

# Railway Coastal Museum e-Bulletin

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## Wreckhouse and the Human Wind Gauge

Weather plays an important role in the lives of Newfoundlanders and Labradorians. There is hardly a conversation passed that does not include a comment on the weather, and it is just as important today as it was in the day of the Newfoundland Railway. We are used to experiencing all four seasons in a day, and the province is ranked second among Canada's provinces and territories for the number of days annually with at least one hour's wind speed at or exceeding 40km/hr. The most notorious area for high winds is known as the Wreckhouse and we will explore this danger zone and the man known as the "human wind gauge" in this month's e-Bulletin.

The area known as Wreckhouse is located near Cape Ray, at the Southern end of the Long Range Mountains. This stretch of land near the Table Mountains is a natural wind tunnel creating winds up to 140km/hr, which many say how it earned the name "Wreckhouse". In fact, winds can often accelerate up to 160km/hr, which is the equivalent of a category 2 hurricane. After the Newfoundland Railway established its path through the Wreckhouse, it became apparent how dangerous these winds can be. In January of 1900, a storm and high winds caused Train No. 1, travelling to Port-aux-Basques, to be blown completely off the tracks. Luckily no lives were lost, but the baggage and mail were destroyed in the fire. These strong gusts of wind could lift trains right off the tracks and it is said that while passing through this section of the railway, trainmen would put out fires in the caboose stove as a precaution when winds were high. Due to the danger caused by the winds, an attempt to relocate the railway inland towards the base of the Table Mountains was made in December 1904 by W.D. Reid, who wrote the government on the issue. However, the suggestion was rejected due to the cost.

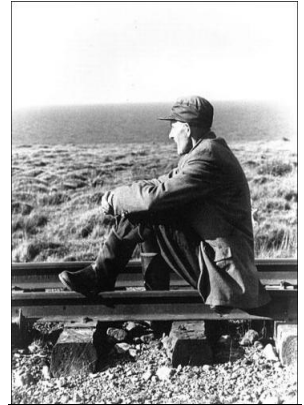


Photograph courtesy of Geological Survey of Canada, Natural Resources Canada

In the early 1930s, the railway hired a local farmer and trapper living in the area named Lauchie McDougal to monitor the winds. He was given a pay of \$20.00 a month and a phone, and was required to call Port-aux-Basques and St. Andrew's if he thought the winds were too high for a train to safely pass through. On his word, trains would be halted until the winds died down. Yet not all trains heeded his warnings and one train chose to travel through Wreckhouse during high winds and 22 cars were blown

off the tracks. Lauchie was said to have a special sense of weather and was able to “smell the wind”, becoming known as the “human wind gauge”. The Railway paid him twenty dollars a month and he held this position for over 25 years until his death in 1965. After his death, Lauchie’s wife Emily continued the position until 1972. It is estimated that Lauchie delayed hundreds of trains during his service, likely saving many lives as well as railway equipment and freight.

The Trans-Canada Highway now replaces the railroad track through Wreckhouse and even today the winds continue to cause dangers to transportation. Transport trucks are known to be blown off the side of the road due to winds and the RCMP often issue advisories for drivers to stay off this section of the highway while winds are high. The following links are from the CBC website and are some recent examples of the havoc high winds still in Newfoundland.



Pictured above is  
Lauchie McDougal.

<http://www.cbc.ca/canada/newfoundland-labrador/story/2008/05/22/wreckhouse-trucks.html#socialcomments>

<http://www.cbc.ca/canada/newfoundland-labrador/story/2009/12/10/nl-wreckhouse-winds-101209.html>

**Do you have a story about the Newfoundland Railway?**

**We’d love to hear it!**

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