



Lennie's Dream

PEI songwriter returns home for the summer with a hit theatre show—
his love letter to the island

by Philip Lee

Lennie Gallant wrote the song early on a summer morning at his father's cottage overlooking the harbour in Rustico, Prince Edward Island. He and a group of friends had been talking into the early morning hours about the collapse of the inshore fishery, how in small towns throughout Atlantic Canada families were losing their livelihoods.

He went to bed and woke a few hours later to the rumble of a diesel engine as a single Cape Island boat headed out. He picked up his guitar and the words came to him as if he was taking dictation.



(2014) Mounting of the Abegweit show.

*I still get up before the day breaks
I still walk down to the shore
I watch the sunrise from the eastern ocean
But I don't sail to meet it anymore...*

He called the song "Peter's Dream", and over the years it has become part of the cultural landscape on the East Coast. It's one of those songs that feels as though it has always been with us, rolling through our minds like breakers on the shore.

Two decades later, the song has become a movement in a larger work that Gallant describes as a musical patchwork quilt. The theatre show, *Searching for Abegweit: The Island Songs and Stories of Lennie Gallant*, was a sleeper hit last summer in Charlottetown at The Mack, selling out all 57 performances.

He will stage the show again this July and August in a 200-seat performance space at the PEI Brewing Company. He's excited about the new venue, and grateful for the support the Confederation Centre of the Arts offered last summer to get the show off to a running start.

The show brings together Gallant's folk, roots and pop songs,



A painting by Lennie's sister Karen Gallant.



Lennie's sister Karen Gallant.

a high-energy band, funny and poignant island stories and legends, photographs and film, all in a multimedia experience. The elements of the show are bound together by the colourful paintings of acclaimed artist Karen Gallant, Lennie's younger sister.

Throughout the show, her paintings are projected on a large screen behind the band and move with the music. The images,

Abegweit is the Mi'kmaq name for the Island, a word that means "place cradled by the waves."

filled with colour, mystery and motion, animate the songs, as though these sibling artists had always been working toward this collaboration.

Gallant has been pulling the threads on this project since 1988 when he released his first record, launching his career as a singer-songwriter and travelling troubadour. Since then he has recorded nine more records, written songs about many subjects and collaborated with songwriters throughout Canada and the United States.

Over the years, he was also building a catalogue of songs and stories about PEI, and he began to consider how he might draw that material together into one show.

"I have a great love for the place," he says. "I always had this dream of gathering songs and stories I had written about the island and putting them together into a show that was a celebration of Prince Edward Island."

Abegweit is the Mi'kmaq name for the Island, a word that means "place cradled by the waves." It was also the name given to the workhorse ferry that Gallant rode as a child on trips with his father to truck cedar posts from Rogersville, NB, back to the Island. It was on one of those trips that a logger gave Gallant's father a guitar that he in turn gave to his 13-year-old eldest son.

But perhaps this story is getting ahead of itself. Because as Lennie Gallant, storyteller, curator of Prince Edward Island history and folklore would tell it, the story really begins with an Acadian fisherman named Pierre Haché.

About 1660, Haché had a son with a Montagnais woman. The boy, later known as Michel Haché dit Gallant, was adopted by Michel LeNeuf de la Vallière, Governor of Acadia.

Haché-Gallant was educated in Trois-Rivières, became a *homme d'affaires* for the Governor and travelled with him to France. He refused to sign the oath of allegiance to England and in 1720 moved with his wife Anne Cormier and four of their children to seek refuge on PEI.

He built a home at a place called Port-la-Joye and helped to create the first Acadian settlement on the island. He transported more families to the island on his sloop, and acted as harbour master and head of the militia. In early 1737, he drowned when he fell through the spring ice on the North River. Not every detail of this story can be verified; but this is as good a version as any. What we do know to be true is that he is the ancestor of all Gallants in Eastern Canada, and that one of his descendants did receive a guitar from his father, learned some chords, started writing songs, and eventually stood in the excavated basement of Haché-Gallant's homestead and sang songs to his ghost.

"We've got a very diverse culture here on the Island," Gallant says. "Yet there's something that binds it all together. I was trying to find out, what is that thing that we all feel part of? We can't really put a name on it. What I'm trying to say in the show is that we're all searching for Abegweit."

"This island has been a refuge for so many displaced people, whether it's the Acadians after the deportation, or the Irish, or the Selkirk settlers, or people escaping from troubles in the Middle East, or central America, or Africa. We've all come here and we've found a place where people accept other people's beliefs and cultures and religions, and celebrate them, and yet we are all part of a community. We all feel connected as Islanders. Maybe we are all searching for Abegweit, that intangible thing that we all feel so proud of."

The eldest of six children, Gallant spent his formative childhood years living in a small apartment over his grandfather's general store in Rustico. He taught himself to play guitar and sing and spent hours listening to an uncle's collection of Bob Dylan and Gordon Lightfoot records.

His mother gave him the love of performing. She played piano by ear, and with her husband and friends, wrote skits and comic plays set to music. They would take these shows on the road to benefit concerts at island community halls. As



Left to right, Sean Kemp, Patricia Richard, Lennie Gallant, Jeremy Gallant, Jonathan Gallant.

soon as Gallant learned to play guitar, he was enlisted to be a member of the troupe.

Three of Gallant's grandparents spoke French; but by the time he was growing up in Rustico, the Acadian community had begun to lose its language and no longer had a French school. After Gallant decided to pursue music as a profession, he also dedicated himself to learning French. He learned Acadian songs, lived for a time in French-speaking communities on the island, and eventually recorded two albums in French.

