

Christmas 1915

Coley's Point Family Receives True Gift of the Season

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Christmas is often said to be the season of miracles. How true that was for Stephen and Elizabeth Russell of Coley's Point, whose son, Billy, age 15, arrived home by train on Christmas Day, 1915, exactly two months after leaving Domino, Labrador on board the schooner *Swallow* bound for Bay Roberts.

When Billy Russell returned home, he had a tale to tell that most people would feel was beyond the realm of possibility. His story involved being blown across the Atlantic on the vessel owned by A. Fradsharn and Co. of Bay Roberts, a deliberately set fire on board and rescue by a Norwegian ship, *Hercules*, which was smuggling supplies to Germany to aid in the war effort. With young Billy and 12 other men and four teenaged girls aboard, the *Hercules* was captured by the British man-o-war, *Earl Gray*.

The Bay Roberts crew and passengers were eventually landed at Stomoway in the Hebrides, Scotland, where their troubles continued. The British, apparently, could not understand what the girls were doing aboard unless it was for immoral activity. The crew had to explain the Newfoundland custom of families migrating to Labrador during the summer months.

The *Swallow* had left Bay Roberts for Labrador in the summer of 1915 with a cargo of freight for Labrador and 60 people including the crew of John R. Bishop, William Russell (of Richard), Samuel Kingsley, Arthur Greenland and young Billy Russell.

After an uneventful trip "down north," the vessel encountered stormy weather and was forced into Seldom-Come-By and remained there until mid-November when the weather had cleared. After leaving that port, they once again faced a storm of such magnitude that the *Swallow* had its canvas torn, the foresail went to pieces, the fore rigging burst and the foremast started to sway. The only lifeboat split into two pieces and loose cargo knocked the wheel out of place. With no control over the vessel, she was blown out to sea, and began leaking badly. On their fifth night, the *Hercules* rescued the seafarers after Russell and his crew had lit a fire on deck to get the attention of the foreign ship.

The *Hercules*, on the trip to Europe, was captured by the *Earl Gray* and was impounded. The Newfoundland crew, fortunately, was treated well by the British. After days of convincing the authorities in Scotland and later in Liverpool, England, of their situation, and proving that the girls among them were British-born, they finally obtained passports and sailed on the *SS Pretoria* to Saint John, New Brunswick. They then went to Sydney, Nova Scotia, and finally to Bay Roberts where they arrived by train on Christmas Day.

Billy's homecoming was quite a surprise for his family who presumed the entire crew and all the passengers had drowned. Not unlike today, there were Newfoundlanders aboard the *Earl Gray* who were quite surprised to meet the Bay Roberts crew. One of those Newfoundlanders was Percy Pickett who befriended 14 year-old Rebecca Menchions of this town.

Billy Russell, who was nicknamed Billy Galvanized because of his tough nature later became a sealer and worked for a time with the American military at Cape Spear, according to his son, Kenneth. Billy married Susan Caravan of Bay Roberts and the couple had 13 children. He died on September 19, 1974.