

Ethnologies

“The mill whistle was blowing and the Germans were coming” : Industrial Soundscapes, World War II, and Remembrance in Corner Brook, Newfoundland

Janice Tulk

Volume 34, Number 1-2, 2012

URI: id.erudit.org/iderudit/1026150ar

DOI: [10.7202/1026150ar](https://doi.org/10.7202/1026150ar)

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d’Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN 1481-5974 (print)
1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Tulk, J. (2012). “The mill whistle was blowing and the Germans were coming” : Industrial Soundscapes, World War II, and Remembrance in Corner Brook, Newfoundland. *Ethnologies*, 34(1-2), 185–203. doi:10.7202/1026150ar

Article abstract

In summer 2007, while conducting maintenance on the mill’s structure, the Corner Brook Pulp and Paper Mill silenced the whistle that had been part of the local “soundscape” (Schafer 1977) for more than eighty years. When the whistle did not return immediately, public outcry was voiced in the local newspaper over the loss of part of the city’s heritage. Its return in December 2007 at half the previous daily frequency provided the impetus for a collection project. While the mill whistle is an important tool that marks the passage of time, regulates the movement of bodies, and signals trouble at the mill (such as a fire), its significance to the community extends beyond the utilitarian. It plays a role in memorialization (sounding on Remembrance Day) and celebration (marking, for example, the end of WWII), and has become a familiar icon for local song-writers and authors alike. This article provides an overview of “The Mill Whistle Project” designed to document the mill whistle in Corner Brook, describes the historic functions of the mill whistle, and identifies alternative uses of the whistle over time. It then interrogates the whistle’s relationship to World War II and Remembrance Day, demonstrating its extension as a community-wide notification system, its mobilization as a means of celebration, and its continuing role in memorialisation.

Tous droits réservés © Ethnologies, Université Laval, 2012

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online. [<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>]

The logo for Érudit, featuring the word "Érudit" in a bold, red, sans-serif font. The letter "É" is stylized with a red accent mark above it.

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research. www.erudit.org

“THE MILL WHISTLE WAS BLOWING AND THE GERMANS WERE COMING”

Industrial Soundscapes, World War II, and Remembrance in Corner Brook, Newfoundland

Janice Tulk

Memorial University of Newfoundland

Introduction

In the early 1920s, the prime minister of Newfoundland, Sir Richard Squires, promised to turn the economy of Corner Brook, Newfoundland around by establishing a paper mill in the community.¹ While his campaign slogan, “put the Hum on the Humber,” referenced the bustling activity of industrial development that would invigorate the economy of the community and surrounding area, it also foreshadowed a host of changes to the sonic environment of the west coast of Newfoundland. The bulk of these changes have been localized and centred on the mill itself, but some have extended as far as Deer Lake, some 50km away, where a hydro-electric plant produces energy for paper-making, and further still when logging operations, which provide the raw material for paper-making, are considered. One of the most obvious additions to the sonic environment of Corner Brook, Newfoundland was the whistle mounted atop the mill.

Although technological advances have largely made the mill whistle an artefact of an earlier era, in the surrounding community the whistle continues to function in important ways and carries with it deep personal associations and memories. In this article, I will provide an overview of

1. This research was funded by the J. R. Smallwood Foundation and the Institute for Social and Economic Research at Memorial University in St. John's, Newfoundland. This paper benefitted from the research assistance of Ryan David Butt; Kathy Elliott and George French, Corner Brook Museum & Archives; Corner Brook Pulp and Paper Mill; Tammy MacNeil; Heather Strickland; Michelle Swab; and Heather Wellman. I am grateful to all research participants for sharing their memories and knowledge of the whistle with me.

“The Mill Whistle Project” designed to document the mill whistle in Corner Brook, describe the historic functions of the mill whistle at the Corner Brook Pulp and Paper Mill, and identify alternative uses of the whistle over time. With this background, I will turn specifically to the whistle’s relationship to World War II and Remembrance Day. In particular, I will demonstrate its extension as a community-wide notification system, its mobilization as a means of celebration, and its continuing role in memorialization.

The Mill Whistle Project

The impetus for the Mill Whistle Project² was a phone call from my mother in late August 2007. I was a doctoral student in ethnomusicology at Memorial University in St. John’s, Newfoundland at the time. During one of our daily marathon telephone conversations, she mentioned that she had not heard the whistle for a few days. This was indeed notable, since the whistle was an integral part of our everyday life. Our home was located on the hill that overlooked the Corner Brook Pulp and Paper Mill, so there was no missing its blasts, which occurred daily at 7:45am, 8:00am, 12:00 noon, and 4:00pm throughout the 1980s and 1990s. In many ways, it had structured our lives, signalling when we should be in the car and en route to school, pause for lunch, or return home for supper. Concerned for what this silence meant, I began following local media.

When the disappearance of the mill whistle was first reported in *The Western Star* (the local daily newspaper), management assured the community that it was a temporary measure while a boiler stack was being replaced on the roof and stated it would return the following week (Kean 2007: 1). As time passed and the whistle did not return, however, there was outcry in the local newspaper and on open-line radio shows. Rumours and conspiracy theories circulated in the community suggesting that management was trying to get rid of the whistle because it was “too expensive” to operate. On September 26, 2007, a call from a resident was made to *The Western Star* asserting that she had spoken with the Mill’s superintendent, who allegedly “said it was a cost factor and he didn’t know if it will start up again” (“Roamin’ ‘Round” 2007: 6). Two days later, management denied this report and stated the whistle would return “next week” (“Mill whistle won’t” 2007: 4). On October 19, the Folk Literature class of Corner Brook Regional High School contributed a letter to the editor, saying, “With the continuing absence of our giant grandfather clock,

2. The Mill Whistle Project can be found online at www.whistleproject.com.

we not only lose track of time but we lose part of our heritage” (2007: 6). When the whistle finally returned in December 2007, it was at a reduced daily frequency: the whistle that sounded eight times a day in my mother’s childhood and four times a day in my own childhood, now sounded only two times a day (at 8am and 4pm). No explanation for the schedule reduction was given (“Mill whistle back” 2007: 4).

