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Publisher's version / Version de l'éditeur:

Habitat, 11, 5, pp. 14-17, 1968

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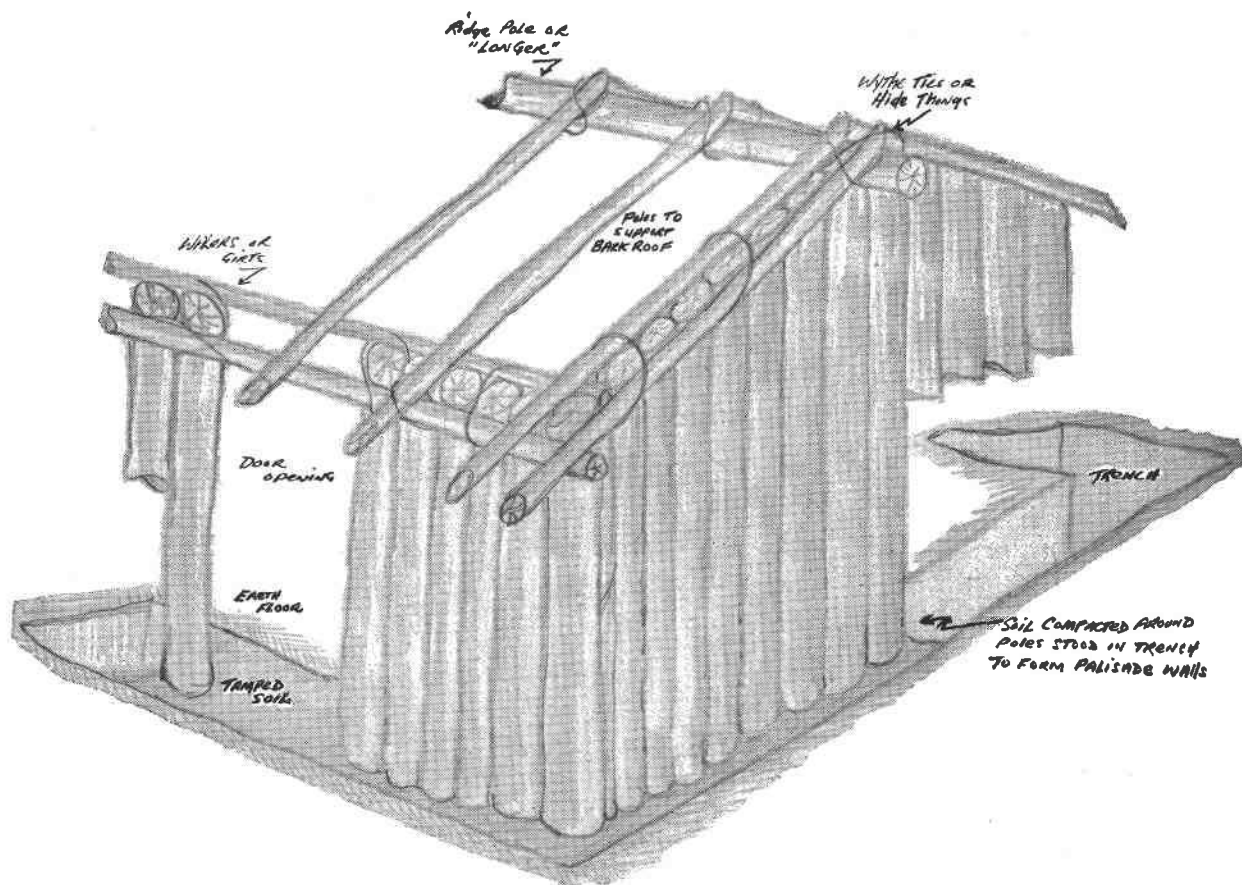
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THE NEWFOUNDLAND TILT

by
D. C. Tibbetts

ANALYZED



EARLY METHOD OF TILT CONSTRUCTION

Price 10 cents

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LA CABANE DE PÊCHEUR (‘TILT’) DE TERRE-NEUVE

