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Research Notes on Traditional Newfoundland Wriggle-Rod Fences

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One of Newfoundland and Labrador's most unique fences is also one of its most rare. The wriggle fence is a traditional fence which is made up of slender and pliable branches. The branches are woven alternately through three horizontal longers.

This type of fence was practical and economical because all the materials could be collected from the local area. In a time when money was scarce in Newfoundland, this style of fence did not require the use of nails, which could be expensive (Paddock 105). Instead, sharpened wooden pegs could be used to hold the longers in place. In some places, the longers could be woven into the fence as well (Riddle Fence). This basket-weave resulted in a fence that was strong, durable, and formed "a remarkable windbreak" (Paddock 105). It was a popular fence type, in part due to the fact it was "the most effective in creating a barrier to keep things in or out of an enclosure" (Fences 1).

Kevin Andrews of New Perlican built his own wriggle fence circa 2012 to pass this traditional skill on to his children. He used young spruce or var for the rods as they were the most pliable and most abundant in his area. He describes the process of constructing the fence thusly:

> You take the wriggle and you bend it, and you go in through the centre one from the top and come out through the bottom one, and that applies the wriggle out facing you. Then the next one you put in, you put it in on the opposite side of the centre piece and the three rail fence, and you weave it the opposite way and put it in through the centre and come down and come out through the bottom. So,

> each one, every second one goes the same way. There's no nails involved because, well, years ago they had no nails, so they used to make wooden dowels and they'd nail the rails onto the fence, drive the wooden dowel in through the rail and into the stake and weave the wriggles in the way I just told you, and you end up with the wriggle fence. But now, in the beginning you got to put the stakes down in the ground first. 6 or 8 feet apart, however wide you want it. And then you start from there after you get the stakes down in the ground. You drive them down through with a wooden mallet. And then you start from there and put your rails on and then after the rails on then come with the wriggle fences which you weave in through (Andrews).

An interesting variant is described from Grand Bank, said to result in an almost impenetrable bottom section. It is made with,

> Little spruce trees about 1 1/2 in. in diameter, trimmed, with the bushy top left. There are three rails on the posts, and the bushy top is placed on the bottom and the trees are woven around the rails. Only one nail in the top rail (Noseworthy 237).

In some communities on the Southern Shore, vertical rods were referred to as gads, or “witrod gads,” which were a long, slender, flexible withe:

> "Riddlin' fences" were also common. These were made probably as late as fifty or sixty years ago. A few riddlin' fences are still to be found in Southern Shore communities. They were made in much the same way as longer fences. Stakes were driven into the ground and longers, the trunks of small trees about an inch in diameter, were nailed to the stakes. Gads were woven or "riddled" in and out through the longers, so that sheep and goats could not get through (Dillon 73,139).

This kind of fence goes by many names in Newfoundland English. Regional varieties include wriggle, wriggle-rod, wriggling, riddle, riddle-rod, riddling, roddle, ringle-rod, and garden-rod (“Riddle”), and, with room for confusion, picket fence (Noseworthy 230). The name *wriggle* may come from its meaning ‘to turn, bend’, inspired by the way the rods are woven between the longers (“Wriggle”).

While the exact origins of the wriggle fence are unknown, there are a few likely antecedents: post-and-wattle fences in Great Britain and Ireland, woven fish weirs/fish traps in Ireland, and wattle-and-daub timber frame construction common throughout Northern Europe.

Post-and-wattle fences are made by weaving branches around vertical posts, instead of the horizontal longers of the wriggle fence. Archaeological evidence shows these types of fences were in use as early as the medieval period (O'Sullivan 1993:53). 11th-century Dublin made extensive use of post-and-wattle fences:

> Post-and-wattle fences would have been in evidence as property/plot or yard dividers. In fact, so commonplace and distinctive were these when they were first noted by native commentators, it was the fences and not the properties they demarcated that struck them (Wallace 10).

By the 1300s, use of timber had reduced available tree cover, as low as 15% in Anglo-Norman Ireland for example (Slattery 64). Across Ireland and the UK, coppicing and pollarding to produce rods for fencing and construction became commonplace, and by the start of the 14th century, organised woodland management in parts of Ireland was capable of producing thousands of rods over a short few-day harvesting period, with rods used for fencing, housing, and pathways (Slattery 64).

North American settlers from England and Ireland brought this detailed knowledge of rod-making and wattle fence-making with them. By the 1630s, English settlers in colonial Chesapeake were recreating an English-style landscape complete with wattle fences:

> A wattle fence was a visually crude but efficient border, which was made up of a series of vertical sticks, with branches and twigs tightly woven between them, atop one another, to form a dense mat. This surface would keep all but the smallest rodents out of a garden, one of the most important aspects of fence design during this period. The wattle fence was probably the first type of small fence used to surround the initially rude gardens at Jamestown in the early 1600s (Brinkley 75,96).

