

OUR MISSION IN DAVIS INLET, LABRADOR

By Paula Delahunty, PBVM – Looking back from April 2022 – “Memories of Davis Inlet”

Our Mission in Davis Inlet was very different from the missions on the Island. We were isolated for a good part of the year as the only way to get in and out of the community was by plane in winter, which was weather dependent, and in summer by boat. Supplies for the year had to be brought by the coastal boats which ran from possibly July until November. It was also our first time living in an Indigenous community of Innu Natives. They spoke their own language, and, in the school, we needed a translator who worked along with us as we taught the children.



Sisters Joan, Paula, and Norberta

The first of our Sisters to go to Davis Inlet were Norberta Ryan, Paula Delahunty and Joan Baldwin. Other Sisters would come later, Alice Dower who came to work in the school, Barbara Lambe as Social Worker in the community, Anne Campbell later as Principal for a year, and Margie Byrne and Marie Furey who came for varying periods of time to be among the people.

When we first went to Davis Inlet in 1984, Sister Martha Groffen was with us. She was one of the Sisters who had originally been in Davis Inlet and as their community did not have any more Sisters to continue the work there, Bishop Peter Sutton asked our Congregation to go. Many of our Sisters volunteered to go but there were only three sent that year.

When Bishop Sutton asked us to go to Davis Inlet, we asked what we could do there. His response was: "I want you to be a presence to the people". In the few visits Bishop Sutton made while we were there, it was quite evident his heart was with the people and all they needed was someone to be with them and to walk the journey with them. Sometimes we would wonder why we were there and other times it was clear to us why we were there. Their faith and life experiences taught us many life lessons and I consider the time spent with them was real gift.

The people of Davis Inlet are a warm and welcoming group of people. Though they could not communicate in their language with us, we knew from the way they worked, prayed and played with us, that we were welcomed and loved.

There was one occasion when one of the women was at the clinic for the birth of her baby. Things were not going to well and we were asked to come. Though the women looked after the mother, we were there for the family. I remember holding the little baby boy who was only about an hour old. Though we were up most of the night, we were at school again in the morning.

The children were always pleasant. We often said that they always came to school with a smile on their faces, even when sometimes they did not have shoes on their feet.

We learned much from this special people. It was a community that cared for each other. When the caribou would arrive in the spring, every household was supplied with meat.

No one was left out.

One day some children came and asked if we would like some caribou and of course we said 'Yes". Shortly afterwards there landed on our doorstep a whole caribou... hoofs, head and hide. We didn't know what to do with it, but we were told "my mother will come." The next thing we knew two of the women were at the door with their knives and all they needed to skin the animal and cut it in roasts, ribs and steaks which we froze and had available for the rest of the year.

I want to note that nothing was wasted with the animal. The hide is used for moccasins, gloves and slippers which are embellished with beautiful bead work. Even the head and the hooves find ways to be used. It is a wonderful example of ways to use the 'fruits of the land' as the people have learned from their years of nomadic existence.

Prayer was always an important part of this community. When we went to Davis Inlet, Father Chris Rushton was the Parish Priest. Every day at 5pm there was Mass in the chapel and many of the community would be in attendance. We sang the Innu songs which were several verses long. When we asked why they sang so many verses, Sister Martha told us that it was 'a whole story' so nothing was left out. It was a way to learn or at least 'get an ear' for the language, and we learned the basic prayer of the Mass just by listening.

There was an elderly couple who would come every day for the Mass and when we no longer had a priest, four years later, we would have a liturgy of the Word lead by one of the women of the Village. The elderly couple were always faithful...being there in all kinds of weather. They were for me the 'Simeon and Anna' of the Gospel. Their fidelity and their prayerfulness were examples for me which will last for the rest of my life. Another couple came one day for Mass. The mother had a tiny infant in their arms. We learned from them that the baby had been born that morning in the clinic and they brought the baby with them on their way home. I think it was their way of giving thanks for the birth of this beautiful child.