When I heard this news, I realized that the iconic sound of the mill whistle was slowly disappearing from the soundscape of Corner Brook and that its loss would have an impact on expressive culture in the community. The mill and the mill whistle specifically are closely tied to Corner Brook identity. Both are deployed as markers of place in contemporary music (such as the Sharecropper’s “The Mill Whistle” and Brendan Mitchell’s “Hum on the Humber”) and literary works (such as Janes’ *House of Hate*, Avis’ “Haiku,” and Maggs’ “Skin Cream for Mermaid Leg Scars”). Further, they are symbols of economic prosperity and, more recently, economic decline, as the industry fades. More than that, the whistle is a vehicle for a signalling system – a series of codes – that can be understood by “insiders.” These codes convey messages, such as the location of a fire in the mill. On a more personal level, the whistle is intertwined with individual experiences and, upon sounding, evokes a variety of memories from one’s personal history.

As Overton has noted, Newfoundland identity is often asserted in singular and idealized ways (1996: 53). In particular, popular representations and assertions of Newfoundland identity are often bound up with the fishery – it is the subject of folksongs and stories; its demise is lamented, its return longed for. Outport life as it relates to the fishery and the local knowledge held by practitioners is a priority for those working in the area of intangible cultural heritage, who hope to preserve this folklore before it is lost. As important as Newfoundland’s relationship with the sea is, it is not the only story that needs to be preserved and told. Newfoundland culture and identity is incredibly diverse. Folklore and literature focussing on the sea and the fishery does not resonate with the lived experience of those Newfoundlanders and Labradorians who have grown up and worked in industrialized communities (whether paper mills or mines).

With this understanding of Corner Brook identity, and informed by my training in both ethnomusicology and folklore, I began a project to document Corner Brook’s mill whistle as a “soundmark” (Schafer 1977) of the community and its related expressive culture. In *The Tuning of the World*, R. Murray Schafer coined the term soundmark, a play on the term landmark, to refer to “community sound which is unique or possesses

qualities which make it specially regarded or noticed by the people in that community” (1977: 10). He suggested that, “Once a soundmark has been identified, it deserves to be protected, for soundmarks make the acoustic life of the community unique” (1977: 10). Initially, one might expect soundmarks to refer to naturally occurring sounds, such as the rush of a river; however, these distinctive sounds may also include church bells, cannons, clock chimes, and whistles. Whether interpreted as noise, or appreciated as music to the ears, these sounds “reflect a community character” (Schafer 1977: 239). How, though, might these sounds also produce community character and identity?

Through ethnographic methodologies, oral history interviews, and archival research, the Mill Whistle Project attempts to identify the sonic boundaries of the Corner Brook mill whistle, its impact on the environment and everyday life, its relationship to culture and identity, the potential effects of removing a soundmark from a community, and possible means of preserving the mill whistle beyond the life of the mill itself. The project documents individual experiences of the mill whistle and its multiple meanings. Unexpectedly, during the course of this research, the connections between the whistle and World War II emerged. This article is a preliminary survey of this complex of meanings.

The Corner Brook Pulp & Paper Mill

At the turn of the twentieth century, Corner Brook was a small farming community with a saw mill on the west coast of Newfoundland. Curling, a nearby fishing town, emerged as a centre for trade when the railway arrived in the area (Horwood 1986: 14-15). The Newfoundland Power and Paper Company began constructing the mill in 1923, while also building the residential area known as Townsite and establishing amenities such as medical, education, and water and sewer services (Andrews and Janzen 2000: 62). Constructed at a cost of \$45 million, the mill opened in 1925 and the first roll of paper was produced on July 8th of that year. Due to financial difficulties resulting from poor management and cost overruns, the mill was sold to the International Power and Paper Company in 1928 and operated under the subsidiary International Power and Paper Company of Newfoundland. Following a downturn as a result of the great depression, consolidation efforts, and significant problems at the power generating station, the mill was sold to Bowater-Lloyd of England in 1938 and renamed Bowater’s Newfoundland Paper Mills Limited (known locally as “Bowaters”). Bowaters flourished in the decades that followed and the

company continued investing in amenities in Corner Brook. For example, Bowaters built Margaret Bowater Park in 1957 and partially funded the establishment of the Arts and Culture Centre in 1968 (Horwood 1986: 121, 150).

As Bowaters expanded its interests elsewhere, it began investing its profits in other mills, instead of reinvesting them in the Corner Brook mill. Consequently, by the 1980s, the quality of the paper produced in Corner Brook was no longer competitive and the operation became unprofitable. In 1984, Bowaters sold the mill to its current owner, Kruger, Inc. Kruger invested in the modernization of the mill and, despite the challenges of the past five years, continues to operate Corner Brook Pulp and Paper Limited (see Andrews and Janzen 2000: 9-24 for a detailed overview of the history of the mill).

