

Taken from “Snippets in Time” by Cyril Chaulk, DRC Publishing, 2009.
Permission granted by the Publisher to include this story in the
Newfoundland’s Grand Banks Genealogy Website.
(Contributed by Linda Elkins-Schmitt Nov 2010)

The Spring Two Brothers Went Missing On the Bay Ice¹

George Shelly loved to visit his grandparents, William and Mary Cull, in Barr’d Islands along with other family members. They made the trip three or four times a year. It was now 1864 and George was in his early twenties. Since the Shelley family in the 1860’s made up the total population of the Cove, a total of 10 persons, there was no young woman to date unless he went to Ladle Cove nearby. One evening as he walked Barr’d Islands road with a couple of young men he met a teen-aged girl over in her Father’s skiff from Beaver Cove at the entrance to Gander Bay. Like George’s father, Robert, Joseph Brinson was selling some long timber for small craft spars. That’s why he was in port. Harriet was only fifteen, he found out later, but he was determined to follow up on the short time they had together that evening.² And so it was that in the next two years he found opportunities of every sort to visit Beaver Cove. You could say that it was love at first sight.

In the fall of 1866 George Shelly and Harriet Brinson were happily married, and settled down in that tiny community to become good parents to their two sons, Esau, and Ananias³. Esau, the older boy, regarded his father as a great man: “Who else,” the proud boy exclaimed, “could copy⁴ the ice-pans as well as his father could, and who else could bring home such excellent seal-meat?” In the early 1860’s food was scarce, especially in winter, and everyone looked forward to harvesting a few seals.

It was on a sunny morning in late March of 1873 when four men with ice-poles and guns left the shoreline in search for seals. They were men of the sea who risked their lives in braving the great dangers that lay abroad on the ice floes. George, his brother Esau, his teen-aged brother Aaron, and brother-in-law John Robinson from Wesleyville, had all left Apsey Cove early that morning and did not intend to stay on the ice very long. It was a sunny day so they carried only enough food for a mid-day snack. The thick ice seemed tough enough as they clambered over the rough pinnacles in search of a seal for each man. Esau succeeded in killing a young Harp shortly before noon. “I ‘m finishing up a set of horse sleds this week,” Esau said. I’d better head on home. What are you fellows planning to do? You can have a share of my seal if you don’t get one.” Aaron spoke up: “I’m not feeling very well today – should have stayed home. But I’m chasing George and Johnny. Maybe I’ll be lucky.” “Esau,” George interrupted, “why don’t we all

¹ A shorter version of this story is found in the “Centre for Newfoundland Studies” in “A Brief History of Aspen Cove” –unpublished MUN history paper, 1968.. George Shelley, a next-door neighbour, and grandson of the George Shelly in this story told this to me in 1967 when he was 74. Though I have expanded on his thoughts and embellished his words I have tried my best here to present this as true story.

² Harriet was the daughter of Joseph and Jane Brinson, a respected family of Beaver Cove, a small community just beyond Fredericton at the entrance to Gander Bay.

³ Esau was born in 1867 and Ananias in 1872.

⁴ To jump from one floating pan of ice to another.

have a lunch, and then you can go. Maybe, with some food, Aaron will feel better. Ask Harriet to put on a pot of beans - she knows how well I like beans⁵. We'll be home by four o'clock or so." After a lunch of molasses bread, Esau put the rope over his shoulder and began to pull his burden over the rough crackling ice, and moved slowly towards the shoreline near Rocky Bay Point.

Before long the three men came upon a couple of young seals. They took chase but one disappeared through a rent in the ice. They got the other one. Aaron used his sharp knife to try his hand at skinning a seal. But he tired quickly and George finished the job. To make the trip home easier and quicker they cut their seal in parts. Aaron took the heart and the flippers. The other men put the rest of the meat in their bags. After washing their hands in a little pool of water, formed by melting ice, they proceeded towards the shore intending to land near the halfway rock, a mile or so from Apsey Cove⁶. The sinking sun cast an eerie shadow upon the ivory-white pinnacles.⁷

Suddenly they froze in their tracks, stopped by a loud noise that seemed to carry up and down the Bay. The ice had separated. A rent in the ice now extended up and down the Bay as far as they could see. The gap was far too wide to allow for a possibility of jumping the gulf. There was no other choice but to follow the rent and try to make land at Western Arm – probably the Days' place at English Harbour⁸. The day was far spent and the possibility of reaching land that evening was slight indeed. Brave hearts helped tired bodies as they trudged on and on and on.

