

*why whycocomagh?*

[where]

Whycocomagh (*why-COG-a-mah*), Nova Scotia is a community on the northeastern tip of Inverness County in Cape Breton Island. Its precise co-ordinates are 45.9667°N, 61.1167°W. Whycocomagh is on the shore of the Bras d'Or Lake, which has the distinction of being Canada's only inland sea. It was settled in the early 1800s by Scottish immigrants. According to the 2011 census, the population was 799, a 6.8% decline from 2001. Local businesses include Vi's Restaurant, Mackeigan's Pharmacy, Home Hardware, RBC Bank, a Co-op grocery store and several gas stations. The village also has a United church, a Presbyterian church and an elementary school.

The name Whycocomagh is commonly described as a Mi'kmaq word meaning "head of the waters." The Wikipedia entry for Whycocomagh notes that, "The community is bisected by the Skye River," which flows into the Bras d'Or and marks the boundary between the village on the eastern side and the Waycobah First Nation community on the west.

Waycobah is a Mi'kmaq community. The population is growing, and as of June 2013 is 853. Local businesses include Rod's One Stop gas station and convenience store and the recently opened Waycobah Gaming centre. Waycobah is also home to an elementary and secondary school, a health centre, and a Catholic church.

*[who]*

First of all, I come from a large family—ten. I was the oldest, in Germany—Hambourg. And after the war, well, there was not much to eat. Anyway, I obviously had to look after food and things, so I thought I maybe go somewhere where I can work myself. So I there was an advertising in the paper, some doctors, they were looking for somebody. So, I made a bet with my friends. They said, “you never ever go to Canada,” Oh somebody said to me, “ you won’t go to Canada, oh, for sure,” and we bet a bottle of beer. So anyway when I got home I sat down and I wrote to this address at this hotel and a few days later I got an answer, they want me to come for interview. So I went to an interview in this big, fancy hotel. I told my mother in the evening where I’m going because you never know who will interview you in a hotel, you know, at the time. So anyway when I get there, there are lots of girls there but they pick me. They are German doctors, they move to Glace Bay, Canada, and they were looking for their children to learn to speak their language. So they hired me and they brought me over. [...] Yea, met my husband in Glace Bay. He’s German, too. So anyway, we had children. Wasn’t easy going, but I tell you one thing—the people are wonderful. They never ever let me know I come from Germany. They were helpful. They help me to speak the language, you know, then we had 5 children. [...] And now we have 12 grandchildren, and 5, no 6 great grandchildren. So we be spread from here to there!

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I’ve never really gone too far in terms of genealogy, but we came from the Isle of Ewe somewhere in the early 1800s, and there were 5 brothers that came over and according to some records one of the bros moved to “a larger centre.” And for years that confused us, stymied us, but until the steel mill opened in Sydney, Whycomagh was actually bigger than Sydney. Because it was the hub for export for farm produce and other commodities going down to New England and there was no major highway then, but the waterway was the lake. And the railway hadn’t gone through. So it was all by water and Whycomagh was central.

And in the mid 1800s Whycomomagh was bigger than Sydney [the industrial centre of the island].

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There used to be a lot of people here way back. If you ever look at the census there are a lot of different names that aren't living in Whycomomagh now on the reserve. Because We'koqma'q used to be big. And had a lot of people. And when the centralization... The grand chief used to live here: Gabriel Sylliboy and his family. And he moved to Eskasoni and his family, most of the family moved. A lot of people went with him because they were promised new houses and farms and everything else they didn't have here.

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On our father's side, our grandfather would have been one of what were called the homeboys. He would have come over on a boat when he was five to work on a farm. So a lot of them were almost like slave labourers. [...] We don't know if he was orphaned or if he was abandoned or they just couldn't afford to feed him anymore over in England. There were 5 brothers that came but 3 sisters remained behind. So it was only the boys who were shipped over. And they were all separated.

*[why]*

It's really We'koqma'q (*Way-koh-mah*).

