

The voyageur

For a half-century and counting, bush pilot Bob Bryan '50 has connected the people of Quebec's North Shore and the wider world, much as the folk hero fur traders did before him.

by Jennifer F. Adams





It is 1960, and a small yellow float plane flies along the Quebec North Shore, crossing miles and miles of rugged coastline, finally touching down in a small harbor and taxiing up to the town landing. A tall man clambers out of the cockpit, moving with the easy grace of an athlete, the purpose of an Anglican priest and the confidence of youth. His smile lights his face and the faces of the children who have run down to the dock to greet him. He is the newly assigned minister of this region, just three years out of Yale Divinity School, six years out of Yale and ten out of Hebron Academy. He is Bob Bryan.

Bob Bryan with QLF volunteers,
Harrington Harbour, Quebec, 1963.
Photo courtesy QLF Archives.

Flight correction

Bob grew up on Long Island, New York. He attended Green Vale School in Old Brookville, graduated from the Hotchkiss School in 1949, and was headed, he thought, straight for Yale. He took a postgraduate detour through Hebron, however, perhaps because he had put more effort into athletics than academics while at Hotchkiss.

"Athletics had been very important to me at Hotchkiss," he said. "Perhaps too important because I didn't study and do the work assigned to me. Barney Williams made it clear to me that if I didn't do [my work] I'd be away from Hebron on the next bus."

At first, the idea of a postgraduate year at Hebron was not a welcome one. "It was difficult to stop in at Yale on the way [to Hebron] to see the names of so many of my friends whom I expected to be matriculating with," he said. "It was a long trip and I found it kind of dreary when I arrived on campus. The first thing that happened, I'll never forget, was the headmaster, Claude, in his white coat. 'You must be Bob Bryan,' he said as we opened the door. And then there was light. That was it. Instantly I had a good feeling about the school."



In 1979, Bob played in the alumni hockey game with Kirby Nadeau '77 and Henry Harding '70. "That was the game where Kirby really nailed me," he recalled. "I don't think I've played hockey in a uniform since."

At Hebron he made lifelong friends—Ranny Galt, Dick Fowler and Jack Pierce—and learned the personal discipline necessary to succeed academically. "I remember meeting my roommate. His name was Randolph Carter Galt, Ranny Galt, from Honolulu. We became great pals immediately and [were] four years together at Yale as roommates." Bob was a member of the cross country, hockey and track teams and was chosen chairman of Green Key, with Dick Fowler as vice chairman and Jack Pierce as secretary (Jack Pierce would later serve on QLF's board, as would Peter Crisp '51). At Commencement, he received the Hebron Cup, the Academy's highest honor, awarded to a senior who represents a fine spirit of scholastic effort, excellence in athletic competition and devotion, high ideals, friendliness, endeavor and responsibility in personal relations with the school.

Yale beckons

Bob finally made it to Yale in the fall of 1950, where he fell quickly and easily into college life, and where he met the men who would set his future in motion: the college chaplain, Reverend Sidney Lovett; his college master John Schroeder; Charles "Kelly" Clark, later Rector of St. Paul's School; and Marshall Dodge, with whom he became known as Bert of "Bert and I."

Bob was a frequent visitor to campus, recruiting volunteers for QLF and as a member of Hebron's board of trustees from 1972 to 1978. He spoke at Awards Night in 1973.

"I started out as a geology major," Bob said. "Then I changed over to history and became involved with groups that had to do with the chapel. It all grew from those days. In my senior year I helped a dear friend, Kelly Clark, with the church Sunday school for faculty children and that pushed me over the top. I went on and did three years at Yale Divinity School."

Although college and church work kept him busy, Bob still found time to explore two other passions in his life: flying and storytelling. He and his Yale friend Marshall Dodge shared a keen ear for dialect and a dry sense of humor. As the characters of "Bert and I" they produced a recording of Maine stories, given first to friends and family. Eventually they recorded a commercial version of their stories, which became exceedingly popular and led to more recordings. Meanwhile, Bob was taking formal flying lessons, building on his early experiences as a young boy.

"I had a brother-in-law who worked for a shipping company and he learned to fly a seaplane," Bob said. "They lived two miles from where I was born and I learned how to fly a seaplane with him. But [formal instruction] and soloing occurred in 1956. In fact, that's how I signed up to work on the Quebec North Shore and Labrador. I expected with pilot training that I could be useful. I talked with the archbishop, Philip Carrington, of Quebec, and he jumped on it immediately. He said, 'We've never had that happen before, but I'd like to see it develop.' So I was able to be the first clergyman to fly an airplane in that area."

