

The Labrador Trapper's Tilt

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The Labrador Trapper's Tilt

ANNE BUDGELL

LABRADORIANS ARE NOT, as is sometimes thought, Newfoundlanders who live in the north. The island of Newfoundland and territory of Labrador combine to make a province and while the people of these two geographic regions share many cultural traits there are also many differences. If something is known by a certain name, or done a particular way in Newfoundland, it is not safe to assume these things apply in Labrador, yet such assumptions are made. A case in point is the Labrador trapper's tilt.

O'Dea writes that "the term tilt is now used in Newfoundland to describe any temporary or rough shelter and, as most such shelters are or were generally always constructed of vertical logs, to refer particularly to shelters constructed in that manner."¹ He goes on to say the "Labrador Tilt" is also built this way, perhaps leaving the mistaken impression that in Labrador all tilts are vertical log structures. The same impression is left by the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* in a full page of information on the word "tilt," including some Labrador references, where again a tilt is a "small single-roomed hut constructed of vertically-placed logs."² These definitions are true for south coastal Labrador, where tilts are built similarly to those in Newfoundland, but they omit another tradition of building. In the Lake Melville (Hamilton Inlet) area of central Labrador a trapper's tilt is a *horizontal* log structure, nothing else. In this part of Labrador log buildings were once common and the usual method of construction was to place logs horizontally. That applied to the trappers' shelters known as "tilts" and also to more permanent log structures, such as cabins and houses, built in a similar way.

In the discussion that follows, I will outline the log building history of the Lake Melville area from published sources. From fieldwork conducted in October 1993, I will present a description of the building method used to construct a central Labrador trapper's tilt and a case study of one building, a shed built by a former trapper in typical tilt style.

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LOG BUILDINGS IN THE LAKE MELVILLE REGION

Using logs as a building material was as natural in the Lake Melville region as was fishing for cod on the Grand Banks. In 1956 a forester, W.C. Wilton, surveyed the area and measured trees in different locations. He found sandy, stone-free soil, "trees fifteen inches in diameter and 90 feet tall are not infrequent" and the "largest tree encountered was 37" diameter at breast height and 105' tall. In the village of North West River there are trees that approach fifty feet in height, with trunks two feet in diameter. The black spruce (*picea mariana*) is the most abundant species, but there are also balsam fir, white spruce and eastern larch. Wilton described the area as untouched and that was after over two hundred years of settlement, including a logging operation at Mud Lake fifty years earlier and, in the 1940s, the building of two large military bases at Goose Bay and the adjoining community in Happy Valley. The first settlers, therefore, found abundant, straight-growing healthy stands of timber. The trees could be felled where the builder needed them. French fur traders, the first in that area, undoubtedly used logs cut right where the communities are today.

Probably the original users of logs for home construction in the Hamilton Inlet area were the "Labrador Eskimos," i.e., Inuit. Richard H. Jordan was a member of a Bryn Mawr University archaeological expedition in 1973 and 1975 to a place called Eskimo Island, near the Narrows at the entrance to the Inlet. There they found the remains of a village he believes was established by 1600. They examined three houses, with excavated floors about one to two feet below ground level and horizontal log walls.

The walls of the house and entrance tunnel were then built up with boulders and horizontally placed logs. A framework of logs was then placed on top of these walls for the roof support. Finally thick layers of sod were placed over the framework and along the walls to provide insulation. Sometime during the middle 1600's these houses collapsed and new ones were built at the same location. These differed from the first three insofar as they were slightly larger and rectangular in outline.³

Jordan mentions that nails were very common in the seventeenth century houses on Eskimo Island and that the Eskimos cold-hammered them into tools.

Louis Fornel's voyage into Hamilton Inlet in 1743 brought the first Europeans to winter in the place. James White, writing in 1926, says two men with Fornel were left behind that first winter and "erected their trading post on, or near, the site of the present North West River post."⁴ These French traders were there at least until 1750, according to White. There were other French traders apparently, for the ruins of three settlements were noted by Captain George Cartwright in 1779. Word of these settlements was brought to Cartwright by William Phippard, who spent a winter in Ivucktoke Bay, at the mouth of Hamilton Inlet.⁵ The French had been there for nearly forty years but the Inlet was still unfamiliar to the English.

Those first buildings are long gone but we can suppose the French traders built in the manner of other French traders of the day, probably the grooved post and fill or “*pièce sur pièce*” method of “planks inserted horizontally into grooved posts that were spaced at convenient intervals.”⁶ This method was widespread wherever the French built trading posts in North America and was still used in Labrador in this century. The photographic archive of *Them Days* magazine in Happy Valley-Goose Bay contains at least two examples: John Michelin’s house c.1900, and Mary Ann and Ambrose Mesher’s house c.1909, both in Mud Lake. A fine example of a building constructed in this style stands today on the property of Beulah (Burey) Blake in North West River. It is a hen house, with six inch squared log walls, built by her father-in-law, Thomas Blake, sometime between when the family moved to North West River in 1913 and when he died in the Spanish influenza epidemic in 1918 (figure 1).



