



Newfoundland's storytelling MD

Beth Ryan

Dr. Ford Elms jokes that he was the only linguistics student in his class who put himself through university by practising medicine.

After graduating from medical school in 1985, he spent more than a decade in emergency medicine before moving to the residency in pathology that he's currently completing. But along the way, he completed graduate studies in linguistics at Memorial University of Newfoundland, with a particular interest in Newfoundland dialects and speech patterns.

"I have a great respect for the language," says Elms, who grew up in St. Anthony, on the tip of the island's Northern Peninsula. "I think all the nonstandardized forms of English are far better at some things. They have more earthy phrases and more pithy ways of putting things."

That passion for language prompted Elms to try his hand at recitations, an oral form of storytelling that's still an integral part of kitchen parties, folk festivals and concerts in Newfoundland. The stories can be completely fictional or they may describe events that happened in a particular community. Once they've been told a few times, the stories enter the oral tradition and get passed along from one storyteller to another.

"The Bridge at Placentia Gut" is one of Elms' favourites. It's a recitation about a bridge built by the Americans in the south-coast community of Placentia, the site of a US naval base. A smile crosses his face as he gets into the tale of the doomed bridge.

You'll never do it, Skipper, said the old feller on the beach
He know more than Boston or Harvard U can teach
Said bye, old man, I've crossed that gut for nigh on 30 years
That bridge will be a failure despite the Yankee's gold, sweat
and jeers

But the Yanks was independent, they laughed the locals down
They ignored all the suggestions from the wisest in the town
Weather fair and beautiful, they put their bridge in place
And when finished celebrated, drinking whisky by the case

Most recitations, like this one, are composed in poetic form with rhymes and verses, but others are more like prose stories. To bring them to life, a performer needs a knack for memorizing lines, a talent for injecting rhythm into the stories, and a feel for the language.

"Recitations are a great way to preserve our language because many of them are meant to be told in the dialect. If you put them into standard English, they just sound wrong," says Elms. "But the dialect has to be real — you can't be putting it on for effect."

The distinctive Northern Peninsula dialect doesn't seem to detract from the audience's understanding of the stories, says Elms, who performed at the Vancouver Folk Festival last year with a group of Newfoundland musicians and singers.

"It was probably the first time those stories were told in the dialect outside of Newfoundland," says Elms. "And the interesting thing was that people understood it. I did not change the stories because I thought it was important that they not be told in a standardized way."

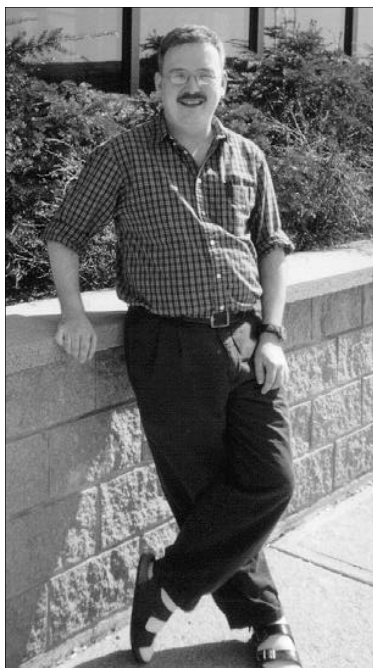
Folklorists from Memorial University have visited many communities throughout the province in recent decades in order to record recitations from various storytellers and archive them. That's how Elms discovered some stories that originated near his home. But he says it's not enough simply to record the words — the

recitations must be performed to keep them alive, to make them "part of a more living tradition."

This lively hobby is quite a change from the sombre and scientific work he does during his pathology residency at Memorial. But he doesn't look at recitations and storytelling as a form of escape. Elms says he's just happy to put aside his medical work sometimes and do something completely different.

"Especially in medicine, your life could very easily shrink down to the 4 walls of the building, and you know nothing else and can't talk about anything else. And there's nothing more tiresome than someone who only wants to talk about their job.

"Being a doctor is not everything I am. The recitations are also a big part of my life — one is not an add-on to the other." **β**



Dr. Ford Elms: telling tales