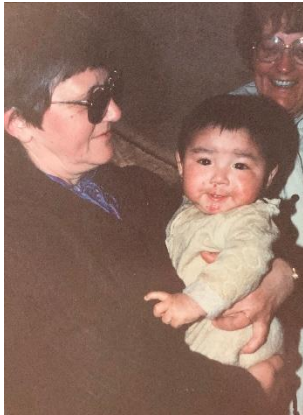
We had much interaction with the people of Davis Inlet. When we would go for a ride or in the country for a boil-up, there was always an 'eye out' for us. They told us the safest places to go and when we were with them, they would periodically stop and check to see if we were cold or showing signs of frost bite. They would then light a fire and we'd be treated to a cup of tea.



The first Christmas we spent Christmas Day going from house to house with Arctic char (a fish that was a cross between salmon and trout). It is readily fished in the North. Just visiting with the people was a way to get to know them and they us. Our house was always a welcoming place for anyone who came, and the children used to come often to look at a photo album of the people and children. There were often lots of giggles among them. They were probably commenting on their sisters and brothers. Not knowing the language, we did not know for sure, but we did know they enjoyed coming to visit with us. That first year many of the Sisters sent candy and gifts for us to give the children. I think everyone sent candy canes...of all sizes. We decided to have a "Candy Cane Tree". As the children came, they could take a candy cane home with them. As you can imagine, the candy canes, especially the bigger ones disappeared fast, and we filled it with the smaller ones. It certainly was a great attraction for the children that year. At school we had Christmas

parties for all the children...a surprise brought by Santa Claus himself.

Bishop Peter Sutton would visit almost every year. He knew everyone in the village and would inquire about anyone he didn't see. That usually meant a trip to the country for a visit to a tent or two.



Sister Martha, holding baby here, was our mentor in that first year in Davis. She tried to help us with the language and taught us some of the traditions of the people. She was like 'one of them' and her love for them was not lost on the people. She worked on Catechesis -translating the religion into their language. She was always helpful and had lots of stories to share with us. She was a real blessing to us, and she taught us much about being 'missionary' as she herself was a true missionary. Martha came originally from Belgium and her community was The Holy Family of Bordeaux. They had a Motherhouse in Quebec. Martha went back there when she left Davis Inlet and we lost track after a few years.

Our years in Davis Inlet were enriched in many ways. It certainly was a way to learn how to 'live simply' and learn community. Visiting the homes, we saw how we could be happy with basic necessities. It was a new way of life.

Though our time was spent mainly in school and for Sister Norberta, at the Mission House doing programs with the people, we learned to balance work with play. We each had a skidoo, so we would go for a ride after school and on weekends to explore the area. Our trips took us over the ocean which was frozen with about 10 feet of ice. It was the main thoroughfare during the winter.



Especially in the month of March we could go for a ride in the country after school. Most times we brought something to cook and have our supper there. It was the time of year when we had "the best of both worlds" as it was daylight for a longer period and the temperature was warmer which made for a pleasant ride. Often the other teachers who worked in the school with us came also. We also interacted with the Social Worker and nurses who lived and worked there as well. We formed a community within the community, each looking out for the other's needs. Especially in the spring when our supplies were dwindling, we shared from each other's store of goods or if anyone had an opportunity to go out... during Christmas and Easter, we brought back anything that was needed. I remember bringing back 12 dozen eggs and 12 dozen of Tim Horton's donuts at one time. We were all out of eggs and the donuts were our treat.

Thinking back over these days, I reflect how simply we lived and how much joy we could get from very simple things. We had few distractions and could enjoy our time together.

My reflection on my first year in Davis Inlet was 'that I learned how to be a pilgrim'. We walked with the people and they with us. I can say it was a very enriching time in my life. In the years following that first year, there were many more experiences. Always we were learning and getting to know a people we had very little knowledge of previously. It was a chance to see our Province in a new way and to see the riches of its people and way of life. For me it was a "graced time."