Figure 1

Over the next hundred years, settlement and development proceeded slowly.⁷ Other French posts were built in Rigolet and Mulligan in the late eighteenth century and then, in the early nineteenth century, there were English settlers, including some who escaped from press gangs, who took Inuit wives. The Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) established posts at North West River and Rigolet in competition with the French. The HBC brought men from England and Scotland to work on five-year contracts. These men married local women and started the families which are the basis of the settler population of the Lake Melville area today.

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A hundred years after the first traders settled, a scientific expedition from the United States went to Labrador to witness a total eclipse of the sun. Charles Hallock wrote of the trip in an article published in 1861.⁸ To explore Hamilton Inlet, they engaged the services of a local man, John Williams, “who had known the bay since childhood.”⁹ They first stopped at Williams’ winter house at the Flatwater River; it was built in the vertical style, of “upright spruce studs, tightly caulked with moss, with a view to comfort more than architectural elegance.”¹⁰ Flatwater, as the settlement came to be known, is just inside the southern entrance to the Inlet. It was a permanent settlement until the 1960s and has been just a summer fishing station since then.¹¹

Expedition members arrived at the Hudson’s Bay Company post of Rigolet (“Rigolette”), and counted fourteen buildings belonging to the post; “some of them were frame buildings and some of logs.”¹² There was a photographer amongst the company and the illustrations in the article are based on his photos. The Rigolet buildings look like horizontal log structures which would be in keeping with the construction method found at most HBC posts at that time.¹³

They cruised on to North West River where Hallock observed that the fort and its buildings were similar to those at Rigolet. Donald Smith was the HBC factor and had livestock including cows, horses, sheep, goats and chickens, as well as impressive gardens, greenhouses, and “in the rear of the agent’s house...veritable barns, from whose open windows hangs fragrant new-mown hay; and a noisy cackle within is ominous of fresh-laid eggs.”¹⁴ At North West River, there were “voyageurs...preparing for their arduous journey to Fort Nascopie, at the ‘Heights of Land.’”¹⁵

North West River during Donald Smith’s time would have been very much like it was until the military bases were built twenty-five miles away at Goose Bay in the 1940s. From the 1860s to the 1940s, there was not a great deal of change in the way of life. The men were fur trappers in the winter and fished salmon in the summer. They were not coastal cod fishers and they did not often travel to the coast. They had summer homes near the salmon fishing places and winter homes closer to the trading post. And they built with wood, as Flora Baikie recalled when interviewed at the age of eighty-seven: “at every winter home we had a saw-pit, a pit saw and all kinds of saws. We had logs to saw for our houses, ships, boats, canoes, komatics, furniture and whatever else we needed.”¹⁶

Eventually, when the International Grenfell Association established a hospital and school in North West River, people who lived in other settlements moved to the community.¹⁷ By this time, in the early twentieth century, there was more competition for trapping grounds, and the trappers had to go farther afield to find an unclaimed area. The early trappers had traplines close to home, but that was no longer possible. They established traplines that were sometimes hundreds of miles away and they stayed for months, often working by themselves.¹⁸

THE TRAPPER'S TILT

A tilt is made of logs, a cabin is too. A cabin is too good to be called a tilt and not good enough to be called a house. 'Tis in between.¹⁹

The late Wallace McLean's assessment of the pecking order of the various log buildings he knew placed the humble tilt on the bottom. A tilt could be "any size, twelve by twelve, twelve by fourteen, eight by ten and so on." He told about the time he could not get comfortable in a very small tilt so he took an axe and gouged out some headroom for himself. There was certainly no agonizing over renovations or concern about appearances.

To learn about the building methods for tilts, I spoke with people in North West River where many retired and former trappers still live.²⁰ In October 1993, I interviewed three men, two who had both trapped in their youth and one who spent his working life as a trapper. My uncle, sixty-seven year old Max McLean, who trapped with his father, Murdoch McLean, for eight years from the time he was fourteen until he was twenty-two. Seventy-one year old Brian Michelin, a fourth-generation trapper, is one of a few in the area who stayed with trapping instead of going to work on the American or Canadian military bases located just twenty-eight kilometres away in Goose Bay. Bernard Chaulk, in his early sixties, was once a full-time trapper and continued to trap occasionally after going to work with the provincial Forestry Department.

Many hours were spent in conversation with my parents, who also reside in North West River. My father, George Budgell, who was never a trapper, knows a great deal about buildings. He was my location scout and found several log structures in the area for me. My mother, Ruby, is a storehouse of information about the people who built them. The articles and interviews with many trappers in the oral history journal, *Them Days*, provided more information and details of trappers' building methods.

The interviews I conducted with the three former trappers provided most of the information in the following description of a typical North West River trapper's tilt. They all started trapping as teenagers with their fathers and each man said he built his tilts the way his father showed him. I will attribute direct quotes or specific details only where their descriptions differ or where the source is someone else.

