

The Spencer's Cove Cyclones

by

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During the first half of the 20th century, several very serious late summer and early fall storms tracked directly through Placentia Bay, leaving devastating property damage, loss of life, and family grief in their wake. The elders of Spencer's Cove, the community's "aunts" and "uncles," spoke often of the August Gales of 1927, 1934, and 1935; they told of vessels lost, relatives drowned, bodies never recovered, and grief-stricken families left to carry on without their loved ones. Their stories made these horrific storms part of our consciousness, but it would be September 1955, when I was 10 years old, before we experienced one of them ourselves when Hurricane *Ione* roared in through Placentia Bay with a force we had never seen or felt before.

People of our generation did not call these storms hurricanes. To us, these catastrophic forces of nature were cyclones; and no doubt it was the calamitous destruction they left in their wake that prompted someone in our island community to come up with Spencer's Cove Cyclones as the name for our hockey team. I doubt that anyone knows now just who that was, which is sad; it was an excellent choice, not only in terms of its connotations of forcefulness but also because of its sibilant alliteration. I also have no idea who designed our eye-catching team logo. Like me, none of the former Spencer's Cove Cyclones of my generation I've asked about it can recall who was responsible for the name or the logo.¹ Perhaps we were too young to have been involved when those matters were decided.



Although we Spencer's Cove Cyclones fancied ourselves tearing through the other teams of Placentia Bay like cyclones on blades, the truth is that, as with most outport hockey teams, there was little opportunity to test that fantasy against other teams. In any given year, the Spencer's Cove Cyclones played few games against teams from other communities. When a hockey schedule depends heavily on travel by sea, weather conditions, availability of transportation, and suitable pond ice conditions, the schedule tends to be highly irregular. For us, it also depended on how plentiful the herring were; it was the *Mollie-O* or the *Evette*, collecting herring, that would take us to another community for a game.

Consequently, most of our hockey was played among ourselves. We had enough hockey players to put together two sides, and in our after-school games with little time to play before dark there'd be no stopping. On Saturdays, we'd play all afternoon without stopping. We'd play all morning, too, except for chores such as cutting up enough firewood for Saturday, Sunday, and most of Monday and getting it stored in the house. Usually, we'd choose players to keep the sides as even as possible; but sometimes, to add a little competitive edge, the boys from Down the Bottom would play against the

¹ I'm indebted to Tony Ryan for this copy of the logo.

boys from Up the Harbour. When the stars aligned and we got a chance to play against a team from another community, it was always like game seven of the Stanley Cup finals.

As for equipment, in the early years it was skates and sticks only. Shin guards, hockey gloves, and elbow pads, even hockey pants and shoulder pads, were available back then; but that kind of paraphernalia was so far out of reach of family budgets that it wasn't even given any thought. Helmets and face protection were future concepts that hadn't yet been thought of, even in the NHL. Bruised shins were part of the game; ankles too, since skates back then didn't have ankle guards. Often we wore nothing on our hands; if it was very cold, we might wear a pair of plain wool work mitts knit by our mothers. Some boys were lucky enough to have a pair of kid gloves.

The photograph shown here, taken on the Big Pond where we played most of our hockey in the early years, gives some idea of the minimalistic nature of our game back then. The goal posts were a couple of rocks, or pieces of wood, or sometimes just a pair of boots, placed on the ice. The goal width was the distance from one tip of a hockey stick laid flat on the ice to the other tip. It usually had to be measured and reset often since one or both of the posts tended to get knocked out of place, possibly sometimes not entirely by accident.



