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Seal Hunting out of Cheticamp From Fr. Anselme Chiasson's Cheticamp: History and Acadian Traditions Hunting for seals was always thrilling, in spite of the difficulties it presented and the tragedies that followed. This hunting took place in the spring and lasted a month or two, depending on the temperature and the duration of the ice along the coastline. In Cheticamp, as everywhere else along the Gulf, the ice freezes in the bays, the harbours, and lightly along the coast, but not in the open sea. The Gulf fills up with floating ice-fields coming down from the north. When pushed by the north winds, they reach our coasts in January or February and stay there up to the beginning of May. In the interval, they shift with the winds. The south-east winds sometimes push them out of sight, then the northeast winds bring them back to violently pound the coasts, sweeping the shores and carrying away the rocks, piling the ice up in huge banks with terrible cracking sounds. This coming-and-going of the ice usually begins about the end of March. That's when the seal hunt begins. Every spring, about March 25, as soon as a passage opens to the Gulf, about ten schooners from Cheticamp would be ready to leave. But since the schooners were still in the harbour, and the harbour was still frozen, it was necessary to saw a path open to the boats, about a mile long. All crews were employed in this work. They sawed the ice in pieces which they then slid under the firm ice. This work would go on quite rapidly. Everyone was happy. The thirst for adventure, the call of the ice, gave a new vigour to these hardy people. Furnished with enough provisions for more than a month, a change of clothing in case of a fall into the water, and their sticks for the hunt, each schooner would leave on its way to search for seals. They would go great distances, even as far away as the Magdalen Islands, when the openings through the ice permitted it. The boats stopped wherever seals were found. Seals, in the early days, were plentiful. From their boat, using binoculars, the hunters would locate the seal herds on the vast expanse of ice. The men would lower their rowboats from the schooners and thread their way towards the herd of seals. Finally, they would lift the rowboats onto the ice and, from there, go on foot. Armed with large clubs, they would surround the herd to prevent the animals from saving themselves in the water. As these animals are not dangerous, and have almost no means of defense since they can't move very quickly when out of the water, the slaughter was easy. One could knock them senseless by clubbing them on the nose. When a herd was surrounded quickly enough, very few managed to get away. Each herd sometimes held four or five hundred seals. This surprise attack was a thrilling adventure for the men because of the great number of seals killed. After the slaughter they had to dress the seal: that is, skin it and cut up the carcass. The schooner was brought nearby, loaded with all this catch, then the men would go off in search of other herds. In this way they spent six or seven weeks on the search, the hunt, and the cutting up of the animals. On Sunday the men never hunted, even if there was a seal herd within striking distance. At the very most they would allow themselves to circle the



herd, to bring the animals closer together in order to drive them as close as possible to the schooners, thereby making it easier to guard them during the night for the next day's slaughter. But, often, seeing themselves surrounded and unable to flee, the seals would use some strategy, such as piling themselves up, pressing down on the weak points of the ice which would soon give way. Next day, not a single seal would be in sight! On the return of the hunters, all the schooners would come to berth at L'Anse-aux-Huileux on Chetivus Island where the fat would be melted down. This is how the area got the name "L'Anse-aux-Huileux" (Oiler's Cove). This fat has several domestic uses. Mainly it was used in the making of soap. Lamps were filled with the oil, and skins, footwear and harnesses were made. You are Welcome to Wandlyn for Your Meals or Overnight