

the folklore campfire sessions



EPISODE DESCRIPTION

There's something about the flickering light of a campfire that brings out the storyteller in everyone. Ghost stories, creation legends, family history – you name it, it's been talked about. Today's episode is inspired by those summer and autumn storytelling nights. We discuss different folklore found on Epekwitk/Prince Edward Island, including supernatural creatures and spooky forerunners. We'll also hear about some old home remedies and traditional Acadian wedding customs.

Features guest interviews: Julie Pellissier-Lush, Marian Bruce, Dutch Thompson and Georges Arsenault.

Forest sounds. Birds. Wind.

Daniel McRae: If I could time travel, that's where I go to. I'd go back to PEI like 500, 1000 years ago. From what I've read, and this is based on work done by Doug Sobey, and listening to Kate Macquarie talk, and all kinds of different you know, really knowledgeable people.

Daniel: But the average tree size when Europeans first started measuring that stuff was four feet in diameter. And that was the average. So, there was ones much bigger than that. And the average height was around 120 feet. So nowadays in PEI, I think the average diameter is probably around 10 to 15 centimeters.

Ocean sounds. Rowing in canoe. Theme music introduces.

Welcome to the hidden island – a podcast where we talk about local Island history. My name's Fiona Steele, and I'll be your host for this journey.

music swells up for a moment, then fades out.

When I think of PEI, I think agriculture. hills. A patchwork quilt of fields as seen from an airplane. I don't think forests. But the forests in PEI have always been here. They're in the background of history – always there, always important, but a friend you never seem to think about often.

Consider this: before colonizers arrived, forests covered about 98 per cent of the Island. Today, that number is about 43 per cent. That's a huge difference. But to understand this story, we need to go back. I didn't know anything about PEI's forests, so I turned to two people working in the field. Or should I say forest?

Anyways, Daniel McRae, who you just heard in the introduction, works with the MacPhail Woods Ecological Forestry Project. I've never met anyone who gets as excited about trees as Dan. I also talked to Kate MacQuarrie, the director of Forests, Fish and Wildlife for the Department of Environment, Energy and Climate Action.

Kate: That's my job, but not who I am. So, I'm a botanist and natural historian with about 30 years' experience working here on PEI.

Kate: The story of our forests really starts at the end of the last ice age about 12,500 years ago, because the glaciers really erased all the previous landforms and evidence and really life that was here.

Elevator music comes in.

EPISODE SCRIPT

Bold = interview quotes

Italics = sound effects

Regular = narration

The most recent Ice Age lasted from 26 thousand years ago to 12 and a half thousand years ago. At this time, PEI would've been covered in ice 3 to 4 kilometres thick. So, imagine a sheet of ice standing up that's about the size of 6 CN towers.

Around 12,500 years ago, that ice began melting. Then, by 10,000 years ago, the Island was connected to the mainland by a land bridge known as Northumbria. There was no Northumberland Strait, just land as far as you can see. The average temperature was -1 degrees Celsius, and it was a Tundra-like landscape.

Between 10 and 8 thousand years ago, trees began growing here: Spruce, Birch, and Willow. By 7 thousand years ago, a Boreal Forest had formed, which included more trees like Oak and Ash.

Between 6 and 5 thousand years ago, that land bridge disappeared as sea levels rose. Remember, the only people living on the Island were the Indigenous Mi'kmaq. So, no invasive species had arrived from Europe yet. That means there were no dandelions or lupines, for example.

When that land bridge disappeared, we became an Island. That sounds obvious, I know, but it impacted our ecosystems. Some animals arrived in the Maritimes after the sea levels cut us off from the mainland. For those that couldn't swim across the Strait or walk across the frozen ice, they just never made it. There are exceptions of course but being an Island did impact what creatures came to Epekwitk or PEI. That's probably why we only have three species of snake, whereas mainland New Brunswick has six.

By this time, Epekwitk was covered in what you'd call a Wabanaki-Acadian Forest.

Elevator music ends.

