If you only heard of it and never had it, you could hardly take it all in, could you?
—Northeast Harbour postmistress

ABSTRACT. This paper describes a syndrome of psychological and physical symptoms involving body paralysis and hallucinations traditionally interpreted in Newfoundland as an attack of 'Old Hag'. Folk theories of cause and treatment are outlined based on 13 months of field research in a community on the northeast coast of Newfoundland. Data derived from the responses of 69 adults to the Cornell Medical Index (CMI) indicate that there are no significant differences in psychological or physical illness complaints between adults who have experienced the Old Hag and adults who have not had this experience. The striking similarity between the Old Hag experience and a clinical condition called sleep paralysis is analyzed, and the implications of viewing the Old Hag as sleep paralysis are discussed within the context of current theoretical issues in transcultural psychiatry.

INTRODUCTION

There is a set of psychological and physical experiences involving paralysis of arms and legs, as well as hallucinations, which have traditionally been interpreted in Newfoundland as a syndrome called the 'Old Hag' or 'ag rog'. The broad purpose of this paper is to present a description and analysis of this phenomenon. Within this context, the objectives of this report are four-fold. First, an ethnographic description of the Old Hag phenomenon based on extensive interviewing within a Newfoundland coastal community is presented. Second, the ethnographic description is followed by an analysis of the Old Hag in terms of the clinical syndrome called sleep paralysis. Third, the relationship between attacks of the Old Hag and other sets of physical and emotional complaints is explored by analyzing illness complaint scores derived from the Cornell Medical Index (Brodman et al. 1949). Finally, the implications of viewing the Old Hag as sleep paralysis are discussed within the context of current theoretical issues in transcultural psychiatry. The paper concludes with a review of issues raised by the Old Hag phenomenon which require further research.

THE RESEARCH SETTING

The information presented in this report was collected during 13 months (May 1973—June 1974) of field research in Northeast Harbour, a community of approximately 400 people on the northeast coast of Newfoundland. The first
permanent European settlers in Northeast Harbour, primarily second-generation immigrants from 'west-country' England, moved into this community from other areas of Newfoundland in the late 19th century to exploit the coastal fishing banks. Until recently most men in Northeast Harbour supported their families by selling codfish, herring, mackerel, and salmon. During the winter months (December through April) many individuals turned to sealing or 'woods work' with a lumber company to supplement their incomes. Inheritance of property and patterns of residence continue to reflect strong patrilineal and patrilocal themes characteristic of Newfoundland fishing settlements.

In the early 1960's several decisions by the provincial government and business interests to promote the economic development of northern Newfoundland initiated a series of construction projects that have had a profound impact on the occupational structure of coastal communities like Northeast Harbour. In 1964 a road was completed which provided easy access to larger towns from these previously isolated communities. By 1973 about 70 percent of the men from Northeast Harbour were commuting to work at a copper mine 14 miles away. The road also improved access to a regional health center, located 30 miles from Northeast Harbour, which opened in 1964. Medical services provided by this facility, in addition to the non-prescription drugs obtained at local stores and Pentecostal faith-healing practiced in the community, represent the major forms of health care utilized by people in Northeast Harbour as they cope with the effects of illness and injury (Ness 1976).

INDIGENOUS PERSPECTIVES ON THE OLD HAG

This section describes the Old Hag or 'ag rog' experience and indigenous theories about its etiology and treatment within Northeast Harbour, based on reports supplied by (a) 43 adults who had experienced an attack of the Old Hag, (b) seven individuals who had witnessed attacks of the Old Hag and (c) 26 adults who knew about the Old Hag but had not experienced it.1

Victims of an attack of the Old Hag typically report that they suddenly awake feeling unable to move or speak. This experience is reported to occur most frequently shortly after falling asleep. Concurrent with the paralysis, victims often feel as though a heavy weight is pressing on their chest. Some victims report seeing the figure of an animal or human astride their chest. People who have experienced the Old Hag insist they are fully conscious during the attack and can see or hear other people in the household. In spite of strenuous efforts to overcome their feeling of paralysis, they remain unable to move until someone touches or shakes them or calls their name.

Informants who have had attacks of the Old Hag report profuse sweating and feelings of exhaustion when the experience ends. Victims say that an attack may