The mill is, however, facing an uncertain future. With a strong Canadian dollar and increased production costs, as well as an overall reduced reliance on newsprint given the proliferation of new media, paper mills around the world are facing temporary and permanent shutdowns in operations. A restructuring by the company and recent investment from the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador will prolong the life of the mill, but only time will tell if the efforts will ensure the sustainability of the mill in the long term (see Government of Newfoundland 2013; “Mill cutting” 2012).

The Whistle

The steam whistle that sits atop the Corner Brook Pulp and Paper Mill is located approximately 70' above the ground and operated by engineers in the steam plant (“Bowaters’ Mill whistle” 1974). There are three sound-producing components to its structure, one large and two small. Originally activated by pulling a cable, the whistle is now computer-operated. Normally, the whistle can be heard throughout Townsite, Humbermouth, and the Westside of Corner Brook. Depending on the weather – and in particular the direction of the wind – it can also be heard in Curling, “across the bay” in Summerside, and, in some cases, more than 10km away at locations such as Marble Mountain or Twelve Mile Dam (Tom Hiscock, interview: July 5, 2012).

In the early twentieth century, there were two primary functions of a whistle at a paper mill: to mark shift changes and to signal trouble. The whistle sounded frequently throughout the day to mark the start and

end of shifts, as well as lunch breaks. Reflecting on this, resident Tom Hiscock noted that few men had wristwatches or pocket watches in the first decades that the mill was open and, indeed, he bought a watch with his first paycheque in 1951 (interview: July 5, 2012). The actual times at which the whistle blew to mark shift changes, however, changed over time in response to the production schedule of the mill and evolving labour regulations. As stated in the *Mill Rules and Mill Safety Rules* handbook, “Mill whistles will be blown as local conditions require. Time of blowing whistles will be posted on Mill Bulletin Board” (Bowaters 1966: 2). While these signals were specifically meant for shift workers at the mill, they impacted the families of workers, as well as the broader community.

The whistle punctuated each day, marking time and providing conscious and unconscious cues. In an interview, Corner Brook resident David Smallwood compared the whistle to “the Dominion Observatory time signal” in that you could set your watch to it, which he confirmed daily from his office at Sir Wilfred Grenfell College in the mid-1970s (July 6, 2012). The association of the whistle with mealtime is perhaps best captured in the words of Rod Lyver. Commenting on his weight loss in an opinion piece for *The Western Star*, he reflected, “When the whistle blows, it’s time to eat. That’s the way it was for the last 80 years and I can’t see it changing anytime soon. I figure I’m just like Pavlov’s dog. No wonder I gained so much weight. Every time they had a fire at the mill I was running for a big snack, taters and a Diet Coke” (Lyver 2006). Today, the whistle only marks the start and end of the traditional day shift, Monday through Friday (Nick, interview: September 23, 2013).³

The whistle was also a safety device that alerted workers to trouble in the mill, especially fire, which was an “ever-present danger” (Andrews and Janzen 2000: 28). The mill was divided into six different regions and each was assigned a unique pattern of short and long blasts of the whistle. Should a fire occur in a particular region, the whistle pattern for that region would sound, alerting workers to the location of the fire. For example, one long blast followed by three short blasts (the entire sequence then repeated) would alert workers to a fire in the lumber yard (Bowaters 1966: 10-11). When the fire was extinguished, the whistle would blow again – one long blast – to signal “all out.” Originally operated manually, in 2009, these sequences were programmed into the computer in the control room so that they too are automated like the shift change signals (“Mill tests” 2009: 3).

3. Research participant Nick, an engineer at the Corner Brook Pulp and Paper Mill, preferred to only be referenced by his first name.

While a controller is still required to initiate the proper fire sequence with one press of a button, he is no longer responsible for producing the sequence itself. Given that every operator had his own feel for the length of a short versus a long blast, the result has been a standardization of the signals that was not present prior to 2009. These fire signals still draw employees to the mill from around the Corner Brook area on their days off to provide assistance if necessary (Nick, interview: September 23, 2013). However, as production decreases and safety at the mill improves, thereby reducing the risk of fire, the signals are heard less frequently in the community (Kean 2005: 4).

As an extension of this use of the whistle as a safety device, patterns were also established for different residential and commercial areas of Corner Brook, as well as for bush fires. These signals alerted the volunteer fire brigade to a fire in the community and identified the general location, such as Lower West or Upper Townsite ("Fire Alarm" n.d.). For example, in 1928, a shop and dwelling was destroyed by fire in Corner Brook West: "An alarm was sounded by the mill whistle, and the firemen were on the scene promptly, but nothing could be done to save the building" ("Corner Brook News" 1928: 5). The patterns for these signals were first learned by rote and later printed inside telephone books once the devices became more common. With the advent of emergency services accessed by telephone, this use of the mill whistle became obsolete; however, an individual interviewed in 2012 still recalled that five long blasts were used to identify West Corner Brook (Tom Hiscock, July 5, 2012).

A less common function of the whistle in Corner Brook was its role in search and rescue operations. It was sounded to re-orient individuals who became lost in the woods and to communicate with search parties. For example, in 1939, when two boys became lost on a fishing trip, the whistle was sounded periodically "so the boys could follow the sound and find their way home" (Corner Brook Museum & Archives et al. 2006: "July 4"). The whistle also marked their safe return: "According to a pre-arranged plan the mill whistle was again sounded to notify other searchers that the lads had been found" ("Lads Astray" 1939: 2). Similarly, in 1935, the whistle sounded for two young men who did not return from fishing as expected: "On Monday night the Mill whistle was kept going at intervals for the benefit of two lads who had gone to Twin Lakes and failed to return when due" ("Not Lost" 1935: 5). While the whistle could still be employed in this capacity by request to the mill manager, this function has also become obsolete as search and rescue teams prefer those lost to remain where they

are instead of having them attempt to follow a sound (Nick, interview: September 23, 2013).