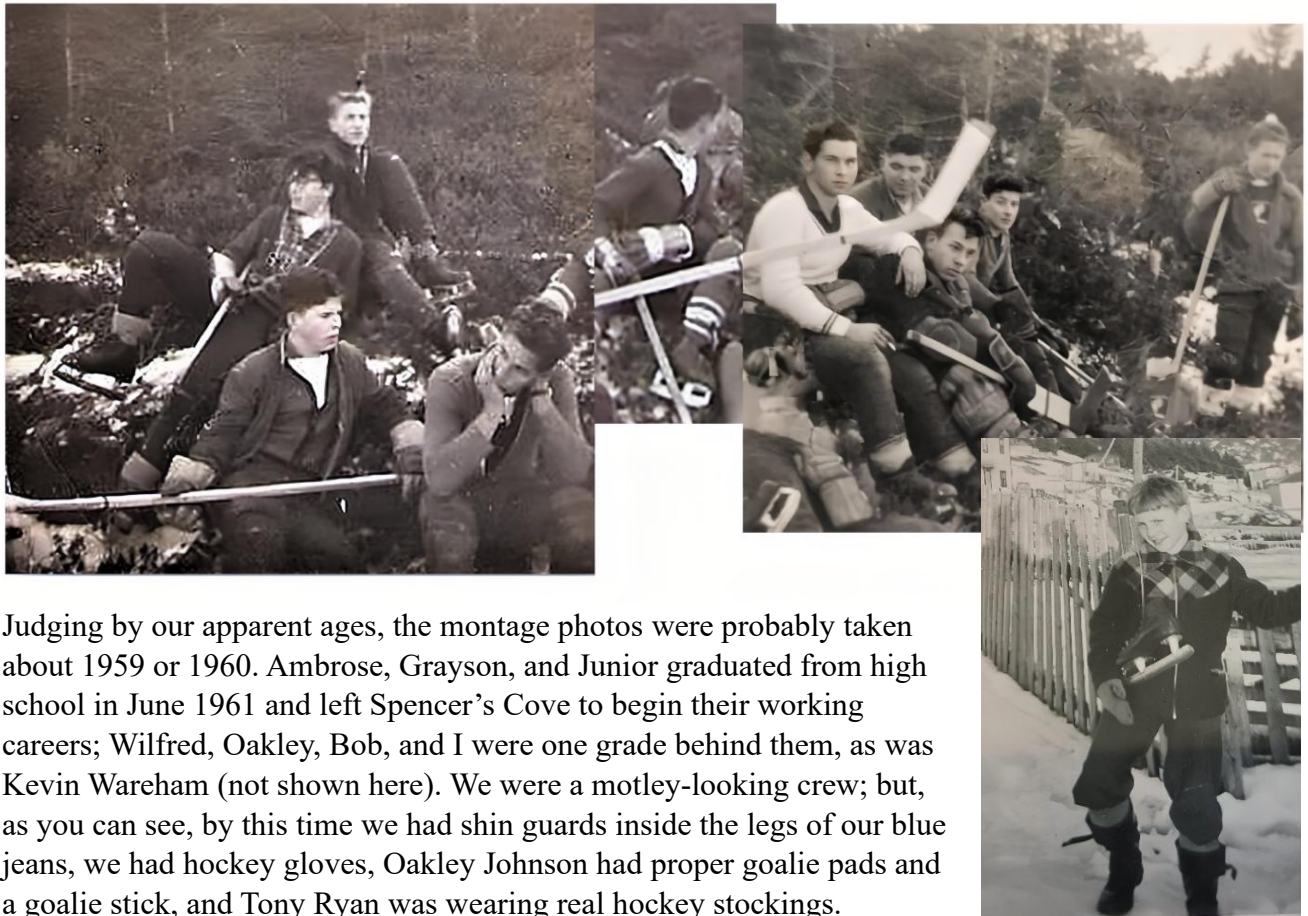
The goalie shown here appears to be wearing shin guards and hockey gloves (but none of the other players seem to be wearing them), he's wearing a baseball umpire's chest protector, and he doesn't have a goalie stick. I can't identify anyone on the ice, so I can't give an accurate estimate of when this photo was taken. Given the way that skaters are scattered around, it also looks like this might have been merely a sideline shinny activity, perhaps a warmup to a game that would be played later on when more skaters arrived. The ice near the shoreline in the background seems to have a rink-sized area cleared of snow for a more serious game, perhaps even against a visiting team.

