

GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY

GASPESIA AS SEEN BY AN EMIGRANT

AND SPORTSMAN

Observations and comments on travel in
GASPESIA by John J. Rowan in the 1870's

KEN ANNETT

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PREFACE

More than a century ago, in the 1870's, an English emigrant and sportsman, John J. Rowan, wrote a book of some four hundred pages, entitled:

THE EMIGRANT AND SPORTSMAN IN CANADA - SOME EXPERIENCES OF AN OLD COUNTRY SETTLER - WITH SKETCHES OF CANADIAN LIFE, SPORTING ADVENTURES AND OBSERVATIONS ON THE FORESTS AND FAUNA. This book was published in London, England in 1876 by Edward Stanford, 55 Charing Cross, S.W. As copies are now relatively rare, GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY presents below, some extracts that may be of particular interest to Gaspesians of the late 20th century.

Following a visit to Anticosti Island that was reflected in a full chapter of interesting observations, the author returned to Québec City where he entrained on the newly built Intercolonial Railway en route to Matapedia. Let us now take up his story as he enters Gaspesian land-space at St.Flavie:

"After leaving St.Flavie, the Intercolonial plunges into the wilderness, and from thence to the Restigouche runs through one of the wildest and most uninhabitable districts in all Canada. The scenery here would be very fine were it not that the whole surface of the country has been devastated by fire. This wanton destruction, besides deforming the face of nature and wasting immense quantities of valuable timber, will probably cost the Canadian Government large sums every winter. In the green forest there is little or no drift. When it is burnt the snow piles up to an almost incredible extent, and nothing short of costly snowsheds in all the levels and cuttings will tend to keep the line clear in winter....

The Metapedia lake is a fine sheet of water, about the centre of the peninsula. All this region bears traces of ice action. In the bed of the lake and on its shores the course of immense boulders may be traced for many yards by their furrows in the solid

rock. The only habitable land in the whole of this district lies round the Metepedia lake, and is locked out from settlement. The old seigniory of Metepedia has somehow or other got into the hands of a Yankee speculator, and the consequence of this is that the whole shore of the lake, which has a circumference of 20 to 30 miles, and would support a thriving settlement, is monopolized by a foreigner or by foreigners. The railroad runs along the shore of this wild and pretty lake, and then follows the course of the river of the same name for 35 or 40 miles. The parallel terraces on this river are the most perfect I have ever seen. Frequently three and even four of these steps or terraces may be seen at each side of the stream, of corresponding form and equal altitude. This is a wild and rapid stream. Its rocky banks, bristling with charred cedar and spruce trees, rise sheer up to a height of several hundred feet. The Intercolonial winds under them along the river's edge. At the mouth of the Metepedia is the charmingly situated residence of Mr. Dan Fraser, whose kindness and hospitality to sportsmen, in those days when his comfortable and beautiful homestead constituted the last outpost of civilization, will be long remembered from one end of Canada to the other.

THE ROYAL MAIL

For many years the mails were carried once a week from the St. Lawrence to the Restigouche by dog sled. The Indian who drove the team had to walk, backwards and forwards, a distance of over 200 miles in six days. This was not bad walking for a continuance, along a mere track (there was no road at that time) through snow and ice and rough forest. Yet I knew a man who never missed the trip during a whole winter.

After a road was built (Ref.- GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY - THE KEMPT ROAD - SPEC 11 NOV. 1980) the mail was carried by "stage". I travelled it once or twice in this way, and I sincerely hope that I may never have to do so again. The stage horses were overworked and half-starved. The conveyance was a buck-board, a trap peculiar to Lower Canada. My driver on one of these occasions was the most accomplished swearer I ever met in a hard-swearing country. One horse dropped dead in the shafts, and the oaths of the driver, who had before then "sworn as steep" as any white

man in America, became now positively appalling. I wonder why stage drivers as a rule use such fearful language.....