Finally, the mill whistle has served a celebratory function in the community. While there is no documentation to clarify how or when it began, the whistle sounds at midnight on New Year's Eve in Corner Brook to mark the start of the new year (Corner Brook Museum & Archives n.d.). Tom Hiscock suggested that during the first half of the century, when there was no television and the radio signal was limited (and therefore often only used for news), it would make sense that everyone would wait for the whistle to signal and celebrate the new year (interview: July 5, 2012). The decision whether to deploy the whistle at midnight is made each year by mill management. It may also be sounded on other special occasions, for example when a dignitary visits the community, also by making a request to management (Nick, interview: September 23, 2013). This celebratory function appears to be quite long-standing. In 1933, the mill whistle welcomed His Excellency the Governor, Admiral Sir David Murray Anderson to the community: "The arrival of the Vice-Regal party on the grounds [of Corner Brook Public School] at 10:30am was marked by twenty-one blasts of the mill whistle" ("Vice-Regal" 1933: 1).

With this background and understanding of the Corner Brook Pulp and Paper Mill and the traditional functions of its mill whistle through time, I now turn to the discussion of World War II and Remembrance Day in Corner Brook, as they relate to the mill whistle.

World War II in Newfoundland: The Bay of Islands Home Guard

In *More Fighting Newfoundlanders*, Colonel G. W. L. Nicholson details the contribution of Newfoundlanders to the World War II effort. His final chapter, however, is devoted to the "Home Front" during that time. He notes, "Up to the outbreak of war [Newfoundland's] traditional reliance upon the Royal Navy for her security, coupled with the financial difficulties which had beset the country for many years, had been largely responsible for the absence of any effective organized defence force on the Island" (1969: 519). In the summer of 1939, approval was given to establish a Defence Force with a mandate to guard the city of St. John's, the Bell Island iron mines, trans-Atlantic cable terminals in Conception Bay, and the Gander Airport. Later that year, the Militia Act was passed, permitting the establishment of a voluntary home guard known as the Newfoundland Militia to protect a variety of resources, such as the water supply in St. John's and communication services. While the risk of attack was deemed

to be “remote,” the invasion of Belgium and the Netherlands in 1940 raised concerns across the island. The Newfoundland Militia expanded their efforts and began guarding the Main Dam on the Humber River because of its role in the production of hydro-electric power for the Corner Brook paper mill (Nicholson 1969: 523-29).

Late in 1940, the Auxiliary Militia Act was passed, leading to the establishment of additional volunteer forces. The first auxiliary unit appeared in Grand Falls, the site of another paper mill in Newfoundland. The second, called the Bay of Islands Home Guard, was formed in 1942 to protect the Corner Brook Pulp and Paper Mill and the surrounding area (Nicholson 1969: 534). Veterans of World War I, along with residents who could not go to war, patrolled the waters around Corner Brook, marched through the streets, and engaged in training to prepare their response in the event of enemy attack. Horwood writes,

The home defence forces helped to keep up morale as well as discouraging raids by landing parties. Such raids were a real danger as the German navy demonstrated by twice sinking ore ships and blowing up the pier at Bell Island in Conception Bay and by seizing virtual control of the lower St. Lawrence and blockading the port of Montreal. Had Corner Brook been undefended, a sneak attack could easily have put the port out of operation (1986: 78-79).

Paper mills, like the one owned by Bowater in Corner Brook, played an important role in the war effort. As Horwood notes, “newsprint was a strategic commodity” in the “propaganda war” (1986: 80). The mills in Newfoundland provided paper to Britain throughout the war, as many mills there had turned to the manufacture of munitions (1986: 80). This role placed paper mills and their communities in a precarious situation and there was fear of enemy threat. Indeed, the S. S. Humber Arm, which carried newsprint from the paper mill in Corner Brook across the Atlantic Ocean, was sunk by enemy submarines during the war (Horwood 1986: 117).

The Bay of Islands Home Guard, established to protect the Corner Brook Pulp and Paper Mill and the port of Corner Brook, was commanded by Major W. M. Balfour.⁴ His orders written on 16 June 1942 indicate an

4. A secondary home guard was organized under the leadership of Monty Lewin to patrol the area by boat (Horwood 1986:78). Grant Hiscock referred to this guard as “Lewin’s Navy” (interview: August 1, 2012). The relationship between the two guards is unclear; they may have been thought of as one initiative by the community (see “Home Guard” 1995) or it is possible that Lewin’s guard was responsible for nearby Curling while Balfour’s guard was responsible for Corner Brook (Tom Hiscock, interview: July 5, 2012).

important role for the mill whistle as a signalling device to assemble forces in the event of enemy threat:

Threatened or Pending Enemy Action: Upon the following signal being sounded on Mill Whistle viz: - A succession of short blasts, at 5 seconds interval every member of "A" Company shall parade without delay at the Eastern end of the Skating Rink Building, fully armed and equipped and carrying 50 rounds of S.A.A. in Bandolier.

Until further notice, all other ranks not yet posted to any Company shall parade at same time and place as above for the purpose of constituting a reserve force to be employed as the occasion may demand (Balfour 1942).

This use clearly extends the function of the whistle as a signalling device; however, it is unclear whether the Home Guard signal to assemble because of threatened or pending enemy action was ever used as intended.