Before they had gone far, young Aaron grew unusually hungry. The calories from lunch had long disappeared. The older men could endure more physical strain than Aaron who was but a youth. Encouragement was given; spirit fought against flesh but the flesh won and Aaron was forced to give up the fight - he could go no further. George would not leave his brother. He begged Johnny to go on ahead, try to reach land, and bring help and food. As John Robinson left the two brothers that evening, he left a sordid sight indeed. Aaron's overwhelming hunger caused him in desperation to gnaw at the raw seal's heart - the only morsel available. Johnny bade good-bye and reluctantly set out in search of a safe passage

Threatening clouds hovered in the darkening sky and flakes of snow began to fall. Before the last rays of light had vanished, the wind chopped to the Northeast and a raging snowstorm hurled itself upon the unsheltered bay. On and on staggered the courageous

⁵ George, Harriet, and the boys had come down to Apsey Cove on horse-sled for a few days, taking advantage of the warm sunny spurt of weather to be with family.

⁶ A small community between Carmanville and Musgrave Harbour – now called Aspen Cove. It is thought that an "Apsey" family from west-country England lived there seasonally for a short while before Robert Shelley's family first settled here. Also in the early days a row of large Aspen trees lined the shoreline. In west-country England they interchanged their "p's" and "s's". So Asp became Aps – hence Apsey and Aspen. I have a Post Office stamper from many years ago when my grandmother Chaulk operated the Post Office. After adding some ink to the stamp pad the word that appeared on paper was "Apsey Cove".

⁷ A peak of ice that has rafted up on an ice floe or jutting up from the top part of an iceberg.

⁸ Then called Western Arm.

man with head bent low. At last he reached an island, recognizing it to be Woody Island. Through the blinding snow he could see lights dimly visible in the distance. Surveying the huge rent in the ice he knew he could make land, but first he must rest a while. "Nothing can be done now until morning," Johnny thought. He was so exhausted he lay down on a small patch of blackberry earth that was free from snow and sheltered on the windward side by low spruce tuckamore.⁹ The storm was abating somewhat so Johnny felt that this was the only way he could gain sufficient strength to reach the settlers at Western Arm, not so far away. It was risky to give in to exhaustion - better men had died that way before. He drifted off into a deep slumber.

As he staggered to his feet he caught a glimpse of human footprints in the snow only three or four feet away. He had slept through the night and morning, and would have entered into endless sleep, if the warm rays of the sun had not brought his chilled body back to reality. A man from Western Arm had gone out to Woody Island to tend to his fox traps and had walked right past Johnny without discovering him. How a man could pass within reaching distance of another human without taking notice is difficult to understand. After being questioned about this later, the man denied any remembrance of seeing Johnny that morning.

John Robinson's thoughts turned quickly to three men who had suffered through the blinding storm without shelter of any kind. A day had passed since he had left his relatives on the ice. Quickly he set out again for help. As he reached the first houses, lights were flickering again in some windows. If they could only reach them in the morning maybe tragedy would not come knocking on the door.

Arrangements were made that night to go to the rescue. Food was prepared; warm clothing was placed on sleighs, and enough kindling was tied to the sleighs to bring warmth to the weary. A good dog team and the rescue crew waited for dawn to break. Then the wind chopped from the North West and blew with a vengeance and miles and miles of ice moved out the bay slowly like a funeral procession. First light dashed all hopes of rescue and hope was blown out with the wind. As the settlers gazed out the bay toward the sunrise, they beheld the broad Atlantic - not a pan of ice in sight. It was a helpless situation, but small rays of hope still flickered in Johnny Robinson's bleeding heart. There was still a slim possibility that the ice had touched shore as it passed one of the seven or eight offshore islands.¹⁰ There were some shacks on Duck Island and Peckford's Island, so when he got back to Apsey Cove maybe they could use a sailboat to investigate. He couldn't help from feeling responsible. He questioned himself: "Why didn't I just push on and on that first evening"?

He was soon ready for the three-hour walk to the Shelly home. Another person volunteered to accompany him to Aspen Cove. He gladly accepted, hoping that the friend would be able to relate the unthinkable.

⁹ Small stunted evergreen trees with thick gnarled branches that often cover barren sections of coastlines or islands. That evening it provided shelter from wind and snow for John Robinson.

¹⁰ A series of small islands off Aspen Cove and Ladle Cove know as the Wadhams.

Up to this time, George's wife and boys, his mother and father, and the other relatives were not aware of the tragedy. Yet there was an uneasiness and quietness around the Shelley household. They assumed that the men had reached land at Western Arm and would in time return home on foot. Esau, who had reached shore, joined with the rest of the family in these hopes. But he was thinking about how his teenaged brother, Aaron, had complained of not feeling well before he left them on the ice. The thought crossed his mind: "Death on the ice!" But he said nothing.

When the two men came round Rocky Bay Point the east wind brought shivers down their spines as the wind veered from west to east. Already they could see the ice was moving in past the islands. It was now the third day. The last hope was dashed. At noon Harriet walked out "back of the point" and saw two men walking down the shore - close enough that she recognized Johnny. But the other man was a stranger. Where were George and Aaron? The news she had already feared pierced her heart. Wiping the flowing tears from her face with her large bib apron, she quickly came back the narrow goowiddy¹¹ path to the house, almost to her knees in snow from the recent storm. Immediately she sent the two boys out to play in their favourite spring abode - their grandfather's barn loft. Bending down she placed a kiss, ever so gently, on the boys' foreheads. "Take care of little Ananias," she reminded Esau¹². The grief, already etched in her face, told the story of death and no return. The others asked no questions - there was no need.

After John Robinson arrived, the friend, who accompanied him, told the whole story amid pauses and tearful interruptions. The ice conditions tied their hands from doing anything. It was just too hard. After a few weeks Harriet Shelly moved back home to Beaver Cove with her two children. It was difficult to raise a family in normal circumstance but Harriet bore up under the tragedy and made two ends meet, and later returned to live in Apsey Cove. No trace of the two brothers was ever found.

On August 25, 1874, at St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Fogo, Harriet married John Coles of Fogo Island. They lived in Beaver Cove for quite a while and then moved back to Apsey Cove. Together they raised a fairly large family. She encountered more tragedy in her life when her son, Joseph Coles, aged 24, drowned, along with two Elkin brothers, Jeremiah and Alphaeus of Aspen Cove¹³. Their sail punt capsized in gale-force winds near Fredericton on November 8, 1908. Late in life, after John passed away, Harriet married George Angel of Noggin Cove and continued to live in Aspen Cove. Looking at the make-up of the population of Aspen Cove today it is interesting to note that all the Shelleys and all the Coles are descendents of this remarkable woman.

¹¹ Known as "sheep laurel", goowiddy is a low shrub, plentiful in Newfoundland. It is very similar to another low shrub known as "Labrador tea".

¹² Esau was about seven or eight and Ananias about three.

¹³ They were sons of Samuel and Selina Elkins. Garland Stratton of Aspen Cove intended to travel with the three young men to Beaver Cove but changed his mind and sent his clothes bag along in their punt. He walked to Beaver Cove the next day. On arrival he discovered they had not arrived and broke the story to the relatives.. Garland's clothes bag was the only item found from the capsized boat.

If you listen carefully on Aspen Cove point¹⁴ on a cold windy summer evening, the rustling of aspen leaves seem to whisper a tale of death and no return. The tragic story of the “fate of two brothers” has become a part of our local history and begs to be retold.

¹⁴ Shelleys still live on the same land that was first settled by Robert Shelley in the 1820's.