The call of the north

Bob graduated from Yale Divinity School in 1957 and was ordained a priest in 1958. In 1959 he made his first flight to the North Shore, filling in for a vacationing priest, and by 1960 the Anglican Church of Canada had assigned him to the area. His territory ranged from Baie Comeau to Blanc Sablon on the Coast, inland to Schefferville and all the way to the northern tip of Labrador.

"I flew with my wife, Faith. We went to about 100 miles east of Sept-Îles, so we didn't really get into Labrador that year," Bob said. "In 1960 I certainly did. And that's when I had this impression of vastness and the total beauty of rivers with steep gradients and waterfalls and rapids rushing down into the Gulf of St. Lawrence, one after the other, as I flew along the coast. You have to pay attention when you're flying the airplane—you can't just look out—that was the problem I had, just trying to stay on the ball, rather than sightsee!"

He used the royalties from sales of "Bert and I" recordings to buy a bright yellow Helio; that plane and its successors would become famous on the North Shore. The seaplane made it easier for him to be a presence on the Coast—clergy before him had traveled more slowly by boat or dog sled—and as he began visiting the isolated villages of his new flock, he saw ways in which he could improve the hardscrabble lives of the families who settled in such distant places. He was interested in the development of youth and remembered his own childhood summers spent at day camps, playing sports and learning to swim. Here the village children—too young to help their fathers and uncles on the codfish traps—played games of their own invention in the dirt paths around their homes.

Basing his plans on the Grenfell Mission, first organized in the late 1800s to bring medical care to Labrador and Newfoundland,

Bob used their volunteer model to recruit helpers from schools and colleges. "I first started organizing young people through community service day camps in the summer which were very popular and worked very well because the persons that I was able to recruit were the best. They came from schools and universities all over the United States and Canada, and from England as well. We plunked them down in these isolated villages—bear in mind there were no roads between the villages, so you'd have a village then 20 miles and another village and 30 miles another village and 10 and another—and that's how the Quebec-Labrador Foundation developed."

Well begun

By 1961, the Quebec-Labrador Foundation was on its way, and Bob spent a fair amount of time during the winter traveling to various schools to recruit volunteers. A few young

Who can forget the unusual sight of a small yellow airplane with amphibious floats flying at low altitude over the quiet Hebron Academy campus in the late 1960s? The plane's pilot was Bob Bryan, who landed on Marshall Pond and visited his *alma mater* to talk about the Quebec-Labrador Foundation.

In 1972, I applied for a summer position at QLF, was accepted and joined two other veterans—Beth Bacon (Bob's niece) and Sylvia Dickey—as a sailing instructor in Kegaska, Quebec, a town of approximately 125 residents on the North Shore of the Gulf of St. Lawrence. QLF had secured the donation of a number of 9-foot Dyer Dhow sailing dinghies which were placed in the isolated towns of Kegaska, Harrington Harbour and St. Augustine. There were no roads to these villages. Visitors arrived either by seaplane or weekly coastal freighter. Despite summer fog and sea water temperatures in the high 40s my students learned water survival, beginning sailing and racing skills. The highlight of the summer was taking my young sailors down the coast on the *Fort Mingan* freighter to the town of Harrington Harbour. This was likely the first lengthy

trip away from Kegaska to Harrington Harbour where QLF staff had a larger fleet of Dyer Dhows. St Augustine sailors joined us for a day of races. I could not have been more proud that the Kegaska team won the regatta!

One February winter day in 1975, while I was in graduate school, Bob unexpectedly called to ask if I would join his full time Ipswich office staff as Outdoor Leadership Director. He wanted me to start a maritime training school the following summer in Harrington Harbour. Bob had secured the donation of a 42-foot sailing sloop, located in the Chesapeake Bay which I sailed in May to York Harbor, Maine, and a new crew sailed around Nova Scotia into the Gulf of St Lawrence to the island town of Harrington Harbour for the start of the program in June. Sailing Vessel (SV) *Syriene* joined the 50' MV *Brest*, a local fishing boat named after the French coastal town, as the primary vessels on which young boys from the Quebec Labrador coast learned navigation, piloting and seamanship skills. The Dyer Dhows still provided small boat sailing skills and their capsizing practice in 40 degree waters were a highlight for the town residents, who had too many stories of family drowning to tell. The

town built a boarding barracks for the Maritime Training School where the boys lived and received meals for the sessions in June, July and August. I was the MTS Director and handled other outdoor leadership programs, including the Robertson Lake Canoe Camp (inshore from La Tabatière, Quebec), and I started the Maine Allagash Canoeing Program for northern rural town Maine boys.

