

from The Crow Gulch Poems

Douglas Walbourne-Gough

What Was Crow Gulch?

*When you get old and can't pay the rent,
go down to Crow Gulch and pitch a tent.*

—Corner Brook schoolyard rhyme

There was also Shacktown, a section of the west side where the very poor lived, and beyond that Crow Gulch which was the dumping ground for bums, bootleggers, and other less-mentionable outcasts.

—Percy Janes

Crow Gulch sub-area is bounded on the north by the Humber Arm, on the west by a steep shoulder of Crow Hill which cuts the area off from any development towards Curling, on the South by Curling Highway and on the east by an undeveloped gap of some 350 feet which separates the area from the buildings on Pier Road. The area is characterized by small, inaccessible houses in very bad condition on a bare, precipitous hillside varying from 29% to 50% in gradient. Total clearance and abandonment as a residential area has been the consistent recommendation of all studies of Crow Gulch since 1955. It is the action proposed in this scheme.

—City of Corner Brook

But the worst part of the West Side, no argument about it, was what we called Crow Gulch, a clutch of tarpaper shacks down by the pulpwood booms that looked as if they might have been tossed up on shore by a tidal wave or the like. There was no road down to Crow Gulch, only a hard stony footpath; no services, not even the hydro, and all hard rock it was too, so you couldn't even think to dig a well.

—Tom Finn

Urban Renewal, as Proposed by the 1966 City of Corner Brook Urban Renewal Scheme

The principal recommendation affecting the physical renewal of the scheme area: Crow Gulch to be cleared at a later stage with the

land reverting permanently to open space.

The plan shows the great majority of properties in Crow Gulch and Pier road to be

in poor condition or worse.

The City of Corner Brook will take title to 29.85 acres of land in the Crow Gulch and Pier Road sub-areas in order to

implement the scheme.

This land should be sold to the city at 50 cents per square foot. The remaining land is unusable and is to be held by the city only

to prevent any recurrence of Crow Gulch.

The difficulties imposed are most apparent when the property to be expropriated is a sub-standard shack such as those in Crow Gulch. Houses which are "reasonably equivalent" cannot be provided as it is public policy to eliminate them because they are

inadequate for modern family living.

After acquisition, the land in these areas should be cleared of all structures; basements, where they exist, should be filled, streets should be closed by such legal procedures as may be necessary and their use by vehicles prohibited. Clearance in the Crow Gulch area and in the seaward parts of Pier Road can best be done

by burning the structures in situ.

Oral History: Q and A (I)

Q. Hmm, how about the origins of Crow Gulch, do you know where—

A. —I have no idea. Like, I know what a gulch is. A gulch is, you know, I guess this unsavoury, unattractive hole in the Earth.

Q. Mhmmmm.

A. You know, it conjures up images of flocks of crows hanging around a garbage dump...

Q. It's fairly ominous, yeah.

A. Yeah, I wouldn't want to go there.

Fuck this town.

This mill with all its money gone wrong. Fuck the cut-eyed stares and the stigma. Fuck the train and the tracks, too. Makin' us into thieves to feed ourselves. And that cocksuckin' school with all the Brothers makin' ya feel like scum, all the other kids from town learnin' to be just like 'em. If God don't want me, no one will. Can't even go up Broadway without bein' chased or spit on. Girls won't even look at ya 'cause you're from Crow Gulch. I swear, too, the next bastard that calls me Jackatar's* gonna get a good shit-knockin'. I just gets so angry with it all. I don't wanna cry but it just comes out and then I feels stupid, like I betrayed my own feelings. Feels like there's something wrong with me. Can't tell anyone around here that, they'd only think there was somethin' wrong with me, ya know? We're all too busy tryin not to slide down into the bay to worry about that emotional stuff anyways. I dunno, b'y. Forget I brought it up.

* *jackatar*, n, also *jackie tar*, *jackitar*, *jack-o-tar*, *jackotaw*: a derogatory term given to those of Western Newfoundland having mixed blood, typically Mi'qmaq and French. One of the more colourful definitions found in *The Dictionary of Newfoundland English*: "Jack-o-tars chiefly subsist on the eels; they are a lazy, indolent people, and I am told, addicted to thieving; in the winter and spring they are frequently in very destitute circumstances; they are looked upon by the English and French as a degraded race, thence styled Jack-o-tars or runaways."