Lennie Gallant thrives on performing as the leader of a band, and in recent years has been drawing energy from a talented new generation of Gallants. His brother Danny's sons, Jeremy and Jonathon, play in the theatre show, joined by Sean Kemp, and this summer, Patricia Richard, who recently starred in the renowned production *Ode à l'Acadie*.

One of the side benefits of the new theatre show is that Gallant is able to spend the summer right where he has always wanted to be.

"I spent most of my summers travelling back and forth across the continent playing festivals and I was missing Prince Edward Island in the summer—and I love PEI in the summer. It was frustrating. So this was a way that I could spend the summer on PEI and let people come to me."

Last year, Lennie and Karen Gallant published a book entitled *Peter's Dream*, a collection of his song lyrics and her paintings. One of her paintings of Rustico Harbour now hangs in his living room.

During the theatre show, when the band is performing "Peter's Dream", images from this painting fill the screen as Gallant sings the final verse of the song that came to him on

that early morning in Rustico Harbour.

*Someone sang an old sea shanty
And Nealy told a mainland joke
And Kelly cursed and swore until his voice gave out
Then he asked me for a smoke
And then he took his father's shotgun
Walked to the harbour through the town
He fired fourteen times, woke everybody up
And we all watched that boat go down*

At that moment, the audience feels as if they are walking through the town themselves. Then they are singing along with the band.

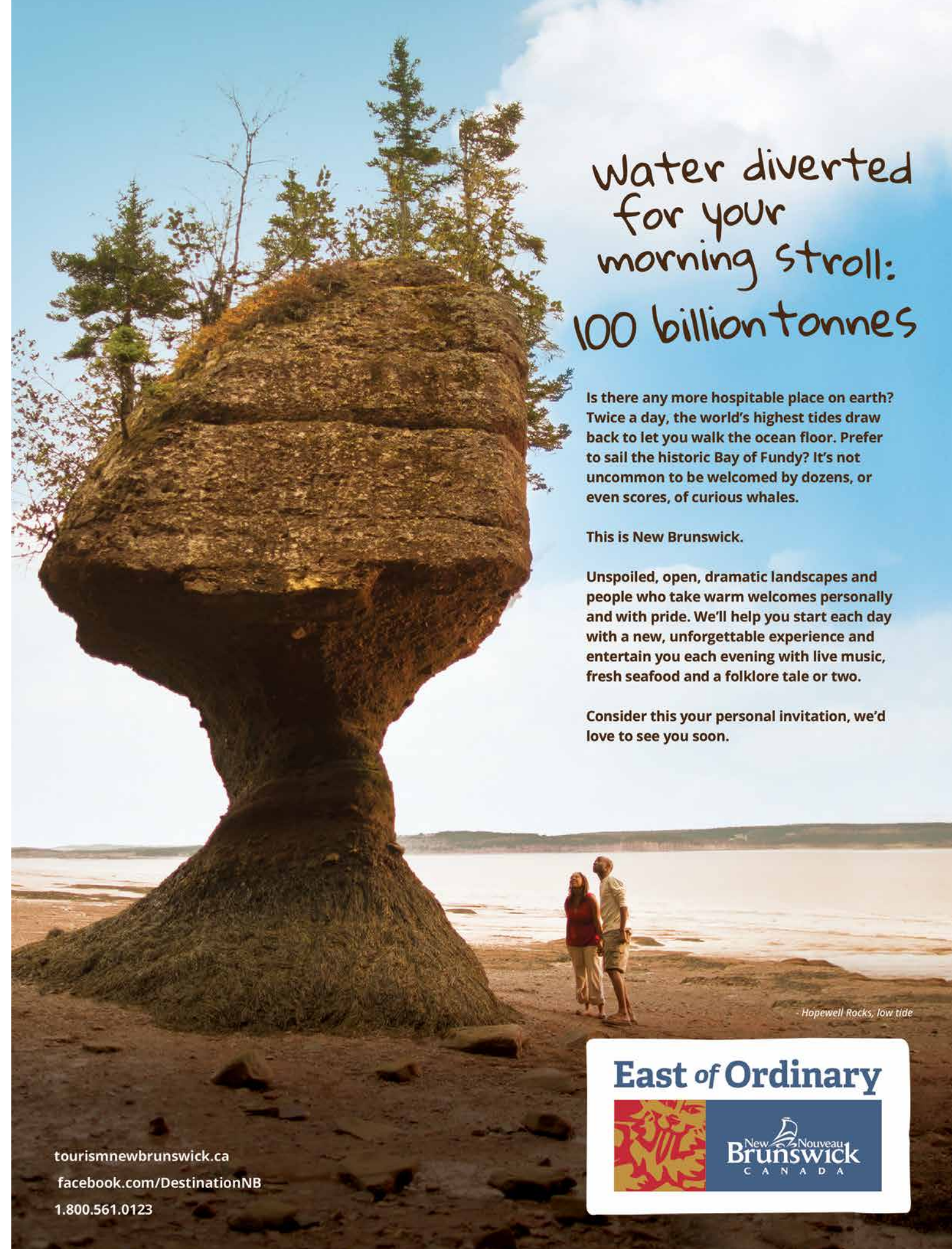
*Last night I dreamed that I was sailing
Out on the Sea of Galilee
We cast our nets upon the water
And Jesus pulled them in with me*

"I love performing," Gallant says. "I get a great kick out of being on stage and having people responding to something I wrote in my kitchen. I'll probably keep doing it as long as people keep coming out to the shows."

(Note: The PEI Brewing Company in Charlottetown will host *Searching for Abegweit: The Island Songs & Stories of Lennie Gallant* every Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday in July and August.)

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