The trapper's tilt was a small horizontal log building of one room, built with an axe, most commonly the 2 ½ pound axe with the 4" blade, using logs from 5" and up to 8"-10" diameter. Logs were cut as near to the site as possible. The trapper brought some nails with him and the other major building material was moss. In recent times, trappers brought roofing felt into the country, and it was soon learned that bears and porcupines were attracted to the felt and would tear it up.²¹

The size varied depending on whether it was a "house," "stopping" or main tilt, or a "night" tilt. According to Max McLean,

One tilt was the main tilt usually and that usually was in the centre of your trap line, centralized. And you probably got back to that tilt on Sundays or weekends. Sunday,

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them days, you didn't trap on Sundays. That was your clean up day and whatever, cut a bit of wood. And your stopping tilt was bigger than the rest of them.²²

A trapper would have several night tilts, about a day's walk apart on his trapline. Austin Montague told an interviewer for *Them Days*, "I had four tilts to my trapline. About a four or five mile trek between each. Took a week, maybe longer, to see the whole line."²³ The night tilts were for sleeping and would be just big enough for a man to stand up in the middle, right under the peak of the roof. They were different sizes, but eight foot by eight foot was common, with three foot walls. Many were smaller than that. The walls in main tilts were shoulder high, about five feet. Brian Michelin had a main tilt and six night tilts at one time during his fifty-six years of trapping. Max McLean says his father had a total of five tilts.

Trappers would leave home in October, hoping to have time enough to build or repair their tilts before the snow fell. The length of time it took to build a tilt depended on how large the tilt was going to be and how many men were there to build it. Max McLean says he and his father could build a tilt in three days. Brian Michelin says a man alone would take nine days to build a 10' x 12' tilt. One account in *Them Days* credits Ira Best with building a tilt, probably a small night tilt, in one day back in 1940.²⁴

The site chosen would be near an open brook for a water supply so the trapper did not have to chop ice to get water for his tea. He would try to place the tilt on the north side of the stream so the sun would hit the front of the building, in a wooded place for shelter from the wind. Often new tilts were built in places where old tilts had fallen down. In Churchill Falls, a group including former trappers built a "heritage" tilt in a spot where three other tilts used to be.

Tilts were named according to their location or another feature, such as size. Brian Michelin's father's main tilt, called Sand Banks tilt, was at the Sand Banks (Sandbank) on Churchill River. Max and Murdoch McLean's tilts were called Seal Island, Wabastan, Sunday Lake and so on. Two tilts on Seal Lake were called Lower Tilt and Big Tilt, to tell the two apart.

The logs for a tilt were most often left round on the outside, squared on the inside and sometimes squared off slightly on the top and bottom sides. Bernard Chaulk said overnight tilts would not always be squared completely on the inside, perhaps just the back wall to make a place to hang things up and put the head of the bunk. Squaring on the inside gave more room and more light, as the scraped wood was bright white. This was all done with the axe.

The logs were stacked on levelled ground eight or nine logs high in alternating tiers and overlapped at the corners six to eight inches. The widest part of the log was laid at one end and then the next log was the reverse. The logs were saddle notched, top and bottom, or just bottom.²⁵ The notch cuts were shallow and moss was placed under the log at the cut and along the full length of the log as they were put in place. This pressed the moss in tightly.

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The tilt had a gable roof of three to five inch diameter log rafters carved out a little on the top underside to rest on a ridge pole and notched to rest on the top wall log (plate) on bottom. Nails were used to fasten the principal rafters to the ridge pole and the plate at each end. The gable logs were stacked up between the principal rafters and the next rafter log, which would also be nailed. The rest of the common rafters were not nailed, either at the top or bottom. The rafters were usually squared on the sides to fit more tightly together. To keep the rafters secure, a log was placed across the bottom of the rafters and nailed at either end and then the rafters were covered in birch rind (bark) or, more often, thick layers of moss. Max McLean says he has seen trees growing in the mossy roof of a tilt.

The moss used to chink the walls and cover the roof grows everywhere in that part of Labrador. The trappers refer to "sods of moss" for the roof, and it is moss, not grass, and not mossy grass. There are several different types of moss, but Wilton mentions the ground cover being a dense mat of hypnum and calliergon moss.²⁶ Max McLean calls it "brown moss." When Bernard Chaulk said he would "cut out junks of sod," he was talking about moss.