I think that my contribution to these programs and adolescents did as much for me as it did for them. After nearly six full years in the North and at QLF's Ipswich office, numerous outdoor adventures across northern Maine and Atlantic Canada and many hours flying with Bob, I gained life skills and appreciation that became the fabric of my life and career outside of QLF (where I remain on their Advisory Board). Bob Bryan not only affected the lives of his service community but also the hundreds (thousands?) of staff and volunteers who worked in the past and still work for QLF, in Atlantic Canada and at many service sites around the world.

Henry Harding '70



QLF students in 1975: Murray Nadeau '75, Mel Nadeau '76, Tim Nadeau '77 and Kirby Nadeau '77. All four returned this fall to honor Bob Bryan '50 as he received the Distinguished Service Award.

returning to St. Paul's River to work in the community.

"I got involved with politics and I was pretty involved with the town," he said. "That's the type of thing that Bob tries to encourage." Kirby and his wife moved on a few years ago, and Kirby now teaches and coaches at Bishops College School in Lennoxville, not far from Bob's Quebec home.

Stewardship

Bob was not content to stop at just the summer volunteer programs, however. "Later in the '70s we got involved in environmental work and we directed our efforts towards helping the people on the coast be stewards of their own resources," he said. "Not telling them what to do, but through educational projects giving them an idea of what conservation meant, would have to mean in their lives."

In 1975, QLF started the Living Rivers Program in Tabusintac, New Brunswick, which was the first of several cross-border community-based conservation programs, followed a year later by the Grey Islands School in Newfoundland and St. Mary's Island Seabird Conservation Program in Quebec. By

Hebronians answered the call, among them Daniel Lyman '69, Jonathan Weisner '69 and Henry Harding '70. Dan and Jon both wrote articles for the *Hebronian* about their summer experiences in Goose Bay and Mutton Bay, respectively. Like Henry (see box, page 25), they discovered that they got as much out of it as their young charges did. In fact, Jon is still involved with non-profit organizations today and his son spent the summer of 2008 as a QLF volunteer in St. Paul's River.

A generation before Spencer Weisner's volunteer summer, St. Paul's River was home to the Nadeau families, who would benefit from Bob's next brainstorm: to provide opportunities for North Shore teens to attend American boarding schools. The Nadeau's oldest son, Philip, went first to Choate (where Bob was serving as chaplain) and then on to Bowdoin. He is now chairman of QLF's board of directors in Canada. Philip's younger brothers Murray '75, Mel '76 and Kirby '77 came to Hebron, along with their cousin, Tim '77.

And others came, in ones and twos, from villages up and down the Coast: from St. Augustine came Maddy Belvin '75, and Marjorie Bobbitt '75 from Chevery; Blanc-Sablon sent Harvey Burke '78; Harry Cox '78, Helen Jones '75 and Michael Osborne '76 came from Harrington Harbour; Bryce Fequet '77 from Old Fort Bay and Brenda McKinnon '80 from La Tabatiere.

In the 1980s, several students from Maine also benefitted from QLF support: Tanya Harden '84 of Beals; Tonia Smith '91 of Perry;

Francis '89, Lewis '89 and Mali '95 Tomah of Princeton and Kristin Wright '87 of Machias.

"This Hebron connection would never have happened without David Rice," Bob said. A Choate colleague, David had been a QLF volunteer in Mutton Bay, and worked to admit QLF-sponsored students when he became headmaster at Hebron.

Kirby Nadeau would go on to Bowdoin and then to a sales job in Ottawa before

In the early 60s, many kids who grew up on the Lower North Shore or the "Coast" had to spend summer holidays on small islands close to the inshore cod fishery. Sports and recreational activities were not given much priority at that time of the year as the fishing season was short and many families focused on income. However, Bob Bryan changed that when he formed the Quebec-Labrador Foundation and encouraged student volunteers to travel to coastal communities to organize and introduce various sports to the indigenous population along the Quebec-Labrador coastline. Because there were few roads, access to many of these villages was limited to boats or seaplanes. Younger kids would often run enthusiastically to the dock whenever the yellow and black N369E was spotted in the vicinity. Mr. Bryan usually brought much-needed sports equipment or

volunteers. At the conclusion of the summer sessions, QLF volunteers organized summer Olympics among the different towns. These events were greatly appreciated by the youth and general population. For many of us it was a time to compete, meet new friends and socialize.

All of the youth who were influenced by the positive contact and initiatives created by Bob Bryan and his QLF volunteers have something to cherish for generations. Those of us who received scholarships to attend Hebron Academy and other first class learning institutions will be forever grateful. One cannot evaluate a memory but we can create more opportunities for others to follow. We thank Bob Bryan, the Quebec-Labrador Foundation, and Hebron Academy for improving our lives.

