

Commercial Salmon Fishing

The highway from Gaspé, after crossing the frontage of the Cass, and Annett Farms and the wooden bridge over the Mill Brook ran past the farms of the Davis, Patterson, and Suddard families. It then rose over the Cannon Hill where the local school was located. To the west of the hill, it crossed the lands of the Coffin families before it entered a wooded portage leading to the North West or Pointe Navarre. Just off the highway on the side of the cove were the fishing stations and ice-houses of the various local families. That of the Annett's was typical. It consisted of a rough, unpainted ice-house and packing shed set above the level of the highest tide in the shadow of the bank. The flats used to fish the nets were anchored off the landing in front and linked to the shore by a long rope at the stern which allowed them to swing freely in an arc dictated by wind and tide. The bar net of the salmon stand started some 100 feet offshore and ran at right angles to the shoreline to the trap or peche. Between the packing shed, which faced on the slab road leading to the Pointe, and the outlet of the Mill Brook was a shelf of level land where the nets not in use could be hung to dry on trestles made of poles and where the flats could be hauled out of the water and repaired as need arose. From this fishing station a footpath led up the bank by the Mill Brook to the highway.

In the early spring of each year tons of snow were hauled and slid down a wooden chute into the opening in the roof of the ice house. When the building was filled to the eaves the mass of snow was covered with a thick layer of wood shavings and straw to insulate it from the summer heat. The thick double walls of the ice-houses were similarly insulated. When the filling was complete the only access to the packed mass of snow was by means of a heavy door reached through the packing shed. In summer fish fresh from the water were buried in the snow until taken home for the table or to Gaspé for sale. During the smelt fishing season in the Fall the little fish were packed in snow in wooden boxes then taken to the railway station for transport to the fish markets of Boston and New York. These boxes were of standard size and were assembled in the packing shed from a stock of pre-cut pieces. As a box was filled with smelt and snow its cover was nailed on and the shipping address stenciled on with a stencil provided by the fish dealer. In addition to the address each box had to be marked as to the particular grade of fish as determined by size. The grade commanding the highest price was Extra, followed by No. 1 and the like.

A minor but memorable use of the snow in the icehouse was to make ice cream for family use or for sales of the ladies' guild. The hand-turned ice cream freezer had a space between its outer wooden and inner metal containers that had to be kept filled with a mixture of salt and snow as the freezer was turned. As a boy I was always ready to turn the freezer for this gave me some claim to prior serving of the finished product.

Some of the six fishing stations very similar to ours that I have described were located at some distance from each other around the rim of the cove.

The fishing that our family and neighbours depended on for a significant part of their cash income was seasonal and well-integrated with the on-going farming activities. Salmon were fished in late May, June and early August. Then after the busy farm period of hay-making and harvest had passed came the time of smelt fishing in September and October. A government license was required to fish a stand of salmon nets but there was no such requirement for the fishing of smelt.

Salmon fishing was a remarkably artisanal and self-contained operation. During the winter months the nets were knit by hand, in our case in the kitchen loft. The hanks of strong linen twine were placed on a home-made revolving rack and from it the hand-carved hardwood net needles were filled. Wooden forms were used to determine the size of the mesh and ensure uniformity. When the required of fathoms of net had been knit a head rope, with corks at regular intervals to provide buoyancy was attached along the top and a foot rope with lead sinkers was added to the bottom to finish the net. The next vital process was tanning which was done in the old tin pot mentioned earlier. Each fisherman had a particular formula for the tanning liquid which would ensure protection for the net from the salt and slime of the water of the Bay. I recall that cutch and blue-stone were two important ingredients used by the Annett men in tanning their nets. The tanning brew was mixed and heated to the boiling point, the nets immersed in it for a specified time and then hung along the farm fence to dry in the sun.

The trap-net or peche was used to take the salmon live for hatchery purposes was too complex to make at home. It was purchased from a marine supply firm and represented a major investment. This net with its smaller mesh and floor was designed so that the salmon swam into the inner compartment or head of the net where they could find no way of escape. The trap or peche was set at the seaward end of a long bar net with its triangular points fastened at the top and bottom to long wooden poles. When the ropes fastening the traps were unfastened the floor could be hauled up near enough to the surface so that salmon could be seen and removed with the aid of a dip-net.