According to Max McLean there would be a small (30" x 36") squared log or plank door in the centre of one gable side, not hinged, usually just propped against the wall from the inside when the trapper was inside, and from the outside when he was gone. This prevented him from being snowed in, unable to open his door out. Bernard Chaulk says, however, that he and his father carried hinges into the country for a door made of squared logs in a main tilt and the night tilts had canvas doors. Over the door, there was a small window (24" x 12") with glass or canvas (tarp). There was a little sheet metal stove inside and a stove pipe extending through the roof. The trapper made his own stove and stovepipe and carried them into the country in the fall. Holes would eventually burn through the stovepipe and it would have to be replaced every four or five years. Boughs were laid on the dirt floor. Sometimes in the main tilts there would be a sawed board floor, but this would only be in the tilts that were accessible by motorboat, otherwise there would be no way to get the boards to the tilt except by carrying them. Max McLean says he and his father had thirty-six portages to get to their traplines and they carried four loads on each portage.²⁷ Trappers did not bring saws into the country years ago, but more recently they would keep a saw at their main tilt.

There was one bunk in a night tilt. The main tilt had two bunks built of logs, in an L-shape, on one wall and the back gable end. Boughs were placed on the logs for a mattress and then a caribou (deer) skin or a bear skin was placed on top of the boughs and a Hudson Bay blanket used to cover up. The stove was in the front corner opposite the bunks. There was usually a small log table on two legs attached to the wall and a couple of peeled log poles extending the length of the ceiling for hanging up wet clothing. There might have been a shelf on the wall with metal cans of flour and other food. The main storage place for supplies was a wooden scaffold erected in trees about ten feet away from the tilt, to protect food in case of a fire.

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The scaffold was of peeled sticks, to make it difficult for mice to climb up. The canoe would also be kept up on the scaffold.

Construction of the tilt was simple until the trapper got to the roof. I was baffled about how they started to build a roof until Bernard Chaulk explained they would erect poles at each end to hold the ridge pole and start building from there.

Next thing would be...stick up a post on each end and then rest the ridge pole on it. Then you'd start putting up the rafters. (So you'd put temporary post on each end to hold the pole?) Hold the pole, yeah. Say this was the back of the house, you'd stick a pole up here, up here three feet high and you'd do the same in front. And soon as you'd put up the others, then he'd stay there then see.²⁸

The trapper would erect two principal rafters at each end, nailing them to the ridge pole and the top wall log. Then another set of two rafters would be nailed in place, not flush with the principal rafters, but allowing just enough space for the gable logs to fit in between. The gable logs would be stacked to fill the space.

When I asked how many nails it took to build a tilt, I was given various answers. I was told sixteen nails were needed, two at each top and end of the eight rafters that held the gable logs. And I was told thirty-two nails were needed, four at each nailing spot. Framing for the window and door was done with squared log pieces, sometimes friction-fit for the window, usually nailed for the door. There was always a log placed across the bottom of the rafters, notched and nailed at either end to hold them fast. Nails would also be used to make the door, but none of these nails seem to be included when anyone calculates how many nails it takes to make a tilt, possibly because many of the night tilts did not have a wooden door. Max McLean told me they might carry a pound of nails into the country in the fall to do their repairs on all the tilts. Bernard Chaulk told me in his day they used as many nails as they wanted but the oldtimers used few nails. I asked him if they used twine and he said, "They had to. They didn't have nails. They almost had to lash them."²⁹ Brian Michelin said he did not know how the oldtimers did it without nails. Perhaps they never did build tilts without nails. I do not know when the French traders and the Hudson Bay Company started stocking nails in their stores, but if the Inuit people who built in the 1600s were using nails they got from fishermen and traders on the coast, then the trappers who built since 1750 likely also had a few nails.

When all the work was done, the trapper's tilt was a comfortable shelter, especially the tilts with glass in the window and a solid door. It could even be warm. Robert McLean went with Max McLean to the trapline in the winter of 1948. He kept a diary and wrote on January 28th that it was "quite comfortable here tonight. Max is thinking about sleeping in his pyjamas."³⁰ Photos of their tilts show them nearly drifted over with snow, so there would not be much draft.

Tilts were built on Crown land, not private property, but trappers had their own system of ownership for the tilts and the traplines. If nobody else was trapping on the river, a trapline could be established there. Isaac Rich in the first issue of *Them*

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Days said the trapline belonged to you "if you went there first and put out your trap line by having so many traps running back inland say for about three or four days walk, and building your cabins onto it."³¹ Wallace McLean explained the informal trapping laws this way: "If you left trapline for two years, trapline was no longer yours, but traps couldn't be taken. Tilts belonged to former trapper. These could be sold or burnt."³² He also said that if someone put a tilt on your trapline, you could burn it, but this never happened.

Trappers never knew how long a tilt would last. There was the normal deterioration caused by weather and there was the damage caused by porcupines and especially bears. Bernard Chaulk said,

You didn't know what your tilt was going to be like, not when you went back. A bear would always get in them, too. Always leave the door open, leave the door open, if you close the door he'd probably be tore flat when you come back next year.³³

The "Sand Banks" tilt which belonged to Brian Michelin's father, Stewart, is still standing and is at least seventy years old. This tilt was visited by every trapper going up the Churchill River and is well-known in the area for the things written by trappers on the walls. Brian has photos of the tilt, including the graffiti. He told me that one trapper wrote a message about having a toothache, another wished for a woman, but most wrote about their travels. All three trappers I spoke with said tilts had messages left for whoever might come along.

