

reminiscing



Little Girl Lost

The incredible story of Lucy Maude Harris

By Kim Ploughman

Beating the odds in life typically takes incredible courage and resilience. While some overcome great challenges over time, others survive horrendous ordeals that would take out ordinary souls.

The latter was the case with Lucy Maude Harris of New Melbourne, Trinity Bay, NL. One spring day, circumstances quickly went horribly wrong, imperiling her life. The experience would forever change her physically, while vaulting her name and face into the international spotlight.

The fateful day

Lucy Maude was a normal 10-year-old in outport Newfoundland until March 26, 1936, the day she and her little sister went on a trout fishing adventure after school. The weather wore a typical spring coat – cloudy with light fog. Snow still covered the cold terrain.

Along the path, the siblings came upon a runoff from a brook, which Lucy was able to leap over; but smaller eight-year-old-Marjorie held back. Lucy encouraged her younger sister to head home and said she would catch up with her there.

At home, her fisherman father, Alexander, and mother Amelia assumed Lucy Maude had stopped over at an aunt's house; but when she didn't show for supper, a heavy worry engulfed the household. By the light of lanterns, the family knocked on doors and scoured the small outport, while alerting all that their Lucy Maude was missing.

The long search and rescue

Early next day, a team of men assembled and began to search far and wide for the young girl, who had already spent one night alone in the cold wilderness. The team retraced the path the sisters traversed the previous day, but the men returned home without any sign of Lucy Maude.

The family would spend another night in prayers and worry – but hope. Day two of the search began at daybreak with the church bells ringing. News of the lost little girl had beamed out along the shoreline and men from nearby outports arrived by boats, horse and cart, even on foot. (Some had walked up to eight kilometres to join the search.) Fears rose as the weather worsened, with rain and snow whipped up by high winds.

The days passed and the buoyancy of hope of finding the young lass alive deflated. March bowed out to make way for April. Dread hung over the close-knit village of New Melbourne. Many questioned how it was possible now to find her alive; but still, they faithfully combed the woods day after day. Above all, her parents never gave up hope.

On day 12, the family got their miracle. Word reached the harbour that Lucy Maude had been found, alive and conscious, by Jack Johnson and Lucy's uncle, Ches Harris. The men crafted a stretcher from their sheepskin coats and carried the weakened Lucy Maude home. From there, she was taken to the Old Perlican Hospital.

Left: Lucy Maude Harris recuperates in hospital after a harrowing misadventure. Courtesy Sharon Pynn

Songbirds and faith

After her rescue on Saturday, April 4, Lucy recounted how her incredible misadventure had unfolded. A pea-soup thick fog had suddenly moved into the area and without orientation, the pre-teen girl took a woods path leading farther from home, rather than towards it.

“When it got dark, I started to run,” Lucy recalled during an interview with Jennifer Reaney for a 1999 issue of *SARScene* (a quarterly publication of the National Search and Rescue Secretariat).

During this flight of fear, she lost her boots and mitts. (Later, searchers would also find her belt). The base of a big tree that Lucy crawled next to that first night became her “home” for the duration of her ordeal. Soon, her frostbitten legs immobilized her from walking, even if she wanted to.

In a recent interview from her home in New Chelsea, Sharon Pynn tells me her mother (who passed away in 2018) remembered being cold at night, but in the morning it would warm up. “The sounds of the songbirds kept her company during the day.”

Sharon explains her mom heard

the searchers, but was too weak to respond. When Lucy Maude was found, it was near Lance Cove Pond, about four kilometres from where the siblings had begun their adventure. When her mom was carried out, Sharon says she showed strength of character by asking about her ailing grandmother, “not concerned about her own poor condition.”

Upon her safe return, the church bells rang for three hours in celebration. Sharon said her mother often attributed her survival to her religious upbringing. “She had faith and hope that she would be found.”

Recuperation, fame and rebuilding

While Lucy Maude was rescued from the wilds, she wasn’t out of the woods entirely. She spent 18 months at the old General Hospital (now Miller Centre) in St. John’s before she could go home. Her legs and arms were badly frostbitten. Her blackened legs had to be amputated below the knees and she needed extensive rehabilitation.

Meantime, word of her rescue was racing around the globe under news



Lucy Maude (left) with her younger sister Marjorie. Lucy lived to be 92; Marjorie is 90 and living in Clarke’s Beach. Courtesy Sharon Pynn

headlines calling her “The Wonder Child” or “The Miracle Child.” Little Lucy Maude’s experience touched the lives of many.

In her 1999 interview with *SARScene*, Lucy Maude recalled the kindness of folks near and far. “I had letters and dolls from England and Australia,” she said, adding, “People in St. John’s would cook dinners and bring them to me. My nurse and doctor were very kind.”

Still, the child who survived alone for days in the dense woods admitted to being lonely on a hospital ward without other children.

After her discharge from the hospital, Lucy Maude was home-schooled until Grade 9 – not a common occurrence back in the 1940s. In her late teens, she was outfitted with two artificial legs.

For years, Lucy Maude worked in the occupational therapy unit at the St. John’s Sanitorium. Described as a crafty soul, she volunteered teaching Sunday school and knitting goods for NONIA.

In 1953, Lucy Maude became a single mother at age 28, when she gave birth to Sharon. The two lived with

Lucy’s parents, with lots of extended family nearby. Sharon says being a single parent was not easy in the 1950s, but “she excelled at being a mom,” and recalls her as “loving to have children around.” Lucy Maude was a great seamstress, making all of Sharon’s clothes and graduation dresses for her and others.

Lucy Maude Harris, born on October 26, 1925, lived to the ripe old age of 92, which is “pretty amazing, considering what she went through,” says Sharon. Lucy Maude passed away a year ago, on May 15, 2018, and as a fitting tribute, eight SAR members served as pallbearers.

In her mother’s eulogy, Sharon, now 65, noted that Lucy Maude “never considered herself as having a disability. And you never heard her complain. She was a smart and progressive person for women in that time.”

Lucy Maude left behind grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and two sisters, Alma Humby and her younger sister Marjorie, now 90. Marjorie, a former Pentecostal pastor, lives in a seniors home in Clarke’s Beach. She says, “Lucy was a wonderful person in every way.”

Search and Rescue Star

In 1999, St. John’s played host to an international search and rescue (SAR) conference. The extraordinary survival story of Newfoundland’s own Lucy Maude Harris was showcased to searchers from around the world. In fact, a 15-minute film was made about it, with two young girls re-enacting the part of the sisters, as a teaching tool for the searchers to never give up.

It was also at this conference that Lucy Maude had an emotional reunion with a nurse, Rose (Peyton) McNamara, who cared for her some 63 years before.