Dan: It's one of five endangered forests in North America. It's a really neat for us because it's like more maritime, so we get a lot of rain. So, we're on the on the edge of being a rain forest, just due to the amount of rain we get. Other conditions are not the same at all. We have winter. But yeah, so then we have this neat mixture of boreal species from the north, south from kind of the take a boreal forest, and then kind of broadleaf hardwoods from the south. And we're kind of a meeting point between those. So, it's a really neat forest because one, it's incredibly biodiverse.

For thousands of years, Epekwitk's forests knew only the Mi'kmaq people. August of 1720 brought changes. Three ships and 300 colonists arrived from France.

While French colonists had been cutting down trees and clearing land for agriculture, settlement, and shipbuilding, it was small scale. In fact, there were only up to 800 Acadians living on the Island before 1750. But the forests still felt their presence. The most damage done to Ile St. Jean's forests during this time came from two forest fires in the north-east of the Island that were likely started as controlled burns for land clearance.

Kate: The landscape along the north shore from let's say, from Tracadie almost all the way to East Point is different. And that's a legacy of escaped fires, essentially fires that were set for land clearing that got out of control and burned that area. And again, in the forests and the plant communities, you can still see that difference today.

Over 80 years later, the British would still be mentioning the effects of these fires in their records. Speaking of the British. Less than 40 years after the first French settlers arrived, the Acadian Expulsion happened. Some Acadians were able to flee into the forest or hide with Mi'kmaw people. But a total of 10,000 Acadians had to leave the Maritimes. For the forest, the English bring really bad news. This is when settlement really ramps up.

Caitlyn: So, my name is Caitlin Paxson, and I'm the site manager at Green Park, shipbuilding Museum and Yeo house. And we're a site that talks a little bit about the history of shipbuilding here on Prince Edward Island. We're located in a place where there was a shipbuilding venture in the 1800s that was begun by James Yeo. And we also have a heritage house that was built by his son also named James Yeo. And we try to talk a little bit about the relationship between timber on the island and forest on the island and shipbuilding because the shipbuilding industry ended up having such enormous impact on what the landscape of the island looks like.

Shipbuilding is what really changed our landscape on the Island. Since we have an entire site in Western PEI about the English period of shipbuilding, I figured Caitlyn could tell this part of the story.

Caitlyn: So, to give a little context of how shipbuilding got started here on the island. In 1815, England was already the most powerful naval force in the world and their commercial success in the slave trade in the 18th century had funded their continued expansion. They fought wars and colonizers across the globe, monopolized trade or the resources from those places. And by 1815, England and France are at war with each other. And England really needed more ships, both for its colonial expansion, and for its military ventures. But because of that point, England had long since exhausted their wood resources, they had to purchase wood from the Baltic in order to build their ships. But Napoleon blocked that trade route and no longer sort of allowed England to purchase wood from the Baltic. So, they really had to figure out where they were going to get the wood to make their ships.

Daniel: And when Europeans got here, it was like a paradise of shipbuilding, right, because they needed lumber, and they had used up a lot of the longer lumber in Europe. So we fueled, PEI as well as the rest of Maritimes, kind of fueled the British Navy.

Europeans living here built ships out of Island trees, and then sometimes stocked those ships full of timber. They'd sell the ship full of lumber once it got back to England.

This industry was a big boom on the Island. In the year 1800, only three ships were built and registered. In 1866, that number was 132 vessels in just one year. So not only did the number of ships being built increase, but the size of these ships did too. The forest would've felt all this, and for every ship built, it became smaller.

Caitlyn: And you know, for hundreds of years, tall ships were the key to global transportation and trade, and the colonization and exploitation of people and their resources went along with that. And it's impossible to talk about tall ships without acknowledging their destructive role in history. And it was no different here.

To this day, Epekwitk is part of the unceded territory Mi'kma'ki, where the Mi'kmaq people have always lived. The forests on this Island were never untouched. Communities formed and thrived here long before settlers came. But by 1830, the records stop talking about how large, plentiful and healthy the forests on PEI are. Previous writers would say things like,

Voice actor: "The Island appeared an entire wood as far as we could see"

Voice actor: "Prepare your mind to see Groves upon groves of wilderness woods"

But by 1900, these types of comments were said only in past tense. For example, one man wrote,

Voice actor: "There are no forests of any extent in the province... they have disappeared under the axes of the settler and lumberman."

