

North America/ Canada

The women make it...

A good website on Newfoundland fisheries

An excellent site to visit is titled *Newfoundland and Salt Fisheries: A Digital Exhibition* (<http://collections.ic.gc.ca/fisheries>). An excerpt from the introduction is as follows:

This webpage explores aspects of the long and complex history of how cod was processed in Newfoundland from the 1500s to the 1950s, the everyday work that was required, and the livings that were eked out by many generations of fishing men, women, and children in Newfoundland's and Labrador's many communities and fishing stations. With images, maps, charts, audio, video, and text, we hope to introduce viewers to a world and to ways of life that dominated here into the 1950s.

An interesting article on this website is about the role women played in fish processing in this region. Written by Mark Ferguson, it is titled '*Fish Makers: The Centrality of Women*'.

This article brings out how women were almost entirely in charge of drying pickled fish in many communities on the east coast where it dominated as a method. There was even a saying that: 'The men ketch [sic] it and the women make it'. According to the author: "It seemed as fish moved further away from the water (the domain of men) and onto the land, women became more and more central to the processing."



"Part of the reason that women were the main makers of pickled and other light-salted fish was due to its quick curing in the salting phase. As soon as the caplin scull fishery got underway in late June, men became completely engrossed in catching fish. Pickled fish had to be removed from salt brine and washed and dried three to five days after it was caught. It fell to women then to get this catch washed, out on the flakes, and made all through the busy days of July. More heavily salted fish could stay in bulks and pounds longer, so that it's washing and drying could be seen to later in the summer. This potentially allowed men to take a more active role in the making. But early in the summer, with men heavily engaged on the water almost every day, women made up the shore crews around most of the island. Later on in the summer and into the fall as the fishing slackened off somewhat and there were more days of rough weather, men could and often did play a larger role in the washing and making of fish. However, women clearly did the bulk of this crucial and laborious shore work through the summer and the fall."

"Wilson Hayward described to me one day that the women fish makers in his neighbourhood were very aware of their status and worked hard to produce good looking, good quality fish—the quality of that work defined them on some basic levels in relation to their peers and neighbours. Keeping an orderly, tidy flake, taking good care of the fish day in and day out were all matters that affected personal identity, status and esteem. When I asked him if certain women were known for their fish, he responded immediately—"You know they were!" When their fish was graded and sold to the merchants, it did not take long for the report of how it had fared to circulate through the neighbourhood. Laura Whiffen asserted that her mother-in-law, Martha, was known to be an excellent fish maker on the Cape. Clearly, fish making was important to fishing women's sense of their selves in their communities."

Overall, this website is an excellent and visually attractive presentation of historical aspects of the Newfoundland fishery.

Some excerpts from this essay are reproduced below: