

# Labrador Life

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Summer 2019

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Smallwood detonating the first blast at the Smallwood Mine in Labrador West.

# Atlantic Films in Labrador

One of Smallwood's "New Industries" used to tell story of regional economic development

story by Mark Turner

In 1952, Atlantic Films and Electronics opened its doors on Prescott Street in downtown St. John's. One of Joey Smallwood's infamous 17 "New Industries," the company was meant to serve as the foundation for a larger, provincial film industry. The basic concept was reasonable: Atlantic

Films and Electronics would produce films as well as service and sell audio-visual equipment. The electronics component of its operations was made up of a company called Motion Picture Supplies founded by Derek Marshall in St. John's in 1942. The films component, meanwhile, was supplied by émigré Alberts Jekste and his Latvian and German colleagues.

In Newfoundland, Atlantic Films is often remembered for two reasons. First is its association with a young John Williams. Long before scoring *Jaws*, *Star Wars*, *Indiana Jones* or *Jurassic Park*, the young United States Air Force officer stationed at Pleasantville composed the score for the short tourism film, *You Are Welcome*, released by Atlantic Films in 1953. *continued...*

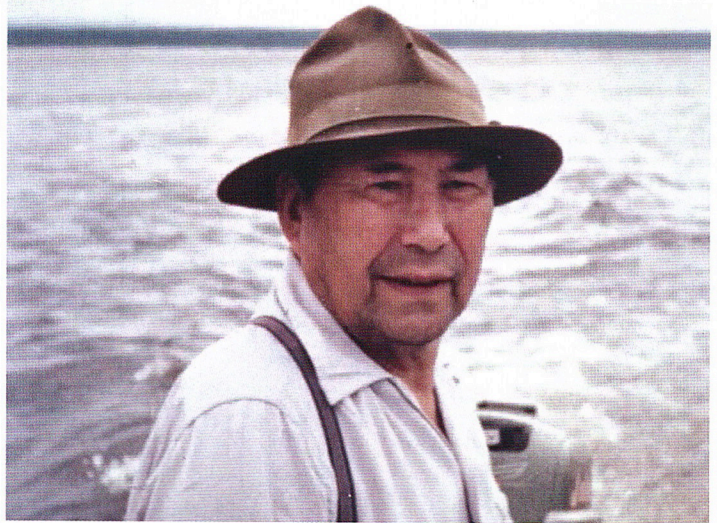
## in focus

Second is for its *Newfoundland Progress Reports*, a series of Soviet-styled films celebrating Newfoundland's "New Industries". Between 1952 and the end of the company's Newfoundland residency in 1966, Atlantic Films had released no less than 37 films, including the anti-communist documentary, *My Latvia*.

Practically, the film part of the company was responsible for producing for the provincial government. During the Commission of Government, film production was almost exclusively the domain of American outdoorsman, Lee Wulff. Confederation and the phase of industrialization that came with it required new types of promotional and instructional films. Atlantic Films' *Roads and Bridges* (1953) chronicled the making of just those in eastern Newfoundland. *You Are Welcome*, also released in 1953, follows a vacationing couple as they drive across the island, well beyond what is shown in and well before the making of *Roads and Bridges*.

None of Smallwood's 17 "New Industries" ever made their home in Labrador. As we know, the province's first premier had grander designs for this place. Industrial projects he could never really lay claim to, like the air base at Goose Bay, became part of a bigger story of industrial development in Labrador. And while other film production companies like the National Film Board of Canada, Crawley Films and the US-based Cinécraft documented developments in Labrador West, Churchill Falls and even Happy Valley-Goose Bay, Smallwood did not pass up the opportunity to use Atlantic Films to help to tell that story.

Smallwood's motivations alone make for interesting film-making. But Atlantic Films' personnel made the company's output truly distinct within Labrador's film history. Prior to the Soviet occupation of Latvia in 1940, company head Alberts Jekste had established himself as a broadcaster, producer and technical designer for the Latvian state-run electrical manufacturing company and state-run radio. Towards the end of World



**Gilbert Blake, a bridge between the old and new ways.**

War II, Jekste fled to Hamburg, Germany where, along with other Latvian ex-patriates, he established a film production company that would become the film production component of Atlantic Films. The connection between Smallwood and Jekste was made by Smallwood's Director General of Economic Development, another Latvian named Alfred Valdmanis.

*continued...*



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Alberts Jeskste introducing his anti-communist film, *My Latvia*.

Gerhard Bassler, a specialist on Smallwood's "New Industries," suggests that once Atlantic Films was up and running, the company employed 13 Latvians and six Germans.

In other industries, those numbers might not mean much. But for media, an industry that had not yet developed in Labrador and Newfoundland, those numbers were significant. The impact of these people on technical and production aspects of our media industry lasted well after the official departure of the company from St. John's. As un inventive as some of their titles were – 1954's *Cable Laying* is a wonderful example – the technical quality of their productions was notable as was their use of rich, orchestral musical scores. With Smallwood as their functional executive producer, the vision of this province provided by Atlantic Films was comically monumental. In Labrador, in particular, the vision was just bizarre.

The subject of Labrador was first taken up by Atlantic Films in 1954 with the fourth volume of the *Newfoundland Progress Reports*. Today, there are no access prints of the film, but we know from its treatment that the vision of Labrador's development was vast and intended for the benefit of Newfoundland.

"After shots of the Department of Northern Affairs there is a fade to exterior shots showing the Resident Commissioner to Labrador," begins the Labrador passage. "Narration tells of work being done by this department, and we see the government supplies being handled, the schools, the health services, the move of Eskimos to central places, the Indians being helped. The Commissioner is seen talking to the Labrador people employed at Goose Bay, and we see shots of Goose Bay and the people working there. Then we view Newfoundlanders in the mining developments of Labrador". It ends, "Narration tells of the value of these great developments to Newfoundland, and to the world."

This was Smallwood's general idea for Labrador. And when it came to mak-



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ing films about development here, Atlantic Films did not stray from that message. Their second film, *Moose for Labrador*, released in 1956, documents a 1953 initiative to introduce 12 moose to southern Labrador, near St. Lewis. Part lecture, part newsreel, *Moose for Labrador* begins with then Minister of Mines and Resources, Frederick Rowe, explaining the motivation for introducing the animals to the region.

“I was impressed by the very great need down there for ample supplies of fresh meat during the winter,” Rowe opines from behind his desk. “And I recall that a similar problem existed in Newfoundland 50 years before.” The solution is in the title. Much of the film centres on the process of capturing the moose on the west coast of Newfoundland. Considerably less time is devoted to the transport and release of the animals. No time is spent speaking with anyone from Labrador about the project.

Flawed as it was, these types of big concept-hastily conceived projects always make for interesting filmmaking. In particular, the process of getting the moose off the boat and onto shore is fascinating. From the boat, a wooden pen is lowered down to a raft, which is steered towards shore. Then a trap door is opened, and the moose lunges off the raft and swims to shore. An exciting conclusion to a technically-oriented film. Like many of the industries Atlantic Films chronicled, this project also has an inconsequential ending. A 2012 discus-

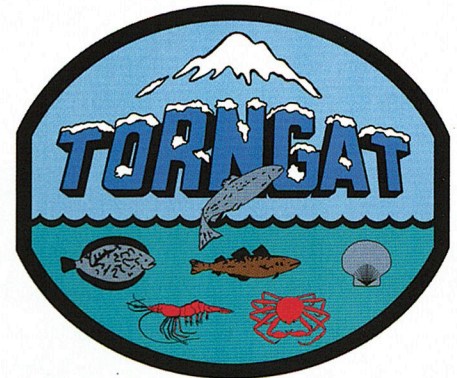


Frederick Rowe explains the idea of *Moose for Labrador*.

sion paper prepared for the Torngat Wildlife, Plants and Fisheries Secretariat suggests that these did not had a significant impact upon the present population of moose in southern Labrador. Today's population is there on its own accord.

*continued...*

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Releasing the moose in *Moose for Labrador*.

In 1963, Atlantic Films released its most comprehensive statement with *Labrador*, a 47-minute documentary written and narrated by the St. John's-

based radio broadcaster, Denys Ferry. Aside from the Straits, whose absence is noticeable, life in every region is depicted. Even Goose Bay and Happy Valley,

which receive comparatively little screen time in films about Labrador up until now, are presented alongside North West River as the hub of a changing coastal Labrador. "So close are past and present that one man's life can span much of Labrador's history," Ferry intones as we watch Gilbert Blake board a boat and coast into Lake Melville. *Labrador* uses the communities of Upper Lake Melville to give context to the coast. It is the place that provides services to the coast and the place in which many come to work in new but basic industries, like egg farming.

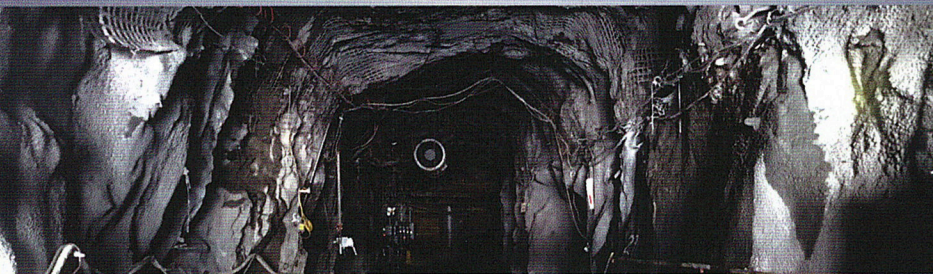
Different is the representation of Churchill Falls and Labrador West. Both places with their own distinct film histories, the industrial developments there are presented as something distinct from the rest of Labrador. The scale of development does not resemble the rest of Labrador.

The communities themselves are newly built. And the development they are undertaking are for markets far away. This is the basic idea of the film. The true potential of Labrador lays in these communities and that potential could not be unlocked until the technological advances of the twentieth century. This idea is reinforced by screen time. The rest of Labrador get the first 15 minutes of the film, while Churchill Falls and Labrador West get the remaining 32 minutes.

Hard as it may be to look past Smallwood's vision in this film, it can lay credit to be the first movie to, more or less, depict Labrador as a distinct region with its own economic history. Even if it is told through the lens of industrial development, *Labrador* still makes the case that those Labradorians living beyond the industrial centres of Churchill Falls, Wabush and Labrador City are a key part of that history. Interestingly, *Labrador* was also the final movie Atlantic Films would produce here. Three years later, in 1966, the company released its final film, *Potato Wart and Its Control in Newfoundland*, before re-locating its headquarters to Montreal. †

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