

A boat, a flour sack and a strong wind

Using nature's power the old fashioned way

History can be a strange bedfellow; not so much for what it records but for what it doesn't. Newfoundland is a case in point. Our cultural heritage can easily slip away without notice, piece by tiny piece. In a minor way, I fancy that I participated in one of these unmarked, micro-milestones. I may be the last person to have been driven along this island's shore by the billow of a flour-sack sail. It was hand-sewn, barked to perfection and secured to hand-hewn, locally cut spars.

Now don't get me wrong. This was no 80 ton schooner that I'm talking about. In fact, it was only a wood-planked speedboat that I decided to equip with a sail. The boat was bought new in Glovertown, in 1976. At the time, my family and I were living in Adeyton, Trinity Bay (a.k.a. Adeytown; renamed because of a mistake made by a 1970's era provincial highway sign painter — but that's another story.)

Our new boat, like any speedboat, seemed to be an unlikely candidate for sail power; lacking a deep keel and all the other necessary features to tack upwind. I decided to try it anyway. What's more, upon the advice of a dear friend and now departed neighbour, Mr. Claude Adey, I decided that my sail should be constructed using 'old fashioned' methods. Regrettably, many details about this project have been lost to time but my memory of the highlights remains.

Mr. Adey had sailed on schooners as a lad and would often recount his voyages to Labrador, especially the section of his route that took him past Quirpon. His knowledge of the sea was freely shared. That knowledge fixed my sail's design. First and foremost, it would have the ability to be folded into a traditional 'mutton cut'. This necessitated the use of a gaff to hold the upper edge and a boom along the bottom. The forward edge, or luff, was secured to the mast with wooden hoops. The gaff could be folded downward and secured against the mast during strong or gusty winds. The resulting triangular sail is what gave rise to the term "mutton cut". For some unknown reason, Mr. Adey always had a fondness for the mutton cut configuration, as opposed to seeing the gaff extended.

Other specifications included using 100 pound flour sacks for the fabric, barking the sail to prevent mildew and rot and using locally cut spruce for the spars. By the mid-1970's flour was not being routinely sold in 100 pound sacks, so finding these things was a bit of a challenge. I was clearly trying to do this at the end of an era. Eventually I found the barking material in Duntara. The person who sold me the bark directed me to someone who had the flour sacks. I am not certain but I believe it was in Keels.

I then connected with Mr. George Rodway of Clarenville. He had experience as a sailmaker and agreed to sew the flour sacks into a sail. Despite his advanced years, he was an active man and went into the woods with me to make certain that I cut the correct size and shape of sticks to use as spars. He also instructed me regarding the proper way to boil a barking pot and how to immerse the cloth. I can still recall the unique red colour that this process imparted to my sail.

The summer of 1977 I used that sail a lot. I could never get the boat to point more than a degree or two toward windward but who cares. I'll bet that million dollar yachts are remembered less fondly than that old, red, flour-sack sail.