

# They found new ways in Newfoundland

By BARBARA UNDERWOOD

Don't tell Don and Jan Sawyer that teachers can't find jobs. They know it isn't true. Even non-teachers can find teaching positions — if they are in the right place at the right time.

That was true for the Sawyers when they accepted teaching positions in a small village in Newfoundland that became their home for two years.

Sawyer was born and raised in Michigan and was educated in the Birmingham Public Schools. He is a 1961 graduate of Seaboard High School. He met his wife at Michigan State University when they were students there.

Sawyer has written his first book, about the couple's teaching experiences in Newfoundland in the mid-1970s. "Tomorrow is School and I am Sick to the Heart Thinking about It" is a thought-provoking account of education in the village of Hoberly Cove.

Sawyer has changed the name of the village and its residents, but the incidents and impressions are as he and his wife experienced them in a town 60 miles northeast of Gander.

ALTHOUGH SAWYER had never taught and had no classes in education, he was offered a position in the high school. His wife, who at the time had only completed three years of college, was to teach in the elementary school.

Sawyer was attending the University of British Columbia on a fellowship in a program of modern Chinese studies when he decided to get a job in education. The job search eventually resulted in "a barrage of resumes to school boards in Newfoundland." He and his wife were in Birmingham when the teaching offers were made. They asked for 24 hours to make a decision.

"Having grown up in the United States, we found that the name of a dog breed just about exhausted our knowledge of the island that was to be our home for two years," Sawyer says in his book.

A trip to Baldwin Library in Birmingham produced only a 1949 National Geographic and some encyclopedias for reference information.

"In seven days we were expected to be competent teachers in classrooms in a corner of North America that our local library had hardly taken notice of," he wrote.

UNDAUNTED, they accepted the jobs. At their first meeting with the superintendent of schools, they were told, "The community you're going to is not like any other place you've ever been."

They were to remember his words more than once and to agree with them almost daily.

Sawyer's first impression of the high school was of a "large, purple T-shaped structure squatted in a bog like a huge toad." Its peeling paint and "flaking white trim contributed to a sense of gloom."

The night before the first day of school, Mrs. Sawyer was pondering what she should wear the following day. Her husband had other worries and replied, "Hell, I don't even know what I am teaching yet."

In an earlier conversation with the high school principal, Sawyer said he was concerned about books, class assignments and other matters.

BUT THE principal said, "Don't worry, everything will be fine. Just go in and tell them who you are tomorrow. Then we'll decide on who's doing what"

Moments before school began, the principal "began dealing out homeworks as though we were playing a game of cards" and Sawyer drew eighth-graders — 35 in all.

Before the day was over, Sawyer was assigned to teach 10th-grade English, eighth- and ninth-grade physical education, eighth-grade geography, 10th-grade world history and seventh-grade art.

He also was assigned to be the library director and volleyball coach. "On his first inspection of the room designated as the school library, Sawyer said he 'froze in disbelief... I was aghast.'"

THE ENTIRE room, about 12 feet square, contained only 250 books, of which one-fifth were in "two ancient sets of encyclopedias, published before 1950."

"As I glanced briefly at the library's titles, I noticed 'The Facts of Life.' I pulled the old, dark blue book from the shelf and glanced at its contents. This was impossible — the entire book was written in German."

"I think it's pretty disturbing," he told the principal. "How do you expect kids to read when the only book with an interesting title is written in German?"

The principal commented that there was a public library in town. Sawyer learned later that most of his students had only been on one field trip — to the public library when they were in fourth grade. They had never been outside during school hours.

Both Sawyers were determined to inspire their students to greater achievements than had previously been the case in Hoberly Cove.

"I FOUND myself teaching in a school with an 80 to 90 percent dropout rate before graduation; a school that saw perhaps one or two from its shriveled graduating class go to college," Sawyer wrote. "I had not the slightest idea where to begin." The grade eight English book was beyond the reading level of more than a third of my students.

The grammar and spelling books were holdovers from another age and the geography book (was) so old that (it) contained maps of Africa that showed Zaire as the Belgian Congo."

Sawyer also found his students afraid to write, because they had been slammed so many times for their mistakes that they had lost a desire to correct them; now, they only wanted to avoid them."

How he turned his classes around, by using comic books to interest them in reading, free films and a group project focusing on some aspect of Newfoundland society, makes this small book a lesson in determination and dedication.

But the class project raised some eyebrows in the community and incurred the wrath of many.

THE SCHOOLS in Hoberly Cove had been denominational until two years before the Sawyers arrived, with students segregated by religious affiliation.

The community was primarily Salvation Army and the "most contentious issue" was the Salvation Army's insistence on banning any dancing in the high school.

When the daughter of the Salvation Army captain announced that the student project was going to be a survey of students' attitudes toward sex education being taught in school, Sawyer "swallowed hard" but agreed that it was a "good project that should pro-

duce interesting data."

Near the end of their first year in Hoberly Cove, Sawyer and his wife had to decide whether they would stay another year.

"I suppose you'll be leaving next year," a student told them. "All the good teachers leave. Ever since I was in first grade, every time we'd get a good teacher, they'd be gone the next year."

Because his year had "been so positive," Sawyer favored staying. But while "teaching had been extraordinarily successful and rewarding" for Mrs. Sawyer, she was uncertain about returning for a second year because of the loneliness.

"MY BEST friends in this town are 5 years old," she said.

Most of the women her age (22) were married and had two or three children. She had joined the only on-going women's activity in town, a weight control club. But since she only weighed 105 pounds, her presence "just made them feel bad" and she finally stopped going.

The Sawyers stayed and the book's title is derived from a comment made by a student the night before classes began the second year.

Throughout their stay in Hoberly Cove, Sawyer's students were in the habit of dropping in at his home. When a group left that had been there the evening before school started, Sawyer found a note written by one of them. It ended with: "Tomorrow is school and I am sick to the heart thinking about it."

In his letter of resignation the following May, Sawyer wrote, "The kids here are fantastic. Try to give them someone who will encourage instead of discourage, interest instead of bore."

Copies of Sawyer's book are in the Baldwin and Bloomfield Township public libraries. It was published by Douglas & McIntyre Limited, 1875 Welch St., North Vancouver, British Columbia, and is also available at South Shore Books, 164 Pitt St. W., Windsor, Ontario.

Artists urged to register

The Detroit Institute of Arts issues another appeal to all Michigan artists, whatever their discipline.

Please call or write the museum to be listed in the forthcoming computerized Michigan Artists' Registry.

Nancy Gordon, editor of the new registry, reports that only 5,000 of the estimated 20,000-30,000 artists in the state responded to the first call in October.

Ms. Gordon is looking for Michigan artists working in the visual arts, music, dance, theater and literature so that they may be listed and notified of programs, competitions and other activities in their field.

Michigan-based arts organizations also will be on the computerized lists. Ms. Gordon says about 60 percent of the organizations have already filed with her office at the art institute.

The statewide computer will divide the artists by discipline — music, literature, visual arts, theater, dance and environmental design. Sub-categories within each discipline will indicate the artist's specialty, such as costume-making, photography, composing and choreography.

A first for the state, the Michigan Artists' Registry requests a brief biography to be sent to the Detroit Institute of Arts, 5200 Woodward Ave., Detroit 48202. The project is funded by grants from the Michigan Council for the Arts and the Founders Society Detroit Institute of Arts on behalf of Michigan artists.

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