The Sand Banks tilt is worth mentioning for another reason. It is also well known as a comfortable, roomy tilt. It is not built in usual tilt style, but rather is built in the French style, with corner posts. Brian Michelin says it is about 14' x 17' in size. Elliott Merrick, an American who lived in North West River in 1929-1931, visited it on a trip he and his wife made up Churchill River with John Michelin, Stewart's brother. He wrote, "It has a door with hinges, a board floor, scrupulously clean, a cast iron stove, an iron poker made from an old gun barrel...in short a most luxurious establishment."³⁴ Wallace McLean probably would have called it a cabin.

Merrick appreciated the skill involved when he helped build a new tilt near an old one on the Churchill River.

Eight spikes are a help to secure the first rafters which support the ridgepole and the gable ends, but they are not necessary. The doorway is seldom more than waist high, as it is a bother to hew out very many boards for the door, the tilt is weakened by cutting too many logs and too much cold comes in around a big door.... All corner notches are in the under side of each log, so they won't hold moisture. Some tilts last for fifty years.³⁵

In the building of that tilt, Merrick mentions they used two panes of glass from the old tilt. Tilts with glass windows were superior in comfort and size to others.

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Merrick's group visited Bill Baikie's "house," which he described as the "biggest, most comfortable cabin on the river. It has two good-sized windows with real glass in them, two bunks, about twice the usual floor space and a board floor."³⁶

Just a couple of years later, a twenty-one year old Englishman, J.M. Scott, went with Robert Michelin on a mapping expedition and heard this story about Robert's father, Joseph (Brian's grandfather): "Not content with merely blazing a trail he had cut a clear lane through the trees that he might bring up a big dog team with glass for the windows of the four telts (sic) he had built between the Naskaupi and Lake Nipishish."³⁷ This sounds a little like a tall tale to me, but Scott was travelling on a wide path and that was the explanation he was given.

THE TILT "SHED"

The tilt shed I studied (figure 2) is owned by Bernard and Rosie Chaulk. It is located beside their new home on Paddon Road in North West River. There used to be another house on the property, in front of the present bungalow, and the tilt was then behind the house. With the old house gone, the tilt shed is more prominent on the lot.

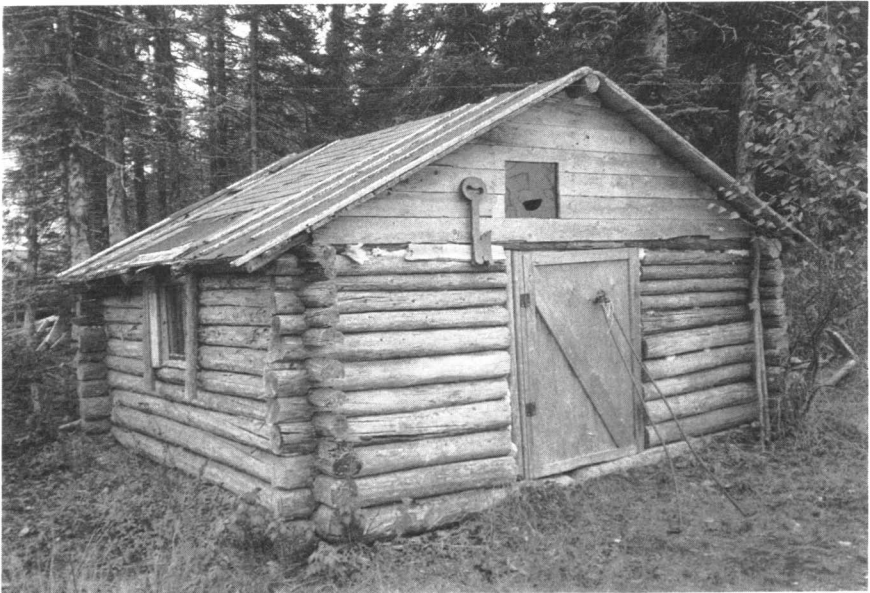


Figure 2

The tilt was built by Bernard in 1961 as a storage place for wood, then it was used to store drums of oil, and then he put a stove in it so he could thaw out his snowmobiles. When his sons were teenagers, they put in a plywood floor and

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insulated the walls with fibreglass so they could use the tilt as a "hangout" and even stay out there all night in winter. Bernard told me, "I got a lot of use out of him after I got him built." The tilt was not chinked when it was first built because it was only for wood storage. Bernard does not refer to this building as a shed. When I asked him if it was a tilt he said, "Same thing. Same as a tilt, that's what it is, tilt I calls it."³⁸