SOMMAIRE

La description de quelques-unes des cabanes (‘tilts’) de pêcheurs de Terre-Neuve illustre l’ingéniosité des Européens qui se bâtissaient des abris à l’aide des matériaux disponibles à leur arrivée dans le Nouveau-Monde. Les rondins, l’écorce, la ramée et les touffes de gazon ont été généralement utilisés pour la construction des premières cabanes. Celles-ci, par évolution logique et améliorations successives, sont devenues des habitations permanentes et le sont restées jusqu’à une époque fort avancée au cours du 19^{ème} siècle. La cabane-type est construite à l’aide de rondins placés verticalement, contrairement à la méthode scandinave qui consiste à placer les rondins horizontalement l’un sur l’autre. Un réseau de perches recouvert de panneaux d’écorce, s’appuyant sur une panne faîtière et sur les murs, constituait la toiture. Souvent le chauffage était assuré par un foyer ouvert, dont la fumée s’échappait par un trou ménagé dans le toit, et qui en plus fournissait la lumière et assurait la ventilation. Il est probable que les cabanes de Terre-Neuve ont constitué les premiers bâtiments d’habitation pour les blancs au Canada.

This article has been reprinted from HABITAT, Vol. XI, No. 5, 1968, p. 14-17,
and is now issued as Technical Paper No. 296 of the Division of Building Research,
National Research Council of Canada, Ottawa.



The Newfoundland Tilt

Possibly the earliest form of shelter devised by European settlers in the New World was the Newfoundland Tilt. It made ingenious use of available materials — poles, moss and bark. Construction was in the *vertical* palisade fashion, an arrangement which might appear unusual to many Canadians to whom the *horizontal* fastening of the log cabin is more familiar.

by D. C. Tibbetts

The walls of the original tilt consisted, essentially, of vertically arranged poles (sometimes fastened into a trench outlining the shape of the dwelling) with the interstices caulked with moss — a process known as 'chinsing' or 'chintzing'.

The roof consisted of small pole rafters covered with rinds (spruce or fir bark) with a hole left at one end to let in light and let out smoke. Tamped earth provided the floor, and an open fire supported on some flat stones provided heat for cooking and for a minimum of comfort in winter.

The first tilt constructed by Europeans may have been built in Newfoundland in the early 16th century, as forty or fifty houses were reportedly there by 1522. In addition, the 'fishing admirals' of the day left a few crews behind each winter to cut timber for building cook-rooms, fish stages, vats, wharves, and boats. During this period the tilt, although not much improved over the Indian's wigwam, did imply a less nomadic existence. In those days of raids and hostile edicts, it was also somewhat of an accomplishment for a family to grow a new 'shell' on short notice should one be destroyed.

The Newfoundland tilt, in its role as a home of sorts and in its various other uses, persisted throughout the 19th century. Similar shelters were erected by the founders of Lunenburg, Nova

Scotia, and also by the early New England Colonists. Alice Morse Earle, in her "Home Life in Colonial Days," describes early attempts in New England to construct shelters — "... forest trees of every size and variety, yet no mills and few saws to cut boards, . . . plenty of clay and ample limestone, yet no bricks and no mortar, . . . grand boulders of rock, yet no facility for cutting, drawing, or using." Sorely in need of shelter, they had to use many poor expedients and be satisfied with rude coverings.

