heard a moose call. And, we walked over in the swamp and we come to a bed where one of them was (i.e., had been) laying down, and walked up that way.

My brother (John), he took to walking up on his

track -- he thought it was up there -- and we, Bigelow and I, stood right there where this moose got up, and it happened to be the cow moose that had got up and went. And about that time the bull moose, he come out of the woods right up on top of the hill above us. And he was about as far away as from here to the bank (across the the road, the bank below which is the Minas Basin, about one hundred yards) from us, and he started coming right toward there, right down across. And the other feller, he hadn't, Bigelow hadn't ever been moose hunting, and well I hadn't been hunting too much, just some. But I had a thirty rifle and he had an old barreled handled shotgun. (He was) between me and the moose, (and) he aimed the gun at the moose and he kept walking backwards and the gun barrel going everywhere and then pretty soon, bang she went. And the moose kept coming right along. And I fired the first shot, I fired when I got a chance to fire by him. I fired and it never stopped. It come right by me and passed me about as far as from here to that window (pointing to the front of the porch, about five feet away). And, I had another shell then, and (when) he went by me I just, never put it to the shoulder, I just pulled the trigger and I cut his backbone right off that time. And he fell within five feet from me. And, Bigelow said that he shot him but there was one little hole right in the end of its nose just about as

big as a lead pencil, and we never found the bullet. We did cut his head open. And it must've been the bullet out of the thirty rifle, I guess, that went up in his head somewhere. The next one cut his backbone off. It wasn't a twelve-gauge bullet, from a twelve-gauge shotgun.

And, he had a snare around his horns, a heavy telephone wire, and it was broke off out in front here, and it was decayed around under his horns, decayed. It must have been (snared like that) the winter before probably 'cause it was all out in and decayed under his horns. I suppose he drew it up right up tight before he broke it, and he might have growed some or something and it wouldn't give. He was an ugly looking bird when he come out of the woods and come down across. He was mad. He had his tongue out and froth coming out of his mouth right over down the side of his head. Of course, we interrupted him and the cow moose. It was right in cowing time. And I think he would have run right over us if I hadn't hit him in the end of the nose, because he was coming just as fair for us, as anything, but I hit him in the end of the nose and I think it turned him a little. But when he went by me he wasn't far from the end of the rifle barrel, 'cause I never aimed or anything, I just shoved her out like that and pulled.

I think the snare around him might have been bothering him a little, making him mad, and the cow moose, he probably thought we was interfering with him. He just took ugly I guess. By God, he (Bigelow) just bent over backwards when he fired, and he just fired one barrel out of it, and it was a hammerless gun. He had both loads in her. Never touched, 'cause the bullet went right up as high as the top of that tree 'cause he was bent right backwards and the shotgun barrel was going up.

And, we were standing there talking and pretty soon we heard a blat up on top of the hill. My brother had been down, and this mobse give a grunt up on top the hill, and I says, "That must be the cow moose." And he says, "You can't tell. It might be another bull." And I says, "No," I says. And he said, "Well, I'm going up and have a look anyway." And he went right up around and he come out within twenty feet of that cow moose, and she was looking at us down there. And I hollered and asked him what it was and he says, "It's a cow moose," he says, "but," he says, "she's in great order." But he meant she was fat (i.e., soon to calf), you know. Well I said, "God, don't shoot her." (laughing) One was enough. Yeh, he said she was in great order. But he would have been just liable to have shot her, and I told him, I says, "I think we got enough of them."

We lost half the moose that we shot. We just got it, we dressed it and cut it up and quartered it, quartered it up, and we put it in under a spruce tree and we covered it with spruce boughs. And we just started out, about as far as from here to the bank, and these two fellers come up to us. They was moose hunting, and they said they fired at one that morning. They talked a few minutes and we come on out. We was gonna get a team, a horse and wagon to get it, and when we got in, we went in early the next morning, why, the hind quarters, they had taken the meat off the hind quarters and just left the bones out. All we got was the front quarters of it. We knowed who it was 'cause we was talking to them, and they went on, but they stopped after we went and stole it,

It didn't bother me that much, but the other feller, Bigelow, was quite mad about it. We went up to a pie sale down here in the (community) hall afterward. He said if he ever got a chance he'd let 'em know he knowed who got the meat (chuckling), and one of the fellers come in, walked in the hall there, and they was auctioning off a pie. They just happened to lift it up when he come in. He says, "You better hang on to the pie," he says. "Somebody might steal it." He didn't say who it was (laughter), who he might thought would steal it, but (he let him know). So he did get back at him.

We knowed the two birds all right, 'cause they'd talked to us, and they, 'just as soon as we left, why, they stripped the meat right off the bone. If they'd taken a chunk of steak or something off of it, why, I wouldn't've cared, but they mauled it all around and never covered it up afterward. I don't believe in anything like that, stealing something. I'd never strip the meat off it, see, it'd look too small. They might've thought they shot it, but they didn't. There was only the two bullet holes, one right in the end of the nose and the one on his backbone.<sup>23</sup>

[It was during this period, before his marriage and while he was still working with his father, that Coffil had the opportunity to expand his sea-faring horizon. Captain Bernie Lyons, who lived up the road a short distance, was sailing to Australia and asked Coffil to come along. He didn't, and the story is his.]

If I had to go all over it again I think I'd do it a little different. I think I'd get in something bigger. If I had it to do over again I'd stuck to the schooling I think. If I could've got, if I had had grade eleven. I guess you have to have grade eleven in order to really get to be a skipper of a big ship, for navigation. I just forget what they call it there, but in order to do it you've got to have grade eleven. That is, to get a deep water ticket. I think if I had it to do over again

I'd go after the deep water ticket 'cause I think I'd like it in bigger vessels.

I had the chance (to go farther). Bernie Lyons lived over where you live, Captain Bernie Lyons, and I was up there and helped him get some logs out, one thing and another one winter. I don't know whether he was married or not. He went with a school teacher down here. And he was home here, and I went to some kind of a party where he was, and we got to talking and he, he was running from Halifax to Montreal to Australia, and he wanted me to go with him. And, we talked it over there that evening and I told him no, I guessed I couldn't go. I don't know whether father had a vessel here or not, and I thought I had to go with him.

Anyway, that night after I got home and I got to thinking about it. He was going nine o'clock the next morning. By God, I got up and got ready and walked, went up there, and I was going to go. But he'd gone when I got up there to the house. And I didn't make up my mind till the last end of it, and when I made up my mind I would've went when I went up, but he had gone to Halifax then. Probably I didn't have education enough to get where I would've wanted to gone, anyway. I could've, went home and went to night school or something. Once get in a rut that way, why, it's, it's hard to get out of it, unless you know where you're going, and it's so hard to tell what you want to do.

### 3. Going to the States, 1923-1924

[When Coffil was twenty years old he went to Boston to work. One or two generations earlier, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, a young man from the Maritimes was likely to journey to the States to work in the lumberwoods and on the lumber drives in Maine and northern New England.<sup>24</sup> In the early 1920's, the attraction of leaving home to work in the States was still felt by young Maritimers, but the heyday of the lumber industry had passed. At this time, also, Canada was in the throes of the post-war depression, and steady or even seasonal jobs were difficult to find, especially in the Atlantic region.<sup>25</sup> The economic situation in the United States was not that much better, but then, there were more people so there had to be more jobs, and young men from the Maritimes went to find work. Coffil's brother Alden went to Massachusetts the same year Bob did, found work as a house carpenter, and married the boss's daughter. Clyde Smith of Campobello Island, New Brunswick, whom Coffil would meet thirty years later, made the first of several trips by train to Gloucester, Massachusetts, where he hired on as a fisherman. This was that same year, 1923, when Smith was only fifteen years old.

[Although Coffil had been out of school and working for seven years, he had always been working during this period for his father on vessels his father owned or on



sailing vessels with his father and brother. The trip to Boston, with the various experiences and jobs he had in the year he was there, was a journey of initiation and discovery. The initiation was into manhood, and he discovered, as all young men must, that he could make it on his own. By comparing himself with the friend he went down with and with other men he met in the course of his work, he realized that he was well prepared to strike out on his own. He also had a good taste of jobs not connected with the sea, and though he would again try the trucking business, his final choice was to be to work on the sea, freighting and fishing.

[This section represents only one year of Robert Coffil's life, but it was an important year. His telling of his varied experiences during this year stands apart, substantively, from all the years before and after. If each year in the recording of Coffil's story had been so fully chronicled, the life history would be more than five times its present length. This certainly indicates something of the significance to Coffil of his year in the States and of his success on his own relative to those with whom he worked. As he said to me the first time he spoke of his year in the States, "Now ain't it funny how I can't remember nothing of what happened two hours ago, but I remember all of that about trucking and working up in the States, and that was almost fifty years ago."]

I just wanted to go, I guess. I went up in the summer first. There was a box mill there (in Pembroke) and there was a feller trucking there and, I don't know, I knowed him and we wrote back and forth or some darn thing. I went up and stayed with him and I tried to get on there striking with him. He was hauling box logs and boxes. I went up in towards fall and I fooled around there about two weeks, and I got sick of that. At that time he had a striker on with him, so I went to Rochester, New Hampshire, where my sister lived there, and I got a job in a box mill there. I stayed there about a month and they laid me off. They were gonna do something, I don't know, they laid off two weeks every fall for repair of the machinery and stuff.

So I left there and come home,\* and then I, just before Christmas, why, I tried her again. There was nothing here (to do). And the feller that drives the mill here (now), he went up with me when I went the last time. It was right depression and it was a hard job to get a job. I had my name in to Mount Hope Finishing Company in North Dighton for a job on a truck there, and we couldn't get nothing so we boarded there and we got a job cutting cordwood, white oak down there in the woods, four dollars a cord. (But) the first job we got there we went over into a rubber factory and got a job on night

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\*See pp. 185-187; below, for a story of what happened when he came home from the States at this time.

shift. Twelve hour shift at night, and they had a boarding house, and we went in and (we agreed that) we'd work one night there (to see how it was). And the smell of the rubber and everything, of course, that old boiling rubber will (stink), rubber heels and car tires (chuckling).

I had a good easy job though. There was just a trough up out of the floor, overhead, up on the second floor, and there was a magnet roller down in the bottom of it, and I found out it was this ground rubber was coming up. They was wheeling it up in wheelbarrows. And when it went down there that magnet took them eyelets out of the rubber so they could use it again, you know, where the nails went through on the rubber heels. And that, as near as I could tell, it was picking the eyelets out of the rubber, and there was a scraper some way another so it scraped them up and off and they got rid of 'em. I never forget that.

We went to work there that night and I worked and this other feller, he went to work there too and he was wheeling or doing something. He wasn't coming in where I was, but he was wheeling somewheres. I wasn't used to staying up nights then, at that time, and I worked along there till nine or ten o'clock and the rubber wasn't going down fast enough to keep me busy. I had (to wait to shovel it into the trough). So I found a junk of

board and I got tired of standing, so I put it across the top and sit down on it. And the night watchman, he come around with a lunch along eleven o'clock I guess it was. First thing I knowed he woke me up. But he said most everybody on that job went to sleep the first night or two. (laughter) I imagine they would, 'cause (of) the smell of the rubber. I was just shoveling ground rubber off the floor, filling this thing up, and it would take it about fifteen, twenty minutes to work down through, to get the eyelets. If it'd been steady I wouldn't've went to sleep but (chuckling), but anyway he said they all done it, and there was no one else around there, so it didn't bother him too much so I didn't worry too much about it.

But the next morning when I got through and we went over (to the boarding house), I couldn't eat no breakfast (because of) the smell of the rubber, and I told this feller that went up with me, I says, told him he'd go to bed and get to sleep. We wanted the job \ pretty bad too. And I says, "I'll go see if I can find another job and I'll come back tonight if I find anything." He said, "No," he says, if I went he'd go too. But I knowed he couldn't work if he went (without any sleep). I figured I could. I figured I'd go back. But we went and got this job cutting white oak cordwood, and I thought as long as we was out in the air, you know (we'd be able

to work without any sleep). So we cut the cordwood.

We cut I think twelve cords, and there was word come to go up, that the job was open up to Mount Hope Finishing Company, and, he went up (to the States) with me so that, he hadn't been around, away too much, away from home. So, I was pretty good friends with a feller where I was staying there, and I told him, I said, "You go up and take the job and," I says, "I'll wait and take the next one if another one comes up." And he left, and I told him, I says, "Well, when you get up there," I says, "don't you leave the job. If you're gonna leave it," I said, "you write; you call me up and tell me so I can go up and take it." 'Cause I didn't want to lose it. Anyway, that was Thursday I think. Monday morning they called me from Mount Hope Finishing Company and told me if I wanted a job to come up. And I went up, and he'd gone and come home. He left Monday morning.

When I got up there, why, it was too late. They had to put a man on the job. So I went back to Pembroke. It was down in Pembroke where I was staying, and I went back there and I didn't do nothing for a week or two. The striker that was on there with them (at the box mill), this Clemens feller, why, he was gonna leave in two weeks, and he lived up in Maine somewheres, and I said, told him, I said, "Well, if you're gonna leave in two weeks," I says, "why, you might's well go now and give me the job and he

can send you your wages up there. Just give me enough to pay me board." He wouldn't.

About three days after that, why, he bought a motorcycle (chuckling). And about the second day after he bought the motorcycle, after dinner, he come to me and wanted to know if I'd go on the truck. He wanted to go somewhere on the motorcycle. Well, that was just the start of it. From then on, why, it was every afternoon, and sometimes all day. So come the end of the week, why, Clemens come up and wanted to know if I wanted the job, and I said, "Well, I wanted it, when it's open." He says, "It's open now." He says, "They fired me." So I went down and went on there striking.

We had a plow on the truck there in Pembroke. But there wasn't much snow. Just one day or two we had to plow. We went right in the woods for that (job). We had Whites where we hauled them, pumped boxwood on them, pine box logs. Them was Whites and they had chain drive on the hind wheel up on another thing. Two chains, one on each side. They wasn't good in the woods though. Them old dry limbs would go in under there and jump them chains off, and then we'd have to get them on a log and he (the driver) would put them out here and snap them back on again. Yeh, quite a racket.

That was sometime in January, I think, and I

stayed there (in Pembroke) till February and then the job opened up at Mount Hope and I went up there and went on. When I got to Mount Hope, why, what I was looking for was to get on a truck 'cause I had a driver's license for a car but I didn't have no chauffeur's license. So I was striking then. I just went on there, I didn't have a license. I went on there the first of February and in May I went up for my driver's (i.e., chauffeur's) license. I put myself ahead one year when I went up for my driving license, and I don't know whether it was twenty or twenty-one I had to be, I forget. I was either twenty or nineteen, so that was quite a while ago. I drove enough to get my license before I come home here in June, I think, and then I went back for July and August (and drove a truck then).

It (Mount Hope) was a finishing company, finishing cloth, all kinds of cloth, and they had cloth coming into New Bedford and they had cloth coming into some place the other side of Boston. We used to go over there. Providence, Rhode Island. And then we went to Fall River and we went into Boston. I was over to New Bedford the first week I was there, then they shift and put me on a run into Boston, and we come up far as Lowell, Massachusetts. That was for car tops, kharki (khaki) cloth. I think they had some kind of factory there. They must've been making car tops or some darn

thing, big rolls of kharki cloth. But they had English broadcloth they brought across from England, and they had a factory and they had everything there (in North Dighton). That plant was three-quarters of a mile along the sidewalk, so it was quite a plant, and I forget how many acres they claimed it covered. They had fourteen cloth trucks running there. They shifted me going into Boston. I shifted every day with a different driver when I was striking.

(A striker was) what they called a helper. You were just helping unload and load. Of course, we didn't have to unload the trucks, but they had two men on every truck. Well, they had two strikers in the whole bunch. They had a Portugee went on the same morning that I went on, and he got fired the first day he was on, but I stuck her out. Fourteen drivers, it's quite hard to get along with them all. There was one truck went into Boston every morning, and the striker, it was his job to find out what was left in there to go back out, the day before, so he could tell the next driver where to pick it up around the different depots and stations.

They had Pearce Arrows, four-cylinder Pearce Arrows with hard tires on'em, hard rubber tires. They was quite rough, all right. They never blowed out, that was one thing. (laughter) You didn't have no tire trouble. Those front tires, after they got half



wore out, it made 'em steer hard, 'cause they come down like that (four inches wide) when they was narrow on the road, when they was new, but when they got half wore out they was that wide (eight inches wide). It wasn't power steering. There was power but it was manpower. (chuckling) Quite a racket. They was good trucks, but you had to hand crank 'em. There was no starters on 'em at that time. I broke the crank off one when I went to try and crank her in Boston. When I put my weight down the damn crank broke right off, and I went down and hit my head a blow. It didn't hurt me that much, but it hit quite a wallop. But she started, the motor started. If she hadn't started we'd have had to got her towed I suppose to get her going. No starters on them, but they had governors on them. They'd only go so fast. I forget (just how fast). I had eighteen miles in my head but it could have been twenty-eight miles. But it wasn't over that. It wouldn't go too fast. But we carried fourteen ton on it of cloth, and most of the bales of cloth weighed five hundred, four and five hundred (pounds).

We had some quite times trucking. We was trucking from North Dighton out to the westward of Boston into Boston, into East Boston. On the way in, in a place called Macpan or some damn name like that, it wasn't that thickly settled and they had a bunch of goats out there right aside of the road in a pasture. And one feller,

he was a German, and this feller every morning we'd go by him, why, he was milking these goats there with a bucket. And we was going by him one morning and he (the driver) shut the switch off and then in a minute or two he'd put it back on again. And when she back-fired the goats went down across the field and he set right there on the stool in the middle of the field. He tried it for a couple mornings, and about the third morning they got a letter and the boss come over, superintendent, told him he'd have to cut it out, scaring the goats.<sup>26</sup>

Packard (a truck driver), he was trying to be a bigshot with the company, I guess, near as I could find out. They got a bonus, and the more he hauled the more he had, and he was always high man, and he never had an accident. In the end they found out he had more accidents than any of them, but he fixed them up himself, paid the amount if there was any paying to do. According to the other drivers, he was having accidents that he wasn't reporting in at all, just fixing them up, getting by with it. If he happened to bang the mud guard up or something, if he didn't hurt his truck much (he'd pound the dents out himself).

He was supposed to pay for our meals on the road (and then the company would pay him at the end of the week). I don't think there was any certain amount

he could pay. It was just whatever your meals cost as near as I could tell. And he turned it in every week, I suppose, and what he turned in and what he paid out, I always figured -- I was only young at that time -- but I figured that he was trying to feed you on doughnuts and charging you (chuckling) for a full dinner. /He wouldn't stop for breakfast. He'd just go into a place and get some doughnuts, and that was it./ I think he was on the make, probably.

I was with another feller coming out of Boston, and he wanted to put in some time. He was getting in there, gonna get in early, an hour or two early, and he said we'd take a drive out in the country. So he did, but he shouldn't have. It was a little longer and he wanted to put in a couple hours longer. He left the main highway and went out. I forget the name of the place we went out around. It was between Boston and North Dighton. And he slid -- it was a dirt road we got on -- and he slid in the ditch with it, the front end, and then the hind end went in. We tried to jack her out and we couldn't. It was soft in the ditch. So he had to call the plant and have them send out the other truck, which was quite a (chuckling) hard thing to do. They brought out five or six Portuguese and they unloaded our load onto the other truck and then they towed us out. We had cloth, big bales, some four

hundred pound bales, and we couldn't do nothing without loading it onto another truck. We dasn't put it off on the side of the road or anything.

The boss never said nothing about it when I was around there when we went in, so he might have said something to the driver but there wasn't nothing said (then) 'cause it was late when we got in there at night and there was no one around. A week or two after that, why, this Packard was accusing me. He told the boss that I was driving and I heard (about) it. He was on the doorstep or on the platform where we unloaded one night. I went in and the superintendent was there and the whole darn bunch of 'em, so I brought it up. I told them I wanted to get it straightened out 'cause he said that. Packard, he owned up and he took the blame of it. Packard was all the time trying to get somebody in trouble that way. It wasn't none of his business as far as that went, nothing at all. He started the story. I was asleep in the cabin when she started to list, down.<sup>27</sup>

#### 4. The Vessel Business and The Trucking Business, 1924-1939

[By the time he was twenty-one, Coffil had worked on sailing vessels carrying coal, apples, potatoes, and general cargo in and out of the Minas Basin; he had helped to build a wharf; he had shot a moose; he had missed an opportunity to sail to Australia; and, he had spent a

year on his own in the Boston area, working at various jobs.

[Young Bob Coffil, as a striker and truck driver for a cloth finishing company in North Dighton, Massachusetts, must have had plenty of time to think of the chance to sail to Australia that he had missed. When he returned home from the Boston area, he and his brother Alden bought a freight boat, an old two-master. This vessel stayed afloat for only three years, and neither brother stayed with it continuously during this time. Although he went once or twice on the vessel in the last year they had it, Coffil had bought a truck in 1926 and began what he calls his "twelve wasted years." He married Myrtle Rogers of Blomidon the next year, and probably stayed with the trucking as long as he did, to be closer to his wife and, later, his family -- twin boys born in 1931, one of whom died of pneumonia when he was one month old, and two girls, born in 1929 and 1942. Alden and Bob were to resume their partnership in the vessel business in 1939.]

I think I was (sorry) for a while (that I missed that trip to Australia), but after a while, of course, I didn't think so much of it. We got interested in the vessel business there, and it was quite a thing for us 'cause we was just young fellers. It was quite an experience. We never had no trouble far as getting

ashore or anything. We, we was sure, must've been quite stable. But experience was the most of it I think. Of course, my brother had more education than I did.

(Our first boat, the Edna Mae) was only a two-masted vessel. She was on her way home from Boston when we come home here, and then she come to Parrisboro and we went over and bought her in Parrisboro. /My brother and father went over there in a fourteen-foot boat with a sail on it and arranged the deal before I come home./ Then we went to Little Bass River and loaded lumber for Boston. Father was here but he didn't own any of the vessel. My brother bought her and he bought half of her for me. My brother John went some (on that boat with us). Father didn't go that much. He went some with us. I don't know just how long after that (father died). Not too long. I come home and then I went in the vessel and before we lost her I had left her and started in trucking here. And I don't know just how long I'd been trucking when he, probably a couple years, when he died.

In them vessels at that time all we had was the straw in the ticks. They was made out of bags, take two or four bags, make like a mattress, and fill it full of straw. We never had no mattress in any of them vessels at that time. Well, we did in this last one my brother and I bought, but them other old vessels there was none. Straw ticks.

Once in a while (they got bugs in them). We got some in Maine after we bought her. I don't know if they was in her when we got her. We loaded lumber the next spring. Well, we didn't see none that fall, but the spring when we got to Boston it was right hot up there. By God, they drove us out. I forget what we, we tore the bunks out and chucked the boards overboard and I don't know what we sprayed with, whether it was gasoline or not. We fumigated her some way or another. It didn't bother us much but itching backs all the time. It's hard to get rid of 'em, bedbugs. In late years you don't run into them so much now 'cause they got more stuff to (fumigate with). Shifting crews, fellers coming aboard I think, bringing old rusty cases out of other vessels is the way they get polluted. If you got your own crew and everything, why, you very seldom get bugs. Them vessels, every trip they'd shift a crew, three or four of the crew or something. They'd have new fellers come aboard from other vessels, and that's the way they got the bedbugs.

There was one feller shot aboard one (of the rumrunners) off of the South Shore during rumrunning times.<sup>28</sup> They was still rumrunning when I got married, and that was over forty years, forty-five years or better. I believe around fifty years ago that was. We seen rumrunners. We was carrying lumber up to the States at

that time, and there was rumrunners laying off the coast, off of Boston. Yeh, there was rumrunners out there.

There was a Coast Guard boat come alongside of us. We was laying in barrels, and he come alongside of us about midnight, after midnight. That was the time they had the big scandal there that come out in the papers. They put a feller in the hospital up there, and he blowed on them. The Coast Guard in the States was all mixed in on it, on the rumrunning. He come aboard to see what we was doing. I give him hell there about coming aboard. He never knocked or a goddamn thing. He come right in and burst right through the door. So I told him, I asked him if he was one of the rumrunners. I had read it in the paper the day before that they was mixed into it and the feller give 'em away. And I says, "Are you one that's in the rumrunning racket out there with the rest of 'em?" They was telling them when to go in and every goddamn thing, where to go, and where the rest of the Coast Guard was.

(My brother Alden) from up to Farrisboro now, he never liked it, I don't think. Well, he used to leave. When we had the Edna Mae first, he went awhile and then he went ashore and I took her. And then I bought a truck here and I thought I'd go to work trucking and he could run the vessel, but he tied her right up, went ashore too and went home. (One time) he came to unload



coal (in Digby). We unbent the sails long before that. I didn't have much trucking right then so I went down to get the sails on her and my brother (John) and father went with him, and he went over and loaded coal (in Parrsboro) and went to Digby and I drove down there and come back in the truck. But I liked going. I thought I'd like the trucking business sometime, but I didn't I guess..

/I started in trucking before I was married. I quit going on the boat and bought a truck. It can be hard sometimes pardnering on a boat like that, like me and my brother was. You get at each other, and I got hung up I guess. We'd had the boat one year, and it was late in the fall. Silas Gates over in Port Williams had some staves, a load of barrel staves that we was gonna take for him down to Rockland, Maine. And he was ready with the load, and my brother, well, he was married then and he wasn't in no hurry to be leaving. So Gates called up -- we didn't have a telephone then, we had to go up to Green's to use the phone -- and he wanted to know when we were going over to Port Williams to load up. He'd been waiting about three or four days.

/And, I was young and in a hurry to go. I didn't have nothing to wait around here for and I thought if we was running a vessel that we should run her, we shouldn't just sit around and wait till it suited us. And it was

getting late in the fall and I thought we should get going. So Silas Gates called up and we was to call back, and my brother was in no hurry to go up and call him so I says, "Look," I says, "I'll go up and call him," I says, "if you'll let me decide what we're doing. Whatever I tell him, you go along." And he says, "All right." I went up and called and he wanted to know when we was coming to load on the staves. He'd been waiting. It was just high water when I was talking to him and I said, "We can't make her up there today but we'll be there the first high water tomorrow, in the morning."

/I come back home and told them -- my two brothers and my father -- that we was going in the morning. Well, he said they couldn't be ready to go that soon, that we couldn't go then. He was taking his wife with him and they was gonna get off at Rockland and go down to Massachusetts for the winter -- that's where she was from -- and he would do carpenter work for his father-in-law. Well, that was no good. Here I'd told Silas Gates that we'd be there in the morning, and he'd been waiting for us anyway, and then they said they wasn't ready. That was no good. That was no way to run a business. I said, "All right, damn it, if that's the way you want to run it then you can take the boat and go whenever and wherever you want." I says, "I ain't going. You take the boat and do what you want." And

I wasn't going. I'd just about had it and I'd made up my mind then not to go.

[Coffil's mother interceded and convinced the two brothers that they were both being stubborn. When they went to Port Williams they changed the boat's register and Bob became the captain because Alden was not making the return trip. Until then, Alden, who was two years older than Bob, was the captain and Bob was the mate. Their father was the cook and their brother John was the engineer.]

When we got over to Port Williams, not the next day but the day after, we changed the register and I was skipper. I wasn't too old. I must've been twenty or twenty-one. We loaded the staves and went to Rockland, and him and his wife got off there and went to Massachusetts, and me and my father and my brother, we come home with the boat. That was the first that I was skipper, and I skippered her for the next spring and summer and fall before I started in trucking.

On the way back home we got up as far as Beaver Harbour and went in there 'cause it was near dark and there was vapor hanging over the water and we couldn't see nothing. Going down we stopped there for a day or maybe two days too, and while we was there on the trip down John went overland to Black's Harbour -- that's just a couple miles below Beaver Harbour -- and bought himself a hound dog. He'd known about this dog some ways

or another and he come back with the dog, so we had the dog with us the rest of the trip down and on the trip back up. We got into Beaver Harbour the Saturday before Christmas and come in and dropped anchor right close to shore. We couldn't see nothing 'cause of the vapor on the water. Once in a while it would break just enough so we could see the top of the lighthouse, but that was it. They said there that a day or so before the temperature was fourteen degrees below zero, so it was pretty cold. I remember I wore three pairs of pants and a bunch of socks and boots and I never did get warm. I'd have to go down below every now and again and take my boots off to get the chill out of my feet.

Well, we couldn't see nothing so we laid in there for two days, I think it was, and then that was Christmas. Father was the cook on the boat and he set to work and cooked Christmas dinner for us and just got it on the table ready to eat when it started to clear and look pretty good. We didn't take the time to eat the Christmas dinner my father cooked for us. We decided to take her out and get going and we could eat after we was underway. So we didn't think nothing of it and we was busy, and about an hour later we went down to eat and that damn hound of Jack's had ate up our Christmas dinner. We wasn't paying no attention and some way or another he got up on that table and ate our dinner.

Nothing but a few scraps left.

/Well, we went on up, and the last two days the wind had been southwest and then that day it was calm, and that usually means the next day will be a northeast wind, a good blow from the northeast. That was no good for where we was going and I thought we better head in to shore. And, it was pretty good, you know, me being just a young feller and skipper and I had my father and my brother, who'd been around quite a lot before I ever went, and I could get their advice. So I asked John, we were just off Lorneville at the time, and he said to take her up far as Quaco. We could come right across from there when the weather turned fair. Well, I thought maybe we should've gone into Lorneville. That's only eight miles below Saint John and they've got a good harbor there, but we took her up to Quaco and anchored just off the beach as far in as we could go.

/I should've took her into Lorneville. That was just the time of the full moon, there was a full moon that night, and we had twenty-eight foot of tide there and there was quite an undertow. She wasn't protected much, and with the undertow she was going up and down and back and forth. I went down below and there was a half barrel of flour fell down and next thing I know the flour was up to the other end, all over the floor, and the dog was in it. I didn't get a chance to scoop it

up or nothing. And that dog, after he ate the dinner and then this, well, I give him a pretty hard kick. I kicked him good and he crawled under my bunk and wouldn't come out. He stayed under there far as he could get, all hunched down, and I don't suppose the vessel rocking like she was done him any good either.

Next day, we left Quaco and started to come across to get into the Basin and up to Mill Creek, but we couldn't do it. There was a strong wind from the southeast and she was blowing us up into the Cumberland Basin, up toward where Moncton is, up that way, and there was no way we could get her into here. So, I thought the Apple River was about our only chance. I headed her for Apple River and took the topsail off her and with the wind like it was we was heading in there under bare poles at two or three miles an hour. This ship that had passed us coming up the Bay, a big three-master, was already in there, straight across the river. The tide hadn't turned her all the way. We come in and we kept coming. I had to drop anchor to stop us coming on and hitting this other vessel, and even then I was afraid she would drag the anchor in the mud the way we was coming. But we stopped.

When the tide run out, the crew from the other vessel, quite a crew of 'em 'cause she was a big ship, they come over and helped us haul our anchor and then we

went over and helped haul their anchor. And, our anchor had settled into a four-inch pipe out of an old mill boiler and that held her or she would've kept on going. You couldn't do that again in a million times, land that anchor on the pipe that way.

When we'd got in there to Apple River, Jack asked where the dog was, and by gosh, I hadn't seen him since we left Quaco and neither had they. We'd been so busy we never thought about the damn dog. Well, I says, "He must've jumped overboard." I didn't know. I said, "I last saw him when he crawled under my bunk over to Quaco." So anyway, we went down to look and there he was, under the bunk, and he hadn't moved since I kicked him. And, he didn't want to come out. Well, he got the dog out finally but he acted funny. He wouldn't walk, he'd just stay down low and kind of drag his hind legs. Jack thought he'd take him out on the mud flats, let him get some exercise and see what ailed him, so he climbed down the ladder over the side of the boat with this hound dog. I can see them now, Jack and that dog going down the ladder, down on the mud flats and the dog just creeping along close to the ground, and my brother would lean over and talk to him. After while, he got so he was creeping a bit better till finally he was standing up and walking. He was scared. I don't know that it

was my kicking him, but I suppose it was, and the rough time we had laying in there to Quaco. But the dog was all right after that, though I don't know if he ever did get a fox with him.

/When it come time to come on home from Apple River, when the tide come in and the wind was right, I of course had to get her out of the river and into the Bay with that little engine she had. I just fluttered her out of the river. We got out ahead of that three-master -- she was coming over here too -- and I wanted to beat her up here 'cause she had passed us. We kept coming on around and she never did catch us.. We left Apple River and got in here down to Mill Creek and we was well ahead. She hadn't come around the Cape yet. And, we was coming so good I didn't slow her down or haul in the sails and we come into Mill Creek right up into the mud, fetched her bow up into the mud way up. And the next spring it took a team of oxen to haul her off the mud. But that was the first I skippered her, and I was skipper for that next year and then I started trucking.

/That next year, we was going down the Bay somewheres with a load and this friend of mine, Clinton Lyons over here, he'd never been out anywhere at all, and I asked him to come along. We got out in the Bay, and we seen this speck on the horizon, looked like a



junk of lumber or a small tree or something, and it kept getting bigger and coming on up, and it was a little skiff, maybe eight foot long, with a sail made out of a bag, an old burlap bag. And this feller in her, he looked kinda rough. Well, you'd have to be to be out in the middle of the Bay of Fundy in a eight-foot skiff like that, six or seven miles off shore. He had a beard, he hadn't shaved for some time, and all he had for an oar was a small junk of lumber, a piece of board.

/So, I went down and got the rifle -- my brother John kept an old thirty rifle on board for shooting, just for fun, if there was something to shoot -- and I loaded the rifle. I came back up and laid the rifle on top of the cabin. Clinton Lyons, he turned all white. He was afraid I was gonna shoot this feller or something. He didn't know. I said, "He looks like a pirate to me." I says, "He might be a pirate and you can't never be too sure." He just turned white. Of course, I loaded the rifle and set it on the cabin like that for his benefit. I wouldn't shoot nobody or nothing. I was kidding him and I seen the chance. But it did seem odd, this feller in a skiff out in the middle of the Bay.

/He come on up, and he looked to be in pretty bad shape. We asked him where he was going and he said, "I'll stop somewheres up on the New Brunswick coast." I asked him where he come from and he said he spent the

night on Isle Haute, that he'd come from down the Bay a ways. Well, we could see he didn't have nothing with him, and he couldn't have had a thing to eat since yesterday anyway. I says, "Come on up," I says, "and have some supper with us." I says, "You can use something to eat." But he wouldn't come. He said, "No, I'm going over to the New Brunswick shore somewheres for the night." He wouldn't come up and have supper with us, and the poor bugger had to be hungry. He couldn't have had anything to eat since yesterday if he was on Isle Haute the night before.

/So, he went on and we come on down to the mouth of the Bay, and we found out he'd jumped ship, he'd deserted and stole the skiff somewhere. Well, he must've wanted to leave that ship he was on some bad 'cause he was taking an awful chance out in the middle of the Bay the way he was. If a storm was to come up a little boat like that wouldn't stand a chance. But he wouldn't have supper with us. He must've been afraid we'd turn him in. Hell, it wouldn't make no difference to me if he'd jumped ship and deserted or who he was. It was no business of mine. I wouldn't turn him in. But he went on, and he looked some odd, with a beard and a board for an oar and a burlap bag for a sail. And Clinton Lyons thought I might shoot him. I can see him now. He turned right pale when I set the loaded rifle up there, and I says,

"He might be a pirate." I got some damn laugh out of that.<sup>29</sup>

I had a little mix-up in the customs once or twice, but it was just over entering and clearing the ship. I had trouble in Digby once. I loaded coal for a terminal in Digby in Farrisboro here, and on the way down our pump broke down, the pump jack in the gasoline engine. We went into Saint John to get a new pump jack. I had them stamp the clearance there that we laid in over a period of hours. We had to go to the custom house so I went up and they just stamped it. And, we went across to Digby. We went in there and they hoisted the coal out with a horse at that time, with a bucket and one horse, and the shovelers, two shovelers come down to shovel the coal out, and, it was seven o'clock. They went to work unloading and at ten o'clock, the custom house never opened till ten o'clock, so I went up to the custom house. And coming in from a foreign port you're supposed to enter the cargo and ship before you start unloading, but we was coming in from a local port and I didn't think it would really matter, you know.<sup>30</sup>

So, at ten o'clock I went up to the custom house and there was a young felder there relieving the other custom house officer. He was away on his vacation or some damn thing. And, I went in and of course he flew right, the first thing he said, he said the clearance.

I had from Farrisboro wasn't any good. That's the first thing he said. He chewed me out and he said, "You shouldn't have started unloading till you entered and cleared the ship." Well I told him, I says, "You wasn't in here at seven o'clock." And I says, "We was coming in from a local port. She's a Canadian ship, we come in from a local port." And I says, "We stopped in Saint John and they didn't say the clearance wasn't any good over there." So he said, "It wasn't, it ain't no good." Well I says, "If it ain't no good we can soon find out 'cause I'll call Ottawa and ask them why the custom house officer in Farrisboro give me bad clearance." I says, "He would like to know that he had."

He thought he was some smart. We had it quite hot and heavy there. I told him, I says, "If I come in from an American port I wouldn't have started unloading. We come in from a local port with local cargo." And I says, "We couldn't have any smuggled goods aboard." And I says, "They figured in Saint John, the custom house in Saint John figured that the clearance was all right." And I says, "I'll find out anyway. I'll call Ottawa and tell them they give me a bad clearance in Farrisboro and that you won't enter and clear the ship." So then he hauled in his horns and he entered her in and cleared her.

And then, another time I was in Port Williams. I took a load of barrel staves in there. I was carrying

staves in to make apple barrels out of. We went in there in the morning and we unloaded, we got her unloaded that night, and twice through the day, they had a little custom house there and a farmer down to Starr's Point and his name was Starr, he was customs house officer, and I went up twice and he wasn't in his office. We got unloaded about six o'clock, and the tide was in, and we come on down home to Mill Creek. Before I left I went up to the store, Chase's store there, and there was a feller by the name of Clark. I filled out and signed the inward report, and the outward report and I asked him if he'd take it over and get a clearance for me at the custom house and mail it to me. There was only a few cars down here at that time. And he said sure he would, so we come out and come down home but we was still in this district, this feller's district. See, we hadn't gone out of the district. Next morning about nine o'clock the telephone rang and I went to the telephone. The first he said, he says, "You're in trouble." I said, "What kind of trouble am I in?"

But before this -- I'll go back, my father had some trouble with him. We was in another vessel and we took a load of staves to Hillsboro over in New Brunswick, for lime barrels, and we cleared out of there for Port Williams by the way of Chipman Brook. There was no custom house in Chipman Brook down below Hall's Harbour.

And we went in there in the morning and we loaded the barrel staves, and the custom house was way up on top of the mountain, and there were no cars there. I suppose it would be two or three miles, probably, up to the custom house, and we had a clearance by the way of there to Port Williams. And we went from there, and then we come into Port Williams and this Starr, he come down, and he was going to attach her, fifty dollar fine if he attached her for not entering and clearing down at Chipman Brook, which there was no custom house really in Chipman Brook. It was at Hall's Harbour but it was up on the mountain. So, father says he wouldn't pay it. Well he says, "I got that creek right below the wharf." He says, "I'm gonna haul her in that creek and get it attached." So father paid the fifty dollars and we brought the vessel out.

I went to the States after that. That next summer I went to the States. (This was his first trip to the States, in the summer of 1923. He returned home after a short while, then went back to Massachusetts at Christmas time.) When I come home in the fall, along in September, why, when I got home here my brother was with father and they'd gone into Port Williams with a load of staves, and I went over to help them unload the staves. We unloaded the staves. We got unloaded at twelve o'clock. I don't know whether it was that day or the next day. We went down, just set down to eat dinner and she grounded on

the bed there and she fell right off on her side. She had a big list on too, and I don't know what made her do it yet. She had a good list on but she fell off on her side and it drove her side up so it ruined her. She wasn't no good. So we went right to work soon as we got our dinner. We took the engine out of her. I took the engine apart, the cylinder heads off of it, and we hoisted it up on the wharf. We stripped the sails off her and rolled them up. She wasn't going to be any more good. It broke the timbers off the side of her. He went up and got a truck somewhere there, and we loaded it on the truck and sent it home.

We just got it loaded on the truck when the custom house officer come down. At that time, anything like that or any wreck like that, why, you had to move it. This Starr come down and he says, "What are you gonna do with her?" Father says, "Well now, Mister Starr," he says, "you wanted her some bad a month or two ago here. You even had a place for her to lay down there in the creek." He says, "You wanted her so bad," he says, "now," he says, "there she is." He says, "Where's the sails and the gear off her?" Father says, "The crew took it for their wages. The wages couldn't come from anything else." He says, "I had no money to pay the crew off so they took the sails and the rigging and I give it to 'em for their wages."

Starr was some mad, but there wasn't a damn thing he could do. Father walked away from him. It cost the government I don't know whether five hundred dollars or something to move it. The old frames, I don't know whether they're sticking out of the mud right across from the wharf, just down over against that other mud bank. What was left of her was buried up in the mud there. There was a few prongs sticking out the mud here a few years ago. I never took note whether they're still there or not.

And then we was in there with this other vessel, belonged to my brother and I, that I had the trouble with. So he says, "You got to get over here." Well I said, "I'll be over, but didn't he bring the papers over for you so you could give me a clearance?" He says, "Yes, but I won't clear her out." That's some stubborn. They done it everywhere. We took a load of fertilizer over to Carr's Brook. There was no custom house there so we just mailed the other clearance and the thing to Farrisboro, and he entered it and cleared it and mailed it back.

So I hired a car here, I forget who it was I hired, and he soaked me for five dollars for going to Port Williams. And I went in. I knowed about the trouble father had with him so I was going to have some trouble. I went in and he said, "You know," he says, "you broke the law." I said, "Mister Starr, I didn't have much



education or anything but I know pretty near that I didn't break the law." I says, "I didn't break the law." I says, "I didn't." He said, "You took the vessel out and took her down to Mill Creek." I says, "I know I did but I'm still in your district, that ship is." I says, "I ain't going out of your district. If I'd gone out of your district I might've broke the law."

"And another thing," I says, "you got a government office here, and you wasn't here all day yesterday." I says, "I was up here two or three times yesterday." And I says, "You wasn't here." Well he says, "I ain't getting paid," he says. Well I says, "What in hell are you doing it for?" I said, "What're you bothering with it for at all? Why don't you let somebody do it that'll get something for it? Give them a job," I says. I says, "You got a big farm down here and you're just knocking somebody out of a job." He says, "You come from a hard crowd." Well I says, "That's you saying that, but you got no right to do it in a government office." I says, "You're a servant." And I says, "You're supposed to be getting paid for it." And I said, "No doubt you are getting some pay. You ain't coming up here for nothing." And I says, "It cost me five dollars to get over here and you could've cleared the boat out."

He was some goddamn mad. He insisted that he wasn't going to. Well I says, "All right, I'll find

out." I says, "I'll get her cleared some way." I said, "They'll tell me in Ottawa what proceedings to do and what to do. Probably they won't tell me but they'll tell you to clear the ship out when they find out the right to it. This tide goes in and out," I says, "and I have to work on the tide." I says, "Perhaps you don't know it but you should, you're the custom house officer." Well I says, "You don't realize that." By geez, he cleared me out and he never fined me either in the end. He shouldn't have said I come from a hard crowd in the government office. He shouldn't have, really. He's supposed to be a business man and everything and educated, and I wasn't educated but I knew enough not to say he come from a hard crowd.<sup>31</sup>

[During the time that Bob Coffil and his brother Alden had their first freight boat, the Edna Mae, Bob went into the trucking business on his own and his brother also found other employment. It was at this time that Coffil got married.]

We bought the vessel and about two years after that (I got married). I can't remember right now just when, whether it was two years after we bought the vessel or not, 'cause I run her some. My brother, he got a job somewhere and tied her up down here and I took her and took a load of coal to Digby that year, and then (we were married). It was two years after, two or three years.

(I had known her) quite a little while. She was born and brought up right down here aside of us. We went to school. I remember when she went to school. She was just small. I suppose she was in about primer by the time I was leaving probably, or something like that, (but) I'd been going with her for about three years (before we were married).

Between the two brothers, they kept the Edna Mae going for three years. We had her about three years I believe. (Toward the end of it) he loaded coal in Parrsboro and went to Digby. From there he went into St. Mary's Bay to about Weymouth there, I forget the name of the place, and loaded pulpwood for up above St. Stephen, right across from it, at Calais. He loaded pulpwood for Calais, and going across, he went out it (St. Mary's Bay) through Tiverton, through Petite Passage there, and on the way across she filled up. It was blowing hard and she filled up. Water was going right over her, as far as that went, till where she was full of water she wouldn't lift much.

He lost the deck about halfway. The pulpwood that was in the hull, it busted the bulkheads in her down and got loose and got to going, and with her full of water, and it drove her deck up, oh, about to the rails and everything. Opened her up around her deck. The pulpwood in her hold (kept her afloat). It was

loose, but her deck kept it in, and that's what kept her. Of course, she was all wood anyway. There was no ballast or anything. He got her into Beaver Harbour in New Brunswick, and they sent another boat in and took the pulpwood out of her and he left her there. She wasn't worth fixing up. If it hadn't wrecked her decks, drove her deck beams in the air (she might have been worth fixing). But she carried, kept enough sail on her so he sailed her in there. She was full of water. Yeh. We brought a boat around from Halifax way back after we lost that sailing vessel. My brother went down and bought a boat and we went, took two engines down, and we brought her around. But we'd never been around then and we brought her around home.<sup>32</sup>

I was in the vessel business a year or two before my brother lost her, and then I trucked here for about twelve years, around here and to Sydney and Moncton and around. (I trucked) mostly apples in the fall and then I trucked fertilizer and stuff in the summer. I worked on the road quite a bit when I was trucking. I was about the first one that had a truck down here, that trucked apples out of here. On the short trips, in the fall when I was trucking apples, you'd need someone to help you load and unload. But, it was never no good trucking down here then. There wasn't no money into it. I wasted about twelve years right there. You'd just wear out one

truck and then buy another one and that's the way it went. Let's see, I had two Chevs and bought two new Ford trucks and I had one new Dodge truck. That's about it. But they, even at that time, they wasn't really heavy trucks for what job I had them on. They were only light trucks.

I only had one or two slight accidents and that wasn't very much. I was going to Port Williams and it was when they hard-surfaced this road to Port Williams, and the old armory here in Canning, there was a road went down across there, and there was a detour on that gravel road. I went across that, and on the further end after I got off it, I come along and I met, I seen a car coming and coming and when I seen he wasn't gonna haul out, why, I went down and put the front end down in the ditch. And he come right along and he never turned out. He went right in under the body and that broke the windshield out of his car and knocked four barrels of apples off the hind end of the truck. We had stakes in that time instead of sideboards, stakes in with ropes around it, and he went just right along under them stakes, right underneath the body, and just broke the front door in. He had his wife with him. It hurt her just a little bit but it didn't hurt him too bad. It buggered the car up quite a bit. He'd been over duck hunting on Starr's point there and he was coming home.

and he was looking at ducks down in the river (outside of Canning). He seen some ducks down in the river and he never seen me at all till he hit the body.

[One time Coffil trucked some fish to Halifax for several men from Hall's Harbour on the Bay of Fundy, about twenty miles by road from Delhaven. His brother John went with him, as he often did during the years that he was trucking.]

Well, I contracted with some people over on the Bay shore there to take this truckload of fish to Halifax. They all wanted to go down 'cause they all had some fish on the truck, and we had quite a day of it. One feller, he wore a big black overcoat with a rope tied around him, and it was in July. I guess his blood must've been thin or something, 'cause he seemed to mind the cold. (chuckling) He went in home and we was going to have breakfast home. Anyway, he waited till I had my breakfast and he never took the coat off. I don't know whether he took his mittens off or not.

Yeh, we had quite a day of it in Halifax. We had some, about a dozen all together on the truck, and they got a box of soda crackers somewheres on the way down and they was walking along the sidewalk eat, eating these soda crackers, ordinary soda crackers. They was going up in the alleys and looking in at the windows there but no one seemed to be up. It must've been about

six o'clock, I guess, or seven o'clock. But they would break these crackers and you could hear them, like a still morning way out on the water. They come to a block here and eat these crackers. (laughing)

It was quite early in the morning, and after we got the fish unloaded and they got their checks, why, they wanted me to go up to the bank. So I went up to the bank with 'em, to get the checks cashed, and after they went in, why I went back to the truck. (I was embarrassed to be seen with them.) And, there was one feller stayed on the truck. It was my brother, and he wanted to know where they was, and I told him they got in a hell of a mess up there. (chuckling) "They was all lined up along the sidewalk, and a cop come along there and got excited, and he run the whole bunch of 'em in." And, he said, "I have to do something about it." Well, I said, "There's only one thing we can do," and that was me and my brother could might get bail for Fred Ellis. He was one of the fellers we had there, and I said, "We might get him out." But he got quite sore at me. He thought I should go right up and get them out some way.

So anyway, about that time they all come on down the street and down to the truck again (from the bank), and we was going up to have dinner, and my brother, I told him he could go along 'cause I wasn't too

hungry then. And they went up the street to a restaurant there to get their dinner and I went up Water Street a ways and of course I got hungry after I got to walking, so I went up to a restaurant and I just got in there and had my dinner about half through when one of these fellers come along and looked in the window (chuckling) and he says, "There's old Bob in there now." (laughing) So, I got my dinner through (as quick as I could) and I went back to the truck. I got way down in the seat of the truck just so I could look over the dash (but so they wouldn't see me).

I was young, I guess, and I wasn't used to that kind of life. My brother, he was having the time of his life. He didn't mind it a bit. After dinner, this (one feller), he wanted to go and see his daughter down in the restaurant there (where she worked), so my brother went with him, and they come to a cop, and he asked him, he says, "Do you, can you tell me," he says, "where the Radio Caffe is?" And the cop says, "Radio Caffe?" He says, "What in the hell kind of a thing is the Radio Caffe?" Well, he says, "A place where you eat." And the cop said then, he says, "I guess I know what you mean." He says, "It's the Radio Cafe." And he said, "Yes, that's the place." And they went on down, I guess, to see his daughter. But I didn't know nothing about a lot of this till after the next day and my brother was telling me about the trip he had.<sup>33</sup>



5. The Merchant Navy and The Woods Camp, 1939-1947

[The reasons for Coffil getting into the trucking business and then twelve years later going back into the vessel business with his brother Alden are never made explicit in the life history, or at least, these reasons are not emphasized. Of his decision to buy a truck and leave the sea, he said, "I thought I'd like the trucking business sometime, but I didn't I guess." Other factors for this decision may have been his upcoming marriage and the slight altercation with his brother about running the boat. At any rate, he trucked in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick from 1926 or 1927 until 1939. "But," he explains, "it was never no good trucking down here then. There wasn't no money into it. I wasted about twelve years right there." So, between his feeling that he was getting nowhere financially and his desire to return to the sea, Coffil quit carrying freight by truck and rejoined his brother to carry freight by boat.]

We freighted before the war in sailing vessels, carried lumber up to the States, up to Boston. And we was running all through the war, this last war. We started, we got that boat in thirty-nine I think, in the fall of thirty-nine, and the war started that fall. So we run her around, I don't know just how long we had her, nine or ten years. We renamed her. Her name was the Chaugamok and she was built for rumrunning. They

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 built her down in the lower end of Nova Scotia. It was the Chaugamok, and we renamed her the Shirley Aleta when we repaired her. She was named after my oldest daughter and my brother's oldest daughter. We put a new deck into it. She burned, the deck (had) burned.

While we was carrying coal there (to Black's Harbour), why, I think we carried there about eight or nine years, they built that cold storage and they built the sardine plant. That was on the opposite side of the harbor. Connors ran the sardine plant; they made the electricity -- there was a big, two big diesel engines in there; they run the post office; they run the bowling alley; they drove the mail to Saint John, I think, I'm pretty sure, or they run the bus service up; they collected the taxes; they hired the cop; they run the milk routes; they run the town. Yeh, they run the town. I think they had a show there once a week or something, I forget. But I know that we bowled, went up and bowled. And they had a little restaurant. They collected the taxes. There was a union man come in there and they run him right out. They run him right out of there, at that time.<sup>34</sup>

I was in what they called the merchant navy, freighting through wartime. They call it merchant marine or merchant navy, anybody in wartime and with a boat I suppose. They didn't tell us (what to freight and

where to freight it), but they told us when we could sail and when we couldn't at different times, when there were submarines. They held us down in New Brunswick there for a night, one night and a day before they'd let us go out. And when we went to Boston with lumber, why, they told us when we left Boston what route to take to get home. They did have quite a lot of restrictions on. They had a boat laying off of Saint John and you couldn't go in without speaking (to) her. You couldn't leave Saint John without notifying them that you was leaving and what time, and they give you permission to go in or out.

They claimed there was one (submarine) off of Digby that surfaced there, and the Princess Helene was on here then running across from Saint John, a ferry boat, and they seen the submarine after they come out of Saint John, oh, probably she'd be an hour out or three-quarters. She carried two gunmen on her and they changed every trip to Saint John. They put two new ones on. They was training them, I suppose. And, there was a feller on her there, he was a traveler for a gas company there in Saint John, and he was on her going over and he said, they had two depth charges on her, and when they sighted the submarine, when she surfaced, why, he said they run back and before the captain got the boat sped up enough, enough speed on her, they let the two depth charges go

and blew every window out of the saloon on the stern of it (the ferry boat). And then they run, they had a gun on the stern of her and he said (they fired it and it went right over the mountain there and the submarine was down here ~~in~~ the water. The depth charge rocked the boat, see.) But, it was true about them blowing the windows out of there. And his name was Steve Thorpe. He lived down in Saint John, and he was traveling and he'd come over and went down to Yarmouth.<sup>35</sup>

When the war was on I'd go in there winters (to the mill and woods camp on Cape Blomidon). We used to tie the boat up in the winter time. We left her in Black's Harbour one winter. The rest of the time we brought her home. We left her up here at this little wharf (the Pereau River wharf) sometimes, some winters. We left her in Parrsboro one winter. She wasn't a big boat. She carried a hundred thirty ton of coal and a hundred thousand (feet of) lumber.