It is the size of a large main tilt, 13'10" by 13'7". It is slightly wider than it is deep on the outside measurement, which I took from the tips of the bottom logs. The largest logs are on the bottom and are 7 1/2" in diameter. The log diameter gradually decreases to the smallest logs on top at 4" to 5" diameter. The logs extend 8" beyond the corners. On the gable sides most are saddle notched on top and bottom (figure 3) and on the other sides most are notched only on the bottom. Bernard says he notched the small logs on undersides only and larger logs on both sides. The cuts are not shallow, as a trapper would normally have made them, because this building was not built for shelter and it was not important that the logs fit snugly. The rectangle of stacked logs stands 5'3" high and the distance from the plate log to the peak of the roof is 3'. Another notable difference from the trapper's tilt is that the shed tilt logs are peeled. Bernard says they last longer that way and while trappers seldom peeled tilt logs, that would be a waste of time," he peeled the tilt logs "because I was home."³⁹

There is a door in the centre of the front gable side; it is larger than a trapper's tilt door because there was no need to keep out cold. The door is 38" x 53" of half inch plywood, framed on four sides by 1" x 2 1/2" wood strips and a diagonal 1" x 4" piece. The door hangs on two hinges, mounted on the left, which until the door blew down last year were on the right. Bernard turned the door around after the windstorm. It is the original door and is kept propped shut with a piece of metal used to tow a sled behind a snowmobile. The doorway framing is a squared log on the right side and two 2" x 4" pine board strips over a squared log on the left side. The top framing is 2" x 4" pine board. On the sides, there is a nail through the framing material into each horizontal log.

There are two windows, one over the door and one on a side. When Bernard built the tilt he installed the side window (figure 4) for light, even though the tilt was to be used for storage. There is no electricity to the building so natural light was needed. It is a framed window of two glass panes, side by side, measuring 27" wide by 24" high, sitting inside another wooden frame. The window is placed 3' off the ground in the centre of the side wall right under the eave. It is held in place with a few nails driven halfway into the log it rests on and is several inches smaller than the hole. The hole is plugged with insulation on the inside and there is a piece of board nailed up on the outside gap. Two squared log pieces 3' long are nailed on either side of the window into the logs, one nail in each log.

The second window (figure 2), over the door, was put in by his sons when they took over the building some years ago. It is off centre because there is a log post,



Figure 3

akin to a king post, from the centre of the plate, supporting the ridge pole. There are two other 2' high log posts two feet away on each side under the principal rafters. The window is not framed. It is a piece of plexiglas covering a hole which



Figure 4

measures 17" wide by 13" high. The plexiglas is screwed into the gable wall, which is 1" x 6" tongue and groove pine board.

The roof has three pairs of log common rafters set between the principal rafters. The logs are 4" diameter and 8' long. The first common rafter is 34" from the front principal rafter, then next is 38", the next is 36" and the distance to the back principal rafter is 32". The roof is of 1" x 6" tongue and groove board and is partially covered in roofing felt and two different types of asphalt shingling material. In some places the boards are showing through. There are random lengths of 1" x 2" and 1" x 4" board to hold down the roof coverings. There is an open stovepipe hole 5'6" from the front and 2' from the edge of the eave. The hole is 7" x 6".

Inside, the floor space measures 11'8" wide by 11'6" deep. There are plywood braces nailed to the rafters just under the ridge pole. They are 20" long and 6" wide and have two nails in each side. The wall is scorched slightly where the stove used to be. Remnants of fibreglass insulation are visible at the gable ends and between the wall logs (figure 5). There is a dartboard fastened to a piece of plywood high on the end gable wall. Also on that wall hang rusty traps and a shovel handle. An old adze hangs on the side window wall to the left of the window. On the floor there is an assortment of stuff including a bed spring, gas tanks, extension cords, a basketball hoop, crowbar, spare tires, and a bicycle wheel.

There is a table built into the wall on the right back corner. The surface is of fibreboard and it is 25" wide by 8' long by 42" high. It stands on two legs of 2" x



Figure 5

4" pine, one in the middle and one at the freestanding end. It is braced underneath at the wall and along the side. The table holds things like paint and lube oil cans, and some tools. Bernard says the tables in tilts were built like that.

The structure is a trapper's tilt, used for another purpose. Bernard Chaulk wanted a woodshed so he built one in a method familiar to him, one that was cheap to construct, using simple tools and trees on his land.

CONCLUSION

Historic data from Scott and Merrick, many oral testimonies from *Them Days*, details supplied by my informants, and this case study should illustrate well that the Labrador trapper's tilt is not a vertical log Newfoundland tilt, nor a coastal Labrador vertical log and grass sod-covered tilt. It is what Rempel would call a Swedish style log cabin, adopted by Scotch-Irish pioneers in North America⁴⁰ and what Kniffen and Glassie believe is the result of the merging of the building methods of Pennsylvania Germans and Scotch-Irish immigrants to the United States — an American log house.⁴¹ They all agree that buildings like this were meant to be temporary and were easier to build than structures requiring complicated corner joinery. These cabins were built quickly by people who needed shelter, exactly the situation of a trapper in central Labrador.

