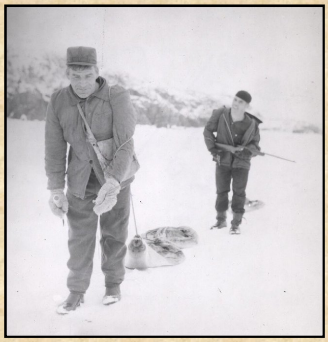
Sealing in Newfoundland in the 19th Century
Copied from Clarenville Middle School

Two Types of Seal Fisheries:



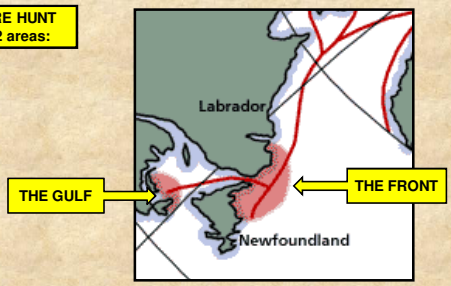
1. **THE LANDSMAN HUNT:**

   Seals caught near the shore

2. **THE OFFSHORE HUNT:**

   - Ships off the North East coast of NL (**THE FRONT**)
   - Ships in the Gulf of St. Lawrence (**THE GULF**)

The OFFSHORE HUNT took place in 2 areas:



Sealing Equipment and Skills

Killing: The most common method of killing young harp seals has always been to strike a hard blow to the head with a blunt instrument. In earlier days, the gaff was used as an aid to travel over ice, and the blunt side of the hook was used as a weapon to crush the skulls of the whitecoat seals. In the 1960s, wooden clubs replaced the gaff. It has always been traditional to use firearms to shoot older seals, since they have to be killed from a distance.

Pelting: A skinning knife was used to pelt (de-skin) the animals. The intent was to remove the fat, hide and fore-flippers (the sculp or pelt) from each carcass without causing damage to the skin.

Towing: Another important piece of equipment carried by sealers, especially during the earlier phases of the hunt, was a tow rope, usually 3 to 5 m long, with an iron or steel hook at one end.

Panning: The pelts were towed directly to the vessel or gathered at central points, called pans, to be collected later. If time permitted, these piles of seal pelts were often combined (creating larger pans).

Stowing: After the pelts had been taken aboard they were stored on deck, hair to hair and fat to fat to reduce staining of the hides. They were kept on deck until "chilled," before being stowed below, thus reducing the tendency of the fat to render and spoil.

Seal Products

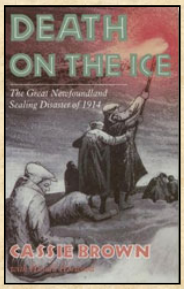
Oil: Seal oil, from blubber, was originally the most important product. It was used primarily for domestic and public lighting, to make soap, to soften leather, hides and other textiles. Seal oil is now exported mostly for processing into machinery lubricants, edible oil products, and cosmetics.

Pelts: Seal skins were processed to remove blubber and meat and then sent abroad to be made into a variety of articles that, unlike oil, were not as easily replaced by more modern products. Pelts thus replaced seal oil in order of economic importance towards the end of the 19th century. Today, hides are mostly used to produce a variety of clothing from coats and jackets to handbags and belts.

Meat: Meat has always been less important than oil and pelts. Nevertheless, seal meat is consumed extensively throughout the Atlantic region, although the sale of fresh and frozen meat is confined primarily to Newfoundland. There have been recent efforts to expand markets through the development of new products such as sausages, pie filling and pizza topping.

Sealing Disasters

The Newfoundland and Labrador spring sealing industry was more hazardous than any other local fishery in the 19th and 20th centuries.



To find their catch, sealing ships had to steam each year into the dangerous ice floes off Newfoundland's north and south east coasts, where large frozen masses of floating seawater and sudden blizzards could jam ships in the ice and crush their hulls. In no other fishery did ships venture into the ice floes.

Between 1906 and 1914, 5 steamers were lost, reducing the country's sealing fleet to 20 vessels.