Perceived Enemy Threat

During a research trip to Newfoundland in 2012, I met with Tom Hiscock, who had worked at the Corner Brook Pulp and Paper Mill in the early 1950s. When I asked if he had any personal memories associated with the whistle, he first recalled that during the summer he would sit outside waiting for friends to play with early in the morning. He would become more anxious to ride his bike once the 8am whistle blew. A few minutes later, when discussing the functions of the mill whistle, he described a more dramatic event from his childhood in 1942:

The other time that is not recorded and I don't know how many people you'll hear this from – maybe I'm the last survivor – but during the war one night in nineteen forty-one or -two, [...] coming up somewhere about eleven o'clock as I recall it during the summer, ah, the mill whistle started to blow and no one knew why. [...] Now eleven o'clock this night the mill whistle started blowing long blasts and everyone took notice and saying, ah, "It's a fire out signal. It's a long one-minute blast, [...] but we didn't hear a fire whistle." But it kept going and it kept going. After the second repetition, they said, "Why?" And no one knew [...] We were fortunate enough that in my grandfather's house, the man on the left and the man on the right were both volunteer firemen working with the town and because they were voluntary firemen, they were two of the select in Corner Brook that had a telephone hooked into the mill switchboard. [...] So we went next door to the handiest neighbour and he phoned up the switchboard and asked them why the mill whistle was blowing, because he was confused being a fireman, and they told him that it was an air raid. That they had received word from [...] Gander that [...]

there was an unidentified aircraft flying over Newfoundland westward and would probably pass our way and, ah, a blackout was in effect. [...]

And the reason I recall that so vividly, in the household, I was the only child. I was in bed. [...] I would have been seven years old at that time [...] and a maiden aunt that was like a second mother to me ran downstairs – and she was sort of the organizer – ran downstairs to try to get the family together to see what was going on. Everyone was going to grab blankets and head for the woods, you know, ‘cause, ah, the word was out that the Germans used incendiary bombs. [...] So everyone was frightened to death of these incendiary bombs – that your house was going to burn down. So we were going to run into the woods, it was all woods behind West Valley Road at that time. And the kitchen was sort of narrow as it came from the upstairs, down the steps, out the hallway, through this narrow area, and right in that narrow area was a stove. And somebody had opened the oven to remove any food that was in and it was an electric stove we had in those days, ah, opened the oven door and forgot to close it. And because of the lights out, all the lights were turned off, ah, blinds were pulled, my aunt ran down the stairs, out the hall, and ran into the oven door, and completely skinned her two shins from the knees down. [...] And of course she started to bawl and cry, and it was absolute chaos. We had my two grandparents, my father and my mother, myself, my maiden aunt, and another son, unmarried son, living in the house, and it was total chaos. And the mill whistle was blowing and the Germans were coming! [...]

But the mill whistle blew for the longest time and of course that sent the fear of God into everyone. But, it only lasted for – the confusion seemed like it went on all night – but in actual fact it probably only lasted less than thirty minutes. And then the mill whistle sounded what seemed like forever. It must have blew for five minutes – a steady blast. And again our neighbour called and they said the aircraft had been identified as friendly. He was lost and he didn’t check in at Gander. And it was a false alarm. So we got our lights back on, bandaged up my aunt’s knees, and everything, and I was put back in bed [...] Now that’s a story that’s vivid in my mind, mostly because of my aunt, I felt so sorry for her. But, I can recall very, very vividly (Tom Hiscock, interview: July 5, 2012).

This personal experience narrative reinforces the fear of enemy attack in Corner Brook during World War II, but also ties the mill whistle to that history as it once again was used as a signalling device related to perceived danger and, later, the return to safety. It also demonstrates a very specific local knowledge. Signals used by the mill were understood in the community and served as a specialized mode of communication. Community members were also able to identify “unfamiliar” or “incorrect” sonic patterns and respond accordingly by investigating the meaning of that pattern. In an

age with limited access to telephones and media, this was an important messaging system.

The End of the War

Just as the “all out” signal notified a return to the status quo after a warning of possible enemy attack during the war, so too did an extended “all out” signal notify residents of Corner Brook of the end of the war. When news that the war was over was received by the management of the mill, the whistle sounded for an extended period of time, often described as being at least several minutes long. Grant Hiscock, who was thirteen at the time, recalled hearing the whistle at the end of World War II: “It blew for a long time, I remember that” (interview: August 1, 2012). Often this event is described as a “celebration” of the end of the war, in the same way that blowing the whistle on New Year’s Eve celebrates the new year. The interpretation of this extended signalling system as a celebratory act both fits with other common uses of the whistle, to celebrate milestones or visiting dignitaries as described above, and conflates the signal with the emotions – celebration and relief – that surely would have been felt at the end of the war. While there’s no doubt that the end of the war would have been something to celebrate and the whistle was used in this capacity, it is also important to consider once again that the whistle functioned as a communication system for the town.

Media available in 1945 would have been one source of information about the war. Though it was difficult to tune in radio stations broadcasting from St. John’s, residents of Corner Brook were able to access programming from New York, Cincinnati, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and New Brunswick. The first local radio station, VOWN operated by the Broadcasting Corporation of Newfoundland (now CBY operated by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation), was established in Corner Brook in 1943 (Horwood 1986: 54; “CBY” 2013). The newspaper, *The Western Star*, was a weekly until 1954 (*The Western Star* 1997). Thus, local and foreign media were available to stay abreast of developments in the war effort and learn of the end of the war.