But why did trappers build this type of tilt rather than the vertical log Newfoundland or coastal Labrador tilt? There was vertical log construction all along the southern part of the Labrador coast. Writing in 1891, Jonathan Prince Cilley described the houses in Red Bay on the south coast of Labrador. "Their houses are made of logs about the size of small railroad ties, which are stood on end and clapboarded. The winter houses are built in a similar way with earth packed around and over them."⁴² In 1908, George Francis Durgin observed tilts with wildflowers growing in their sod roofs in both Battle Harbour and Indian Harbour, where a couple from Brigus invited him into their sod home.⁴³

The Flatwater station, mentioned by Hallock, was frequented by people from Sandwich Bay and even Newfoundland, which perhaps explains the vertical logs found there. O'Dea estimates there are communities in Newfoundland where as many as a quarter of the surviving buildings were constructed of vertical logs. He says this technique was used until well into the twentieth century and mentions both full-studded structures and tilts being built in this fashion.⁴⁴ Buildings like those were common on the south coast of Labrador, but it was a style that did not penetrate into Lake Melville with any great and lasting impact.

There is anecdotal evidence that the vertical log structure style exists in the Lake Melville area. Max McLean told me that an old vertical log house, now covered in clapboard, still stands at the Northwest Islands, about twenty kilometres from North West River by boat. It was owned by Freeman and Flora Baikie, the woman who recalled the pit saws, and was built in the late 1930s or early 1940s. He said in recent years a man named Lee Baikie built a vertical log cabin on the Naskaupi River at a place called Haygrew and that he had seen it again during the summer of 1993.⁴⁵ George Budgell says there was once another old vertical log house in a former winter settlement at Sebaskachu River, about ten kilometres away by water, and he believed it was built by Mersai Michelin, the patriarch of the clan by that name. Michelin was a trapper from Trois Rivières, Quebec, who married a local woman. Hallock mentions meeting him and his family in Rigolet in 1860.⁴⁶

The vertical log technology was certainly known to people in the region, even if only from visits to the coast, but it was not the method most often chosen for houses, and never for tilts, as far as I can determine. I could find no mention of vertical log trappers' tilts in central Labrador in eighteen years of *Them Days* magazine and none of the people I spoke with knew of such a tilt.

I believe trappers chose the horizontal building method because it is easier than the vertical method for one person working alone, as trappers often were. The Newfoundland vertical log tilt requires a trench to be dug for the full perimeter of the building, whereas the trapper simply lays his first logs on level ground. In the time it would take to dig the trench and secure the first few logs, a trapper would likely have his walls well underway. The Labrador vertical log tilt of the south coast is banked, and even covered over with grassy sods,⁴⁷ which were not available

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in trapping country. Burying the tilt was probably found to be necessary after the previously migratory fishermen spent their first winter on the coast.

Philip E.L. Smith describes the Newfoundland tilt or "winterhouse" as "small in size, with rectangular ground plans, involving simple and rapid construction methods with local materials, short lifespans and poor insulation and temperature control."⁴⁸ All that is true of the Labrador trapper's tilt, except perhaps the short lifespan. The trapper's tilt was repaired every fall. Large families were not living in them, as with the Newfoundland tilts Smith described. One or perhaps two men would enter a tilt, light the stove and stay there until the next morning, when they would leave for days, spending their nights in other tilts. Trappers took care when building their tilts, some even carrying glass into the country on a sled or in a canoe. Tilts were not considered permanent structures, but trappers wanted to get as many years out of a tilt as possible.

Today in the Lake Melville area, people travel to their cabins on snowmobiles for the weekend. They go as far in half an hour as the trappers used to go in a day. In Happy Valley there are tilts in backyards that are used for recreational purposes. Bernard and Rosie Chaulk have a little tilt at Portage Island, Mulligan, which was built in 1991 and is a rusty red color you would never see on the Churchill River in "them days."

While the use of the building has changed, the fact that people still build these structures is a testimony to the strength of the trapping tradition in the area. Largely owing to *Them Days* magazine, people who were trappers are well respected and acknowledged. In July 1993, a memorial to trappers was dedicated in North West River. Just outside the Heritage Society building in Goose Bay, there is a model tilt that was built in 1981 in consultation with former trappers, including Brian Michelin and Bernard Chaulk. In 1980, when Max McLean worked in Churchill Falls, he was one of a committee that applied to the Department of Forestry for a grant of a small piece of land to build a heritage tilt. Their letter of application speaks of the age of the trapper slowly slipping away and says that the loss of heritage must never be allowed to occur.⁴⁹

Brian Michelin is not one of those, however, who is pining for the good old days when he slept on boughs in a log tilt. He was happy to show me the photos of his father's and his own tilts and answer all my questions, but when I asked him if he had a cabin out in the country he snorted, "I've seen enough of them damn cabins."

Notes

¹Shane O'Dea, "Simplicity and Survival: Vernacular Response in Newfoundland Architecture," *Society for the Study of Architecture in Canada Bulletin* 8, 2 (1983): 4.