Not having proper goal nets hampered our games in a number of ways. Besides having to reset the posts far too often, we had to deal with disagreements about whether an off the ice shot was too high, inside the post, outside the post, or off the post, or about whether the post had been accidentally or otherwise moved from its rightful location. If only we had real goalie nets! Wishful thinking. We couldn't afford real nets even if they were available. But wait! Why not make them ourselves? And so we did, sometime near the end of the 1950s. The first ones were wooden, two right angled triangles constructed from 2 x 4 lumber, with the sides opposite the hypotenuses measuring 4 feet high and 2 feet deep; the triangles were held together with 6-foot pieces of 2 x 4 lumber at the top and bottom of the twin hypotenuses. Braces or "stiffeners" were nailed across the back corners, and there you have it, a perfect frame for a regulation-sized net. Who knew that geometry could be so useful?

Netting from old herring nets was attached to the sides and backs. This worked alright for awhile, but the netting was soon cut by skates, ripped by sticks, torn by hard shots that simply went on through the back, or simply became too rotten (since only old netting that was no longer used by fishermen was

available, and nylon and filament netting hadn't come along yet), so it was soon replaced by chicken wire. This was near perfect once you got used to the puck springing back out of the goal after it got by the goalie and you learned to avoid damaging your skate blades on the wire if you slid into the net with, or instead of, the puck. The frequency of disputed goals declined dramatically.

The next picture, a montage constructed of three different photos, illustrates our early hockey "outfits" before we got team jerseys. The montage shows Mac Brown and Bob Hollett in the back on the left with Norman Ryan and Grayson Slade in front; the middle section shows Tony Ryan looking over his left shoulder; then there's George (better known as Junior) Connors, Wilfred Best, goalie Oakley Johnson, Lorne Connors, and Wayne Slade. The inset photo, taken several years earlier than the montage photos, shows a young Ambrose Vaters with his skates hung over his shoulder.



Judging by our apparent ages, the montage photos were probably taken about 1959 or 1960. Ambrose, Grayson, and Junior graduated from high school in June 1961 and left Spencer's Cove to begin their working careers; Wilfred, Oakley, Bob, and I were one grade behind them, as was Kevin Wareham (not shown here). We were a motley-looking crew; but, as you can see, by this time we had shin guards inside the legs of our blue jeans, we had hockey gloves, Oakley Johnson had proper goalie pads and a goalie stick, and Tony Ryan was wearing real hockey stockings.

Our inter-community games, when they could be arranged, were played most often against the Harbour Buffett Wildcats or the Kingwell Golden Eagles because the herring collector boats travelled frequently to and from those communities; there was also an occasional game against the Tack's Beach Beavers. I recall only one game against Arnold's Cove, played on the lagoon behind the beach in that community. It was a 12-1 victory for the Spencer's Cove Cyclones (13-1 if my disputed goal had been allowed), which indicates that the later Arnold's Cove Cyclones had a good pool to draw on when they joined the Trinity Bay Hockey League.

It wasn't until the beginning of the 1960s that we raised enough money to outfit the Cyclones with jerseys, but eventually we did. Our uniformity may have been intimidating to other teams at first, but soon at least one other team, the Kingwell Golden Eagles, also had team jerseys.



The Cyclones shown here are Bob Hollett, Oliver Boutcher, Oakley Johnson, and Tony Ryan in front, with Wilfred Best, Kevin Wareham, Lorne Connors, Mac Brown, and Gerald Boutcher in the back row. It was probably taken in 1961-1962. Grayson, Junior, and Ambrose (1961 graduates) are no longer there. Wilfred, Kevin, Bob, and I finished school in June 1962; Mack, Gerald, and Tony still had a year or two to go; Oliver and Oakley, members of the workforce, were no longer in school. The top right inset is David Berkshire, our other goalie.