BAY CHALEUR

Crossing the Restigouche just below the mouth of the Metapedia, the Intercolonial runs along the bank of the former river down to the Bay of Chaleur. There are many charming places in the Dominion, but I know of none to equal the Bay of Chaleur in the summer and autumn. Hitherto it has been shut out from the world, but now it is probable that many tourists in search of health, of sport or of beautiful scenery, will find their way here. To the half-baked American it offers a delicious summer climate, cool and bracing, with unrivalled sea-bathing; to the lover of the picturesque it offers wild and lovely scenery; while for the sportsman it has many charms. The rivers are full of salmon; trout of the largest size and the finest quality abound in every stream, lake and pond. In the Spring and Fall the bays are black with wild fowl; and large game, though not so plentiful as formerly, are still to be found deep in the forest. Hotels have yet to be built; but the sportsman, if not very fastidious, will get fair accommodation wherever he goes, and will meet with a rough and ready hospitality for which the settlers in the back parts of Canada are famous.....

The Bay of Chaleur is not without a history. It received its name from the discoverer, Jacques Cartier, who dropped anchor in its quiet waters on a hot July day, in the year 1534. Had he arrived three months later or three months earlier, it would now be known by some other name. Jacques Cartier left it in undisturbed possession of the Indians, and it was not settled by whites for a century later, when a band of Acadians, probably fugitives from Port Royal, established themselves at Bathurst. This country then formed part of the seigniory of Gaspesia, belonging to M. Denys. (Ref. GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY - #039 -THE DENYS FAMILY and #175 1688 CENSUS - BAY CHALEUR) In 1638 there was war between the Mohawks and Micmacs, in which the former were victorious and the Acadians of Bathurst had to flee for their lives to the Isle of St. John (P.E.I.) In 1670 they returned and resumed possession of their land, from which they were again driven away by the Mohawks in 1692. A Portion of them, however, having formed an alliance with the Micmacs, remained and established themselves at Petite

Rochelle, on the Restigouche (i.e. Cross Point)

THE PETITE ROCHELLE STORY

In 1760 an effort was made by the French to retake Québec, and a fleet destined to assist in that enterprise made its way into the St. Lawrence. To avoid a collision with the British fleet, it took refuge in the Bay of Chaleur - a doubly disastrous move, which involved not only its destruction, but also that of Petite Rochelle, which, hid away up the Restigouche, might otherwise have escaped; for Captain Byron, with five English frigates from Louisburg, followed close on the heels of the French, who took shelter under the batteries at Petite Rochelle, and after a severe engagement captured or sunk the whole of the enemy's fleet, consisting of four frigates, two or three privateers, and twenty-two store-ships. The village, containing about 200 houses, was burnt, and the Acadians were again homeless. The site of Petite Rochelle is nearly obliterated by the spruce trees, the weeds of this country; a few cellars and stone chimneys alone remaining. Cannon, muskets, shot, and shell, have been dug up in some quantities, and are kept as trophies by the neighbouring settlers. Not long ago two bottles of French brandy were found by a fortunate individual. Off Bourdo Point, so called after M. Bourdo, the French Commander, who was buried there, the hull of a French frigate lies embedded in the sand. The iron has rusted away, but the oak timbers are still sound.

FABULOUS FISH - SALMON

The Indian name of the Bay of Chaleur is "Echeetan Nemachii", or sea of fishes. There is probably no other expanse of water in the world of the same extent in which the finny tribes exist in such multitudes and in such variety. It is a favourite resort of the SALMONIDAE, a species that delights in pure, clean water, in rough and rapid rivers. This is essentially the nature of the rivers in this region, which flow through an uncultivated and rocky country, and in which the Salmonidae find beds to deposit their spawn safe from molestation. Both salmon and trout are particularly large and fine. At the head of the bay, more especially at the Canadian side, salmon average 20 lbs in weight. The fishery is a

