

PROVINCIAL

Film tells tragic story of Escuminac disaster

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Cyril Jenkins stands on the shores of Escuminac Harbour steps from the very wharf from which the fateful fleet of salmon fisherman sailed. The monument carries the names of the 35 victims who died on the night of June 19, 1959, when a hurricane struck without warning sinking 22 fishing boats. Jenkins was a survivor.

Photo: Adam Huras/Telegraph-Journal Archive

FREDERICTON – A new documentary about the Escuminac disaster examines the endurance of New Brunswick fishermen and their communities despite one of the worst fishing tragedies in Canadian history.

Still Fishing, produced and directed by Miramichi-based filmmaker Andrew King, focuses on three New Brunswick fishermen who survived the Escuminac tragedy of 1959 when an unpredicted hurricane roared into the Gulf of St. Lawrence and swamped the salmon fleet.

Thirty-five men and boys died in the churning maelstrom that produced waves as tall as five-storey buildings. Many of the bodies were never recovered.

Alphonse Doucet, Theodore Williston and Max Martin were among the 101 fishermen who made it back to port. Doucet continued to fish for another 50 years while Williston and Martin are still fishing.

“People often ask me if I have fished all my life and my answer is, not yet,” says a smiling Williston during the opening scenes of the half-hour documentary.

Doucet, who retired recently, says, “I love fishing. I used to love fishing. But the Escuminac disaster put the brakes on that because you get scared after awhile.”

King, who also works with the Miramichi River Tourism Association, didn’t know much about fishing or Escuminac when he arrived in New Brunswick a few years ago, fresh from his native Ontario.

The first eye-opener for the young filmmaker was “setting day” last spring when he headed out with the lobster fleet on opening day of the season – a thrilling experience that is shown in the documentary.

It was while he was out on the water that King first heard stories about the Escuminac disaster and became curious about the lingering impact of the tragedy on the fishing communities along the northeastern New Brunswick coast.

King said people often still become emotional when they talk about the terrible events of June 19, 1959.

“It is about surviving disaster and overcoming an act of God,” King said when asked about his documentary.

“The story, at its heart, is about human beings. As David Adams Richards says in his comments ‘it’s about human greatness’ -- about how people can survive terrible tragedy and carry on.”

Richards, a well-known author and native of Miramichi, is interviewed in the documentary and talks about the triumph of the human spirit.

“My God, over the years there has to be a pride associated with it and the tremendous reality of the nobility of human beings,” Richards says. “That is why it is so important for people to understand.”

King said he knew it would be difficult to approach people about the Escuminac tragedy because it is such a sensitive and painful event.

“The biggest thing I learned from making this, in terms of making documentaries, is that when it’s a difficult subject, it’s best to first ask people whether they think it is a story that should be told,” he said in an interview.

“When they say yes, that’s when you can relax and do the interview and you don’t feel like you’re prying. The people in this documentary all think it is a story that should be told.”

The documentary, produced by King along with associates Terry Power and Cindy Trevors, will have a premiere in Miramichi at an unspecified future date.

“I’m waiting for the snow-ocalypse to end,” King said, referring to the repeated snowstorms that have slammed New Brunswick.

He also will be entering the documentary into several film festivals in the region and is hoping it might be considered by CBC-TV for its *Doc Zone* series. The Escuminac disaster left 83 fatherless children and 24 widows.

The three surviving fishermen said they believe fate decided who would live and who would die that day.

“God decides when he wants you back,” Doucet said.