Our early season hockey was played on a small gully pond in New Grove which froze early and didn't have enough water to be dangerous if someone happened to go through the ice. As soon as the Big Pond was considered safe, we moved there. It provided a gigantic ice surface with many potential places for "rinks." We could move from one location to another when we wanted a cleaner sheet of ice. The long narrow peninsula that almost divided the Big Pond in two near the middle also meant we could find a sheltered place to play on windy days regardless of the wind direction or strength.

Even a heavy snowfall wasn't such a bad thing on the Big Pond. We had made large, long-handled wooden scrapers very similar to the squeegee-type scrapers seen nowadays on television when attendants have to scrape rats, octopi, hats, and other debris off the ice during NHL games. With these, a dozen or so fellows could mark out and clear a regulation sized "rink" in no time with a ridge of snow built up around the perimeter similar to the boards around a real rink. It confined us to the right size ice surface, making the game more realistic. It was almost like the real thing! Then someone asked: Why not the real thing? If we put our minds to it, we could have a real rink. We wouldn't have

to go all the way to New Grove early in the season, we wouldn't have to wait for the Big Pond to freeze, and we'd have an NHL sized ice surface right in the community. The well-watered marsh (or mesh) near Mesh Cove at the western end of Spencer's Cove seemed like a good location. It was well sheltered; it was close by; it was a wet location that wouldn't dry up; and since it didn't have a hard rocky surface, it probably wouldn't take much difficult digging to get the depth we'd need.

Most aspects of the assessment may have been accurate, but Spencer's Cove's amateur junior engineers were way off the mark when they calculated that the digging would be easy. We would find, to our dismay, that marshes, surrounded by trees, bushes, and shrubs, have a notoriously complex, intertwined, and amazingly strong network of roots spreading like an impregnable blanket of tightly woven ropes below the spongy surface. Try to imagine standing in the first uncovered corner of the planned ice surface in your hip rubbers with your feet clogged in the muck, struggling to cut through a compact entanglement of roots with an axe or a bucksaw, digging into the mess with a pick that insisted on continually splashing muddy water back in your face, and breaking your back shovelling out a heavy, dense, waterlogged clog of mud, peat, and roots. Then look across the mesh to the far end of the proposed rink, a rectangle that would be 200 feet long and 85 feet wide, with an extra five or six feet all around the perimeter to allow room for installing the boards, all dug to a depth of three to four feet to provide the water depth that would be needed - and no excavator, just boy power. Daunting and discouraging are just the most readily available of an endless list of falteringly enfeebled understatements that come to mind. Ready to throw down your pick and shovel and head for home? Then you weren't a mid-century Spencer's Cove teenager; once started, there was no quitting.

Kevin Wareham and his older brother Eric had access to their family business's metal cutting and welding equipment, and they knew how to use it. They were also ingenious when it came to transforming imaginative concepts into workable physical realities. They managed to get some discarded steel plate, possibly from the abandoned whale factory at Rose aux Rue; and before long they'd created a large scoop like the buckets on excavators. They also managed to come up with an old deck engine (a large, heavy motorized winch mounted to the deck of a ship that was used to raise the anchor) that had probably been scavenged from one of the Wareham family's decommissioned vessels.

The deck engine was set up and anchored at what would be one end of the rink while the bucket was placed at the far end and tethered to the winch by a long cable attached to the front of the scoop. Then came the test. Fueled up, the motor was started up; it sputtered into life, the cable tightened, and the shovel began to sink its mighty teeth into the boggy soil. It was beginning to look like a huge success; but before anyone could shout "hurrah," the scoop flipped over, face down into the muck. There was too much hold by the teeth and not enough weight in the scoop to prevent it from flipping as it tried to tear through the web of tangled roots.

