

COME FROM AWAY

BY MARGIE GOLDSMITH



If you don't come from Newfoundland and Labrador, you "come from away," which also happens to be the name of the award-winning Broadway musical in which the residents of Gander took care of 7,000 unexpected air passengers on 9/11. During *Come from Away*, one of the musicians plays an Ugly Stick, a musical instrument made from an upside-down mop with a painted face and bottle caps and tin cans which jounce and jingle when hit with a stick.

This crazy-looking home-made instrument sounds like a bass drum when banged on the ground, and the jangling bottle caps create perfect percussion. The Ugly Stick dates back hundreds of years when residents in small isolated outposts, most inaccessible by road and with almost no opportunity for outside entertainment, held impromptu gatherings to sing, dance, tell stories and drink. They were called kitchen parties because they took place in the kitchen, the warmest room in the house,





Abbotsford House, located in the Scottish Borders, the home of the writer Sir Walter Scott. Photo Wikimedia Commons

Almost every family had an accordion or fiddle and everyone could play spoons, but most people had no access to drums so they created the Ugly Stick.

All the traditional folk songs were passed down at kitchen parties and the music helped define the eclectic sound of Newfoundland musicians.

I loved the idea, so when I learned about an Ugly Stick-making workshop in Newfoundland, I signed on.

My home was a cottage overlooking Conception Bay where you could see whales spouting in the distance. In the back yard was a shed where the Ugly Stick workshop was to take place. The participants were me and three locals and the workshop was led by Sue, who was also the owner of my cottage. In the shed, her neighbor was cooking Toutums (pronounced like "POUT-ums") on a hot plate. This Newfoundland specialty is leftover fried bread dough served with molasses, and they were so good I ate at least seven.

There were two large tables, one set for a dinner of Toutums, home-made pea soup, freshly-baked bread, and



barbequed beans. The second table was covered with beer caps, driftwood, nails, screws, colored pipe cleaners, plastic googly eyes, tassels, pompoms, feathers, various doo-dads, hats, caps, gorilla glue and a glue-gun. Sue handed me a mop, pointed to a pile of boots on the floor under the table

and told me to pick one. I chose a classic olive green Wellington boot.

Sue was a pro with the electric drill. In seconds, she'd drilled the boot to the bottom of my mop handle and I banged it on the ground, imitating a kick drum. Perfect. Next was the fun part – decorating. She drilled a large empty tin can beneath the mop strands for the face. I braided

the stringy hair and fitted a bathing cap onto the ugly Stick's head because my Ugly Stick was going to be a diver. I glued on googly eyes and then covered them with an old pair of swim goggles. For the mouth, I shaped a red pipe cleaner into an "O" big enough to hold a snorkel.

One woman was making a "diva" with a feather boa and mini pie tins running up the shaft. Another made a Newfoundlander with two pompoms for eyes, a bright yellow

Southwester hat and no other decoration. A third chose to substitute a face with a small plush Snoopy and a bedroom slipper instead of a boot. Maybe it was meant for sleeping.

I screwed in some small rubber fish along the stick and on the boot -- finished, and just in time because two musicians arrived. Wanda, a fiddler (the owner of the only grocery/hardware store in town) and Renee Batten, considered the best accordionists in the province. Other locals showed up. Wanda and Renee played jigs and reels and we kept time by banging our Ugly Sticks up and down and hitting them with small pieces of driftwood (or "beaters").

We whopped and hollered and burst into laughter as all the pie tins fell off the diva Ugly Stick and she was left only with her boa. The musicians played non-stop and Sue danced up a storm back and forth across the room. Then everyone quieted down as a story teller (story telling is another kitchen party tradition) regaled us with stories about his semi-fictional family.

Giddy from the music, we went outside just as a fiery orange ball, the full moon, rose directly over the ocean. And as I stood watching it next to my new friends, I knew that I might have come from away, but when you meet people in Newfoundland, you've got friends for life, and at this moment, there was no place in the world where I felt more at home.

