

Contagious conversation on the 'Rock'

For those who noticed, I wasn't around last week.

The Sidekick and I took off to The Rock, better known as Newfoundland, to visit that most easterly part of our fair country, where their time zone is a half hour ahead of everyone else in the Maritimes, and 90 minutes ahead of us here in Halton Hills.

We took up residence at Murray Premises, an historic harbourfront warehouse built in 1840 and recently renovated into a business centre/hotel, complete with 67 rooms.

Two blocks to the north is George St., the St. John's hot spot for bars, restaurants and pubs, most with maritime folk music lofting out of the open windows, enticing all to come inside and sit a spell.

O'Reilly's, an Irish pub that seems to be the place to be on George St. was a prominent music venue. We enjoyed O'Reilly's more than a few times, where the Kilkenny flows like water and Murray Premises is a short downhill stagger away.

Music from traditional Newfoundland/Irish folk roots and a dash of Stan Rogers thrown in was the norm—of course when someone mentioned Stan Rogers, it was with 'but he was from Ontario' good-naturedly added to the statement.

Pub-hopping aside, we also enjoyed the natural sights—Newfoundland is visually awe-inspiring to say the least.

We stood on Signal Hill, 750 feet about St. John's harbour, and imagined what it must have been like to be stationed there in the 1600s, watching for a ship to appear on the horizon, then face the relentless biting winds to signal the town down below.

Further south, at Cape Spear, the most easterly point of North America, a pair of 30-foot Second World War gun emplacements were installed to protect the harbour at St. John's against possible German U-Boat attacks. The gun barrels remain, but the carriages are gone.

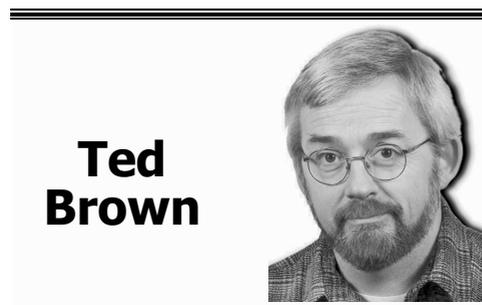
Cape Spear lighthouse is nearby, now a National Historic Site.

In 1983, the Prince and Princess of Wales, Charles and Diana, officially opened the place. As I surveyed the lighthouse keeper's home (which is the base of the original lighthouse) I wondered if 1983 was the last year the building had seen paint, and the wooden picket fence was falling over. If that's how we maintain a National Historic Site, it's nothing short of an embarrassment.

Newfoundland has majestic views and loads of history, but the most appealing part of the country is by far the people and their hospitality.

I tell you, one could strike up a conversation in a matter of seconds—talking is contagious. They are THE most friendly and approachable people I've ever met.

For example, stopping at an art gal-



Ted Brown

lery, we chatted with the owner, talking about raising sheep in Ontario. As it turned out, he also was a documentary movie producer, and had recently done a story on a longtime shepherd in the St. John's area.

Howard Morry is a 77-year-old multi-generation Newfoundlander. The documentary told how Howard and his sons loaded their sheep into barges and transported them out to various islands off the coast, leaving them on the islands for the summer. The islands provide good grazing and freedom from coyotes.

In late August, they bring the sheep (and their lambs) back to the mainland.

Thumbing through the phone book we found Morry's number, and the next day found us seated on his back porch with a coffee, 'talkin' ship' (sheep)—for two hours.

We spent a day on the scenic Irish Loop around Avalon Peninsula, stopping at various little cove villages, many of them casualties of the 1992 cod moratorium, when the federal government shut down the cod industry.

At Trepassy, a small fishing village with a population of less than 600, the local restaurant waitress told us how the village once had 1,750 residents, and the local cod processing plant ran three shifts. The high school and elementary schools both boasted about 500 students each.

Now there's 50 kids between Kindergarten and Grade 12, and the only businesses in town are the restaurant, a Home Hardware, and a small medical clinic. If there's a life-threatening medical emergency, they are air-lifted to St. John's, which is an hour and a half away by road (in good weather). Most of the 600 residents are retired and their houses are looking pretty tired.

Yet these people don't feel sorry for themselves. Instead, they embrace the fact they are alive and well, and enjoy their families and the community spirit the surrounds them.

As we flew out of St. John's Saturday morning, The Sidekick and I reflected upon our week on The Rock.

We agreed, this country of ours could be a better place if we all took a page out of the local Newfoundland culture—be mellow, laid-back, and treat everyone like a friend.

And most importantly—make sure conversation continues to be contagious.

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