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The Time We Had for One Another: The Curtis Family & Songs INTRODUCTION:
The search for songs in Cape Breton is also the search for the life people lived around songs, and how the songs themselves affected their lives. Readers will remember Winston "Scotty" Fitzgerald's description in Issue 46 of Cape Breton's Magazine of Newfoundland fishermen in his parents' home at White Point, taking turns around the room, singing. Patricia Dunphy's family lived next door. His wife, Victoria, was a singer, and Newfoundland fishermen visited there as well. Patrick's daughter, Helen, learned songs there. And Helen Dunphy married Jimmy Curtis, who also came from a singing family. Together they raised a family appreciative of song, many of whom also sang. Helen Curtis. Top: the Curtis home and St. Margaret's Church. In their little house in Bay St. Lawrence, Jimmy and Helen Curtis provided an arena for songs. The songs are now called "the old songs" but several were once the hit tunes of their day, communicated from singer to singer and via newspapers and occasional printed "slips" that songmakers sold. Over the years we've talked with Helen Curtis and some of her children. Helen introduced us to the work of Andrew Dunphy, who created several extraordinary obituary songs in northern Cape Breton. (See "Searching for Cape Breton Folk Songs" in Issue 41 and "An Elegy by Andrew Dunphy" in Issue 44.) One of the important lessons the Curtis Family story teaches is that it is not only what we sing that makes the world in which we live, but the fact that we sing • a world that Theresa Curtis MacDonald, considering songs and her childhood home, once perfectly referred to as "the time we had for one another." The following is edited from conversations with Helen and with two of her daughters, Rose Curtis Burton and Monica Curtis McNenly, alone and together. The portions of song inserted throughout are taken from the Curtis Family Songbook. Helen Curtis Begins: They used to come to my father and mother's home (at White Point--the Newfoundland fishermen), and they'd be singing, and oh, I used to love listening to them. And (the songs were) all, you know, something that really happened. Like loss of life by the fishermen. And there was one dear old fellow, we loved him. He was the captain of a boat. They were the Clarke brothers. And his name was John Clarke-- the sweetest-looking old man you ever looked at. He had his sons with him. They were Dave and Charlie and John and Phil. And they were all fishermen, they were out with their father. And they were going home with their load of fish. Used to be in to White Point, and they'd come up
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