It is just as likely, however, that many learned of the end of the war through the communication process described by Tom Hiscock above. By the end of the war, telephones were still rare in Corner Brook and found only in the homes of mill managers and the select few, such as fire brigade members. Hiscock estimated that there might have been twenty-five phones

in Corner Brook at the end of World War II, as they did not become more common until the 1950s (interview: July 5, 2012). Thus, having one person call the switchboard to obtain an explanation of the whistle signal pattern and then relaying that news by word of mouth was an important and seemingly effective means of communication.

An Act of Remembrance

Today, the mill whistle is part of the observance of Remembrance Day at the Cenotaph in Townsite. Many have told me that normally the whistle blows for 15 seconds at 11:00am, is silent for 1.5 minutes, and then blows again for 15 seconds (for example, Nick, interview: September 23, 2013; David Smallwood, interview: July 6, 2012). However, in 2011 when I observed and documented the ceremony, the whistle actually filled the two minutes of silence.⁵ Around me, there was much debate about whether it had been done “correctly.” It seemed ironic that something easily dismissed as industrial “noise” would be used to mark two minutes of sober silence. More curious was the fact that the two minutes of silence marked by the whistle did not replace the more common mode of observation demarcated by the last post and rouse played by a trumpeter. Rather, on this occasion, there were two observances of two minutes of silence, with the last post and rouse coming first, followed by the whistle a few moments later. That evening when I reflected on the experience in my fieldnotes, I contemplated the sonic boundaries of each. Only those gathered around the cenotaph would hear the trumpeter mark the silent reflection, but the entire community would hear the reflection marked by the mill whistle.

Many former employees of the mill served in the wars and were veterans. The sounding of the whistle was one way to honour them and their fallen comrades in a company town. It also is an acknowledgement of the role of the Corner Brook Pulp and Paper Mill in World War II as a supplier of paper to Britain and the threat to the port of Corner Brook as a result. In earlier years, it is likely that the whistle was also a practical choice for this observance, since it could be heard throughout the community. Interestingly, there is no “standing order” that dictates that the whistle will sound every year or how it will be done. Instead, the Corner Brook Pulp and Paper Mill, through its front office, coordinates with the Legion each year to determine whether and how the whistle will be used in the Remembrance Day ceremony (Nick, interview: September 23, 2013).

5. See <http://www.whistleproject.com/resources/remembrance-day-at-the-war-memorial/>.

The tradition of the whistle sounding on Remembrance Day, however, appears to be as old as the mill itself. For example, in 1927, the editor advised, "The Mill whistle at Corner Brook will be sounded to announce the hour of eleven, and at two minutes after eleven, a second whistle will announce the close of the brief interval of meditation and reverence" ("Editorial Notes" 1927: 2). An account of the first Armistice Day ceremony held at the Bay of Islands War Memorial in Curling described, "The mill whistle denoted the commencement of the 'silence' and two minutes later a blast of the bugle its termination," and the last post was played after wreaths were laid ("Armistice Day Ceremony" 1932: 2). The following year, the public was advised prior to the service that:

At eleven o'clock on Saturday morning the mill whistle at Corner Brook will sound as a notification of the observance of the two minutes' silence. The influence of the two minutes of silence on citizenship cannot be too highly estimated when [the] observance is made as a grateful tribute to the Ruler of the universe for His gift of Peace, and in gratitude to those departed and living heroes of the Empire, whose prowess, service and sacrifice, were humanly instrumental in making that peace possible ("Armistice Day" 1933: 1).

These excerpts from *The Western Star* demonstrate not only that the practice of marking the two minutes of silence on Remembrance Day has been ongoing for almost a century, but also the variability of the tradition in the early years. In a similar fashion, the whistle was deployed at a memorial service in Corner Brook when King George V passed away and two minutes of silence were observed ("Memorial Services" 1936: 3). It is clear that the use of the mill whistle for memorialization or commemoration is a fluid tradition and that variation has marked the practice through time.

Conclusion

There are important connections, then, between the mill whistle, World War II, and Remembrance Day in Corner Brook, Newfoundland. The whistle was the signal for the Home Guard to assemble in the event of enemy action, an extension of its use to summon fire brigades in the first half of the twentieth century. It was also used as an air raid siren to communicate a perceived threat and signal the return to normalcy. As a result, there are powerful memories associated with the sound of the whistle during the war years. As was common, the whistle served a celebratory function at the end of World War II as it communicated the end of the war. In the decades following the Great Wars, the whistle has had an important

role in Remembrance Day services.

The use of the whistle in the observance of Remembrance Day is “overtly commemorative” – the sound is “used quite intentionally in order to remember” in the same way that songs or music can be deployed for commemoration and memorialisation (Shelemay 1998: 6-7). Community history and collective memory are entrenched in the minds of community members through this sonic repetition year after year. The whistle, like song, can also “trigger memories of people, places, and past experiences” (Shelemay 1998: 7) that move from the collective to the personal. As demonstrated through the narrative told by Tom Hiscock, the mill whistle carries stories of highly personal experiences and life histories amid community history and collective experiences. Following Shelemay’s discussion of song, the mill whistle, while a seemingly utilitarian tool of industrialization, both “preserves memories and provides a means for accessing unconscious memories” (1998: 7).