Favours

Broadway. Boardwalk and mud, booze
and punch-ups. Sailors and servicemen
chasing all the local women. The b'ys
didn't always like the idea,
Yanks from Harmon base with their fancy
uniforms, those stupid hats. Women
fawning over them like they killed
Hitler with their bare hands.

Constable makes his rounds, another
chilly Friday full of stars and the
boardwalk's alive with stumbling drunks
coming from Corbidge's, headed to
the Bucket of Blood for some excitement.
He breaks up brawls, flags down taxis.
Some weekends he fills the lock-up.

Three or four of them out, most nights.
Doing favours. Assumed they were from
Crow Gulch, but never asked. No one wants
to know about heritage when they're
chasing that little death. Constable
never asked, either. Just checked up
on them, doffed his cap and let them be.
Knew how this town turned people to stone,
slaving their guts out, always dreaming
of a Townsite house.

Women never having heard so much
as a handful of kind words without
some threat or leverage intended.
Hard enough being a woman at all,
then there's being from that fucking Gulch.

You've got fellas from up Corner Brook,
maybe the American base
on a night's leave. Sharp uniforms,
straight haircuts, handsome faces not scarred
with scowls. Chance of a night out they'd
never see otherwise. A night's
reprieve from that stagnant pile of rocks
and shacks must be worth something. When you
have fuck-all else to offer, the self will have to do.

All the Same

No way to heat a house at night. Winter mornings, your breath came out steam. Ya'd see the frost on the ceiling and start prayin' the firewood wasn't too damp. Bad enough not havin' a fire built, couldn't thaw your bread and molasses for breakfast. The beds were warm, though. Feather beds. Ya'd fair sink outta sight when you lay in one. Just like a cocoon. Between the bed and the weight of the homemade quilts ya'd wanna sleep forever. 'Course, ya had to get up and that meant a job in itself to get at the water for tea, for a wash up, ya know? And don't think that water come from a tap, no b'y. Just as ya had to work to get it thawed out, ya had to lug it from the spring the day before. Take it off the porch shelf and there'd be ice thick enough to skate on. Mind ya, this all depended if the firewood was dry enough. Lots of places with no insulation back then. The wood usually damp with the frost and stubborn to catch fire. Nothin' worse than comin' back from the outhouse with the hopes of gettin' warm and the house'd still be just so cold as when ya left. Bad enough ya had to wipe with old newspaper—last week's sports section smeared across yer arse. I s'pose nowadays you'd call it a hardship. It was all the same to us, just livin' to stay alive. Some nice though—knowin' ya could escape into a big feather bed at night and dream up whatever life ya wanted.

Oral History: Q and A (II)

Q: So, do you recall much about Crow Gulch? Like, any stories or experiences? Did you know anyone from there?

A: I knew a scattered one down there but only to see 'em. I mean, what ya hears and what ya knows can be a funny thing, right? Let's just put it this way—nothin' I really wants on tape.

Q: So you don't want to talk about it on record?

A: No, I can't say I do. Not with that thing on. You turn it off and I'll tell ya a few things, though.

Notes

"What Was Crow Gulch?"—quotes come from the Bowater Oral History Tapes, Percy Janes' novel *House of Hate*, the 1966 City of Corner Brook Urban Renewal Scheme, and Tom Finn's story "Quigley's Luck" from his 2011 short-story collection *Westsidiers*, respectively.

"Urban Renewal, as Proposed by the 1966 City of Corner Brook Urban Renewal Scheme"—text taken directly from the 1966 *City of Corner Brook Urban Renewal Scheme*, published by Project Planning Associates, LTD., Toronto. Access granted by the Corner Brook Museum and Archives.

"Oral History: Q and A" (parts I & II)—taken from an interview from the Crow Gulch Oral History Project, access to which was granted to me by Dr. Rainer Baehre of Grenfell Campus, Memorial University of Newfoundland.

"Fuck this town."—definition of "jackatar" found in *The Dictionary of Newfoundland English*, ed. G.M. Story, W.J. Kirwin, and J.D.A. Widdowson (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1982).

"Favours"—directly inspired by the Bowater Oral History Tapes, housed at the Ferris Hodgett Library, Grenfell Campus, Memorial University of Newfoundland, Corner Brook, NL.

"All the Same"—paraphrased from/inspired by an interview with Jim McCarthy found in *Corner Brook: A Social History of a Paper Town* by Harold Horwood (Breakwater Books, 1986).