[The three or four winters Coffin spent at the saw mill and the woods camp during the Second World War were among the best times of his life. The all-male environment, with local men and a few outsiders at the mill and camp, was conducive to the traditional behavior that Bob and his brother John excelled in. Practical jokes were played; stories were told. These are to be found in the texts. Some of the work is described here.]

Just about all the boys from down here (worked in there). A few of 'em (were) from outside, over in Medford.\* This feller from Windsor.\*\* The cook come in, and I don't know where he ever come from and I never found out where he come from or where he went to.\*\*\*

They was in there before Christmas. I imagine they worked pretty near a month in there before I went in, the first winter, 'cause we never hauled the vessel up till Christmas. I went in there a day or two after they come out before Christmas. I went in a day to look at the skidway thing where they were rolling the logs. They had two men on it when I was in there. And I went in and looked the damn thing over, and the way they had it rigged up, why, three men couldn't roll enough logs to keep the mill going. They didn't have it built right, so, I never rigged up a skidway before but I knowed that you couldn't roll logs uphill and stand there and hold them till they sawed that log and then go back and get another one and roll it up. It had to be level enough so that when you rolled a log up there then you could leave it, or else carry a dozen chips with you to put under the log.

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\*See Chapter VI, Texts, no. 38.

\*\*See Chapter VI, Texts, no. 41.

\*\*\*See Chapter VI, Texts, nos. 1-2.

And, it was downhill, and I lifted the outer end of the skids up and put a log under 'em. And, they couldn't swing the log to roll it out so it would go straight. If it got crooked you couldn't swing it, 'cause the outside log was what it was taking on, and the center log was took down too low. So I jacked the center log up so I could swivel the damn thing and then I walked to the end of it. They was running right out along the top of it, and logs without any bark on them and ice on 'em, why, they would've killed themselves. But when I went on he didn't hire no other feller, but I'd never rolled on a skidway before. But I kept her going and had lots of time to turnaround and talk to the boys and keep it straight. I kept her going all winter. And when I left, the next day after I left they told me -- I wasn't in but they told me -- that they had the same two men back on the skidway rolling. But it was working good. And I had a path out of sawdust. I had a path (out on the outer) so you could walk right to the end.

They was using long-handled peaveys and walking on top of these logs, and it was six feet down through them, down to the ground. It was on a sidehill kinda. Naw, you couldn't do that, 'cause you'd keep slipping off the logs. You could kill yourself. But they didn't know nothing about logging. I'd been around to a few mills.

I'd been down in Hants County hauling lumber in a truck. I had a truck here then and I hauled a lot of logs and lumber here one winter, a million feet of lumber down the shore here. I'd been in a big mill over in Alma, New Brunswick, had two rotaries there, double carriage. And I watched them there sawing and rolling in and one thing and another.<sup>36</sup>

I think I worked in there about three or four winters. Then I went out on New Ross Road and worked one winter, but we was sawing pine then and they couldn't fire the boiler. They couldn't keep fire in the boiler to make the steam, and she broke down. Well, I went out there. The feller that was cutting the timber out there, he was a Moline from pretty near over in Port Williams. I was working for him at first and then Bigelows took the mill out to saw it and they wanted me to go in on the skidway, and so I went with them, to help them on the camp and that. But they never sawed any while I was there.

I went in there about right after Christmas I think it was, and, oh, in the latter part of February he (Bigelow) came out there one day and we hadn't sawed very much. Well, we wasn't getting no time in. She'd just go a little while and then she'd run out of steam. They hauled wood clear from off the Cape, dry slab wood, to try to keep steam on it. But they couldn't get no steam on her, and so he come out. And, we had the boat. We

was carrying coal to Black's Harbour here (except in the winter months) and I come home. There was a high set of tides a-coming, and I was afraid (if) she was froze down she might fill up with water or something, so I thought I better come home.

It was a nice day, beautiful day. Morris Porter up here, he was working out there, and of course he hollered and asked me what I thought the weather was gonna be like. He telled me I could come home with him (but he didn't go then). Well, I said, "I think it's going to be nice warm weather and probably rain," just for something to say. That was on Thursday and I come home, and the next morning (when) I woke up it was the dammedest blizzard there ever was in the world here. And along the first of the week -- we never had no mail here till the next Monday or Tuesday -- I got a card in the mail said, "Well," he said, "we got the storm but," he says, "it come down in white stuff that you had to, it takes a shovel to remove it from the road." They had to shovel from way out there in New Ross, or not New Ross, I forget the name of the little lake there the other side of Kentville there a little ways, about fifteen miles from there to Kentville. They had to go out and help shovel the road out to get the snowplows through from there to Kentville. And I never went back in. 37



Chase was over here doing business (at Port Williams) and he come down and he said he had a boat coming up and they had no pilot here. The pilot was drowned in the wartime here, in Western Head, on a steamer that was torpedoed. And he wanted to know if I would take a boat into Port Williams.\* So I stayed home and I took her in, and I got more off of that boat than I got off the whole damn winter's work out there. I had fooled around all winter. If I'd laid at home on the couch I would've been just as well off, 'cause I never got any money.

They brought her (the mill) back that winter (after the snow). My father-in-law put logs in down here and they went out there, but they didn't do much. In the spring they brought her back here and sawed this cut out and then they went back out there and sawed that after the logs had dried out, the bark had dried out. But the pine had so much sap in it, and you can't fire one of them boilers with green pine slabwood. The fire would go right off the slabs, would leave them all black. Couldn't do it. There's a lots of things happen around that people that, I don't think, I think it's lack of experience. They don't really know what they're up against. They'd have been better off letting the mill

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\*See pp. 233-234, below, for a description of this incident.

right here 'cause they went in debt. They had to, 'cause they had fourteen men there eating there every day, and they wasn't sawing no lumber. Them young fellers, they was good eaters. If they'd left the mill right here they could've sawed this spruce in the winter time. It's different that pine. But I took this old boat into Port Williams.

[When the Coffil brothers were freighting during the Second World War, both Alden and John moved to FARRSBORO. At the time, it was a logical move. The township of FARRSBORO had been part of Kings County until 1840, when it was annexed to Colchester County and Cumberland County because of the difficulty of winter travel across the Minas Basin to Kentville, the county seat.<sup>38</sup> Until well into the twentieth century, however, the town of FARRSBORO maintained close economic ties with the Kings County towns on the Minas Basin. Coal was brought across the water from FARRSBORO to Wolfville every week. A ferry, the Kipawo, named for its three ports of call, Kingsport, FARRSBORO, and Wolfville, made daily trips during all but the winter months until it was needed for wartime duties in the early 1940's. After the war, it was purchased as a coastal boat in Newfoundland.<sup>39</sup> Since then, FARRSBORO and the towns across the water have grown farther apart. With coal no longer a major source of fuel, all internal freighting within the Minas Basin

ceased. Commercial fishing never had been particularly viable in the Minas Basin, for a fish processing plant was never built in the area.

[Bob Coffil's two brothers, when they moved to Parrsboro during the war, lived only ten miles from him by water. Today, with no small boats traveling from one side to the other, Bob Coffil and his brother Alden live more than one hundred fifty miles apart. A few times Coffil has had to drive this distance to get a pilot boat to take him to a freighter, anchored in the Minas Basin, which he was to pilot into Port Williams. These ships could be seen from the front porch of Bob's house in Delhaven.]

We was carrying coal out of Parrsboro in the boat. We was coming back in there to load, and he (Alden) had to rent a place here so he just went to Parrsboro and rented, and it saved him coming way over here. The way I got home, I had to bring a boat over and bring the other feller, Sam Bigelow, the engineer, with me. It would've been (handler for me if I had lived in Parrsboro too). There was some trips I got home and some trips I wouldn't, 'cause if the coal was ready on the wharf, why, I wouldn't get home. But if it wasn't coming down from Springhill for a day, why, we'd come across home and then we'd go back. Some times we brought the big boat right over. We'd just land him in Parrsboro and come over if

the coal wasn't there, and then we'd go back. And then, after he (Alden) had a motorboat there, the next year I think we carried that one up and he had her there and he went in the boat with us and, when we'd go in we'd take his boat and come over. (It was) a smaller boat, about forty feet.

He (John) moved over in the end. He lived right at the top of the Stuart Mountain. You turn to the right, you get to the top and you turn right after you get to the top, and it was the first house. He sold that out when he went to Parrsboro. He was freighting out of there and he was going with us then and he wasn't getting home too much, and I guess his wife wanted to move out. She got tired of it over here. It's been quite a long while (since he moved over there). My other brother's been over there for darn near thirty years. He moved over there, it must've been when the war was on.

/One summer, my brother run our boat and/ I took a power skow for the Bond Lumber Company. She was in Truro. They landed in Truro but she was out of Parrsboro, and we was going to East Brewer, right across from Bangor in Maine, and we took this one feller, the engineer from Parrsboro there, and he liked beer pretty well. By the time we got to East Brewer, why, see the skow was quite slow, she was a power skow, and he was getting pretty well dried out. So he, when we got in there about eight

o'clock at night, why, he said he was going up to get a quart of milk. So, I told him to be careful when he came back aboard 'cause he might get caught. We was laying to a boom of pulpwood there in the river, and I says, "You get overboard, why," I says, "there won't be anyone around 'cause," I said, "I'm going to sleep." He said, yes, he'd be careful.

So when he come down pretty sdon in the night, why, I heard water running and he, I woke up and he was going down the steps. He went in through the wheelhouse and went down, and I seen he'd been in (the water) but he was out so I didn't worry or anything about him. He hopped down in. The next morning I asked him how he got out, and he says, "I don't know." He says, "I can remember getting in the water, but," he says, "I don't remember how I get out." Now I don't know neither, 'cause the pollution was so thick in that river at that time and that was over twenty years ago. Why, you could almost walk across it. I guess now they ain't gonna try and clean it up. They're gonna, they think they can go across it anywheres and save bridges over there.<sup>40</sup> (chuckling) But he was overboard three times that summer.

The next morning we hauled the skow in through, into the boom and they unloaded it there, and he went ashore again after another quart of milk. And I don't know, it must've been awful strong milk, 'cause when he

come back he tried to get up aboard the skow and he went down between the boom and the skow. I got down and he come up, and he could only come up about a foot, go up to the top of the water and stop. Well, I jumped down on the boom while it was before he come up, and I grabbed him and hauled him up on the boom on there and got him out again. That was twice.

Then, when we come to leave there, why, we was a-waiting there for orders and we laid there a week and then we went down to Bucksport. And he had quite a lot of stuff to drink aboard and he went over aboard another skow. They was having a little party there, and when he went to go ashore she was falling out from the wharf about four feet, and of course he didn't see the hole there and he walked right down and went down through it. (chuckling) It was in back of an old garage and there was a lot of grease they'd been dumping from automobiles and trucks and tractors and things there, and his clothes was in quite a mess the next day.

We had quite a trip getting home. I told him Friday that he'd better get around and get in shape there so he could run the engine. He was supposed to be engineer. We was gonna leave Sunday morning and we left and got in Jonesport that night about nine o'clock and we anchored there. Along about midnight, why he called and said there was somebody pounding. It was the rudder

on the stern. There was a little groundswell there and it was knocking the rudder around and he thought it was somebody pounding, I guess. Then he said somebody was hollering at him ashore and I went up and there was a rooster crowing up on the shore. We was only anchored off about three hundred yards. (After that) we come on to Black's Harbour and I got the doctor down and he was all right outside of he was a little bit weary, drinking I guess. They sent him up to the hospital in St. Andrews. I guess he kept the nurses quite busy that night in there. And then they come up and his father come and got him, and brought him up to Parrsboro.

He'd been the skow engineer with his father, as I remember. But I run the engines. That summer I started them quite a few times. There was one morning in particular, I told him to be back aboard at four, by four o'clock. We was going out. He come down about three and when we turned out at four, why, I couldn't get him awake, so I went down and run the engine myself. After we were through and got breakfast ready, why I was eating my breakfast and he come out of his stateroom and he wanted to know who started the engines, was he starting them or was I starting them. I said, "No," I says, "you started them." I said, "Go down and put some oil on them." And he put some oil on them and come back up and went in and turned in. We was loading at a seven-

hundred acre island off of Rockland and when we got down to the island, why, I tried to get him up again to take her in, and he, I couldn't make or get him awake there. I had to run the engines. The cook (Ralph Blenkhorn) took her in to the wharf. But he don't know to this day, I guess, that I started the engines instead of him. (chuckling) I never told him the difference.

(He was with me) five months, I think it was.

I don't think I'd do it today, but them days it didn't seem to bother me very much. But that old Bangor River there when the booms were tied up along the side of the river there all tied there and they was full of pulpwood, big logs, big heavy pulp too. Quite a place to get overboard.<sup>41</sup>

We was down there two different summers into Bucksport, Maine. That's just to the westward of Bar Harbor a little ways, and when we come home we had a big power skow up there carrying pulp, and we come up to Southwest Harbor -- that's just to the west of the Mount Desert hills there when you come out of Bar Harbor -- and on the right they're these big hills. A big lot of old big summer places up there on the mountains. And we come right up inside there and we went right straight across the mouth of that Schoodic (Point) they call it. There's an island, and we went up inside that island, blowing quite hard, and we come right along inside



everything. My wife was with me then. If we went off shore it would get rough, so we come right up inside.

I've been up into Northeast Harbor, going into Bar Harbor, just in the mouth where it's way wide, right on the right there going up in there's a little harbor in there. Northeast Harbor. I've never been in too much. I've been ashore in Bass Harbor. There's a big Baker's Island coming out on the right hand side coming out, and right over there. And then you can go right around and go into Bass Harbor, and I was ashore in there. There's a fish plant in there. I've been into Jonesport, Maine, and Stonington was another place, but we didn't see much of it. I dare say if a feller stayed around there a while he would (hear some stories). I think there probably is some (around there in Maine).

Well, I don't think I'd be satisfied if I had to look out on a prairie or anything. When I was up in Rochester, New Hampshire, at my sister's there (for a visit in the fall of 1972, the same sister he stayed with for a short while in 1923), and the road goes right along out front of the house like that but there was all trees around it. There was two or three big apartment houses across the road and it was all woods in back of that. Well, I don't know, I just couldn't, I had to get out and walk around in the woods there in order to ... tack meself, you know.<sup>42</sup> You're used to seeing a great

lot. I think being out on the prairies is a lot like being out on the water. Them fellers out on the prairies don't never want to leave very much. It's because they can see so far, I think.

When we come up off of Maine the Mount Desert hills there and everything, and look way ashore at them big hills that's blue, just as blue as they can be, in the sky. And you can see so far and it's so quiet in a sailing vessel. And, it, I don't know, it just seems that it gets you or some darn thing. And you, you're always wanting to go back, or I always did. I don't know about what other people think. But, seeing a long ways and seeing them hills way ahead, just see 'em sometimes, you know. And I think out on the prairies, looking all around a long ways, is probably the same thing.

[Coffil's love of the sea is paralleled by his admiration of a good sailor and navigator. Alan Taylor was such a man, and Coffil takes pleasure in recounting Taylor's trip down south under the pretense of being a farmer. This anecdote dates to the early or mid-1940's, probably 1944 or 1945.]

(This one feller wanted to take a trip down south and) he got this Alan Taylor to go with him down south, 'cause he'd never boated, he'd never been down and he wasn't acquainted. Alan Taylor, he was towing a barge to up in Bucksport, and when he got through, why, between

Christmas and New Year's they started out. And all they had was a lantern, an oil lantern, and a one-cylinder diesel engine, and I guess they had a sail on her. And they got down to Portland, Maine, and they went in there, of course, for a harbor, and the fishermen come down and they asked him how he come to start out to go south that time of year in the boat. This Alan Taylor, he said, "Well," he said, "I told them that if they get in all the crop, get all the hay in and everything and look after the farm that, why, when they got through they could take a trip."

Well, the fishermen, they got right interested in him, and they got to telling him how to go, how to get to Boston, about the weather and everything and to be careful, and he took it all in of course. When he went out and went on, when he got down going through the inside waterway, going down after he got by New York, why, he tied up to a buoy one night. And a little tugboat come chunking along down through and he got out this old dirty lantern and held it up, and the feller on the tugboat, he says, "That's a hell of a damn lantern, or light," he says, "to have on a boat." And this Taylor, he says, "Well," he says, "that goddamned dirty light," he says, "brought me further than you ever was or ever will be." (laughter) He was just working on the inside waterway and Alan went clear from Farrisboro in Nova Scotia and he took her down south.

He could take it down south because he was a good navigator. He'd been on that coast all his life. He'd been on sailing vessels with his father, and then he, after the other war there, why, they sent them old ships to China for junk, why, he took one of them over. He could go anywhere he wanted to. But still, he acted the farmer going down. But he got a lot of sympathy and a lot of advice how to get there. They had a pretty good trip of it I guess.<sup>43</sup>

6. Farming and Fish Dragging, 1947-1968

[For the last twenty years before his retirement in 1968, Coffil owned a fish dragger and fished in the Minas Basin and the Bay of Fundy. He also spent two summers dragging for scallops off the Magdalene Islands in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. With him for all of this period was his son, Robert, Jr. (Bobby). When Coffil changed his occupation in his mid-forties and took on his son as his partner, they approached this new work seriously. In the first few years that they fished, they attended five government-sponsored fishing schools, which were and still are available to men who want to begin fishing or learn new methods of the trade. They learned how to knit and mend nets, how to set a trawl, how to adapt techniques to varying weather conditions, how to repair and adapt to broken or damaged equipment, and so on.

[They hired on a succession of third men to go with them. His brother John, who had been with him so often before, spent three or four years with them, and Bob learned more stories and told more stories, at this time. At least one of John's stories\* is remembered from this time, a story given in context that reveals an interesting form of tall tale telling among the fishermen, as they ask each other over the boat radios where the fish are. This is explained by Coffil in this section of the life history.]

[Another man who worked with Bob Coffil and his son Bobby was Clyde Smith from Campobello Island, remembered by Coffil as one of the best storytellers he ever knew.\*\* That Smith was and is a character is beyond doubt, yet, interestingly, the tall tale is not part of his stock in trade, and of the Smith anecdotes that were collected from both Coffil and Smith, the ones told by Coffil appear to be more successful as oral narratives. This will be discussed in Chapter VI.]

[From the time of his marriage in 1927 until he bought his present house in Delhaven in 1947, Coffil and his family lived several different places between Blomidon and Canning. The house where he was born and grew up, at the mouth of Mill Creek in Blomidon, eventually became his.]

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\*See Chapter VI, Texts, no. 23.

\*\*See Chapter VI, Texts, nos. 42-49.

The house ain't there. My sister built a little bungalow there, a cabin, and the old house (was) tore down. They tore it down when they built the cabin. I was foolish. I had the old place there and she wanted to build a cabin down there and so she offered me something for it so I let her have it. But today I could've got ten times as much for it there, right on the shore, but I let it go.

I lived there and then, after I was married and when we come home that fall, why, I lived in a house down the road a ways, and then the next winter I lived in this one over the other side of Don's store (in Delhaven). I lived there that winter and then the next winter I moved to Canning and I lived out there about two winters. And then I built this place down here. It's on the left, a little ways from where you lived there. That bungalow in there, on the left hand side of the road. I built that. We lived there for fourteen years I think it was. I had a feller help me some. I didn't do too much of the work on it. My brother helped me some -- the feller that's in Farrisboro now. He worked on it some and I had a Thorpe from Scotts Bay, a boatbuilder, but he had built houses, and he helped me on it some. I think my brother drawed up what I wanted. He worked up in the States at carpenter work. He inside finished in the winter and then he worked on houses

there in the summer. His father-in-law was a carpenter, boss carpenter at building houses there. When we sold the Shirley Aleta, why, I bought this place here.

I bought the farm here and he (Bobby) stayed on the farm one summer, and he didn't want to farm. I went (on the boat) one summer and, the boy, he run it the first summer and his grandfather helped him. We sold the boat that fall, and the next summer I worked here. I run the boat one summer after I bought the farm, then I sold her out and come home. Then he got married but he didn't want to farm. I don't know why. But I had the dragger, I bought the dragger then, so he went with me in the dragger. I'd handlined some, just for the (fun), but no time, just out for a day or two. But I went fish dragging at that time that I bought that dragger.

The boats come up here from Digby and they (had) sent a government man here in a boat and he found flounders up here, lots of flatfish. And the boats come up here and they loaded them in one day out here. (I worked one summer and fall on the farm.) It was the next spring they come up here because I was up there hoeing potatoes, and that's the first spring I stayed home, and they come up there. They come up here in the morning and they got thirty thousand pounds and went back through the gut before the sun went down. I hoed potatoes up there on that sidehill, and I could see them out there, going,

and I don't think I hoed too many potatoes that day 'cause every time I'd hoe one hill I'd have to turn around and look at the boats out there. I couldn't seem to (stay away from it, so I bought the dragger).

If there'd been a lot of money in it (the farming) I might've stayed with it. I couldn't see where I was gonna make too much money at it, not knowing anything about it. And, it wasn't something I was used to doing. /I didn't have the experience. When I bought the farm there was two horses in the barn that come with it. I'd walk into the barn, and the horses, they'd look at me with their eyes and they'd say, as much as say, "Mister, you better watch out, 'cause you don't know nothing about us." And they knew I didn't know nothing, they could tell. "Mister," they'd say, "you watch out."/ I kind of liked farming in one way and in another way it didn't seem to content myself. There was something out there (on the water) that was more, stronger. I liked it 'cause I was home more. And then, in a way, I missed going around different places, different people.

Ralph Bigelow over there (in Kingsport), the first summer I fished out here, he rigged up an old dragger. He bought her in Wolfville and got geared up and got a net on her. He fished, and I think there was fourteen boats, ten or fourteen up from Digby that year, and we was fishing off from here down to the Cape, and he'd come down about two mile off shore, right outside



of us altogether. And he fished there all one day, and he went in that night, and we had anywhere from ten to fourteen boxes of flounder and he had a box and a half. The next day he went out, and he went right back out there. Now, that's how much he knew about fishing. He didn't know nothing, 'cause he went right back to the same place and we fished in there.

Along about after dinner he run short of gas, so he come in. He says, "You ain't got five gallons of gas aboard?" And I did. I had ten gallons aboard for the electric light plant there. And I said, "Yeh, I got a five-gallon can here." And he said, "Can I borrow it?" And I said, "Yeh," I says, "I don't need it." I was going in at dark. So I handed that down, and he said, "You ain't got another one of them cans full?" And I said, "Yeh," and I went over and got it. He never matched it since. He went in that night with a box and a half of flounder. Now he didn't know enough to know or stop to think. Them fellers was fishermen from down there (in Digby), and I had sense enough, as it was, even if I hadn't fished, to know that they wouldn't be fishing there, a bunch of boats, unless there was fish there. When he went into Kingsport that night, and us with fourteen boxes of fish, he should've been bright enough to know that there was the place to be. But he never shifted, and he never caught no fish all summer.<sup>44</sup>

(One fisherman from Digby) went to India on that year. He drug and got ahold of all them flounders that summer, of course that stepped his papers right up. Couple years afterwards, they wanted somebody to go to India. Big holiday. He got all the fish up here, (so) he was the man to go down to India to show them how to fish these draggers, same as they used here. Christ, they give him pretty near a thousand dollars a month and a living bonus and all his expenses and clothes and what they ate after they got there. And he was down there just a year, and he had every damn cent of his wages when he came back. His living bonus I guess he sent home to run the house that year. He come back and then he built a new boat.

But the second year, after he was out here, we was out there, and his gear was no good then. If there wasn't a lot of flounders when he come up the first year he wouldn't have got any, 'cause the next year it went down and he laid to an anchor all one day out there. He made a couple tows and couldn't get nothing, and we got thirteen or fourteen boxes that day. And that night he went down through and went to Digby. He couldn't get any. And he laid to an anchor out there all day. Now the year before his gear couldn't have been half working. There must have been a lot of flounders there. But Bigelow never got none. He fished there and tried it and he couldn't.

In the summer we wasn't home that much. We was home different times, weekends. When we was in Digby we used to (come home). We had a car and we used to come up weekends and go back Sunday night. And some Sundays, of course, we wouldn't be in so we didn't come. As a rule we come home about every Sunday. My wife went with me when we were freighting some, down to Boston. She went on the sailing vessel a trip or two to Boston when we was carrying lumber (but she never went on the fish dragger).

That first dragger I had about seven years, and then I sold her out and I bought this last one, and I forget how many years that was. We had her up to about three years ago I think it was we lost her here. It's about four years this year. She filled up with water out here in the Basin, or practically filled up. We got a tow in down to Mill Creek and when we ground her full of water, why, it strained her so bad, and it damaged the engine, of course, and all the gears. We stripped the gear off and we sold the hull in Farrisboro and we sold the other gear to a feller down in Parker's Cove, by Digby there.

I did buy another one, or took it over. The feller couldn't do nothing with it and he wanted me to take her over so I took her over here, but I couldn't get no one into her to run her or do anything. He still

owned her. So, we sold her to a feller in Advocate. I helped him. An engineer was who we sold her to in Advocate.

We hired on, we had a third feller. Most of them were all from Digby a lot. Then we had a feller from Kingsport, New Brunswick, on the freight boat. My brother, my other brother (John) in Parrsboro, he went with me after we had the dragger here, the three of us, Bobby and him and me. He went with us in the vessel quite a bit and he went fishing with us quite a bit. My (other) brother wasn't fishing with me any after I got the fish dragger. When we sold the freight boat out, why, he went to building boats there in Parrsboro. I guess it was just one of them things. He was over there and wasn't no fishing over there, and he got into boatbuilding. (But John) We was with us (fishing) three or four years. Then he went home. He got tuckered. Well, he was quite a big man. He was quite fat. He got so he couldn't get around too good so he left and went home. But he would've been better if he kept going. Just as soon as he went home and set down, why, that was it. He took a shock the next year. I think if he'd kept on his feet and kept going he'd have been all right.

John, he died, oh, it must be, time goes so damn quick, it must be seven or eight years ago. I think he

was fourteen years older than I was, just about. This feller (Alden) is two years older than me, and then, there's a girl in between (Alden and John). (But John) he'd been with father a long while. Well, he made a trip when I was just a young feller to New York. He went mate on a vessel called the Jessie Ashley. She was a two-masted vessel. They bought her in Newfoundland and she loaded fish for Spain somewheres from Newfoundland. I was just a small feller. I suppose I was like this feller here at that time. Stevie here (his fourteen year old grandson).

[In November, 1952, Bob Coffil and his son Bobby went into Wilson's Beach on Campobello Island. Clyde Smith went down to the wharf, as he always did when a boat came in, and started talking with the Coffils, who at the time needed a third man for the dragger. (This was prior to the period when John Coffil went with them.) Smith was hired on, and it worked out well for all concerned. Only a short time before this, Smith had lost his first wife, so he had an empty house and was glad to have the company. They fished in nearby St. Andrews Bay and were back home almost every night.

[The Coffils brought their wives down in a truck loaded with food -- mostly garden vegetables and jams and preserves. Bobby by this time had one daughter, two year old Linda, and she came too. Smith explains,

"They had a whole truckload of vegetables of all kinds. Jesus, didn't she have some lovely preserves, and I enjoyed them, don't you think I didn't, 'cause I hadn't had any for years.... Yes, she had all kinds of stuff. Pickles, god, even a sackful of dried beans, god, apples, potatoes.... I thought quite a lot of Bob, and Myrtle too. They were nice people. I spent a nice winter, a good winter and fall, and we caught some fish too." Smith enjoyed the company and the preserves, and the Coffills found a home away from home from that fall until the next spring. If Smith was not an experienced fisherman, he was nonetheless a good host and a fine storyteller.]

We went in there new, and every dragger that come in, now he'd go right down on board, and they'd start in talking about different things and they'd tell him about some trip they made, say up to Canso or somewheres fishing, all the trip around and what a storm they got into. He'd memorize it, and the next feller come in, why he'd go right down and tell him the trip he was on, see, on this trip up around. (chuckling) And that's the way he got his (experience and stories). He was quite a storyteller. He was pretty damn good. He told me about this fishing trip up to Canso. This feller, and he got scared and couldn't do nothing, and he had to take over. But he was with me that winter and he couldn't do nothing. He couldn't even run the winch on our boat, so I don't think he took over.

Well, he told that story and he telled it so well, you know, well, I figured that he was pretty good 'cause he laid everything off just like the feller told him. It sounded good. But before spring, he went with us that winter, and before spring I found out that he didn't know that much. He couldn't take a boat anywheres. No, he couldn't go anywheres in a boat 'cause he didn't know the compass hardly, and he couldn't run the winch. First day we went fishing up in St. Andrews Bay there. It was right windy and cold, and we come to set the net out, and it took two to run the winch. He said he'd never worked a winch like we had, and he said he didn't believe he could do it. So I told him to go in and take the wheel. He didn't even know how to run the boat to set the net under. And I told him what to do.

We got the net out. We got that tow over, and the next tow, why he went back in the wheelhouse again. So I just says to myself, "This'll go on all winter." (chuckling) I says, "You go out!" when we come to hoist it back, and then it was a little easier. I says, "You go out now, and help him hoist back." Bobby was out there on the winch. I says, "Anything you don't know, you ask." He went out. I think he knowed how to run the winch. I think he could've at the start, but he ran the winch from then on.

Them fellers in the draggers, they'd tell one another about any damn thing or another (over the radio), 'cause they'll ask you some quite questions about fishing, and some fellers you'd like to tell but there's so damn many draggers out there, if you start telling one, why, they all hear it. If there's any fish anywheres, or (if you're) getting any fish, and you tell one feller, why, they all know it. You got twenty or thirty draggers around you in no time. /One time, when we were fishing out of Digby, / I said I'd gone up through the (Reversing) Falls (at Saint John) to see if I couldn't get a little trip -- they called it getting a trip of fish on -- to get a trip of sheep.<sup>45</sup> (chuckling) Yeh, I just thought I'd tell them some foolish thing like that.

There was some fellers from Parker's Cove that was quite the fellers. They don't have to think about what to say. They'd come right back with an answer. Yeh, there was one old feller, Raymond Longmeyer, and he was apt. He could think some quick. We was fishing about two mile off of Digby Gut there. I was coming in across to where he was fishing and he called and asked me where I was, and he could see me. I was only about as far as from here to the wharf up there (the Pereau River wharf, a quarter mile away). He could see me coming. He called and said, "Where are you at this morning where you're fishing?" I told him (chuckling) I was laying to



somewheres off of the Nova Scotia coast under a double reef stovepipe. Of course, he come right back and told me something of what he was doing. I don't know what he told. I don't remember what he told me he was doing. But they'd ask me where I was if we couldn't see 'em or anything. If it was foggy they'd ask me where I was fishing, and I'd tell 'em I was fishing somewhere off the Nova Scotia coast, ten miles off. But that could be anywhere from here around to Cape Breton.

Some of them, if (it was) anybody I knowed and I knowed there wasn't no one around, no boats around handy or anywheres, why, I'd tell 'em the truth about it. I wouldn't lie about it. But then some of them fellers would just call somebody up and then he'd (lie to them, mislead them intentionally). But I never believed in that, when I was fishing, to lead anyone off. I wouldn't tell them I was getting a lot of fish somewhere, and I wouldn't be there or anything, to lead 'em off, 'cause they wouldn't (like that).

They would be awful mum. You can always tell when they're getting fish. They ain't no one saying anything. But if they're all talking, gabbing, why, no one's getting any fish. They don't mind telling you where they are then if there ain't no fish. (chuckling) Just as soon as they start in getting fish, why, they'll start quieting down.

7. Up the Port Williams River, 1916-1973

[The second of the two fish draggers that Coffil and his son had during the twenty years they fished together filled up with water in the Minas Basin in 1968. They had had the boat for twelve or thirteen years. They brought it into Mill Creek and sold the parts for salvage. In June of that Year Coffil turned sixty-five and was thus at retirement age, so the loss was not that great, and, rather than getting another boat and continuing, Coffil quit fishing. His son now is mate on large trawlers fishing out of Prince Edward Island and out of Riverport, near Lunenburg on the South Shore of Nova Scotia.

[A year or two previous to this Coffil had been given exclusive pilotage for the only two Minas Basin ports that today are serviced by sea-going vessels, Port Williams and Hantsport. A gypsum company has its own pilot boat and pilots for the gypsum boats that sail out of Hantsport, but all other freighters going into and out of the two ports have Coffil at the helm as pilot. Usually, this means no more than a half dozen ships a year. For Coffil, however, it is an income in addition to the old age pension and a merchant navy pension, and, more importantly, it keeps him in touch with the sea and the ships that have been such a large part of his life.

[His familiarity with the Cornwallis River, which he calls the Port Williams River, dates back to the first year he began working with his father and brother John on sailing vessels in 1916, and although he has been the pilot for Port Williams only in the past few years, he had taken two ships into Port Williams during the Second World War and had expressed interest in being the pilot as early as the mid-1920's. Of the thirty-odd ships he has piloted into Hantsport and, primarily, Port Williams since 1968, the Greek freighters with Greek captains, he has discovered, pose the greatest problems.]

My father piloted a square-rigged vessel into Port Williams and took her up there under sail one time without a tugboat. He had the wind just right to do it. But they knowed just what they was doing and they didn't get rattled like these fellers do. They wasn't Greeks, I guess. They was mostly men from around (here). They used to sail vessels into Wolfville under sail, three-masters loaded with hard coal. It's a pretty narrow creek there. They loaded in New York and used to carry it there. We took smaller two-masted vessels in there under sail and come out (when) we were carrying coal from Parrsboro there some. We had no power at all.

We went up there (to Port Williams) and put an engine in an old vessel that father had that we carried apples in the first fall I went, (when I left school and)

went over there in Kingsport, and we was carrying apples to Moncton and Saint John. He went up there and put a one-cylinder engine in her. Coming down, the wind come up ahead there and the engine wouldn't handle her and we had to anchor right off of that farm there that's on the side of the river. Willowbank Farm they call it. They have a lot of horses there. It blowed that night and the next day it blowed to the eastward and the next day it was still to the eastward, and didn't have much water aboard. We got low on water, and we stripped our shoes off, my brother and I, and we walked ashore there and got a couple buckets of water.

The first year I was married, the winter I lived in Canning, why, they were shipping a lot of apples out of Port Williams and they had about twenty-eight or thirty boats out of there one fall, and every fall they were shipping apples over to the old country. I got it in my head, if I was going to stay around, that it would be a fairly good job because they was having a lot of fertilizer come in too. They had a pilot from Parrsboro here at that time. Chase didn't say but the feller there, Billings, he's the harbor master there now, he said that nobody could bring a ship in there. That was before I took any in, and he said no one could take a ship in but, this man's name was Anderson from over to West Bay. We was all along the wharf, I was trucking there

at that time, and there was one come up the river then and he said no one could bring it in but Anderson. Well I says, "Well," I says, "what would happen to the ship if he got in here and took a heart attack and died? Do you suppose she'd lay here and rust out?" Well, it was foolish for a man to say that, that no one else could do it. I says, "No." I says, "Shit, they wouldn't leave her in here and rust out." I says, "Somebody would take her out." And that's just what happened. When he was torpedoed on Western Head, why, I took that one in.<sup>46</sup>

I brought two in (during) wartime there. The pilot that was here, he went down on a ship that was torpedoed, and I brought one in. I was down in Spence's Island. We was loading coal going down to Black's Harbour, and it was blowing so hard we couldn't go down. So he (the captain of a ship) come in there and wanted a pilot, and there wasn't none here around. He wanted to know if I'd take him in and I said, yeh, I'd take him in, but I couldn't bring him back out. I took her in. My brother brought the boat back up here and then he rowed ashore and picked me up, off down aboard, and then we went on. I didn't want to wait long enough (to take him back out). We had to get down with the coal because they burnt pretty near a load a week in Black's Harbour, and we had to get a load of coal down there, and it'd take him two or three days here to unload. I never found out how he

got her back out, but he probably kept watch going in and I think he must've taken her out himself. Then I brought another one in, and I think it was the next spring.

Chase come down here himself that spring. I worked out on New Ross Road that winter and I come here and he come over. He wouldn't send anyone over because he knowed that I was worked up about the piloting business there before. He come over and seen me, and it was in April I think there was a ship coming up with a load of spray stuff. She loaded in ~~some~~somewheres down in Philadelphia or somewheres. And, he'd come over and wanted to know if I'd take the ship in. That was after Falkenberg had died. I asked him where the other feller was and he told me what happened, and he said he didn't know of anyone they could get. Well I says, "Well, I'll take her in then." And he says, "Do you want me to send Billings down with the car and take you over so you can have a look at the river?" And I says, "No," I says, "I've walked up and down that river in my bare feet." I saw the chance to come on to him. Well, I had. It was no lie. I lugged water there from the Willowbank Farm down there to the vessel. And at that time I was really quite well acquainted with the darn river. I'd been up there a lot more than any of them pilots that had been in. George (Carl George from FARRSBORO, who was the pilot for Port

Williams from 1945 until 1967) had never been up in Port Williams River till he come out of the navy. He cruised the river some, of course, after that, before he took a ship in. So I was about as well acquainted with the river as any of them, as far as that went.<sup>47</sup>

The pilot that was piloting here come on after the war. He was in the war, this other feller, George. So I didn't pay any more attention to it after that first racket. And I was in Digby and Joe Casey, the pilot in Digby, why, he come to me along in June I think it was, and he'd been up here and taken two boats out, two pulp boats out of Port Williams, but I didn't know anything about it. He come to me and told me, "Why don't you go after the piloting," he says, "up in Port Williams." He says, "I've been up there but," he says, "I don't want no part of it. I had two boats in there," he said. "I had a little trouble with one of them." And he said he had all he could do anyway down there. He had two fish plants there, one in Digby and one over on the other side. And he said, "You better go after it." And I said, "No," I says, "I wouldn't go after it." I says, "When they want me," I says, "they can come to me." I says, "I wouldn't chase them again."

So anyway, I never heard nothing till about a month, I guess, and Billings over here, the harbor master, he called me up and wanted to know if I'd bring a boat in

for him. Well I was pretty well worked up about that time. And I said, "Where's Joe Casey?" And he said, "Well," he said, "he's in the hospital in Kentville." And he says, "He can't bring her in and she's due." Well, there wasn't no one else around here that I knowed of at that time could take a boat into Port Williams. So I said, "Well," I said, "I don't know." I says, "I'll go over and see Casey." I wasn't going to interfere with Casey, as far as that went. I made up my mind not to. And I says, "I'll let you know tonight by six o'clock, between now and six o'clock." So I went over and seen Casey and he said he didn't want it. He said he couldn't take this one in anyway. He said he didn't want to take any more in. And he says, "It's up to you. If you want it, why," he says, "you go to it."

So I drove right down to Port Williams, and he asked me what I thought about bringing one in, and I said, "Yeh, I'll take one in," I says, "if I can take the next one and the next one." But I says, "I've fooled around about long enough as far as I'm concerned." I says, "It's up to you." And he said it was all right as far as he was concerned. Of course, only word of mouth. He could fire (me), get someone else tomorrow. I told him that day, I says, "I tried to get it once, piloting here, and they thought no one could do it but Anderson, and I'm the third one that's been on now." There was a



Captain Falkenberg, he was on here a little while in wartime down here, and when George got out of the navy he took over, and he was on up until I. He died that summer, that spring. So I've been on there ever since. I don't know when I'll quit. I suppose if I made a mess out of her, or anything (I would). I told him I'd take it until something did happen, that if I did get in trouble I didn't expect to keep it.

At the age I was (when I took the two ships into Port Williams during the war) it didn't bother me a bit, but the first one I took in after I took over this time (it did). Of course, she was a lot bigger ship and practically a new ship, and I hadn't been into Port Williams before that, up the river, for about twenty years. Well, it was in wartime when I was in there and it was about five or six years (ago this last time). So it was quite a little while. So it did bother just a little. While I was aboard of her out here -- I went aboard of her in the morning and we never went in till after about three o'clock in the afternoon -- and laying there it was the worst. As soon as we got the anchor up and started I was all right, but while we was laying there I was going over that damn river all the time, coming back over it. After we got underway, why, I forgot all about that. I was going then and that was all there was to that, far as that went. It did bother me. I was a

little worried about that (first one), but it didn't bother me after that. I knowed what I was doing then, but it had been so long and at my age then it did bother me a little. But when I was younger there, in them first ones, it didn't bother me a bit. I probably knowed nothing and feared nothing, as they say.

I think (I've taken) twenty-five or thirty (ships into Port Williams and Hantsport). I kept a book with them all set down. We lost that. Then two years ago we started in keeping another one. I don't know what happened to the book we lost. Somebody must have burnt it up. I had six in last summer, but I had more than that the summer before. There's just enough. I don't want any more than that or it bothers my pension if I get too many. They don't allow me to earn too much, 'cause I'm getting the merchant navy pension and I'm getting the old age pension and the other (the piloting) with it, whatever they call it, supplement. I can only earn about twelve hundred, and I have to have an awful lot of hotel bills even at that to keep it down, and traveling expenses, boats. That's one thing they can't control too well is the hotel bills and that. If they did undertake to do it, it would cost an awful lot.

(The ships going into Port Williams are) either loading or unloading. I've never had one yet that took off a load and then put on aboard another load. They

just either unload or load. This last one had soybean meal. It loaded in Chicago. And, they bring fertilizer in there. They didn't have none this fall. They didn't get the wharf done in time. They just got done in time for this one (at Christmas, 1972). The boat that was supposed to go to Port Williams with fertilizer went to Hantsport and unloaded and they trucked it from Hantsport. And there was a load of salt that was supposed to go to New Minas and unload in Port Williams. They unloaded that in Hantsport. Pulpwood (is what they load on). They had none there this year, no pulpwood at all 'cause they was building the wharf and he wouldn't cut any last winter or he wouldn't buy any pulp, so they had no pulpwood. I don't know whether they cut this winter or not.

(When a ship is anchored in the Basin) I heave her up two hours and three-quarters before high water, and it takes me three-quarters of an hour to get the anchor, usually, as a rule, and I can come dead slow. I have to be over here, at two hours to high water I have to be over here abreast of Kingsport off that Long Island there. And it takes her one hour from that to Port Williams, dead slow. I want to be in there one hour before high water. That gives you enough time to get the headline to it and (by the time) she gets swung around beside the wharf and they get the stern lines out, it's high water. It takes about an hour. So it's two hours and three-

quarters from the time we start heaving down here. If anything goes wrong with the windlass, why, then I can go half speed or full speed to make it up. If I waited right there till so I could go full speed up to Long Island, why, I couldn't get it. You can only go dead slow up the river anyway, 'cause she can't make the turns. She's too long. You got to go dead slow and then if she won't come fast enough you got to go full ahead on her, and that can kick the rudder on her. You go too fast and then she gets too low (in the water).

You turn it when you go in. You come right in just below the wharf and put her about thirty or forty feet below the wharf at the mud bank, and then the tide running in will take her right around. She gets around, she's right aside of the wharf. (That's) the only time you could turn her good. Three hundred fifty feet is plenty big (for a ship coming into Port Williams). A three hundred twenty-five foot boat is a little easier to handle 'cause three hundred fifty takes about all the river up. When you're turning her there, with her bow in the mud bank there, the stern is just scraping the bank on the other side. It don't give you much room. You're coming up like this, you got to turn. If the ship's stern goes around you've got to be careful or it would strike before her bow went in the mud. If she did, why, she'd go the other way then. Three fifty is just

about what you can get in there.

(Going out of Port Williams) you've got to leave the wharf when the tide's running in a little. You want to take and shorten her up with two lines or three lines about an hour before high water. You want to be ready at three-quarters of an hour, anyway, so you got enough tide to get her away from the wharf. If it gets to run down you can't get away from it. It will blind her onto it. Before that she'll cut off and you can put the wheel over on her and she'll be going away from the wharf and you slack her out. All you have to do is slacken her off about ten feet from the wharf -- the tide running in will cut her off -- and then let the lines go.

The Norwegians are the best you can get going in. They'll do anything you tell them to. And the Germans are good. I had an Englishman in there. He was good. They said that I'd have trouble if I got an Englishman, but he was so drunk he didn't know whether he was going into Port Williams or not. He was drunk when I got aboard off of Digby. She was an old steamboat. And he was drunk when we come up in the Basin here. He never come on deck till the next morning.

[The Cornwallis River is difficult to navigate as it meanders through the dykelands to Port Williams. At low tide, it is a three hundred fifty foot wide trough of mud; at high tide, the water at mid-channel is about

twenty-five feet deep. Coffil has had difficulties with three boats he has piloted into Port Williams. Each time the ship was a Greek freighter, and the problems resulted from the Greek captains' unfamiliarity with the river and its tides and with the logistics of bringing a ship into Port Williams.]

I had two skippers panic on me there. I pretty near hit the wharf one time. I hit the toilet sticking out the end of it and upset the toilet. There was a toilet built out over the end of wharf, about half of it over, on the lower end. They had it for the help there working, right out on the end of the wharf. When we come up here, when we started swinging, I got her heading over and I told him to go full ahead on her and he said, "No." I says, "Why not?" He says, "She'll go up on top of the marsh bank." She couldn't get up on top of the marsh bank. I said, "You got to go full ahead on her." And he said, "No." His eyes popped right out. He just wouldn't. Well I says, "Let go of the anchor." He had some weight on her but she was heading right straight up into pretty near to the wharf. I said, "Let go of the starboard anchor," I says, "and go full astern on her." I knew she was gonna go into the wharf. I figured she was going into the wharf. At that time she was heading right for the end of the wharf, and I couldn't see it over her bow, it was so low. And she went and

she went and she never stopped. The tide was carrying her. And, I braced my feet. I figured she was that close to it. She was going to roll the logs up (chuckling).

I never heard a thing. She went right in and fetched up in the mud right up against the wharf. I knew she was right up against it. They put out the headlines and when she swung back around I looked up alongside of the ship and the toilet was laying on the wharf. Her bow was like that, flared out, and it just kind of tipped. It must have just hit it on the top and tipped it in. But she never touched the wharf.

The harbor master there said if he straightened the toilet up, put it back up on its bottom, why, it'd be all right. But when they went to the custom house to clear her out there was a bill of fifty dollars there. They straightened it up and stood it up, but there was a bill of fifty dollars. The freighter paid it. He'd pay it before he'd keep the crew (there and argue about it) 'cause it'd cost about a thousand dollars a day to keep one of them ships laying, so he wouldn't bother with that. There's twenty-eight men there on wages and the insurance on the ship and the whole thing, and her time for a day. It comes to right around a thousand dollars. He just paid the fifty dollars. A day or two afterwards, why, he moved the toilet around back of the other building there, out of sight, and that's what he wanted the fifty

dollars for I guess, just to move it. It didn't hurt the toilet a bit, but he seen a chance.

(Another Greek captain) done the same thing. He wouldn't go ahead on her and she drifted up abreast the wharf and we had to let go of the anchor. Then she got between the bank, the mud bank over there and her bow here against the wharf where we couldn't go ahead or back, and we had to wait till she got swung around far enough and then we got a headline out on her and we got her back in to the side of the wharf. It just got her out of position enough so there wasn't nothing much I could do. He had to let go the anchor, which he shouldn't have to do with the bed there, big cement bed there with hardwood logs on top of it, and if you get the anchor hooked in one of them and pull it up you'd have to go back to sea and you wouldn't be able to ground the ship on it and you wouldn't know. We got the anchor down just before we got to the bed so got her swung around enough so we got back down beside the wharf. But we could've caught her."

If her stern would hit the marsh bank on the other side, her bow would've come up and caught on the wharf and she'd have wedged right there. It's just like damming a river up. The boat was drawing probably twenty-two feet of water and there was about twenty-four feet of water there, so that the whole river is dammed up.



The whole pressure of it would be just like putting a dam across, and you couldn't move her. When the tide run out again, well, probably by the time the tide run out you wouldn't get her out. She'd settle down in the mud.

[The last ship Coffil brought into Port Williams in 1972 was again a Greek freighter, on December 24. The following is his telling of some of the problems he had with this ship and its captain, problems which began when he went by train to Port Hawkesbury on the Strait of Canso to board the vessel.]

I went up there so I wouldn't have to get aboard of her off a small boat. I (would have) had to go to Digby to get aboard and I was afraid it might be a gale of wind or something. Up there I step right off the wharf onto her coming through the locks there. Then when I come up here I didn't have to worry. We just come up here and anchor.

I left here on a Saturday afternoon. I got a train right up, and she was supposed to be in there early Sunday evening, in through the locks. She got in the ice and she never come through. I spent eighty dollars there on motel. I couldn't find out whether the icebreaker was getting her out of the ice or whether she'd be in another week. So I called Bobby up and Thursday morning he come up and got me. Friday I got word that the ice-breaker had gone up and she'd be in Port Hawkesbury

Saturday night at seven o'clock, so then I had to turn around Friday night and go back up. I got home Thursday after dinner and I went back Friday night. She got in there Saturday night, when she come through. But if she'd come right along, why, it would've been cheaper. It wouldn't cost me as much as it would've for a boat here. If I'd have drove to Parrsboro and hired a boat there it would've cost me more than it would to have gone down on the train.

This ship was jinxed from the time I heard from her. She was in trouble in the ice. She was in trouble coming down through the locks (in the St. Lawrence Seaway), so they told me. They said she was broke down, but I guess that wasn't right. She wasn't broke down. He was a stubborn bugger, the skipper on it. You couldn't do nothing with him.

I didn't take over till we got up here. I didn't want charge of it. Most of the Greeks will ask you when you're going to take over. They want to get clear of the responsibility, then if anything goes wrong it's yours. But it was his baby till we got here in the Basin.

We had a little trouble. Coming down Sunday off of Halifax, I was up in the (mates' quarters) and one of the mates was up there, and I could see that this skipper was quite nervous. He wasn't showing too much nerves but I knowed the way he acted that he would be (nervous) if

he was in a bad place. So I asked the mate how he was if he got in a bad place around the harbors or going in. He said, "Well," he said, "he had a lot of trouble coming down through the locks with the pilots." He says, "He's quite bad," he says. That's the word they always use, quite bad. So, I could tell the way he acted that he was going to be, 'cause I've had two or three into Port Williams (that were quite bad).

Well, when we was coming up down below Cape d'Or here on the Bay of Fundy, why, there was quite a tide, and he wasn't used to tides, and when he sent, Billings over here, Gerald Billings, he's the harbor master there and he wanted to know what time she was going to be there so he could take the lines. He has to have a crowd of men there to take the lines. He told me to have the captain send him a telegram Sunday, and tell him what time we was due here in the Basin, and then he could judge from that what time we would be in. He knows what time I'd come in there. So I told him, I says, "Billings wants you to send him a telegram so he'll know what time." So he said, "All right."

So, the next time I seen him, an hour afterward, I said, "Did you get your telegram away?" I don't trust a Greek, and I wouldn't. He said, "Yeh." He said, "I got it away." I says, "Who'd you send it to, Billings?" "No," he says, "I sent it to my agent in Halifax."

Well I says, "They've appointed Billings your agent." I'd told him before that they'd appointed Billings the agent. Well I says, "That ain't no good!" It was the day before Christmas, Sunday, and Monday was a holiday, and I said, "Look," I says, "that ain't going to do Billings one bit of good." I says, "That will be laying in the office in Halifax till about Tuesday or Wednesday." And I said, "We'll be laying into the wharf in Port Williams." I says, "That wasn't what he wanted." But he says, "You write a telegram." I says, "I won't write no damn telegram." I says, "I'm just telling you what he wanted." And I says, "It's up to you to send the telegram." And so he went down. He brought the telegram to me. And I said, "No," I said, "I won't write the telegram." I says, "You're the skipper of this ship." I says, "He told me to tell you to send the telegram." But you couldn't beat it out of his head that that feller in Halifax wasn't his agent. (Eventually, he did send the telegram to Billings.)

So anyway, we come along up. When he got to Cape Sable, well there's a rock buoy there, why, he had quite a time and he hunted around pretty near an hour before he found it. His radar wasn't working and he didn't keep close enough check on her. Then, he was out about four or five miles at that. Well, then it was dark. When he sent the telegram I said, "What time are you going

to be in the Minas Basin?" And he says, "Eight o'clock tomorrow morning." And I had the tide book and I'd figured it up, we was going to have the ebb tide against us from Digby up into the Basin here. I says, "You ain't going to get into the Basin at no eight o'clock." I says, "You'll be three or four hours late." But he just looked at me as if (he didn't understand). They play dumb. They can talk English and they can speak English and they can understand English, but anything they don't want to understand they'll must make out they don't understand you. They play, keep that way. So he didn't let on but what he didn't understand me at all. Never said a word. So we got up down in the Bay here, and he didn't know how to get up through it (the ebb tide). He went across the tide instead of going right straight ahead to it, and she wouldn't go any. She'd just go sideways, and we lost an hour anyways. But we got in here at eleven o'clock.

