

Draught and Sled Dogs in Newfoundland and Labrador



Heritage NL

info@heritagenl.ca - PO Box 5171, St. John's, NL, Canada, A1C 5V5

By Ellen Power

Introduction

Draught and sled dogs once had an important role in the domestic economy of Newfoundland and Labrador. Until the mid-20th century, these dogs were a common sight in town and outport alike. People across the province relied on their dogs for many tasks including pulling sleds and carts, hauling lumber and even sea rescues.

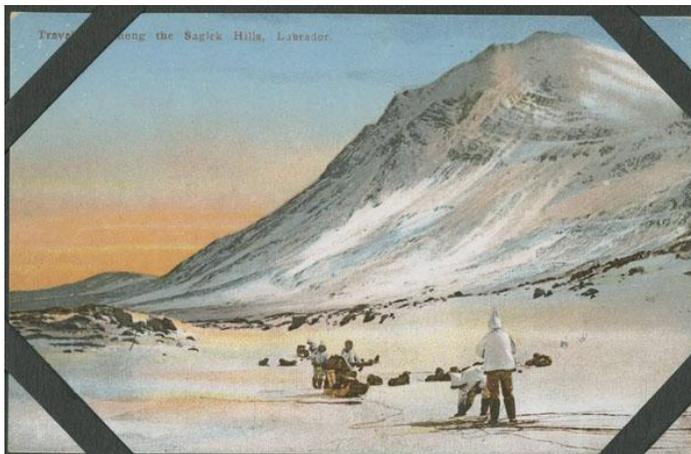


Fig 1. Travelling by komatik in the Saglek Hills of Labrador, c. 1912. (The Rooms Provincial Archives Division)

Sled Dogs and Komatiks

Many communities in the province have a historic tradition of dogsledding, particularly the Inuit communities of Labrador. The husky-pulled komatik has been used by Labrador Inuit for transportation and travel since time immemorial. European settlers were also quick to adopt the dog sled, as dogs were well suited to the cold

weather and uneven ground conditions of a Newfoundland and Labrador winter. Hunter and trappers relied on their dog on long trips that covered hundreds of miles. Later, dog teams carried everything from medical patients to mail bags. (*Fig. 1*) These working dogs were not treated as household pets, but as valued assets in travel and transportation. It took skilled observation of individual dogs' abilities and personalities for a driver to put together a team.

A good dog team could be depended on even by an inexperienced driver. A story from the 1930s tells of a Newfoundland Ranger travelling by borrowed dog sled between Deer Lake and Woody Point on a stormy night. He wrapped a blanket around himself to shield himself from the rain, sleet and snow. The trip took many hours and the Ranger soon found that the blanket had frozen around him, leaving him unable to move or direct the dogs. Thankfully, the dog team knew their own way home. They brought him all the way to their owners' front door, where the trapped—and likely embarrassed—Ranger was carried into the house “like a wood log” to thaw out. This amusing tale could have ended very differently if not for the well-trained dog team. (McGrath 2005, 138) Another story, this one from a Grenfell nurse of the late 1950s, tells of a helicopter nearly lost in a blizzard en route to St. Anthony. Unable to get his bearings, the pilot spotted a dog sled travelling below and landed nearby to ask for directions. The sled driver was easily able to point the way, despite the low visibility. (Lombard 2017, 60) A dog sled could be the safest way to travel during the winter. The instincts of a good team and driver often won out over unreliable technology in inclement weather.