Early settlers to Newfoundland found ready sources of small rods during land-clearing activities, without needing the work of coppicing or pollarding. As permanent settlement increased, fences were needed to protect subsistence gardens from hungry livestock, which largely roamed free. This included goats, as remembered by Cyril Pinsent of New Perlican:

> But before they were let go a yoke was placed on their neck. Now the yoke was made from three sticks. Two short ones about an inch in diameter, and one long one. Now there’s a reason for the yokes. Every square inch, I would say, of the land during these years in New Perlican was fenced in with either wriggle fence or pickets. And the yokes were put on the goats so they wouldn't get into the gardens and eat the grass. They also were free to roam wherever they wished (Barrett and Drover 30).

The major difference between wriggle and post-and-wattle fences is the orientation of the rods: post-and-wattle using horizontal rods woven around the upright posts; wriggle fences using rods woven vertically between horizontal longers. There are, however, scattered mentions of Irish fences where furze bushes were woven vertically to form a continuous screen from the ground upwards:

> Gates leading to gardens and fields having crops which could be damaged by fowl were made secure against their entry by lacing furze bushes between their bars in a similar fashion. Although this was not the subject of any specific enquiry, it was recorded by informants in Louth, Meath, Laois, Wicklow, Wexford, Tipperary and Cork and, although this shows that it was a widespread practice, it was, undoubtedly, more frequent than these rather casual mentions of it indicate (Lucas 145).

The other possible ancestor of the wriggle fence would have been familiar to early Irish settlers: woven fish weirs. A fish weir was typically a V-shaped wooden or stone structure, with post-and-wattle fences and a gap or eye at the focal point into which fish were funnelled and trapped (O'Sullivan and Downey 30). Remains of woven wattle fish traps have been documented in Ireland as early as the late Mesolithic, 6100-5700 cal. BC (McQuade 8). Styles of Irish post-and-wattle fish weirs dating to the fifth century were used up to the nineteenth century in Irish agri-fishing communities (O'Sullivan and Downey 32).

Like land-based fences, post-and-wattle fish weirs used vertical posts and horizontal woven sections, but could also be made with predominantly vertical rods driven between horizontal rails, utilizing soft river bottoms to full advantage. Medieval fish weirs on the Deel Estuary, for example, featured closely spaced vertical posts, interwoven with horizontal wattles (*see* O'Sullivan 1995). While the use of weirs would have been familiar to early Irish settlers, weirs were never used in great numbers in

Newfoundland. By the 1880s, there were calls to dismantle those weirs which existed in order to stimulate salmon stocks (House 4) and the French use of weirs on the West Coast of Newfoundland was a contentious issue in the last decades of the French Shore (Pinsent 4; Dashwood 4).

A third possible influence which used a similar technique was wattle-and-daub timber frame house construction, where wattles (or withies) were woven around staves of cleft oak then daubed with clay to create walls between timber frames. Staves were generally set vertically and spanned the shorter dimension of a rectangular panel, but “sometimes they were set horizontally, with the wattles woven vertically” (Practical 49).

Whatever its origins, the verticality of the Newfoundland wriggle fence had practical benefits. As Tilting native Jim Greene told researcher Robert Mellin (66):

> … the picket fence and the longer fence you could run out and go over, but this bloody riddle fence, you couldn't climb over that. You could keep in anything or keep out anything. Riddle fences were made from boughs and longers -- you could use spruce, fir -- they had three longers -- alternate weaving -- there was nowhere to put your foot to go up, and there was spears sticking out on top, you couldn't go over that so you had to keep away from it.

The wriggle fence is a long-lasting fence, with an estimated lifespan of 15 to 20 years. But while once a common feature of the Newfoundland landscape, the wriggle fence has all but disappeared since the 1970s. With the decline in animal husbandry and kitchen gardens, the wriggle fence was no longer a necessary structure. The construction of the fence was also a time-consuming process, and other fences eventually replaced the wriggle fence.

There are still some who are working to pass on this knowledge and hope to see wriggle fences dotting the landscape once again. In 1977, artist Don Wright created a short film entitled “Wrigglin’ fence” which follows Paddy Brothers of Port Kirwin as he builds a wriggle fence around his garden patch. With videography by Nels Squires, and sound by Randy Coffin, Wright focuses on the gathering of materials and construction of the fence. Wright also produced prints featuring wiggling’ fences. He says:

> When this appeared in a gallery, the security guard came up to tell me that in his part of the island it would be called a 'garden rod fence'. Our resulting discussion

> was a fascinating blend of practical and artistic understanding. If my work makes other people take more notice of their surroundings, then I am satisfied (*qtd in* Leaving 11).

In 2009, grade eight students at G. C. Rowe Junior High School in Corner Brook were coached by art teacher Eileen Murphy in making their own models of “Wrigglin’ Fences” using materials they collected locally (Wheeler 4-5). In 2011 the English Harbour Association for the Arts offered a course in wriggle fence construction, and others like Kevin Andrews are constructing wriggle fences on their own property to act as windbreaks around fire pits or to protect their backyard vegetable gardens.

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