When we come up in the middle of the gut down there where there's a lot of tide, seven to eight knot of tide, why, he says, "I guess I'll anchor." Well I said, "Look," I says, "you don't want to anchor here." I says, "You want to go up in the Basin." Well he says, "There ain't nothing wrong with it here. I'm going to anchor here." Well I said, "Look," I says, "I never seen a boat anchor down there yet and I've been around

here a long while. It just ain't no place to anchor 'cause of the big tide." I says, "You go up in the Basin." "No," he says he's going to anchor. And then he turned around and he said, "Which anchor will I use?" I says, "Look," I says, "you can use either one of them damn anchors you want to 'cause," I says, "you are gonna use whichever one you want to." I says, "If I say 'use the starboard one' you're gonna say 'I'm gonna use the port one.'" I knowed there's no time to argue in the Port Williams River but there was time out there. No, I says, "You anchor anywheres you want to and," I says, "you use any anchor you want to. But," I says, "when we heave that anchor up and start for Port Williams," I says, "if you're going to want to (argue) then," I says, "you can take her in yourself." I says, "It's either you or me." And I says, "Another thing," I says, "I want a man on the throttle there so if I want full ahead I want full ahead or if I want full astern." And I says, "You ain't gonna stand there and look at me as if I didn't know what I was doing, 'cause I had two or three block on (me) and I damn near hit the wharf." In the end, he says, "You take her up and anchor her then." I says, "All right. I'll take her up and anchor." So I brought her up off Whitewaters here where the gypsum boats anchor. I says, "I've been around here a long while and," I says, "I've never seen a ship anchor down in that damn place yet."

When we come up to get underway to go in, why, he brought another man up and she had two, one on each side of the wheelhouse. One would work both but he put another feller on there 'cause he knowed damn well he was gonna lose his head. (chuckling) But he put the other feller on, and he says (in a meek voice), "We'll give you whatever you want." "Well," I says, "that's what I want 'cause," I says, "we ain't got time to argue in Fort Williams River." I says, "The tide's going in there," I says, "and we only got twenty or thirty feet to work on." So I got what I wanted there.<sup>48</sup>

They ain't really stubborn but they lose their head. They just go dumb. A Norwegian or a German won't. If you tell them full ahead they'll go full ahead. They seem to hold themselves. But then that marsh bank and her going into it, it seems to do something to them. They'll just stand there and the look in their eyes, they'll pop right out of their head. They don't know what to do. They just freeze. It makes it hard on the pilot. You don't know what you've got till you get there.

Going out of there last fall with that last one I broke six posts. I guess they'd been drunk all night, the damn things, and they still had the water hose (hooked up). They was taking fresh water in. They had to have fresh water to keep their lighting plants going while they was laying there while the tide was out. I went

over there Sunday morning. I had told him what time I'd be there and what time I wanted her ready and everything, and I went over there and there wasn't one of them up, and the water hose was still connected down in the engine room. And, (by) the time I got them out and got that out of there /it was quite a rush to get away from the wharf in time. I should have gone back home and waited till the next day./ There was pretty near two feet of ice in the river there that morning, and it was so tight that it wasn't even moving up the river. I suppose she had ten or fifteen degrees list towards the wharf, and she had portholes along on that side of her. And, the only way I could get her out of that, I had to spring her stern in in order to get her bow out, so I packed her up with a swing out and that helped check her in against the wharf, and when I went ahead onto her, why, them little spiles that they built the wharf out of wasn't big enough for a wharf. They shouldn't have been in the wharf at all. She scalped some of them, about six of them, before she left altogether and left the wharf, and they made a great big ado about that.

He (Billings) called me up and told me what happened and everything and wanted to know what he could do about it. Well, I said the ship would have to go good for that. She was insured. They wouldn't expect me to



pay for the wharf. Well, he said it cost forty-five hundred dollars to put six new spiles in. Well, I said, "What you better do, you better figure up how many spiles is in that wharf and figure every six at forty-five hundred dollars and see how much (chuckling), how much the spiles cost." It'd cost a million.

What they done, as near as I could find out -- of course, I don't know too much about it, but -- they said they was gonna get three hundred thousand (dollars) to build that wharf. Well, the first thing they done when they condemned it, they sent an engineer from Ottawa down. He arrived on that wooden wharf and he'd never seen one before and he said he didn't know there was one left in the country or had never seen one, but still he condemned it and went back to Ottawa. That was the very start of it. Well, it was in the paper here that they had three hundred thousand to build a new wharf, the first report. Then the next report that we got, the contractor took it for ninety-some thousand, ninety-four thousand.

So they built the wharf there and before they got it all built they put a road out onto it. There was a gap there, and they dumped enough stuff in behind it, and they went out on it with a big spiledriver there. I went over one day, and it had a bow about pretty near a foot into it from end to the other. They'd wedged it up with this dirt in back of it. One of the engineers

was there on the wharf and I asked him what he was going to do, and he said he didn't know but they'd have to do something with it. Well, they put two big tractors on it and they hauled it back, but it's still got a little bow into it. The top of it is out further than the bottom of it. That's the reason that the ship crowded it so much. Well then, what the hell is the good of coming after me?

I told them, I said, "There's two feet of solid ice in the river that morning." And I says, "The only way I could get her away was take her out." And he thought if he'd been down there. But, "Well," he says, "I'll have to tell them something." Well, it wasn't up to me. I couldn't tell him anything. I just took the ship out and if there was any damage to the wharf, why, her insurance would have to pay for it. She was insured. If she loses an anchor the insurance pays for it, so why wouldn't they?

They didn't build a good enough wharf anyway. They had a chance to get a good wharf built and they didn't. I called it a matchbox up on four or five matches, for a big heavy ship like that, then stand the thing up on stilts there on the side of that mud bank. And they expect you to bring one of them ships in there and not touch that, just lay her up here three inches from her, and she's supposed to stay and not touch it. Well, I

don't know what they expect a man to do, put his foot down between her there and hold her out or what, but she ain't supposed to even touch.<sup>49</sup>

We got broke down out there (in the pilot boat off of Digby) New Year's Eve. We went out of Port Williams here Sunday morning and that night when I went to get off her at Digby, I just got aboard the pilot boat and the engine broke down. We had quite a time of it there. It was just after when we broke down, and, he steamed away from us, the Greek. Casey, he's the pilot down there. He's the one that take me off too, and he had another man with him. We was a mile off shore there, blowing fifty miles an hour by the time I got aboard the boat. We put the freighter side to the wind and put the ladder over on the lee side and he come right up on the lee side. It was quite rough, but you can get aboard of it when it's quite rough. The ship acts as a wharf, breaks the sea off. She's big enough to. She was over three hundred feet long, and she broke the sea off the pilot boat.

Just when I got aboard of her, why, he said she was broke down, and he told the captain on the ship to stand by till we found out whether we was going to get her going or not. He just walked away and steamed away from us, (and) he was supposed to go in to (shore). I come over on Saturday here (to Port Williams) and I

took a harbor chart of Digby Basin there and the anchorage and everything. And I told him if it was blowing hard that we might have to go inside there or I wouldn't be able to get off of it the moment we got down. He said he would there, but when we got down off of Digby he was different. He was out of Port Williams and he didn't give a damn, so he wouldn't go inside of a mile. We could've went in as far as from here to Don's house over there (two hundred yards away), from the shore. If he'd went in we could've had smooth water but he wouldn't go in. We was pretty near two miles off by the time I got aboard of the pilot boat, by the time I got down. She was blowing off shore all the time.

We never got in there till about ten or eleven o'clock into Digby, but we got damn good and wet, and we would've gotten more if we hadn't got ahold of a boat. At that time of night at winter time that way, it looked to be a long while till daylight and us wet, if it happened to turn cold; and it was quite cold then. It snowed all the way down the Bay that day. But we made her, got ashore. We got a boat to come out of Digby, and they come out, and he couldn't get up to put a tow line to tow ours in. We had the anchor down then but she was dragging it, going off shore dragging off, and he drug across her bow and picked the anchor up and towed us into Digby. Oh, we got darned wet, boots full of water, /with

eight to ten-foot waves and us out there for about four or five hours. / But we got dried out. I never got no cold out of it or anything.<sup>50</sup>

[When Coffil is no longer taking ships into Port Williams] they'd have to get another man and I suppose he'd have to do the best he could, but they ain't nobody left around that is really acquainted with Port Williams. Casey in Digby, but he don't want nothing to do with it and I don't think he'll come up here anyway. He's got two big fish plants there. He's a member of parliament (the provincial legislature). And, he's busy, but he still pilots to Annapolis and Digby 'cause he can go out there in an hour and take a boat in. It'd take about three or four days for him to bring one in here.

My son went out there with me and went in and come out on two different ships. Of course, he had one of them steel draggers out of Riverport for two or three trips, and then he's been mate on them. He could take one in, I think. He may be the only one around here that would be able to take one in by that time, unless somebody comes and goes up and down the river. As far as the river goes, he could take her in, and I think he could take her into the wharf if he didn't make a boo-boo the first time. He knows the river well enough. He's had enough sea experience on his own to be quite level-headed. He must be. But he went in twice with me, and

he knows where all the buoys is. There ain't a doubt that he could take one in probably as well as I could.

[Since his retirement from commercial fishing, Coffil goes out occasionally with the men from Kingsport who drag for flounder in the Minas Basin, usually because they are not experienced fishermen and they want his expertise. He also handlines for halibut with a neighbor who owns a small boat.]

We've been busy fishing. Howard DeWitt over here, he's got a boat up here at the wharf. He had a feller going with him and he died last fall, so he had to have somebody to go and help him some. She needed some calking<sup>51</sup> this spring, and he asked me over at the store if I'd help him some. It almost turned out that I done the calking and he helped me a little. But we got her afloat. We've been out a few times.

He was always farming down here. Well, I took her out and brought her in. We went out and fished. The other night coming in, when we got ready to come in, why, he says, "I'll take her a ways." So he brought her along. He wanted to see if he could bring her into the wharf. We got it all bushed out up there, the channel, and we put all the stakes on this side of the channel but one just right here where we cut to the wharf there, and I put that one on the point.

So, the first one out of here when we come up to it, the tide wasn't all the way in. He come in ten feet in back of that one on the shore water and she drove way in, but he never noticed it. As it was, she listed down just a little, but she come over that one. And he made it in till we come to this last one and it was on this side. I told my brother-in-law here, he was with us, (and) I told him, I says, "You brace your feet 'cause he may fetch up in the mud bank, you know, knock you over if you ain't looking for it." He had too much weight on her, coming too fast. And when he come to this (channel marker), he come inside of this one about ten feet, and when he did I says, "Look at the grass sticking up out of the water." The grass was sticking up, and I never said a word to him but I knowed it was soft mud. He got her back off again and he never slowed his engine down much. He put her in gear and she was heading right fair for the wharf, and I got up on the bow of her then after he got her out of there. Geez, here she was heading for the wharf. I hollered, "Full astern." They never, they just looked at me. I says, "Full astern!" Here she was heading right for it. They never done a goddamn thing, but they got their hands against the wharf. When she come up close enough I got against it and I shoved her bow by the post. That was the only thing that saved her. (chuckling) They didn't know what "full astern" meant.

I told my brother-in-law here, I says, "I'd hate to see him going in to Port Williams with about a three hundred fifty foot boat." He went behind two posts and he never knowed he went behind the first one. I don't think he ever seen that. Reg was telling me, going out, he says, "I never seen that post before." And Reg said, "No," he said, "you come in from the other side of it." But the boys up there on the wharf was laughing and giggling. So the next day we went out, day before yesterday I guess it was, why, when we got ready to come in, I says, "You better take her in, How." I wasn't going to interfere. I says, "You better take her in." He stepped right back and he said, "No," he wouldn't do it. He's too old to learn. He was always farming. If he was young he would learn quick, but he'd never learn now.<sup>52</sup>

[Three years earlier, as I was going to the door to leave after a session of tall tale telling, Coffil stopped me for a moment and told one more anecdote, also about Howard DeWitt.]

You know, there must be six or eight fellers along here now and they've all got trawls out along the shore here. And now, I'm the only one that's really fished much, but all these fellers here, they're fishermen too I guess. I was telling them down at the store that a man that fishes is the biggest liar, so I guess



I've got company now. Howard DeWitt came into the store one day, said he caught a seventeen-pound halibut, and then another feller come in, his halibut turned out to be an eighteen-pounder. Well, before you know it, Howard's was nineteen pounds. - And now, I don't know, but I think Howard DeWitt's halibut is up to something around twenty-four pounds by now.

[Coffin has an ambiguous attitude toward the two and sometimes three men from Kingsport who drag for flounder in the Minas Basin during the summer. He wishes them every success, but at the same time he knows that they lack the necessary experience and that fishing for profit in the area is marginal at best. Occasionally, he goes out with them.]

The feller that rigged up this spring has done pretty good. He's done all right. He's quite smart. He never drag any before but he got his net rigged over in the school (a government-sponsored course for fishermen) so he got that fixed up pretty good to start with. He went out a trip or two, and then I was up around there and he told me I better go out a trip. He says, "It'll do you good to have a day out there." He wanted to find out where the marks was, where to tow. I knowed what he wanted. So I says, "All right," I said, "I'll go out there with you pretty quick." So when I got straightened out after a day or two, he didn't get out. It blowed

for a couple days. I went over to see how they was doing and he asked me again, "You better go with us." He wasn't doing so good at that time. I said, "All right. I'll go out with you tomorrow." So we went out, and he got thirty-six hundred (pounds). So then, I got another invitation to go. He says, "We want to go out around Scotts Bay some day." He says, "You better go out. It'll do you good for the day." Well I says, "Perhaps I will."

But, they wanted me to go just for the trip, and there's too much pulling and hauling. I couldn't be there without doing it. I had to pull and haul a little 'cause they didn't know one thing about getting the gear in and out. That was their trouble. They didn't know how to get it out nor how to get it back in. They was doing it all the hard way. And, of course, I had to get ahold and pull and haul and one thing and another. It bothered my back a little so I didn't pull much. But I'm going to go out with him again. I want him to put me aboard of a ship if it comes up. I have in mind to tell him I'd go out a day or two if he'd put me aboard the ship. Of course, he's got a pretty good boat.

[This life history, this autobiography of a sailor and truck driver and fisherman and ship's pilot, has been in the main a story of different trips Bob Coffil has taken and of his experiences on these trips.

It seems appropriate, then, that his story should conclude with one last trip. He told of this proposed trip more jokingly than in earnest, and began in a loud voice to get the attention of his wife, in the other room sewing and watching television. He wanted to tease her. She didn't hear, as the organ of a television soap opera moaned in the background, but he continued telling of his planned trip.]

There's one thing I'd like to do. If I could get ahold of some good cedar logs, I'd like to build a raft and put a square sail on it, with a spar in it, and I'd like to sail it somewhere like over to Parrisboro just for the sake of sailing it. I believe I could sail her across with a square sail on her. I was never in a square-rigged ship, but knowing the tide pretty good and everything I think I could get across. But if I took her across I'd bring her back. I wouldn't leave her over there. I'd make the round trip. I'd go over and back. My wife might want to make a trip if it gets good and warm.

I suppose I'd make her probably fifteen or twenty feet long, probably eight feet wide or something like that. Fasten her together solid and everything. She wouldn't sink. You couldn't sink it. Put a sail on it. Of course, a feller doing that, you know, I'd get a motor-

boat to be around somewheres handy here (chuckling) to tow me in if it got to be calm. As long as there's a breeze a feller would be all right.

[As he often does, Coffil grinned when he finished telling of his idea. And, for all I know, he just might build his raft and make that trip, if the weather is warm and the wind is fair. "As long as there's a breeze a feller would be all right."]

#### Notes to Chapter V

<sup>1</sup>(page 116) The following article appeared in the Halifax paper, The Morning Chronicle, November 29, 1910, p. 2. The three men were Coffil's father and his two oldest brothers, Daniel and John.

#### Mount Temple Saves Three of Crew Of Lone Star

St. John, Nov. 28 -- The C. P. R. liner Mount Temple that arrived here tonight rescued three men from the schooner Lone Star, which was dismantled and abandoned in the Bay of Fundy.

The Lone Star was rendered helpless by striking a submerged wreck some time last night. Her crew drifted about on the Lone Star until picked up this morning by the Mount Temple off the Old Proprietor Ledge. The Lone Star was a Bay trading schooner of about thirty-five tons, owned by Eaton and Company, of Canning, N.S., and commanded by Captain Coffell.

The Government steamer Stanley found the derelict and succeeded in getting a hawser made fast. The heavy seas, however, broke the line and the schooner sank.

The Donaldson liner Athenia, in port from Glasgow today, reports the storm very heavy in the Bay last night.

<sup>2</sup>(page 119) Children, in their play, often imitate the roles of their parents or adults in general. In a traditional community, these imitative games prepare the

children for the serious roles they will fulfill in later life, as in this description of two young boys with a rowboat in a small pond pretending to be transporting cargo on the sea. Their father and his father before him were merchant sailors, and they too would spend a good part of their adult lives freighting on the Bay of Fundy and the Gulf of Maine. In Newfoundland outport communities, the imitative play of young boys has included transporting freight with miniature boats, fishing with the same cooperative organization as that followed by their fathers, pretending to shoot and catch sea birds, and gathering firewood on a cooperative basis with goats and small sleds just as the fathers cut and haul wood with horses and larger sleds. These examples are drawn from written exercises by students in my Introduction to Folklore classes at Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1973-1974.

For discussions of imitative play, see, for example, Roger Cailliois, Man, Play, and Games; trans. Meyer Barash (New York, 1961), pp. 19-23; and Brian Sutton-Smith, The Folkgames of Children, Publications of the American Folklore Society, Bibliographical and Special Series Vol. XXIV (Austin, Texas, 1973), pp. 63-64, 265-266. Sutton-Smith writes, "It has often been observed that boys follow fantasy models in their imitative play (Cowboys and Indians) and that girls follow realistic models in theirs (Mothers, Nurses, etc.); and it has been suggested that for boys this is due to their lack of clear-cut father models to imitate, their fathers being absent most of the time and involved in abstract and complex white collar functions." (p. 266). In a more tradition-oriented family or community, where the father's work is concrete and primarily physical, boys do have clear-cut father models to imitate in their play.

3 (page 121) Reports of German sabotage and attempted sabotage were not uncommon during the First World War, though few had any basis in fact. It seems highly unlikely that German saboteurs would have been in Great Village, Nova Scotia, and even more improbable that they would have planted a bomb on a small freight boat loaded with general cargo. The otherwise unexplained "two bright spots" suggest the traditional basis of this story and its relation to supernatural lore. See, for example, the following motifs: E530.1. Ghost-like lights; D1478. Magic object provides light; and N532. Light indicates hidden treasure. The text of this story is a composite of two tellings of the same incident, recorded seven months apart, on September 29, 1972, and April 25, 1973.

4 (page 122) The Canadian Temperance Act or Scott Act, named after Secretary of State R. W. Scott who introduced the legislation in the Canadian parliament, was signed into law on May 10, 1878. The Scott Act was a compromise to placate both prohibitionists and anti-prohibitionists of the time, and made the existing liquor laws of Ontario and Quebec universal throughout Canada. By this legislation, any county or municipality had to hold a referendum on prohibition if twenty-five per cent of the voters petitioned for such a vote. A simple majority in the referendum brought total prohibition, with all trafficking in and sales of liquor being illegal. The Maritime provinces became the staunchest in enacting prohibition. At the turn of the century, for instance, Prince Edward Island was totally dry and sixteen of Nova Scotia's eighteen counties were also dry. The regions historically established trade routes to the West Indies, by which fish was exported and rum, molasses, and sugar were imported to the Maritimes, made the enforcement of the Scott Act only partially successful at best. Nova Scotia continued under the jurisdiction of the Scott Act until 1930, when government liquor stores were established. See John G. Woolley and William E. Johnson, Temperance Progress in the Century (London, 1903), pp. 254-277; and Louis W. Moffit, "Control of the Liquor Traffic in Canada," in James H. S. Bossard and Thorsten Sellin, eds., Prohibition: A National Experiment, The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science Vol. 163 (Philadelphia, 1932), pp. 188-196.

For a local song about the Scott Act, "'Twas in the Town of Parrsboro," see Helen Creighton, Songs and Ballads of Nova Scotia (Toronto, 1932), pp. 324-325. A locally composed and recited satiric verse, detailing the chicanery involved in stopping the completion of a cross dyke on the Habitant River below Canning, also makes note of the Scott Act. The year was 1886, and local politicians and merchants halted work on the dyke because it would have blocked Canning's access to the sea and to the lucrative but illegal rum trade. At that time, in Canning, there were seven illegal taverns or rum parlors which operated in furniture stores, drug stores, and the like. Today, by contrast, there are none. William Rufus Borden, a local folk poet, owned a piece of salt marsh that would have been reclaimed by the dyke, and he didn't think much of the illegal manner in which the dykework was halted anyway, so he made up a humorous poem about it, as he often did when he was angered. Collected from Ernest L. Eaton of Upper Canada on May 9, 1970, the poem is twenty-two

stanzas long. In one stanza, the poet said facetiously of the Scott Act and its local inspector:

The Scott Act man will soon be gone,  
His house will make a barn;  
We will not miss him very much,  
He's done so little harm.

5 (page 123) No chances or omissions have been made in this anecdote, recorded June 14, 1973.

6 (page 124) This story has been told to the fieldworker three times. The first time, on September 29, 1972, my notes were inadequate for any reconstruction of the tale. Afterwards, I never thought to ask Coffil to tell it over. Then, on June 14, 1973, when we were again talking about his father, he told the same story. I thought I had it on tape but realized midway through the interview that for thirty-plus minutes when I thought I had been recording that I was not. The machine had been on "play" rather than "record." After cursing my stupidity and gathering my wits, I asked for the story again. Coffil dutifully responded, but this time it was a much briefer narrative followed by my questions to bring out further details. This fragmented telling resulted from his having told the story moments before. Also, as he said, he never made a point of asking about or remembering his family history because "I never realized that I'd ever want to tell it." The story as it is included here, then is an integrated version of the one recorded telling. His father's trip to Eastport would have been in the early 1880's.

7 (page 125) A carpenter shop in Five Islands was purchased by Jacob Resnick and Frederick Waugh in 1910. They enlarged the building and started a general store, known by the trade name of Resnick and Waugh. In 1913, Waugh sold out to Resnick and moved to western Canada... In 1914, Resnick moved his merchandise to the Community Store, and later sold the building as a Community Hall. Resnick ended his Five Islands business in 1918, although a store bearing his name still operates in Parrsboro. The Story of Five Islands, Colchester County, Nova Scotia, compiled and edited by The Women's Institute, Five Islands (Sackville, New Brunswick, 1969), pp. 68-70.

8 (page 127) This memorate was told after my question asking if his father was strict or easy-going. Four false starts and one "you know" have been omitted, as has his introductory comment at the beginning of the

fourth sentence of the story (page 124): "I don't know whether I told you about the time ...." Also, the last four sentences in the first paragraph on page 126 ("I don't know what the crowd .... They looked like an army on patrol.") have been added from a later discussion of this experience during the same interview. Recorded June 14, 1973.

9 (page 130) This story about going to see the medium was also "recorded" when I forgot to push the "record" button on the tape recorder (see note 6) and then retold a short time later. I asked fourteen questions to bring out details from the previous telling plus a good deal of information that had not been mentioned before. Consequently, I have done a lot of editing and piecing together here, but the words are all from Coffil. Recorded June 14, 1973.

10 (page 132) Recorded September 29, 1972, this is an allusion to the recently completed Canada-Russia hockey series of September, 1972, in which the team of Canadian professional hockey players was expected to win easily but instead was outplayed by the better-conditioned Russian national team. The Canadians eventually won the series, winning four games, losing three, with one game ending in a tie.

11 (page 132) In an interview on May 1, 1973, with Clyde Smith of Campobello Island, New Brunswick, with whom Coffil spent a winter fishing in 1952-1953, Smith spontaneously offered the information that Coffil had been quite a good hockey player in his younger days: "He was a great skater at one time, when he was a young man. He used to play hockey. They tell me he was a good one. That's what I was told. He never told me that himself, but somebody else told me that he was .... Somebody from up there told me. That's one thing, Bob would tell some jokes, as I say, he would fool and joke, but he was no man to brag on himself or anything."

12 (page 133) In the 1910's, ice skates were not all of one piece as they are today, with the skate runners attached to the boots. Skates were purchased separately and strapped onto a pair of boots.

13 (page 135) The Annie Pearl, the vessel his father owned then, was stranded at Mill Creek in the Minas Basin on October 13, 1916. Index of Shipwrecks, Public Archives of Nova Scotia, Halifax.



14 (page 136) This narrative, beginning with the last paragraph on page 135, is a composite of two different tellings, recorded September 29, 1972, and January 11, 1973. The September version is included in its entirety, with the following additions from the January telling. The sentence beginning "We were carrying apples . . ." at the bottom of page 135 was the opening sentence of the shorter January version. The last half of the long paragraph on page 136, beginning "and he must've had some sharp eyes," is from the second recorded version. My question, "Was it a good suit?" preceded "I guess it wasn't a bad suit . . ."

Personal experience narratives telling about how a man spent the first money he earned are probably quite common, and most often tell of how much one could buy with the money relative to the high cost of living today. Clyde Smith told the following story about the first money he earned as a Gloucester fisherman:

I went in (Fileen's) basement -- one trip we had eighty-one dollars apiece and the next trip we shared fifty-four dollars and seventy cents. I went in (Fileen's) basement in Boston and I bought double everything. Two topcoats, two suits, two shoes, two hats, two shirts. Thirty-six dollars. Neckties was ten cents apiece. I remember them. And a big leather suitcase I got with all the rest, for thirty-six dollars. Now you can't buy a pair of pants for thirty-six dollars. Of course, that stuff was right down cheap. It was stuff they'd had in the windows and they put it down in the basement. Yessir.

15 (page 137) No motif approximates this proverbial exaggeration, so called because it is a very brief tall tale with no narrative structure. For example, "That old boat leaked so much that . . . we pumped the Bay of Fundy through that old vessel that fall." This is a good example of the tall tale as a one-liner. One familiar with the genre, like Coffin is, can improvise such one-liners quite easily, just as someone adept at punning can readily contrive new puns. For collections of such exaggerations, see Loomis, "Jonathanisms: American Epigrammatic Hyperbole," pp. 211-227; and Halpert, "A Pattern of Proverbial Exaggeration from West Kentucky," pp. 41-47. William Hugh Jansen has aptly called the tall tale lacking narrative structure a "whopper." See Jansen, "Abraham 'Oregon' Smith," pp. 291-302.

16 (page 138) The cross dyke or aboiteau on the Habitant River was completed in 1945, the date cited in

two locally composed poems commemorating the event. The effectiveness of Canning as a port, however, ended with the last of the sailing vessels in the mid-1920's.

17 (page 139) No motifs in the Thompson and Baughman indexes approximate this exaggeration, recorded September 29, 1972, but it appears to be a traditional whopper: "They were such good sailors that ... they could draw a bucket of water in the fog and know where they were by the smell of the water." For similar material, about sailors who could tell where they were by smelling the mud from the bottom of the sea, see George Carey, A Faraway Time and Place: Lore of the Eastern Shore (Washington, 1971), pp. 39-49.

18 (page 140) "Lorans" is an acronym for Long Range Navigation System, by which ships can determine their position relative to stations along the coast that send out radio signals for this purpose. All ships and fishing boats are now equipped with this and other electronic equipment for navigation.

19 (page 141) Three false starts, two questions of mine, and three sentences of repetition have been omitted from this traditional anecdote, recorded May 17, 1970. Motifs K958, Murder by drowning, and K2259.4, Treacherous sailor, are both applicable. The cruel sea captain is a traditional character in the lore of sailors. For parallels to these reports from Coffil, including mention of one captain who "drowned men right off his boat rather than pay them their fees," see Carey, A Faraway Time and Place, pp. 75-78.

20 (page 143) No changes have been made in this tall tale, recorded April 25, 1973, except that my question, "So then he took the gun back?" has been omitted. This followed "It was a pretty good story, all right." Motif X1121.8\*. See: miscellaneous gun motifs. See Chapter VI; Texts, no. 30, for another telling by Coffil of the same story.

21 (page 146) The landscape is beginning to change now. A mile down the road toward Cape Blomidon from Mill Creek a sizeable acreage of shorefront property that had been in brush and potatoes is now a subdivision with building lots for sale. A provincial park atop Cape Blomidon opened in May, 1973, near where logging operations were carried out thirty years earlier. This park eventually will include more than a hundred campsites and a golf course, as well as a large picnic area.

22(page 148) This loosely structured narrative, beginning with the last paragraph on page 146, was called forth by my question, "Did you ever get any moose yourself?" Four false starts have been omitted, as have three questions from the fieldworker: Now why would they (the men) have done that (blamed Coffil)? Did it taste good? So they tried to make their get-away out over the water? Recorded September 29, 1972.

23(page 153) Four false starts and three "you know's" have been omitted from this long personal experience narrative (pp. 148-153). Otherwise, it is included just as it was recorded, on September 29, 1972, with the following exceptions. Sentences two through four of the paragraph beginning on page 150 were in answer to a facetious comment from the fieldworker at the conclusion of the story. I said, in reference to the two men who stole the moose meat, "Maybe they snared it." Coffil replied, "No, it was somebody in the winter, I think...." The paragraph beginning at the top of page 151 was preceded by my question, "I wonder what would have been the matter with him that it would do that?" Finally, the first paragraph on page 153 was preceded by my question, "They were from around here?" Coffil answered, "Well, they was pretty handy around, yeh. There's a couple of them working over here...." Such questions and comments from me, as the audience of one, are a natural part of storytelling situations. This is true, for example, of the storytelling at Forsythe's store in Delhaven. See Chapter VI, Texts, nos. 14-15, for similar dialogue between the audience and narrator.

24(page 155) For an excellent and fully documented discussion of young men from the Maritimes going to Maine to work in the woods, see David C. Smith, "A History of Lumbering in Maine, 1860-1930" (Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University, 1965). See also Ives, "A Man and His Song; Joe Scott and 'The Plain Golden Band'," p. 77. For a song about boys from Prince Edward Island going to work in the Maine woods, see Ives, Larry Gorman, pp. 122-125.

\* 25(page 155) For a survey of the economic history of the Maritimes up to 1930, see the following two works by S. A. Saunders: The Economic Welfare of the Maritime Provinces (Wolfville, Nova Scotia, 1932); and Studies in the Economy of the Maritime Provinces (Toronto, 1939).

26(page 165) This brief narrative is included as it was told, except that one "you know" has been omitted, and the sentence following the first sentence, which

announced the beginning of the story, has also been omitted: "I don't know whether I told you about scaring the goats down there, backfiring the truck and scaring the goats?" I shook my head to indicate that I hadn't heard the story, although in fact a longer version, including dialogue, was told to the fieldworker on September 30, 1971. This was not recorded, and my notes are insufficient to attempt any reconstruction of this version. Coffill's second telling of the story was recorded January 11, 1973.

27 (page 167) I include this as a narrative because it was better organized and more humorous in an unrecorded telling, September 30, 1971. In the recorded telling of the story, April 25, 1973, it is closer to reminiscence than narrative. As it is given here, beginning with the paragraph on page 166, four questions have been omitted, including a question asking specifically for this story. One confusing sentence, replete with false starts, has been left out of the final paragraph. This sentence erroneously implies that Packard was the driver.

28 (page 170) Clyde Smith of Campobello Island had this to say about the man who was shot and about the runrunning business:

When they shot Bill Tanner I was supposed to be in that boat, but I wasn't. I got warned to get out. I was sailing out of Riverport then, and I got the hell out of there and come home. They come and tipped me off, told me to get out, that they was gonna get me. And they could get you when they wanted to.... We didn't by a damn sight get rich out of it. The guys that set on the beach, the same as the factory men or somebody like that, the bigshots got the money. We got the shit. We got a lot of work and a lot of punishment....

There is a curious absence of any documentary record of the shooting incident, although a further search perhaps might unearth some record of this event.

29 (page 182) These two stories, about his becoming skipper of the Edna Mae and the trip to Rockland, Maine, and back and about the "pirate" in an eight-foot skiff, were told toward the end of the interview of June 14, 1973. I had already packed up the tape recorder and was not inclined to set it up again, especially because of my earlier mischance with it (see notes 6 and 9). So, I

listened and remembered.

These were the last two stories Coffil told that afternoon, and as soon as I got home I outlined them and then typed them out. This is not a recommended way to collect and present narrative material, but in this instance I was quite familiar with the informant's narrative style and was consciously committing to memory the incidents and notable phrases and dialogue as Coffil spoke. Furthermore, Coffil has read the entire life history to check its accuracy and authenticity, and even remarked that I did a good job in getting these two stories without the tape recorder. Vance Randolph did much of his voluminous folktale collecting in the Ozarks using the same method, but because he collected in this manner from hundreds of informants what resulted was a fairly standardized regional style and narrative structure with little to indicate individual variation in storytelling within the broader regional tradition.

The order of the two stories here has been reversed, the story about the "pirate" being told before the other, longer one. The transitional phrase "That next year" that introduces the "pirate" story is therefore mine alone. I asked no questions during the telling of this story. The only question related to the telling of his becoming skipper was asked at the outset: "Did you start trucking when you got married, so you could be home more with your wife and family?" Coffil replied, "Well, yes, I suppose that was the most of it." He paused for several seconds and then said, "No, I started trucking before I was married...." Missing from this recreation of his narrative are some of the nautical details of the trip back home, especially relating to going into Quaco and into Apple River. This much had escaped me before I could get it written down because such terminology is not a natural part of my vocabulary. What I do know is recently acquired.

30 (page 182) The purpose of having to enter and clear ships through customs at each port of call is twofold. First, without this regulation even a boat traveling between two local or Canadian ports could go to an American port, pick up goods, and smuggle them into Canada without any customs duty being paid. The chances of smuggling increase greatly, of course, when a ship is carrying cargo from one country to another, and these international carriers are inspected more closely by customs officials. Another reason for entering and clearing each ship is that it enables the authorities to estimate where a ship is at any given time. In the case of a severe storm or a disabled ship, search and

rescue operations stand a better chance when it is known that a ship is overdue and where, approximately, it should be.

31 (page 189) This long personal experience narrative or series of narratives, about the troubles he and his father had with customs officers, is notable for several reasons. It was told from beginning to end (pp. 182-189) without pause or interruption, except for two questions I asked just as he was returning to the account of his own trouble with the Port Williams custom house officer. The questions, asked to confirm the exact time of year when the various incidents occurred, were both answered "yes," and then Coffil continued the story.

There are four separate incidents described in this narrative. The first one, about the trouble he had in Digby, stands apart from the others, although in the telling Coffil moved from this incident to the Port Williams saga without a hitch. Three incidents are included in the Port Williams saga, his own experience and his father's two run-ins with the same customs house officer. Coffil was a participant-observer the two times his father had trouble. The interesting feature here is the way in which Coffil interrupts the telling of his experience to tell of his father's troubles with the same man, probably because he realized that this would provide needed background information for his own personal experience story, which climaxes, in Coffil's mind, with the customs official saying, "You come from a hard crowd." After telling of his father's two experiences, he picks up his own story where he left off and completes it. At either end of this long digression, interruption, footnote, call it what you will, there are no pauses or false starts. My two questions were in the nature of interruptions, answered with quick "yes's" so the story could continue.

I am certain that Coffil has told of these related incidents before, probably many times, but in what form I could only conjecture. And they are not, and probably have not been for some years, part of his active repertoire. In the late 1940's, when he stopped freighting and began fishing, these stories probably became a passive or inactive part of his repertoire, if not even earlier. It is, I think, remarkable that he interrupts himself as he does and then picks up the original thread without any verbal groping and grasping, and even more remarkable that he gets away with it as a storyteller. From beginning to end, it is an organized and well told story. This would seem to indicate a considerable mental agility on Coffil's part.

About one-sixth of the speech tags (I says, he said, etc.) have been omitted, as have a very few false starts of no consequence. Recorded June 14, 1973.

32(page 191) In the telling of this incident, Coffil used the pronoun "we" throughout, but he was not with his brother on the Edna Mae when it filled up with water in the Bay of Fundy. His use of "we" was not meant as a deception or as an attempt on his part to tell the experience as his own. He had told me before and has told me since that he was not on the boat at this time. Simply, his use of "we" is intended as "my brother and I, the owners of the boat." As co-owner of the boat, he was there in spirit though not in person when the boat was lost. To avoid confusion, I have changed "we" to "he" in the story. Recorded January 11, 1973.

33(page 195) Coffil first told me this story toward the end of a long evening of intensive interviewing, tape recording, and casual talk, the first time I had recorded him; on May 17, 1970. By the time this story was told I was inclined to listen and enjoy rather than to take notes or record. His wife, son, and two grandsons were also present. The present version of the story was recorded the next time I saw him, June 10, 1970, under less than ideal conditions. I had gone to his house with the express purpose of getting on tape this story and another personal experience narrative he had told that first night (see pp. 207-211 and note 41). This was the first story I asked him to record that evening, a long and complicated narrative to perform on command without any sort of warmup. The telling was fragmented and lacked any chronological order, at least in part because he knew that I knew the story and so was not truly performing. His wife made two explanatory comments and I asked four questions which helped to bring out details from the previous telling. As it is included here, I have tried to approximate his previous telling by putting the different parts of the story in chronological order and have also omitted two brief passages that were unintelligible on the tape recording.

34(page 197) This description, recorded June 14, 1973, followed my comment that Black's Harbour looked to be a company town. I had been through Black's Harbour on the bus a few weeks before, returning to Nova Scotia from Campobello Island. Block after block of houses on the main road leading into Black's Harbour are identical: small, four-room bungalows on one side of the road, two-

story saltbox duplexes on the other. The pastel-colored houses and the once white duplexes are all in need of paint.

35 (page 199) This story is included exactly as it was told, without any changes or omissions. Recorded January 11, 1973.

36 (page 202) A description of the various jobs at a saw mill in Kentucky can be found in Roberts, Up Cutshin and Down Greasy, pp. 11-13. See also Ives and Smith, "Fleetwood Pride," pp. 38-39, and especially, pp. 56-57, note 54. Fleetwood Pride spent the greater part of his long life as a mill owner and operator, but most of his unfinished autobiography deals with his earlier years on the lumber drives. Pride's mills operated on a much larger scale than did the mill and woods camp where Coffil worked. The Kentucky reference, on the other hand, describes a quite similar operation. For a good survey of logging practices in North America, see Nelson Courtland Brown, Logging: The Principles and Methods of Harvesting Timber in the United States and Canada (New York, 1949).

37 (page 203) No changes have been made to this story, recorded September 29, 1972. The story itself is only the one paragraph, about Coffil's weather prediction and the ensuing blizzard, yet for the needed contextual information one must go back two paragraphs. Coffil and Morris Porter had a standing joke whereby, upon meeting, each would try to be the first to ask a question to which the other would give a foolish reply. See Chapter VI, Texts, no. 39, for another story based upon a reply Coffil gave to Morris Porter's question, "What's new?"

38 (page 205) A. W. H. Eaton, The History of Kings County, Nova Scotia, Heart of the Acadian Land (Salem, Mass., 1910), p. 115.

39 (page 205) Wright, Blomidon Rose, pp. 111-118. In the spring of 1974, when the ferry John Guy was to be taken off its normal Portugal Cove-Bell Island run near St. John's, Newfoundland, for annual maintenance, the Canadian government proposed to use the Kipawo as a temporary replacement. Bell Island residents protested that the Kipawo was too old and unreliable -- most seagoing vessels have a life span of little more than twenty years -- and after several weeks of public meetings and turmoil another ferry was obtained. The Kipawo,



looking its more than forty years of age, now (July, 1974) is still docked, however, at Portugal Cove.

<sup>40</sup>(page 208) When Coffil first told me of the engineer who kept falling into the Penobscot River, no mention was made of walking across the river and saving on bridges. He did note, however, that the river was quite polluted. I told him at that time that the river was probably even more polluted now, as I had lived near Bangor a short time before. Three weeks later, when I recorded this story, Coffil added the tall comment about not cleaning up the river and saving on bridges, probably because what I had told him gave him the kernel of truth he needed to base his improvised exaggeration on.

<sup>41</sup>(page 211) This story, like the one about trucking fish to Halifax (see note 33), was recorded on June 10, 1970, at my request. Just as Coffil began telling this story, the telephone rang. His wife, Myrtle, walked past the tape recorder sitting on the floor, answered the phone and talked for a moment, then went to the stairway to relay the phone message to her daughter-in-law. All of this was very audible and within fifteen feet of Coffil, who continued his story without a false start or a pause. This lasted until the beginning of the second paragraph of the story, top of page 208 as it is given here.

Unlike the story told before, this one was set in a chronologic framework and is presented as it was told, with the following exceptions. In the second paragraph, on page 208, "over twenty years ago" was "over twenty years ago, wasn't it?" His wife replied, "Oh yes. It was twenty-five." Before the paragraph beginning on page 210, I asked, "Had he ever sailed with you before?" Coffil replied, "No, he'd never sailed on any, ...." The final paragraph, on page 211, was preceded by my question, "He was with you for most of one summer?" Five false starts have also been omitted.

This personal experience narrative, as a structured story, ended with my first question, which was asked because the content of the last sentence spoken, Coffil's intonation in speaking it, and a pause of a few seconds following it all signaled that the story was finished. The last two paragraphs, then, are a sort of post-mortem on the story itself, the first paragraph emphasizing once again how drunk the engineer was much of the time, the second paragraph reviewing from a distance the main point of the story -- "quite a place to get overboard." Personal experience narratives

often follow this pattern, the story itself being followed by a discussion of the story, with the narrator and/or listeners who had been a part of the original experience adding further details to and comments on the experience.

Motifs J1811.4. Rooster's crow interpreted, and J1812. Other sounds misunderstood, are only vague approximations for the two times the engineer, in his drunken state, misunderstood sounds he heard. I include them because of the possible basis in tradition of these two incidents.

42(page 212) The ellipsis indicates a pause, as Coffil groped for the right word. His use here of "tack" is, of course, as a sailing term, meaning literally to sail head into the wind by following a zigzag course. In other words, tacking is a means of making some headway when there is an unfavorable wind. Tacking also is done by sailors to bide time until they can determine the proper course to follow. The use Coffil has for the term in this syntax, then, is quite apt -- he felt claustrophobic surrounded by woods and large apartment houses, and by going for a walk was able both to make some headway and to bide his time until he could be free from the situation that caused him some anxiety.

43(page 215) Three false starts, two "you know's," and one "you see" have been omitted from this anecdote. Recorded September 29, 1972.

44(page 220) One false start has been omitted from this narrative, recorded April 25, 1973. Ralph Bigelow still fishes out of Kingsport, one of three Kingsport men who own boats and drag for flounder during the summer months in the Minas Basin. By Coffil's estimate, this seasonal enterprise is marginal at best, since none of the three are experienced fishermen and because every other day the previous day's catch must be trucked to a fish plant in Digby, eighty-five miles away. Coffil spent a week with Bigelow on his boat in 1972.

45(page 227) No motifs can be found to approximate this extemporaneous whopper. Recorded January 11, 1973.

46(page 232) No specific details about this incident of the ship that was torpedoed off Western Head can be found, either from oral or published sources. From the Index of Shipwrecks in the Public Archives of Nova Scotia, the most likely candidate is the Liverpool Packet, torpedoed and sunk by a German submarine on

May 30, 1942, twelve miles west of Seal Island off the South Shore of Nova Scotia. Two lives were lost.

47 (page 234) This personal experience narrative has been split asunder for the sake of chronology. The paragraph beginning at the bottom of page 230 was the first part of the story as it was told, and led directly into the next paragraph (page 233), "So, Chase come down here himself that spring." The transitional tag, "So," has been omitted, as have two "you know's" and one sentence of repetition. Pages 231-233 was another story told during the same interview, recorded April 25, 1973.

48 (page 250) Of all the difficulties Coffin had with the last Greek freighter he took into Port Williams, only this part of the narrative, beginning with the paragraph at the bottom of page 245, has been told as an uninterrupted story. The rest of his description of his experiences with this ship were direct responses to questions I asked. This personal experience narrative, however, was recorded twice without being elicited. Included here is the first version, recorded January 11, 1973, eighteen days after the events he describes. Four false starts, one repetitious sentence, four "you know's," and one "you see" have been omitted.

The second version, recorded April 25, 1973, is shorter but more concise and compact. It follows a more definite chronological order and does not, for instance, have the long and misleading false-start prefacing the incident with the telegram (page 246). It also includes an explanation that the telegram was finally sent to the harbor master at Port Williams (page 247) and mentions the fact that Coffin anchored the ship off Whitewaters. This last incident (the bottom five sentences on page 249) is all that has been included from the April 25 version of the story. Omitted here is the last sentence of that incident in the January 11 version, "So, anyway, he never said a word." Not included in the second telling of the story were the opening incident, about the Greek captain being "quite bad," and the beginning of the paragraph at the bottom of page 247 about the captain's trouble in finding a buoy off Cape Sable.

A full discussion of the development of this narrative, with a content analysis of three different texts, will be in an article I hope to complete in the near future, "From Experience to Narrative: An Analysis of Memorate Formation."

49 (page 254) One long paragraph, in which Coffil accounts for the discrepancy between the \$300,000 funded for the wharf and the \$94,000 contract to build it, has been omitted from this discussion, recorded April 25, 1973. His description of the wharf is an accurate one, and the condemned wharf was probably stronger than the new wharf, at least judging from the first test the new wharf had. Practically all wharves which handle ships of this size are made of steel and concrete, and have reinforced log facings to protect both wharf and ship from the inevitable bumping as the ship docks and leaves. The Port Williams wharf has none of this.

50 (page 256) Coffil's telling of the trouble they had off Digby in the pilot boat is a composite of two recordings of the incident -- January 41 and April 25, 1973. Neither telling could be considered a story or narrative, and both were understated. What little colorful description there is in this account was only gotten by repeated and specific questioning. The following story, confirming the incident, appeared in the Halifax Chronicle-Herald, January 2, 1973, p. 9:

#### TRIO RESCUED FROM HIGH SEA

Digby -- Joseph Casey, Digby MLA, was one of three men rescued Sunday when heavy seas and near gale-force winds threatened to swamp his disabled 40-foot pilot's boat.

The Liberal MLA is a Digby pilot. He and crewman Arthur Hudson of Victoria Beach, Annapolis County, had taken the pilot from a Greek freighter heading out of the Bay of Fundy. The pilot, who had directed the freighter from Port Williams, was Robert Coffil of Blomidon, Kings County.

The engine in Mr. Casey's boat, The Fundy Mist, failed soon after the pilot was picked up. Anchors slowed the boat's drifting, but winds had built to 40 and 50 miles per hour and the boat was shipping water in seas that were to hamper rescue efforts.

An emergency signal on the Fundy Mist's citizens band radio was picked up in Victoria Beach and Digby. The nearest search and rescue craft was the coast guard ship at Westport, about 40 miles away and it was already dark when the emergency signal was made at 5 p.m.

Capt. LeRoy Robicheau of Digby, put out in his 60-foot scallop dragger, Wendy Faye, and found the

water off Digby Gut had built into mountainous seas. His radio was unable to communicate with the Fundy Mist, but the two boats were kept in contact through a relay system using shore radios.

Capt. Robicheau was unable to put a line aboard the Fundy Mist, but, in the dark, was able to snag one of the trailing anchor lines and use it to tow the boat to Digby.

Mr. Casey, who was elected in 1970, and his two companions were cold and soaked when they finally made shore at 8:30 p.m.

51 (page 257) "Corking" is the common pronunciation for "calking." Each spring a boat is checked for small cracks, especially along seams and joints. The boat is made watertight by calking it; first, the old paint is scraped off the bottom of the boat; then the cracks and joints are filled with cotton batting and covered with putty; finally, the boat bottom, if not the entire boat, is painted. This is Coffil's method.

52 (page 259) Four false starts, one "you see," and one "you know" have been omitted from this mock-account of piloting a boat into a wharf, recorded June 14, 1973. Also, before the final paragraph I commented, "As much trouble as taking a Greek into Port Williams." Midway through the last paragraph, his wife passed through the room as we were laughing and asked, "Now what's he telling?" Coffil: "I was telling about how bringing the boat in." Mrs. Coffil: "You better not get that on tape." Then Coffil continued. His next sentence, about some men on the wharf who were laughing, might be a rationalization for telling the story to me and the tape recorder, that is, that the incident was common knowledge.

## VI

### TEXTS

#### 1. Introduction

Folklorists, in the past, most often studied oral expressive culture by concentrating on items of folklore divorced from their use and function within a culture and within particular social contexts. Of late, however, the shift in emphasis to contextual studies has created a folkloristic cliché: the text on the printed page is but a shadow of its true existence, at best a photograph of how a thing appeared at one moment in time and place.<sup>1</sup> It is a good cliché, and one most folklorists know.

Alan Dundes suggests that to begin to understand folkloric phenomena the folklorist must collect and analyze texture (i.e., performance style and features of language that cannot be translated) and context (i.e., the situation in which a folklore item occurs) as well as texts.<sup>2</sup> Dan Ben-Amos offers a contextual definition of folklore that, among other things, sheds the term

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<sup>1</sup>Elli-Kaija Königäs Maranda, "The Concept of Folklore," Midwest Folklore, XIII (1963), 69-88; and Elli Königäs Maranda, "Theory and Practice of Riddle Analysis," Journal of American Folklore, LXXXIV (1971), 51-61.

<sup>2</sup>Alan Dundes, "Texture, Text, and Context," Southern Folklore Quarterly, XXVIII (1964), 251-265.

"tradition" as a definitional criterion of what folklore is because the folklorist should be interested in context and performance instead of traditional items. A thing need not be traditional to be folklore. Ben-Amos overlooks the existence of traditional contexts.<sup>3</sup> Kenneth L. Ketner proposes a new kind of computerized folklore archive that would not include texts, "since a 'text' is just a small part of a very complex phenomenon ...." Rather, Ketner's scientific archive of the future would include hypotheses about folklore behavior made prior to their being tested and descriptions of the tests or methodologies applied to the hypotheses.<sup>4</sup>

All of these suggested changes for new theoretical approaches in folklore dovetail to a problem with which most fieldworkers are confronted and to the resultant lamentation that accompanies the presentation of their collected data: How can I tell you, dear reader, that these bare texts can only live on the lips of men and women, as they speak and tell and sing? The attempted answer differs, of course, but every serious contemporary folklore study based on fieldwork in a given genre attempts

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<sup>3</sup>Dan Ben-Amos, "Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context," Journal of American Folklore, LXXXIV (1971), 3-15.

<sup>4</sup>Kenneth Laine Ketner, "The Role of Hypotheses in Folkloristics," Journal of American Folklore, LXXXVI (1973), 114-130.

to give understanding and depth to the collected material, to place it in some kind of contextual framework. With oral narratives, for example, Melville Jacobs posited sociopsychological analyses to add meaning to the skeletal myths and tales he collected from a Clackamas woman. The esoteric associations supplied by Jacobs at least give the reader an idea of what the stories might have meant to the tellers and listeners of this North American Indian culture with which the average reader is not familiar.<sup>5</sup> Daniel Crowley described performance contexts and analyzed narrator-audience interactions in his study of Bahamian storytelling.<sup>6</sup> Istvan Sandor wrote on the "Dramaturgy of Tale-Telling" and likened the performance of a traditional folktale to a dramatic event, with the narrator creating her own stage and acting out the roles of the story's characters.<sup>7</sup>

The approach in the present work, obviously, is also an attempt to understand more fully a folklore genre and a collection of texts. As a biographical-contextual study, it is founded on two premises. First,

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<sup>5</sup>Melville Jacobs, The Content and Style of an Oral Literature: Clackamas Chinook Myths and Tales (Chicago, 1959).

<sup>6</sup>Crowley, I Could Talk Old Story Good.

<sup>7</sup>Sandor, "Dramaturgy of Tale-Telling," pp. 305-338. This article includes a series of photographs which illustrate the role-playing of the narrator.



if the reader knows the storyteller through an autobiographical account of his life, then his stories will be more meaningful. Second, if the situations in which he tells stories are adequately described, then the stories can be understood as they function, exist, and endure within the culture. Each of these two premises ultimately turns to the other: Bob Coffil's life is the broadest context in which to view his stories; the stories themselves and the situations in which they are told hopefully will shed a little bit more light on an understanding and appreciation of the significance of Bob Coffil's life. William Butler Yeats once wrote, "How can we know the dancer from the dance?" The same might well be asked of the narrator and his story. The two are inseparable.

This chapter, then, is a collection of verbal photographs, pictures of tales as Coffil told them to me and to others. The texts, however, can no more reflect the actual stories and storytelling than a photograph can truly represent the actual person. Writing is merely a symbolic representation, just as a photograph is. Coffil himself should be partially visible from the preceding chapter; the storytelling situations, which have been touched upon in previous chapters, are explained explicitly by Coffil in some of his stories and will be considered further in Chapters

VII and VIII. This chapter presents a collection of folktale texts and personal experience narratives as told by Robert Coffil. In all cases, I have supplied titles for the individual texts; Coffil does not identify stories by name.

The stories are divided into four sections:

Tall Tales, Other Folktales, Practical Jokes and Tricks, and Folk Legends, Beliefs, and Knowledge. Each section has an introduction; each story is also introduced by a headnote in which the story is annotated and commented upon. The headnotes are included to give necessary background material on the stories, such as where and from whom he learned the stories, specific situations in which he has told them, and so on. Many short excerpts from tape transcriptions are included in the introductions and headnotes, in most cases on specific contexts, i.e., occasions when he has told the stories, and on the sources of the stories, i.e., those from whom he first heard them. These are not given what would be unnecessarily redundant footnotes. All of these brief quotations are from the tape-recorded interviews of September 29, 1972, and January 11, 1973.

