

Prince Edward Island

Moss loss

As the struggle to make a living from the traditional Irish moss industry gets harder, more families turn to other ways to make a living

by Lou Anne Gallant

Lou Anne Gallant is a member of an organization, Women in Support of Fishing. She lives in Miminegash, PEI and during the summer months is the manager of the Seaweed Pie Café and Irish Moss Interpretive Centre which is owned and operated by Women in Support of Fishing. Lou Anne, her husband and three children have been involved in the Irish moss industry for more than 30 years

The commercial harvesting of Irish moss began in Miminegash in the 1930s. Irish moss harvesting is a way of life in the West Prince area of PEI, and entire families are involved. Harvesting Irish moss is hard work. It can be harvested by boat or along the beach with horses and scoops. You need a licence to harvest by boat, and the season is from 21 June to 21 October. There are presently about 60 boats harvesting Irish moss.

There are only a couple of companies dealing with Irish moss, and they fix the quota according to what they need as well as the price. The harvesters have no control over the price. The price for the 2000 season is 33 cents a pound for dry moss, and nine cents a pound for wet moss. At one time, PEI exported 80 per cent of the world's supply of Irish moss. Today, it exports only two per cent. Three million pounds of dry moss were shipped out of PEI in 1999, mainly to Europe and the US.

Irish moss is valuable for the *carrageenan* product that is extracted from it. This extract is used in medicine, cosmetics, dairy products, beer, car tyres, as well as many other products. The buyers have found a cheaper source for the *carrageenan* product in places like the Philippines. They are acquiring a similar product for a fraction of what it costs them to buy in PEI. This sea plant is being farmed in southern countries as an aquaculture product.

In the early 1960s, the government set up a research station in Miminegash. It was closed down around 1980 mainly because the provincial government was not

committed to putting a substantial amount of money into research related to Irish moss.

Each year the struggle to make a living from the Irish moss industry gets harder. More and more harvesters have to find work elsewhere. This is especially true for women, and many have gone to work in fish processing plants and retail stores.