Kirby Nadeau '77



1978, many environmental programs were managed under the umbrella of QLF's Atlantic Center for the Environment. In the 1980s, QLF started its first international programs, which continue today.

As QLF's mission expanded, Bob continued to work as a clergyman, flying up and down the coast to hold services and offer support. He and his yellow plane became well-known on the coast, and although he flew other planes over the years he always painted them yellow, so those on land would know who he was, especially if he needed help himself.

In addition to spiritual support, Bob also provided practical help to the people of the North Shore with his plane. "I helped out as an ambulance pilot, med-evac, which is not first on call," he said. "But often pilots on the extended coastline might be 300 miles away from where the accident occurred and I'd be close to it. Over the years, I got to know the country all the way north to Hudson Strait, just below Baffin Island. In that area and North Labrador there are mountain peaks of 5000 feet that go directly into the sea and there is snow on them every

month of the year. When you're flying along, you count on the engine continuing to tick, because you might have to make a forced landing; you think about it all the time. If you have floats, you land on water unless it's unbelievably rough; on wheels and skis you try to look for the softest place you can think of and then hope and pray that the radio's working. The radios we had were high frequency and required a

trailing antenna 180 feet long. You would peak the load on the antenna when you got set to make sure you were getting out on the radio. You would try to keep in touch with someone with a transceiver on land. It would work two or three hundred miles away when you were on land but sometimes it wouldn't work 10 miles away."

That funny fella

In 1982, Bob received word that Marshall Dodge, his old Yale friend and Bert and I partner, had been killed in a hit-and-run accident in Hawaii. Bob was one of several speakers at Marshall's memorial service, and there he met a young man who had been performing with Marshall in recent years.

"There I was at this service for Marshall feeling like a complete fish out of water because I didn't know any of these people and they didn't know me," recalled Tim Sample '69. "Then Bobby found me. He gave me his number and told me to call him when I wanted to talk. A few months later I did call him and went to see him. We had never met before Marshall's service. We talked for hours and he ended up by saying he wanted to do what he could to support my work."

Tim and Marshall had planned to do a recorded version of a book that Tim had illustrated, called *How to Talk Yankee*. Instead Bob and Tim recorded it and it became a huge hit. Over the years, Bob and Tim have performed occasionally and

Among those who came from Canada for the Distinguished Service Award ceremony were: (back row) Mel Nadeau '76, Laurie Nadeau and Kirby Nadeau '77; (front) Murray Nadeau '75, Bob Bryan '50 and Tim Nadeau '77. Bob and Tim are holding artwork by Michael Osborne '76, who was unable to attend.



worked on projects together, becoming great friends in the process. But storytelling for Bob was always a sideline, something he did for fun, or, as Tim said, "At the weddings of presidents, prime ministers and kings."

The ambassador

What is it about Bob that has allowed him to accomplish all this?

"He is extremely empowering of people," said former volunteer and staffer Henry Harding. "He doesn't have a backup plan, he just trusts you to get the job done and knows that you will. He has no fear that you will fail and you don't."

According to Kirby Nadeau, Bob was a bit like Dr. Grenfell, whose medical mission served the North Shore for nearly a

century, and he had the church on his side. "He carried the bishop around to these little communities with the plane," Kirby said.

"Most of these places are fly-in places, so the only contact with the world that these people had was with Bob Bryan. He was one of the few people that we saw more consistently than anyone else. When people would show up with Bob they would meet family members and households, have a dinner, get a perspective on these small communities. The reverse happened when he came back to places like Boston and New York. He'd get us guys to go and meet people and talk to them. He was a good salesman and a good ambassador in both directions."

"In public life, in politics, in business, there's a lot of manipulation and everybody

has a game face," said Tim Sample. "But with Bobby it's disarmingly personal and real and genuine. What you see is what you get... this guy actually cares and he has these expectations. You would do anything for him, and be glad for the opportunity."

It is 2010 and a crowd packs the Hebron Community Baptist Church for Alumni Convocation at Homecoming. White-haired now and stiff, Bob moves forward, his smile reflected back by Dick Fowler and Jack Pierce; by Kirby, Mel, Murray, Tim and Laurie Nadeau; by Henry Harding; by Tim Sample. Bob accepts the Jay L. Woolsey Distinguished Service Award with the purpose of a runner, the confidence of a clergyman and the easy grace of age.



Old friends. Tim Sample '69 and Bob Bryan '50 catch up after Alumni Convocation at Homecoming.