When a parallel is cited in a headnote without reference to the source, other sources are listed in Ernest W. Baughman's Type and Motif Index of the Folktales of England and North America or in Stith Thompson's

Motif-Index of Folk-Literature under the motif given in the headnote. Motif numbers imply a certain traditionality of a narrative element over time and space; no motif number for a given item does not mean that the item is not traditional, only that parallels have not been published or were perhaps overlooked by the indexer.

Included in the first section of the collection are traditional ball tales, whoppers (statements of exaggeration without a story), and spontaneous stories and exaggerations. This section of exaggeration humor is the only recognizable body of fictional narrative material that is broadly traditional, except for four humorous tales that comprise the second section of texts. These four are not based on absurd exaggeration, and, as I have stated previously, give a negative indication of the extent to which Coffil has selected from tradition only a particular kind of story to remember and tell. The third section includes two story cycles, one about practical jokes Coffil played on men at the woods camp and mill at Cape Blomidon during the early 1940's, the other about tricks Clyde Smith of Campobello Island played on other men in the course of his life. Some of this latter cycle of stories have also been collected from Smith, and are included for comparative purposes which will be discussed later. This is the only instance where texts not collected directly from Coffil are included. Stories of practical

jokes and tricks are not broadly traditional, but the behavior on which the stories are based and the story-telling itself are traditional. The fourth section of texts incorporates memorate and legend material based on belief in the unusual or extraordinary, superstitions, and a small amount of miscellaneous material based on common sense. The superstitions are presented in a tape transcription of a conversation between Coffil and the fieldworker, not in a numerical list.

Most of the texts have been collected by me. The principal exception is the February 17, 1970, interview with Coffil by Paul Sheffield and Linda Legge, students of mine when I was teaching high school in Canning. Paul and Linda transcribed the tape-recording of this interview with my help. Unfortunately, the tape was stolen from my desk at school before I had a chance to check carefully the accuracy of the transcription. Thus, a few phrases remain doubtful and are placed in parentheses. On the whole, however, they did a good job, and in all cases but two (nos. 7 and 35) I have collected the tales that Coffil told the students.

Many of the other stories also have been recorded at least twice, and most items in the collection have been told to me by Coffil more than once.<sup>8</sup> With the stories

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<sup>8</sup>The following texts have only been told once by Coffil to a collector: nos. 7, 8, 13, 34, 35, 37, 45, 47, 48, 54, 58, 60.

where there has been notable variation or similarity I have included variant texts to illustrate these inconsistencies and consistencies in different tellings. As a general rule, the first telling of a story has been the most spontaneous and natural. For example, some stories that Coffil told the student collectors in the first person were told to me as third person narratives. Other times, however, when Coffil had forgotten that he had previously told me a story, a second or even third telling had as much or even more detail and spontaneous humor than an earlier recorded telling.

All stories in this chapter are included exactly as they were told except for the omission of a very few false starts of no significance (e.g., He, a, he ...; So he come, no, they come ...). Most false starts, however, have been left in the texts. Editorial indications are the same in the texts as in the life history, except that in a few places where there are notable dramatic pauses I have inserted ellipsis marks (...). This is the only use of ellipses. As in the life history, the use of dialect spelling has been avoided with few exceptions. In some instances in the texts, however, Coffil's pronunciation is inseparable from that which he is saying, per Dundes's discussion of texture,<sup>9</sup> and for this reason

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<sup>9</sup>Dundes, "Texture, Text, and Context," pp. 254-255.

some words are spelled so as to indicate the pronunciation. My limited use of dialect spelling is intended to approximate Coffil's pronunciation of those words which he accents strongly in the telling of a story. Usually, these accented words are part of the dialogue in a story, so that "git," for example, is more emphatic and imperative than the standard "get," and is also spoken more slowly.

Stories that were not tape-recorded are presented, as closely as possible, in the way in which they were told, and are preceded by an asterisk (\*) to indicate that they are not from a tape transcription. These unrecorded stories, in all instances, were written out by the fieldworker directly after the interview during which they were told. The process of note-taking has been discussed in Chapter IV. See also Chapter V, note 29.

The purpose of the present study has been to collect the stories and life history of one man who specializes in telling tall tales, and from this collection to arrive at certain conclusions about the tall tale genre, about tall telling and storytelling in general, and about the storyteller. An emphasis throughout the work is placed on the value of a biographical approach for understanding a folklore genre and a living performer. Although excellent studies, based on historical reconstructions of the lives and tales of local folk heroes, have been done by such scholars as William Hugh Jansen

and Richard Lunt, my interest was rather in a living storyteller and the complex interrelationships of his life, his stories and storytelling, and his world view. This interest precluded any in-depth study of John Coffil, who was in his lifetime (1889-1963) more of a storyteller than his brother Bob has been to this point in his life. A complete collection and study of John Coffil and his tales, I felt, could not yield precise conclusions on performance or on the place of autobiography in the study of folklore. John Coffil stories collected from other informants are therefore not included in the collection, though some of these stories are discussed in the headnotes. His importance to his younger brother Bob is great enough, however, that a discussion of Bob Coffil's development as a storyteller must begin with John.

## 2. Tall Tales

Bob Coffil has learned stories of exaggeration from many men during his life. The most influential of these, certainly, is his brother John, to whom Coffil attributes eleven of the tall tales I collected. It was John, also, who first interested his younger brother in storytelling. Bob Coffil dates his real interest in storytelling and the tall tale genre to the period from 1939 to 1947 when the two of them, along with a third

brother, Alden, were freighting in the Minas Basin and Bay of Fundy:

When we owned the Shirley Aleta there mostly (I started telling stories). We was carrying coal. We was in Freeport, down here on Briar Island, Westport, and Tiverton and places. And the fishermen all come aboard, you know, in the evening, and they, of course, them and John get to swapping stories. But about everywhere we went in they all knowed him.... He was quite a storyteller, my brother was. Everywhere we went in the vessel why he, he always got a few around.

Yet, as early as 1916, when Bob was thirteen years old and began working on vessels and when John was twenty-seven, a recognition of the genre is apparent in their saying that they pumped the Bay of Fundy through a leaky vessel. Thus, there was an early familiarity with the genre.

No thirteen year old boy or young man of twenty-seven, however, can be expected to command attention as a storyteller. It is to older men with more experience that the fishermen and sailors turn for stories. The twenty-five years or so from this first evidence of Coffil's awareness of traditional exaggeration to the time when he consciously emulated his brother's storytelling was a period of growth and development for both brothers. John developed a considerable repertoire and added to his experience. By the 1920's, when he was in his mid-thirties and his two younger brothers owned their first freight boat, John had already begun telling stories.



Bob, meanwhile, extended his own experiences, and, though he was not consciously learning stories, he was nevertheless becoming well acquainted with the genre and with storytelling situations. While still in his teens, he heard a man tell stories, many of them tall, for an entire evening:

Joe Parker, he lived in West Hall's Harbour somewhere, I think it was. He told a lot of stories. He told stories all one evening. They built a three-master in Canning here, and we were in Kingsport unloading potatoes or some damn thing, or apples, and he was aboard of her. He used to go as mate on square-rigged ships, and he could rig, spliced wire and everything, and they was finishing up rigging her there. They brought her down to Kingsport, was putting the rigging on her, rigging her up. And the captain was aboard of her. He was from Port Greville. And we went down aboard of her in the evening, and him and Parker was there, and Parker told stories all evening. The captain was laughing all evening. But he had some great funny stories.

How many of Joe Parker's stories are remembered by Coffil can only be guessed. Probably very few. Only one story has been directly attributed to Parker, and in a more recent interview Coffil was not even certain that he heard this one tale about catching a big trout (no. 16) from Parker.

By 1939, when Bob and his brother Alden bought an old rumrunning vessel and repaired and refitted it as a freight boat, John Coffil was fifty-one years old, old enough certainly to command attention as a man of experience and as a storyteller. He had sailed on a

three-master to New York, had been on another sailing vessel that sank in a storm in the mouth of the Bay of Fundy, had hunted and trapped and fished. In short, John Coffil had been around, and this was apparent in his casual conversation and in his stories. When John was with his two brothers on the freight boat, as he often was, "he held the chair usually." "When Bob and Alden had Sam Bigelow as a third man, the engineer, Bob tended to take on the role of storyteller. "I think I picked up (where he left off)," Coffil explains. "That's what started me out." Wherever the freight boat stopped, in-shore fishermen of less varied experience would come aboard the boat and exchange talk and stories. The stories, for the most part, came from John or Bob, whose experiences ranged over a larger geographic region than those of the fishermen who returned home with their catch each night.

Some men, for a variety of reasons, become storytellers; others do not. Alden Coffil never took an interest in storytelling to the extent that his brothers did. He was, in most instances, a passive listener. To be sure, he listened often enough to know a good many of the stories, but he never told them. His interest was in painting and fiddling:

He was a good painter, my brother was. Well, he wasn't a good painter but he painted some good pictures of vessels. He's got quite a lot of pictures of vessels over there, and some women, and one thing and another.... He started (playing

the fiddle) when he was quite young, way before he got married, way back. I don't know how he come to start, but he got ahold of an old fiddle somewhere. I never played. I couldn't play mouth organ or anything. Well, I tried a couple times and didn't seem to be (able to). But I like music and I like singing. Yeh, any kind of music. I used to like to dance. We went and had a lot of dances. He used to play for the dances around. And then his wife played the piano, and when they come home here from the States, she used to play the piano and he'd play the fiddle. (But places where stories were told there was no singing or music.) Just talk, just stories.

Alden might have become a storyteller, but he found other outlets for his intelligence and creativity.

Still, three of Bob Giffil's stories were learned from his brother Alden in Parrsboro. The fourth and oldest brother, Dah, also was not a storyteller, and quit going to sea after a shipwreck which occurred before Bob began sailing.

Of course, they heard them all so they knowed about what the stories he (John) knowed. I got a brother in Parrsboro there now and he plays the fiddle. He come up with some stories. He painted some too. I got some paintings here that he done when he was a kid, when he was just young. But he was all the time painting vessels. And then he got to playing the fiddle. And we was in the Joggins, and there was a feller come down, and I think he played the fiddle too. He spent the evening, and he got to telling some stories, and, he told a few stories there. And then my brother turned around and told him some about the fiddle business and painting, ... about where the girl down in New Brunswick painted the knot on the pine board. But he, I never knowed he told any stories until then. But he told him some stories.... I forget the ones that the other feller told.

Alden, though not as a rule a storyteller, was still

familiar with the genre, and of all the stories he had heard he chose to remember three that had a special appeal to him as a fiddler and painter. Often this is the case, where the inactive bearer of a folklore tradition will remember and actively perform a limited number of stories or songs that have special and personal connotations.<sup>10</sup>

Besides the stories Bob Coffil learned from his brothers and from other men, he has told and will continue to tell countless exaggerations that he invents or adapts to fit a given situation. More often than not, these spontaneous tales are told only once and then forgotten. Of the nine spontaneous items in the collection, five were collected as they occurred or shortly after the fact; of the other four, two are remembered because of the woods camp context in which Coffil first told them, and a third, about a woodsman eating grease out of the machinery at a saw mill, is remembered and told as a standard part of his repertoire, sans any particular context when the story was first told. The last of these adaptations and inventions is based on a true experience, yet it is told as a tall tale.

The extent to which creativity is an important factor in tall telling has been noted before, especially

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<sup>10</sup>See Lunt, "Jones Tracy," p. 47, where a tall tale collected from one man who is not a storyteller reflects his personal interest in woodcarving. See also, for example, G. Legman, Rationale of the Dirty Joke (New York, 1968), p. 17.

in Brunvand's study of Len Henry. Seventeen of the Len Henry stories lack even approximate parallels in the literature, and Brunvand concluded from an analysis of 116 variants of "sixty-seven distinct tales associated with Len Henry," that he changed traditional tales to fit particular contexts and that he doubtless invented several other tales of exaggeration.<sup>11</sup> The present study and collection is further proof of creativity and adaptation in the tall tale genre. A storyteller who has chosen the tall tale as his forte is inclined to spontaneous invention and adaptation. Certainly this is true of a teller like Coffil, who places considerable emphasis on the story fitting the situation. If a situation calling for a tall tale presents itself and nothing in his repertoire seems to fit, then there is a good chance he will invent one for the occasion or perhaps make changes in a story he has told before.

When Coffil and I were trying to sort out the sources of his stories, I asked him if his whopper about sitting on a ship's rail and leaning against the fog was an original. The dialogue that followed indicated Coffil's unself-conscious attitude toward his stock of tales:

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<sup>11</sup>Brunvand, "Len Henry," pp. 15-16. See especially p. 16, note 6.

Coffil: No, I heard that somewheres. I, I, when I first, you know.

Tallman: How long ago would that have been? Any idea?

C: It was quite a long while ago.

T: Now, would you tell that one, do you think you've told that one more often than some of the others?

C: No, I don't think, but, you know, it's pretty hard to say.

T: You can't think of any stories that you tell that you've probably told more often than others?

C: No, I don't think so. I think they all run about the same.

T: There aren't any particular favorites that you have?

C: No, don't seem to be. It's just under the circumstances. Somebody's mentioned something that one of them'll come to me.

Another time Coffil explained, "You'll hear a story, you can shift it around some. I don't know just how it works. But you hear a lot of different kinds of people, you know."

Although it is beyond the scope of the present study, it might well be that the tall tale would lend itself to formulaic study: the broad tall tale tradition with which the narrator is familiar thus providing him with various formulas for narrative exaggeration. One point in relation to this can be made, however. C. W. von Sydow's concept of repertoire as either active or passive needs reexamination.<sup>12</sup> Kenneth S. Goldstein took a step in that direction by suggesting that all

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<sup>12</sup>Sydow, Selected Papers on Folklore, pp.

items in a performer's repertoire are not of equal value to him and that individual items can go from active to inactive and back again to active.<sup>13</sup>

With a storyteller like Coffil, whose interest is in the storytelling context and who is adept at inventing and recreating, the concept of the folklore performer's repertoire needs further consideration. Coffil does not conceive his repertoire as consisting of a body of set stories; rather, it is a reservoir of experience and traditional material that he can draw upon and perhaps recombine when the occasion arises. Most of what is presented here as Coffil's repertoire of exaggeration humor and other narrative material was passive for a greater or lesser period of time prior to its being recorded.

This idea may sound like a theoretical tight rope, an extreme position that appears good but is difficult to maintain. But, it is based on the facts as Coffil presented them: he has no favorite stories; he has difficulty remembering or caring where and when he learned a story; he is interested primarily in the performance context, the story fitting a situation. Without a full consideration of Coffil's aesthetic, which

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<sup>13</sup>Kenneth S. Goldstein, "On the Application of the Concepts of Active and Inactive Traditions to the Study of Repertory," Journal of American Folklore, LXXXIV (1971), 62-67.

is the subject of Chapter VIII, this concept of repertoire cannot be further delineated. This will be a topic for the concluding chapter. But it is important to keep the concept in mind, that is, the difficulty of conceiving Coffil's repertoire as either active or passive. Many of the tall tale texts are not so frozen in his mind to be either active or passive; at best, perhaps only the stories he learned from his brothers can be accorded such status. For the rest, they can be told to a folklore collector in a fairly set form, but in a natural situation they will probably provide only kernels for tall statements and stories.

As well as the nine texts included in the first section of tall tales as adaptations and inventions, the following two incidents illustrate how Coffil is inclined to spontaneous exaggeration. Neither of these incidents could be considered in any way part of his repertoire since neither will likely occur again or be referred to by him.

One afternoon in the fall of 1972, Coffil was in Don Forsythe's store when the school bus made its regular stop in front of the store. Among those who got off the bus was Coffil's seventeen year old grandson, Leslie, who came into the store for a soda and a bag of potato chips and to do some afternoon loafing. Coffil was about to leave, but before he left he asked Leslie



to come home soon to help sack up several bushels of potatoes and carry them down to the cellar. "That's an awful load of potatoes for a feller my age to be hauling down those stairs," Coffil said. "If you don't come home pretty soon and help me I think I'll just eat all them potatoes now as well as later. I won't have to carry them down the steps that way." Coffil grinned; Forsythe, his wife, and I laughed; Leslie got the message and went home, in his own good time, a few minutes later.

More recently, in April, 1973, Coffil and I were talking in the kitchen when his son came in the kitchen door and sat down for a while. After Coffil finished describing how the wharf at Port Williams had been rebuilt, Bobby told us of the large codfish that were being caught over in Kingsport, "as long as that kitchen table there." An opening presented itself, and Coffil replied, "They'll have to watch out that they don't haul a boat into the mouth of one of them codfish, if they're that big." His son grinned faintly, and reaffirmed that they were the biggest codfish he had ever seen. Parallels for each of these exaggerations can be found under the motifs, Y93. Lie: remarkable eater, and F911.4.1. Fish swallows ship, indicative of the fact that they have a basis in tradition despite their apparent spontaneity.

## Adaptations and Inventions

## 1. Strong Wind off Cape Horn

Bob Coffil has never sailed around Cape Horn at the tip of South America -- he may have known other sailors who sailed this extremely rough stretch of water, but the closest he has been to Cape Horn is Boston. This does not stop him from telling a remarkable tale about the storm he and a friend faced on such a journey. This story about a story, which includes the situation in which it was first told, combines a traditional tall tale motif -- X1611.1.5.1\*(a). Man who is gawking at the doings of the wind is turned inside out. -- Coffil had heard before, probably from his brother John, with a narrative setting and conclusion that Coffil invented at the time. Coffil explains:

I made it right up there. He got to telling about the fog over in the English Channel and all this, and as he talked along the darn company, you know, and it was blowing hard then that night at the camp in the woods there, and the wind was roaring like the devil. I'd heard something about it or something the same thing before that, but I, you know, so I put it together after a while.

As Coffil tells this tale, it might be considered Type 1920, Contest in Lying. However, this tale-type illustrates an inconsistency in Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson's The Types of the Folktale.<sup>14</sup> Any tall tale

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<sup>14</sup>Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson, The Types of the Folktale, Folklore Fellows Communications No. 184 (2nd revision; Helsinki, 1961).

or tall tales which are told as they were heard in a lie-swapping session could be classified under this tale-type, yet the purpose of the indexers was to classify by content. In this instance, what has been classified is a storytelling context. For further discussion of this weakness in the Aarne-Thompson index, see Henningsen, "The Art of Perpendicular Lying," pp. 193-194. Other motifs for the present story are: X1005. Lie: remarkable cook; X1611.1.5.1\*. Remarkable wind affects man; X1739. Absurd disregard of anatomy: miscellaneous.

1.1

2/17/70 (Collectors: Paul Sheffield, Linda Legge)

I was working in the woods for my father-in-law in the mill down on Cape Blomidon here. He hired a new cook to come in on Friday and he brought this woman along with him to taste the grub. It seems he had lost his taster in the army when he was in the army some way or another. She was supposed to taste it and see if it was seasoned right. Sunday night when we went back into the camp, he invited us over for a little get together and play a little music for us. He told us some stories about peeling potatoes for soldiers in the war. Peeling potatoes for five hundred. And Monday at noon there was fourteen of us in the camp and there wasn't enough potatoes to go around. We went without.

And that night, why he told us about how thick the fog was in the English Channel and how hard the wind was blowing. And I told him that I hate to hear the wind blow because I was shipmates with a feller coming around Cape Horn. And we went aloft to stow the topsail and the wind caught him and blew him adrift. The next year I got a letter from him and he was in South Africa and had a good job and was getting along good. So I was quite happy.

1.2

5/17/70

Tallman: There's one story about a cook. Did there used to be a mill down at the Cape, down around there somewhere?

Coffil: Yeh, there was a mill in on the Cape. I worked in there one winter. My father-in-law was doing the logging. He was cutting the logs and hauling them into the mill there. Yes, this cook and his wife, or, it wasn't his wife, she, it was some woman that come in. He, he'd been in the army and he said he'd lost his taster in the army and he had had to take her in to taste the stuff he cooked so he could get the right flavoring on it. And, he stayed, he only stayed a couple days and he left. He, he wouldn't stay and cook. I don't know what the reason was.

T: Did the woman stay?

C: No, she never stayed.

T: They both went together?

C: Oh yeh, they went together.

T: How can you lose your taster?

C: Well, I don't know. He said he cooked for, peeled potatoes for five hundred men in the army. He come in there on Thursday, and Friday at noon, why there was only twenty-four of us in the camp there, and we, there wasn't enough potatoes to go around, so he must have slowed up a lot from the time he was in the army. (chuckling) I guess that's about it. He, a, invited us over Sunday night. He said he was going to leave Monday and he said he was having a little get together, so we all went over, the rest of the fellers and I. He had a mouth organ there and he started in a-playing the organ and then he told us about how thick the fog was over in the English Channel, and one thing, and another, and how rough it got. And I told him that I hated to hear the wind blow. And he says, "Why do you hate to hear the wind blow?" "Well," I said, "I was shipmates with a feller coming around the Cape Horn, and we was up stowing one of the topsails and he hollered something at me, and, a, the wind got his upper jaw and rolled her right over back the back of his head.... And also took and blowed him away. And, I never heard from him for a couple years, and about two years' time I had a letter from him.

He was in South Africa and doing good there, so ...  
(chuckles).

1.3

9/13/72

(This unrecorded telling included the same details, except for additional description of the context and a transitional sentence leading into another story he told the cook that same evening. The variant ending to this story is included in Chapter VIII, below.)

## 2. Sailing on the Fog

The first two times Coffil told about the cook at the woods camp on Cape Blomidon and about the wind that blew his friend from Cape Horn to South Africa, he made no mention of another tale he told the cook and the other men at the same time. In fact, since the cook had been boasting about thick fog in the English Channel, this tale about a ship sailing on the fog was more appropriate than the other.

Again, Coffil adapted a traditional motif (X1651.2. Ship sails on thick fog.) to a story of his own creation. The traditional kernel that gave him the idea for this story might have been about shipping lumber up the Bay of Fundy on the fog, which in the one recorded version of this tale Coffil told as an appendix to the sailing on the fog story after a pause of a few seconds (see no. 13).

Tall tales about fog thick enough to support foreign objects are so common that Coffil need not have heard about a ship sailing on the fog to think of it himself. Similar stories of boats and ships sailing on the fog, though none with the detail of the present story, have been reported from Pennsylvania, Indiana, California, and Prince Edward Island. The latter story is in Roland H. Sherwood's Tall Tales of the Maritimes (Windsor, Nova Scotia, 1972), p. 22.

Coffil's explanation of the genesis for this story is an example of how a storyteller who has had varied experiences can use those experiences in the stories he tells:

I think I made that up. I never heard that one anywheres, 'cause I never heard anyone tell it. But I was out to Lake Williams to a guide meeting one time and I knowed about the lake there and I knowed about carrying hard coal to Yarmouth from New York, and it didn't take long to sail across to ... (chuckles)

They had a lot of sports there (at the guides' meet). They was rolling logs. There was one girl from down to Bear River. She was an Indian girl, and she was a log roller. And there was two or three log rollers there but she, she was supposed to be the champion; and I think she rolled up in the States. They set on, two of 'em get on one log. I dare say you've seen it. (T: Yes.) And we went down one afternoon and we stayed till the next afternoon, in the truck. They had a lot of chopping logs and different things there. They called it a guides' meet at that time.

\*And then I told him how foggy it got down around Yarmouth. One time I was on a sailing ship, a schooner, and we didn't know where we was. Then, one of the fellers heard some music, sounded like a party, so we convinced the captain we should steer for that. And when the fog lifted the next morning, do you know where we found ourselves? At Lake Williams, at a guides' camp. (laughter) The fog was so thick the ship sailed right through it, over the trees and everything, to that guides' meet.

2.2

9/29/72

Well, she loaded hard coal in New York, coming to Yarmouth. They used to bring hard coal down and they carried it to Wolfville and everywhere. He run it, they call what they were running her time and they time 'em. They was timing 'em at that time, and I suppose, towing a log too, for the mast. And they didn't make anything. It was thick, thick fog, and they heard music, that was it, they heard music playing after a while and they ran it to and let go the anchor. And the next morning they was out here in Lake Williams, the way I heard, they was anchored in Lake Williams and they was having a guides' meet out there. They used to have them guides' meet, there'd be a lot of people there and canoe races. (chuckling)



## 3. Hungry Woodsman

Of the nine stories in this first section of tales, this is the only one that has been collected without a context, that is, without it being collected in context or without Coffin explaining the situation in which he told it originally. Yet, as he says, "I think I made that one up." There is no reason to think otherwise. No parallels for this story have been found elsewhere. The only applicable motif (X931. Lie: remarkable eater.) refers to various Paul Bunyan stories from popular literature, stories that are not given a realistic or believable framework. Tales of remarkable eaters are also told about legendary strong men, but legends of this kind are told as true and lack the ironic humor of tall tales. Similarly, giants in the long European folktales, like Jack and the Beanstalk, consume large amounts of food, but again, these are not tall tales, and are properly classified as marvels: F53f.3.4. Giant eats a prodigious amount; F632. Mighty eater. None of the variants listed under X931 in the Baughman index deal with a man who eats the unusual or inedible. It is always simply an impossibly large quantity of food that is consumed. In this Coffin story, on the other hand, a remarkable eater is denied his daily ration of rolled oats and thus resorts to eating the inedible for the sustenance he needs.

3.1

6/10/70

But I was in a mill over there in, a saw mill over in a place called Alma, New Brunswick. That was right across Cumberland Bay. And they had two ropers that were there and one feller was riding the carriage there and counting logs. And they hired a feller to come in there to lug the lumber and he made them sign a contract that they'd give him a bucket of oat meal, stir it up in water every day, just to drink, you know, to keep him going, 'cause he had a lot of lumber to carry. So he got along about three days straight, and by gosh they forgot to give him a barrel, or, the bucket of oat meal to drink, and along after dinner, why, the bearings all went out of the mill and (they) didn't know what the deuce caused it. But they hunted around, and come to find out, he'd et all the grease out of the bearings.... (laughter) Of course, you couldn't blame him. He went, he said he had it in the contract, you see, for this, this bucket of rolled oats and water. I suppose that was what was keeping him going.

#### 4. Big Lobster in the Bay of Pigs

This story, or rather this story about a story as it happened at Don Forsythe's store, has helped to gain Bob Coffill something of a reputation; or has added

lustre to the reputation he already had. Don Forsythe, and those who frequent the store have mentioned on several occasions the time Coffil caught the outsider with his story of the lobster. Coffil first told the story in late September, 1971, at the store. A few days later, on September 30, he told me about it. At the time I had no tape recorder with me, so only took notes and later wrote it up. But the story was too long to lend itself satisfactorily to this method of collection. I recorded it from Coffil a year, less a day, later. The man he fooled and infuriated with the tale lives in Yarmouth County, about one hundred fifty miles southwest down the Bay of Fundy. For the past several years he has come to Kings County in the fall for the potato and apple harvests.

Coffil, of course, has never been in the Bay of Pigs, the setting for his story of a gigantic lobster. He has only heard of it from newspaper and television reports of the abortive invasion of Cuba in 1962 which focused on the Bay of Pigs. The story itself was original with him, something he made up to fit the situation. As he has explained, he has no favorite stories, no stories in his repertoire that he particularly likes: "I just like them when they fit right into a situation, what's being talked about, you know." This one fit just fine, and it also indicates his skillful use of dialogue in

telling a story, an aspect of his narrative style which differentiates him from other, lesser narrators in the area. This use of dialogue in his telling is in full evidence in the life history, and its effectiveness is further apparent in the stories of practical jokes and tricks in the collection.

An interesting feature of this storytelling situation is the reaction the story gets from the outsider. He is mad because he has been put in his place by Coffil's tale, so mad that he throws his hat on the floor and walks away from Coffil to the door. This is quite different from the reaction of the cook at the woods camp, who walked over and shook Coffil's hand after a good story. The man from Yarmouth, in this instance, was bragging rather than telling an artful tale, and he expected to be believed. The story Coffil told, however, was patently untrue, and by association indicated that the outsider was also lying but without any pretense at art. The closest parallel for this story is X1301. Lie: the great fish. The text is included in Chapter III. Included here are the introductory comments that prefaced the story itself.

4.1

9/29/72

Tallman: That fellow that was here last year, he's back now.

Coffil: I see he's back. He won't stay over

there. When I go over and he's sitting on the back bench, you know, why he'll get up and go over and sit by the door. I tell him about the lobsters and things. I don't know whether I ever told you that about that.

T: No, I don't think so.

C: Well, he goes down there where the lobster fish are, down around the lower end of Nova Scotia....

#### 5. Dory Race at Lunenburg

The preceding story was the first time Coffil "caught" the Yarmouth man with a lie, but it was not the last. A few days later another opportunity presented itself and Coffil again invented a story for the occasion. Both times, someone at the store set Coffil up for a story, in a sense asking him to put the outsider in his place. Coffil willingly obliged, for the outsider's presence was a challenge to his role in the group as a man of experience and storyteller. The closest motif for the present tale is X1781. Lie: boat with light draft. None of the stories in the tall tale literature, however, approximate this one about greasing a boat to improve its speed.

Following this tale, without pause, Coffil told how he put the same man in his place with the truth. This is included as it was told. It illustrates the difference between a boast and a lie. Had the other man

been lying, telling a tall tale, Coffil would not have minded; he simply would have tried to outdo him, to tell a better tale. But he was boasting, being a braggart, and this Coffil objected to. Using the truth could be just as vindictive as a tall tale, perhaps even more so. Subtlety and indirection characterize the tall tale in such a situation; the truth is blunt and direct.

5.1

9/29/72

I was down to the Fishermen's Exhibition (in Lunenburg), and I went over to the store that night when I got home. Someone asked me what I thought of the Exhibition, and I said, "Well, the dory race didn't amount to much," I says. He was in there this night. Well, he said, "What happened?" "Well," I said, "the fellers from Lunenburg there," I says, "they took the damn dory the night before," I says, "and they greased it and then they painted her over the grease." I says, "When they started out, they started her so quick she slipped her paint and she was right on that grease." And I says, "Why, them American fellers couldn't catch her." (laughter) I had him going there, you know. He didn't know what the hell to make of it, 'cause he, he was trying to tell partly the truth with the lobsters.

But, he was telling how many traps he fished down there, about a hundred fifty I think it was, and

I says, "Well," I says, "that ain't too many traps. But," I says, "I know why you only fish a hundred fifty." I says, "They fish, they fished a thousand to twelve hundred up in the Northumberland Strait, in George's Bay up there." And he denied that. He said they couldn't do it. But that's right, there's nothing wrong with that, 'cause I was in this Cape St. George up there and they was talking about lobster fishing. And up there they can fish fourteen hours a day in the summer time. They can fish just as long as it's daylight, from daylight till dark, and they got no tide to bother them and they can pull more traps. Down here at Cape Sable they got so damn much tide they can only pull about four hours a day, you see. And he, he didn't know nothing about up there, but I knowed about down there 'cause I seen 'em hauling traps and the buoys, just the spindles sticking the end of it out of the water. The tide run 'em under, and they have to wait till the tide's flat to get ahold of them. But he just said they couldn't do it, and that was it, you know. He thought he knowed what he was talking about but he didn't know. And I wasn't lying, but, but some of the boys here might have thought I was. It was the truth. They don't fish that many now up there 'cause they got a law. Now I think it's six hundred or something like that. But it ain't because they can't fish that many. You know, can't pull 'em.

## 6. Salt on the Roads

One evening at Don Forsythe's store a local man who often frequents the store came in and was soon complaining about how badly his car was rusted from salt on the roads the winter before, how he had to pay fifty dollars to have it repaired. Coffil kidded him with this whopper, for which there are no related motifs. Those present included the man with the rusted car, the fieldworker, Coffil, Forsythe and his son-in-law, Bill Kay, who helps run the store, and eight others, ranging in age from fifteen to fifty-five. When Coffil began talking, all but two young men standing near the door listened. What follows is Coffil's description of the situation, recorded three months after the fact. The section enclosed in single slash marks is taken from field notes made the evening that Coffil told the story at the store, on October 10, 1972.

6.1

1/11/73

We was talking about I took a ship into Hantsport with a load of salt and they stockpiled it in New Minas here. And then, of course, they got to chew that over 'cause they brought salt in here with a salt mine down here. And that come from overseas. It come from over there where they're having so much trouble there in a, in Ireland. It was supposed to come from some other



place but they couldn't make the shift. And then, of course, the liberals brought it in and the Tories wanted to git something agin 'em so they said it was crusting over and it wasn't as good as the other salt. And of course, O. G. down here, he hates 'em to put salt on the road 'cause it rusts his car out. And he come in the store there and he got talking about it, about 'em putting salt on. Well I says -- and not letting them bring -- I told him, I says, "You know what, what's the reason of it?" And he says, "Yeh, I know." He says, "It's just because they got salt here." I says, "No it wasn't." I says, "It's the garages and the service stations," I says, "is kicking agin it 'cause," I says, "they took something out of that salt over there that wouldn't rust the cars and this here up here will rust the cars." /You know, I heard that you can't take a Ford car or Chev up near that Malagash salt mine (here). You take a Ford or Chev up'in there, in no time it's just four tires and rust. (laughter) Any other kind of car, you could take it in there and it'd be ... evening afore it was nothing but rust. / And I says, "That's the reason they, they (the government) didn't want it (the Nova Scotia salt) here, so they (the garage owners) kicked." And he never said a word. He went home, but whether he, you know, he didn't even grin when I told him.

### 7. How to Keep the Arrow Afloat

In February, 1970, a Greek oil tanker, the Arrow, grounded on a poorly marked rock buoy in Chedapucto Bay when it was coming into the Strait of Canso with a load of crude oil. After a few days the tanker sank, with most of the oil still in it. The accident and the resultant oil pollution, which killed thousands of sea birds and fouled beaches in the area, were headline news in Nova Scotia for several weeks, and the oil spill from this wreck is the largest in Canadian history. The men at the store naturally talked about it, and they asked Coffil, as the resident expert on ships and the sea, what he would do to get the oil out of the ship before it sank. Coffil's exaggerated reply was told to the two student collectors the next day. Three months later he did not remember his own exaggeration, about bringing Indians up from Panama to blow bubbles under the ship.

It is difficult to imagine where Coffil heard of the San Blas Cuna Indians, popularly called the San Blas because they inhabit islands off the San Blas coast of Panama on the Caribbean side. Perhaps he learned of them in an old encyclopedia or from someone he met during his earliest sailing days. Be that as it may, when I heard the tape recording of this spontaneous whopper I had never heard of the San Blas, and accordingly transcribed the name as "Sandblast," with a question mark

following it. Even more fascinating and beyond deciphering is Coffil's allusion to the San Blas Indians as having blowpipes. They only had the blowgun as a weapon for a short period of time in the nineteenth century. An ethnography of the San Blas Cuna explains:

Blowguns have never, in the early sources, been credited to the Cuna or any of the groups considered ancestral to them. However, in the mid-19th century they are described as using them and obtaining the poison from the Choco. The present-day San Blas Cuna do not have them. It is very likely that the blowgun was diffused to the Cuna from the Choco during historic times, but rapidly passed out of the culture with the large-scale advent of firearms.<sup>15</sup>

This does not solve the enigma of Coffil's knowledge of the San Blas, but it does indicate that his exaggeration has a basis in reality or historical fact. One wonders how many of the men at the store understood his allusion.

7.1

2/17/70 (Collectors: Sheffield, Legge)

Well, they asked me over in the store, the boys did, how I'd float the oil tanker that was ashore up in Cape Breton, and I told them that the quickest thing, quickest way to do it would be go down to the Panama Canal and get a crew of San Blas Indians and pipes and stuff to blow some bubbles and blow her full of bubbles, and let her float that way.

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<sup>15</sup>D. B. Stout, San Blas Cuna Acculturation? An Introduction, Viking Fund Publications in Anthropology No. 9 (New York, 1947), p. 70.

### B. Pheasant with a Stovepipe Tail

This tale, collected by a student, was the first Bob Coffil tale to come to my attention. It was the only story attributed to either of the Coffils to be turned in the first year I was teaching in the area and having students make folklore collections. A year and a half later, when I asked Coffil if he knew one about a pheasant flying into the kitchen and flying out with part of the stove he said he didn't think so. Since he is the only Bob Coffil in Delhaven, with the exception of his son, and since theirs is the only Coffil family in the area, his failure to remember this story can be attributed to one of two possibilities: either it was told by his son, which I have reason to doubt because Bobby does not tell tall stories in the community and because the Bob Coffil from whom the student collected the story was "an older man," or it was a more or less extemporaneous bit of exaggeration told at the country store which he has in the meantime forgotten. It would seem, then, that it is similar to the above exaggeration about blowing bubbles to keep an oil tanker afloat because he has forgotten his ever having told it. Applicable to this story is a general motif, X1290. Lies about birds.

Curiously, the boy who collected this tale collected nothing else from Coffil, and he failed to describe the collecting situation. Probably he overheard

the story when he was in Forsythe's store with a friend who lived nearby. The collector was from Baxter's Harbour on the Bay of Fundy shore, about fifteen miles from Delhaven. Paddy's Island, mentioned in the tale, is a mile offshore from Coffil's house. At low tide, this island can be reached by foot; at high tide, the fish draggers from Kingsport often circle the island and come much closer to shore. When Coffil was a boy, Paddy's Island was considerably larger than its present one hundred fifty feet by twenty feet, and people frequently rowed or walked out to the island with a picnic.

8.1

1/27/69 (Collector: Robert Irving)

\*I was sitting in my house the first day of pheasant season cleaning my gun when my dog started barking outside. I went to the door to see what he was barking at, and just as I got to the door what should come through the door but a big cock pheasant. He sailed across the room and smashed into the stovepipe, and then he smashed through the window. And now, the last I saw of him, he was scaling Paddy's Island with six foot of stovepipe trailing behind him.

#### 9. A Good Whipcracker

The classification that comes closest in spirit to this story is X1130(a). Hunter kills deer without

bullet. Noise of shell frightens it to death. Here, however, the principal actors are a whipcracker and a sea gull. Motif X1002. Lie: remarkable user of whip, is a general classification for this Coffin tale which is based on a true experience. The following discussion of the experience illustrates how realistic and close to truth the tall tale is at its best. This conversation between the fieldworker and Coffin could be considered a third version of the story. There are remarkable similarities between this discussion and the telling recorded by collectors Sheffield and Legge, an indication that Coffin does tell some stories in a set or formalized manner:

Tallman: What about the one about this guy who could really crack a whip?

Coffin: Oh yeh. That's a, that's Pineo. He always had a pair of steers, you know, and he broke 'em and made oxen of 'em.

T: Well now, this Pineo guy actually lived then. Was it something you or your brother told on him or was it something he told about himself?

C: Well, I actually seen the, or heard the whip cracking, you know. He used to have it when he lived down here. He lived down here at one time, and we was young fellers there and he used to have these steers. And the last time I seen him he lived down in back of Margarettsville somewhere on Mount Hanly. And we went in there with a load of fertilizer at night, and the next morning we was up early and we went up on the wharf, and it was still. And there was a lot of woods up on the road, you know. It wasn't cleared, it wasn't all cleared land, and we heard this damn snapping and cracking up there in the woods and pretty soon he come out of the woods with a pair of steers, and my brother turned around to me and he said, "Owen Pineo. That's Owen Pineo coming."

He says, "I can tell by the whip snapping." And sure enough, he come out of the woods and it was Owen Pineo.

T: Then what about the gull thinking it had been shot?

C: Well, he, he snapped the whip there and the gull did go down and light in the water and we figured that he, that it was such a shock to him, he thought it was a gun, and he fell down into the water there.

T: Did he move at all?

C: Well, the waves moved him around but we couldn't tell whether he was, whether he really was shot or whether it was the waves moving him. (grinning) It was pretty hard (to tell).

9.1

2/17/70 (Collectors: Sheffield, Legge)

There's a feller that lives down here and he always has a yoke of cattle or a pair of steers, and had one with him, and he could snap it (a whip) awful loud, you know. And we took a load, he moved to Port George back on Mount Hanly. About a year or two afterwards we took a load of fertilizer down. We got up in the morning and there was this wharf. We got up on the wharf and it was a nice morning for early in the morning. We was up in the woods, we hear this damn cracking and banging, and the brother said, this John he said, "That's Owen Pineo coming. I can tell the way that whip's snapping." And sure enough, he come out of the woods with this pair of steers and a wagon. Come out on the wharf there. And he was on the wharf snapping this whip around and there was a flock of gulls come over, and, by God, he snapped that

whip and one fell down in the water. It was so real he thought he was shot.

9.2

5/17/70

Tallman: One about this man who could really crack a whip?

Coffill: Oh yes, there was a feller worked down on Mount Hanly down back of, of, a, Port Lorne, or a, Port George. I guess it was Port George. And he had a pair of steers and he could crack this darn whip something. He, he practiced it for a long while. And he come down there on the wharf -- we was in there with a load of fertiliser -- and he come down on the wharf there and there was a big flock of gulls over there on the end of the wharf. There always is when they been fishing on the wharf. And he up and give this damn whip a snap and the gulls, it sounded so real like a gun going off, that one of them fell right down in the water and never kicked.

Traditional Tales, Learned from Others

10. Quick Shift in Weather

The two recorded versions of this brief story exemplify Coffill's tendency to tell traditional tales to the student collectors in the first person, with himself as the hero. When I later recorded the same tales, they were told in the third person. This is



because I was collecting material that, in most instances, he knew I was familiar with. Where the same story was performed for the students, it might be said to have been reported to me. This distinction between performing and reporting is discussed by Dell Hymes in "Breakthrough into Performance," in Dan Ben-Amos and Kenneth S. Goldstein, eds., Folklore: Communication and Performance (The Hague, in press).<sup>16</sup> The difference between the two, however, is not overly significant in terms of the tall tale as Coffil performs it. His artless use of understatement makes his best "performances" seem no more than casual "reports."

Gustav Henningsen suggested that a tall tale told in the third person is not a tall tale at all, that a definitional criterion is that the story is told as a first person narrative.<sup>17</sup> Many of the tales in the present collection are not and could not be told in the first person, yet Coffil has told them successfully in a variety of storytelling situations, most especially as a way of fooling or chiding a member of the group, and just as often as well-contrived, fictional nonsense to be enjoyed for its own sake. The tall teller need not be

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<sup>16</sup>Reference to Hymes' paper is taken at second-hand, from Richard Bauman, "The La Have Island General Store: Sociability and Verbal Art in a Nova Scotia Community," Journal of American Folklore, LXXXV (1972), 330-343.

<sup>17</sup>Henningsen, "The Art of Perpendicular Lying," p. 216.

overwhelmingly egocentric to tell tall tales, and Coffil's measured, deadpan style of delivery makes his stories as tall and realistically believable as if they were all told in the first person. Some, such as this story about picking trout off the ice, lend themselves to first person narration; others do not.

Coffil does not recall the source of this tale or when he first heard it. The traditionality of the story is indicated by motif F935.2. Ice forms while fish leaps from pool. See also X1606.2. Mies about quick change in weather from warm to cold.

10.1

2/17/70 (Collectors: Sheffield, Legge)

I was fishing up north one time alone and it was a nice day, but the climate shifted quick where I was. I sat there watching the trout jump, and of course it shifted; a cold squall come down and froze the ice over, and all I had to do was walk out over the ice and pick the trout up.

10.2

5/17/70

Tallman: Any other stories about weather of any kind? Cold weather or hot weather or anything like that?

Coffil: Well, it, it, it does, the climate shifts quick up north of here. Up in northern New Brunswick there they claim that there's a feller down watching trout

jump in a lake up there one time and, a, it come one of those cold squalls out of the northward and froze the lake over. And he walked out and picked the trout up. (grins)

#### 11. Leaning against the Fog

Coffil heard this whopper about sitting on the rail of a ship and leaning against the fog "quite a long while ago." As this is a tall statement rather than a story no specific classification exists other than X1651. Lies about fog. In the Henningsen article based on tall tales collected through an advertising campaign conducted by a Norwegian paint company, however, the same exaggeration is to be found: "The fog would be so thick that the passengers sat on the rail and leaned against it. The bad thing about it was that if the fog lifted suddenly, they all fell overboard."<sup>18</sup>

11.1

2/17/70 (Collectors: Sheffield, Legge)

Foggy weather? Well, in the Bay of Fundy it gets awful thick sometimes, you know, in the Bay of Fundy. You can sit on the rail (of a ship) and put your back right up agin it. It's really thick.

11.2

5/17/70

Well, in the Bay of Fundy here in these tides it

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 200.

(the fog) gets really thick down around Yarmouth there in the lower end of Nova Scotia. It's, well, it's about as thick as you'll find it. We used to set out on the rail and lean our backs up agin it sometimes.

## 12. Talking Fish

Of this story about fish wanting to be caught, Coffil says, "Somebody told me that, but that was over between Joe Parker and Patterson, that lived in Five Islands. Two old fellers there, two Pattersons, ... Every time they'd get together they'd tell stories." Since the setting for the tale is Hall's Harbour, Joe Parker was probably Coffil's source. Motifs X1307\*, Fish which are eager to be caught, and B211.5. Speaking fish, both apply to this story although no parallels could be found in the literature.

12.1

2/17/70 (Collectors: Sheffield, Legge)

The thickest I had ever seen the fish was down off of Hall's Harbour, you know. One day when I was out there fishing, and I had a good-sized boat too, and when I got her loaded and I went to haul in the anchor to go in, the codfish stuck their heads right up out of the water and said, "Bob, where's your hooks?"

12.2

5/17/70

Tallman: I think you told one about fishing over around Hall's Harbour and you were pulling your lines out.

Coffil: Yeh, we was fishing codfish off of there and we had quite a good-sized boat, and after we got her loaded and we went to haul the anchor to go in, why the codfish went and stuck their heads out of the water and says, "Bob, where's your hook?" (grinning) So they was quite thick there.

### 13. Shipping Lumber on the Fog

This whopper was told to the fieldworker after the story about a ship sailing on the fog (see no. 2) and probably was the inspiration for that tale. His telling of this exaggeration, without a trace of a smile, served as a footnote to the longer story, verifying that "the fog does get thick in the Bay of Fundy." The two have been separated because this one is not a Coffil original, though from whom he learned it he does not remember. No close parallels to this are to be found in the literature. The only motif is a general one, X1651. Lies about fog.

13.1

9/29/72

But the fog does get thick in the Bay of Fundy.

Yeh, down around the lower end of Nova Scotia here it's about the worst place in the world. They used to tell me when I was a young feller that they had mills down there and they'd grind up a lot, and every time the wind comes sou'west they'd send a big batch up the Bay of Fundy. It'd blow it right up, you see. I guess it comes in off the Atlantic, keeps blowing in.

#### 14. Mosquitoes

North American tellers of tall tales have found the mosquito to be the best subject for their exaggeration humor. Baughman lists 109 separate motifs under the general classification, X1286. Lies about mosquitoes. No collection of tall tales from Nova Scotia to California is without at least a few stories about the lowly mosquito. The most popular tale is Type 1960M, Large Mosquitoes Fly off with Kettle. This has also been classified as motif X1286.1.4. Large mosquito flies off with pot or kettle (or other object). A variant of this traditional exaggeration is included in the following dialogue.

What is presented here is from a tapè-recorded interview with Coffil. His wife Myrtle was also present at the time. Because of the nature of the comments and the difficulty of separating one "text" from another, this part of the interview is included as it happened. Although not in a natural context -- we were not fooling

any third party -- this is a fairly representative example of cooperative lying, with one person setting up and leading on the narrator.

Part of the difficulty in excerpting "texts" here results from the close relationship between fact and fantasy in Coffil's talk about mosquitoes. Almost two years later, when I asked Coffil where he learned the mosquito stories, he implied in his answer that it was all the truth:

We did run into mosquitoes up in Gouldsboro in Maine there. I don't know whether I told you about that. We went up there and loaded pulpwood and we were in a bay and up in the woods, around in back in the woods, and there was mud flats up there. And by god, just as soon as it come night they got some thick there. And, they was some vicious. We had screens on the windows and we had to put out a gauge anchor and they grabbed the anchor and run with it, and I paid the rope out. We just had to keep brushing 'em off. That's about the worst place I've ever seen them. They wasn't as big a mosquitoes as I've seen, but they was some, they had a lot sharper stingers on 'em. (grinning)

14.1

6/10/70

Tallman: The other day you were saying something about the mosquitoes they had down there somewhere in Maine.

Coffil: What, what was that about?

Mrs. Coffil: About those mosquitoes.

C: Oh yeh. That was up in at Gouldsboro. We went to a place called Gouldsboro. It was, it was just

east of Ellsworth, Maine, there a little ways, and we went up in about a mile up in the woods there there was a harbor, the Gouldsboro harbor, laid right there, and there was woods all around the harbor there. There was kinda mud flats there and there was some awful mosquitoes up in there. We had had to put a gauge anchor out the stern of the skow at night as it was coming dark, and they was going over just like it was these fighter planes. The cook and the engineer, they took the anchor and run with it, and I paid out the rope, and by gosh, I had a hard job to fight 'em off. We had screens on the windows and everything. And after they got back and we got down and got her shut up, they were so mad that they drove their beaks through, their stingers right down through the cabin and we got to clinching them over there, and after a while they got so many on her they took off and took the roof right off the cabin. (chuckles)

T: But then they couldn't get their bills unstuck, could they?

C: No, we had them clinched down. (grins)

T: What did you clinch 'em with?

Mrs. C: (shrieks of laughter)

C: Oh, we had some hammers there.

T: (chuckling) Oh.

C: All them places along in Maine there was thick with 'em, but you wouldn't think it would be on



that coast but there's, it's the worst place for mosquitoes. Yup. We've been in places there where we had to put iron pots over our heads and then they'd drive them right through.

T: There's nothing that bad around here, though, is there?

C: Well, there is up, up here in a place called, a, where was it we used to be, across from Hantsport there?

Mrs. C: It wasn't Somes?

C: No, it was a ...

Mrs. C: I heard you say when we got home ...

C: We went up that river there. Burlington, Burlington River. We was carrying staves to Port Williams, and by gosh, just as soon as we got through loading at night at six o'clock, why, they'd be so thick then that we'd have to get down and shut the cabin doors there. It was all mud flats on the dyke up in there. Yeh. Just a steady roar overhead. They was some mosquitoes up in there. My, my brother and I, we was just young fellers. We, we couldn't have been over fourteen or fifteen, I guess. And that was some place to spend a long evening in on the mud flats when the mosquitoes got going. Yeh, we was down there yesterday. We never shut the car off, so I don't know. If we'd've stopped and listened there I dare say there'd a been mosquitoes around.

## 15. Grasshoppers at Grand Pré

The telling of this tale directly followed the preceding one, with only a pause of ten seconds to separate the two. Again, the dialogue between Coffil and the fieldworker is included. Coffil "can't remember who told me that," but it is a well-traveled story, classified as X1280.2.1. Insects eat team of horses or mules, pitch horseshoes to see who gets what is left. Usually, the ferocious insects are grasshoppers, though occasionally the story is told about mosquitoes. In the United States, this one has been reported from Missouri, Michigan, Nebraska, and Idaho. The Idaho version has mosquitoes pitching the shoes to see who gets the driver for dessert. In Roland H. Sherwood's Tall Tales of the Maritimes, p. 11, the more common version of the story, told about mosquitoes, is reported from Sussex, New Brunswick. The usual prize for the winner of the horse-shoe-throwing contest is the harness. No version besides the present one has a mowing machine as the prize for the best horseshoe pitcher, but then; there is no more natural place for a mowing machine than the dykeland hay fields of Grand Pré. This is one of many examples in the collection that illustrates how Coffil's stories are adapted to the specific geography of the area.

15.1

6/10/70

Coffil: But we was in to this Grand Parea over here and they told me over there one time that grasshoppers hit there on the Grand Parea dykes. Thick, one summer, awful thick. There was an old feller down there with a pair of horses mowing, and at noon, why, he didn't take his dinner with him. He took the horses and tied them up to the mowing machine and went home, and when he came back they'd, they'd, a, at the horses and the harness up and they was pitching the shoes to see which one would have the mowing machine. (laughter) ... So, I never heard tell of them being that thick since, but they claim this summer there's gonna be quite a bunch of something come over. What was them, flying bugs of some kind.

Tallman: That's this summer?

C: This summer they claim it's supposed to be.

T: We'll have to watch out for that, won't we?

Mrs Coffil: (laughs)

C: Yeh. They claimed everything up on Grand Parea dyke that summer, I guess.

T: How long ago would that have been?

C: Oh, that was quite a few years ago.

## 16. Big Trout

Coffil told this tale during an unrecorded session, September 28, 1970, about Joe Parker, the man from whom he probably learned it. This telling was so similar to the recorded version that I include only the one, recorded seven months earlier by Sheffield and Legge. For them, he told it about himself. It is a fairly common tale, classified by Baughman as X1301.54(c). Fish is so big that the water level of the stream falls two feet when the fish is pulled out. Versions have been reported from Texas, Missouri, Arkansas, Indiana, and Mississippi.

16.1

2/17/70 (Collectors: Sheffield, Legge)

I was trouting in Economy Lake over there one time, and it's quite a big lake. I guess it's three-quarter miles long and about a quarter of a mile wide, and I hooked a good trout. I said he was quite long when I hooked him, but when I hauled him in on the bank the water dropped on that lake a foot.