Once on the ice, sealers faced many dangers. Carrying little food, no shelter, and dressed in clothing ill-suited for sudden squalls, the sealers often spend 12 consecutive hours on the ice.

Because their ships could not maneuver far into the ice fields, the men often had to walk for miles before reaching any seals.

If the unpredictable North Atlantic weather worsened, the men would have to turn back and fight their way through blinding snow and fierce winds, hopefully guided to safety by the sound of their ship's whistle.

Inevitably, these dangers – in addition to human error or negligence – resulted in many accidents and deaths.

The Sealing Disasters of 1914:

- ***The SS Newfoundland (and the SS Stephano)***
- ***The SS Southern Cross***

The two most horrific Newfoundland sealing disasters both occurred in the same year – 1914.

The first disaster occurred as March ended and April began, 1914. It occurred on the Front, and involved two sealing vessels: the *SS Newfoundland* and the *SS Stephano*. 78 men died. The second disaster also occurred in March, but involved a ship called the *SS Southern Cross,* which was returning from the Gulf . 178 men died.

In these two separate but simultaneous disasters, 252 of the country's sealers died.

The SS Newfoundland (and the SS Stephano)

When the SS *Newfoundland* left St. John's for the Front in March 1914, no one anticipated the hardships that lay ahead.

The sealing vessel *SS Newfoundland.*

The Captain of the *SS Newfoundland was* Wes Kean. He was accompanied on the hunt that year by his father, Abram Kean, a veteran sealer and Captain of the *SS Stephano*.

Although the two ships worked for competing firms, each captain had agreed to alert the other of any seals they spotted by raising their after derrick – a type of wooden crane found on marine vessels.

Captain Abram Kean, thought by many to have been responsible for the men being marooned on the ice.

On March 30, the powerful steel steamer *SS Stephano* had navigated its way deep into the ice fields where it found a herd of seals. Abram Kean ordered his derrick raised, but the *SS Newfoundland* – a weaker and less maneuverable wooden steamer – was jammed in the ice between five and seven miles to the south and could not proceed.

Frustrated by his inability to move and anxious to catch a share of the seal herd, Wes Kean ordered his men off the ship the following morning. He instructed them to walk to the *SS Stephano*, believing the sealers would spend the night onboard his father's steamer after a day of hunting.

Although the sky was cloudy, Wes Kean did not anticipate bad weather as the morning was mild and the ship's barometer gave no indication of a brewing storm. The *SS Newfoundland*, however, was not carrying a thermometer and Kean could not tell if the temperature was falling or rising.

Nonetheless, at 7 am, 166 men jumped onto the ice and headed for the distant *SS Stephano*. As the morning progressed, many of the sealers recognized signs of an approaching storm and talked uneasily about the weather. At 10 am, 34 men decided to turn back. The remaining 132 men reached the *SS Stephano* by 11:30 am.

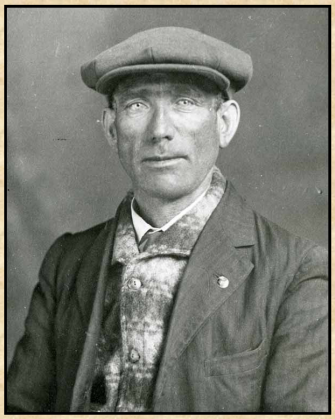
Abram Kean invited the men on board and offered them a lunch of tea and hard bread. He mistakenly believed that the group had left the *SS Newfoundland* at 9 am and had only been walking for two hours. While the men ate, Abram Kean navigated the *SS Stephano* towards a group of seals two miles to the south.

Although it was snowing quite hard, Kean ordered the men off his ship at 11:50 am, with instructions to kill 1500 seals before returning to their own ship, the *SS Newfoundland*. He did not invite them onto the *SS Stephano* for the night.

Tired from the morning's four-hour trek, and unable to see the *SS Newfoundland* in the thickening storm, the 132 men were once again on the ice.

The group's leader, George Tuff, did not object to Abram Kean's orders and the *SS Stephano* steamed away to pick up its own crew members hunting to the north. By 12:45 pm, the blowing snow forced the sealers to stop hunting and head for their own ship.