Kate: you know, when we talk about historic forests, so much has been lost, because by 1900, about 70% of the land had been cleared and farmed.

Going from the Island being 98 per cent forested to 30 per cent in two hundred years is a big loss. To a modern-day listener, that sounds like a lot of environmental damage. And it was. But here's the thing: Islanders in 1800s knew that, too.

Daniel: Francis Bane, he was an Island naturalist in the mid 1800s, maybe could be off on the dates, but you know, he was already remarking, going to places. And then two decades later, after farming started, watching springs dry up, and commenting in the 1800s that, like, if we keep cutting like this, we're going to ruin this place. And so, the alerts were nice and early. And we just continued to do that. And then industrial agriculture came in. So, the island we often think of it now is this agricultural province. But one of the things I like pointing out when I'm taking tours out, or leading courses is, if you just drive on the island, and you look at any field that just hasn't been plowed, or hasn't been mowed, and you'd go for like a five-minute walk, it is covered in little baby trees. So, we put in plantations of white spruce and things like that, that are just naturally seeding.

Daniel: If you did leave a field for three years, it will be filled with all white spruce, as well as some other species. And so, the energy, the ecological energy, or direction of our island wants to be a forest. If you just leave land and you don't touch it, it becomes a forest on PEI. You know, so if you look at a field that no one's using, it wants to be a forest.

I love that wording: the Island wants to be a forest. Now, we've talked a lot about what the forests were like before European colonization, during, and after the shipbuilding boom. But what about today? And for those of you who have never stepped foot in a PEI forest, what does it look like? What does it feel like?

Footsteps in forest, wind, birds, trees rustling.

Alena: My name is Alena MacLean. I work at MacPhail Woods. I'm an Islander. And, you know I do I do a lot of different work in a lot of woods around the island, but especially this one here, I spend a lot of time in the woods that we're walking in right now.

Instead of bringing Alena MacLean into a dusty old office, I went to her. So, we went walking through MacPhail Woods while I ask her questions. The tree canopy is probably 60 or 80 feet above us, and I'm wearing a flannel shirt to keep bugs away despite it being the middle of August.

Alena: this particular part of the MacPhail woods. And it's a fairly rare example for the province of PEI is it always reminds me of a cathedral. Whenever I'm down here with kids or just walking by myself. You've got a stream that's kind of winding through the base of this narrow valley. And the trees are big hemlocks, big yellow birch, that kind of tower over the stream. They arc, they're big pillars of tree and they're very tall and it's shady. It's very green. It's very calm and it gives, it's always cool. No matter how hot it is in the summer, it there's always a coolness down here because of the shade and the water. And it's one of my favorite stretches of woods in the province, because I have a close relationship with it from all my years of doing camps and working on this property. But also, because it has a real serenity to it, that I think a lot of people feel as soon as they step in

There's moss growing at the base of some trees. The stream is bubbling alongside us as we walk. There's almost a hushed feeling because although there's bird calls, and the highway is pretty close, this space feels different.

Alena: Yes, it has a very, it has the same kind of awe-inspiring feeling, you can really look up and up and up into the canopy. And if you look up, you've got quite a mixture of like really lime-green, pale leaves of something like a yellow birch. And these are kind of light is shining through them. It's sort of dappled, and then you have the really dark lacy branches of the Eastern Hemlock that are much deeper green, and sort of scattered kind of against the sky.

Alena: So there's a lot of really beautiful contrast and that contrast of needly coniferous trees. And leafy deciduous trees is one of the hallmarks of the Wabanaki Acadian forest. And it's this is a good example of it here.