## 17. Deer on Anticosti Island

Coffil heard this tall statement fairly recently, from another fisherman when he was fishing off the Magdalene Islands in the Gulf of St. Lawrence in the early 1960's. Motifs X1122.2. Lie: person shoots many

animals with one shot, and X1234\*. Lies about deer, are both applicable to this non-narrative exaggeration.

This was told twice to the fieldworker, first on September 30, 1971, without being tape-recorded, then a year and a half later at my request. In this story Coffil again affirms the basis in truth for the exaggeration, by telling of deer poaching on Anticosti Island.

17.1

1/11/73

Well, he told me that, when we was in the Magdalenes there, he told me that he went in there (to Anticosti Island) and anchored, and he said, "If you want a deer, there's all kinds of 'em." He said, "All you had to do was go up there and walk up along the woods and fire into the woods and go in and pick up two or three deer." So they're, they're quite thick.

Tallman: You never tried it though.

Coffil: No. No, we never got over to Anticosti. But I guess there was lots of deer on it. There was another feller telling me that there was one of them draggers brought a whole load of deer into, I don't know whether that was into Quebec or Montreal. And they was selling them out there, and they had about half sold out when they, when they caught 'em and got over after them. He went in there and shot the devil out of them, you

know. I suppose they went down there over a weekend or something. But, I imagine they're quite strict there now though, you know. I imagine they got probably a game warden station.

18. The Church in Corner Brook

Coffil learned this story too when he was fishing in the Gulf of St. Lawrence between the Magdalenes and Newfoundland in the early 1960's. The closest classification for the present tale is X1611.1.8\*(a). Wind blows house. The only reference in the Baughman index is to an Alberta tale about a tornado that lifted up a house and then set it down in place again. A story with a Nebraska setting, in Roger Welsch's Shingling the Fog and Other Plains Lies (Chicago, 1972), p. 19, comes closest in spirit to Coffil's Newfoundland story. One of Welsch's informants wrote, "My parents told this one. It happened in 1896. On June the 5th a tornado in Howard County moved a church -- Our Lady of Mount Carmel -- off its foundation. The next week another big wind set it back on. They didn't call it a tall tale -- just a miracle."

18.1

9/30/71 NY

\*I don't know that they tell so many stories like this up in Newfoundland. My recollection is they don't, from the people I've met and from visiting in

Newfoundland. Bobby's wife here, she's from up there and we've visited and drove around some different places. But there was one story I heard, about this church in Corner Brook. Some feller told me, and I guess it's the truth, that some years back there was quite a storm and the wind blew quite a gale. It blowed this church from one side of the harbor across to the other side, and set it down without breaking nothing. And where it was, on this other side of the water, was up on a bluff in this grove of trees, a real pretty view. So, the church members decided to leave it there it was so nice. And it's still there today. So that was pretty good. It worked out good.

#### 19. Sabre Tooth

Coffil's discussion of this tall statement, for which there are no motifs, is significant in the way in which it indicates something of the storyteller's aesthetic, that vivid imagery is the basis for successful exaggeration humor. Coffil's aesthetic will be discussed in Chapter VIII, and the text is included there.

#### Tales Learned from His Brothers

#### 20. Autumn Leaves on the Fiddle

This and the following two stories are the only ones Coffil ever heard his brother Alden tell. The three stories form a separate unit in Coffil's repertoire:

When he tells one story it suggests another. Both times Coffil told these three stories to me, without my elicitation, they directly followed one another. In the telling of this first story to me Coffil attributes it to the man who came aboard their boat when they were in the Joggins, near the head of the Bay of Fundy. In subsequent conversations he always mentioned this as Alden's story. The following motifs all help to classify the present tale: X960. Lie: skills of remarkable person; X1749\*(ja). Disregard for passage of time; J1820. Inappropriate action from misunderstanding. This last motif, from that section of the Thompson index titled "The Wise and The Foolish," suggests the similarity between this story and fool tales. Yet, this is a tall tale, both because of its truthful guise and because of the absurdity of a fiddler imitating the sound of falling leaves. The old farmer in the story, hearing the sound of the fiddle, thinks it is fall and hurries outside to dig his potatoes. 20.1

2/17/70 (Collectors: Sheffield, Legge)

There's a girl that can imitate anything she ever heard on a fiddle. She was imitating the autumn leaves falling down and the old farmer across the road, why he ran out with his hoe and dug his potatoes all out in June.



20.2

5/17/70

Tallman: Something similar to that (the whip-cracker) where someone makes a sound, a, something about making different sounds with a fiddle?

Coffin: Oh yeh. That, all that happened up in New Brunswick. We, we was a-laying in the Joggins there and there was a feller come around there and told us that, a, that there was a girl there that played the fiddle, and she could imitate any sound you ever heard. So, she was, along in June, she was out on the piazza in front of the house and she was imitating the autumn leaves falling. The old farmer hadn't had his potatoes planted over a week, he thought it was fall and he went out and dug all the taters up.

#### 21. Ventriloquist Fiddler

In traditional folktales, fiddlers are usually associated with the devil. The virtuoso fiddler is believed to have signed a pact with the devil, and the fiddle, for instance, is said to be the devil's instrument. Thus, when Baughman compiled his Type and Motif Index of the Folktales of England and North America, all the stories that had been collected about fiddlers and fiddling were legendary rather than tall, so the fiddler's tall tale can only be classified under a general motif, X960. Lie: skills of remarkable person.

Interestingly, this brief report about a fiddler who could throw music combines two traits that have been associated in tradition with the devil, or with those who have sold themselves to the devil: ventriloquism and skillful fiddling. Among the many traits attributed to George Knox, a legendary figure in northern Maine tradition, was his skill as a ventriloquist. Knox was also believed to have signed a pact with the devil.<sup>19</sup> It is quite possible that this exaggeration, in its original form, was a believed legend rather than a tall statement. At some point in time and to some teller, it must have lost its specificity and its functional value as legend. Coffil's telling of this directly followed text 20.2.

21.1

5/17/70

Tallman: How do you make the sound of autumn leaves falling on a fiddle?

Coffil: Well now, I don't know. But they telled us that there was another feller there could throw, he could play in one end of the hall and throw the music down to the other end just like these fellers that talk so. Vntriligust or whatever they call them.... Yes, he could throw it from one end, (grinning) so I just don't know how far they can go with a fiddle making music.

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<sup>19</sup>For stories of Knox's ventriloquism, see Mitchell, "George Knox: From Man to Legend," pp. 43-46.

## 22. Realistic Painting

Bob's brother Alden was a painter as well as a fiddler, so the one time he told stories he also told this one, about a remarkably life-like painting. Many stories which can be classified under X1788. Lie: the realistic painting, have been collected, though none approximate this tale, which is notable for its simple ingenuity. In other tales with the same motif, for example, cats have eaten the heads off duck decoys and tramps have slept beneath a billboard with a picture advertising a hot stove. Here, a girl simply painted a picture of a knot on a pine board, and the knot fell out. A more specific motif is X1788.3\*. Lie: painting acts like original. The closest parallel to this Coffin tale is an 1844 account in an American newspaper, about a house painter who imitated oak grain so well on a door that the door grew leaves and acorns. Text 22.2 directly followed 21.1 in the recorded interview of May 17, 1970:  
22.1

2/17/70 (Collectors: Sheffield, Legge)

There are quite some painters around New Brunswick. I was ashore there, and there was a girl painted a knot on a junk of pine board and she gave it to the minister. And he took it home and stood it up behind the stove, and there the heat dried the board and the knot fell out on the floor. And the next morning he found it on the floor.

22.2

5/17/70

Tallman: Did you ever hear the man that could throw music?

Coffil: No, I never heard him play.... But there was another girl that done some painting up there. She painted, she could paint most anything, she, you know. She painted a knot on a nice pine board and she got it finished, why, she stood it up there on the wall, and the minister come in that night. He liked it, it looked so natural, the knot did, and he took it home. She give it to him to take home. And he took it home and stood it up behind the stove without thinking, and the next morning the knot was laying on the floor. It dried up and fell out of the board.... (chuckling) It must have been quite a real knot.

### 23. Ship Stuck in Fog

The following eleven tall tales were learned by Bob Coffil from his older brother John. John Coffil told this first one over the boat radio to another fishing boat when the two brothers and Bob's son were fishing off Digby in the late 1950's. Coffil describes this type of storytelling at some length in Chapter V, pp. 227-228. None of the tales classified under motif X1651. Lies about fog, are similar to this one about a ship getting

stuck in the fog, but parallels have been collected. For example, Sherwood's Tall Tales of the Maritimes, p. 22, includes a story from Cape Tormentine, New Brunswick, of a vessel stuck in the fog: "We sent out a call for help, but before we could be towed into port, the government ice breaker had to come out and break a path through the fog."

23.1

2/17/70 (Collectors: Sheffield, Legge)

We were fishing on Yankee Bank. We went in there on the Bank one morning. It was quite thick. When we went in on it, the boat drove her bow in the fog. And the only thing, of course, I was scared of was if the fog lifted quickly it would back-end the boat. But it lifted gradually so it wouldn't upend it.

23.2

5/17/70

Fallman: They say they have some pretty good fogs around here.

Goffil: Yeh, they do. It gets thick sometimes, especially in wet weather. We was fishing in Yankee Bank off of Digby and we run out on the Bank. It wasn't too thick going out but when we went on the Bank it was really thick and she stopped going ahead.... And we was quite lucky because if the fog had lifted quick or the

sun come out or anything, why she would've upended her. Yeh.

23.3

9/29/72

Now, we was fishing on Yankee Bank off of Digby, and it was thick fog, and there was a fishing boat from New Brunswick through there fishing outside of us somewhere, and he was talking on the telephone, and my brother was on it, John, the feller that, well, he's dead now, but he asked him where he was fishing. And he says, "Well," he says, "we're fishing on Yankee Bank." He says, "Is it foggy there?" "Yes," he says, "it's so foggy when we come on here," he says, "that on the Bank, you know," he says, "if the sun come out and it lifted quick, the fog had lifted quick, it would've upended the boat." And the next year we was down there a-trawling and this feller that was talking called us on the telephone and asked us, and he asked us if we had ever seen any thick fog on Yankee Bank since last summer. (laughter) Some foolish thing like that, you know. You can keep adding to 'em if you got the imagination to do it, you know.

#### 24. Hens in the Windstorm

The wind has blown hair off sailors in tales collected in New York, South Carolina, and Norway,<sup>20</sup> and

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<sup>20</sup>Henningsen, "The Art of Perpendicular Lying," p. 205.

has blown feathers off chickens in Texas, Oklahoma, Nebraska, and now, Nova Scotia. The motifs X1611.1.7\*(c). Wind affects chickens, and X1262\*(c). Intelligent chickens, sufficiently categorize this John Coffil tale. There are no close parallels to this story in the tall tale literature, however.

Particularly notable in Coffil's two tellings of the story are the two sailing metaphors. The featherless hen "come in under bare poles," just as sailing vessels would come into port during or after a storm under bare poles because the sails had been torn away by the wind or because the sails were hauled in when the wind became too strong. Coffil uses the same phrase in Chapter V, p. 177, in his story of the first time he was captain of the Edna Mae, an old two-master with a small engine. The other metaphor of the hen as a sailing vessel is when "she ... swung head to the wind," as ships do to ride out a storm at sea. None of the three versions of this John Coffil tale collected in Scotts Bay include these metaphors.

24.1

2/17/70 (Collectors: Sheffield, Legge)

Seems in the olden days they used to have a story going 'round that Cape Blomidon was quite a windy place down here, you know. And there was some awful hard squalls of wind there. And there was one family

that lived on top of the Cape at that time, and they had quite a big flock of hens and some of them they had brought in, some of them. There was one old hen, that they'd had for quite a while. There come this squall of wind this day and of course it took the hens going.

'Course, the old one, she grabbed a big alder bush and swung head to the wind and hung on. They thought they had lost the whole works but after the squall that old hen come in under bare poles and she'd lost every feather. After that they had to teach the hens, you know, to stay under cover and they got another flock so they wouldn't all blow away. That's the way it was there.

24.2

5/17/70

Tallman: There's one about some hens in a wind-storm or something. This is a good day for that with all the wind.

Coffil: Well, that was, that was up on Cape Blomidon and years ago it used to blow awful hard, squalls, and it still does up on the Cape there. There was an old feller by the name of Rogers up there and he done a little farming and had a flock of hens. He had one there quite a long while and then he went away and got a flock of new and brought down there, and then come this squall and it blowed everyone of the hens off but this one, old one, and she was quite well experienced



in a breeze so she grabbed hold of an alder root and swung head to it there. She, after the storm, she come in under bare poles. There wasn't a feather on her.  
(laughter)

#### 25. Bringing Back the Anchor

This is one of the two most widely known John Coffil tales. The several details in the story can all be classified as X1611.5\*. Remarkable wind blows objects and living things about. Judging from the six shorter versions of this tale collected from others, which only include the final incident about the anchor being blown out behind the ship, it may be that only this incident originated with John Coffil. In one Scotts Bay version, however, the captain hollers to heave to and has his lip blown back over the top of his head, probably the source for text no. 1 above. Two other Scotts Bay versions link this tale with the preceding one about the old hen in the windstorm. One of these versions begins, "John Coffil was in a bar one time and the men began to talk about how hard they had seen the wind blow. John spoke up and said he had only seen the wind blow hard twice." The other version of the same two tales has a similar beginning, the only difference being that the bar is in Boston.

Bob Coffil's telling of this story is quite apart

from the preceding tale of the old hen, and both times he told me this tale (one telling was not recorded) he combined three episodes. For the student collectors, he told this as two separate stories, and omitted the incident about a cow being blown off Cape Blomidon. Interestingly, two versions of the tale collected on Scotts Bay Road have John in one and Bob in the other walking out the anchor chain to retrieve the anchor. To tell such a story about oneself, however, is tantamount to the storyteller telling a fool tale in the first person, about himself. The big Swede, in the story, is a foolish character. As Coffil says, "Well, they shift them around, they shift 'em around a bit."

Coffil himself once changed his longer version of the tale to fit a particular context. In September, 1971, he told this story to the captain of a German freighter he was piloting into Port Williams. When the captain asked if there were many bears in the immediate area, Coffil responded by telling this tale, changing it so a bear rather than a cow was blown off Cape Blomidon and through the sails of a square-rigged ship. This story, with the change, was especially fitting since the freighter was laying at anchor a mile off Cape Blomidon waiting for high tide. So a cow became a bear, although in fact there are very few bears in the area. When the freighter docked at Port Williams that evening, Coffil

stayed aboard the ship for several hours before returning home. The time was spent swapping stories, factual and fictional, with the German captain and those of his mates who could also speak English.

25.1

5/17/70

But they, they claim that one time here that there was a vessel coming up the Bay of Fundy, a square-rigged ship, and all she could carry for sail was a carpet tack from the mast by the after cabin, and two fellers were there with tack hammers keeping it drove in so it wouldn't blow. And when she got up here pretty well off the Cape, why there was a cow that blew off the Cape and went right through one of the sails.... And, it really was blowing after they got up here off the high land up around the Cape there and it blew one of the big anchors off the bow the whole length of chain, and they claimed at that time that they had a big Swede on board and he got excited and ran clear out on the anchor chain and lugged the anchor back and put it on deck.

25.2

2/17/70 (Collectors: Sheffield, Legge)

There was a feller come up around the Cape around here in a square-rigged ship and it was blowing hard and he wasn't carrying too much sail on, and right off the

Cape here, and it blowed both big anchors off the bow out the whole length of chain. It seems as though the mate and bosun was Swedes and they were big heavy men, and of course they lost their heads, which the Swedes they usually do, and they run out on the chain and grabbed them anchors and lugged them back in.

25.3

2/17/70 (Collectors: Sheffield, Legge)

There was one ship coming up here and they told me that all the sail that she carried on her was two carpet tacks coming from the after cabin. Two fellers there was tacking there and driving them in to keep them from blowing away.

## 26. The Travels of John

The following John Coffil tale is of particular interest on several accounts. There is a remarkable similarity, in structure and content, in the two tape-recorded versions from Coffil. This suggests that his telling approximates that of John, and judging from the four versions collected in the Scotts Bay-Scotts Bay Road area, which include only the final episode, this was one of John's most often told stories. When I asked Bobby if his Uncle John had any favorite stories, he quickly replied, "Did the old man tell you the one about the hogshead?"

This is a long, saga-like narrative by the standards of the tall tale, especially the others in this collection. Such multi-episode tall tales have been collected in other areas. Leonard Roberts collected such a story from Jim Couch in eastern Kentucky. Couch, a teller of long European folktales, also linked shorter Irishman jokes into a longer, continuous narrative.<sup>21</sup> If we can judge from popular collections of tall tales as well, notably Boatright's Gib Morgan and Jagendorf's Johnny Darling, this saga-like or picaresque form of tall tale may have been more popular than generally recognized. The most significant fact is that where these longer tales have been collected there has existed a Märchen tradition, indicating that the storytellers, feeling comfortable with the longer narratives, have combined exaggeration motifs to create a familiar and satisfying narrative form. This was the case with Roberts' informant, Jim Couch.

No Märchen, or Jack tales, have been collected in the area of the fieldwork. The presence of this tale and a few other multi-episode tales in the collection points to the possible existence of these longer folktales in the storytelling tradition in which the Coffills participated. Although the traditional European folktales were

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<sup>21</sup>Roberts, Up Cutshin and Down Greasy, pp. 129-135.

not an active part of John Coffil's repertoire, there is the possibility that he had heard them told. Bob, on the other hand, cannot recall hearing any giant stories or Jack tales.

The first part of this tale can be classified as Type 1875. The Boy on the Wolf's Tail. Also applicable here are motifs Q467.1. Casting into water in sack (barrel) as punishment, and X1133.3. Man in barrel grabs wolf by the tail and is drawn out of danger. Motifs X1133.1. Lie: man uses remarkable means of getting out of tree stump, and X1739.4\*(a). Man shrinks until he is small enough to go through a crack in a log, both categorize the final episode. In the second episode of the tale, which Coffil normally does not tell as he heard it, the woman trying to make pancakes attempts to urinate on the flour in the pan, but because of the dry spell she cannot even do this and farts instead. It is this that blows the flour away, not the euphemistic "gust of wind" in text 26.1. In 26.2, Coffil stammers momentarily at this point and then has the woman spill the flour. He told me the original ending to this episode when I did not have a tape recorder, on September 30, 1971. Motif X1641.1\*. Dry weather affects people, is applicable here.

The four versions collected from others, as noted above, include only the final incident in which John Coffil hides in a hollow tree to get out of the rain.

Three of these use Coffil's ending: after the tree has swollen shut from the rain he thinks of the good things he has done and then the bad things, and after this he feels so small that he crawls out through a knot hole. The different locales and details in these versions suggest that John Coffil did not always tell the entire saga-like adventure. One version, set in British Columbia, probably was learned from the long tale as John sometimes told it. The others, set in the Blomidon woods and near Scotts Bay, would not have fit as endings to the complex tale. Each of the four short versions also have John hiding in the hollow tree because of a heavy rain when he is out hunting. In Coffil's tellings, he goes into the tree to sleep for the night and the rain occurs during his night's sleep.

Further proof of change is the final version, collected on Scotts Bay Road, in which John Coffil is trapped in a swollen tree near Cape Split after he has gone into the tree to escape a heavy rainstorm while he is coon hunting: "So he thought of all the good things and all the bad things he'd done. He even thought that now he couldn't vote for the Conservatives. When he thought about this the crack in the tree opened up and let him out."

To understand and appreciate fully this version, one must know something of the politics of Scotts Bay and

of Nova Scotia. Although Nova Scotia cannot be categorized as a Conservative province -- at present, for instance, the Liberals hold a substantial majority in the provincial legislature -- it has in the recent past been Conservative. From 1956 to 1970 the Tories controlled the legislature, and at the time this text was collected there were forty-one Conservative MLA's and only five Liberals. On the federal level, Nova Scotia and particularly Kings County have traditionally voted for the Tories. Despite this predominance, Scotts Bay has always been what might be characterized as a Liberal community, and some people vowed that the road to Scotts Bay from the top of Stuart Mountain, where John Coffil lived, had never been paved because of the political affiliation of its residents. Be that as it may, the road was paved shortly after the Liberals formed the government in 1970. John Coffil was a staunch Tory living on Scotts Bay Road, and probably told this short version of the story to enrage and amuse his Liberal friends.

26.1

2/17/70 (Collectors: Sheffield, Legge)

(Told in response to a question about his brother John being a storyteller!) Well, seems how he got locked up in Saint John, for something and they took him to court and they decided they'd give him, he could take his chances in a hogshead or got to jail, whichever he wanted. He



said he'd take his chances in the hogshead. They were going to shove him down over the Reversing Falls. So he went down over the falls and he landed on a junk of dykeland where there was a lot of cattle. There was one big steer, a Holstein, and he knowed that it would get curious, you know. It come up and it keep coming up. All there was, was a bunghole. So he thought if it come handy he could haul its tail in through and it would tow him somewheres. So he hauled its tail in through the barrel and it took off. And he ran into a tree and smashed the hogshead.

So, he started out west. Thought he'd get a new start. He was traveling along, he come to a house at night and there'd been quite a drought out there. He went to the house and asked the woman if she couldn't give him something to eat, and she said her husband was gone to the town to get some flour and stuff, but she would pound the barrel out and see if she could get a little flour to make some kind of pancake out of it. She got the flour in the pan all right, but she didn't have no water. She found she had no water. So about that time there come a gust of wind and blowed the flour out of the pan. So he traveled on. No good to stay there.

It come night on him, so he see a big redwood with a big season crack in it, so he crawled in the trunk of this big tree and during the night it came on a rain

storm and of course the tree swelled up and closed him in there. In the morning, all he had was a little knot hole, and he didn't know how to get out, really. But he got thinking about the bad things he done and the good things. And the bad things was so great and he felt so small, that he crawled out through the knot hole.

26.2

5/17/70

Tallman: Isn't there one story about your brother? This was over in Saint John.

Coffin: Why, that was the time they arrested him there. Yeh, he, a, they arrested him and then when they took him to court there and they told him that, they asked him which he would rather do, would he rather be locked up or take his chances in a hogshead? They was gonna put him in a hogshead and dump him over the Reversing Falls there. And he said he thought he'd rather take his chances in the hogshead. So, they dumped him over the Reversing Falls and the next thing he washed up on the meadows there in the river. And there was quite a bunch of cattle around there, and there was one big Holstein steer there and he got curious with this hogshead so he got to working over till he got right up to it. And my brother rammed his hand out through the bunghole in the hogshead and grabbed at his tail and hauled it in through and hung on to it. And he took off and 'course he hit

a tree, smashed the hogshead all to pieces and he was clear then.

So he thought he'd go out west and try it. He'd quite a hard luck to there, and he traveled out west, and when he got out there there was a drought on. And he went to a house to see if couldn't get something to eat, and the man's wife that lived there, she said that he'd gone into town to get some provisions and, but she'd, a, see if she couldn't get him a little flour, a little something to eat, and so she took the flour of her own and pounded it out, and when she got some flour in the pan, she thought she'd make some pancakes for him. Of course, the water was scarce 'cause there was a drouth on, and, well, some way or another she upset the flour out of the pan, and he had to travel on.

He traveled on that night and he come to a big redwood, a, and he shinned into it, a great big season crack in it. And during the night he got, he went to sleep and it come on a big rainstorm and it swelled the crack tight so he couldn't get out, but there was a little knot hole out through. And he figured, tried to figure some way to git out, but after a while he commenced to think of the good things he'd done and the bad things, and I guess the bad things was so many that he felt so small that he crawled out through the knot hole, traveled

on from there. I don't know whether he come back and tried it over again or not.

27. John and the Fox

This traditional tale has appeared in the literature twice previously, first in an 1878 version with a Virginia City, Nevada, setting. The same story, about a coyote in Montana, was collected by Herbert Halpert in 1945. A precise description of the story is given in motif X1218\*(aa). Fox eludes dogs by running into shed where pelts are stored, hanging upside down on wall.

27.1

5/17/70

I don't know if I ever told you one about my brother catching the foxes without shooting the foxes, with a hound up here. He lived right up here on the mountain and he fox-hunted some every winter he was home. He was going to sea at the time, but he was home and he took the dog into the woods below the house this morning, and the dog took after the fox and he circled around two or three times and then the dog started up towards the house. So he followed the dog along up towards the house and when he got there the dog was going around the house in a circle. And that morning before he left he'd had two foxes there, had 'em skinned, and he hung the skins

out to dry on the side of the house. And there was three nails there and after a while he looked up at the side of the house up at these skins and there was three foxes there, so he walked over and here was this fox. He'd run and jumped and grabbed the nail and he'd flattened out agin right between the other two.... They're quite foxy. (grinning)

Tallman: (chuckling) So did he finally, did he get him or did the fox...?

Coffil: Oh no, he got him.... Yeh, he outfoxed him.

### 28. The Wonderful Hunt

Alongside the story of mosquitoes flying off with a large kettle or some other object, this Münchhausen tale about the wonderful hunt, Type 1890. The Lucky Shot, is the most popular tall tale in North American tradition. Although the game killed by the shot and the ensuing lucky accidents vary, the tale is perhaps best identified by the closing episode, with the hunter thrown in the stream by the kick from the gun getting up to find his boots or pants full of fish. This episode is also classified as Type 1895. A Man Wading in Water Catches Many Fish in his Boots. I have collected a similar version of this story in Kings County, and proof of its popularity is the fact that Sherwood, in Tall Tales of

the Maritimes, pp. 13 and 21, prints two variants of the story, one from Pictou, Nova Scotia, the other from the Canso Strait/area. In his small, 36-page booklet, Sherwood gives no other story two tellings. Also present in Coffil's story is motif X1122.4.1\*. Lie: ingenious hunter splits bullet against sharp object, kills an animal with each half, which is one of the less common motifs in this far-traveled tale. Variants with the split bullet motif are included in Type 1B90F. Lucky Shot: Miscellaneous Forms.

28.1

6/10/70

My brother said he went hunting here when he was a young feller, and there was, a, his ammunition was pretty scarce. And in them days they didn't have, he just had one shell or bullet. He tramped around pretty near all day and he hadn't, it come into the afternoon and he was getting pretty anxious to get some game and he hadn't seen very much, and he come to this brook and he looked across on the other side of the brook and there was a big bear over there, and about that time he looked just above and there was a deer, and he commenced to figure out how he gonna get the both of them with the one shot. So, there happened to be a big sharp stone in the middle of the brook, so he figured if he aimed at that he'd split the bullet and so he'd get 'em both.

So he got this old blunderbaster up and aimed at the stone and pulled the trigger, and when he did the kick, the gun kicked pretty heavy and kicked him down in the brook, and when he got out he looked and the deer was dead there and the bear.... And he had his hip pockets full of trout. (grinning) So he done all right with ...

Tallman: That's using your shot to the best advantage, I guess.

Coffil: Oh, yeh. He got all that was in that lead.

#### 29. Piggyback Deer

Bob Coffil told this story he heard from his brother John directly following the split bullet tale. No parallels for this story have been found in the literature. The closest motif for the tale is X1234\*(b). Intelligent deer.

29.1

6/10/70

But he told me about a wounded deer back here in this Fraser's orchard. Fraser had an orchard up, Stan Fraser. And he said he went back there and they's, a, two deer there and he could only get a shot at the doe deer, and he fired at that but he only wounded it, and they both took off. And he was just back in the woods a little ways when, he was trailing them and he found the track, but one track had left and there was only one

track, and he seen ~~where~~ the buck deer had kneeled down on his front knees. He couldn't figure what was the matter, but he followed it up over the mountain and when he got up on top of the mountain and found it level again, why he found, he seen where this doe deer jumped off, was walking along with the other one. He figured that the buck must've kneeled down and took this doe on his back and lugged him (her) up over the side of the mountain and helped him (her) along.

### 30. Weak Gun, Tough Moose

Again, no parallels are to be found for this tale, though it comes closest in spirit to X1796.2.2. Lie: man runs as fast or faster than bullet. Here, however, the emphasis is on a weak gun rather than on a slow bullet or a fast man, so the proper classification for the story is X1121.8\*. Lie: miscellaneous gun motifs. The tall tale most like this story that has been collected in the area comes from Scotts Bay, about a goose that repeatedly coughed out bullets shot at it until the hunter was out of ammunition. The moose then walked away nonchalantly. This Scotts Bay story may be a variant of the present tale and may also have originated with John Coffin. Another telling of the story here is included in Chapter V, p. 143.



30.1

6/10/70

He had an old thirty-eight fifty-five Winchester rifle and he always claimed that she was weak or didn't have enough power. He went in one day there hunting and he come back out and he said that he came to a great big cow moose laying down, and he had six shot in the magazine and he started in and he fired six shot at her. And after a while she got up and stretched kind of and walked away. And he went over and the six bullets was laying there in the bed where she'd got up, flattened out, but her hide was so tough that they wouldn't penetrate into it and he never got her. So I guess she, she couldn't have had much power. (grinning)

### 31. Frying Doughnuts in Bear Fat

The ending to this story, told in a natural setting, would probably be more graphic. Instead of the fat dripping from the bear's "stomach," or from an anatomically unspecified place, it would drip from its "ass" or "asshole" or "bung-hole." This is to be expected because the general motif, X1124. Lie: the hunter catches or kills game by ingenious or unorthodox method, includes many of the obscene or scatological tall tales in tradition. Other motifs for the present tale are X1221. Lies about bears, and X1005. Lie: remarkable cook.

Coffil gives this description of how his brother got the story: "My brother John told that. He was back there. He worked back in the woods there. He had a cabin and camp back there one winter and he chopped and his wife stayed in the cabin. And he come out with this story in the spring, so I don't know whether (it's true or not but) that's where it come from though." Coffil's son Bobby further explained, "That was another one he liked to tell a lot. Every spring when Jack came over he'd tell me that one. The bear came and she put the kids out the window. Yeh."

31.

2/17/70 (Collectors: Sheffield, Legge)

There was a family over in Parrsboro, in back of Parrsboro there, and the way they tell me that, they lived in a log cabin back in the woods. And this woman's husband and her son left out for the woods in the morning and after they gone a while, the little girl -- proved she was in the cabin -- she looked and this big bear was looking in through the door. She (the woman) put the little girl out through the window, she did to go for her husband. When he came back, why, the bear was jammed in the door and she stuck the hot poker down its throat, and she had a pan under its stomach catching the fat and she was frying doughnuts.

31.2

5/17/70

Tallman: One I don't remember at all, it's something about a bear getting jammed in a door.

Coffin: Oh yeh, huh. It was over up back of Parrisboro there on the Lynn Mountain somewheres. A man took his family back there and he had a log cabin back there, and he was cutting wood up in the woods there, and his wife, after he went to the woods in the morning, and they had one young boy. He, a, went to the woods and after he went, why, she looked out and here's this bear looking in the door, so she dumped the boy out the window and told him to run and get his father, and, she, away he went. And when, a, when her husband come back to the cabin, why, she had him jammed in the door and she shoved the poker down his throat and she was frying doughnuts with the fat.

### 32. Wife Trained as Ox

Several motifs apply to this story: S62. Cruel husband; S410. Persecuted wife; X940. Lie: person of remarkable strength; and Q285. Cruelty punished. Motif J2081#3. Fool exchanges wife with ox, would seem to refer to this tale, but the man here is not depicted as a fool, and the emphasis in this motif is a case of mistaken identity, of the man thinking that his wife is

the ox. No parallels to this tall tale have been reported elsewhere, although in the past it has not been uncommon for people to work alongside or in place of draft animals in times of need or hardship. Perhaps the closest in spirit to the present story is motif X1770\*(a). Boy hitched to plow with horse shies at piece of flying paper, runs off with horse and plow. See also J2013(b).

32.1

5/17/70

But they was telling me a story when I was just a little feller, somebody, and I don't know who it was (about). I guess it was a true story however. There was a feller somewhere up the Valley here along towards the mountain. He was out of wood and at that time he had no team or anything, so he made a short yoke and he hooked his wife and made a big, one of those long sleds, and he yoked her up and started hauling some wood down from the mountain. He got along all right for two or three days, but he, she was going so well after he got her toughened up though that he, a, thought he might as well jump on and ride, so he jumped on a load of wood and took to riding. But the women got after him and they had him arrested for, for, a, cruelizing his wife by jumping on the sled, and they bound him over to the peace. But

I never found out who that was. They never did tell me who it was so I don't know.

Tallman: That was just right up here somewhere?

Coffil: Yeh, up in the Valley somewhere.

T: It would have been all right if he hadn't jumped on the load.

C: Oh yes, if he hadn't jumped on while they was hauling wood, why I guess they didn't bother him, but when he jumped on they thought that it was, (chuckling) it was-too much for her.

### 33. Harvesting Wood

This tale, in the telling, followed the previous one after a pause of a few seconds, and is told about the same anonymous man who trained his wife to haul wood. It is the last of the tall tales in the collection and the last of those that Bob Coffil learned from his brother John. Although this is a tall tale, it too has an affinity to the fool tale. The anonymous man, despite his cleverness, bungles what he set out to do. Neither this story nor the previous one could be told very well in the first person because the humor is based on foolish action by the protagonist. Motif I1081.2\*. Lie: remarkable logging methods, comes closest to describing this one, yet all the tales listed under this motif in the Baughman index are Paul Bunyan stories from written rather than

oral sources. No specific motifs can be found for the man's foolish method of getting logs down the mountain. J2050. Absurd short-sightedness, is a general motif for this aspect of the story.

33.1

5/17/70

But the next winter, why he had to find out some other way of getting his wood down, so he went up in the fall and he took a junk of chain up and he built a raft and chained it to a tree up there at the top of the mountain. And he chopped pretty near all winter, and towards spring he cut the damn tree down and let the raft go. And it come down through a feller's orchard there and took three rows of apple trees out. (chuckling)

### 3. Other Folktales

Only four traditional folktales collected from Coffil are not based on exaggeration humor. This illustrates the extent to which Coffil has selected from a broad storytelling tradition a particular kind of narrative, the tall tale, and has made no effort to remember other humorous folktales. The storytelling tradition in this part of Nova Scotia extends well beyond exaggeration humor. Pat and Mike stories were popular for a long time and are still told by many people, especially older men and women. Jokes of all kinds, from

the obscene to those based on clever puns, are told by all ages. Fool tales are not uncommon, and shaggy dog stories and riddle-jokes are popular among young people. Jokes and anecdotes about ministers and priests are often told, particularly by the ministers and the priests and the active church members.<sup>22</sup> And more prevalent than all of these humorous folktales are the legends and belief tales based on supernatural phenomena, about headless ghosts, restless ghosts, haunted houses, buried treasure, and the like.<sup>23</sup> These believed stories, however, are not part of the storytelling tradition as it is defined in the

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<sup>22</sup>For example, Ernest L. Eaton of Upper Canada, Kings County, has kept a small notebook of joke and anecdote motifs for the past fifty years. Each time he hears a story that he wants to remember and tell, he writes in his notebook the kernel of the story, such as "hungry sharks chase sheep in Hall's Harbour pasture" and "counting the nuts in cemetery." The stories in Mr. Eaton's notebook include examples of all genres of humorous narrative. Predominant are jokes about Irishmen and Scotsmen, jokes about ministers and priests, many of which he has learned from clergymen, and jokes about colored people. This latter category is now off-limits because of his and other people's awareness of the derogatory implications of some of these stories. A notebook like Mr. Eaton's offers an interesting personal view of stories and storytelling over the past fifty years. As Mr. Eaton explains, the kind of stories that are told has not changed noticeably, but the places and occasions for leisurely storytelling have dwindled somewhat. Mr. Eaton's attitudes toward stories and storytelling will be considered briefly in Chapters VII and VIII.

<sup>23</sup>See Helen Creighton, Bluenose Ghosts (Toronto, 1957), for a representative collection of Nova Scotia legends and belief tales; many of which are based on supernatural phenomena. For Kings County, see Tallman, Belief and Legend from Northern Kings County, pp. 102-30, 45-52.

present work. They will be discussed in the final section of this chapter.

Of the four non-tall folktales collected, three are directly or indirectly related to the tall tales in Coffil's repertoire. The catch tale is told in the first person, and, like the tall tale in some situations, it is told to fool the listener. Similarly, the fool tale is made specific by being told in the first person. It was, we are told, Coffil's own experience with a foolish person, and because of this personal framework within which he sets the traditional tale, the punch line to this story catches the listener by surprise. Rather than the groan that would normally greet the punch line, the listener laughs. The anecdote about the cross-eyed man and the near-sighted man, though obviously traditional, is told specifically about two old-timers from Parrisboro, one of whom was "kind of an ugly old feller." Coffil learned the story from his brother John, from whom he also, of course, acquired many tall tales.

The last of these four folktales pretty much speaks for itself in indicating how Coffil has selected from tradition only humor of exaggeration to tell and to create. Knowing that Pat and Mike stories and other fool tales about Irishmen had been and still are popular



in Nova Scotia and Kings County,<sup>24</sup> I asked Coffil if he ever heard or told any of these stories. "I have heard some stories about that," he said. "There was a lot of stories about that." But he never told these stories. They were fun to listen to, and he laughed at the punch line of a good Irishman joke like the next man, but the stories did not lend themselves to first person narration so he never remembered them to tell himself. Perhaps because such stories lacked the guise of realism, they lacked the substance needed to create a vivid picture in the mind.

#### 34. Pedalling Her Behind

When I returned to the area in early August, 1972, I first saw Bob Coffil the day after we moved into the house we rented. I was walking home from the store with a sack of groceries when I saw him on the roof of his house, replacing loose shingles. It was very windy, and we had difficulty hearing each other during the brief time I stopped to chat, or rather, holler. Given such an ideal context, a tall teller shingling his roof, I hoped that he would finally prove to have the "shingling the fog" tale in his repertoire, a tale I have collected

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<sup>24</sup>For a good sample of Irishman and Pat and Mike stories from Nova Scotia, collected primarily from Negro informants, see Arthur Huff Fauset, Folklore from Nova Scotia, Memoirs of the American Folklore Society Vol. XXIV (New York, 1931), pp. 52-67.

several times in the area and one of the few most popular and widespread tall tales in oral tradition. This was not to be the case, although I did later collect a Scotts Bay version of the tale attributed to John Coffil.

Coffil had not known when I was returning to the area to complete my work with him and had no idea I would be living only a quarter mile up the road. We exchanged pleasantries, and then I shouted through the wind to him, sitting near the top of his roof, "Got any new stories?" He hollered back, "No, not very many. But ..." And then he realized that I could barely hear him as a gust of wind rushed by, so he shinned down from his perch to the roof on the front veranda. The comic absurdity of a storyteller holding forth from atop a roof in a thirty mile wind was apparent to neither of us, but what was apparent to him was that, first, we could not hear each other very well, and second, that the story he was about to tell was slightly risqué, "kind of a dirty one," and if the wind suddenly quit he didn't want to be heard by anyone else shouting a dirty story from the top of his roof at the top of his voice. A fiddler on the roof risks no embarrassment that his music might fall on the wrong ears; a storyteller on the roof does face that risk. Besides, the story he was about to tell, a catch tale, required verbal interaction between teller and listener. The precise timing

and casual, factual narration needed to set the listener up for the punch line could not succeed very well if the telling was to be a shouting match. And "catch" me he did. We both laughed when he finished the story.

Catch tales are classified under Type 2200 and motif Z13. I have found no parallels for this story but it appears to be traditional. Coffil may have heard it recently or it might even have occurred as he explains it in the story. Nonetheless, the formula for this type of folktale is traditional; the listener is forced to ask a particular question or make a specific comment, to which the teller returns a ridiculous answer, often with the humor of the answer based on a pun, as in the present story.

34.1

8/8/72

\*Tallman: Got any new stories?

Coffil: No, not very many. But ... (at this point he shinned down the roof, to the edge of the roof of the front porch. This took about fifteen seconds.) There is one I could tell you. It's kind of a dirty one, a dirty story. This happened just the other day. A feller told me about this fourteen year old girl in to Kentville, and she was just fourteen but was pedalling her behind all around town. He asked me what I would do if that

was my daughter. He didn't know what to do. Well, (chuckles) I told him....

T: Well, what did you tell him?

O: Well now, you tell me. What would you do if that was your girl?

T: I guess I'd at least give her a good talking to.

O: Well, I said I'd take her damn bicycle away from her and sell it. Then she wouldn't ... (laughter)

35. Wrong-Way Moose

The folklorist would classify this as a fool tale or numskull story. Applicable motifs are J2210. Logical absurdity based upon certain false assumptions, and J2700. The easy problem made hard. Because Coffil tells this in the first person, as his experience, it functions much like a tall tale: the setting is realistic and believable, and not until the punch line does the listener know that he has been set up and taken. In this manner, the story functions as a catch tale and as the tall tale does in certain storytelling contexts. When I reminded Coffil of this story three years after it was recorded, he only remembered it vaguely after I told the entire tale, a good indication that this is not an active part of his repertoire.

35.1

2/17/70. (Collectors: Sheffield, Legge)

I was up in the woods hunting over in Cumberland County. I come up on a feller who shot a moose. He was trying to haul it out by the tail, caught it in a snag, and broke its tail off. And I asked him why he didn't take it by the horns and haul it out. He said, "I wasn't going that way."

## 36. Cross-Eyed Man and Near-Sighted Man

This story was first told during an interview session, when Goffil was explaining that all towns have their storytellers. As he said, "There's always somebody to tell." By his telling this local anecdote, which he learned from his brother John, he implicitly stated that every town not only has its storytellers but also its characters about whom stories are told. A general classification for the story is X120. Humor of bad eyesight. A Newfoundland parallel to this story has been reported. See Q68-369-4, Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive, (MUNFLA). A new motif has been given the story by MUNFLA: [J1499.15.1.] "Why don't you (go where you're looking?" said to cross-eyed man.

36.1

9/29/72

Now over here in Parrsboro there was two old

fellers, and one was cross-eyed and the other feller was just about blind. Jerome Lovely was one feller's name and I forget the other one. They was going a trip walking across the river when the tide was out, and one feller ran into the other feller. One feller, he turned around and he said, "Why in the hell," he says, "don't you look where you're going?" And the other feller, he turned and he said, "Why don't you go where you're looking?" (laughing) They walked right into each other.

### 37. Irishman Sails to America

The many jokes about the foolish Irishman and about Pat and Mike have never been classified or even adequately collected or published. This story can only be given the Baughman motif X621\*. Jokes about the Irish. As a fool tale, it comes under J2210. Logical absurdity based upon certain false assumptions. Notable in Coffin's telling of the story is his unsure narration. This is not an active part of his repertoire.

37.1

6/14/73

I heard Pat and Mike was coming across the Atlantic, wasn't it? And, no, I guess that was just an Irishman coming across, and he was coming to England (America). They run into a lot of this green seaweed on the water, acres of it, and this Irishman, he -- it

might've been Pat and Mike, I forget now -- anyway, he jumped right overboard, and when he went he says, "Fare-ye-well old Ireland," he says, "here's the green fields of America." And he, he (chuckling) was so anxious to get to America he jumped overboard. I've heard quite a lot but I can't remember. I can't remember, I get so I can't remember too good. I forget some quick about things. It makes me feel stupid, too, that I'll meet somebody that I know quite well and then I can't think of the name to save my neck. I can't call them by name.

#### 4. Practical Jokes and Tricks

This part of the collection includes two story cycles, one about the practical jokes Bob Coffil perpetrated at the woods camp on Cape Blomidon, and the other about Clyde Smith and the tricks he has played throughout his life.

The practical joke has received little attention from folklorists, probably because of the extreme esoteric nature of the tradition in specific folk groups, and the few collectors who have published texts of practical joke stories have failed to consider the relationship between the story and the event it describes.<sup>25</sup> A dis-

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<sup>25</sup>The published material in North America on pranks and practical jokes is slight indeed, and difficult of access because practical joke stories are never identified or indexed as such. The only exceptions to

ussion of this folklore genre, as behavior and narrative, and its relationship to the trick -- fooling someone for personal, material gain as opposed to fooling someone for the purpose of having fun at that person's expense -- will be included in the introduction to the cycle of Clyde Smith stories. First, however, it is to Coffil and the pranks he played at the woods camp that we turn.

#### The Woods Camp Stories

Coffil's woods camp stories all date to the time in the early 1940's when a saw mill operated near the base of Cape Blomidon. Logging for the mill was done in the woods atop Cape Blomidon, extending several miles

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this practice are I. Sheldon Posen, Michael Taft, and Richard S. Tallman, Index to Hoosier Folklore Bulletin (1942-1945) and Hoosier Folklore (1946-1950), Folklore Forum Bibliographic and Special Studies No. 10 (Bloomington, 1973), where practical joke material is indexed both as narrative and as pranks and practical jokes, and Jan Harold Brunvand, The Study of American Folklore: An Introduction (New York, 1968).

Perhaps the most notable inclusion of prank anecdotes is to be found in Vance Randolph's several folktale collections from the Ozarks. See, for example, Randolph, The Talking Turtle and Other Ozark Folk Tales (New York, 1957). Practical joke material in journals is for the most part derived solely from the traditions of the college campus and the army barracks. For examples, see Wayland D. Hand, "Going to See the Widow," Western Folklore, XVII (1958), 275-276; Alfred B. Rollins, "College Folklore," New York Folklore Quarterly, XVII (1961), 163-173; and Anonymous, "Scatological Lore on Campus," Journal of American Folklore, LXXV (1962), 260-262. Also see Brunvand, The Study of American Folklore, pp. 233-235; and J. Barre Toelken, "The Folklore of Academe," in ibid., pp. 317-337.



toward Scotts Bay. The old logging road between the top of the Cape and Scotts Bay is now used by snowmobilers in the winter, and, as mentioned in the life history, a large provincial park on Cape Blomidon opened in the summer of 1973.

Times change, but the stories remain. These four stories all concern lies or practical jokes that Coffil told and carried out during the few winters he spent working in the woods and at the mill. As Coffil said, in the woods camps "They used to tell a lot of them stories. I think them woods camps was made for it." The woods camp provided a congenial atmosphere for storytelling, lying, and practical joking, especially for a man who excelled in these pastimes, as Coffil did and does: "That was a good time then. I had the best time of my life in there. There was lying going on there. Some good lying."

The stories themselves, as folk narratives, are personal experience stories or memorates. They are not, it should be emphasized, merely disjointed bits of reminiscence. Coffil has told them before, at the store, and at other places and other times when stories have been told. He has not told them as often, however, as the tall tales. The practical joke stories are well-structured, and illustrate the narrator's ability to organize his own experiences and relate them with humor

to others. One stylistic device that separates the exceptional storyteller from lesser narrators is a masterful use of dialogue. Such dialogue is in full evidence in these tales.

### 38. Working Hard To Go Skating

This story was told to the fieldworker twice, and was recorded once. It was the first story recorded in the interview session of September 29, 1972, and after I turned on the tape recorder I first asked for another woods camp story (no. 40). Instead, Coffil told this story, about the time he fooled a co-worker into believing that if they worked hard and finished early, the woods boss would let them go ice skating. This is somewhat unusual as a practical joke story because the entire emphasis in Coffil's narration is on the action rather than on the man being fooled and later realizing it. We never learn what his reaction was to being fooled.

38.1

9/29/72

Tallman: And you scared somebody, what, you scared somebody right out?

Coffil: I better not. I better leave that one out. I'll tell you about the feller, I told you, was going skating. He liked to skate pretty well, in there, in working in the camp. He was driving a pair of cattle

for my father-in-law. My father-in-law was doing logging, you know, he was cutting the logs and hauling them in to the mill. His son here, Gerald, the feller that worked in this place here, well he was in there too. He was kind of a woods boss. And they, he had a big pair of black cattle and he hired a feller from Medford way here to drive the cattle, and he liked to skate awful well. He was all the time on the rink when he wasn't in the woods.

I was rushing around there one day before dinner, and he come in and wanted to know what I was rushing for. Well I says, "Gerald told me that if we worked hard and got through, could get through early and get a good day's work done by around four o'clock, we could all go skating that night." So, he took off, went on back in the woods where Gerald was coming out. And he come up, shovelled up about twenty bags of sawdust to take back and put on the hills to keep the sleds from running too hard when they loaded. And he (Gerald) come over to me, and he says, "What in the hell is the matter with this feller driving the cattle?" He says, "I met him going back in the woods running the cattle." Well I said, "I don't know." I says, "He must have felt he was behind or something, to catch up." But anyway, he, Gerald, he shovelled up this sawdust to take back in the woods and he went over to the camp.

And while he was back over in the camp, this feller come out with a load and he fired the load of logs off, and he says, "I should shovel up some sawdust to take back, or, to bed the cattle with." They was bedding the cattle in the barn with sawdust. Well I says, (chuckling) well I says, "There's no need to shovel up any sawdust." I says, "There's lots right there." So he muckled on, and hauled the sawdust onto the sleds and took it all and put it in the barn. And away he went, back in the woods.

And pretty soon Gerald come out and said, "Where in the hell'd the sawdust go?" (chuckling) I said, "I don't know, but," I says, "I seen Crowell getting some sawdust for the bedding for the cattle in the barn," I says. And he went over in the barn and there's the sawdust. So he got that out and put it on another team, took it back in the woods.

But anyway, he run the cattle all day and he hauled all day. We wasn't going skating a-tall, you know. (laughing) They got a lot of logs hauled that day. He worked like a slave. But they never knowed what in the hell he was rushing so much for till after, I told him after while why he was rushing. But damn foolish things like that will come to me head, you know. But, I knowed he wanted to go skating bad. He was a great feller for going skating.

## 39. The Toothless Saw

During the session when the woods camp stories were recorded, this story directly followed the preceding one without interruption or comment from me, with only a pause of a few seconds while we laughed about the man who worked hard so he could go skating. Coffil had told me this one twice before, once when I had used up all the tape I had with me, another time when I had no tape recorder. Coffil's remark that triggered the practical joke in this instance was intended only as a spur-of-the-moment tall tale. But the tale was acted upon and resulted in the practical joke and, ultimately, in this practical joke story. For another humorous incident based on the repartee between Coffil and Morris Porter, see Chapter V, p. 203.

39.1

9/29/72

Then we was sawing there, and the people that run the mill, Bigelows down here, they put a new, a brand new rotary saw on. They put it on that morning, and this mill was running and they was sawing, and there was an old feller name of Frank Weaver down here, and he come in with Morris Porter. He was hauling slab wood for a wood pile. And every morning he'd come in, he'd ask me what was new and I'd tell him, and if I got a

chance I'd holler afore he did and ask him what was new, and he'd tell me outside.

So, this morning he come in and he hollered -- Mr. Weaver was on the sled with him -- and he said, "What's new this morning?" "Well," I said, "quite a lot new this morning." I said, "Hell, the thing happened ..." This feller driving the mail here (now), he was lugging the lumber away from the mill. But he says, "What happened?" "Well," I says, "Norris," I says, "brought a big crowbar around and leans it up agin that new saw." I says, "They started the mill and (laughing) that cleaned every tooth out of it." This Weaver, he went right in and talked to Jim Bigelow. He was sawing, running the saw, and they was sawing then. He never said "ah yes" or "ahum" to him, but he talked to him all the while they was loading up with those slabs.

And they went out, and when they come down from the top of the Cape, the mail driver was down there. Noel Blinds drove the mail here then. And he was down a-gathering up the mail, and Weaver got in with him and drove up as far as his place. And he told him about the (laughing), about this crowbar dropping in the saw. And they had some relations here in Canning, the Bigelows did, so the mail driver went right to Canning. Of course, he seen one of 'em, and he said something about ruining the saw with a crowbar. And at noon it was back

down, and Bigelow's wife walked clear in there to the mill to see what it had (done) to this saw.

So they, they laugh about it now. It was, really, I told 'em a joke. I didn't tell 'em (expecting to fool them), and Weaver, if he'd been smart, he was standing right there talking to the sawyer and there was nothing wrong with the saw. But the only feller that showed any sign of madness was Norris here, the mail driver. It was about two weeks there he wouldn't hardly speak. It was a hell of a thing to do. But Christ, they was all lying, you know, every time, every chance they got they'd lie. But that's how quick that spread now, went right to Canning and right back there by noon.

#### 40. Scared Out of the Woods

All of the stories from the woods camp and saw mill had been told to me previous to when they were recorded on September 29, 1972; in some cases I had heard them twice before. The time between these earlier tellings and when they were recorded, however, was sufficient so that Coffil was not simply telling abridged versions of the stories at the tape recorder. He told them to me while we sat on the enclosed front porch of his house, watching the tide come in on a sunny September afternoon: a natural context for collecting folklore, to be sure, and pretty natural on any account if one

teller and one listener can be considered a storytelling event. The tape recorder, by this time, was an accepted and unobtrusive neutral participant in our talk, and the relationship between the two of us was more natural than it had been when I first collected tall tales from Coffin. For these reasons, the practical joke stories perhaps succeed better as aesthetic entities than do the tall tales, most of which were recorded in 1970.

Like the previous story, this one concludes with an after-the-fact comment on what happened. Depending on who comprised the audience, this conclusion might or might not take its present form. Such stories do as a rule end with a summarizing comment on the event and the actors in it. If told as a story of reminiscence with others present who had been part of the event itself, this conclusion would probably be in the form of conversation, with the others also commenting and chuckling. Told to persons who had no previous knowledge of the event -- to folklore collectors, other house visitors, other men during times of rest and talk when he fished and freighted on the Bay of Fundy and the Gulf of Maine -- the conclusion would be much as it is here.

The practical joke in this case focuses on a situation that was not uncommon in the lumberwoods: the desire or need to scare a bad worker out of the woods, or to make life in the woods so difficult for



him that he will leave voluntarily. That Coffil succeeded is beyond question, although his intent was more to have fun than actually to frighten his co-worker into leaving.