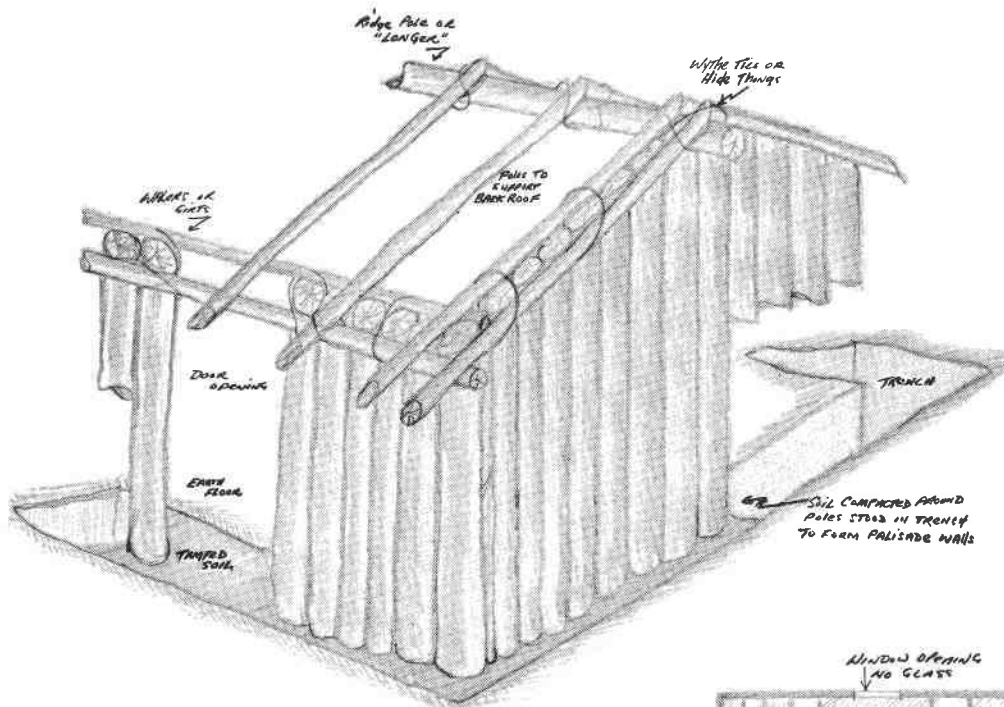
A favourite method of the New England settler building his first 'cut down' in the virgin forest was to dig a square trench about two feet deep, of dimensions as large as he wished the ground floor of his house to be, and then to set upright all around this trench (leaving a space for a fireplace, window, and door) a closely placed vertical row of logs all the same length — usually 14 feet long for a single storey and, if there was a loft, 18 feet long. The earth was filled in solidly around these logs, keeping them firmly upright; a horizontal band of 'puncheons,' (split logs smoothed on the face with an axe) was sometimes pinned around within the log walls to keep them from caving. Over this was placed a bark roof of squares of chestnut bark or shingles of overlapping birchbark. A bark or log shutter hung at the window, and a bark door hung on with hinges or, if very luxurious, on leather straps, completed

the home. This was called 'rolling-up' a house, and the house was called a 'puncheon-and-bark' house. A rough puncheon floor, hewn flat with an axe or adze, was truly a luxury. There is a clear parallel here with the Newfoundland tilt.

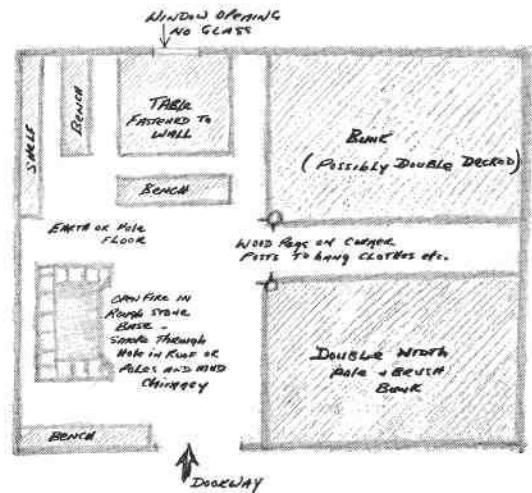
By the end of the 18th century the tilt, as a home for the 'established' settler, was developing into a house. By this time the typical fisherman's house and that of the established planter had a hinged door, a few small windows, also pit-sawn stud or plank walls with both the roofs and walls clad with shingles of cloven fir.

The early missionaries to Newfoundland kept very good journals, and some of their experiences can be related here to further define the nature of the tilt, the people it sheltered, and the other several uses to which it was put. The Reverend Edward Wix in covering the period February to August 1835, makes some interesting entries in his journal:

"By 9½ o'clock we reached Chapel Arm, where, and at Little Gut in its neighbourhood were about 70 souls, chiefly from New Harbour, for winter's work. Assembled 24 people, all who had not gone into the woods for their work before our arrival, for full service at the 'tilt' of William Pollett. The 'barber', a vapor so called from its cutting qualities was distinctly visible upon the water this morning. It rises,



EARLY METHOD OF TILT CONSTRUCTION



EARLY INTERIOR TILT LAYOUT

I believe, from the air being colder than the water.

"One 'tilt' was visited by me on the Isle of Valen, the dimensions of which were only 12 feet by 10 feet and I found living in it a man and his wife—the master and mistress of the house—two married daughters with their husbands and children, amounting, in all, to fifteen souls. I was fortunate enough to come out upon the shore in Fortune Bay, exactly where there were houses, and a very decent young man and his wife, having only left their 'winter tilt'

that morning, had cleaned up their neat summer house, and lighted a good fire, as though for my reception."

He was not always so favourably impressed and mentions . . . "My eyes, which have been much tried by the glare of the sun upon the snow, and by the cutting winds abroad, are further tried within the houses by the quantity of smoke, or 'cruel steam' as the people emphatically and correctly designate it, with which every tilt is filled. The structure of the 'winter tilt', the chimney of which is of upright studs, stuffed or

'stogged' between with moss, is so rude, than in most of them in which I officiated, the chimney has caught fire once, if not oftener, during the service. When a fire is kept up, which is not unusual, all night long, it is necessary that somebody should sit up, with a bucket of water at hand to stay the progress of these frequent fires. An old gun barrel is often placed in the chimney corner, which is used as a syringe or diminutive fire-engine, to arrest the progress of these flames; or masses of snow are placed on top of the burning studs, which as they melt down, ex-



tinguish the dangerous element. The chimneys of the 'summer houses' in Fortune Bay are better fortified against the danger, being lined within all the way up with a coating of tin, which is found to last for several years."

Anspach, in his history of 1819, while describing some of the better Newfoundland homes also has something to say about the tilt . . . "They call tilts temporary log houses, which they erect in the woods to pursue their winter occupations. Tilt-backs, or linneys (lean-to), are sheds made of studs, and covered with either boards or boughs, resembling the section of a roof, fixed to the back of their dwellings towards the wind. They have only one fire-place in a very large kitchen, partially enclosed with boards, and having within a bench on each side, so as to admit 8 or 10 persons. Under these benches they manage convenient places for their poultry, by which means they have fresh eggs during the most severe winters. These chimneys are likewise by their width extremely fit for the purpose of smoking salmon and other kinds of fish or eatables, as the only fuel used in them is wood which is found at no great distance."

R. Bonnycastle, writing in 1842, gives his description of a tilt . . . "It was about 18 feet by 14 feet and consisted of one apartment only in which the whole family squat around a scanty fire. This dwelling, which was as lofty as a barn, was built of poles or sticks of very small diameter, placed upright, irregular together, and braced every here and there. The chimney, formed of rough unmortared stone, adjoined the roof, which was also of poles, at one gable end, and was finished above the ridge pole with boards or short slabs of wood. The roof had been covered with bark and sods, and some attempts had been

made originally to stop or caulk the crevices between the poles, both of the roof and walls, with moss or mud; but these substances had generally disappeared, and in every part of this wretched dwelling, was the light of heaven visible, and everywhere must the rain have fallen in it, excepting towards the gable, opposite the chimney, which had some pains taken with it, and where the unfortunate family slept in their rags.

"The house had evidently been built in better days, upon too large a scale; but even this hut is good, compared with some of the 'summer tilts,' which are constructed to carry on the fishery in the little harbours and coves, where, very often, a huge boulder or projecting rock forms the gable, or actual reredosse, as our ancestors called the only chimney, or substitute for a chimney, and from this 'chimney-rock', a few slight poles built up erect in an oblong form, with a pole-roof sloping against a bank, or rock, the whole covered with bark, when it can be had, which is seldom, or with turf; and with turf piled up against the side walls, without a window, and with only an apology for a door; and the whole interior scarcely affording standing room; compose the only habitation of the poor fisherman, and his generally numerous family, the smoke escaping always from an old barrel, or a square funnel of boards placed over the fire.