very important and lucrative business here; it commences on the 1st of June, and lasts for two months. During that short period I have known one fisherman take 20,000 lbs weight of salmon, which at 6 cents would amount to \$1200. It is hard to estimate the total amount exported from the bay, but it must be very large. The greater part of it is manufactured in tins. One American firm puts up as much as 280,000 lbs. in a season. Lobsters are manufactured in the same way; they are worth about \$1 per hundred here. Herring abound in countless shoals. Anyone not familiar with northern waters will suspect me of romancing when I say that I have seen 600 barrels taken in one sweep of a seine net. Often sufficient salt cannot be procured to save them, and they are used as manure. An American schooner struck a school of mackerel in the bay at 8 o'clock in the morning, and before midnight, fishing with hook and line, the crew had 100 barrels caught and cured. Fish are destroyed and wasted in the most reckless way, but the supply never fails. For a week in the spring of the year smelts run up the rivers in one unceasing stream. It is an astonishing sight to paddle down the Restigouche at this season and see the farmers "smelting" - scooping up the little fish in hand-nets. The amount they take is incredible, and most of the potatoes grown near the river spring from this fishy manure. Now that the railway is completed, fish of all kinds can be sent to market in ice, and the value of the fisheries is consequently much enhanced.

White porpoises (*Delphinus Leucus*) visit the bay in considerable numbers every summer. These huge monsters, measuring from 25 to 30 feet in length, go in shoals, probably in pursuit of the salmon, and may be seen from a great distance disporting themselves on the surface of the water. I am told that one of these fish will yield oil to the value of \$100, yet no means of capturing them has yet been devised. I have mentioned a few of the principal fishes, but all other varieties known in the Gulf of St. Lawrence are represented in proportionate numbers. Even in the depths of winter, fish can be procured in large quantities. At this season, at the mouth of the Restigouche, dozens of Indian boys earn their livelihood by fishing through the ice with hook and line for sea trout, and spearing eels, tommy-cod and smelts. The cod fishery in the bay is almost wholly in the hands of Jersey firms, who have been established on this coast for one hundred years. Their establishments at Paspediac, at Percé,

and at Caraquette, are models of system and order. In the fishing season they employ thousands of men and boats, and ship the cured fish direct to Europe, the West Indies and Brazil.....

SALMON CANNING

Hitherto the salmon caught in the Bay of Chaleur has been put up in hermetically sealed tins for exportation. Several firms have been engaged at this business, some of them manufactured as much as 200,000 lbs. weight of salmon in the season. It is a pretty sight to see the fish coming in of a morning. Canoe after canoe discharges its load of silvery beauties fresh out of the nets. Sometimes in the early part of the season whole canoe loads will average 25 lbs. each, and I have seen fish here up to 56 lbs. in weight. As the fish come in, they are at once prepared, and pass through a good many hands before they are done up in the tins with which we are all familiar. The first man into whose hands the fish comes lays it on a bench and scrapes off the scales; the next opens and cleans it, washing it in a cistern provided for the purpose; the third cuts the fish into junks of the thickness of the length of the tin. All this is done in an outhouse or shed, but the pieces are now passed into the workshop, where they are further cut up, weighed, and packed into the tins by a succession of hands. Another man wipes the tins and passes them on to have the covers fitted on. In each of these covers a small hole is punched. The solderers next receive the cases, and seal them up carefully, including the hole in the cover. They are now packed in perforated trays and passed out of the workshop through a trap-door to the boiling house, where they undergo a certain amount of boiling. The trays are then raised out of the boilers, and as each one comes out of the water, a tinsmith applies a hot iron to the soldered hole in the lid of the tin. The solder melts and the heated air fizzes out. The instant this air has escaped, a second tinsmith finally seals up the aperture. The cases are then doused in cold water and passed into the storeroom, where they are painted, labelled, and packed for exportation.

But now that the Intercolonial railroad is completed, salmon will be too valuable to put up in tins; it will pay the fishermen much better to send them fresh to market. Hitherto the price of salmon in this country has been from 2d to 3d (pence) a pound.