Dog teams and komatiks were vital to the work of the Grenfell Mission in northern Newfoundland and Labrador. It was the easiest way to bring medical service to remote communities in the winter, and in turn was a common way for patients to travel to Grenfell clinics. Dog teams were used by the mission until the 1960s. Their popularity made them a common motif on Christmas cards and hooked mats sold to fund the Mission. (Lavery 2005) (Fig.2)



Fig 2. A dog sled features prominently on the front of this Grenfell Christmas Card, c. 1929. (The Rooms Provincial Archives Division)

But the use of sled dogs to provide public services was by no means confined to northern Newfoundland and Labrador. There were few roads in many parts of Newfoundland and heavy sea ice limited winter travel by boat. Dog sleds were used as far south as Hermitage Bay. The postal service, the cottage hospital system and the Newfoundland Rangers all relied on sled dogs for travel into the 1940s and 1950s. (Fig. 3)



Fig 3. Dog sleds in front of the post office in Trinity, c 1900. (Virtual Museum Canada)

Draught Dogs

Hauling was another common job for draught dogs. Most houses were historically heated by wood stoves, which required huge quantities of firewood to keep a house warm through the winter. Dogs were trained to haul lumber out of the woods using specially designed slides and harnesses. (Sparkes 1996) (Fig. 4) Though they could not haul as heavy a load as a horse could, they were “wonderful fast”. (Mellin 2015, 138) Dogs were ideal for hauling wood from out-of-the-way places difficult for a horse to access. They were also cheaper to feed than horses. (Mullet 1980)

In the summertime, dogs were sometimes used to cart stones from agricultural fields. There were instances of large dogs being harnessed to ploughs or even helping to haul in fishing nets. The Newfoundland dog, capable of pulling loads much heavier than its own body weight, descended from these large hauling dogs. Their strength famously made them ideal rescue dogs, who helped bring ashore shipwreck survivors on the rocky coasts of Newfoundland. (Churchill, Dalziel and Rice 2015) But Newfoundland dogs were just as often used to pull shop carts or even children’s sleighs.



Fig 4. Dogs harnessed to haul wood in Cape Broyle, c. 1950. (Ronald J. O'Brien photo)

Changing Attitudes Towards Working Dogs

Not everyone looked on working dogs positively, particularly as they were often left to run loose—and occasionally semi-feral. The situation was described in a 1934 report about living conditions in rural Newfoundland:

[T]he perennial dog question, which causes so much high feeling between sections of many of our communities, cannot be evaded. Thousands of our people keep and use one or more dogs for hauling purposes in winter, particularly in the securing of firewood. These animals are powerful mongrels, often of uncertain temper and predatory habits... That they are in many cases of economic value to their owners is unquestionable. On the other hand they are frequently destructive of the property of others when, as usually happens, they are allowed to roam at large... (Neary, 1985)

The government at the time instituted the “Dog Act”, a per-head dog tax designed to control dog numbers. The act lasted only a few years. Its ineffectiveness was likely due to the difficulty of enforcing the law in rural jurisdictions, combined with the fact that owning draught or sled dogs was a necessity for people in remote areas even if they could not afford to pay the fee.

Working dogs were ultimately made obsolete not by law, but by technological innovations in the mid-20th century. The prevalence of modern vehicles and year-round roads in most communities was the greatest factor, as was the invention of the snowmobile. Increased use of electric and oil home heating also decreased the scale of winter firewood hauling. Cars and trucks filled the role that dog cart used to play; increased vehicle traffic on the province’s roads made the roads unsafe for slower dog and horse traffic. In a period where modernization was an economic and political priority, draught and sled dogs were left behind. Dogs are rarely used for hauling or transportation today. Recreational dog sledding and racing still take place in some communities, but draught and

sled dogs are no longer a part of everyday life in the province. (Samson 2016; Randell 2019)



Fig 5. A husky on a modern recreational dog team, with a snowmobile also visible in the background (CBC Newfoundland and Labrador)

Many of the specialized breeds of dogs still exist today. The Labrador husky, though reduced in numbers, is still popular with dog sledding enthusiasts in the province. (Fig. 5) The Labrador retriever is another water dog originating in this province, popularized in the 19th century by its use as a hunting dog in the United Kingdom. The Newfoundland dog, becoming endangered by the early 20th century, is well-known worldwide after nearly going extinct in the early 20th century. (Churchill, Dalziel and Rice 2015) Although most are kept only as pets today, these working dog breeds are still immediately recognizable symbols of this province. As draught and sled dogs, they were historically essential to a variety of everyday work undertaken by Newfoundlanders and Labradorians.

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