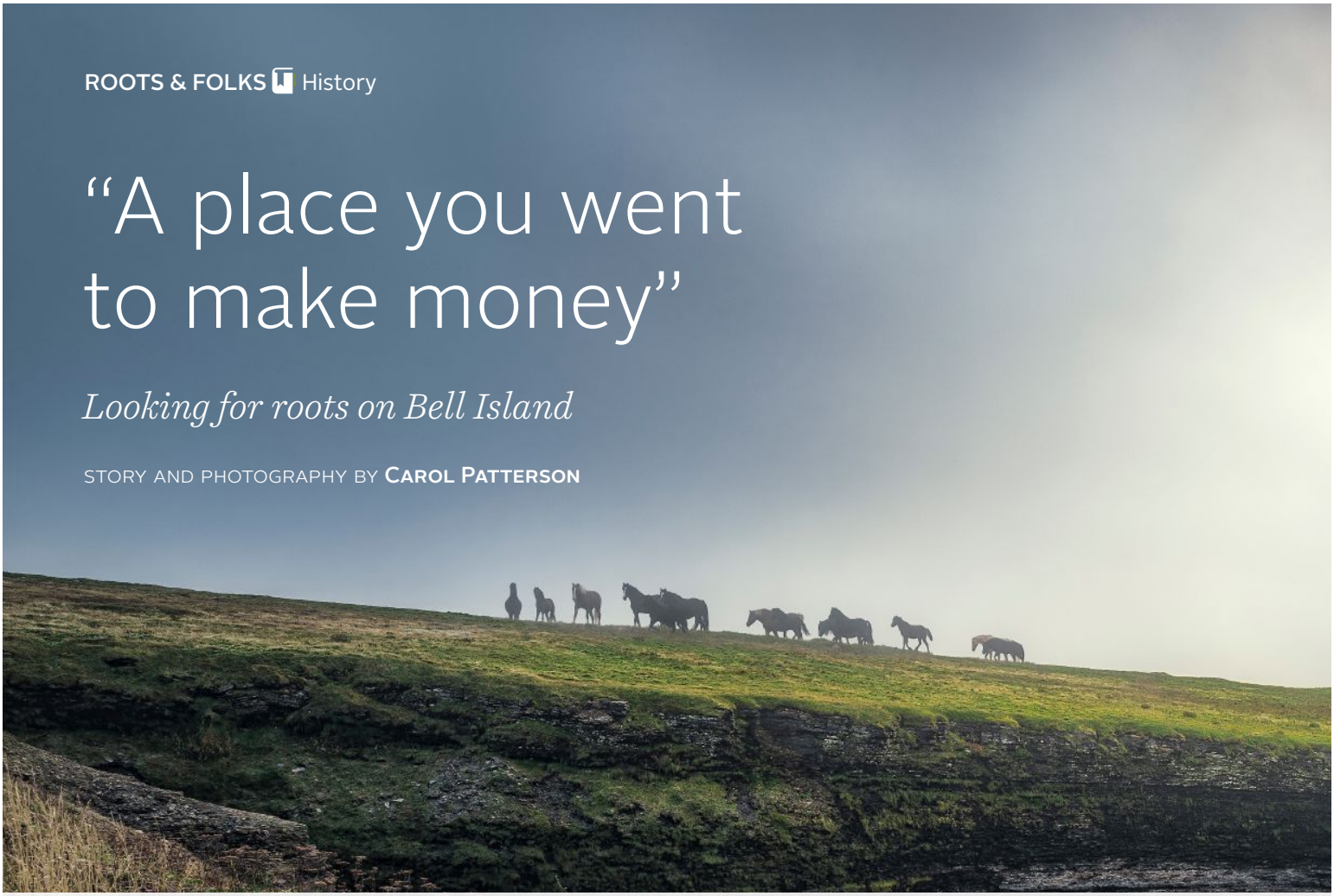
"A place you went to make money"

Looking for roots on Bell Island

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY **CAROL PATTERSON**



More than eight decades ago, high above the cliffs of Bell Island in Conception Bay, NL, my mother-in-law, Dorothy Rideout, entered the world. She grew up on the windswept nine-by-three-kilometre landmass, her father blasting iron ore in mine number six, deep under the Atlantic Ocean, her mother, raising nine children and following her faith.

Dorothy's auburn hair and easy laugh attracted the attention of a new RCMP constable, Paul Stallknecht, from a hardscrabble farm in north-west Alberta. They married and lived together on the island for 14 months before moving to Halifax and giving birth to Colin, the man I've shared my life with for about three decades.