Fresh salmon is worth at least a shilling in the cities of Canada. There are two ways of sending salmon fresh to market. When the time taken in transition does not exceed two or three days, they are packed in boxes with broken ice, or better still with snow. Collecting and storing these packing materials is not a great labour in this country. Snow is considered the better of the two. It is collected in wooden sheds with double walls and roofs, with a vacuum between the outer and inner one. As the snow is put in, it is tramped down, and in this state there is no trouble in preserving it all summer. The other way of sending fish to market has the advantage that by it fish may be kept perfectly fresh for almost any length of time, and can be held up like wheat until the market is high. The fish in this case are frozen solid. By the kindness of one of the owners of these great refrigerators, I was allowed to see the process. The fish when brought in are exposed to a temperature of about 30 degrees of frost. This intense cold is caused by packing a freezing mixture, the main ingredients of which are crushed ice and salt, into a chamber which surrounds the fish about to be frozen. Between 300 and 400 can be frozen at a time. A fish requires about an hour's time to freeze for each pound that it weighs. Not only are they frozen perfectly solid, but they are coated with ice. They are then removed to a storeroom in which the temperature is kept below the freezing point. The vessels in which they are shipped are supplied with refrigerators, as are also the warehouses at the port of delivery. By this process a fresh salmon from the Bay of Chaleur can be put on the table at Chicago in perfect order a month after it has left its native element. As fresh fish by the Treaty of Washington is allowed to go free to the United States, there ought to be a great deal of money made in the Canadian fisheries. Even in mid-winter, trout, tommy-cod, eels and delicious smelts are taken in great abundance in the Bay of Chaleur, and at this season these fish can be sent frozen to the American market in perfect order, without resorting to any artificial process whatever....