40.1

9/29/72

Tallman: What was the one about chasing someone out of the woods? You wouldn't have to mention any names.

Coffil: Well, there was a feller working in there and he was quite quiet. He was awful quiet. And he was all the time picking his fingernails. And there was a feller from outside (the immediate area) in there, and every once in a while he'd say something slurry to him, you know. And this feller'd just grin. So, anyway, he was, he was out a-helping me brow logs out at the, where the mill was. And they wasn't running the mill at that time, but we was browng 'em all in brows, you know, to be ready. They didn't have no water to run her. And he wouldn't, he was rolling them in crossways and every way. And I'd have to get 'em back on the skids. He was no, really no help to me. And Forrest Lyons, he was hauling logs out of the woods.

So I, all the while he was back in the woods for a load of logs I got to thinking what in the hell, how I could get rid of this feller. So, I seen Forrest coming out and it come to me. And when he got out there,

we was just standing there waiting for the load of logs, I asked Forrest, I says, "What do you think of this feller that sets on the bench and picks his fingernails?" Forrest says, "I don't know." He said, "He's a hard feller to tell anything about." "Well," I says, "I'll tell you what I think." I says, "I believe that he'd shoot a man in a minute." This feller was standing there, and he was getting pretty interested too. (chuckling) Well, Forrest, he helped me out all he could. "Well," he said, "he acts queer." Well I says, "Look," I says, "I wouldn't want him to have anything on me and catch me outside that camp door after dark." And of course we kept it going there.

And, I didn't think he was going to take it or anything, but, by Jesus, the next morning he never showed up. I went in, out to the brow soon as I got me breakfast and this feller never come out. And at noon they told me he got on the sleds and went out. And, the feller that was going out for a load of tote there with the double team, and oats and stuff for the horses, he went out with him. And when he come back he told me that he asked him if he thought that this feller would shoot. So it scared him right out of the woods. He got scared and went. He had been saying a few things to him.

But Forrest got quite a laugh out of it. He, (chuckling) he got right into it too, just as I started

it. "By God," he said, "he might be a bad feller," he said. I said, "I wouldn't wonder if he's got a gun there somewheres." And he, he never said a word, but he took it all in. But he went the next morning.

My father-in-law, my wife was down there keeping house for him that winter. His wife was dead. He wondered why this feller left. He went up and got his money and went. And I never told him for a long while, two or three years. I think he mistrusted it or something, but every once in a while he'd bring it up, you know, about this feller leaving and why he left and he had nothing to leave for. After a while I told him he was no good to me. They hauled just as many logs afterwards and I piled them up. I saved his day's wages and his grub. But I done it more for the hell of it than anything else, you know, when I started it, but I never thought it would scare him out.

#### 41. Saltpeter in the Tea

The two practical joke anecdotes included here are inseparable in the recorded telling of them. The first one, about making the man believe that John Coffin was an outlaw, I had heard before in a longer, unrecorded version. At one point in this previous telling of the story, the dupe is so frightened by a command of John's that he begins to run away and races right into one of

the horses, knocking it down. The second story in this text, about saltpeter in the tea, I had not heard previously. It is the second story -- Bob Coffil's -- which is elaborated here. The first one is little more than a prologue, establishing the fact that the man, called Stinnochio by John Coffil, was the gullible sort toward whom practical jokes are often directed. Any folk group in which practical jokes are played, such as that at the woods camp, can be expected to have men noted for practical joking and also those whose personalities seem to invite the pranks of others. In this sense, Stinnochio is a good example of a traditional dupe. Notably, the dupe is an outsider, as is also the case in nos. 38 and 40.

The threat of saltpeter being put in the food to produce impotence is often rumored where groups of men work and eat together. Male students in college dormitories, for instance, talk about saltpeter in the mashed potatoes, and some of these students no doubt have not eaten the potatoes to protect their fragile virility. Similar rumors are common in army barracks. For a brief historical survey and a sociopsychological discussion of saltpeter lore, see George W. Rich and David F. Jacobs, "Salt-peter: A Folkloric Adjustment to Acculturation Stress," Western Folklore, XXXII (1973), 164-179.

41.1

9/29/72

Tallman: Was there always someone, you know, in there or wherever you went who liked to or did pull tricks like that? Like that Smith fellow who obviously did.

Coffil: Yeh, I think there's always somebody in every camp around the woods. They used to, a lot of them stories. I think them woods camps was made for it. Now, we had a feller come from down in Windsor somewheres and I don't know his name yet. But my brother, he was in there a few days afore I got in there a-working, and he called him Stinnochib. He, he was driving a snig horse for my brother, snigging the logs out in the brow so they could load them on the sleds, you know, and my brother was chopping, sawing, and he was driving the horse. So, somebody told him that me brother was an outlaw at one time. And he got back there in the woods, and Christ, and he was scared to death and he'd do anything my brother told him to. If he'd said "Chop the head off that horse!" I think he'd have chopped it off, you know, 'cause he was scared. He thought he, he really thought he was an outlaw. And this went on afore I found out anything about it, a day or two.

And anyway, why, it worked along anyway, and he used to, I don't know how he got to Windsor before this,

but he, he had a wife in Windsor. And Christ, it snowed, all the week there, and my father-in-law came in with a load of tote stuff, grub and stuff for the next week. We went all in the camp to get supper there. It was Saturday night, and we was setting there waiting. They had a cook house and a bunk house besides, and we was waiting for them to holler. Him and I was setting right together there, and I don't know what in the hell got into me at the time, but I says, (chuckling) "You know what the old feller brought in today?" And he says, "No," he says, "I don't know what he brought." I says, "He brought in a whole salt sack full of saltpeter." I says, "It's a hell of a thing to do." I says, "I'm going out home tonight and," I says, "I don't want no damn saltpeter." And I says, "He told the cook I think to put it in our tea tonight." (laughing) I says, "Do you know what I'm going to do?" I knowed Joe Aldrich who was doing the cooking and he went to sea. I knowed him. I says, "I'm going over and tell the cook not to put none in my tea." "Well," he says, "I'll go over with you." He says, "I'm going home tonight."

We went over and I went in, and I says, "Joe," I says, "don't you put none of that damn stuff in my tea tonight." I says, "I'm going out and," I says, "I don't want none of that." "Well," he says, "being it's you, I won't put none in." So I said, "All right.

"Thank you, Joe." I just turned around. I had the damnedest job to keep my face straight but I turned around and headed for the door. He says, "Wait for me." He says, "Joe," he says, "don't put none in mine." He said, "I'm married too," he says, "and I'm going home." (laughing) By Jesus. I walked right out and walked back to the cabin. He walked right back out. But Joe says, "Well, bein's it's you gotta walk clear to Windsor."

(chuckling) We went back in the camp, but they all got ahold of it, you know. They heard me, some of them heard me when I told him I was going over. He, he come out that night and the snow was about that deep (about waist deep), and he walked right straight to Windsor. He walked to Windsor and Sunday afternoon he walked back in. (The distance from Cape Blomidon to Windsor is approximately thirty miles by land.) He must have been some tired. I said, "What did you do, walk clear to Windsor?" And he says, "Yessir," he says, "I walked straight to Windsor." There wasn't too many cars at that time, here, you know. And the roads, I don't believe they was plowed. No, they wasn't, they wasn't plowed down here. They might have been plowing the main road. But he walked clear to Windsor.

But those boys, the fellers in the camp, got some damn laugh out of that, you know. He never brought in no saltpeter. I said, "He brought in a whole bagful

of saltpeter." But this Joe, the cook there, got as big a kick out of it as anybody. His face just got red as a beet when I told him, but he stung right to it. "No," he says, "Bob," he says, "bein's it's you we'll just forget it."

T: Well now, the cook didn't know anything about it before you came up.

C: No, he didn't know a word about it.

T: (chuckling) That would've taken some good acting to ...

C: But he got pretty red in the face when I tell him but he pulled her off. He took just as if he'd, you know, if they did bring it in.

#### Clyde Smith Stories

The following eight stories all relate the experiences of Clyde Smith of Campobello Island, New Brunswick. Coffil and his son Bobby, who owned and worked a fishing boat together until Coffil retired, met Smith in 1952 and hired him on as a third man to work on their boat. They heard these stories from Smith at this time, except for the one incident that happened that winter. Smith was, in Coffil's estimation, one of the best storytellers he has ever heard and seen, and Coffil enjoys telling these stories of Smith's exploits and tricks.



The term trick is here used in a particular sense, and is different from the practical jokes and the practical joke anecdotes Coffil tells about himself. The purpose of a practical joke is to fool someone, to have fun at the expense of someone else; the purpose of a trick is to get something for nothing by fooling someone. For a practical joke to succeed, it helps if the dupe knows, after the fact, that he has been fooled. Only then can the practical joker and others in the group fully appreciate the joke. For a trick to succeed, the dupe or the person tricked need never know that he has been tricked because the primary purpose has not been humor at someone else's expense but the possession of some tangible, material object. This is illustrated well by the first anecdote, about how Smith obtained a new fur coat for the asking. Likewise, the trickster need not function within or be sanctioned by any folk group; the practical joker, on the other hand, needs the group to sanction and appreciate what he does. The humor of the practical joke, as an event, cannot be enjoyed by the joker alone; the joke must be shared with the group as it happens, whether the joke is a group endeavor or the work of one person alone. The trick, as an event, is humorous after the fact, when the trickster or another storyteller, like Coffil, tells about it.

That Smith was a good storyteller and trickster is apparent from these stories. He was a convincing man of talk, as this description from Coffil explains:

I didn't know him actually but a short time, but he could talk. He could tell you something, and he could take you on a trip from down there up around fishing off of Newfoundland or anywheres and tell you -- he never went and never done it, but he memorized what he heard and he could take you on a trip right up around and just what they'd done from the time they left there and all what kind of nets they had. Every strange dragger come in there and he'd go down and spend the evening, and by the time the evening was over he'd memorized what they told him. He'd take them off, he'd ask them about the going up around and they'd tell him the whole thing. And after a few times you could see how easy it would be for him to set right down and tell you about going up and dragging fish somewheres, how many they got, and you'd go in there and you'd think he'd drug fish all his life, but he never. He couldn't, we took, he went with us a month there that winter and he didn't know how to run the winch, did he Bobby? (No.) And when I went in there I would've swore he could've taken the dragger and went up there and drug, to hear his talk, 'cause he knows everything about it. But the experience wasn't there. (Chuckling)

This was, in fact, how Coffil and his son met Smith, and why they hired him to go with them. In effect, he tricked them into hiring him. The extent to which this cycle of trickster stories is based on Smith's actual experience is a moot point. The stories exist, and that is enough. I am inclined to believe, however, that most of what follows is true, and also that Smith had a bit more expertise than Coffil's description would suggest.

Whenever I asked Coffil what makes a good story-

teller, Clyde Smith would be mentioned and one of his stories told. As I stated at the beginning of this chapter, I went to Campobello Island to see and hear for myself this man Coffil admired as a good storyteller, and as a consequence of this visit I have included Smith's versions of stories I also collected from Coffil because of Smith's importance in determining Bob Coffil's aesthetic of storytelling. Smith is sixty-six years old, of average size and build, and a nervous chain smoker. When I first went to his house and met him, he was more friendly and open than most folklore informants are on first meeting, and warned that we should not talk about politics because he gets too excited. He did eventually get into politics anyway, and spoke vehemently on everything from fisheries legislation to the Watergate scandal in the United States.

As an excitable man, Smith's best stories are told with considerable vigor as opposed to Coffil's quiet, bemused style which is characterized by understatement and a deadpan delivery. The stylistic difference between the two is great, partly because Smith never remembered and told tall tales. Although he had heard Coffil tell many tall tales, he remembered only "him telling stories about how hard the wind blowed and blowed feathers off of hens and all this stuff, you know."

Why, then, is Smith such a good storyteller in Coffil's estimation? One reason is that Smith is a character; Coffil, on the other hand, is not. Also, Coffil appreciated Smith's cleverness and his occasional use of vivid imagery. Yet, perhaps the greatest reason why Coffil singled Smith out as a memorable storyteller is because of his belief that many of Smith's stories are patently false. They are not tall tales, but if they ever happened they certainly did not happen to Smith. In essence, this is Coffil's ambiguous attitude toward Smith and his stories. In this sense, Smith is a con man both in the story and in the telling of the story. He cons his listener into believing him.

Because these two storytellers are so different stylistically, it is difficult to make valid comparisons. Yet, of the four stories collected from both Coffil and Smith, all but one stand up as better stories in Coffil's telling of them. Smith's versions of two of the same incidents are better described as reports than as narratives. Coffil's stories are better organized, and he emphasizes the humor of the situation more than Smith does. This is to be expected because Coffil is once-removed from the original storyteller. In fact, Coffil may have unconsciously polished and improved on some of the stories, especially given his belief that if they are

Smith's experiences he too has expanded the experience in the telling.

#### 42. The German Dogskin Fur Coat

This first anecdote was recorded twice from Coffil, both times as the first Smith story he told. The second version, remarkably similar to the first, was told as an illustration of why he was a good storyteller, how he could tell a story. Both versions are notable especially for their similarity to Smith's telling of the story, even to certain phrases like "I'm gonna have that coat." Smith's version differs and is particularly outstanding in the conclusion, where the owner of the bedbug-infested coat tells Smith to sink it in St. Mary's Bay. The narration here can best be described as excited frenzy, as if the man was terrified of having bedbugs in his house. Smith's commentary after the story is, in fact, another story. Coffil has combined the two in his telling of how Smith got the furcoat, and consequently depicts him as a self-serving trickster as opposed to the good-hearted, fun-loving person we see in Smith's narration. This difference will be further considered in the concluding chapter.

42.1

5/17/70

Well, this feller was carrying rum off the rum-

runners in to Eastport around there and they got to St. Mary's Bay down here and come on a storm in the winter time and they had to go into a wharf there. And there was some fish houses there and the old feller on the wharf said he'd unload it for them. They had to stay over Sunday or over the storm, so he brought the oxen down and filled the fish house up with this liquor. And that night he asked Clyde and his pardner up to the house.

So they went up to the house and spent the evening, and when they got ready to go home it was a pretty rough night. So, he had a brand new fur coat there and he told Clyde to put it on, on his back and wear it down to the boat. So he wore the coat down.

When they got down to the boat, why this feller told his chum, he said, "I'm gonna have that coat." It was brand new German dogskin or some darn thing, a helluva nice coat. He says, "I'm gonnâ have that coat." But he says, "You can't get that coat." He says, "I'll get that coat, you watch and see."

So the next night they went up and he took the coat up. Instead of taking it in the house he hung it up on the outside. It was a brand new house the man had just built. And they went in, and the feller said, "Did you bring my coat up?" And he says, "Yes," he says, "I brought the coat up." But he says, "I'm some sorry," he says, "about that coat." He says, "What's wrong?"

Well, he said, "That boat is polluted with bedbugs down there, and," He says, "I wouldn't bring that coat in here for a thousand dollars in this new house." "Oh God, no," this feller says. He says, "I, don't bring it in, whatever you do, don't bring it in 'cause," he says, "I wouldn't have bedbugs in the house." Clyde says, "I'm sorry," he said, "but I never thought of it till I hung it up in the cabin," he said, "and it must be polluted." "Well," he said, "just leave it outdoors." And when he got up to leave that evening, he said, "Just take the fur coat and take it back to the boat and keep it." So he got the coat. Now that was pretty good, wasn't it, what?

42.2

9/29/72

Well, he told me about being in a, I don't know whether I told you this one or not, but they went across from St. Mary's Bay here and they picked a load of rum off a rumrunner out there, and it come up quite a storm, and they went in there to a place down in on the French Shore (of Nova Scotia) there. An old feller come down, he knowed they had a load of rum in, so he said he had a fish house there and he says, "I'll bring the cattle down and put it in the fish house for you until the storm is over because," he says, "you can't keep it aboard the boat." So he did. He come down, and when

he got it in the fish house and went home he asked them up for the evening.

And it was snowing quite hard then, a dirty night, so he had a new house there, and he said, when they got ready to go back aboard the boat, he had this dogskin fur coat there. I don't know whether he said it was made in Germany or not. I forget just what it was. Anyway, he, the old feller told him to take this coat and wear it down to the boat. He didn't have much clothes on.

And on the way down he said, "I told the feller that was with me," he says, "I'm gonna have that coat." And he says, "You can't have that. He wouldn't part with that coat," he said. "You couldn't buy it." And he said, "You watch and see," he says, "I'm gonna have that coat."

So the next night, why, they took, they went up and he took the coat, and when he got to the house he hung it on the outside of the house. He went in, he says, "Look," he says, "I brought that coat up. But," he says, "I didn't bring it in." He says, "I'm some damn sorry," he says. "That coat," he says, "is polluted with bedbugs." He says, "I didn't dare bring it in." (chuckling) And just when he got ready to leave that evening, why the old feller says, "Look," he says, "you take that coat and take it back to the boat." He



says, "I, it's a new house," he says, "and I wouldn't have a bedbug in this House." So he put it on and wore it back to the boat, and got the coat. So it was pretty good, wasn't it? (chuckling)

But mister, he told that, just as, you know, however you think. Of course he had it all memorized down. That went through his mind probably when he was up there, and probably he did give him the coat to wear down. But he told us all about; told me all about being up to Ottawa (for a federal hearing) on the rumrunning racket afterward.

42.3

5/1/73 (Informant: Clyde Smith, Campobello Island, N. B.)

Tallman: You went in somewhere on the French Shore and you ended up with some kind of a fur coat.

Smith: Oh yeh. Yeh, yeh.

T: What was that about?

S: Oh, we was raising hell over there. We went up and spent the evening with a feller, Captain Ben Hankenson. Him and I was friends. Drinking, you know, they drank a lot. And it started in to snow. And Ben said, "Here, wear my German, wear my dogskin, my fur coat aboard the boat." It was a German dogskin coat and it was a good one. And of course they was always playing tricks on me whenever they could. Old Ben had any amount of money anyway. He could've bought twenty fur coats

if he wanted to. So we went down aboard the boat and I said to Guy, I said, "I'm gonna have that fur coat." He said, "He won't give you that fur coat." I said, "Yes he will give me that fur coat too. Now you watch and see."

So the next night we got a couple fifths of Golden Wedding and went up to the house. I went in and I took the coat off and laid it on the washing machine on the porch. Went in, had a few drinks. I said, "Captain Hankenson." He said, "What?" I said, "I'm some sorry. I done something I'm some sorry for." He said, "What'd you do?" Well I said, "I wore your, that's the reason I left it out on the porch, I wore your fur coat aboard that boat, and she's alive with bedbugs." I said, "They tell me they go right for the hair." He said, (spoken quickly and excitedly) "You take it, Captain Smith. You take it right out in St. Mary's Bay and you sink the damn thing." (laughter) When we come out through the door, I put the coat on and wore it aboard the boat. (laughter)

Ah, my god. Fun. That was some fun over there, and boy they was the finest bunch of people you ever met in your life. I went into Church Point one night with a whole load and a gale of wind and they come in them old ox teams and hauled it away and hid it for me. Even had the undertaker in an old hearse hauling it. We laid

there four or five days, and by and by it come a fine night. They watched everything and hauled it down. They was one case shy when they got it down. They said, "Boys." A man by the name of Thibodeau, he was the undertaker, and they had it stored in his boat shop. He said, "Clyde, I give some boys some of that to drink." I said, "Leave them two cases right on the truck. Give 'em some more to drink." (laughter)

#### 43. Solid Full of Brass

The folk themselves, the people who tell tales and sing songs, cannot be expected to have well-formulated aesthetic concepts. Folklorists probably do not for their own traditions. Yet, the folklorist today insists upon asking questions in an attempt to understand what makes a good story or song, teller or singer, from the point of view of someone within the tradition. Often, our questions don't make sense, not the least of all to ourselves. When I proposed the statement or question that brought forth this anecdote, I was not certain that I made any sense to myself or to Coffil. As it turned out, he knew exactly what I was asking, and, good storyteller that he is, he answered not with an abstract statement but with a story to exemplify at least part of his personal aesthetic: the good storyteller has a special vocabulary of colorful idioms and humorous phrases which

sets his telling of a tale above the ordinary and makes it memorable. This will be discussed further in Chapter VIII.

Smith, in telling the same story, makes it longer and somewhat disorganized in comparison to the Coffil version. Also, the one phrase that Coffil emphasized is omitted and the incident that it arose from is altered considerably. Although Coffil, as a tall tale teller, exemplifies creativity and adaptation to a certain extent, his versions of the Smith stories may well be very close to the way he heard Smith tell them twenty years previously. The story about the fur coat, at least, would suggest this conclusion. When I played the tape with Smith telling this story for Coffil, he frowned, shook his head in disbelief, and said that Smith had changed the story. The implication was that this version was not as good, and, as a man who has always been truthful about his personal experiences, he was miffed that Smith would try to impress me with his own importance by adding obviously untrue details to the story, such as the promisory note Smith has the chief officer sign.

43.1

9/29/72

Tallman: Now, about someone who's been around, who's traveled around, being a better storyteller. Certainly there are a lot of guys who have traveled

around that don't tell stories and that aren't story-tellers. So there must be something else besides that.

Coffil: Well, I don't know. Some fellers like to tell some foolish things, like that. But he told me about landing that boatload of rum down there in the winter time and they couldn't, the fellers that was supposed to buy it didn't show up or something. And there was an island right off of, down in Campobello where he was. He lived over kind of alone over on the point, and they landed this on the island and put it there that winter, and the next (day), he said, they found out they was going to get a chance to get rid of it, so they went out and got it off the island and brought it in. And he buried it in his woodpile.

And, by gosh, he said, the next morning was a beautiful morning. The sun was shining, he said, and when he was eating his breakfast there was a knock come to the door. He says, (chuckling) "When I opened that door," he says, "it was solid full of brass." One of these customs fellers, I suppose. He says, "It was solid full of brass." (chuckling) And he asked him if he knowed of any, or heard tell of any rum being out on an island that day. They said they'd heard and they was going out to find out. "Well," he says, "I think," he says, "you're too late (laughing) to find the rum," he says. "I think they was there yesterday." He said,

"Somebody told me they seen the tracks, where they went and got the rum yesterday."

So, they got in the boat. They had the boat there and they got in this boat and they went to the island. He got scared then, and he lugged the rum up in the woods. Got it out of the woodpile and lugged it up in the woods. And when they come back to the wharf, why he went right down to the wharf. And when they come in they said, "You was right. The rum was gone, but," he said, "we found the tracks." So he says, "You was right about the rum." "Well," he says, "I was pretty sure," he said, (chuckling) "that the rum was gone."

So they got in the boat and went back to Eastport. He was just a little ways from Eastport, (Maine) about as far as from here to Pereaue somewheres there by the store (about three miles). But he said the rum was gone, and it was all right. It was up in the woods there. But he was pretty, pretty good. Well, what struck me funny (was) when he said the door was solid full of brass (spoken slowly, with emphasis and relish). Ah, he was quite the lad. His brother run the ferry to Eastport back and forth. Quite the lad.

43.2

5/1/73 (Informant: Clyde Smith, Campobello Island, N. B.)

Well, I had some (rum) stored on an island here.

And they used to come here and search my premises, see, but I never had none on the premises whenever I'd hide it, when I had some stored. No, I had six or seven cases left on an island over here. Thumbcap. I was over to Eastport in the afternoon. A feller come and said, "I'd like to git that. I'll be over tomorrow night after it." So I said, "All right."

Well I come home, and when I got home my wife said, "The Mounties was here and searched this whole point." I said, "To hell with them. Let 'em search." Well, that night it was right calm, and the captain, the old Bohemie, had a couple cord of wood over here I bought. He was from up there. I burned it out here and they throwed it in a pile in the dooryard. So, that night it was calm, and I said, "Perhaps tomorrow night when them birds come that'll be a gale of wind and I'll have to row over there." I said, "I guess I'll go over there and git and have it right here tomorrow night when they come. Them damn Mounties have just been here today. They won't be back for a week." I went and got the six cases and hid it in the woodpile, covered it up with wood. Oh, about two o'clock in the morning went to bed.

We got up to eat our breakfast, my wife said, "Look right there." I looked out the window. The Ottawa was off of the beach here and there was four of 'em rowing ashore in a dinghy. So I went up on the bank

7

and met 'em. I said, "There's an old feather bed upstairs. I'll make a bed for you goddamn things and you can stay here. You can come and sleep all the time if you want to." So G., he was chief officer, he said, "Olyde, this is a complaint." I said, "Sure it's a complaint. You just got me for a goat," I said. "You, you ain't chasing the guys that's hauling rum. You're just chasing me. The real guys you ain't looking at." I said, "I saw fifty cases of liquor landed last night. You don't bother those fellers." So, he said, "You tell us where fifty cases of whiskey is and we'll give you one-third of what's its value." I said, "Will you give me a written agreement to that?" He said, "Yes." I said, "Come on in the house." So they walked right by the woodpile and in the house, wrote me out the written agreement, and I said, "Right over there on Thumbcap." That's where I'd had it, look.

So, while they was gone to Thumbcap I got it to hell out of the woodpile and got it hid out in the alders way out back here. Got it hid. So they went over, and they was on Thumbcap two or three hours. Finally, I see 'em come back and I went over to the breakwater. Bill Porter, the deputy collector, he was with them. Of course Bill didn't want to search anyways. He was a great, great big old fat man. Again they come up on the wharf. "Smith," he said, "you was right. We found



the straws off of the bottles and the tracks where they'd carried it up and down the bank." They was my tracks. (laughing) It was so good I had to tell Bill Porter one time in St. Stephen's there. (laughing)

#### 44. Getting Grubbed Up

This trickster story further indicates how the main object of the trick is to succeed outside the law or to get something for nothing. This does not mean, however, that any such action, for instance ordinary shoplifting, is a trick that might in time become a traditional narrative. For such anecdotes to enter tradition, as these have at least to a limited extent, the trick must be ingenious, clever, or daring, and the story must be humorous if not outright funny. It also helps if the illegality of the trick is acceptable by traditional moral codes, as are smuggling and poaching. If humor is secondary in the trick, it is of primary importance in the anecdote about the trick. Otherwise, the story would not be told and retold. Thus, in the story, the trick or "crime" is not so important as how it was done, why it is now funny. Coffill's son was present when this story was recorded, and helped to remind him of stories that he might not have remembered to tell.

In Smith's version of the same incident no trick is involved, and the setting is Yarmouth rather than Digby. After Coffil heard this on the tape, he objected that this took place in Digby and that Smith has not dared to return to Digby since. He added that he knows this as a fact from other people. Perhaps Smith changed this for my benefit and because of the tape recorder, or perhaps he is describing a different incident entirely. The role he wished to fulfill for me was as a man of experience who could tell stories, but not as a trickster or as someone who succeeded outside the law.

44.1

5/17/70

Bobby: How about down at Digby when he got grubbed up?

Coffil: Oh yes. This same feller, he come over to Digby seining herring and he stayed around Digby about a week or two. And there was no herring in Digby, and they got at it pretty well down on grub. So one night he made up his mind to do something about four o'clock, and he went up town, went to the first grocery store he come to, and he said, "The herring has struck," he says, "down shore here a little ways," he says, "and we need some grub. We ain't got the money but we, we got to get grubbed up and git down there to git 'em." So the feller loaded up a half-ton truckload of grub

and took it down and they rushed around and got it aboard the boat, and away Clyde went. And they ain't seen Clyde since. (chuckling)

44.2

5/1/73 (Informant: Clyde Smith, Campobello Island, N. B.)

That was in Yarmouth. Yeh, that was at the last of the rumrunning. They wouldn't, they wouldn't trust anybody, at the beaches, the storekeepers. But I got my grub. Then when I got into the custom house here I had to pay the bill. To get it through the customs, see, when you cleared, why, it went on, right on your clearance, the bill. They wasn't gonna fit us out when we wanted grub and water and oil. They'd been stuck a lot from them American, a, American rumrunners. So I went up to that American consulate there in Yarmouth then. British consul. I went up to see him and he said, "I'll damn soon git you some grub soon." We went right down to the customs and he said, "You call up Parker in (Aiken's) mill and he'll pay the bill." So they did. Of course, when I got home here I had to pay it in this customs.

Tallman: There wasn't any way out of that?

Smith: Oh no, no. And it was right too. It was all right.

## 45. The Scaling Business

What was recorded of this escapade is probably only an abstract of what could be a longer narrative. Possibly Coffil did not tell a complete story either because of the complications related to the trickster bringing a woman from Saint John to Digby to be his secretary or because of the more obviously criminal aspect of this experience. A fisherman can load up his boat with provisions and not pay for them; this is bound to happen occasionally, and besides, the life of a fisherman is not easy. A man in business, however, does not have the same moral latitude. He should know better, and he should have the money to pay for that which he uses. With this story, then, Coffil did not want to go into details that might seem immoral or criminal. Judging from the laughter that accompanied the story, however, I feel justified in suggesting that there was more to it than is presented here. This story, for obvious reasons, was not elicited from Smith.

45.1

5/17/70

Coffil: He called up here about two or three years ago one day. I wasn't home then, and I don't know what he wanted. Some big proposition I suppose.

Bobby: He always had a big proposition on the go. He, he could hook good jobs, I'll tell you that, boy.

He was smart.

C: Yeh. He come to Digby there and run some kind of a scaling business.

B: The \_\_\_\_\_ Corporation. And he run it for quite a while.

C: Well, he run, he, he had all his expenses. He was staying in the hotel there in Digby, and he, I guess he needed a secretary and he went to Saint John and brought one over. And, they got ahold of it and they wouldn't pay the secretary, you know. (chuckling)  
He got a-living pretty high. (laughter)

#### 46. Salmon Poaching

This story and the following two were recorded a few days before I went to Campobello Island to interview Clyde Smith. Although Smith and his stories had been a frequent topic of conversation, these stories had not been told before. Smith's own account of almost getting caught with illegally caught salmon, though the same in detail to Coffin's version, was told without humor. He simply did the only thing he could do to get rid of the evidence.

Humorous anecdotes about poachers of wild game and fish are quite common throughout the northeast. Edward D. Ives, for example, plans to do a book on George Magoon, a moose poacher of local fame in northern

Maine. One tall tale from Canard, Kings County, tells of a man jacking deer with a flashlight. One deer looked out from behind a large rock and the man shined the light at it and shot. A moment later the deer looked out again, and again the man fired. Finally, the third time the deer appeared he shot and apparently killed it, for it didn't peek out again. When the hunter investigated, he found three deer behind the rock, one on top of the other. This can be classified as motif X1119.2. Lie: remarkable bag of deer. The "biggest liar in the world" tale (motif J1155.1.), about the bragging poacher who discredits himself by claiming to be a notorious liar when he learns that the man to whom he is speaking is the game warden, was collected from an informant who told one John Coffil tale. The same man also told an anecdote about roasting deer shot out of season when the game warden came into the camp. He shut the oven door, and the warden "took off and never even heard the deer roasting."

46.1

4/25/73

You ask him about catching the salmon, when he was catching salmon on the St. Stephen's River, and when he went into the end of the wharf the cop was there. One of the fishery officers was there on the wharf. And, the fishery officer started to come down and when he

started to come down, when he got pretty near to the boat, why, he (Clyde) jumped up on the gunwale of the boat and rolled her down and she filled full of water and the salmon floated out and went adrifting down the river. He lost the evidence. (chuckling) He's pretty good, now. He's some smooth.

46.2

5/1/73. (Informant: Clyde Smith, Campobello Island, N. B.)

Tallman: One time you caught a big salmon somewhere.

Smith: Oh yeh, I used to catch salmon up in the Mackadavey River. Yeh, caught quite a lot of them up there. But, that was illegal. They got after me, give me hell, and drove me out of there. They wanted to save them for the sports.

T: Did you ever have one on hand when they ...

S: No, when they caught me I didn't have any on hand. I had some in the punt and I rolled her bottom up and they sunk. But they caught me with a net out and fined me four hundred dollars and I wouldn't pay the fine. They took me down to the jail. I stayed there six days.

#### 47. The Junk Dealer

This story directly followed Coffil's telling of the preceding story. As I have suggested earlier, the stereotypes of the Jew as a junk dealer and as a

shrewd businessmen are so common that no generalizations about personal prejudice can be made from this story.

A7.1

4/25/73

And then he told us about getting a load of batteries out at Grand Manan Island there. A Jew up in St. Andrews, or St. Stephen, St. Stephen I guess, had a big boat and he wanted to know where he could get a load of junk, so this Smith told him out on (Grand Manan). He (Smith) always wanted to get into something like that, you know, to get a dollar or two out of it. But, Grand Manan Island, so they went out and they got her loaded with old car batteries. They had a whole boatload of stuff. And they got up as far as this Wilson's Beach there. He told the Jew -- I guess it was Friday -- he says, "It's no good." He said, "They couldn't do nothing up there, sir. They couldn't get up, anyway, till Sunday." He said, he told him, "You better get on the Grand Manan, she runs to St. Stephen's, and go home. Monday," he says, "I'll bring the boat up."

So he got on the damned old Grand Manan and went to St. Andrews home, and Clyde, he jumped in the boat just as soon as he got out of sight and he went over to Eastport and sold the whole load of junk before they were back, you know (chuckling), tied the boat up to the wharf, and went up to Boston for a trip. The Jew come



back and the boat was tied up in Eastport and the junk gone and Clyde was gone. I don't know how long he stayed. He never finished it (the story) up, I guess. He never told how long he stayed, but he said he had a good trip. He claimed there he was the only one that ever got ahead of a Jew. (chuckling)

#### 48. Towing for Redfish

Redfish are known to those who do not fish for them as ocean perch, and are called redfish, obviously, because of their reddish color. That redfish do swim in enormous schools is true enough: Coffil's son Bobby was mate on a midwater trawler out of Riverport, Nova Scotia, that got 125,000 pounds of redfish in one tow. The size of the tow in this story, however, is beyond belief, and the description of it is the closest of any of the Smith stories to the tall tale. As exaggeration humor it can be classified under motif X1150.1. The great catch of fish.

This story was introduced by the explanation -- an explanation, by the way, that was recorded three different times -- of how Smith went down to the wharf whenever a boat came in, listened to the men's stories and memorized them, and later told these personal experience narratives as his own.

48.1

4/25/73

He told us there about going out there down there on, I forget the name of the place he went down to below Grand Manan there, and he said they'd made a tow for redfish and he said, "When that come up," he said, "it was some red," he said, "and you could walk out onto it half a mile." (chuckling) Right on top of the water... He never got a redfish in his life. (grinning)

## 49. Buying the Oil

This last of the Clyde Smith stories was not told by Smith. Rather, Smith played the trick on Coffil when he and his family spent the winter at Smith's house on Campobello Island. Coffil laughs at this now as he did at the time it happened. Smith was too forthright and charming in his deception to be rebuked. As Coffil has said, "You can't help but like him."

49.1

5/17/70

My golly, mister, if you're ever down there you look Clyde Smith up and get to talking with him. We, a, lived there with him. He was supposed to find, he was supposed to buy the oil.

Bobby: Yeh. He was supposed to buy half of it.

Coffil: So, by god, we run along and we got down

on oil. Well, I'got, bought the first two barrels. We took, I told him, I said, "Clyde, look, we're running out of oil." Yup. But we weren't gonna get none. So I went out, and said I'd go out and order some barrels. "No," he said. He'd do it. So, it was sometime through the day, and that night, why, I went out to the store. I knowed the feller in the store. And I says, "Clyde get a barrel of oil today?" And he said, "Yes." I says, "Did he pay for it or ...?" "No," he says, "he charged it to you." (laughter) I never said nothing to him. I paid for the damn oil. "No," he said, "he charged it to you."

##### 5. Folk Legends, Beliefs, and Knowledge

The material in this section is rather a mixed bag, ranging from ghost stories and superstitions in which Coffil professes no belief to the traditional beliefs of fishermen and other sea-faring men that he would never violate himself. The attitude of most people toward their own oral traditions that require belief and faith is bound to be ambiguous. Some people, certainly, put more stock in superstitions and in encounters with the supernatural or unexplainable than others, yet all persons can be placed somewhere on a continuum between the two poles of total non-belief and total belief. Robert Coffil, in this respect, is no exception. On a scale of one to ten from less to

greater belief, he would fall somewhere in the bottom half, tending to be more a non-believer than a believer, relative to the population as a whole in the area of the fieldwork.<sup>26</sup>

Given the precarious nature of life at sea, one might expect Coffil to be more prone to believe than he is. This has at least been the case in recent research done with other groups of fishermen.<sup>27</sup> It must be remembered, however, that Coffil is not a salty old fisherman on an isolated Nova Scotia coast whose only resource against the vagaries of wind and weather is a vast assemblage of superstitious beliefs. Superstition has never played an important part in his work. He always knew enough about the sea, about the weather, and about his boats to have no cause to resort to hope and magical beliefs alone. But his brother John once did, and it is this story of "buying the wind" by towing a baby's

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<sup>26</sup>This observation is based on my own fieldwork throughout the area and that of high school students of mine who systematically collected superstitions and belief tales in 1968-69.

<sup>27</sup>See John J. Poggie, Jr., and Carl Gersuny, "Risk and Ritual: An Interpretation of Fishermen's Folklore in a New England Community," Journal of American Folklore, LXXXV (1972), 66-72. See also the following two articles by Patrick B. Mullen: "The Function of Folk Belief Among Negro Fishermen of the Texas Coast," Southern Folklore Quarterly, XXXIII (1969), 80-91; and "The Function of Magic Folk Belief among Texas Coastal Fishermen," Journal of American Folklore, LXXXII (1969), 214-225.

chamber mug behind their vessel that best exemplifies the ambiguity of reason confronted by personal experience. Coffil was with his brother at the time, and the wind did in fact come suddenly and swiftly after a long calm, and only after the chamber mug was thrown overboard. Yet, to this day Coffil does not know what happened, and is inclined to pass it off as coincidence rather than easily accepting a cause-effect explanation for the experience.

Besides a well-formulated and understood technology to be brought to bear upon any difficulties or unforeseen problems at sea, Coffil's relative non-belief in the supernatural and in superstition, especially superstition not related to the sea, can be explained by the fact that this aspect of oral tradition simply has not been of particular interest to a man who has selected out of a broad folk narrative tradition those humorous folktales and anecdotes that he, as a storyteller, would want to tell to others. As he selected from tradition, he adapted the stories to himself and his own telling, recreating some, inventing others, and telling of his own experiences and exploits. This partiality toward the humorous tale precluded any lasting interest in belief tales, ghost stories, and so forth.

Believed narratives, like ghost stories, are generally speaking a female-dominated genre in the area, just as the humorous tales are more often told

by men. This does not mean, however, that a man in Coffil's position would not have heard many ghost stories and the like. Rather, the ghost stories and other supernatural legends were not the sort of narrative that he chose to remember and tell. Nova Scotia is an excellent field for the collection of supernatural and other legend lore, but Coffil has selected from this tradition only two supernatural stories that he has heard from others, one a ghost story that an old man in the neighborhood told him when he was very young, the other a "true story" of a specter seen by his two older brothers. Coffil does not tell these two stories very often, and the same can be said of the two belief tales from his own experience that are part of his repertoire. It would even be safe to assume that they are only family narratives, that he has rarely if ever told them to anyone outside his extended family. This could not be said about any of the other narratives in the collection.

Besides the reasons suggested above, these stories are not part of his active repertoire because the teller of supernatural legend lore in an all-male environment is leaving himself open to ridicule from his peers. In this sense, each of the four such narratives in his repertoire (nos. 50, 52, 53, 57) are notable more for being unusual, odd, or humorous than for being frightening or truly believed by the teller.

## 50. Ghost in the Molasses Barrel

Only the bare details of what was doubtless a longer story are given here. The closest classification for the tale is motif E421. Spectral ghosts, for the main criterion for stories classified under E421 is that the ghosts act or appear quite unlike humans. It is safe to assume that if a person stood in a barrel of molasses, the molasses would stick to him and not run "right off his legs."

50.1

5/17/70

Well, there was an old feller that used to be down home when I was a boy and he told us about he was a-wheeling a barrel of molasses that he, a, a keg of molasses that he had brought up the mountain down here one moonlight night, and there was some kind of a ghost come and lit on the barrel of molasses and he said the molasses sugar ran right off of his legs, this ghost's, he told us. I can remember that, I was just a young feller, when I was home. I guess it was even afore I went to school. But I thought it was quite a story at the time of it, but there was a lot of ghost stories going around.

## 51. Sham Ghosts

This prank story is based on several of the most

common motifs about buried treasure and treasure-seekers: E291. Ghosts protect treasure; N576. Ghosts prevent men from raising treasure; and G401.3. Tabu: speaking while searching for treasure. These motifs are all present in this story, as they are in many legends of ghosts and buried treasure that have been collected in Nova Scotia and Kings County. The tabu against speaking while digging for or raising treasure is especially widely known and is often collected as a folk belief without a narrative belief tale to support or substantiate the belief. Wherever there is a strong belief in supernatural phenomena, there is also a good chance that practical jokes will be directed toward that belief. Such is the case with this story about sham ghosts. This aspect of the story can be classified as K1833. Disguise as ghost. Compare K1682.1. "Big 'Fraid and Little 'Fraid." In this story, a man covered with a sheet is frightened by another sham ghost chasing after him.

51.1

5/17/70

Tallman: Do you know any stories about people hunting for treasure around here? Any kind of treasure? Have people done that around here?

Coffin: No.... Yeh, there was a feller that used to go with my sister when I was home, when we was small there. And my other brother and a feller by the name of



Perc Fraser that lived up here towards the mountain, they was running around together there and my sister got this feller off the mountain that told about the ghost stories. They were going hunting down an old pasture there to see if they could find the treasure. They'd cut the trees and burned the brush and this moonlight night she said she'd go down with him and they'd dig, but they couldn't speak 'cause if they spoke a ghost would appear. So these two brothers of mine (his brother and friend), they put two sheets over them. And they just got to digging nicely when my sister forgot and spoke, and these two ghosts raised up from these old burnt stumps. (chuckling) Well, they arrived home and he stayed a little while home there a few minutes and then he thought he'd have to go home, and when he started for home they took down across the field and he took to running. We seen, I seen him running and (laughing) these sheets over them. They chased the devil right out of him.

T: (laughing) What did he say about it later?

O: He never said much. He was, he was a little on the odd side. No, they chased the devil right out of him. I can see him now. There was a little old house down below ours just a little ways, oh, from here to the further end of the barn (a hundred yards), and he went down the road in front of it and they run right down.

behind it and I can see those sheets flying. (laughter)  
 But in them days there was a, quite a lot of them things  
 going on, you know. But I never really got fight down  
 and believed in ghosts. I never believed in ghosts or  
 black cats or anything like that.

52. Unexplained Specter: A True Story

Coffil calls this a true story because it is the  
 experience of his two oldest brothers, Dan and John. This  
 does not mean, though, that what they saw was a ghost.  
 It is simply something that cannot be explained by  
 rational means. The likeliest explanation is that what  
 the two brothers saw was a forerunner, a warning of what  
 was to happen: that the ship would be grounded in a storm  
 and the man from Sheffield Mills would go ashore by  
 climbing down the bow and walking up the beach. By this  
 rationale, which is not Coffil's but mine, the best  
 classification for the story is D1812.5. Future learned  
 through omens. For other Nova Scotia forerunners, see,  
 for example, Creighton, Bluenose Ghosts, pp. 1-26;  
 Helen Creighton, Bluenose Magic: Popular Beliefs and  
 Superstitions in Nova Scotia (Toronto, 1968), pp. 5-8;  
 and Tallman, Belief and Legend from Northern Kings County,  
 pp. 50-52.

This story is somewhat confusing, despite the  
 fact that it has been recorded twice. Coffil's humorous

anecdotes and tall tales, on the other hand, are never confusing, further proof of his greater interest and skill in telling humorous stories. Legends and belief tales, as a rule, are more fragmented forms of folk narrative that do not require virtuosity in telling to remain in tradition; they do not have the performance value of the humorous narratives.

52.1

2/17/70 (Collectors: Sheffield, Legge)

They was going on a vessel with my father, and someone up around Sheffield Mills loaded up with apples for up around Sackville, (New Brunswick, near Moncton at the head of the Bay of Fundy,) and he was going through with the cargo to sell his load of apples. They had her down here in Mill Creek, and they were to shore one night and when they come down there wasn't supposed to be anyone aboard her. But when they got right to abreast the vessel someone came out of one of the cabins and walked forward and shin down over the bow, and walked up the beach.

Well, my brothers, both of them got scared and they wouldn't go. So I had an uncle, Wes Balsor, down there. He went on the vessel and they anchored in Advocate down the Bay here, and come a big breeze of wind there and she drug ashore and my uncle said that the fellow that owned the cargo of apples went forward when

she went on the beach and shin down over the bow and walked up the beach just the same as they told him that this fellow they had seen do.

52.2

5/17/70

But there's one true story down there. My father owned a vessel and they loaded apples for a feller that lived up around Centreville or Sheffield Mills somewheres. And he was going to Moncton to sell them, and the other brother, the two oldest brothers -- there was four of us, altogether -- and they was going in the vessel and they was up, somewheres up the shore that night and when they went back down they had to walk right quite close to the vessel, why they seen the feller come up out of the cabin and go up on the bow and go down over and walk up the beach.

And they wouldn't go. My uncle, Wes Balsor, he was there at that time, so he went. And they went down to, to Advocate, and they anchored in the harbor, Advocate Bay, that night and there come a gale of wind and she went ashore. When he come back he said that the feller that went to sell the apples went down over the forward and down over the bow and walked up the beach just the same as they seen that feller there. They, they claimed that was true. They wouldn't go, whether they, they must've been scared. Of course, they was only young fellers at

that time. They wasn't too old. But that's what he said. He said when the fellow went down over the bow, why he went just as they said they seen this feller down here.

### 53. Two Places at Once

In this story Coffil tells of his only personal experience with what might be called a specter or revenant. Yet, despite the unexplained experience and the scare it gave him and his brother Alden, he suggests that imagination could have been the motivating factor in this incident. No motifs capture the essence of this memorate, but this is to be expected since it is a personal tale. For classification purposes only, I have given the story motif F403.2.3.2. Spirit gives warning. Although the father with his feet in the oven is certainly not a ghost, see also E599.9. Ghost seen in two places at once. The story presents an example of a doppelgänger, that is, the ghost or wraith of a living person. In this instance, the sighting of the person's ghost was not a token of his imminent death as often is the case with such phenomena.

53.1

2/17/70 (Collectors: Sheffield, Legge)

When I was a young feller at home there, we was coasting on the side of a hill down through an orchard down next to the beach, and father told me not to go over and coast down through the orchard. And there was

a crust on the snow. But we went anyway, my brother and I. He was two years older than I was. And we just got over there when my father come out of the house and walked across to the foot of the orchard and went up the road out of sight. We could hear him walking on the crust and we of course got scared. He went up out of sight and we run down and went into the house and he was sitting in the kitchen. Then we asked him and he said he had never been out of the house.

53.2

5/17/70

Tallman: Didn't you say that you had some sort of strange experience when your father said not to ...

Coffil: Yeh. We lived down here about two mile down here right down on the shore up here, and there was an orchard up on the hill here and there was a crust on (the snow). And me and my brother, we was coasting down through the apple trees down past the pond down there. And he told us not to go over and coast there. There was a wire fence down below, and he told us to stay out of there, so we didn't. We went over and left him home there in the house and we was coasting down across there and we just got back up after we coasted down and we seen him going along down at the bottom, and we could hear him. I can still, you know, remember hearing him walking in this crust, breaking through it. And he had

an overcoat on and he went right up the road out of sight, and when he went out of sight we run down across to the house there and he was setting with his feet in the oven. And we asked him if he went up the road and he said he hadn't been out of the house. And he couldn't have time to get back. Yeh, I, but we was scared, afraid he would catch us or not or whether we imagined it. But I can, I know that we heard him walking in the crust. But 'magination sometimes will ...

T: There's no rational explanation for it though?

C: No, there wasn't. He was setting there with his feet in the oven and he never said a word about us being over there. And we asked him if he had been up the road and he said no. But we thought he was going up to come around and catch us. (chuckling) That's what we thought, and we went right down around and crossed.

#### 54. Captain Kidd at Black Hole

If all the stories of where Captain William Kidd (d. 1701) buried his treasure in Nova Scotia were true, he would indeed have been a busy and wealthy pirate. Practically no stretch of shoreline in the province does not have at least one story of Kidd and his buried treasure. In several places, so-called proof of his presence has been found: large rocks with various spellings of Kidd's name inscribed on them. Helen Creighton mentions

these "discoveries" in Bluenose Ghosts, p. 43, and includes a story about such evidence in Bluenose Magic, p. 75. For a good study of Kidd, see Willard Hallam Bonner, Pirate Laureate: The Life and Legends of Captain Kidd (New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1947).

The present story from Coffil is not so much a narrative as it is just one more report of where the infamous Scottish pirate and privateer stashed his loot, and Coffil does not believe it. My question that brought forth this report was an attempt to collect a story popular in the area, about a disappearing cave on North Mountain in which the Acadians supposedly buried treasure just prior to their deportation in 1755. I subsequently asked Coffil specifically about the story and he had never heard of it.

54.1

5/17/70

Tallman: Have you ever heard the story about a cave on the mountain or any cave around here?

Coffil: No. There's some holes over here at Black, a place called Black Hole just above Baxter's Harbour where I see they been digging. They claimed Kidd's, Captain Kidd's treasure was there. They said he used to come into the mouth of the Bay of Fundy and disappear, and they always figured that's where he went, into Black Hole, 'cause after you get in there you can't



see out or see in, you know. But I don't think he ever come up in there.

#### 55. Tree Grows from Walking Cane

Versions of this legend are told throughout the world. It is directly related to legends about saints, and it is among the saints' legends that we find a motif most closely approximating the present tale, D1673.1. Tree grows from stick saint has used and thrown aside. See also D1254. Magic staff. The willow tree in the present tale is no longer at the Hortonville wharf, evidently the victim of old age.

55.1

6/10/70

There's an old willow tree up in there at Grand Patee, at the wharf there in Hortonville, that, I think it's still standing there yet, and my great grandfather I think it was went down there and he broke off (a stick from) a willow tree bush for a cane and he walked down there and stuck it in the ground, and now it's three or four feet across there. I ain't been down there this last, oh, for twenty years, but it was there then, a big tree sitting right at the head of the wharf in there at Hortonville.

#### 56. Superstitions of the Sea

After telling the story of the Sham ghosts

(no. 51), Coffil paused for about ten seconds and then gave his explanation of why some people think a black cat crossing their path brings bad luck, a superstition he equates with those who live on the land, not on the sea. This naturally led to a discussion of superstitions more closely related to his own life and livelihood, and, as might be expected, he does admit some belief in the tabus of sea-faring men. The superstitions included here are annotated to Helen Creighton's Bluenose Magic.

56.1

5/17/70

I seen, I drove a truck here for twelve years and I drove in the States a couple years, and a black cat I don't think means anything, unless you let it work on your nerves and you get so nervous after a while you'll, something will jump out and you'll run off the road. I think that's about what happens.<sup>28</sup>

Tallman: Are there any sort of beliefs or superstitions that were connected with going to sea?

Coffil: Well, yeh, I think there was. Oh, there's a lot of superstitions. If you took a feller, and shipped any greenhorns that hadn't been to sea and they'd

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<sup>28</sup>Creighton, Bluenose Magic, pp. 135-136, nos. 175-176. Black cats are sometimes associated with bad luck at sea, although this is not part of Coffil's personal tradition. See Ibid., p. 124, nos. 58-59, 61.

turn a hatch upside down on deck, one of the hatches, you know, if they turn it upside down, why it's bad luck, if you drop it in the hold it's bad luck.<sup>29</sup> And most all them green fellers, the first thing they would do when they went to put a hatch on would be to drop it down through, you know. And then, if they mentioned "pig" aboard a vessel it was bad luck,<sup>30</sup> or if you whistled it was bad luck.<sup>31</sup> So there, there was a lot of superstitions.

T: Where would the one about mentioning a pig have come from?

C: I don't know. They wouldn't, you'd start talking about a pig, why they'd, some of them skippers was quite strict on things like that. They was awful strict on hatches and things.

T: Is this still true to some extent, that they are?

C: Well, there could be something into it, you know. I don't know. I wouldn't say. We, they, we hired this dragger up here and we was nineteen years I guess it was. No, we had this one about fourteen years, and they dropped hatches and the like, and they'd take hatches and

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., pp. 120-121, nos. 24-25.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., pp. 117-119, nos. 1-10. Several of Dr. Creighton's informants associate the mention of "pig" with a strong wind, one informant explaining that this is because "pigs can see the wind."

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., pp. 122-123, nos. 41-42.

turn them right upside down, just as they would on the land, you know. They was used to taking a door or anything and chucking it down upside, but when they got aboard there, why, they did the same. But anybody that's been to sea won't do it, any, any of them sailors been to sea won't do it.

T: You mean you wouldn't do it yourself?

C: Oh no, no, I wouldn't drop one unless I, intentionally, you know, and they wasn't careful. I was always careful about hatches and everything.

T: Well, what would happen if a hatch was dropped, just some kind of bad luck?

C: Yeh, they claim it was bad luck for the vessel. And whistling they claim come a breeze of wind or a blow or something, you know.