As the ferry chugs across the dark waters of Conception Bay, Bell Island's steep cliffs beckon. I visited the island one day many years ago, but Colin had no memories of this place. What his father thought of life here, we don't know: he's been dead almost a decade. We've come with stories passed down

Below, left: Colin Stallknecht wanders along the roads of Wabana. Left: Horses graze on a cliff overlooking the ocean. Above: Approaching Bell Island on the ferry.

by Dorothy and the hope we can find family roots while we still have one parent to guide us.

Mining mecca

Bell Island was a mining mecca for years, the iron ore attracting miners from around Newfoundland and Labrador. Colin's grandfather George Rideout was eight years old when he left school to work in the mines, starting in Pilley's Island before moving to Bell Island with his family.

"It was a place you went to make money," Dorothy had told me. "It was dirty with dark orange dust everywhere. You had to wipe the clothesline before you hung laundry and when you took the clothes down, there were orange outlines of where the clothes pins had been. And it seemed per capita there were more bars than any other place in the province!"

I imagine my father-in-law Paul Stallknecht was busy keeping the peace in a boomtown atmosphere, but today Bell Island is quiet. Many residents commute to St. John's for work. The traffic from each ferry fills the main road for a few minutes before stillness descends again.

We settle into one of the few B&Bs on the island in the rural community of Lance Cove. "That would have been a day trip when I lived there," Dorothy says, revealing that few people had cars. Fortunately, we have a rental so we can explore the island faster than our ancestors.

Dorothy had told us the family home had been lifted from its foundation and floated to another community when the mines closed in the 1960s, but we want to see the lot where Dorothy spent her early years.

"99 Bown St.," I mutter, turning the search over to Google Maps, "It's sending us to a vacant corner near a busy playground." Dorothy had also said the house had been across the street from the magistrate's building, but we found nothing that looked like it had been built decades ago.

"I could look out the window at the cemetery and see the graves of my sisters, Barbara and Jeannie, who died of tuberculosis," Dorothy recalls. Figuring it might be easier to place the home from the graveyard, we go to the Salvation Army cemetery. Purple and pink lupines bob in the wind as we open a rickety, wire gate into rows of headstones, some tilted sideways, others weed-swallowed. We read each weathered inscription but can't find the aunts we'd never known.

"If you buried someone in the cemetery, it was up to your family to look after the graves. It's been over a century since my sisters died so I'm not surprised their headstones are gone," Dorothy laments after I report our unsuccessful search.

Ghosts in the mine

The next morning, we sign up for a mine tour with Bell Island #2 Mine Heritage Society. It's a chance to see the conditions Colin's grandfather laboured under for six days a week for 50 years.

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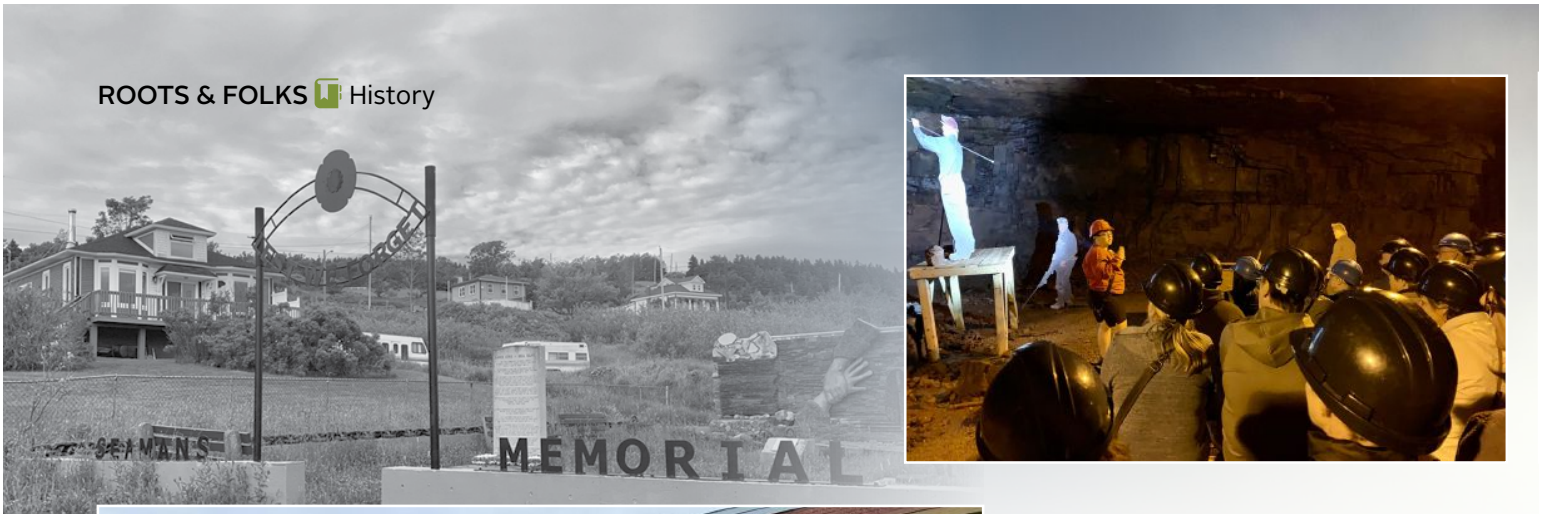

Clockwise from above: A large mural of a miner decorate's Wabana's town office; the Seamans Memorial in Lance Cove; mine tour at Bell Island #2 Mine Heritage Society.