It was a bitter disappointment, but it was too close to success not to be made workable. There had to be a way to keep the scoop from flipping. But how? Applied physics came to the rescue this time. A long, heavy, iron rod was welded firmly to the back of the scoop. By its own weight alone, it added stability to the shovel - but sadly not enough to keep it from flipping over when the cable drew tight. We needed weight on that handle, but it had to be variable weight that could be adjusted as needed to keep

the scoop level as it encountered changing conditions beneath the surface. Too little weight at any given time and the scoop would flip over. Too much and it would pull itself up out of the bog instead of through it. We needed an intelligent way to add and subtract weight as conditions demanded. And, lo and behold, there it was, standing all around – a dozen or more muddy, young Spencer's Cove Cyclones who could hang off the handle, adding or subtracting from their number as needed. And so it was done; a large rectangular hole came into being at Mesh Cove. There was plenty of water and when winter came, we'd have an excellent, and early, ice surface. The young workforce was happy.

Tired and worn out by this time, the youth of most communities would probably have left it right there, just the way it was. After all, it would still make a good ice surface that would serve us better than New Grove or the Big Pond. However, that was not the Spencer's Cove way. We'd set out to build a rink, not dig a hole, and that's what we'd do. Industrious teenagers headed for the woods with axes and saws, returning with stout logs to be driven deep into the bog around the perimeter of the hole; when the boards were added a few feet inside these logs to create a rink that was exactly 200 feet long and 85 feet wide, they were stabilized with braces attached to the outside poles. And there it was – a perfect regulation size rink, just waiting for the frost to give us the ice surface we'd been dreaming of.



In the meantime, while we waited for the frost, extra features were added. Electric lights, wired to the Warehams' diesel generator, were attached to poles set up around the perimeter to allow playing at night; and wire mesh was strung along behind the end boards to prevent the puck from going out of the rink when high shots missed the net. A couple of wheelhouses from derelict vessels were towed to the site and set up as side-by-side dressing rooms, complete with a stove and an indoor well. We even had



a primitive, but effective, version of a Zamboni to ensure we could maintain a clean ice surface. A steel drum with a number of small holes drilled in it was placed on a sturdy cart. Water from the dressing room well was heated on the dressing room stove and poured into the drum; the cart, with a wide piece of cloth trailing behind it to spread the warm water smoothly and evenly, was pulled around the ice surface. All we had to do was stay off the rink for a few minutes to allow the ice to “set,” and we had a sheet of ice as good as in any stadium.

Of course, we didn’t have a concrete floor under the ice as indoor rinks do, so it wasn’t possible to add blue lines and red lines that would be visible on the ice itself; but, as the next photo shows, we did paint the lines vertically on the boards so it was possible for the referee to call offsides and determine where faceoffs should take place.



After years of playing freewheeling pond hockey, it took awhile to adjust to an enclosed rink. On the first day, I broke off three hockey sticks fending myself off from the boards. However, when we got the hang of it, we had a distinct advantage for a while over visiting teams still accustomed to playing on ponds. Even so, other teams developed a distinct preference for coming to Spencer’s Cove to play



the game as they saw it played each Saturday night on the snowy screens of the television sets that had come to our communities about five years earlier. The Cyclones are shown here playing against an unidentified visiting team.

When Spencer's Cove was abandoned in 1964, the rink we'd built was dismantled and moved to Arnold's Cove where it was reconstructed, in a space dug out this time no doubt by excavation equipment. Arnold's Cove also appropriated our team's name and jersey colours and the team that participated in the Trinity Bay Hockey League became known as the Arnold's Cove Cyclones.

While a major fire at the Alberto Wareham Ltd business premises led to the abandonment of Spencer's Cove more than 60 years ago, indelible traces of a close-knit, industrious community remain for those of us who lived there. Most are traces etched in memory only; but some, imprinted into the landscape itself, are still visible. One of these, dwarfed by the Big Pond near the top of the Google map section shown here, is a small rectangle carved in the green landscape near the bottom left corner – the home rink of the Spencer's Cove Cyclones.