How well I remember the many times I went fishing with Dad to tend the nets: he would row off in the flat along the bar-net to the head of the peche. It was always a thrill to see salmon, fresh from the ocean, swimming about there. To remove them and transfer them without loss to the low wooden pontoon supplied by the hatchery called for skill, strength and some luck. The dip net with its long wooden handle was brought into play to scoop the elusive fish from the trap and lift them, slippery and struggling, to the open door in the deck of the pontoon. Though the average salmon ran about 25 pounds in weight the occasional fish might reach 40 pounds or more. To lose any fish during the transfer operation was to see money lost. Needless to say, few salmon escaped as the fishermen were skilled and serious.

To withstand the mighty forces of current, tide, wind and storm, the nets were anchored in place by massive killicks and anchors. The killick was a heavy slab of stone wedged between to tough hardwood

stakes set in a sturdy wooden claw. Once set in place and marked by wooden buoys the killicks could withstand great strains. By the end of the fishing season, they would be embedded so firmly that a capstan had to be used to dislodge them and bring them ashore for storage.

The long bar-net was designed to be a barrier for the salmon on their way from the sea to the Dartmouth River. The fish would follow the barrier out to the trap net. On occasion one would attempt to force its way through the bar-net and be caught by the gills. These fish were used for food at the homestead or taken to Gaspé to be sold. Every morning during the fishing season the nets had to be cleaned of the slime and floating debris from the lumber mill that collected. Under certain circumstances a green slime would coat the nets, ropes and buoys with a covering that had to be beaten off with a hardwood flail. It was hard, dirty work to keep a stand of nets clean and in good condition. An ever-present threat was posed by drifting logs that had escaped from the lumber booms. At any time-of-day emergency action might be required if such debris drifted into the stand and threatened to carry the nets away. Summer after summer during my boyhood Dad fished our salmon stand in addition to the summer work of the farm which was always waiting his return from the nets.

In addition to the income from the live salmon the fishing had some fringe benefits for the homestead table. Young salmon or grilse and fine sea trout were found regularly in the trap net and provided many a good meal. Lobster also found their way into the nets and the larger ones were brought home and boiled. Lyng, a relative of the cod fish was delicious when it was fried fresh from the water. Flounder, poules d'eau and crab were generally considered as fit only to be dumped out of the net as of no value.

June was normally the best month for salmon. Later in the season the composition of the water changed and the fish tended to move directly from the sea to the river. By mid-July the nets would be taken up, left to dry for some time along the fences, then stored away. During the season the live salmon in the pontoons were towed away daily by Allie Cass to the salmon pool on the York River above tide-water. Each afternoon Allie would start with his boat to call at each stand to collect the pontoons which were moored near the trap nets. Once or twice Lloyd and I would be invited to accompany him on his overnight trip. This was a big adventure for us. We would take blankets for the night in the snug cabin of Allie's boat and a supply of food. Leaving the cove with the pontoons of the Cass and Annett stands in tow we would head out the Bay past the Point to the next port of call at the Patterson stand off Battery Park. Our route then lay into Gaspé Basin where we would stop to collect the fish from George Richmond's stand near St Paul's Anglican Church. From the head of the South West Arm onwards the meandering channel of the York River made for difficult navigation. Before the light faded Allie would anchor for the night and we would cook supper. At dawn we were on our way again navigating by the markers driven into the edges of the river channel. Finally our goal, the old covered bridge between Sunnybank and Upper Wakeham would come into view. Just upstream from the bridge a branch of the river had been penned off to provide a large retaining pool for the salmon. The pontoons were floated in this pool and the salmon removed to find relative freedom in the fresh water. By the end of the fishing season hundreds of fish would be concentrated here in the tree shaded pool of the pond. Dad always enjoyed taking visitors to see these salmon. If conditions were right the fish would frequently leap clear

of the surface in an attempt to catch flies. Our delivery made; Allie would start on the return trip towing the empty pontoons for return to the fishing stands.