Colin explains to the elderly lady collecting our entrance fee that his family had lived on the island and asked if she knew any of them. "Were they United Church members?" she queries. When he says his grandmother had been a staunch supporter of the Salvation Army Church, she quickly replies, "Oh, we didn't visit with them."

Church membership was a big deal. I notice each denomination has its own cemetery. A strong faith came in handy when working deep underground.

Our tour guide, Samantha, grew up on the island and left to become a high-school teacher, returning to do summer tours at the short-staffed museum. "If you hear voices in the mine, keep it to yourself," she jokes. "Some may be real and some are not. I don't want to know if it's the latter!"

Mist rises up the shaft as we started down the wet, slippery rocks into the mine, the tungsten lamps giving it a medieval glow. The sound of ghostly voices wouldn't surprise me; about 150 men died in these mines.

"Church membership was a big deal. I notice each denomination has its own cemetery. A strong faith came in handy when working deep underground"

The cavern ceiling is surprisingly high but when Samantha turns off the lights, the darkness is absolute. Horses worked down here for a month at a time. When the miners took them out, they would put cloth over the horses' eyes so they didn't go blind, and removed layers as they got reaccustomed to the light. No one harmed the rats that shared the space, explains Samantha, as their behaviour alerted the miners to impending danger.

My husband Colin is quiet as we emerge. A volunteer explains where we could find remnants of the entrance to his grandfather's mine and we head towards perhaps the world's loneliest airstrip, a herd of cows grazing on the meadows high above slag heaps left from the mines. Tidy white-sided bungalows follow narrow roads towards the coast. Stacks of split wood stand neatly in yards. ATVs are parked in driveways. A delivery van blocks the whole road.

There isn't much else to see of the island's mining history. A large mural of a miner decorates the town office. Another mine entrance became a theatre but the place where Colin's grandfather laboured seems lost to time.

Proof of life

We go to Wabana, the major settlement, where my father-in-law patrolled the streets. His future mother-in-law would have invited him to her house for a home-cooked meal. She made it a point to invite the Mounties over to eat, although they were very sedate events.

"My mom didn't believe in drinking or dancing. My dad used to walk to Dicks' Fish and Chips to play cards with the guys," Dorothy recalled of her mother, Pearl, who had come to Bell Island when she was a young woman and worked at Lawton's Drug Store.

Jeannie Bursey of Jeannie's Treasure with Newfoundland traditional mittens.

"She was known as the Rexall doll because she was so pretty," my husband recollects of his grandmother.

Now, wildflowers wave on vacant lots where once businesses served an island population of 12,000. A series of murals offer a walking tour of the downtown, many with historical photos depicting life in the 1940s. One showcases Lawton's Drug Store. I snap a photo and email it to my mother-in-law, explaining that there wasn't much left from her island era.

A bright yellow building, Jeannies's Treasures, promises souvenirs. In the tiny store, Jeannie Bursey, a blonde, middle-aged woman with a big smile stands in front of rows of cellophane-wrapped greeting cards and locally, hand-knitted Newfoundland style mittens beneath T-shirts from China.

Colin explains how we'd come to the island to look for evidence of his family's time there. "My mom might have remembered them," Jeannie considers. "She passed three years ago but every day she'd ask me who'd come to the shop, and she would often remember them or their families."

Feeling the impermanence of our lives, we settle into a booth at Dicks' Fish and Chips. The establishment had grown since Colin's grandfather George used to play card games in the back room, but it still has tasty food. As I dig into battered cod pieces, an email pings on my phone.

It's my mother-in-law, Dorothy: "The picture (on the sign) of Lou Lawton with his three employees has my sister Ruth in the middle! I have never seen that picture before and will treasure it. Thank you for capturing that portion of the mural without even knowing the family significance it has."

We found evidence of family roots on Bell Island in the unlikeliest of places! A mark that our people had lived and thrived here. We toast each other, as a meal once popular with Colin's ancestors connects us to history.

Carol's mother-in-law Dorothy identified the middle young woman in this photo as Ruth, her sister; a photo she had never seen before.