²G.M. Story, W.J. Kirwin, and J.D.A. Widdowson, *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), 567-8.

³Richard H. Jordan, "Archeological Investigations Into The Labrador Eskimo History of Hamilton Inlet," *Them Days* 2, 1 (1976): 20-6.

⁴Quoted in David William Zimmerly, *Cain's Land Revisited: Culture Change in Central Labrador, 1775-1972* (St. John's: Memorial University of Newfoundland, Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1975), 49.

⁵Charles Wendell Townsend, ed. *Captain Cartwright and His Labrador Journal* (Boston: Dana Estes and Company, 1911), 269.

⁶John I. Rempel, *Building With Wood and Other Aspects of Nineteenth-Century Building in Central Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967), 14-5.

⁷I have summarized a nearly one hundred year period based on Zimmerly, 52-173.

⁸Charles Hallock, "Three Months in Labrador," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 22, 131 (1861): 577-99, 743-65.

⁹Hallock, 747.

¹⁰Hallock, 749.

¹¹Joseph R. Smallwood et al., eds., *Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador*, 5 vols. (St. John's: Newfoundland Book Publishers, 1981-1994), 2:213.

¹²Hallock, 755.

¹³Fred B. Kniffen and Henry Glassie, "Building in Wood in the Eastern United States: A Time-Place Perspective," *Common Places: Readings in American Vernacular Architecture*, eds. Dell Upton and John Michael Vlach (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), 159-81.

¹⁴Hallock, 759.

¹⁵Hallock, 760.

¹⁶Flora Baikie, "Long Ago," *Them Days* 3, 2 (1977): 29.

¹⁷Zimmerly, 212.

¹⁸I asked my father why he had never become a trapper and he told me there was no ground. His father was a HBC factor and did not have a trapline so there was nothing to inherit. Also see Zimmerly, 222-3.

¹⁹Wallace McLean, "You grows into it," *Them Days* 4, 3 (1979): 26.

²⁰The two taped interviews have been deposited with the Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive (MUNFLA), Accession Number 94-046.

²¹John Montague, "Ballicaters, traps and tilts," *Them Days* 4, 3 (1979): 30.

²²MUNFLA 94-046.

²³Austin Montague, "Tha' Was Nothing," *Them Days* 1, 1 (1975): 11.

²⁴Ira Best, "Hunting and Trapping," *Them Days* 14, 3 (1989): 10.

²⁵John Rempel seems to doubt the existence of double saddle notching but the three trappers all told me it was often done. See Rempel, 52. Kniffen and Glassie say it is simple and easy to do and is found on many temporary buildings, 173-6.

²⁶Wilton, 28.

²⁷Max McLean, "Max McLean, North West River, 1989," *Them Days* 14, 3 (1989): 26.

²⁸MUNFLA 94-046.

²⁹MUNFLA 94-046.

³⁰Robert McLean, "Hunting Trip to Seal Lake-1948," *Them Days* 7, 3 (1982): 7.

³¹Isaac Rich, "Trapline Rights," *Them Days* 1, 1 (1975): 7.

³²Wallace McLean, "Old Custom Trapping Laws," *Them Days* 2, 1 (1976): 5.

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- ³³MUNFLA 94-046.
- ³⁴Elliott Merrick, *True North* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1943), 297.
- ³⁵Merrick, 67.
- ³⁶Merrick, 241.
- ³⁷J.M. Scott, *The Land That God Gave Cain* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1933), 119.
- ³⁸MUNFLA 94-046.
- ³⁹Bernard Chaulk. Telephone conversation. January 9, 1995.
- ⁴⁰See Rempel, 14 and 28, on the Swedish connection; 32, on the propagation of the cabin.
- ⁴¹Kniffen and Glassie, 177.
- ⁴²Jonathan Prince Cilley, *Bowdoin Boys in Labrador. An Account of the Bowdoin college Scientific Expedition to Labrador Led by Prof. Leslie Lee of the Biological Department* (Rockland, Maine: Rockland Publishing Company, n.d., 1895), 13.
- ⁴³George Francis Durgin, *Letters From Labrador* (Concord, New Hampshire: Rumford Printing Company, 1908), 110. There is a good photograph of this tilt showing a glass window completely surrounded by long grass growing from the sods.
- ⁴⁴Shane O'Dea, "The Tilt: Vertical-Log Construction in Newfoundland." *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture*, ed. Camille Wells (Annapolis: Vernacular Architecture Forum, 1982): 55-63.
- ⁴⁵MUNFLA 94-046.
- ⁴⁶Hallock, 755.
- ⁴⁷O'Dea, "Simplicity," 4.
- ⁴⁸Philip E.L. Smith, "In Winter Quarters," *Newfoundland Studies* 3, 1 (1987): 10.
- ⁴⁹Max McLean, Brief presented to Ministry of Forestry, Resources and Lands, Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, October 7, 1980.