Industrial soundmarks hold power, for “each subsequent hearing adds new layers of associations, enriching and altering the memory over time” (Shelemay 2006: 217). The various uses of the whistle through time and space have become intricately layered. The resulting polysemic sound embodies and transmits individual and collective memories. A single iteration of the mill whistle can elicit memories of personal experiences, family practices, individual life stories, and local histories of the mill, the town, and the war years. Understanding the signal and reacting in appropriate ways is a sign of competency and one’s place as a cultural insider. The sound also directs behaviour in a company town, as residents become attuned to the daily schedule demanded by millwork. The mill whistle, then, is a critical force shaping everyday life in Corner Brook (see DeNora 2000 and Frith 2002) and is intricately linked to the identity of the community as a whole. Like the relationship between music and place, particularly with regard to how music both exists *in* a place and is constitutive *of* a place (Casey 1996: 19; see also Wrazen 2007), so too does industrial sound produce and reproduce the place and identity of Corner Brook itself.

As recognized by institutions and governments through strategic initiatives, identity, cultural distinctiveness and diversity, and the preservation of local and traditional knowledge are critical concerns for the economic and cultural sustainability of communities in the twenty-first century (see, for example, Government of Newfoundland and Labrador 2006). There are calls for the recognition, documentation, dissemination,

and promotion of intangible cultural heritage in Newfoundland and Labrador; however, too often the industrial past of the province is forgotten. This study of the industrial heritage of Corner Brook, particularly in terms of the mill whistle and its relationship to World War II and Remembrance Day celebrations, contributes to a more diverse understanding of occupational folklore surrounding paper mills and the lumber industry (following the work of Ashton 1994, 1986; Burns 2007; and Small 1999), as well as Newfoundland identity more generally (see Carroll 2008, Coristine 2002, Noel 2007, and Tulk 2008, to name only a few).

Resident David Smallwood has asserted, the whistle is a “unique identifier of Corner Brook and should remain that way” given that Corner Brook is home to the last paper mill in the province and the last mill whistle (interview: July 6, 2012). The relationship between the mill whistle and Corner Brook identity is produced through the intricate layering of meanings and associations through the community’s history. Undoubtedly, there is an element of nostalgia present, as the mill whistle is a sonic reminder of the community’s prosperous past, even as it augurs an uncertain future. Its power to produce and reproduce identity and local meaning, however, is dependant on its continued presence in the soundscape. As Shelemay has observed, “a song cannot convey and mediate memory if not performed” (1998: 9). Nor can the Corner Brook mill whistle convey and mediate local memory and history if it does not sound.

References

- Andrews, Ed and Olaf Janzen. 2000. *Putting the Hum on the Humber. The First 75 Years*. Corner Brook: Corner Brook Pulp and Paper.
- “Armistice Day.” 1933. *The Western Star* [Corner Brook]. November 9: 1.
- “Armistice Day Ceremony: At the War Memorial.” 1932. *The Western Star* [Corner Brook]. November 16: 2.
- Ashton, John. 1994. “‘The Badger Drive’: Song, Historicity, and Occupational Stereotyping.” *Western Folklore* 53 (3): 211-28.
- Ashton, John. 1986. “The Lumbercamp Song Tradition in Newfoundland.” *Newfoundland Studies* 2(2): 213-31.
- Avis, Nick. 2003. “Haiku.” In Stephanie McKenzie and John Ennis, eds., *The Backyards of Heaven: An Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from Ireland and Newfoundland & Labrador*: 73. Corner Brook: Scop Productions.
- Balfour, Major W. M. 1942. “Orders.” *The Home Guard Collection*. Corner Brook Museum & Archives. Corner Brook, NL. Accession 000-051,

- location 2-B-3, file 3.
- “Bowaters’ Mill whistle.” 1974. *Attributed to Pioneer Resident of Corner Brook*. Corner Brook Museum & Archives, Corner Brook, Newfoundland. Scan received via email from archivist, July 11, 2012.
- Bowaters Newfoundland Limited. 1966. *Mill Rules and General Safety Rules*. Corner Brook: Bowaters Newfoundland Limited.
- Burns, Jane. 2007. “Everyday Objects as Mediators of Self: A Material Culture Study of Work, Home and Community in the Pulp and Paper Town of Grand Falls-Windsor, Newfoundland and Labrador.” PhD Dissertation, Memorial University of Newfoundland.
- Carroll, Patrick. 2008. “How a Community Understands its Past: Oral History, Archaeology and Identity in Placentia, Newfoundland and Labrador.” MA Thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland.
- Casey, Edward S. 1996. “How to Get From Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time: Phenomenological Prolegomena.” In Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso, eds., *Senses of Place*: 13-52. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press.
- “CBY.” 2013. *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/CBY>
- Cristine, Pamela E. 2002. “The Landscape of Home: The Role of Signal Hill in the Emergence of a Sense of Identity and Place in St. John’s, Newfoundland.” MA Thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland.
- Corner Brook Museum & Archives. [n.d.] *Corner Brook: A Pulp and Paper Community*. Community Memories, VirtualMuseum.ca. http://www.museevirtuel-virtualmuseum.ca/sgc-cms/histoires_de_chez_nous-community_memories/CM_V2_Apps/ui/remWindow.php?remID=60511&remP=/sgc-cms/histoires_de_chez_nous-community_memories%2FCommunityMemories2%2FCBMA%2F0001%2Faudio%2FCBMA00010047.aspx&remEx=Corner+Brook+-+A+Pulp+and+Paper+Community&lg=English.
- Corner Brook Museum & Archives, City of Corner Brook, and The Western Star. 2006. *Journey Through Time: 50th Anniversary Calendar*. Corner Brook: Transcontinental.
- “Corner Brook News” 1928. *The Western Star* [Corner Brook]. February 22: 5.
- DeNora, Tia. 2000. *Music in Everyday Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- “Editorial Notes.” 1927. *The Western Star* [Corner Brook]. November 9: 2.
- Feld, Steven and Keith H. Basso. 1996. “Introduction.” In Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso, eds., *Senses of Place*: 3-11. Santa Fe: School of