Alena: Okay, this guy, just one more thing. We're below a big yellow birch. And these are kind of yellow birch. They're like, I don't know, they're like the grandmother tree of the, of the forest because they're really big around maybe two or three, two and a half, three feet are in diameter. And they're really tall, really graceful with big, big limbs going outward, and a really big canopy. And you can see like way, way up there how the branches are sort of tossing in the wind. They have this shaggy silvery bark. They just seem really ancient and enormous, and they are protecting a lot of woods with their big canopy. And this is that kind of thing that that plantation forests, younger forests, more disturbed forests, they don't get this. And even when you have big trees in the city, along streets, they're not as healthy as this tree is because this yellow Birch is growing in a community. And its roots aren't being driven over by vehicles. It's just able to really flourish in the woods the way it it's sort of designed and adapted to grow. And so, these are the kinds of trees that are very precious that we have in this woods that that are throughout the province, but their woods that it produced big trees like this are really special. In my opinion. And you can see that it's got this, this other, you know, this other eastern Hemlock very close to it. And their canopies are touching. And I'm sure that underground, their roots are Connect are touching as well. And they're all in communication with each other. And this is another really big, beautiful Hemlock here. So, this is the way that they're adapted to grow is all in community like this. And it's really exciting and beautiful to see them. See them like that. And you can't, there's nothing that can fake it except the right environment and time. You know, we can't force trees really to grow faster. And we can't force them to be big and beautiful like that, even in our lifetime.

Forest sounds fade away.

Daniel: It's uh, you know, humans are cool. I like humans, they are neat. And we do a lot of cool things. We send things into space, and blah, blah, blah. But we can't make a thousand-year-old tree. We have no technology to do that. And I don't think we're going to get one anytime soon. And so, it's just these irreplaceable things.

Kate: And I always talk about the importance of unplowed soils. know, once the land is cleared and farmed, really all of that genetic diversity, the seed bank is gone from the soil, and restoring the forest on that land is not impossible, but it's challenging and expensive. That 30% of the land that wasn't cleared and farmed, some of it remains as old growth and we're working to protect that and designate them under provincial legislation. Some of the others was cut over multiple times, so the quality is no longer there. But those seeds are still in the soils. So for my mind, the bang for the buck, if we want to talk forest restoration is definitely in that 30% area that was never cleared and farmed.

Fiona: And for the areas that have been disturbed within that 30%, how long would it take to get back to the point that we're talking about?

Kate: Yeah, and that's a great question. We're talking hundreds of years. So you know, one of the things that I like to talk about in those unplowed forests is that pit and mound topography, if you're walking through a forest and you notice the ground under your feet is really uneven and you have to be careful that you don't fall flat on your face. That's indicative that that land was never cleared and plowed. It's formed by trees that have fallen over centuries and decayed. And that process, the formation of that pit mound topography takes centuries. You know, we're, I think humans tend to like things immediately. And we want to kind of take a look at a field or a forest that's been cut and say, how can I get that back right away. But it's not a short product process. If we want to restore the entire suite of diversity, which includes you know, the biodiversity and the tree species and the tree quality, it's a very long process.

So long story short: there are still old-growth forests on PEI. But as the famous Island poet Milton Acorn said, "nowhere is there a spot not measured by hands." Old growth forest doesn't need to justify its existence to humans, but there's no denying there are a lot of benefits we receive from a healthy forest ecosystem. Lucky for us, there are a lot of fantastic organizations doing forestry and restoration work on the Island. For now, I want to highlight two projects happening.

First, let's talk about the Krummholz forests. If you don't know that word, don't worry. I didn't either until I interviewed Dan.

Dan: And so, it's a German word. To my knowledge, Krumholtz means: 'Krum' means crooked or bent. 'Holtz' means trees or woods. So, it's like bent wood. And then there's sometimes called needles, which would be bent or crooked knee.

