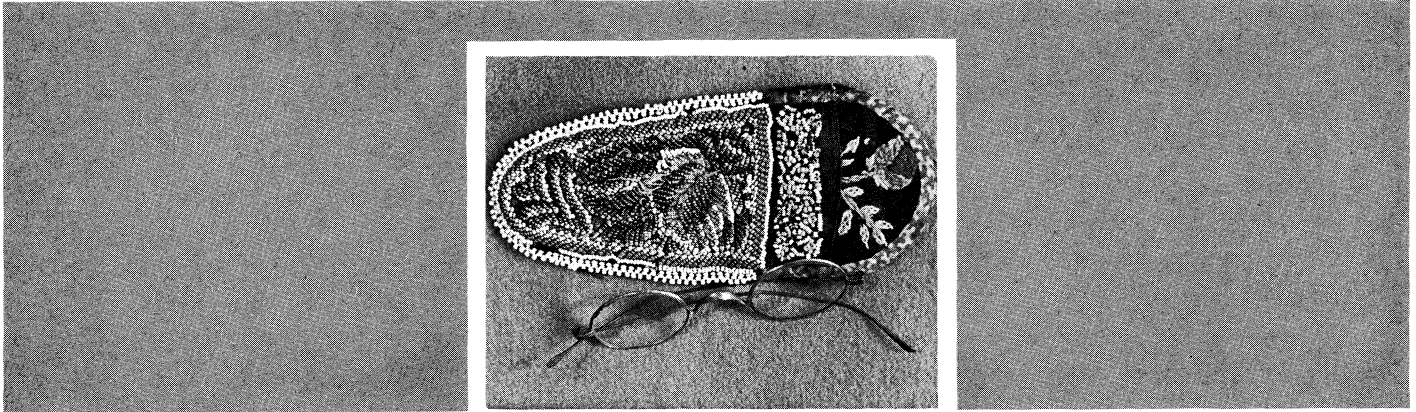


The Crafts of Labrador Women

Judy Ford and Ellen McDonald



Glass Case made by Lydia Campbell circa 1875.

Labrador is separated from the Island part of the Province by nine miles at its narrowest point, thereby giving Labrador a different culture than the Island and bringing forth a people with an identity of their own. When referring to crafts in Labrador we must keep in mind two factors. First, crafts are as diverse as the land itself because within Labrador there are four groups of people: the Naskopie/Montagnais Indians, the Inuit, the Métis, and the Settlers. Secondly the crafts, in most cases, are made out of necessity and therefore bring with them tradition and culture.

The majority of craft producers in Labrador are women who consider their role very important and unique to their culture and lifestyle. Crafts have always been an integral part of the economic base of Labrador. What is remarkable about the women who produce these crafts is the way in which they have united themselves to distinguish the needs in the area of development and to apply the right path of development to the individual and to the groups as a team.

The crafts of the Labrador women include duffle, grenfell, deerskin and sealskin products, embroidery, weaving, grass-work, mat hooking, canvas cossacks and pants, birch bark dyed products, birch wood work, knitting, crocheting and souvenir items. The crafts are as unique to the different areas as the people who produce them and have played a vital role in the lives of local people, giving them a sense of identity.

Sealskin and deerskin work is mainly done by the women of the northern communities; working with these skins is easy for some of the women since they have been doing this sort of work for a long time. Rosie Ford is one of these women. She has been doing the crafts as long as she can remember and she is now seventy-one. She remembers when the highest price for a pair of skin boots was three dollars and sealskin slippers went for two dollars a pair. Rosie also made duffle and grenfell attigiks and parkas for her family and relatives. Now she is experimenting with grass baskets and dolls and rug hooking with rags.

The community of Northwest River is divided by the river. The north side consists of white settlers and one Inuit family and the south side the Montagnais Indians. It is on the south side of this community that the creative 'tea doll' originated. It happened about twenty-five years ago when an Indian woman, Mary Gregoire, was preparing to go in the country for the winter. In order to save valuable space Mary would make dolls and fill them with tea leaves and the tea would be taken from the dolls as needed. This unique idea is now being shared by the other Montagnais doll makers.

Of all the crafts found on the south coast probably the most beautiful and best known item is the hooked rug. It is one of the oldest crafts in that area and many people believe it was brought over by early European settlers.

Lodge Bay, a small community of 129 people in southern Labrador, is one of the first places a local would look for a traditional rug of the best quality. It was in this community in the early 1900's that the International Grenfell Association first started to notice the skill and expertise that women had. The IGA people didn't like the tibit, scroll and crazy mat patterns that the locals used so the missions sent in rug hooking packages and included in these were the necessary supplies to do the rug. They sent the brim (burlap), the pattern (which was often displayed as a typical Labrador pattern), and silk stockings in the necessary colours. For their work the native women would be paid with old overcoats from the mission stores that could be cut down for children's clothing. But when the mission stores closed so did the orders for rugs.

For years nobody hooked rugs except for personal use and through the years the art and skill which was once so popular along the southern Labrador coast almost died out. This happened with the traditional knitting, crocheting and quilting as well. When modern stores began to supply the same items for a few extra dollars, many developed the attitude: why learn to make crafts? However, the people with a genuine interest in crafts found themselves producing for the sake of originality and creativity, thus preserving a lifestyle through their artistic work.

Crafts in Labrador have become a unifying factor between men and women; they often work side by side. But to the women it means more than just unity with the men. It also means a little cash income which is seldom found around the coastline for women. More than this, it means a stronger voice in community affairs. Craft councils are being formed and as each group is funded, the members must be informed of what's what and who's who in the field of Government agencies. But most importantly, the women have established within themselves and within Labrador a sense of identity and an organized voice that can be heard beyond the kitchen table. Now they can take their complaints to their council, which has an elected body known as Labrador Craft Producers Association. From here complaints are dealt with and things are made a little easier for the people who are preserving the heritage and culture of Labrador with their traditional crafts.