But when I was a councilor in the 1990s [...] there was this radical group on the reserve that wanted to change Whycomomagh to Waycobah. It was always known as Whycomomagh. They wanted to change it to Waycobah. There was a plebiscite that went out. People voted for which name, and they chose Waycobah. Yeah. And the people that were originally from Whycomomagh (the reserve) didn't like that name. They don't call it Waycobah. They call it We'koqma'q still. Even though it was changed to Waycobah.

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They chose Waycobah. Because they said that was easier to spell. And not everybody went to vote, they didn't think it would pass or anything like that.

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I really don't know the true origin of the name. I guess I never thought of it.

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It means "head of the waters." So does Hogomah, the Gaelic name.

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We'koqma'q the name itself it means the end of the water or the beginning of the water. Waycobah is the summer and We'koqma'q, We'koqma'q is just as far as you can walk on top of the water. On top of the ice or whatever. I noticed the sign in the village—ever notice? Whycomomagh. Hogomah. That's what the people in the village call it: Hogomah. People say it's the Gaelic word. It sounds a lot like the Mi'kmaq word.

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Whycocomagh must be the English version of We'komaq. We'komaq means end...end of the waters. Where the water ends. Or the head of the waters. According to my sister people don't say it right, it's We'komaq (*Way-ko-ho-magh*). So I guess you can see where they got Whycocomagh. And Waycobah is Mic-lish for We'komaq.

[how]

Well, it's home for me because I was born here. It makes it easy.

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Work...work, and coming back home. We used to travel back and forth. We were working away and then we'd come home. Me being from Sydney and M. being from Margaree, we were trying to split the, the...

Family time...

...family time up and then the chance for me came to take a job here. So I did, and I got it, so we moved.

And I mean, you know we had a discussion early on that I would prefer to stay at home and raise kids and that makes a big difference on how you live your lives on one income, that you're stretching in that regard but...

Because I wasn't making very much money.

No, civil service is secure, but you don't become a wealthy forest technician.

I didn't make very much money. So it was pretty nip and tuck. We know what it's like to live from paycheque to paycheque.

But I have to say it's been a great place to raise a family.

Especially up here, up here in this part of Whycocomagh because when the kids were small there must have been 20 kids getting on the school bus. And they all played together. And you're up here you can see that it's very safe.

Very safe, very secure,

Very secure.

You have to go a long way before you get into any major trouble.

Major trouble.

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I was away for many years—Canada World Youth, East Bay, Halifax. My dad was diagnosed with cancer and didn't have much time left. That's why I came home, to be with him. Me and my partner at the time bought a cabin in Malagawatch, where the population is 8—on the weekend! Living there has allowed me to be close by, and have my own space, too.

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I was out west for a lot of years and couldn't wait to get home [to Cape Breton]. And I'm very happy to be home. I was living in Vancouver, and I wanted to get some live/work space, and the prices are just ridiculous. You can do what I wanted to do here for a pittance of what it is in BC. And it's goin' good.

*[when]*

A lot of the people who came here from Ireland and Scotland went for the high ground; went for Skye Mountain and Whycocomagh Mountain and tried to farm, and it was terrible ground. It wasn't suitable at all for that. And I think it's so tragic. Some of those people cleared that land with no horses, no nothin'. Just their backs. With the idea that someday somebody would benefit from it. But when their offspring came of age, there's no way they were living that life. They wanted something better. Those areas are all filled in again. Nature reclaims its own very quickly. But the average age at that time for the male was in the mid 40s, so they wouldn't have lived long enough to see any benefit from their labour. They worked hard. I mean, they were used to hardship. They were used to hard work. And when they came here they were now for the first time ever working for themselves. And it was a labour of love.

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With centralization the government wanted to make 2 big reserves [in Nova Scotia]—Eskasoni, in Cape Breton and Shubenacadie on the mainland. That's why they're the biggest reserves now because people were forced to live on them. They were told that they had to live there. They'd get houses and farms and all that. And when they moved there they just got shells of houses. Just shells. And a farm? It's one goat. Because most of them ended up eating their goats. Because Eskasoni was not farmland. It was rocky. And when people when the Grand Chief left he left with his family. And most of the families left. There were about 7 families left here. My father didn't want to move. He stayed here. And when people moved, they vacated their houses, people were hired to burn them so they wouldn't move back. And they did that to the school.

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Did you have to milk the cows?

I'd milk the cows, yes—lot's of them. Before we went to school, too.

So did I.

And weed gardens?

Everything you do on a farm.

They had a butchers shop, too where they...

We shipped cattle to the Sydney area. Lambs and pigs and cattle.

So they slaughtered a lot of animals and took them to Sydney where they were sold to stores.

Lambs and all that stuff.

Do you miss the farm at all?

Do I miss it? Not one bit. It was too much work.

w

I was 3 going on 4 when they took me to Residential School because they didn't have any school here. And my father wanted us to go to school and my mother got sick with tuberculosis and she had to be taken to the hospital. And my dad worked in the village, at Watkins. It was the undertakers. And the gas station, he used to work there, worked there for ages. And he couldn't look after us. Even though I have an older sister and she was just married and starting to have her kids. My mother didn't want her to look after us. J. used to be my friend—she's still my friend! She used to be in Whycocomagh. Her family didn't go to residential school but they moved to Eskasoni and they moved back. They stayed in Eskasoni about 3 months or something like that. She said "I thought you were so smart!" because my mother was always involved in stuff. They started a Homemakers Club, her and J.'s mother. They started a Homemakers Club for the church fundraising and they used to use me as a bingo caller. And I used to impress J. that I knew the numbers! I'll have her tell that story sometime. Back then being able to talk English you thought you were very smart because they didn't value our language. I'm glad that when I came back I was able to catch on. [...] Thanks to the community I got my language back. It seems to me now it's hard for me to talk English. Or speak English!

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Have you heard about the mineral springs?

Are they still there?

They're not hard to find. If you go up Milford Road, you're gonna come to a steep curve in the road but there's a little old road that goes off of there. You have to walk. There's a gully or a hollow. If you go down there, the water just bubbles and gurgles out of the ground. It's really salty.

People used to come from all over North America here...

Rheumatism.

...back in the 1800s and bathe in them,

Yeah.

In those mineral salts. They thought it was a spa cure.

Is it warm?

Warm?

Oh no, these are just natural...cold.

Oh yes, people used to come in here to get jugs of that stuff. They found it was a great cure.

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Growing up I never knew of us going to a grocery store to go get groceries because we had everything from the garden, from the trees, and in the summertime we'd go pick blueberries and strawberries. All those berries. My mother used to preserve. The only time I remember going to Co-op is when they would get feed for the horses. We used to go to the Co-op where the wharf is now in the village. That's where the old Co-op used to be. There's one wharf in the village. We'd go there and there used to be a movie theatre in the village, too. They used to give us a quarter. Used to cost a quarter to go in. You know where Father Robert used to live? In the village? Was around there, anyway. We used to walk to the village. My dad would go to the village and sometimes he would get odd jobs—digging ditches, moving outhouses and stuff like that. And I would go with him. I remember when we used to go to the village. I must have had a snotty nose all the time. Because I remember soon as we almost got to the village he would clean my nose. His hands were rough.

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We were lucky we were able to maintain a primary school here. Like, some communities lost everything. They had no school period. And they'd have to ship...

And that's a big thing in a small community to have a school because it's the only way you can build a community population-wise. Because if there is no school people will tend to shy away from the area.

Look at Orangedale. It had its own school, post office...

When we first moved here.



When we first moved here Orangedale had its own school. They came here in grade six?

Seven.

In grade seven they came over here to the high school but they had their own tight community over there with their own school, their own post office.

w

Did you know Alexander Graham Bell wanted to live in Whycomagh? He wanted to buy the island and he was refused land because he was an atheist. At that time the minister was in charge of land allocations, or owned land, or was in charge of sales. So Bell went to the manse. He was asked what church he belonged too. He replied, "None, I am an atheist." And the minister said, "There is no land for sale in Whycomagh!"

*[what]*

I'm like Dad. Dad says everyday when he goes outside, "it's a good day to be home." And if he goes anywhere else, he says, "it would be a good day to be home." So it's always a good day to be here. And I kind of feel the same way. I'd rather be here. It's just so beautiful.

w

I remember years back I was in Baddeck, and someone came in from Germany on the bus and they was, "How did you ever live here with no rye bread?" And, well, you can buy it now in the stores. Changed a lot. So in Sobey's you get German bread, you know. But I get my bread from New Brunswick. There's a German bakery. I call up and then they ship it up. I put it in the freezer. Last time I ordered 20. And we freeze them and we take them out and when it is thawed I re-bake them for 15 minutes, so then we have fresh bread! I never hardly buy toast bread.

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There is a pull. It's like, I would not hesitate to leave but there would be parts that would always want to come back. But I definitely would move to a town.

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Today the poor young fellas have to go away to get work. We have three grandsons in Fort McMurray. And the oldest boy has a very good job. And the second boy is a chartered accountant and he went back when he was 24, 25 and got his CA. The youngest boy he works for a car dealership in Fort McMurray. So they all have to leave. A lot of men from Whycomagh have gone out to Fort McMurray to get work 'cause there's no work here.

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Well, we enjoy it here. It's not like going to the city. Getting pushed around. Travel at your own free will here.

I guess it's like any typical small community. Years ago you didn't have to lock doors; you trusted all your neighbours.

Now you lock your doors.

Now you lock your doors.

Our biggest problem here is this bunch over here. They come over here in the nighttime and root everything apart and see what they can take.

Broke into 2 trailers last week.

Yeah they tried to steal our barbeque last week. [...]

There's a lot of nice Indians.

There are. But some of the ones who move in can't be placed in the same category. And I think, as with all youth today, it's a challenge. So things happen.

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There's a good relationship between the reserve and village. They have long been separate, but it's a better relationship than in some other areas.

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There's a history of a huge divide between the reservation and the village. There needs to be some awareness and understanding of why, in this century, the divide is still there.

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I personally have not been much affected by racial discrimination from people here. On Cape Breton Island, generally speaking, the Scottish settlers came from an oppressive context themselves. I think this explains my experience of having faced less racial discrimination than people receive from their non-Native neighbours in other parts of Canada. But know that there is a divide. For example, there used to be a law that after 6 p.m. non-Natives weren't allowed on reservations. So laws prevented social interaction. It also helped preserve language and religion, which is critical. The [Mi'kmaq] language is in a state of crisis.

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It's separate. It's always been separate. Its like, I don't know. It's always been separate. I don't like talking bad about the people in the village, but there's a lot of prejudice. And you can feel it when you go there. You don't have to be told. People feel it. But there are some, you know, who are not prejudiced. But I know there are a lot who are.

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People marry non-Indians. There are a lot of white people living on reserve. They got new houses and all that. I don't treat them any different. We're accepting people. Some of us are. There are others...Indians can be prejudiced themselves.

w

I don't like to talk bad about people, but there was a lot of prejudice. So when I did the Canada World Youth program after high school, I didn't tell anyone I was Native. I passed as non-Native, because I didn't want to be treated differently. [...] My partner has done some workshops on colonial trauma. I think it's helped. It probably helps that she is an outsider. I mean, you still hear names like "squaw" and "wagon-burner." I didn't even know what that meant! But as people get older and go, and there is more understanding, it gets better.

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The only commerce is on the village side and yet there are more people living on this side that contribute to that commerce as consumers. It's not right to see the enterprise there and not here. If it was a level playing field this wouldn't be the case. In Membertou [a reservation in the Sydney area] they have developed business and commerce, including a busy convention centre and hotel. This pattern could be reversed as it was in Sydney and in Membertou where non-Natives are utilizing services provided by Native communities. We are not less than. The truth is that all people, given the same opportunities will have the same results. Some opportunities have not been given to Aboriginal people.

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Where the village is, that all used to be native land. It's still in the courts, the land claims. People don't necessarily understand that. And it's not recognized or acknowledged. So it's a sore point.  
I don't know if they think we'd kick them out or what.

w

Do you like living in Whycomogagh, L.?

Yeah.

What do you like about it?

I don't know. It's just like you're close enough to everyone. And most of your friends and cousins are around here and grew up here.