Kate: So, when we talk about old growth forest, I think in the public's mind, it's those big trees, those big hardwood trees that we talked about, but it depends on what habitat you're in. So, if you're in coastal PEI, that dense white spruce or in some areas Balsam Fir is old growth and you can have a tree that may only be five or six feet tall, that could be 100, 200 years old because of that tough habitat that they live in. So, they're important because they're old growth. They're important because they're a natural forest community. And they're important because they provide protection to our coastline. And you really just have to look back to some of the recent storms that we had you think of Dorian a few years ago. Think of the campground at Cavendish, where most of the trees blew over. Those were all old field white spruce, compared to the Krumholtz the natural forest along the coastline in that same area that really didn't notice the storm at all. So, these forest communities are important for protecting our coastline. They also have some rare plants and wildlife in them as well. So, they have a range of values and are definitely worthy of conservation.

Dan and his team have been working to study the Krummholz forests recently. Like Kate said, they noticed how these forests didn't suffer the same damage other areas did during the terrible hurricane Dorian a few years back.

In case you don't remember that storm was intense.

Houses were smashed, nearly 75 per cent of the Island lost power, and the Cavendish Campground in the PEI National Park lost 80 per cent of its trees. But here's the thing: these Krumholtz forests, the coastal windblown forests, had very little damage from the storm. Dan and his team wanted to know why.

Dan: And then yeah, we managed to get funding for the last year and a half or so. I think it'd be like two years of funding total, to do a survey. So we chose 12 sites around Pei, kind of from North Cape, right to East Point. Most of them are no shore sites, because that's where the biggest wind exposure is, but we did choose a couple of South Shore sites that have some exposure just to try to look at what levels are.

Because this project is still ongoing, you'll have to stay tuned for results on how these forests can help erosion. Okay, second project. Dan is also involved in a project to replenish the Black Ash tree population on the Island. I sat down with him and CJ Cleal to learn more.

CJ: I'm CJ Cleal. From the Abegweit First Nation. I'm the forestry manager and a part of a black ash project with Dan, to replenish the population of black ash on Prince Edward Island, Epekwitk.

CJ said that Black Ash is a really important tree culturally for the Mi'kmaq people on Epekwitk.

CJ: the black ash is a main source of wood for our baskets. And we made we used to before the drum was here, we used to have a, a hand instrument where you just kind of like, have a stick of black ash. And you have a handle and the new beat one side and it frays. So you can get strips. So you just kind of leave it. And then as you hit it, that was a Ko'jua. That was our musical instrument that we use a long time ago.

Fiona: So then if we go backwards, when did the Black Ash first become less and less on the Island?

CJ: Well, there's probably like, controversial topic is like, when they tried to limit the intake of food for the natives, we, we had to source different projects or ways to accumulate money to buy food. So we made baskets. And yeah, that was probably us that was the biggest.

Dan: Yeah, like I read a neat report from Nova Scotia. So, it may not apply to Epekwitk. But in that one, they do, they had like, literally record spreadsheets of the barrels of black ash that the Mi'kmaq were making in Nova Scotia, and then the amount of cod they were catching to fill the barrels with, and then the amount of those that were shipped to England. And it's really neat because that's those are two major stocks that are now very depleted. And you can just see this record over decades and the 1800s, of that was, as you said, a way to integrate, and try to make money so that you could survive in this totally new system of economy and totally new system of territory, and totally, you know, and all that stuff. So it was this adjustment, but it did lead, you know, to the depletion of these trees and and their habitats. And then that was coupled too with farming, right, so the Europeans were coming in, and the Acadians drained wetlands to farm because it was the first easiest, you didn't have to cut out as many trees, and then the English came in and harvested the giant trees for shipbuilding. And again, when you take away trees, you generally dry up wet areas, because the trees are providing the shade and all the different things that roots and stuff keeping the moisture in the ground. And so then we started destroying the habitat that they like. So not only were we harvesting the trees, but then we started taking away wetlands and paving them over or farming, and that also took the habitat.

Flash forward to today, and Black Ash trees are super rare. It's because of them being cut down, but CJ also said that

CJ: Black ash having the hardest, most complex reproduction process of all the trees I've seen, doesn't help any.

