

[Page 9 - With Alex John Boudreau, Cheticamp Island](#)ISSUE : [Issue 32](#)

Published by Ronald Caplan on 1982/8/1

and give them some courses in leadership. So first, I went around the Gaspé coast, and with the help of the parish priests, I selected 54 young people. I wanted them relatively young, but established and married. I wanted stability--people who were married and who had an investment in their communities. I brought them to Ste. Anne with the help of the government of Quebec, and I had them there for 5 weeks. I gave them 6 hours a day: training in leadership and setting up local study clubs. So they all went back to their communities. That was the point. Trained, them in leadership and public speaking and social animation and a little bit of economics and the principles of credit unions--and I sent them away. Now, every one of them had to write to me-- it was quite a system--I couldn't organize that today--every one of them had to write to me once a week and give me a report. What the fishermen were saying, and what were their objections, and how were they being successful. That was in the fall. That lasted until next spring, in May. And out of the 54, about 25 kept up and did a tremendous job. The other 29 were helpful, and they tried, but they just, you know, they just didn't have it--they got discouraged and they fell by the side of the road. Then I brought the 25 back to Ste. Anne, and I had to teach them some accounting, you know, because they had to keep the books, and some letter-writing, and some basic business principles, marketing and all that kind of stuff. Some of them became very good. (Were they setting up the cooperatives?) Oh yes. Of the 25, they all eventually became my local managers for the fishermen's cooperatives. And some of them were extremely good. (What were the fishermen saying, what were their fears?) It wasn't fear, it was--in most cases, it was complete disbelief. Lack of confidence in themselves. As Msgr. Ross, who as Bishop of Gaspé, used to say at that time, "They've been so long in chains that they've come to love their chains." And he said, "When you start talking about liberating them from their chains, they're afraid. One, they don't believe you can. Two, they're afraid that if you do, they're going to get hurt some other way." And lurking in the back of their minds was their fear of either William Hyman and Sons or Robin Jones and Whitman. They were afraid. You know, they had been--they and their fathers and their grandfathers and their great-grandfathers before them--had always been under the hammer of Robin Jones. They'd lived off Robin Jones. They were sort of pawns in a game. Now you suggested to them, you're going to get rid of all that, you're going to be on your own. They started shaking. Don't tell me I'm going to be on my own. Yes, you're going to be on your own. Then they had reasons, they found reasons. My son's getting married next spring. I need a hundred dollars, who the hell's going to give it to me, except the manager of Robin Jones. My roof has to be rebuilt this summer, it's raining in the house. And then our debts-- it's all right for you to talk, you've got a job, but I've got to live here, and I've got my family. (What could you say to that?) Well, then I brought in the argument of the credit union, and that we'll pay you cash every Friday. It won't be much money--it'll be hard for a year or two--but then you'll be free men. I didn't get them all. In the spring in 1939, three localities, three groups of



fishermen were ready to go. So I went down, organized them, got their charter, and then they started. With a little bit of help from the provincial government of Quebec. It was rough going. But after three years, the war came. Markets were automatic, because all the fish was sold to the federal government, and paid cash on the barreltop. It was bought by the federal government for the combined allied food service. That was during the war, starting in '39. So all our fish was bought and paid for by the federal government and shipped to England. By ships that picked up the fish in Gaspé. Didn't even have to ship it. So, in a side of three years I had 38 cooperatives, all around the coast. (All paying the fishermen cash?) Right. Every Friday. (Don't have to shop at the Co-op?) No. (Shop anywhere?) No restrictions at all. It's your money, you do what the hell you want with it. Then simultaneously we organized credit unions, encouraged them to put in a few dollars every pay, in their credit union. Then when one of you has a stroke of bad luck, or something special that you need, then your fellow fishermen will get together and they'll help you. As a matter of fact, it worked, worked very well. I started in 1938, and in '43 we were doing 5 million dollars worth of business with our 38 cooperatives. (Was this, then, the Antigonish Movement?) No, no. It was the same principles. In Gaspé it was not the Antigonish Movement. You know, the Antigonish Movement didn't create anything or didn't find out anything or didn't change anything. They just picked up the principles of cooperation from Europe. You know, you've got to know the history of the Antigonish Movement. Fr. Jimmy Tompkins, who was the father--Fr. Coady was not--Fr. Jimmy Tompkins was the father of the Cooperative or the Antigonish Movement. While he was a student in Rome, he spent his summers travelling over Europe, and he went to Germany and studied the credit unions there. Then he went to Sweden and Denmark. And there he found out their methods of organizing study groups, study clubs, and their cooperative movement. Then he went to Belgium and he studied the Boyebond movement, which is the huge farmers' cooperative. So, when he came back to St. F. X. he was a professor of philosophy, and he eventually became vice president of the university. Then he started squawking about the university being only for the elite, and the university should go down to the people and--if you'd known old Dr. Jimmy Tompkins--I knew him well--he was the most persuasive man I've