"When winter set in, or as soon as the fishing is over, this tilt is abandoned, and the family retires to the woods, and erect another somewhat better tilt and there they are somewhat more comfortable."

Julian Moreton, while travelling in Newfoundland, had his share of unusual experiences and in 1863 writes

about an encounter with a fishing party (a man, his wife and little boy) from Fair Islands . . . "Their only shelter for the night was a shed, such as is called a 'back-tilt', made of a punt's sail strained along the ground on one side, and supported at an angle of about 45° from the ground by stakes. The ends are walled in with boughs, and the whole front is open; whence its name, being a 'back-shelter' only. In front of the tilt there was a fire burning, with a kettle hung over it to boil. We were kindly and gladly welcomed. The bed was of boughs, and my pillow was a sealskin filled with biscuit, commonly and rightly named hard bread.

"Many families leave their usual dwellings in the fall of the year, and remove for the winter into the woods far up the country, where they remain till nearly the end of May. Their purpose is to fell and square timber, saw board, cleave coopers' staves, make birch hoops for casks, or build boats. Their houses in the woods, named 'winter tilts,' and required only to serve one winter's use, are of very simple construction. A small space is cleared of all wood except two opposite trees, growing at such a distance apart as is a suitable length for the house. A 'longer' (ridge pole) is extended from one to the other of these trees, and seized to them at the proper height for the roof ridge. The four walls are made of the trunks of trees set close together perpendicularly. Slender young trees are used for rafters, and these are covered with fir rinds to form a roof. The floor is made of 'longers,' a flat rock forms the hearth, and the chimney is simply a space left uncovered in one end of the roof. No window is made or needed, the 'chimney' admitting sufficient light. The chinks between the sticks of which the walls are made are caulked, or as these people say, 'chintzed' with moss.

No labour is spent in dressing any timber in the tilt; even the rind (bark) is kept on."

The Reverend William Wilson in 1866 stated that . . . "The Newfoundland tilt can lay no claim to any ancient order of architecture, but is in its style perfectly original. The walls are formed of rough spruce sticks, called studs, of about 6 inches diameter, the height of the sides six feet, and of the gables about 10 feet or 12 feet. The studs are placed perpendicular, wedged close together, and the chinks or interstices filled with moss. This is the only defence against the cold. A ridge-pole passes longitudinally from the gables on which the round rafters are notched. These are covered with rinds, or the spruce bark which has been used during the summer as covering for the fish-piles. These rinds make the tilt water-tight. A hole is left in the rinds about four feet square, which serves the double purpose of a vent for the smoke and an aperture for the solar rays to permeate the dwelling. The tilt has seldom any window. The floor is made with round studs like the walls, which are sometimes hewed a little with an adze.

"A few stones, piled five feet high form the fireplace. These stones are placed close to the studs, which, being thus exposed to great heat, will often ignite. A vessel full of water was always at hand to extinguish the kindling spark; it required no small skill to throw water from that vessel up the chimney in such a manner as to prevent its return, surcharged with soot, upon the head of the unfortunate operator. A rough door, a few shelves, and a swinging-table fastened to the side of the building, exhausts nearly all the boards usually used for such structures."

The Rev. Wilson goes on to say that in a tilt like the above, with the only addition of a rough, boarded floor, and two windows, brought from the mission house did he and his family spend the winter of 1827-28. "In the 'mission-tilt,' however, we had three apartments, two sleeping apartments, and one large room, nearly twenty feet square, which was our kitchen, our parlor, my study, and also our chapel where we held public service and class-meetings during the winter. Our tilt was erected upon the bank of Fresh-Water Pond, and, as we were surrounded by some