Dan: Black ash have male trees that have male flowers producing the pollen, and then they have female trees producing them, you know, the ovary that'll eventually get pollinated and turn into a seed. And they only majorly flower once every eight or nine years. And so you need not only a site with multiple trees, with the gender representation that you would need to pollinate those trees.

Fiona: And so the work you folks are doing, when did that begin?

CJ: Last year, I guess, for me?

Daniel: Yeah, I think the project got its start, like maybe a year and a half or two years ago. And then initial was like, applying and planning. And that was through the coordinators who were involved in the project from the Abegweit Conservation Society. And then CJ, and I started doing field work last year. And basically just, we collected records of where black ash were spotted, some were really good records. And other ones were like, somewhere in this region within 5000 meters, you know, just really large guesses. So then we just started going to the sites and with it was, you know, always see Jamie and then various other crew members from the Abegweit Conservation Society.

Daniel: So CJ's staff, and yeah, and then it's just been, it's like, it's just like fun exploring, because you're never quite sure where you're going to find them. So it's part of it. It's like planning and looking at maps and drainage patterns and river flows and all kinds of things like that. And then another part is just being in the woods and getting a sense for the light and levels that they like, and swampy levels that they like, and

CJ: you can definitely feel where they're going to be when you're walking through them. You just know,

So, they have 940 seedlings at MacPhails now and they hope to plant them next spring after identifying some good locations. Like the Krummholz project, you'll have to wait to find out what happens. But I'll provide links in the shownotes to these two projects I mentioned so you can learn more, as well as some groups Dan recommended you check out if you want to get involved.

Theme music comes up underneath narration.

And that concludes this episode – as well as this season. Thank you for taking the time to listen and I hope you enjoyed these episodes. If you want to learn more about our content, find us on social media or go to peimuseum.ca. As a not-for-profit organization, we rely on donations to make a lot happen.

Speaking of money, I want to thank the sponsors for this season. To Beyond the Brim Consulting, Confederation Centre of the Arts and Upstreet Brewing: thank you for the support you've provided. We really appreciate it.

Thanks to Innovation PEI and Skills PEI for your support.

Also, I really want to thank Tristan Atkins and Jacob Majcan for voice acting in this episode, and Adam Gallant for producing our soundtrack.

Take care, and we'll talk to you next time on the hidden island.

Georges: So it's what not very jolly just what's saying in this verse. It says, 'What makes me sad,' it's the bride that's talking. 'What makes me sad is that when one when one is married, we must stay together for better or for worse. Oh God, here I am thrust into marriage life for the rest of my life.' So this is an old song, you know, from traditional song from France. But it's a one of the songs that could be sung at a wedding, but some of them weren't more happy. But there's one that I remember my neighbors had, oh, we used to sing this at the wedding. And it's so something we wouldn't do today. And it says, 'This is the day of my wedding the saddest day of my life.'

Now that's one tradition that's definitely faded away today. But sometimes families would also hire a fiddler and there'd be square dancing and celebrations that go on into the night.

So a traditional Acadian wedding isn't that different from today, but I had no idea weddings were often celebrated at home in previous years. Once community halls came into play, many weddings began celebrating there because they'd have an electric stove and more space to host everyone. But Georges remembers growing up and attending these home weddings, so they only phased out within the past 40 or 50 years.

Campfire sounds come up under the last little bit, then fades into theme music under narration.

But that concludes our campfire folklore sessions. As you can probably tell, I wanted to share a variety of folklore. When you're at a campfire, the discussions lead everywhere and rather than focus on a single aspect of life, I asked these storytellers to share what they thought might be interesting. So thank you for listening, and I hope you enjoyed this episode.

You can find the PEI Museum and Heritage Foundation on our social media and our website at peimuseum.ca. I'll add in too that we are a not-for-profit organization, so if you want to buy a membership or donate, we really appreciate it.

Speaking of money, we have official sponsors. To Confederation Centre of the Arts, Upstreet Brewing, and Beyond the Brim Consulting, thank you for supporting this show.

As well, shout out to Adam Gallant, who's responsible for our intro music.

Thanks for joining and I'll talk to you next time on the hidden Island!