#### 57. Buying the Wind

Tales of buying or getting up wind are fairly common among those who fish and freight on the sea, even today, more than fifty years after the heyday of sail. Most often these are legends about someone else, typically a mean sea captain who, enraged by a calm that leaves the ship's sails limp and the ship immobile, hurls a coin into the water while directing a curse heavenward. A hurricane follows, and if the ship stays afloat it at least has its sails torn to shreds. Richard M. Dorson's

Buying the Wind (Chicago, 1964) takes its title from such a legend. Two different stories are included, pp. 32-36, and Dorson also lists references to other published variants. Patrick Mullen has discussed the varying degrees of belief in legends and superstitions among Negro fishermen from the Gulf coast of Texas, and includes several versions of the "buying the wind" tale, ranging from a legend totally believed by the teller to a fabulate or entertainment legend, in which no belief is held. See Patrick B. Mullen, "The Relationship of Legend and Folk Belief," Journal of American Folklore, LXXXIV (1971), 406-413. Creighton includes only one brief reference to buying wind in Bluenose Magic, p. 122, no. 39. The general motif for all these tales of purchasing wind is D2142.1. Wind produced by magic.

The tale Coffil tells, a personal experience narrative, is unusual because of the object used to bring the wind -- I am not sure that "buy" or "purchase" applies in this instance since the chamber mug was retrievable -- and of interest because of the teller's bemused, ambiguous attitude toward his own experience. Coffil chooses to hedge a bit on his experience, concluding by saying that the wind "may have come anyway."

57.1

5/17/70

Tallman: Any way that you could, if you didn't

have any wind, that you could get up wind?

Coffin: Well, there, there was a, (chuckling) I'll, I'll tell you a story about that. We was coming home from Boston. My brother had his wife with and she had a little kid with them. It wouldn't be over a year or two old. And we got up as far as Grand Manan and it was dead calm and we was in a hurry to get home, or wanted to get home. There wasn't a breath of wind, just daylight in the morning, and my brother was getting anxious to get home, so he said he'd get some wind. So, she had one of these little chamber mugs for the baby aboard, so he tied a junk of rope in it and chucked it over the stern, let it go astern and tow it. And he said that would get some wind.

Well, it wasn't twenty minutes I don't think before it started to breeze up. And that night we was right up here coming into the gut up here. It, it blowed about thirty mile an hour all day from that time and it never let up, and that's one time I think that, that I would never do it, you know, 'cause I think we'd probably get too much or something. (chuckling) But he, he done it 'cause he was a little mad. We were in quite a long while-gittin' home and he wanted to git home. But we did have a good breeze all day, but whether that was what brought it or not, well it kinda looked that way. It may have come anyway.

T: It wouldn't be too good if you got too much wind.

C: Well, that's it. Yeh, yeh. I never liked to see anybody, hear anyone say they'd like to see it blow so hard it would wash the plugs out of the deck or anything, 'cause it can blow, you know. I wouldn't, I don't like that. I had a feller say it once, but it, it made me feel kinda funny, you know. No, it can get rough without saying that.

#### 58. Oil to Hold Down Breaking Waves

This section of the collection has been entitled Folk Legends, Beliefs, and Knowledge because much of what is generically called superstition or folk belief is simply common sense or folk wisdom. Even with such an irrational superstition as the tabu against turning a hatch upside down, however, nothing is to be gained by tempting fate. It makes good sense, regardless of how unexplained it is, to do things in the traditionally prescribed manner. Besides the tabus and other superstitions that sailors follow, they also have "scientific" ways of handling problems and adversities.

Two years after he had told of how to use oil to hold down rough seas, Coffin loaned me a book, Nicholls's Seamanship and Viva Voce Guide for the Use of Apprentices, Junior Officers, and All Classes of Young Seamen ...

(Glasgow, 1920). This volume, first written and published by A. E. Nicholls in 1905 and revised and brought up to date eleven times by F. W. Maxwell, includes a chapter entitled "Use of Oil for Modifying the Effect of Breaking Waves," in which it is stated that "a very small quantity of oil, skilfully applied, may prevent much damage, both to ships (especially the smaller classes) and to boats, by modifying the action of breaking seas." (p. 196) Twelve "principal facts as to the use of oil" are given.

Although Coffil has read the book, given to him by the widow of Captain Bernie Lyons who lived up the road from his house, his knowledge of this subject comes more from talking to other sailors.

58.1

5/17/70

Tallman: Is there any way if there is too much wind to get it to calm down?

Coffil: Well, you can, if the sea is breaking and you got oil aboard you can. You can throw a bag with shavings or something like that and soak it, put the oil to it so it will just drip out along, you know. They, they sometimes had to put oil bags over sailing vessels, over the bow, and that'd spread out on the water and smooth it down some. Yeh, or out on the end of the bowsprit it might have been dropped, you know,



and that would keep the water off them 'cause it would knock the sea down. You get enough oil on the water, it'll make it, it'll hold it down, you know. It'll still be a roll but it won't break over so bad. Yeh.

#### 59. Land Looms, East Wind

As well as having ways of coping with bad weather, it is always helpful to know beforehand that a change in weather is imminent. This belief was told when the two of us stood on the wharf at Kingsport, three miles by road from Delhaven, waiting for a fishing boat to come in. Coffil needed to arrange to have the boat take him out to a ship that he was to pilot into Hantsport the next day. As Coffil predicted, the next day it was raining and foggy, with a strong east wind. This is a common weather belief; Creighton includes several similar items in Bluenose Magic, p. 265, nos. 177-180.

59.1

9/13/72

\*See that land over there (pointing across the water, toward the land rising beyond Wolfville and Grand Pré), how it's loomin'? That'll usually mean a wind from the easterly tomorrow. When the land across the water seems high, when it's loomin' up like that, you'll get an east wind, and we might get some rain tomorrow with that breeze. Now when it ain't loomin', when it's low and

flat to the water, you'll have a south-southwest wind, and generally drier weather. Sometimes you'll get what they call a dry easterly, and it'll blow hard and dry for a week or more, but most times that east wind means dirty weather.

#### 60. Education or Experience?


Much of what might be called the wisdom of Robert Goffil, though I am sure he would object to such a high-sounding phrase, has been shared with the fieldworker in casual conversation as opposed to specific folklore texts. Some of this has been incorporated in Chapters III and IV, and his experience and knowledge based on common sense are fully evident in his life history, Chapter V. The following memorate, however, is a narrative with its own structure, its own beginning and end. This story was told as we were driving in his car to Kingsport (see no. 59), and was suggested by his talking of the lack of experience and subsequent poor luck of the two men at that time who operated fishing boats out of Kingsport, dragging for flounder. He seemed to enjoy telling this story to someone, like myself, long on book learning but short on experience, especially because I was a college student at the time.

60.1

9/13/72

\*A feller needs experience to be any good at any-

thing. One time this ship owner down to Halifax was arguing, complaining about how uneducated the men on board his ship was, said he'd take a college man with education over one that didn't have the education. So I asked the ship's skipper, we was all there together, I says, "Skipper, if you was bringing that ship in around the Cape, which would you rather have on board," I said, "a feller that's been to college or one that doesn't have his education but has been around the Cape a few times?" The skipper says, "The one that's been around the Cape." So I guess that settled that argument.



## VII.

### WHERE STORIES ARE TOLD

Much contextual data on storytelling has been included in the preceding chapter. The times and places where Bob Coffil has listened to and told stories have been many and varied throughout his life: aboard boats tied up at wharves; at local stores in communities he has visited and at the store in his own community; at the woods camp on Cape Blomidon; during hours of leisure when he was trucking for twelve years in Nova Scotia; aboard the fishing boat, when he was fishing out of Digby, Nova Scotia. And, like any man who enjoys a story, Coffil tells an occasional story in other situations that are not specific to storytelling.

Wherever men have had the leisure and the social meeting place, they have sat and talked and told stories. Always, with storytelling as Coffil has known it, this has been a pastime for men only. Richard Bauman points this out in his study of storytelling in a Nova Scotia community on the South Shore, and his description could just as well apply to Don Forsythe's store in Delhaven: "The gathering at the store was an exclusively male activity, although both sexes recognized it as the premier speech situation of the community. Women might come in to buy something in the evening, but they pre-

ferred to leave the store to the men, and those few women who did come did not stay."<sup>1</sup>

Kay Cothran, whose doctoral dissertation dealt with tall tale telling in a rural Georgia community, has suggested why most storytelling contexts in rural communities in North America are male-dominated:

Men, living on a year cycle, work intensively and then have slack seasons. Women have as their principle work cycle the day, during which they perform many small, highly repetitive tasks. Men look lazy in such a situation. Men and women do not live in exactly the same cultural world; owing to the division of labor, they have been taught different ways of living in and perceiving the world.<sup>2</sup>

With storytelling that endures as a family tradition, with the home as the place of performance, women too can be active tradition bearers; tall tales and related first person narratives, however, are not told primarily in such situations. They are told by the men who, because of their work cycle, have time to spend in leisure talk at general stores and blacksmith shops and gas stations in rural areas.

The places for storytelling are as traditional as the stories that are told. In Country Stores in Early New England, for example, Gerald Carson writes

<sup>1</sup>Bauman, "The La Have Island General Store," p. 333.

<sup>2</sup>Kay L. Cothran, "Women's Tall Tales: A Problem in the Social Structure of Fantasy," St. Andrews Review, II (1972), 21.

that "The storeroom was an arena where conflicts and quarrels flared over town and school affairs, the church and its doctrine. A horse trade would do, or a disputed fence line. It was all a bit of theatre to relieve the tedium of isolated lives and a monotonous diet.... Folklore took shape around the stove or fireplace in tales of human ails, their cause and cure, of ghosts; scoundrels, and mighty hunters."<sup>3</sup> Closer to Coffin's time and place, the local history for Five Islands in Colchester County, Nova Scotia, notes that the general store was the place for men to gather and talk on winter evenings: "In days gone by, the store was the social centre for the men in the community. In the winter evenings they would gather around the stove, chew tobacco, smoke and swap 'yarns'."<sup>4</sup>

"In days gone by" is an attitude often confronting the folklorist in both the regional literature and the field. Invariably, the best singers and storytellers are no longer living; the times and places for home-made entertainment simply are not what they once were. Certainly there is a grain of truth in such thinking: if all people were bonafide folk to the extent of being fully integrated in homogeneous communities with work centered on the land and the sea, there would be no folklorists

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<sup>3</sup>Gerald Carson, Country Stores in Early New England (Sturbridge, Mass., 1955), p. 14.

<sup>4</sup>The Story of Five Islands, p. 72.

interested in collecting, classifying, and analyzing oral and material cultural traditions. But the point can be overemphasized. For every rural community in Nova Scotia that no longer has a local meeting place where men loaf and talk, such as the La Have Island general store that Bauman studied after the fact, there are probably several similar communities that do have and will continue to have places where talk and storytelling is appreciated for its own sake. For every John Coffil who has died there are at least a couple Bob Coffils who are living and telling stories.

Bob Coffil recognizes that storytelling has changed, that the occasions for talk are not as frequent and dynamic as they once were, but this is far from being a major preoccupation with him. When asked about possible changes in the tradition, he simply commented, "I don't think people gets around in bunches and spends evenings like they used to."<sup>5</sup> Ernest Eaton of Upper Canard, Kings County, a man whose expertise within local tradition is history but who nonetheless has a considerably larger repertoire of traditional folktales than does Coffil, expresses much the same view. The times and places for storytelling have changed, but not significantly. Eaton explains:

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<sup>5</sup>Recorded interview, January 11, 1973.

I know that when people are in a hurry they sometimes won't stop to listen to a story if it's too long. You got to make it short if you want to get them to hear it. But I think that was always the case. There were always people who were in a hurry. And the old blacksmith shop (which closed to business about thirty-five years ago) was a leisurely place because you were waiting to get a job done. You had no other way to spend the time. People would, that was a wonderful place to tell long stories or to hear a long story... because there was always a waiting audience. They were in no hurry.<sup>6</sup>

Some areas where men once gathered to talk and tell stories have been greatly affected by the changes wrought by modernization and industrialization, and the resultant changes in economy and life style. The tractor replaces the horse, for example, and with this change man's productivity is greater, his pace becomes less leisurely, and the blacksmith shop ceases to exist as a social center in the community because the horse is no longer an integral part of the economy. Cultural change of this nature has occurred in Kings County, Nova Scotia, to be sure, yet the serene, calming landscape and the relative ease with which man can work the land and earn a living must have played a role in keeping the cultural change from being rapaciously destructive in terms of local storytelling traditions.

To a lesser extent throughout Nova Scotia, but most significantly in Kings County, there has not been

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<sup>6</sup>Recorded interview with Ernest L. Eaton, Upper Canard, Kings County, N. S., March 21, 1973.



the syndrome present in the other Atlantic provinces of young people, especially, wanting to move from their home communities -- to metropolitan centers within the region, to Toronto and Montreal, to New England. Examples of this attitude toward an area are many. Of Bob Coffil's three brothers and four sisters, only one -- an older sister -- settled outside of Nova Scotia, when she married and moved to Rochester, New Hampshire. The rest all settled in the greater Kings County area<sup>7</sup> except for another sister, who lived in Eastern Passage near Halifax. The four brothers all traveled widely in their work but ~~never~~ moved their homes from the area. Bob fished out of Digby for the better part of twenty years without moving his home, and today his son fishes out of Lunenburg and Prince Edward Island but still resides in Kings County. Likewise, former high school students of mine, who moved to Ontario for work and education, have mostly returned to the area.

A final example of this attitude toward the land can be seen with the children of an elderly couple from whom my family and I rented a house for two years. Of their three grown children, the oldest, a daughter,

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<sup>7</sup>Farrsboro, where John and Alden Coffil eventually settled, was part of Kings County until 1840, and until the late 1940's had close economic and social ties with Kings County on the opposite side of the Minas Basin, ten miles by water, one hundred fifty miles by road. See Eaton, History of Kings County, pp. 115-116; Wright, Blomidon Rose, pp. 117-118.

married and moved to Cape Breton but has since returned to Kings County with her husband and family; the oldest son, though he went to school for a while outside Nova Scotia, married and bought a large farmhouse less than a mile from his parents' home and teaches school in Canning; the youngest son married a girl from Blomidon and now is an agronomist in northern Alberta, but he has bought his father's farm with plans to settle eventually in Kings County. And these cases are not exceptions. They are typical of the area.

The reasons for this difference in attitude toward the land and the landscape are two: (1) the agriculture-based economy of Kings County affords steady employment, especially since it is far from being a one-crop economy; and (2) the landscape itself is calming and pastoral in its effect upon the people -- gently rolling farmland protected by North and South Mountains, prominent ridges of six hundred to eight hundred feet in height that shelter the fifteen-mile wide Cornwallis Valley, with the constant tides of the Minas Basin as a further reassuring influence. Thus it is that Bob Coffil can look out each morning over the fields and water and think of his sailing days: "You're used to seeing a great lot. I think being out on the prairies is a lot like being out on the water. Them fellows out on the prairies don't never want to

leave very much. It's because they can see so far, I think."<sup>8</sup> With the dykeland of Kings County, the local inhabitant has at least the illusion of prairie expanses as well as the water. There is much sky in Kings County, and it is little wonder that an extraordinary amount of romantic and pastoral verse has been based on the history and landscape of this small area, from the time of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's Evangeline (1847) to the present.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Recorded interview, September 29, 1972.

<sup>9</sup>Longfellow's Evangeline: A Tale of Acadie (1847) initiated a tone of verse for the area that has continued to the present, and includes such widely anthologized Canadian poets as Sir Charles G. D. Roberts, Bliss Carman, and John Frederic Herbin, an Acadian descendant who worked as a jeweller in Wolfville. Longfellow, an American, never visited Grand Pré, the setting for his narrative romance, but got what he needed of the area's history and geography from histories of Acadia that were then available and got the idea for the poem from a friend of Nathaniel Hawthorne's who told him the story. Longfellow made many changes in the story he heard by word of mouth. The specific details in his description of the area are largely erroneous, and his description of Acadian life is based on his firsthand acquaintance with rural Sweden. Nonetheless, the poem did capture a mood that in many ways does typify the area even today.

For a representative selection of Kings County verse, see Eaton, History of Kings County, pp. 360-398. A few poems on the cultural landscape of the Minas Basin area, by Roberts, Carman, and Herbin, are included in Ralph Gustafson, ed., The Penguin Book of Canadian Verse (revised edition; Baltimore, 1967). C. Bruce Fergusson's introduction to a souvenir edition of Longfellow's Evangeline is a valuable source on the historical and literary background of this work. See Henry W. Longfellow, Evangeline: A Tale of Acadie, intro. C. Bruce Fergusson (Halifax, 1965), pp. 5-36. Esther Clark Wright, in Blomidon Rose, discusses the inaccuracies in Longfellow's work on pp. 190-196, and her book in its entirety is eloquent testimony to the effect the landscape has on its inhabitants.

The implication, of course, is that these two factors -- the strong economy and the pastoral landscape -- have combined to give people living in the area a sense of continuity and stability that is often lacking in rural areas confronted with modernization. The long-standing agricultural importance of Kings County to Nova Scotia has also kept it from the extreme isolation that other rural areas experienced in the past, and the resultant radical change in life style and world view once modern technology took hold. Because of the constant contact with a larger world beyond the area, the people in Kings County have been able to absorb changes as they have come without wholeheartedly embracing modernity and forgetting their cultural past.

The attitudes expressed by Clyde Smith of Campobello Island, New Brunswick, typify the feelings of an older generation that has witnessed a radical change in the opportunities for sociability and storytelling. Informants in Kings County recognize the changes brought by the automobile, radio, and television, but they do not view the change as adamantly or as eloquently as Smith does:

Well, I'll tell you, the historical part of things I was always interested (in). I always liked to listen to elder people, which today the younger class don't do. To hell with that. They don't want to hear an old man's ceremony or his talk. That's all ballyhoo. Now, to them guys, look, that's the reason a lot of them don't

know anymore. They won't listen. When I was a kid I used to go up in stores and listen. Now, we had an old feller here by the name of Jimmy Lorne Savage, and whatever he read he could remember it, he could recite it right off. He knew the Dominion budget. He knew every damn thing ....

Look, when I was a kid I don't think there was a man here on Campobello twenty years old that couldn't split fish, what. Everybody could split a fish. And I think there's about four of us on this island now can get the bone out of a fish. There's one young man, one young man, well, he's forty-five and he's a custom house officer, and he don't have to do this, but he comes down to help Jackson brothers out and he split for me. See, that's gone. They just don't want to do it, they won't learn.... (When I was young) if you wanted to see your girl up to Lubec (Maine) you got on your old shoes and you walked from here to the Narrows and rowed across. Now they jump on a big motorcycle or a nice great big car. They ain't got no gasoline they'll go steal a little somewhere.<sup>10</sup>

When Smith was a young man, one of the principal gathering places in his community was the barbershop, where men could have a haircut, a drink, and take part actively or passively in quartet singing, storytelling, and, occasionally, heated arguments:

Mr. Small, he had a little barbershop down here. I've often said I'd like to see it on a newsreel or on a picture reel, the happenings in there. Used to get a little toddy, you know, and that's where we all gathered. Nothing wrong, nothing wrong. There never was anything, oh, once in a while they'd get in a little fight but the next morning they'd go back and patch the windows up and fix things up, pay the barber, and have a little drink. Not very often. Once in a while someone would get a little mite ornery

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<sup>10</sup>Recorded interview with Glyde Smith, Campobello Island, New Brunswick, May 1, 1973.

and get in a little scrap, but never, it was always patched up the next day. If there was anything broke they went back and fixed it or paid him.

.... Everybody went there, young and old, and he'd get a few drinks, boy, and didn't he (the barber) love to sing. I'll never forget, we was in there one night, poor old fellow, he was singing "Why Did They Dig Mother's Grave So Deep?" This Murray Noonan picked up a candlewood stick and when he lifted his hands up, why, Murray hit him across the fingers with this candlewood stick. He wasn't long in changing the story. They used to tell all kinds of stories. Yes, that would've been a great place to go with one of them (tape recorders) years ago.<sup>11</sup>

In 1952, when Bob Coffil and his son spent the winter fishing out of Campobello Island with Clyde Smith, the barbershop as a local meeting place had passed into oblivion. There were general stores, however, and Coffil frequently spent time in these stores telling his stories. The stores on Campobello are likewise a thing of the past, as Smith explains:

Oh, he (Coffil) used to go over here in the stores. There's people usually in around the stores, you know, in them days. Not now, anymore, no seats in 'em to sit down. Only thing they want you in there now for is your money. These little stores here years ago where the men always used to go and spend the afternoons or mornings talking in the stores, but that's no more. No sir. They just want them greenbacks now when you go in and to hell with you. You can sit on the floor if you want to. Yeh, there's no more of that around here. No, there used to be some sociable times in them stores. Men would go in and talk fishing. Of course, I can remember when there was only one newspaper

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

come to this place, the old Nova Scotian, and that only come once a week, I guess. Them old fellers would read every thing there was in that, you know, and they believed everything was in it those days. Yessir.<sup>12</sup>

There have been changes in the patterns of life in Kings County over the past fifty years, to be sure, but the general store still is important as a place of sociability in the small farming communities. Sheffield Mills, a village of several hundred people about equidistant between Canning and Centreville, exemplifies this importance. Of the change that has occurred in the past generation, one store owner had this to say:

This was before the days of TV and the old custom was, especially among the farmhands, that the paycheck didn't come until possibly late Saturday night. After everything else was done they got their money and so consequently their shopping was done on a Saturday night. We found this quite hectic at times, but it was the way they did things. They didn't get paid on Thursday for it, they got paid on Saturday night, but it was sort of, as I say, TV didn't come into the entertainment field at that time so they more or less made up their own entertainment, and this is what, they used to gather around these old country stores and talk over things that happened during the week and tell stories. And sometimes they had a bit too much home-made liquor under their belt, but that was, it was something that they looked forward to.

.... It was quite different than the average grocery shopping tours that most people go on today. The men apparently in those times, they brought home the bacon. They went to the store and did the trading and most of the time the wives stayed at home, I guess, and looked after the family, but Saturday nights now our country

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

stores are quite different. I quite recall when I came down here in forty-six it was the custom then to go to town on a Saturday night, in Kentville (a distance of five miles), and most of them didn't have cars of their own at that time and gas was still rationed after the Second World War, and they had one big commercial truck with benches in it and hold perhaps fifty people, and everybody piled in that and went to Kentville. And, I was from the mountain area and around here they all knew me and of course they wanted to give me some of their business, so they'd leave their memorandums and what not here and they'd pick them (the groceries) up on their way back. And it wouldn't be unusual perhaps to have twenty-five or thirty people in this little small store on their way home from Kentville at eleven o'clock, and perhaps half past eleven, when they'd drop in here to do some more trading, and quite often it was well after twelve o'clock when we got closed up, usually so weary that we wouldn't care if we ever opened again or not. This was the way, this was the thing that they did in those days and you just had to take (it) along with a grain of salt.<sup>13</sup>

From the storekeeper's point of view there has been considerable change since the Second World War, when he first entered the business. In Sheffield Mills, however, there are three general stores today that cater to talk as well as to money: the one discussed above, another across the road from this one, and a third store a few hundred yards up the road. All three offer customers a place to sit near the stove, and now a good portion of the income in such stores comes from the sale of non-essential items like candy, soft drinks, ice cream, and cigarettes. Some people shop for basic staples in these

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<sup>13</sup>Recorded interview with Robert Irving, Sheffield Mills, Kings County, N. S., May 9, 1970.



stores on a regular basis, but more do their major grocery shopping at supermarkets in Canning or Kentville and use the local stores for the stopgap purchase of such commodities as bread and milk.

The store in Scotts Bay, where John Coffil occasionally spent long evenings, went out of business a few years ago when its long-time owner, Henry Thorpe, finally retired. Within a short time, Cyril Steele opened a new store at a different location in Scotts Bay, and because Scotts Bay is ten miles from Canning, the nearest market town, this store is much larger than those rural community stores in the Valley. It is, in effect, a small town supermarket, with practically as large a selection of food products as one would find in one of the chain stores in Kentville. The owner buys sides of beef and pork and does his own butchering, with meat prices noticeably lower as a result.<sup>14</sup>

This Scotts Bay store, despite its appearance -- four aisles approximately forty feet long -- displays one distinguishing feature that is lacking in comparable stores in the larger town of Canning: two wooden benches in a corner along two walls, where both young and old men sit and talk. Once in a while, this talk focuses on John Coffil and his stories; more often, however, the

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<sup>14</sup>This discussion is based on the fieldworker's most recent visit to Scotts Bay, August 26, 1973.

talk concerns past experiences of those present and the events of the day. One time, a drowsy Scotts Bay student came into my class in the morning and explained that he had been at the store till past midnight the night before, talking and arguing about snowmobiles with several men.

All communities in the area have general stores or canteens, a name applied to stores with a smaller range of food products which cater to the candy-soft drink-potato chips clientele. A good many of these stores are not loafing places, or, if they are, they function in this manner only for the young people.

Don Forsythe's store in Delhaven, the place where Bob Coffil spends some afternoons and evenings, serves as a meeting place for old and young alike, and its inventory is about what one would expect of a typical country store -- a hodgepodge of soup to nuts to axe handles, with only prepackaged food products except for a few garden vegetables in the late summer and fall, an occasional bunch of bananas, cheese, bologna, and milk. Pots and pans and brooms and shovels hang from hooks in the ceiling; a gas pump is just off to the side of the store. Indicative of the range of Forsythe's inventory is the following personal example. On Christmas Eve my wife and I realized, after all the stores in town were closed, that we had bought a turkey too large for our roasting pan, so I hurried to Forsythe's and bought a

larger roasting pan at a lower price than what I would have paid at a hardware or department store in Kentville. Many of the men who spend time at the store wear heavy flannel shirts, made in China, that they bought at Forsythe's.

In the evenings, when men congregate at the store, they buy soft drinks, ice cream, candy, potato chips, thick slices of bologna, and hunks of cheddar cheese that Forsythe always has gotten from Prince Edward Island. They eat, drink, and talk. Four or five men sit on the crude wooden bench that Forsythe made when he built the store over forty years ago; two men sit on a desk in which Forsythe keeps a cribbage board, a deck of cards, and checkers and checkerboard, both games of which he plays expertly with local customers in the afternoon and early evening; one or two others sit atop the soft drink cooler, as well as on the counter; either Forsythe or his son-in-law, Bill Kay, stands behind the counter; other men, if there are others present, either lean against the counter near the wood stove in the rear center of the store or stand toward the front of the door. The front part of the store, where all the activity goes on, is no more than thirty feet long, and the space occupied by people rather than shelves is only eight feet wide.

Don Forsythe, who opened the store in 1932, is a small, rotund man of seventy-seven with a quip or comment for everyone and everything. When a customer makes a purchase, Forsythe dramatically puts the few pennies of sales tax into a large coffee can, saying "God bless the government" as the coins rattle in the can. If the customer has some change coming, he then says, "and God bless you." Once I handed Forsythe a new Canadian five dollar bill to pay for a large hunk of the Prince Edward Island cheese, the bill with a picture on it of former prime minister Sir Wilfred Laurier. Forsythe thoughtfully studied the picture, then said, "Hmmm. Sir Wilfred. I saw him speak in Kentville in 1911. That man was an oratorical genius." Bob Coffil, who along with two other men was in the store that afternoon, grinned slightly as the others spoke for a moment about the design on the new bill and about Laurier. Then, in reference to the honesty and sincerity that Laurier conveyed by this "oratorical genius," Coffil explained with a chuckle, "Now that man was the kind that speaks from down in his ankles. His words come up from way down there somewhere. Yep. Down in his ankles." The other two men laughed; Forsythe reaffirmed his original contention, "It's true. He was an oratorical genius." I finally received my change and blessing.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Field notes, January 13, 1973.

Forsythe opened the store for business when he was thirty-five. Until then, he taught school in other parts of Kings County, worked on his father's farm near Sheffield Mills, spent two years overseas during the First World War in much of the heaviest fighting without once being wounded, and attended Acadia University in Wolfville for two years. He is an intelligent, whimsical man. He finished high school at the age of thirteen and went to university when he was fourteen. Of his education, Forsythe tells the following anecdote: "I was fourteen years old when I went to Acadia University, and one time after I'd been home for a weekend someone asked my father if going to Acadia was doing me any good, and my father said, 'I guess it has. Last time he was home he beat me at a game of checkers.'"<sup>16</sup> In all the times Forsythe and I played checkers, I never won a single game.

This storekeeper's evaluation of his success is not in terms of money, though he does a good business, but in terms of people:

People told me when I started this store that I would get tired of it and sell out eventually. But I tell you, this has been the best thing. I haven't regretted it for a minute. The people up along here are the best people, fun-loving people, that you'd ever hope to meet. Good, fun-loving people.... If this store was like

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<sup>16</sup>Field notes, September 21, 1972.

some of the others, where folks come in and buy something and stay just a minute, why, I probably wouldn't have stayed with it. But with that bench, and the old stove, my God, elections have been won and lost on that bench.<sup>17</sup>

The owner of a store that specializes in sociability acts as both participant-observer and master of ceremonies. If Forsythe's son-in-law or one of his grandsons is working behind the counter, then Forsythe sits on the bench and usually functions as a straight man, a prod to conversation and a provider of continuity. Bill Kay, his son-in-law, takes a more active and gregarious role in the talk, whether from behind the counter or standing with a foot propped against the wood stove.

The conversation is as variable as the weather and the crops. Forsythe's general store does not present a performance-conscious context for the telling of stories, but stories are told nevertheless. The first time I went to the store and met Forsythe, I asked him if it was a place where people sit and talk and tell stories. "Oh yes," he replied. "There's fellows that tell stories, but I wouldn't tell on any of them. They're all true stories, of course." He chuckled, and then added, "I dasn't question the veracity of any of 'em." This was before Forsythe knew the nature of my work and the extent of my interest. He also indicated that Bob

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

Coffil "has always been our best."<sup>18</sup>

This first time that I spoke to Forsythe was only a few days after Coffil had put the man from Yarmouth County in his place with the story of a twelve-foot lobster he caught in the Bay of Pigs. Forsythe explained, "Just lately a new fellow came in and they've had quite a competition. Fierce competition, those two. This man ... from Yarmouth, he comes up here each year about this time to pick apples."<sup>19</sup> Almost a year later, Forsythe remembered the competition and described how it was not altogether friendly: "They didn't jibe. Coffil got that ... fellow mad once, so he got up and walked out of the store. This fellow was talking about fishing down Yarmouth way, lobster fishing, and how big the lobsters were. Coffil up and told one about lobster pots. Got him mad, 'cause he was telling the truth with just a little bragging. No, they didn't jibe."<sup>20</sup>

The most dynamic storytelling situation that I observed at the store was once when Coffil was not present. Forsythe said on this occasion, as he did a few other times, "Where's Bob Coffil? We need Bob here now!" The

<sup>18</sup>Field notes, October 1, 1971.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>Field notes, August 8, 1972. The story of the lobster is included in Chapter III. See also Chapter VI; Texts, nos. 4-5.

number of men at the store this particular evening varied between twelve and fifteen, with ages ranging from fifteen to seventy-five. Besides Forsythe and Bill Kay, those present included one of Kay's sons, one of Coffil's grandsons, seven local men who frequent the store, and a varying number of outsiders who were in the area for the fall harvest. One of these men was the one Coffil "defeated" the year before. He was subdued for the entire evening, and was kidded once or twice for not joining in since Coffil was not there. I was sitting on the desk between the bench and the soft drink cooler, beside a farm laborer of sixty about whom I was told, "He's never missed an evening at the store in thirty years." He is a quiet, smiling man who probably has never, in all those years, said anything that could be defined as a story.

Quite early in the evening, two other men from outside the area entered the store. They were from the French Shore of western Nova Scotia. The small, lively, and authoritative man was bilingual; the other man was large, shuffling, and shy, and gave the appearance of being somewhat mentally retarded. He spoke only a halting, mumbling French, and when he wanted to buy an ice cream the small man acted as his interpreter and protector. The relationship between the two was reminiscent of George and Lenny in John Steinbeck's



Of Mice and Men. In this instance, Lenny stood by the door with a vacant look on his face and his hands in his pockets; George, who knew some of the men from the work of the harvest and who also had met Forsythe and Kay previously, proceeded to tell of his experiences since his last visit to the area.

These experiences took the form of three tall tales: (1) he caught a three hundred pound flounder on a small, unbaited hook; (2) over the past winter he got himself a good woman who really knew how to treat a man, but she wasn't much to look at -- nothing but skin and bones and a pair of rubber boots; and (3) he was digging clams and got a forty-five pound clam, but it is was so ornery that he spent three days and nights with a pick and shovel digging it up, and then it pissed in his eye. Bill Kay asked, "What did you do with the shell, make a bathtub?" He answered, "No, the shell wasn't that big. But I made myself a nice wood stove out of it."

As a storyteller, this man is quite the opposite of Coffil, whose telling is always matter-of-fact understatement. Where Coffil waits for a context to present itself, this man created the context for his storytelling. In fact, however, it is difficult to characterize such open-ended brag talk as storytelling or as narrative. He insisted upon the truth of his experiences, and his performance consisted of cornering one man at a time and

carrying on a bragging conversation with that person, so loud that everyone else was conscious of his presence. He could only perform with someone to feed him questions and comments, and in the thirty minutes he and his friend were in the store he fairly well walked and talked his way from front to back and then back to the counter, where he bought some tobacco. They then left to drive into Kentville to a tavern.

The end effect was brag talk more than structured narrative. Although there was more continuous laughter for this thirty minutes than at any other time I was at the store, it was for the most part laughter directed at a foolish character. . . Certainly the men in the store enjoyed his presence, but at least to an extent he threatened the norm of sociability established at the store. For example, the regular customer sitting next to me on the desk at one point turned to me and said disparagingly, "Turn him off!" And when he did leave there was a communal sigh of relief and some talk to the effect of "Where does he get off acting like that, anyway?" It was clear, despite the enjoyment derived from his brief presence, that this was not a kind of performance that the group accepted. Those who allowed themselves to be cornered -- some did not, simply by ignoring him when he confronted them -- appeared to be egging him on for the sake of a laugh and not because

they appreciated the intrinsic worth of such performance, which was punctuated by much gesturing and play-acting.<sup>21</sup>

Aside from this one occasion, the most dynamic situations that I observed at the store had nothing to do with talk<sup>or</sup> narrative. Frequently, and for no overt reason, some of the men would roughhouse with one another. As in other all-male situations, this would consist of punching someone on the upper arm or chest or holding someone with a headlock. An unmarried farm worker in his mid-thirties, whose conversation was notably the most vulgar of any of the regular customers at the store, one time was mock-wrestling with a fifteen year old boy and said, "Well, they say if you can't find a good woman, then get a chubby young boy and a jar of Vaseline." Some of the men, young and old, participated in the roughhousing to a greater extent than others. Most often it would be an older man (i.e., thirty-five to sixty-five) punching or grabbing a younger man (i.e., fifteen to thirty-five) or vice versa, though sometimes there would be no significant age difference between two combatants. And as often as not, this mock wrestling involved more than two at a time. Occasionally, such fighting would get to a point where something in the store might be pushed over or broken, and then a non-participant would remind

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<sup>21</sup>Field notes, September 21, 1972.

the fighters of this danger and the fight would cease.

Certain psychological conclusions could, no doubt, be drawn from this mock-fighting, but in the broad context of activity and behavior at the store it is not particularly significant. What is significant is that Bob Coffil, a generally quiet man who is an outsider by occupation, never participates in this horse-play, and of all the men who spend time at the store, the one whom Coffil least likes is the aforementioned vulgar bachelor.

Coffil's attitude toward the store as a place to sit and talk is ambiguous, both because he is a sailor in a group of farmers and because he values truthful talk as much as tall talk. He has a reputation in the group as the storyteller, or at least the best storyteller, and is recognized as the local authority on everything to do with fishing and sailing. In this respect he is sometimes referred to as The Captain. More often than not, however, the talk has to do with farming, where Coffil's knowledge is limited, and when the talk does focus on the sea, many of the farmers are so lacking in knowledge, from Coffil's point of view, that he could stretch the truth and no one would know it.

In one interview session, I asked if he enjoyed it most when an outsider, such as a salesman or itinerant worker, was in the store. The question was directed

toward the esoteric-exoteric nature of much tall telling, whereby the local storyteller might fool the outsider with a tall tale. Coffil explained, "It helps out a little.... (If) he knows a little something about boating, you know, and you can leave it up to him if it's some place down where he is if they don't believe what you're trying to get across to 'em."<sup>22</sup> Of his experience in the storm off Digby on New Year's Eve, Coffil said that he had not told the men at the store much about it: "They asked me about it. You know, they wouldn't believe half of it if I told them, and if you did tell them they wouldn't understand."<sup>23</sup> The proper relationship between truth and fiction, apparently, cannot easily be established in such a social context, where the storyteller is, by occupation, an outsider.

For Coffil, the general store in Delhaven is a good place to spend leisurely afternoons and evenings. If called upon, or if the situation presents itself, he is ready with a tall story or a clever quip. Still, there is an ambiguity in what he says about the store, an ambiguity that comes close to capturing Bob Coffil as a storyteller and as a man: he is not the storyteller that his brother John was, but he is the recognized story-

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<sup>22</sup>Recorded interview, January 11, 1973.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

teller at the store; he is and was, by all accounts, an expert sailor who succeeded in his trade on the Bay of Fundy with its thick fogs, high tides, and frequent rough weather, but in retrospect he wishes he had gotten into something bigger, that he had had the education to get a deep water ticket and captain large freighters.

Compared to other places where stories are told, Forsythe's store is about like most. The difference, to Coffil, is one of background. Although he has spent his entire life with his home in the immediate area, he is not like the other men. He has the experience to be a storyteller; he also has the experience to add factual knowledge to countless discussions. At least some of the time, this knowledge is not fully recognized. He explained his attitude toward the store and the men who frequent it in the following manner:

There is some stores where more people was in, I think. More men, you know. But it's pretty hard to break into a bunch of farmers like we got here, and, wah, you get in there, and they'll talk pig and chickens and cattle and hay and apples and potatoes. And for a man that never farmed any much and don't, well, don't know too much about it, but he just knows enough to, heard enough out around so he can get by. And then if they gets to talking, why, you can take 'em offshore and sink 'em in about a hundred fathom of water, you know. You can soon lose them then. They're all right along where they know. They're all right where they know they can talk, but when they get to talking about fishing or anything around bandy, why you can take right off shore and lose 'em in no time. They wouldn't

know whether they was on Sable Island or Cape Sable down here.<sup>24</sup>

Despite the ambiguity of Coffil's position as the local outsider, the storyteller and man of knowledge whose audience has difficulty at times discerning fact from fiction, the general store in Delhaven has provided him with a convenient rostrum both for his stories and for his esoteric knowledge of the sea. Notably, this store is not an anomaly on the Kings County landscape; it is one of many. Forsythe's store, which is fairly typical of general stores in rural Kings County, exists and flourishes as a place of sociability today because of local attitudes toward change, attitudes that have been tempered by the fact that the area was never extremely isolated like Campobello Island, New Brunswick, or the La Havé Islands off the South Shore of Nova Scotia. Thus it is that a gregarious raconteur like Clyde Smith has only his home for a rostrum, and laments that young people are no longer interested in hearing "an old man's ceremony or talk."

The store where Bob Coffil can talk is of interest, then, because it coexists with much of the modern world, while in some other places similar stores are only a memory. Bill Kay might bring a television set from his house across the road to the store to watch the World

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

Series, but if someone comes in to talk he will forget about the baseball game. On Saturday nights during the winter, the store closes at nine o'clock instead of nine-thirty or ten because of the hockey game on television, but even on these nights the men return to their homes after having spent several hours in the store.

In Richard Bauman's discussion of the store in the La Have Islands, it is noted that the young men, because of their age and lack of experience, did not talk or tell stories to any extent.<sup>25</sup> They listened and learned. The same situation was implied by Clyde Smith for Campobello Island. At Forsythe's store, this is not the case. Young and old talk freely together as equals, and in their mock-fighting reaffirm a bond of sociability that exists at the store and is reflected in their daily work. The older men have a status achieved by age and experience that the younger men lack, but no dichotomy exists between the young and the old. The young men are high school students, high school dropouts, and recent high school graduates, all of whom work part-time or full-time at farming either for their fathers or for other men in the area. The greater opportunity they have to be heard is attributable in part to the emphasis placed on youth by popular culture and the mass media. Of at

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<sup>25</sup>Bauman, "The La Have Island General Store," pp. 333-334.



least equal importance, however, is the fact that the younger men as well have valid ideas and, occasionally, humorous stories based on their own experiences. Both the young men and the older men recognize this, and so the process of informal education is expanded beyond listening and learning to include talking, and this is a process that works in both directions for young and old alike. This kind of sociability also insures that, as long as the store is there, it will function in the community as an informal meeting place for the men.

The extent to which Bob Coffil is and has been a storyteller, in the context of the local store as well as in other times and places, cannot be determined solely in terms of repertoire and reputation. Forsythe's store, it must be remembered, is a place of sociable talk where stories are sometimes told; it is not a setting for storytelling where casual talk fills the gaps between stories. Thus, the final chapter will attempt to evaluate Coffil as a storyteller by showing to what extent he is conscious of oral narrative as an art form. In other words, what follows in the aesthetic of a storyteller.

## VIII

### THE AESTHETIC OF A STORYTELLER

Bob Coffil's appreciation of stories and storytelling is based in large part on the times and places that he has participated in storytelling situations, either as an active teller or as a passive listener.<sup>1</sup> It would be a mistake, however, to suppose that his aesthetic of storytelling is limited to an enjoyment of the social milieu of storytelling. When and where stories are told is certainly important, but the art of storytelling is not exclusively contextual.

The intent in this chapter is to discuss Coffil's sense of an aesthetic and to demonstrate how this aesthetic has been determined. The primary assumption upon which this discussion is to be based is that the folk aesthetic is, in many ways, the key to understanding both the storyteller and his tradition. Because very little work in aesthetics has been done by folklorists, my conclusions can only be tentative and hypothetical, and these hypotheses need further testing in the field to determine their validity. My purpose in this chapter, then, is

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<sup>1</sup>A shorter draft of this chapter was read at the American Folklore Society annual meeting in Nashville, Tennessee, November, 1973. A somewhat longer version of that paper has been published: "You Can Almost Picture It": The Aesthetic of a Nova Scotia Storyteller, Folklore Forum, VII (1974), 121-130.

not to put forward a definitive discussion of a broadly conceived folk aesthetic but to consider the aesthetic of one narrator and to suggest conclusions that might well provoke disagreement as well as agreement. The chapter will also review much of what has been considered previously in regard to Coffin's life and stories.

The importance of the folk aesthetic in the study of folklore cannot be overemphasized. If the folklorist does not try to understand how the culture and the individual evaluate their folklore traditions and why they value them as they do, he cannot expect to have a complete understanding of these traditions. The functional approach in folklore study has this as its basis. Yet, when we recognize that much of what is folklore persists because, functionally, it is entertaining or amusing, it becomes apparent that we should learn why this is so, why people find performance-oriented genres such as folksong and fictional narrative entertaining.

Whenever a folklorist elicits informant attitudes toward a particular genre or tradition, he is inevitably collecting the folk aesthetic. More often than not, however, these aesthetic concepts are never presented within any theoretical framework by the collector. Few collections of story or song that offer glimpses of the people from whom the material was collected fail to

include at least a few comments of an aesthetic nature. The storyteller particularly liked a story because of its brevity, or length, or clever punch line; the singer stopped midway through a song and commented, vehemently, on the villainy of the antagonist; the singer or storyteller was recognized in the community because he could go on all night without once repeating a song or story. But rarely has the scholar attempted to put together the scattered indications of an aesthetic and thus show how and why the listeners and singers and tellers are entertained and amused.

Among the first to recognize clearly the value of collecting informant attitudes toward folksong was George Herzog, who, as an anthropologist, was aware of the need to determine the folk aesthetic.<sup>2</sup> Herzog's student and collaborator, Herbert Halpert, discussed the aesthetic of singers in his introduction to a volume of folksongs published in 1939.<sup>3</sup> Halpert's early Hoosier

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, the following two articles by George Herzog: "The Study of Folksong in America," Southern Folklore Quarterly, II (1938), 59-64; and "Song: Folk Song and the Music of Folk Song," in Maria Leach, ed., Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend (New York, 1950), II, 1032-1050.

<sup>3</sup>Herbert Halpert, "Truth in Folk-Songs -- Some Observations on the Folk-Singer's Attitude," in John Harrington Cox, Traditional Ballads and Folk-Songs Mainly from West Virginia, ed. George Herzog and Herbert Halpert (1939) and George W. Boswell (1964), Publications of the American Folklore Society, Bibliographical and Special Series Vol. XV (Philadelphia, 1964), pp. XIII-XX.

Folklore Bulletin articles on both singers and storytellers also include informant attitudes toward their material.<sup>4</sup>

MacEdward Leach, writing from the point of view of a literary aesthetician, was one of the few folklorists to state flatly that the folk aesthetic can and should be studied:

The folk esthetic is, I think, the most important aspect of folklore and for this reason the collector must keep constantly in mind the elements which demonstrate it and which furnish the basis for the study of it by the desk scholars. Failure to recognize and understand the folk esthetic accounts for the urge to do something to folklore, to rewrite it, to piece different versions of songs together, to censor it, to rearrange it, to try to make it more like sophisticated art.<sup>5</sup>

Leach's thinking on the subject, however, was never fully developed. In his article "Problems of Collecting Oral Literature," for example, Leach offers only a potpourri of words and phrases to describe the folk aesthetic:

Limiting enumeration of details largely to the verbal arts, I suggest that the folk esthetic is worked through combinations of the following, highly concrete and specific diction and detail, sense of drama, formulae, cliché, archaisms of style and culture, personification to the point of animism, understatement, naturalness, simple

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<sup>4</sup>For a complete listing of Halpert's contributions to Hoosier Folklore Bulletin, see Posen, Taft, and Tallman, Index to Hoosier Folklore Bulletin (1942-1945) and Hoosier Folklore (1946-1950), p. 17.

<sup>5</sup>Leach, "Problems of Collecting Oral Literature," p. 339.

repetition, repetition with increment, montage rather than expository connective, pathos, mystery, translation of time and of space into action, compression rather than diffusion.<sup>6</sup>

Although anthropologists have shown an interest in aesthetics for many years, only recently have American folklorists become actively engaged in the study of aesthetics. This recent emphasis especially is reflected in the work of several younger American folklorists interested either in performance and verbal art<sup>7</sup> or in material folk culture.<sup>8</sup> None of these scholars have come

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid. For further explanation of Leach's concept of the folk aesthetic, see MacEdward Leach, "The Singer of the Song," in Mody C. Boatright, ed., Singers and Storytellers, Publications of the Texas Folklore Society No. XXX (Dallas, 1961), pp. 30-45.

<sup>7</sup>See, for example, Roger D. Abrahams, "Introductory Remarks to a Rhetorical Theory of Folklore," Journal of American Folklore, LXXXI (1968), 143-158; Roger D. Abrahams, "Creativity, Individuality, and the Traditional Singer," Studies in the Literary Imagination, III (1970), 5-34; Abrahams, A Singer and Her Songs; Richard Bauman, "Differential Identity and the Social Base of Folklore," Journal of American Folklore, LXXXIV (1971), 31-41; and Bauman, "The La Hava Island General Store," 330-343. For a representative sampling of current folklore theory which leans toward behaviorism and is at least implicitly aesthetic in orientation, see Parés and Bauman, Toward New Perspectives in Folklore, especially Bauman's introduction and the essays by Robert Jerome Smith and Dennis Tedlock.

<sup>8</sup>See Henry Glassie, "Folk Art," in Dorson, ed., Folklore and Folklife, pp. 253-280. Also see the following works by Michael Owen Jones: "The Concept of Aesthetic in the Traditional Arts," Western Folklore, XX (1971), 77-104; "For Myself I Like a DECENT, Plain-Made Chair": The Concept of Taste and the Traditional Arts in America," Western Folklore, XXXI (1972), 27-52; and "The Well-Wrought Pot": Folk Art, and Folklore as Art," paper read

forth with a satisfactory definition of the folk aesthetic in terms of verbal folklore, but they all recognize the importance of context in determining the folk aesthetic. The difficulty of definition is due in part to the only recent interest shown in the folk aesthetic, and also to the fact that there is not one folk aesthetic but various aesthetics depending upon the individual and the tradition. Thus it is, for example, that Richard Bauman attempts to define the aesthetic of storytelling in a Nova Scotia community with only passing reference to other cultures which place greater emphasis on talk and stories.<sup>9</sup>

The best that can be done at this point is to delineate the aesthetic of a performer-creator in a given genre and tradition, and the best such work in this sense is that of Roger Abrahams, who made a short and admittedly tentative study of two female singers, one from Arkansas and the other from Virginia.<sup>10</sup> Abrahams suggests two methods of collecting necessary to gather the data needed for studying the aesthetic of a singer: participant-observation and direct interview. Besides

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at the American Folklore Society annual meeting in Austin, Texas, November, 1972. I am grateful to my colleague, David Hufford, for supplying me with this last reference.

<sup>9</sup>Bauman, "The La Have Island General Store," p. 330.

<sup>10</sup>Abrahams, "Creativity, Individuality, and the Traditional Singer," pp. 5-34.

the contextual observations of the fieldworker and the direct comments of the informant on the genre and the tradition, two other types of analysis are suggested: (1) analysis of repertoire to determine the conscious and unconscious process of selecting from tradition only that which appeals to the individual and his personality; and (2) comparative study of the repertoires of two performers in the same broad tradition to illustrate the options available for selection.

With material culture and folk art, the elicitation of informant attitudes is facilitated by the physical object that is the focus of attention. Thus, Michael Owen Jones has been able to study in depth the aesthetic responses of an Appalachian chairmaker,<sup>11</sup> and Henry Glassie has posited what appears to be a valid definition of the folk aesthetic in material folk culture by extensive fieldwork in the eastern United States and artifactual analysis of houses, boats, earthenware jugs, and the like.<sup>12</sup>

The greater ease with which aesthetic responses

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<sup>11</sup>Michael Owen Jones, "Chairmaking in Appalachia: A Study in Style and Creative Imagination in American Folk Art" (Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 1970); Jones, "For Myself I Like a DECENT, Plain-Made Chair," pp. 27-52.

<sup>12</sup>Glassie, "Folk Art," pp. 253-280; but especially pp. 271-279. Also see Henry Glassie, Pattern in the Material Folk Culture of the Eastern United States (Philadelphia, 1969).



can be gotten when dealing with physical objects cannot be overemphasized, and has been ably demonstrated by anthropologists. In her work with Yurok-Karok basket weavers, for example, Lila M. O'Neale was able to obtain informant attitudes by showing the weavers baskets that others had made and asking for their comments.<sup>13</sup> A similar experiment, though its potential was not adequately exploited, was carried out by high school students in northern Georgia who brought together two basket weavers, a white woman and a black woman, and had them compare techniques with the result that one woman taught the other her method of production.<sup>14</sup>

Despite what work has been done, the study of the folk aesthetic has not been a major preoccupation of folklorists, and only rarely has the folklore fieldworker purposefully sought aesthetic attitudes. The extent to which this has not been of primary concern to folklorists is indicated by the fact that neither the Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend<sup>15</sup> nor

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<sup>13</sup>Lila M. O'Neale, Yurok-Karok Basket Weavers, University of California Publications in Archaeology and Ethnology, Vol. XXXII, no. 1 (Berkeley, 1932). I am grateful to Herbert Halpert for bringing this work to my attention.

<sup>14</sup>See Eliot Wigginton, ed., Foxfire 2 (Garden City, New York, 1973), pp. 394-395.

<sup>15</sup>Maria Leach, ed., Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend, 2 vols. (New York, 1949-1950).

Laurits Bødker's exhaustive international dictionary, Folk Literature (Germanic),<sup>16</sup> includes any discussion or definition of "aesthetic" or "folk aesthetic."

Aesthetic concepts in western civilization most often have been related to an appreciation of a cultural mentifact or artifact for its own sake, divorced from any particular social or physical context. When we speak of aesthetics our minds conjure up the appropriate words and phrases that we have been trained, culturally, to associate with art appreciation: truth, beauty, art for art's sake or for truth's sake, and so on. The formalist school of literary criticism in the United States, calling itself the New Criticism, was based on just such an aesthetic principle -- that the work of art (or literature) can best be understood and appreciated on its own terms for its own sake, that the author and his milieu are of no real importance in literary criticism and appreciation. More recently, in Alan P. Merriam's The Anthropology of Music, we find the same aesthetic fallacy perpetuated. Merriam writes, "The aesthetic person is . . . considered to be an emotional person, moved by the art he surveys; it must be stressed that he is moved not by the context

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<sup>16</sup>Laurits Bødker, Folk Literature (Germanic): International Dictionary of Regional European Ethnology and Folklore, II (Copenhagen, 1965).

in which the art is perceived, but directly by the art itself."<sup>17</sup>

The aesthetic fallacy is that art can be appreciated and reacted to devoid of any context: the context in which it exists and the contextual associations which the viewer or listener, the aesthetic person, introduces to his own reaction to the item. When one person writes or reads a story, or tells or listens to a story, he brings to bear upon this event many associations and experiences from his own life. The mind pictures only what is within the realm of the individual's experience and imagination. In this sense, the concept of an aesthetic, particularly a folk aesthetic, is dynamic rather than static. A cultural artifact or mentifact can be appreciated out of context -- the boat in a museum, the folktale in a book, the jet plane mounted like sculpture at an airfield -- but even then the aesthetic person is imagining its true context or creating an

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<sup>17</sup>Alan P. Merriam, The Anthropology of Music (Evanston, Illinois, 1964), p. 265. In the chapter on aesthetics in Merriam's provocative work, he attempts to judge primitive and folk aesthetic attitudes in terms of Western "art" concepts of aesthetics. As a survey of aesthetics, however, this is an extremely useful chapter, particularly in its review of the anthropological literature. For a good critique of Merriam's approach to aesthetics, see Jones, "The Concept of Aesthetic in the Traditional Arts," pp. 89-92 and passim.

acceptable alternative context. It is this importance of context, for example, that makes the outdoor folk museum a more viable forum for the presentation of material folk culture than an indoor museum where artifacts become static and non-functional. When Melville Jacobs wrote that "readers of non-Western oral literature are, I suppose, about as rare as nuclear physicists who read Bulgarian poetry,"<sup>18</sup> he made precisely the same point. No one can respond to cultural materials to which he cannot relate his own cultural experience.