20 Wesleyan families we called the locality of our winter residence Wesley Vale."

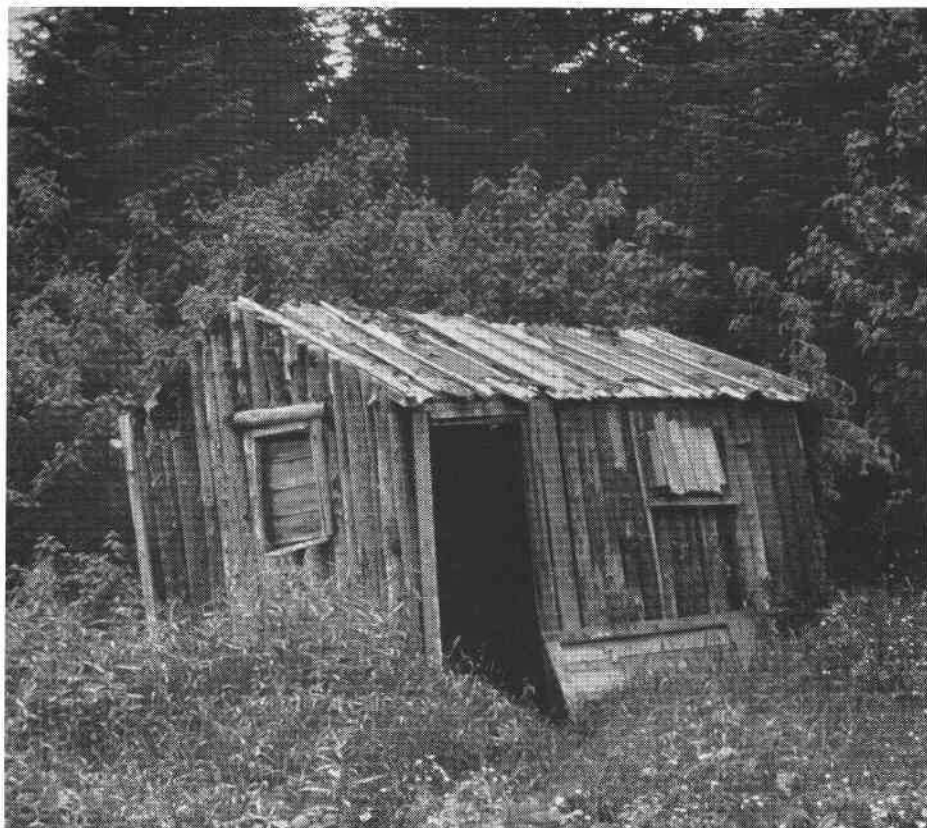
In "The Treasury of Newfoundland Stories" is *The Duck Hunt*, an account of two Newfoundland boys travelling to Gull Island December 28, 1878 in a quest for sea birds, only to lose their punt and be trapped on the island. They spent their nights on the island in a hut or tilt erected earlier for the use of seal hunters by the operators of the Tilt Cove Mines. This camp or shack was built of plank and clad with clapboards. With typical Newfoundland ingenuity, they obtained the necessary materials from this tilt to build a boat, and on New Year's Day, 1879, they crossed the 15 miles to Tilt Cove and safety.

The word tilt has been used in Newfoundland to convey the same meaning as that of the term camp as used on the mainland. In many ways, mainland camps were used for the same purposes as tilts — as winter shelter for woodworkers and their families, in the summer as fishing shacks both inland and along the coast, as permanent residences, and, more recently, improved versions used as holiday camps or cottages. Tilts have not always been built from poles and moss, any more than have camps continued to be log cabins. Farley Mowat in his book "Westviking," refers to some of the early Norse shelters at Epaves Bay as sod tilts, whereas others might have used the word camp or hut to describe the same thing.

The tilt is still used as temporary shelter in Newfoundland the same way that other Canadians use camps or huts for hunting, fishing, and logging activities. Although these camps or tilts have been modified over the years to include boards, building papers, windows, smokepipes, and hinged doors in their construction, it is still popular to refer to them in Newfoundland as tilts.

Author's note: I am indebted to Dr. Louise Whiteway of Saint John's for a copy of her excellent paper, "Towards an Art of Architecture in Newfoundland." Dr. Whiteway's paper won the annual Arts and Letters competition in Newfoundland a few years ago, and contains a number of references used in the preparation of this article.

The remains of a tilt.



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