Walking through knee-deep snowdrifts and across wheeling ice pans, the men continued until dark, when Tuff ordered them to build shelters from loose chunks of ice. This, however, proved ineffective against the night's shifting winds, sudden ice storms, and plummeting temperatures. Many men died before morning; others could barely walk, their limbs frozen and numb.



GEORGE TUFF, Second Hand of the *SS Newfoundland*.

George Tuff was the officer in charge of the 132 sealers stranded on the ice between March 31 and April 2, 1914.

He was one of 54 men to survive the ordeal.

The group spent the next day and night trying to reach the *SS Newfoundland*, but without luck.

Some men, delirious, walked into the frigid waters and drowned; others were pulled back onto the ice by their companions, but often died within minutes.

Wes and Abram Kean, meanwhile, each believed the sealers were safely aboard the other man's ship.

Communication between the two vessels was impossible because the *SS Newfoundland* was not carrying wireless equipment. The steamer's owner, A.J. Harvey and Company, had removed the ship's wireless because it had failed to result in larger catches during previous seasons.

The firm was interested in the radio only as a means of improving the hunt's profitability and did not view it as a safety device.

It was not until the morning of April 2 that Wes Kean, surveying the floes through his binoculars, spotted his men crawling and staggering across the ice.

Desperate to help, but lacking any flares, Kean improvised a distress signal to alert other vessels within the fleet.

Soon, crewmen from the *SS Bellaventure* were on the ice with blankets, food, and drink. The *SS Stephano* and *SS Florizel* also helped in the search.

Of the 77 men who died on the ice, rescuers found only 69 bodies; the remaining eight had likely fallen into the water.

The survivors were brought to St. John's for medical care, where another man, John Keels, also died from his ordeal on the ice.

78 sealers from the *S.S. Newfoundland* were left on the ice off the NE coast for 53 hours in a savage blizzard.

April 2 1914. Rescuers from the *SS Bellaventure* carry dead and injured sealers from the *SS Newfoundland* on stretchers.

Charles Martin of Elliston was one of the four survivors of the *SS Newfoundland* disaster. It was believed that rescuers had him laid aside with the dead when they noticed a slight movement in his body. As a result of his terrible ordeal, Charles lost seven fingers; three on his left hand and four on his right. He also lost part of both of his feet along with other bodily injuries.

The SS Southern Cross

While the 132 men of the *SS Newfoundland* were stranded on the ice in the North Atlantic, a second sealing tragedy was unfolding to the south. In late March or early April 1914, the *SS Southern Cross* sank while returning to Newfoundland from the Gulf of St. Lawrence, taking with it 174 men.

On March 31, the coastal steamer SS *Portia* passed the *SS Southern Cross* near Cape Pine, off the southern Avalon Peninsula. Although the *SS Portia* was headed for St. Mary's Bay to wait out a worsening blizzard, the *SS Southern Cross*, low in the water with its large cargo of seal pelts, seemed headed for Cape Race. The steamer was not seen again, and because no wireless equipment was on board, communication with other vessels was impossible.

In this photo, the *SS Southern Cross* sealing vessel is jammed in the ice in St. John's harbour and its crew is trying to pull it free.

Most people at the time suggested that the ship's heavy cargo may have shifted suddenly in the stormy waves and capsized the steamer.

In his book *The Ice Hunters*, Shannon Ryan also suggests that the ship's captain, George Clarke, may have pressed through the storm because he was anxious for the recognition and the small prize traditionally awarded to the first arrival back from the seal hunt.

Whatever the cause, the sinking of the *SS Southern Cross* resulted in more deaths than any other single disaster in Newfoundland and Labrador sealing history.

Reactions to the Disasters

Although the *SS Newfoundland* / *SS Stephano* disaster resulted in fewer deaths than that of the *SS Southern Cross*, its shocking details sparked a more intense and emotional response from the public. For two days, 132 sealers were stranded on the ice in blizzard conditions for 53 hours without adequate shelter. More than two-thirds of the men died and many of the survivors lost one or more limbs to frostbite.