Research to determine the folk aesthetic is of particular importance because only in this way can we learn to what extent and how people value and evaluate their own cultural traditions. Also, the study of aesthetics is most fruitful when approached in terms of one person's aesthetic, for then the research can be more detailed and specific. No two people can react to the same cultural item or social situation in precisely the same manner. The individual's idiosyncratic experiences determine how he will respond to the item or the situation. The following fictional exaggeration, as told and explained by Bob Coffin, is a case in point:

I've been down around Yarmouth quite a few times, and I heard about a nigger wench down there and they called her Sabre Tooth. I've heard them

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<sup>18</sup>Jacobs, The Content and Style of an Oral Literature, p. 1.

talking, some fellers, you know, and they said that she could eat peanuts right through a chickenwire fence. I was over there in the store the other day and there was a feller come in there, a traveler or something, from down Yarmouth way, and I asked him if he ever heard tell of Sabre Tooth down there, and he said, "Who's that?" Well, I says, "It's a nigger wench down there somewhere and she can eat peanuts through a chickenwire fence." And by gosh, he'd never seen her. Well I says, "I heard tell of her down there and they told me she was the one down there." And I did. Somebody down there told me, you know. But he (the man who originated the exaggeration) must have been some kind of a storyteller or something 'cause he, he added that on to it. They might have called her Sabre Tooth but he must've added the peanuts on to it. But when you think about it, why, it is kinda funny, it makes you, you can almost picture it, you know.<sup>19</sup>

Coffil grinned as he told of this exaggeration, and obviously enjoyed the telling. Certain prerequisite experience, knowledge, and bias are necessary, however, for the individual to be able to picture and appreciate the exaggeration. First, it helps to know what peanuts are and what a chickenwire fence looks like. More importantly, the listener or teller must either accept the racist connotation of "nigger" and find humor in it or be able to accept it as simply an added humorous detail without any racist intent. The latter instance is un-

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<sup>19</sup>Recorded interview, January 14, 1973. The exaggeration is probably more widely traditional than Coffil imagines. My father tells me that, as early as the 1930's, it was said of Eleanor Roosevelt, President Franklin D. Roosevelt's wife, that she could eat corn on the cob through a picket fence because of her protruding front teeth.

likely, so it would seem, yet, as discussed previously, Coffil has little if any racial prejudice to bring to bear upon his appreciation of the exaggeration. The point here is that an aesthetic concept has been verbalized -- you can almost picture it -- and that the aesthetic cannot be separated from personal experiences and the associations they call forth.

The remainder of this chapter will deal with Coffil and with his aesthetic. First, however, the methods used to determine the folk aesthetic must be outlined, for aesthetic principles are not readily or easily verbalized at the folk level of culture. Henry Glassie explains this when he writes, "the folk aesthetic can rarely be elicited directly; analysis of artifacts, behavioral observation, and ethnoscientific questioning are the means for its determination .... The lack of an aesthetic vocabulary does not prevent aesthetic operation."<sup>20</sup>

The folk aesthetic in a geographically defined storytelling tradition can be determined by fieldwork research and analysis in the following manner: (1) by observation of and subsequent interviewing on audience reaction to performances by various narrators; (2) by collection and analysis of the active and inactive repertoires of storytellers within the defined tradition; (3) by focusing upon the repertoire of a premier narrator,

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<sup>20</sup>Glassie, "Folk Art," p. 268.

for he has selected from a broader narrative tradition certain kinds or a specific kind of narrative, and this selective process on the part of the narrator indicates his aesthetic response to the broader tradition; and (4) by intensive interviewing with the storyteller to determine his sense of an aesthetic. It is with these last two approaches that I am primarily concerned here, the first two steps having proven that Bob Coffil is the best storyteller of the twenty to thirty men who regularly or occasionally spend their evenings in a small general store in the community.

It should be noted here that the validity of the folklorist almost always focusing his attention on the "star" performer has been questioned in recent years, for such an approach does result in a slanted view of folk traditions. Edward D. Ives offers a strong argument against the elitist approach in folklore and, especially, in oral history. As Ives says, "Oral history offers us the greatest technique we've ever had for reaching out into the silences and making them articulate, but God forbid that we let the glib do all the talking."<sup>21</sup>

Kenneth S. Goldstein also notes that the average informant and inactive tradition bearer should be given closer attention by the folklore collector.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Ives, A Manual for Field Workers, p. 13.

<sup>22</sup>Goldstein, A Guide for Field Workers, p. 125.

In terms of studying the folk aesthetic, however, the star performer is a better indicator of what the tradition does for and means to the people, although the less skilled performers in a tradition are useful as a check or control on the attitudes expressed by the collector's principal informant. Both Stith Thompson and MacEdward Leach have emphasized this need to focus on the exceptional performer when studying style and aesthetics.<sup>23</sup>

For a study of the folk aesthetic, Coffil is a particularly good subject for at least two reasons: First, he is the best storyteller at the store in his community. Second, because he is not a highly egocentric and self-conscious narrator, his attitudes toward stories and storytelling are probably representative of the majority of storytellers whose forte is the personal experience narrative and tall tale. The life and reputation of his brother John are near enough at hand to afford a glimpse of the latter's aesthetic vis-à-vis Bob's aesthetic, and this comparison can help to indicate the extent to which Bob Coffil is a gifted storyteller, just as comparison with the passive and unexceptional listeners at the store can show us how and why Coffil is the storyteller.

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<sup>23</sup>Thompson, *The Folktale*, p. 450; Leach, "Problems of Collecting Oral Literature," p. 339.



Bob Coffil, as we have seen, was born seventy-one years ago. When he was eight or nine years old he began to sail during the summers with his father, a merchant sea captain and occasional vessel owner, and at thirteen Coffil left school to work full time on his father's boat with his father and brother John, fourteen years his senior. That fall the vessel leaked, so much so that he and John afterwards said that they must have pumped the whole Bay of Fundy through the boat. Except for "twelve wasted years" in the late 1920's and 1930's when he bought and drove a succession of trucks, Coffil has spent his entire life on the sea, freighting, fishing, and now as a ship's pilot. When he was twenty-one years old, he and his brother Alden bought a two-masted vessel. At twenty-two, he became captain of the boat.

In the ensuing years, John Coffil often worked with his younger brother Bob -- on the freight boats, on the fishing boats, and in the trucking business. John died eleven years ago, yet many people remember and tell the tall tales of John Coffil. As one man said of John, "He could lie through a hole in an iron kettle."<sup>24</sup> Bob Coffil first became interested in storytelling because of his brother, and a third of his tall tale repertoire came from John. Some of these he now tells as his own stories,

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<sup>24</sup>Field notes from conversation at Steele's store, Scotts Bay, Nova Scotia, August 26, 1973.

others he tells about John, still others are third person anonymous. The same is true with the rest of his limited stock of fairly canonized tall tales.

Bob Coffil's repertoire, as I have previously stated, indicates that he has selected from a broad storytelling tradition only a particular kind of folk narrative -- exaggeration humor. The other stories that can be considered part of his active repertoire are all humorous personal experience narratives. His stock of tall tales and his spontaneous exaggerations, in the framework of such a repertoire and such a storytelling tradition, are an artful extension of the personal experience narrative. The tall tales have a firm basis in experience and reality. What Mody Boatright wrote of the frontier tall tale teller is equally applicable to a narrator like Coffil: "... his art is essentially realistic.... The teller of tall tales about the weather had better know his weather."<sup>25</sup>

The collection of the storyteller's repertoire and its relationship to the storytelling tradition in the community or area is a beginning attempt at discerning an aesthetic. More important, however, is the storyteller's ability or inability to express his own aesthetic. Based on my own research, it appears that the more explicit an

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<sup>25</sup>Mody C. Boatright, Folk Laughter on the American Frontier (New York, 1961), p. 99.

aesthetic is; the more value the culture and the individual place on that tradition, regardless of whether the tradition is storytelling or singing or boatbuilding. Three aspects of tradition also must be considered in determining the folk aesthetic in performance-oriented genres of folklore and in material folk culture: the item or text, the creator or performer, and the social, physical context and its functional meaning. The individual in tradition who can segment and describe these three aspects of the tradition has a more fully developed attitude toward it than one who does not see the tradition in this way. The more interest the individual has toward the first two aspects -- item or text and creator or performer -- the more explicit is the aesthetic.

With storytelling that is basically personal, that is, where the memorate is the accepted or usual form of narrative, the folk aesthetic has been found to be quite low. This was the case with Richard Bauman's study of verbal art in a Nova Scotia community. A situation -- evening talk at the general store -- was singled out by the people in the community as being the time and place when "stories" were told. A good storyteller, apparently, was defined solely in terms of a man's experience.<sup>26</sup> Since none of these good storytellers

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<sup>26</sup>Bauman, "The La Have Island General Store," pp. 334-335.

were available for interviewing and since the situation Bauman studied had ceased to exist, his work of necessity was largely reconstructive and the determination of the folk aesthetic could at best be tentative and inconclusive.

That the people within a tradition recognize the importance of a wide range of experiences for someone to become a good storyteller is understandable enough. Folktale scholars, as noted previously, have made the same point.<sup>27</sup> By traveling and working over a wider area than others, the potential storyteller has more interesting and unique experiences to draw upon in telling fictional tales or memories, and he also hears more stories and finds himself in more storytelling situations which provide him with fresh material and a variety of performance techniques from which to choose.

Like any man in this storytelling tradition, Coffin's initial definition of a good storyteller is someone who has traveled in his work, who has the experience to tell about that the stay-at-home lacks. The man of experience also has a rightful sense of superiority over those who have not been around:

If a feller out of a place like this, if he'd been away and around a lot of these outports, and

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<sup>27</sup>See Dégh, Folktales and Society, pp. 80-81, 168-171. For a good example of this recognition on the part of the folk, see Sayers, An Old Woman's Reflections, p. 24.

one thing and another, and where there's shipping, that when he comes into a place like this that there's a lot of people that don't know anything about it, you know, and you can tell 'em the truth and they'll still think you're telling them stories, see, and you're bound to after a while, say, "Well, if you wants a story, why, we'll give it to you." That's about the way it is. They think they know everything that's going on, but they's an awful lot of stuff that they don't know one thing about.<sup>28</sup>

Asked if there were any stories that he particularly liked to tell, Coffil answered, "No, don't seem to be. It's just under the circumstances, somebody's mentioned something that one of them'll come to me."<sup>29</sup> Although he has no favorite stories, none that he tells more often than others, there are some stories that he now tells with their original context, in other words, stories about stories he has told. The stories about the dory race at Lunenburg and the twelve-foot lobster he caught in the Bay of Figs, both of which he told to an outsider at the store, are examples of this.<sup>30</sup> Another Coffil story is of a shipmate of his who was blown overboard as the vessel rounded Cape Horn, where Coffil of course has never been, and of the woods camp cook to whom the story was first told. One telling of

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<sup>28</sup>Recorded interview, January 11, 1973.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

<sup>30</sup>See Chapter VI, Texts, nos. 4-5.

the story ended as follows: "The wind blew his upper lip back over the top of his head, and blew him overboard. So, I was feeling pretty bad about that 'cause he was my friend. And then, I never heard from him, and then about two years later I got a letter from him. He was in South Africa and doin' good. After I told the cook that he shook my hand. He got up and came right over and shook my hand."<sup>31</sup>

The telling of stories with their original context is also done with those he learned from others, although my role as fieldworker was probably a contributing factor in stories being told in this manner.<sup>32</sup> Sometimes, however, when Coffil tells as reminiscence a story he learned from another man, he does include description of the situation in which he first heard the story. More frequently, the stories are presented as third person narratives, or, if a specific social situation reminds him of a story, he adapt that story to himself and the situation. The identification of stories with particular contexts is not done by Coffil alone. The men who frequent the store, when asked about Coffil and his

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<sup>31</sup>Field notes, September 13, 1972. The same story about a story, though without the hand-shaking conclusion, was recorded February 17, 1970, and again, in a somewhat longer version, on May 17, 1970. For complete texts, see Chapter VI, Texts, no. 1.

<sup>32</sup>See Chapter VI, Texts, nos. 20 and 23.

stories, will more often than not describe a storytelling event rather than tell the story. The identity, the aesthetic appreciation, is directed toward a story fitting a situation. The two are usually inseparable.

Coffil's aesthetic of storytelling extends beyond an appreciation of storytelling contexts and the recognition that a good storyteller is a man of experience, a man who, like Joe Parker of Hall's Harbour, could talk all night. After being told by Coffil that experience was what made a man a storyteller, I argued, "Certainly there are a lot of guys who have traveled around that don't tell stories and that aren't storytellers. So there must be something besides that." His reply was neither abstract nor theoretical. "Well, I don't know," he said. "Some fellers like to tell some foolish things." Without pause, he then told the story about Clyde Smith hiding rum in his woodpile, a story that to Coffil is distinguished and identified by the phrase "solid full of brass": "And, by gosh, he said, the next morning was a beautiful morning. The sun was shining, he said, and when he was eating his breakfast there was a knock come to the door. He says, 'When I opened that door,' he says, 'it was solid full of brass.' (chuckling) One of these customs fellers, I suppose. He says, 'It was solid full of brass.'" At the conclusion of the story, Coffil added, "Well, what struck me funny (was) when he said the door

was solid full of brass.<sup>33</sup>

A brief explication of this phrase will show why Coffil thought it particularly memorable and amusing, though it must be remembered that the interpretation is mine and not Coffil's. The uniformed official, standing in the doorway with the morning sun reflecting off the brass buttons of his uniform, represented the authority that the trickster had to outwit. The door was "solid full of brass," and the connotative picture presented here is one of pompous and powerful authority. The official in his uniform, with its gleaming brass buttons which are symbolic of the uniform and of the authority it represents, filled the doorway. Yet, as the story progresses, the trickster succeeds in hiding the smuggled rum and fooling this authority. The story becomes humorous because, in an instant, we see the conflict and the magnitude of the odds against the trickster. The picture we receive from this one image epitomizes and intensifies the relationship between the trickster and the police -- a man eating his breakfast and caught off guard pitted against several officials who apparently know of his illegal rumrunning enterprise.

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<sup>33</sup>Recorded interview, September 29, 1972. The same story, notably without the "solid full of brass" incident, was recorded May 1, 1973, in the first person telling of Smith, from whom Coffil learned the story more than twenty years ago. See Chapter VI, Texts, no. 43.



At the time Coffil first told me this story, I was not aware of the exact significance of the story as an answer to my question about what makes a good storyteller besides a wide range of experience. More than three months later, after he told the exaggeration about Sabre Tooth eating peanuts through a chickenwire fence, this became clear. A good storyteller, from Coffil's point of view, is one who can create vivid, humorous imagery, who facilitates the listener's appreciation of the story by allowing him to picture scenes in the story as it progresses. And the process works both ways. The storyteller must have a vivid picture in mind to tell or describe.

When I asked if he preferred telling tall tales in the first person, Coffil answered, "I don't notice much difference." He then continued: "I don't know why it is. Somebody will get to talkin' and they'll say somethin' about somethin' somewhere and this damn thing will, you know, I'll think about it, and then I'll picture it, and then I'll tell it."<sup>34</sup> A good example of this is the story he learned from John about an old cow moose with a tough hide that John shot with his "weak gun."<sup>35</sup> After John fired six shots that did not phase the moose, lying

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<sup>34</sup>Recorded interview, January 11, 1973.

<sup>35</sup>See Chapter VI, Texts, no. 30.

down and resting, "she got up and stretched kind of and walked away." In Coffil's telling of the story, "stretched kind of" is spoken slowly, with a yawn and a slight indication of stretching. Because of this subtle use of gesture and tone, characteristic in his style of narration, both Coffil and the listener can "see" the moose at this moment.

The aesthetic of Bob Coffil the storyteller includes several points that can be inferred from his own storytelling and from what he has said about his art. Obviously, a story must be complete and well-rounded. Coffil does not tell fragments of tall tales or personal experience stories. A story must also be clearly identifiable as a story. The teller must know that he is performing and convey that special pose to his audience by whatever means of humor and guile and gesture and tone that he can, so that they too understand and accept the storyteller's license. In this instance, for example, Coffil objected to the outsider from Yarmouth County because he had not created this necessary relationship between himself and the other men at the store, and as a consequence he was bragging rather than performing. Finally, it is a presupposition that the storyteller must have a reasonably large repertoire and range of experience so that, if called upon, he can rise to the occasion with an old or new story, either true or fictitious.

Coffil conveys his pose as a storyteller in subtle ways: a slight grin, a deadpan expression, a pause and a quick flashing of his eyes to see if individuals in his audience recognize that a story is being told and that someone is about to be fooled. Other storytellers, like Clyde Smith, create a similar expectancy in their listeners by more boisterous means, but they too are able to establish a viable narrator-audience relationship.

That part of Coffil's aesthetic that is explicit includes two concepts which, in the broadest sense, are both contextual: first, an appreciation of a story fitting a situation; second, an awareness that good stories and storytelling are dependent upon vivid phrases and images which allow the listener and the teller to picture in detail the story as it progresses from one scene to another. The first aspect of this aesthetic of storytelling suggests several conclusions vis-à-vis an aesthetic in folk narrative and, more generally, in all performed folklore genres: (1) the performance-conscious genres, such as the tall tale and personal experience narrative in the area of study, do not lend themselves to an "art for art's sake" aesthetic, that is, to an appreciation of a specific item or story for its own sake, divorced from any particular context; (2) when the folk aesthetic is related intrinsically to context, this aesthetic is relatively unspoken; (3) the more static

and item-oriented a folklore genre is, the more explicit is the aesthetic; and (4) the closer to professional status the performer is in his or her community, the more explicit is that performer's aesthetic.

The first two conclusions are illustrated by the attitudes of the men at Forsythe's store in Delhaven. They appreciate a Coffil story that fits a particular situation, like the one about Coffil catching a lobster larger than his boat, and they can describe that situation, but they do not remember the story itself. Furthermore, they do not have well-developed concepts of stories and storytellers. Coffil's sense of an aesthetic, though not lucid or abstract, is greater in this respect than that of the other men.

Coffil's greater ability to discuss stories and storytelling relative to the others who frequent the general store is proof of the fourth conclusion. He is closer to professional status as a storyteller, and, consequently, his aesthetic is more readily verbalized. He is, after all, the recognized storyteller in the group; it is to be expected that he would have a better idea of what a story is and what a storyteller is. When compared with Ernest Eaton, another narrator in the area of the fieldwork in Kings County, Coffil's example helps to prove the third conclusion, that the aesthetic is more explicit when the genre is more static and item-oriented.

Over the past fifty years, Eaton has kept a notebook in which he lists jokes and anecdotes that he has heard and enjoyed and might want to tell himself. His interest is in the story and in the story being told to the proper audience. Although Coffil is a better storyteller by any subjective standard that can be devised, Eaton has a larger and more varied repertoire and also is better able to discuss the art of storytelling, using items from his repertoire to exemplify different points in his aesthetic. Quite simply, this is because his interest is primarily with the traditional item of folklore, not with the spontaneous situation for its performance.<sup>36</sup>

The second aspect of Coffil's aesthetic suggests a final conclusion: at the core of the aesthetic in all folk narrative, beyond the appreciation of a specific story that fit a particular situation, is an appreciation of the imagery of the narrative, a sense that "you can almost picture it" as the story is told. In this final aspect of the storyteller's aesthetic, the story itself becomes a visual drama in the mind's eye of both the teller and his audience. The extent to which a story is appreciated by any one person thus depends upon the many

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<sup>36</sup>The attitudes expressed by folksinger Almeda Riddle, in Roger Abrahams' A Singer and Her Songs, further exemplify these last two conclusions, that a more explicit aesthetic can be elicited when the performer is close to professional status and the genre is relatively static and item-oriented.

associations and connotations that the story calls to mind. The more vivid and detailed the mind-picture is, the better the story. This helps to explain the esoteric nature of much folk narrative. It also suggests a basic aesthetic similarity between written and oral literature. The short stories and novels as well as the anecdotes and folktales that we like best are those for which we are able to create a detailed, personal, idiosyncratic picture on the stage that is our mind.

With the tall tale, this concept of the narrative as visual drama is of special significance because of its unique content -- the tall tale is a personal experience narrative, told to be true and with a realistic setting, but with an absurd incongruity or exaggeration of truth. The humor of the tall tale derives from this juxtaposition of the believable and the absurd, the realism shattered by exaggeration. The listener and the teller enjoying his own story picture a realistic setting as the narrative unfolds and then suddenly find that picture changed by exaggeration to one of absurdity, to an impossibility.

By contrast, the humor of the joke can be motivated by various means -- a play on words, an awkward or embarrassing situation for the joke's protagonist, sadism or masochism, personal identification with the protagonist, and so on. Certainly jokes succeed or fail in large

measure depending upon how vivid is the mind-picture they call forth, and a good test of the validity of this aesthetic concept that "you can almost picture it" is for anyone to consider his own narrative repertoire and realize that the stories he likes best are the ones for which he has the most vivid and detailed pictures, yet jokes are never told to be true, and the humor of their visual drama derives from a willing suspension of disbelief. The tall tale succeeds when a previously established belief is "suspended" by absurd exaggeration.

The determination of a storyteller's aesthetic is of particular value because this criterion perhaps more than any other can indicate whether a man is indeed a storyteller or might be seen by others as a storyteller. In other words, a man who can evaluate the tradition of which he is a part, the stories, the storytelling, and the storytellers, probably has a better chance of being judged favorably by his peers and remembered by later generations as a man who could talk and tell stories.

Throughout this work, a primary goal has been to determine to what extent Bob Coffil is a storyteller. In summary, it has been seen that other people in the community know him as a man of experience and as a storyteller. Coffil has the ability to structure his own experiences into story form so that his telling of the places he has been and the things he has done is dramatically

effective. In other words, he has a sense of the dramatic in his subtle use of gesture and facial expression, in his use of argumentative dialogue, and in his deadpan style of narration which is occasionally punctuated by a slight grin. The collection of texts as well as the life history indicate a moderate repertoire of well-told stories and a wide range of common and unique experience. Analysis of personality in terms of the life history confirms my observation that he is a quiet man, in most respects quite typical of his age and occupations, and, most importantly, a man who has no need to command attention as a storyteller because of his extreme competence in the more important business of life. Finally, his aesthetic of storytelling, though more clearly verbalized than that of most other men in the area, is focused primarily on the context for performance rather than on the item, the performer, or the method of performance.

One final method of examining Bob Coffil as a storyteller can now be considered: an evaluation of his art in comparison with that of his brother John, certainly the most convenient and logical yardstick for such comparison. The conclusions that can be drawn by comparing the two brothers can only be considered tentative, for the major portion of the research has been focused on Bob, his life and his stories. Nonetheless, by reconstructing what John's aesthetic probably was, we can see



how they differ as storytellers.

Bob Coffil's brother John did adapt stories to social situations -- the John Coffil stories for which there are several collected texts indicate this clearly. The fairly long story of John going over the Reversing Falls in a barrel and ultimately being trapped in a hollow tree, for example, was sometimes told as a single episode tale with only the concluding incident, and the setting differs in each collected version. If we can judge from the lack of parallels in the literature for several of his tales, he was also inventive in his storytelling, and John's comment about the boat getting stuck in the fog is clear evidence of both spontaneity and invention or recreation.

The difference between the two brothers, apparently, is that John chose to remember and retell his inventions, and more often than not, John told stories as items, probably because he had a greater appreciation of the stories as art and because he enjoyed being the storyteller. Bob's son, a forty-three year old fisherman, explained the difference: "He was always telling stories, everywhere we went. The old man was always quiet. He never talked so much. And everywhere we went in the boat, Jack would tell the stories. He held the throne and people came to hear him talk. Everywhere we went, they knew him. The old man never had much chance to

tell stories when Jack was around, but he was kinda quiet anyway."<sup>37</sup>

Opinion on John Coffil as a storyteller is remarkably consistent. He was an exceptional narrator, always had new stories to tell, and in lie-swapping situations he invariably came out on top. One afternoon in August of 1973, I sat on the bench in Steele's store in Scotts Bay and asked the older men as they came into the store if they remembered John Coffil. Each man had at least one story to offer, and they all recalled him as the best storyteller they had known. Young men in their twenties, though they had never met him, knew of him as a remarkable tale-teller who used to bring a boat into the Scotts Bay wharf.

The words of one man in his early sixties epitomize the attitude toward John Coffil and his stories:

He was the world's record liar, greatest liar there ever was. I worked with him in the lumber-camps, one over in Hants County, and one right up here. That was in, let's see, 1937 and 1938 it was. He was quite a liar. No one could ever top him. They'd swap stories in the lumber-camps but he could always talk the longest and the best. He always had new ones.<sup>38</sup>

This same Scotts Bay man added a comment about John that can best be described as indicative of John's humorous

<sup>37</sup>Field notes from impromptu interview with Robert Coffil, Jr., August 24, 1973, at the Wagon Wheel Beverage Room and Grill, Kentville, Nova Scotia.

<sup>38</sup>Field notes, August 26, 1973.

Irreverence, a characteristic that is not part of Bob's personality:

He called his old man, old Willard Coffil, he called him the Bay of Fundy pirate. I guess he had kinda light fingers, you know, always picking something up and taking it. There was old Willard and his boys, four of 'em, they sailed a packet up and down the Bay of Fundy. Dan was the oldest and he must've been three hundred pounds. Then John, and he was quite big. And then Bob and Al, but they was younger. One time I remember they loaded crushed rock off the beach here at Scotts Bay and sailed around to Kingsport or Canning, and they hauled all the rock for the Kingsport to Canning road.<sup>39</sup>

All four brothers never sailed together with their father, yet the picture we get from this description is of a romantic, adventurous, sea-faring family. And John, of course, provided the comic relief. Those sections of Bob Coffil's life history that include John all suggest the same conclusion.

John's status as a legendary liar is further illustrated by a lengthy anecdote about two friends of his who were caught, out of season, with twenty-three freshly shot ducks in the freezer at their camp in Halifax County. Because the duck-hunting season had opened in Kings County, John went to court and said the ducks had been shot at his non-existent camp in Kings County. The non-existence of John's camp was later

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<sup>39</sup>ibid.

proven and the two men who shot the ducks were fined. The teller of this story concluded, "They could've got John on perjury charges, but then they decided that if they tried him for that he'd just tell another lie and it wasn't no use, so they let him off."<sup>40</sup> By comparison, then, the men in Delhaven do recognize Bob Coffil as a storyteller, but this recognition is not on the same level as that accorded John by the men in Scotts Bay and probably in other places where John Coffil made himself known.

A final difference that can be discerned between the two brothers is that John did have favorite stories,<sup>41</sup> about going over the Reversing Falls in Saint John, New Brunswick, in a barrel and then traveling west; about a bear getting jammed in a cabin door and a woman shoving a hot poker down its throat and then frying doughnuts in the bear fat that dripped out the bear's hind end; about a big Swede running out a wind-blown anchor chain to retrieve the anchor; about a "hard old man" he worked with at a rock quarry who slipped and fell into the stone crusher; John caught the pieces on a blanket as they came out of the stone crusher and took him to the hos-

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

<sup>41</sup>This conclusion is based on the comments of Bob Coffil and his son, as well as on the many collected versions of some of John's oft-told tales.

pital where they put him back together so he could be back at work the next day.

John's aesthetic was thus at a higher level of consciousness, and he was more of a storyteller than his younger brother Bob, who is a pretty fine storyteller himself, but of a different kind. Coffil's son again explains, with a comment that the folklorist interested in performance and repertoire often hears: "The old man would tell stories like that, but never so much as Jack did. I wish you could have heard him. It's too bad he's not around now. He could really tell you some stories."<sup>42</sup>

From our study of Robert Coffil, the student of storytelling must recognize different kinds of storytellers, some who are better remembered than others. It would be easy, for example, to state that John Coffil was a better storyteller than Bob, but given the differences in personality, intent, and aesthetic, this would be fair to neither of them. With the tall tale there are at least two kinds of narrators, those who are egocentric and those who are not. It appears probable that future studies in other genres of folk narrative will add further to our understanding of storytelling as art and to our realization that the bearers and transmitters of tradition.

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<sup>42</sup>Field notes, August 24, 1973.

are not simply active or inactive. Various storytellers can only be accurately evaluated by their own aesthetic criteria and by the extent to which they are conscious of their art and seek recognition with it. In this sense, Robert Oeffel is an excellent folk narrator whose reputation is and will be tempered by his lack of egocentricity and his achievement in other facets of his life.

## CONCLUSIONS

The preceding chapter has included much in the way of summary on Robert Coffil's life, his stories, and his storytelling. A few aspects of the present work need to be highlighted and further commented upon. These are Coffil's reputation as a storyteller, his repertoire of stories, and his autobiography.

1. Reputation

I stated at the outset of this work that my initial interest was to study a living teller of tall tales and to try to foretell his chances with posterity as a locally renowned tall tale hero by comparison with the tall tale heroes who have been described in the literature on the subject. Most especially, the folk heroes that I have considered are Abraham "Oregon" Smith, John Darling, Gib Morgan, Jones Tracy, and Len Henry. Although the direction of my work shifted from this theoretical construct to focus on a man, his autobiography, his stories, and his storytelling, and to try to work out their complex interrelationships, we still might look at this initial question. A final answer cannot be given until some time after the storyteller's death, but by comparing Coffil with the folk heroes who have been studied

we can better appreciate the kind of man and storyteller he is.

As a tall tale teller, Coffil exhibits practically all the traits that have been attributed to these artists of oral storytelling. He is inventive, both in creating new stories and in telling variations of standard stories to suit particular audiences and situations. In the past he has been a swapper of yarns, although today the group of men with whom he socializes at the store in his community is not enough aware of performance for yarn-swapping to be the normal form of narration. His quickness of wit is apparent in the spontaneous and quickly forgotten whoppers, i.e., non-narrative statements of exaggeration, that are a part of his normal conversation. He strives for an illusion of truth in his tall tales, with his deadpan style of narration, his use of understatement in voice inflection, dramatic pause, and gesture, and his insistence upon realism in the setting for his stories. Some of his best tall tales are closely related to actual experiences, such as his description of mosquitoes in Maine, his story about an exceptional whipcracker, the one about a ship sailing on the fog, and the spontaneous tale about the dory race at Lunenburg.

William Hugh Jansen, in concluding his study of Oregon Smith, wrote that "There is a folk explanation of



the tall-tale teller's genesis, an explanation that has not been applied to Oregon Smith alone -- a theory that disbelief by other people of his true stories drives him into exaggeration. At least in the instance of Smith, there is clear proof that such an explanation has no factual basis."<sup>1</sup> With Coffil, we even have some proof of this, although the disbelief of his true stories is not so much an explanation of genesis as it is a justification for telling more preposterous, fabricated stories than he otherwise would. As quoted before, Coffil said of the men at the store, "You can tell them the truth and they'll still think you're telling them stories, see, and you're bound to after a while say, 'Well, if you wants a story, why, we'll give it to you.'" He also did not tell these men much about his New Year's Eve experience in a storm off Digby because, he felt, they wouldn't believe it, and even if they did, they wouldn't understand it because they are farmers rather than sailors.

A final point that makes it difficult to ascertain Coffil's status as a potential tall tale hero is our imperfect knowledge of the folk memory as it relates to the individual storyteller who is remembered by the tradition. In reference to Oregon Smith, Jansen wrote,

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<sup>1</sup>Jansen, "Abraham 'Oregon' Smith," pp. 341-342.

"The survival after his death of a tale-teller's reputation as an artist and of his particular canon depends upon his successors in the art of tale-telling."<sup>2</sup> Oregon Smith had at least one such successor who amused local audiences by assuming his role and imitating Smith's style of narration. For the rest of the tall tale literature, we have little evidence to indicate that the stories, if they stay in active tradition, remain attached to their original teller.

Once in a great-while at the store in Scotts Bay, John Coffil and his stories are a topic of conversation. When tall tales are told, however, the usual form of narration is in the first person or in the anonymous third person. If the stories of a man remain in an active tradition, it seems probable that they will not continue to be attributed to the local folk hero. What we have in the tall tale literature on tall tale heroes might well be stories culled from the memories of inactive tradition bearers, stories that persistent folklore collectors were specifically asking for as the tales of a local folk hero.

If Coffil were to have a successor, his son Bobby would be the one. Coffil says of his son and the stories, "I dare say he might know them, but he never says

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 342-343.

any."<sup>3</sup> Of course he doesn't, when his father is present, just as Bob rarely told stories when he was with his brother John, and, for that matter, as Alden Coffil only once told tall stories when Bob was with him. But Bobby does know the stories that his father tells. When I asked him if he did, he smiled and said, "Oh, I imagine so. I might know them and some more too. You know, on the fishing boat they'll be telling stories some. I'll tell some on the boat sometimes."<sup>4</sup> Because his work keeps him away from home for long periods of time, Bobby is not an active member in the community and only occasionally visits the general store. When the time comes in his life that he might take on the active role of storyteller in his community, however, he will not emulate his father to the extent of telling tall tales about him. The nature of his own experiences and the nature of the tall tale tradition as one of original and spontaneous exaggeration eliminates this possibility. Besides, he considers John Coffil to have been more of a storyteller than his father ever has been.

Robert Coffil is a different kind of storyteller from the folk heroes who have been well-documented in the tall tale literature. This difference also makes Coffil

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<sup>3</sup>Recorded interview, January 11, 1973.

<sup>4</sup>Field notes, August 24, 1973.

of particular interest because he probably is more like the vast majority of oral narrators who, for many years, have kept the tall tale and other personal experience stories alive as popular forms of storytelling among groups of men. He is not the kind of "star" performer or character who commands attention with the force of an overbearing personality. He does not seek such attention, yet he does have a quiet strength of character and personality that is apparent in his manner and in the true personal experience stories he tells. The difference between Coffil and folk heroes like Gib Morgan and Oregon Smith can be traced to two related conclusions made in the course of the research.

(1) Coffil is and always has been more concerned with his success in life than with his success as a storyteller. His orally-recorded life history documents this convincingly, for it includes many stories of Coffil succeeding in conflicts with others and in comparison to others because of his innate common sense and his experience in life. The series of stories about difficulties he had with customs officials, his ability to rebuild and run the skidway at the woods camp by himself, and his success as a young man relative to others during the year he spent in the States all illustrate this well.

The extent of this concern with success as a workman and as a person is further shown in his ability

to move through different periods of his life working at different occupations -- as a merchant sailor, as a truck driver, as a vessel owner and captain, as a woodsman, as a fisherman, and as a ship's pilot. One does not succeed in such varied occupations by chance, and Coffil worked hard to be successful in each one because success, in terms of occupational skill and status, was important to him. For Coffil, such success is equated with total competency and complete knowledge.

The importance Coffil places on formal education also illustrates this facet of his personality. As I have pointed out previously, he sometimes wishes he had continued in school so he could have had the education required to become captain of large ships because this is one field he did not explore and that might have been more satisfying to him. Furthermore, when he was middle-aged he recognized the importance of education for his success as a fisherman and hence attended five government-sponsored courses to familiarize himself with this new occupation and to upgrade his skills. Coffil is, in the true sense of the phrase, a man of knowledge. His extreme competency suggests an ability to adjust to the reality of life.

(2) Coffil's adjustment to reality precludes any great need on his part to use imaginative storytelling as a means of self-fulfillment. His sense of self-esteem is

fulfilled by his successes in life, so consequently he does not find it necessary to satisfy his ego by commanding attention as a storyteller. He knows he is the best storyteller of those men who spend time at the store, but storytelling is not as important as other kinds of competency. He is not a highly egocentric storyteller, as the tall tale heroes of the past apparently were, and he does not insist upon creating the situation for his storytelling. He is, however, ready with a newly invented or recreated tall tale if a situation for such a story occurs.

This ability to invent new stories and adapt old ones for specific storytelling situations is also attributed to the tall tale heroes described in the literature, but Coffil does not bother to repeat his inventions, and this makes it improbable that his stories will be remembered by the men who share his rostrum. The men remember the situations of Coffil's storytelling, but they do not remember the stories. And the fact that the general store is not specifically a forum for Coffil and his stories would further appear to weigh against his possible reputation as a future tall tale hero in the community.

## 2. Repertoire

• A study of Robert Coffil's repertoire and narrative

life history offers certain insights into storytelling as Coffil represents that tradition. Consideration of his repertoire also poses a few problems.

The repertoire, or that part that has been collected, indicates Coffil's ability to create new stories and to adapt traditional tall tale motifs to particular storytelling situations. His creativity is further illustrated by the personal experience narratives in the life history and in the collection of texts. He is able to structure complete and successful stories from his own experiences and from the experiences of others. His story about the difficulties he had with the captain of a Greek freighter exemplifies this, for it is a well-told and well-organized story that was first collected only eighteen days after the events which he describes in the story occurred. Subsequent collecting of the same story shows how Coffil has tended to compress the experiences and make the story more unified and complete. By comparing this story with his fragmented description of a harrowing experience he had in a storm at the same time, we can see that Coffil is more interested in humor and personal success than in danger or heroism. A particularly notable aspect of his personal experience stories is his use of dialogue, a stylistic feature that characterizes good storytelling everywhere.

Because Coffil places greatest value on the story fitting a situation, his concept of the story as an identifiable item is not fully developed. He has invented and adapted stories for particular social contexts and then thrown the stories away, that is, without bothering to remember the stories for possible future telling. Creativity goes hand in glove with a repertoire that is not made up of set items for performance. It is these invented and then forgotten stories that might best be considered his active repertoire, for these are the ones that he now tells in natural situations, but because they are forgotten they cannot really be described as part of the storyteller's repertoire at all.

The passive or set items in the repertoire suggest new or recreated stories for performance. These set items might be told with minor changes if he was in a true yarn-swapping tradition at present, but he is not. The passive items now are told only to someone like me, a visitor to the house who shows interest in him as a man of experience and humor, but they are not told at the store. This also applies to most of the true personal experience stories, which are reserved for those situations where listeners are sympathetic in their desire to know of his life experiences. He has told some of these memorates at the store, but they have fallen into disuse.



except for occasions when he is swapping stories with other sea-faring men or with visitors in his home.

Although Coffil is a creative storyteller, his competency does not stop at invention. He is also able to tell tall tales and personal experience narratives in an extremely set form. This is evident from the tellings of some of the stories he learned from John, most especially the tale that ends with John trapped in a hollow tree. There is also evidence of this in some of the stories he tells about Glyde Smith. In fact, one reason for his admiring Smith as a storyteller is his belief that Smith could hear another man's story and memorize it.

As well as his ability to create stories and to recite stories in a set form, Coffil also has a tendency to combine different stories and hence create a new story. This is shown in several of the tall tales, where he combines his true experiences with traditional tall tale motifs and also combines related motifs to create longer stories. This is further exemplified in the story he tells of how Smith tricked a man into giving him a new fur coat. Whether consciously or unconsciously, Coffil has taken two of Smith's stories -- one about Smith getting the fur coat from a friend who could well afford the loss and one about his taking shelter from a storm on the French Shore of Nova Scotia during his

rumrunning days -- and combined them to present a totally different picture of the man. Smith becomes a self-serving trickster rather than a fun-loving man who took the coat as a joke and who shared his smuggled liquor with the men who helped him store it during the storm. In the Coffil version of the story, the coat is taken from the man who helped him.

With a storyteller who places considerable emphasis on context for recalling and adapting stories, the active-inactive dichotomy established by scholars to describe a folklore performer's repertoire can be applied only very loosely. Except for the limited number of set or canonized stories, all of Coffil's stock of narrative material is inactive until a specific social situation reminds him of a story, or, more aptly, a kernel of a story. A good example of this is Coffil's story about a shipmate of his being blown overboard off Cape Horn and later turning up in South Africa. The incident of the sailor having his lip blown back over the top of his head was the only part of the story Coffil had heard before, and he did not (and does not) remember where he heard the motif. The storytelling situation in the woods camp, however, reminded him of the motif and he proceeded to create a story around it. In all likelihood, the motif came from his brother John. In one Scotts Bay version of the John Coffil story about a big Swede running out

the anchor chain to retrieve the anchor that was blown out behind the boat, the captain of the ship has his face turned inside out when he yells "Heave to!" into the wind.

Kenneth S. Goldstein, who has discussed the active and passive parts of the folklore performer's repertoire in terms of traditional singers and has shown how the repertoire does not remain stable throughout the person's life, concludes his discussion with the following suggestion:

... a closer connection than has been attempted previously will have to be made between the items of repertory and the extensive personal histories collected by trained folklorists from their informants. My own attempts along this line in recent field work have resulted in an improvement both in the life histories obtained from my informants and in the case histories of the items in their repertory. Not only has personal history research resulted in my informants' remembering fuller data on the folklore in their possession, but the attempt to obtain data from them on the active life of individual folklore items has resulted in a better understanding and verbalizing of the meaning of these items and of their place in the lives of the informants.

Certainly this observation is valid; I could not have collected the background data on items in Coffill's repertoire without having collected an extensive life history, both because of the relationship between the folklore items and the man's life and because of the

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<sup>5</sup>Goldstein, "On the Application of the Concepts of Active and Inactive Traditions," pp. 66-67.

increased amount of time the collector spends with an informant from whom he collects a life history. But, songs are more identifiable as items than are stories, both to the informant and to the collector. Folksong, despite the fact that it lends itself to performance, is a relatively fixed form. Folk narrative, as discussed in the present work, is a relatively free or non-fixed form. The entire concept of active and inactive items in the repertoire of the folklore informant is most applicable to those folklore genres, like folksong and riddle, that are relatively fixed in form.

With stories and storytelling as Robert Coffil reflects the tradition, items become less important than the context for their performance, and most of the repertoire remains dormant until a situation triggers his memory and brings an inactive item or motif to the surface of his mind. The only alternative, and one that is less important to understanding Coffil's stories and storytelling, is that a change in the kind of audience he has could bring more of his inactive reservoir of narrative traditions to the surface. This change would be either that his audience would have the background or interest necessary to appreciate his experiences, such as myself as opposed to the farmers at the store, or an audience that included another man of equal experience

and ability so that he could actively swap yarns in his present situation.

Furthermore, should our primary interest be focused on the items rather than on the tradition? The items are textual examples of the tradition, but they cannot, by themselves or placed within the framework of the tradition bearer's life, offer precise insights for an understanding of folklore as a traditional means of communication and entertainment. The items must be collected and analyzed in relation to the informant's life history, but an understanding of both genre and tradition bearer is more complete when the focus is on storytelling rather than stories, singing rather than songs.

### 3. Autobiography

A final conclusion to be drawn from the present work has to do with the fieldwork approach the researcher uses in studying the individual and the tradition, and this is an approach I have tried to follow throughout my work with Robert Coffil.

To view folklore in its proper social, cultural, and personal perspectives, the folklorist must not, in the course of his work with a principal informant, continually emphasize items or performance contexts. By so doing, he makes the informant self-conscious and

aware of himself as a tradition bearer or performer, and the resulting life history, taxonomy, and aesthetic will be formed and shaped to meet the folklorist's expectations. In other words, the subject will have gone twice through the folklorist's analytic filter -- first, during the fieldwork; second, in the written presentation of his findings.

Ideally, the fieldwork should be carried out in such a manner that the informant's relationship to his family and community, indeed, even to his own stock of folklore traditions, remains unchanged. A primary example of this not being the case is Leo W. Simmons' work with Don Talayesva, the subject of Sun Chief: The Autobiography of a Hopi Indian. Don not only was paid to write voluminous diaries; he also went to Yale University to spend time with Simmons and his colleagues, and Simmons spent several months in Don's home on the Hopi reservation at Oraibi.<sup>6</sup> Among the results of this ethnographic interference were Don's changed and ambiguous status in his own community, and a much more introspective and self-conscious life history than might normally be expected. One is reminded of the syndicated "Grin and Bear It" cartoon, where one Indian is seen bragging to

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<sup>6</sup>See Simmons, Sun Chief, pp. 1-9, for a description of the relationship that evolved between the anthropologist and his subject.

another, "We are now a two-anthropologist family."

If by "folklore" is meant the unself-conscious autobiography of a people, then those who collect and study it must keep in mind the extent to which their field methods affect the very stuff they propose to collect and study. This is obviously most significant in terms of the intensive study of the individual. If we choose to prepare psychological studies of folklore and of the individual transmitters and creators of that folklore, then the methods of the anthropological life historian will probably suffice with only minor modifications of field technique. If, however, our interest in function is more sociological than psychological, or if our interest includes oral history, or if our interest in the person we propose to study is humanistic as well as scientific, then the folklorist's methods of collection need to be considerably less intrusive and prying than those of the anthropologist.

Participant-observation is a useful field technique the folklorist has learned from the anthropologist; it is a method I used extensively in the fieldwork for the present study. But folklore texts and extensive life histories of informants are not gotten by participant-observation. For these, the personal interview remains the primary method of collection.

For my work with Robert Coffil and my purposes in doing it, there was no wholly satisfactory model upon which a biographical-contextual study such as this could be based. What I decided upon, in terms of field methods and organization, can only be tested by further studies of a similar nature which also attempt to study a generic folklore tradition by intensive investigation of one person within that tradition. The organization should, by now, speak for itself, and is in no way extraordinary. It includes three major units: (1) an introductory unit, including surveys of the relevant literature on the subjects to be considered; (2) a unit of collected data; and (3) a unit of analysis. This organization is not as clearcut as it appears, however. Every chapter contains introductory material, collected data, and analysis.

The field methods relating to personal interviews were based on my feeling that the less I interfered with Coffil and his tradition the more accurate would be the texts, life history, and attitudes toward storytelling that I collected. Thus, as I have explained earlier, the interviews were, for the most part, non-directed; the formal, recorded interviews with Coffil were well-spaced in time; and my relationship with Coffil, though always cordial and friendly, was not and is not what could be termed intimate. We are good friends, but there is no dependency in our relationship with each other.



This last point, certainly, is the most difficult. It would have been easy, and in some ways desirable, for either one of us to extend the relationship beyond what it was at any time during the research. The kind of relationship a folklore collector has with his informant depends in part on the personalities of the two involved. In our case, Coffil and I are similar in that we are both somewhat quiet and self-sufficient. Because of this, the ethnographic distance I sought was readily accepted by Coffil, and as a result, I feel confident that I have not to any great extent put him twice through the filter of my analysis. The distance we maintained aided my attempt to avoid influencing what he told me and distorting my presentation of him as a man and as a storyteller. Coffil did not, for example, make it a point to go to the store in the evening, or, when he was there to tell more stories than he normally would have simply to fulfill any expectations I might have had. With another collector and another informant this might not be as easily achieved, and even in this instance there were times, I am sure, that we both would have liked to have been closer personally.

The collection and presentation of full life histories of folklore informants is a method that is only now beginning to be explored by folklorists in North America. As a means of understanding folklore

genres and the individuality that is part of tradition, this method has much to offer. I have tried to show how much more we can learn from an individual-focused study which includes a lengthy life history than from the broader study of a folklore tradition. The autobiography, as a record of a man's life, has an intrinsic value apart from any folkloric considerations, and also it is perhaps the best possible demonstration that folklore is a particularly viable approach to understanding ourselves and others.

## TALE TYPE AND MOTIF INDEX

Tale types are from Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson's The Types of the Folktale and from Ernest W. Baughman's Type and Motif Index of the Folktales of England and North America. Motif references are from Baughman and from Stith Thompson's Motif-Index of Folk-Literature. Reference throughout is to the specific page or pages on which a tale type or motif is to be found.

### Tale Types

1875. The Boy on the Wolf's Tail, 356, 357-358.  
1890F. Lucky Shot: Miscellaneous Forms, 361-362.  
1895. A Man Wading in Water Catches Many Fish in his Boots, 362.  
1920. Contest in Lying, 302-303, 303-305.  
1960M1. Large Mosquitoes Fly off with Kettle, 330-332.  
2200. Catch Tales, 374-375.

### Motifs

#### B. Animals

- B211.5. Speaking fish, 327, 328.

#### C. Tabu

- C401.3. Tabu: speaking while searching for treasure, 428.

#### D. Magic

- D1254. Magic staff, 436.

- D1478. Magic object provides light, 121.
- D1673.1. Tree grows from stick saint has used and thrown aside, 436.
- D1812.5. Future learned through omens, 430-432.
- D2142.1. Wind produced by magic, 441.

#### E. The Dead

- E291. Ghosts protect treasure, 428.
- E421. Spectral ghosts, 426.
- E530.1. Ghost-like lights, 121.
- E599.9. Ghost seen in two places at once, 433-434.

#### F. Marvels

- F403.2.3.2. Spirit gives warning, 433-434.
- F911.4.1. Fish swallows ship, 300.
- F935.2. Ice forms while fish leaps from pool, 325-326.

#### J. The Wise and The Foolish

- J1499.15.1. "Why don't you go where you're looking?" said to cross-eyed man, 377.
- J1811.4. Rooster's crow interpreted, 210.
- J1812. Other sounds misunderstood, 209-210.
- J1820. Inappropriate action from misunderstanding, 339, 340.
- J2050. Absurd short-sightedness, 369.
- J2081.3. Fool exchanges wife with ox, 367.
- J2210. Logical absurdity based upon certain false assumptions, 376, 377-378.
- J2700. The easy problem made hard, 376.

## K. Deceptions

- K958. Murder by drowning, 140.  
 K1833. Disguise as ghost, 428-429.  
 K2259.4. Treacherous sailor, 140-141.

## N. Chance and Fate

- N532. Light indicates hidden treasure, 121.  
 N576. Ghosts prevent men from raising treasure, 428.

## Q. Rewards and Punishments

- Q285. Cruelty punished, 367.  
 Q467.1. Casting into water in sack (barrel) as punishment, 355-356, 357.

## S. Unnatural Cruelty

- S62. Cruel husband, 367.  
 S410. Persecuted wife, 367.

## X. Humor

- X120. Humor of bad eyesight, 377.  
 X621\*. Jokes about the Irish, 377-378.  
 X931. Lie: remarkable eater, 300, 309.  
 X940. Lie: person of remarkable strength, 367.  
 X960. Lie: skills of remarkable person, 339, 340, 341.  
 X1002. Lie: remarkable user of whip, 322-323.  
 X1005. Lie: remarkable cook, 302, 303, 365, 366.  
 X1081.2\*. Lie: remarkable logging methods, 369.  
 X1119.2. Lie: remarkable bag of deer, 417.

- X1121.8\*. Lies: miscellaneous gun motifa, 143; 364.
- X1122.2. Lies: person shoots many animals with one shot, 336.
- X1122.4.1\*. Lies: ingenious hunter splits bullet against sharp object, kills an animal with each half, 361-362.
- X1124. Lies: the hunter catches or kills game by ingenious or unorthodox method, 365, 366.
- X1133.1. Lies: man uses remarkable means of getting out of tree stump, 357, 358.
- X1133.3. Man in barrel grabs wolf by the tail and is drawn out of danger, 356, 357-358.
- X1150.1. The great catch of fish, 421.
- X1218\*(aa). Fox eludes dogs by running into shed where pelts are stored, hanging upside down on wall, 359-360.
- X1221. Lies about bears, 365, 366.
- X1234\*. Lies about deer, 336.
- X1234\*(b). Intelligent deer, 362-363.
- X1250. Lies about birds, 320.
- X1262\*(c). Intelligent chickens, 347-348.
- X1280.2.1. Insects eat team of horses or mules, pitch horseshoes to see who gets what is left; 334.
- X1286.1.4. Large mosquito flies off with pot or kettle (or other object), 330-332.
- X1301. Lies: the great fish, 46-47.
- X1301.5\*(c). Fish is so big that the water level of the stream falls two feet when the fish is pulled out, 335.
- X1307\*. Fish which are eager to be caught, 327, 328.
- X1606.2. Lies about quick change in weather from warm to cold, 325-326.

- X1611.1.5\*. Remarkable wind blows objects and living things about, 350-351.
- X1611.1.5.1\*. Remarkable wind affects man, 303, 304.
- X1611.1.5.1\*(a). Man who is gawking at the doings of the wind is turned inside out, 303, 304.
- X1611.1.7\*(c). Wind affects chickens, 347-348.
- X1611.1.8\*(a). Wind blows house, 338.
- X1641.1\*. Dry weather affects people, 353, 356, 358.
- X1651. Lies about fog, 326, 327, 329, 344-345.
- X1651.2. Ship sails on thick fog, 307.
- X1739. Absurd disregard of anatomy: miscellaneous, 303, 304.
- X1739.4\*(a). Man shrinks until he is small enough to go through a crack in a log, 357, 358.
- X1749\*(a). Disregard for passage of time, 339, 340.
- X1781. Lie: boat with light draft, 313.
- X1788.3\*. Lie: painting acts like original, 342, 343.

Z. Miscellaneous Groups of Motifs

213. Catch tales, 374-375.

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