- American Research Press.
- “Fire Alarm.” [n.d]. *Telephone Book*. Corner Brook Museum & Archives, Corner Brook, Newfoundland. Scan received via email from archivist, July 11, 2012.
- Folk Literature 3203 Class, Corner Brook Regional High School. 2007. “Whistle is part of our heritage.” *The Western Star*. October 19: 6.
- Frith, Simon. 2002. “Music and Everyday Life.” *Critical Quarterly* 44(1): 35-48.
- Government of Newfoundland and Labrador. 2013. “Provincial Government Pledges \$90 Million Loan to Corner Brook Pulp and Paper.” Press Release. Department of Natural Resources. April 17. <http://www.releases.gov.nl.ca/releases/2013/nr/0417n04.htm>.
- Government of Newfoundland and Labrador. 2006. *Creative Newfoundland and Labrador: The Blueprint for Development and Investment in Culture*. St. John’s, NL: Government of Newfoundland and Labrador.
- “Home Guard.” 1995. *The Western Star* [Corner Brook]. May 8, 1995. [n.p].
- Horwood, Harold. 1986. *Corner Brook: A Social History of a Paper Town*. St. John’s: Breakwater Books.
- Hurley, Cory. 2004. “United Church minister to leave city after 24 years.” *The Western Star* [Corner Brook]. July 30: 1.
- Kean, Gary. 2007. “Icon since 1925. Whoohoo. City’s mill whistle has fallen silent... but only for a few days.” *The Western Star* [Corner Brook]. September 1: 1, 3.
- Kean, Gary. 2005. “City mill aims to stay course in tough market.” *The Western Star* [Corner Brook]. January 29: 4.
- “Lads Astray.” 1939. *The Western Star* [Corner Brook]. July 5: 2.
- Lyver, Rod. 2006. “Speaking out: Fifty five pounds off my gut – a ton off my chest.” *The Western Star* [Corner Brook]. July 6: 6.
- Maggs, Adriana. 2004. “Skin Cream for Mermaid Leg Scars.” Winning Entry, Senior Division-Short Fiction. 2004 Arts & Letters Awards. http://www.tcr.gov.nl.ca/tcr/artsculture/artsandletters/2004/senior_fictional_2004.html, accessed 5 December 2007.
- “Memorial Services Held Yesterday.” 1936. *The Western Star* [Corner Brook]. January 29: 3.
- “Mill cutting at least 43 full-time jobs in Corner Brook.” 2012. *The Western Star* [Corner Brook]. February 1. www.thewesternstar.com/news/local/2012-02-01/article-2883439/mill-cutting-at-least-43-fulltime-jobs-in-Corner-Brook/1.
- “Mill tests new automated whistle.” 2009. *The Western Star* [Corner Brook]. March 10: 3.

- "Mill whistle back." 2007. *The Western Star* [Corner Brook]. December 6: 4.
- "Mill whistle won't be abandoned." 2007. *The Western Star* [Corner Brook]. September 28: 5.
- Nicholson, Gerald W. L. 1969. *More Fighting Newfoundlanders: A History of Newfoundland's Fighting Forces in the Second World War*. St. John's: Government of Newfoundland and Labrador.
- Noel, Erin. 2007. "In Other Words: An Exploration of French Newfoundland Language Identity in Cape St. George." MA Thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland.
- Norcliffe, Glen. 2005. *Global Game, Local Arena: Restructuring in Corner Brook, Newfoundland*. St. John's: ISER Books.
- "Not Lost." 1935. *The Western Star* [Corner Brook]. December 18: 5.
- Overton, James. 1996. *Making a World of Difference: Essays on Tourism, Culture and Development in Newfoundland*. St. John's, NL: ISER Books.
- "Roamin' 'Round." 2007. *The Western Star* [Corner Brook]. September 26: 6.
- "Roamin' 'Round." 2001. *The Western Star* [Corner Brook]. December 19: 6.
- Schafer, R. Murray. 1977. *The Tuning of the World*. Toronto: Knopf.
- Sharecroppers, The. 1993. "The Mill Whistle." *Natural*. [CD] St. John's: Ibycus Music.
- Shelemay, Kay Kaufman. 1998. *Let Jasmine Rain Down*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Shelemay, Kay Kaufman. 2006. *Soundscapes: Exploring Music in a Changing World*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co.
- Small, Contessa. 1999. *Occupational Narratives of Pulp and Paper Mill Workers in Corner Brook, Newfoundland: A Study in Occupational Folklife*. MA Thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland.
- Tulk, Janice Esther. 2008. "'Our Strength is Ourselves': Identity, Status, and Cultural Revitalization Among the Mi'kmaq in Newfoundland." PhD Dissertation, Memorial University of Newfoundland.
- "Vice-Regal Visit to Bay of Islands" 1933. *The Western Star* [Corner Brook]. August 16: 1.
- Western Star, The. 1997. "History of the Western Star." *The Western Star*. [Corner Brook] <http://www.thewesternstar.com/FlyingPage/1997/History-of-The-Western-Star>.
- White, Neil. 2012. *Company Towns: Corporate Order and Community*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Wrazen, Louise. 2007. "Relocating the Tatras: Place and Music in Gorale Identity and Imagination." *Ethnomusicology* 51(2): 185-204.