In 1915, the government held a commission of enquiry to examine the *SS Newfoundland* / *SS Stephano* and *SS Southern Cross* sealing disasters.

Although it laid no criminal charges, the enquiry found Abram Kean, Wes Kean, and George Tuff all guilty of errors in judgment.

In Tuff's case, the enquiry felt he should have refused the orders of Abram Kean, one of the most powerful men in the seal hunt, to return with his watch to the *SS Newfoundland*.

More importantly, the commission recommended that all sealing vessels carry wireless sets, barometers, and thermometers, and that ship owners be held accountable for any injuries or deaths sustained by their crews.

In 1916, the government passed legislation prohibiting sealers from being on the ice after dark and requiring all sealing ships to carry wireless equipment and flares.

In response to theories that the *SS Southern Cross* sank because of overloading, the government also made it illegal for any ship to return from the hunt with more that 35 000 pelts.

Sealing – A History in Photos

The *S.S. Neptune*

St. John's harbour, 1902.

Inuit people building igloos in Hudson Bay, with the *S.S. Neptune* in the background, 1903.


The *S.S. Neptune* sank off St. John's Harbour in February, 1943. This photo was taken from the tug boat that rescued the crew before the ship went down.

S.S. Diana and other sealing vessels, St. John's, 1902.

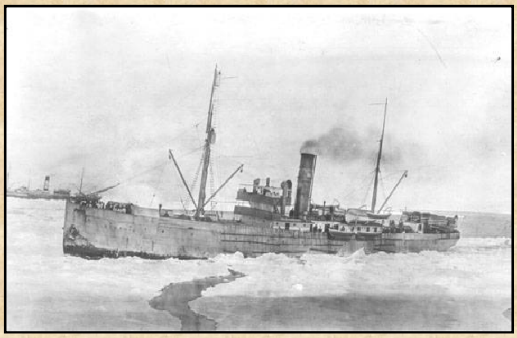
A photograph of the *S.S. Viking* disaster, 1931.

This disaster was caused by an on-board explosion. 28 people were lost and only 2 bodies were recovered.

S.S. Viking disaster, 1931. Towing the rescue boat.

Sealers on the ice near sealing ship *S.S. Beothic*, 1926.

Sealing Fleet, 1901, at Job Brothers & Co., St. John's



The *S.S. Beothic* and the *S.S.Nascopie* in icy waters near Fogo, 1912.

The *S.S. Diana* and another ship in St. John's harbour, unloading seal pelts at Job Brothers & Co., 1905.

Ice-bound ships in St. John's Harbour, 1860

Way back in 1803, over 100 vessels, carrying 3500 to 4000 men were engaged in the sealing industry.

Fogo, on the northeast coast of Newfoundland, was one of the important sealing centres in the country.

The *S.S. Stephano* (Left), the *S.S. Beothic* (Centre) and the *S.S. Bellaventure* (Right), stuck in ice off Fogo, 1906.

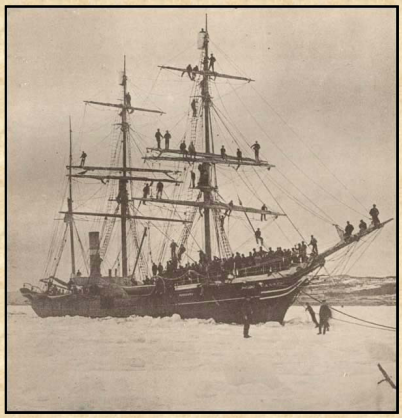
Every Spring, the return of sealing vessels made St. John' s harbour a very busy place.

Unloading seal pelts, St. John's.

Ship steaming through the ice of St. John's harbour, possibly a Red Cross sealing ship c.1892

S.S. Beothic leaving harbour, 1926.

Sealing ships stuck in ice, St. John's Harbour.



19th-Century Sealing Steamer.

c. 1895

Millions of harp seals on the ice floes off the coast of Newfoundland and Labrador.

A sealer stands on the deck of a sealing ship as it approaches a herd of harp seals.