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I guess, you know when your family has lived in the same place for 6 or 7 generations that there's a sense of family and history and that's about it. Like so many families to day they move around they don't know where to call home.

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Jesus, the people here are great. Super nice to me, always popping by. Good spot. Good vibe here, too. It's like an un-broadcasted magnetic pull to people to come here. Like you know, have you been to the Mabou Farmer's Market yet? I mean, all those people are around here. I mean there's Organic Chicken Guy, there's the Killer German Baker out in River Denys. It's like there's food everywhere, but it's kind of underground. But it's coming, it's coming.

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Did you know this is a UFO hotspot?

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That's the thing about small town Cape Breton is that unless you were born and raised and have about 3 generations behind you, it's not home. Yeah. But we certainly have made it our home.

Yeah, yeah very much so. I mean, we're part of the fabric here now.

Yeah

I mean we've been here...

33 years

And we've raised 2 children here, and we've both held jobs, very involved in community activities, church, all of those regular things that, yeah...

Yeah...we might not have been born here, but we're here.

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The government was hesitant to support a residential facility given the history of residential schools. We've only been able to support people with disabilities in this community since 2007, when Mawita'mk opened this house. Before that the family was the main support network. E. had no family, so that's why he eventually went to [an institution].

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It's always just a rush [going to Sydney]. Get in and get out. Because there's basically nothing, there's nothing in Port Hawkesbury anymore. There's nothing here. If you need shoes—Wal-Mart shoes kill my feet—I can't wear Wal-Mart shoes. So it's like an hour and a half or booking a spree to get to Halifax to get some half-decent variety.

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In the city it's easier to be who you are. There's so much diversity. I could be myself. And being two-spirited as well...it's not something I could always do. But what I missed was the community—being able to knock on a neighbour's door and ask for a cup of sugar or some milk. You can't do that there. People only come together during disasters—like White Juan. I really noticed that.

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They would love to stay here. Both of them really want to stay here. But there're no options here.

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Some people think welfare...you know...they look at it like we're being paid for our land. They really believe that. That's why they don't care, getting welfare. A non-Native getting welfare, they don't like that—it's a handout. But most of the people that I know that get welfare think it's repayment for our land. Because we were never compensated. Myself? I see it as welfare. I used to be on welfare. I used to be the welfare clerk, too! When there're no jobs you know you got to look for welfare, feed your family. A lot of people are able to budget. I don't know how they do it.

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So, I mean we've been really fortunate that in 30+ years we still have the same family doctor. Granted, the service has declined a bit because those doctors used to come to the community on a weekly basis. They would offer a weekly clinic in the community but they don't do that anymore. But we're still a 35-40 minutes drive away from a hospital facility. So that's a worry for us now. Especially that N. is getting into his senior years...but really it is and it's something that we talk about quite a bit: how are we going to maintain our lifestyle here because now we're getting older we're going to have to drive for medical appointments. I wouldn't be surprised if in the next 5-8 years the Royal Bank will be gone. Because they'll be able to whatever they need to do with a banking machine. The post office will be another thing that will probably be eliminated.

We don't know that.

Well, I think there's a trend out there, though within the next 5-10 years, anyway. So what does that mean for seniors having to travel for services? And if we know, we know that the demographic is going to be senior-based in Cape Breton and that over the next 10-15 years the average age is going to be late 60s. So, who's going to take care of us? Umm hmmm. So we dream about moving to more central areas like Antigonish or Truro, into these, you know, good sized towns that aren't anywhere near the size of a city, but offer everything that you want or need and you'd be able to walk to get what you needed.

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Everybody looks out for each other. If E. wasn't doing well, someone would say something. Someone would speak up. People don't like this—the downside that people complain about is people being in your business, knowing everything. But the positive is that we are looking out for each other.

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It's been a very interesting place to live. I think that anyone you would talk to would probably say the same about any small town. Not even town, village. I don't think you could even classify it as a village. I'm not sure what the classification is.

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Thank you to the many members of the We'koqma'q and Whycocomagh communities who generously shared their thoughts, stories and time for this project.

Aislinn Thomas, 2013