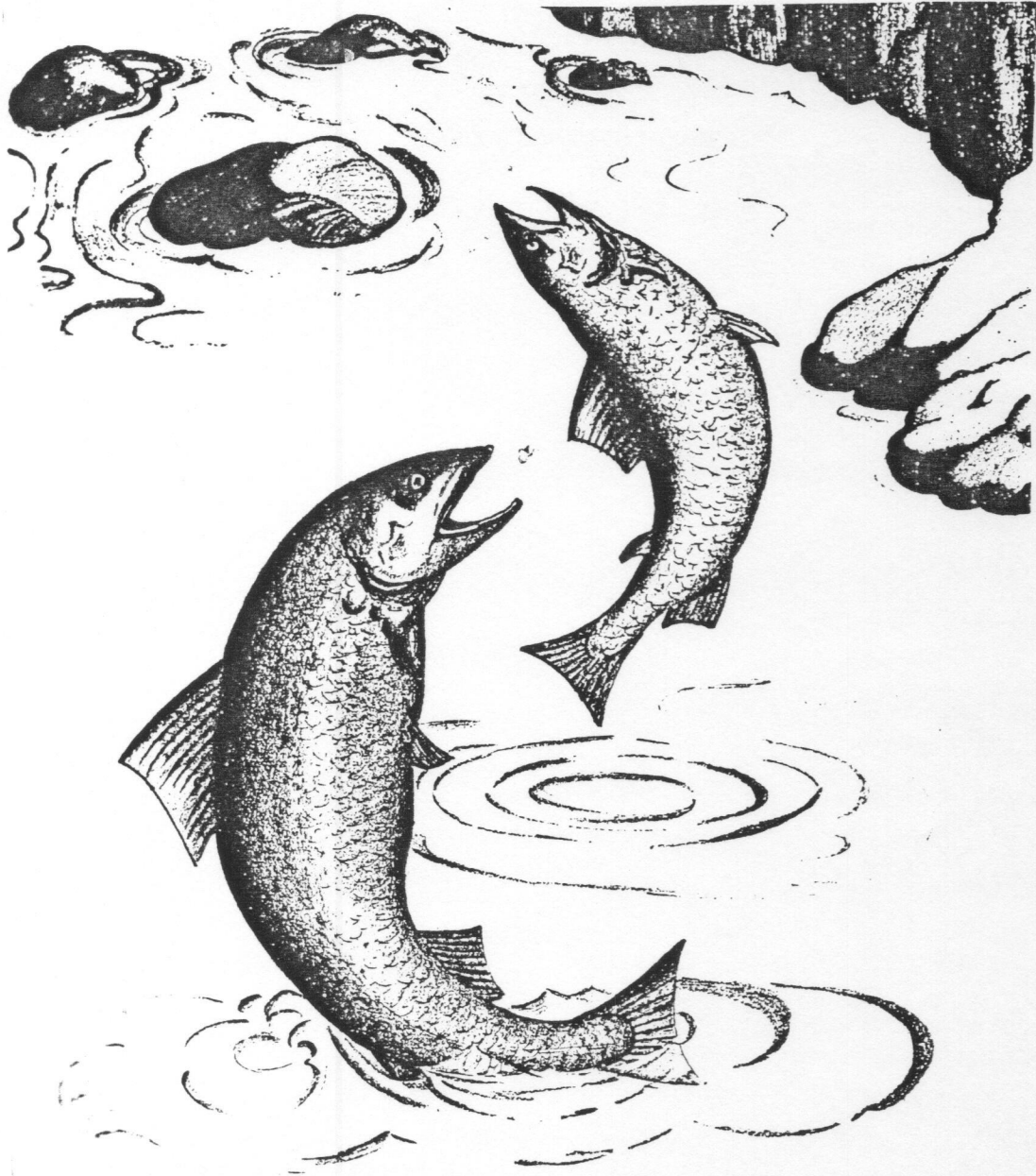
FISH SPECIES

In the rivers and lakes that flow into the Bay of Chaleur there are at least five different species of the Salmonidae:

- * The American salmon (*Salmo salar*) is allowed by naturalists to be identical with the European fish, although its habits are slightly modified by different conditions of climate, etc. In the Bay of Chaleur salmon commence to run into the rivers about the 1st of June. The first fish taken in the nets are medium sized, viz. about 12 or 14 lbs. These are merely skirmishers, and are not taken in numbers. Next comes -commencing from June 7 to June 15 - the main army. In the Restigouche and Cascapedia these fish average over 20 lbs. For two or three days together I have known the average size taken in a net to be as high as 25 lbs., and running up to 40 and even 50 lbs. As the season advances the fish get smaller, with the occasional monster. The grilse commence to run about July 20, and run all August. It is a remarkable thing that in rivers such as the Restigouche and Metapedia, where the adult salmon are particularly large, the grilse are very small, viz. averaging about 3 lbs., and I have taken them as low as 1 lb. Salmon spawn in Canada somewhat earlier than they do at home. In Ireland, where I have had ample opportunities of noticing their habits, I have seldom seen them on the rood much before Christmas. In Restigouche I have killed a gravid fish on the 1st of September, and in October most of them are on the rood. Nature teaches them that the seasons here are shorter. In Canadian rivers, if they put off rooding till December, the action of the ice on the shallow spawning beds would make rooding impossible. Many kelts - probably all the June run - return to the sea in November, or just before the ice makes; the remainder return in April, May, or on the break-up of the ice. Some fish only spawn every second year. I base this assertion upon the fact that I have killed female kelts in the Restigouche as late as the month of August; these fish had probably spawned late in the season of the preceding year, and would most certainly not have been in condition to spawn again before the following year.
- * *Salmo trutta*, which is, I think, identical with the British sea trout. In the Bay of Chaleur the sea trout follow the smelts into the mouths of the rivers in the month of May, and remain in the

- * tideways of the rivers for a considerable time swimming backwards and forwards with the tides and feeding on smelts. They can then be taken with the bait, but will not as a rule rise at the fly. About the head of the tide in the Restigouche river the boys of the country make immense bags of these beautiful fish, which average about 2 lbs. and run as high as 8 lbs. The next time we see *S. trutta* is far up the rivers, generally at the mouth of cold streams, where they lie in the months of July and August for the sake of coolness. The colder the water the more they seem to like it, and in this respect they differ from the *S. salar*, which seems to prefer a moderate temperature. Although an odd sea trout may be taken now and then by the salmon fisher in the lower portions of the rivers, they seem to make little stay after they leave the tideway till they have pushed right up to the mouth of the little rivers in which they mean to spawn. At the mouth of Tracey's Brook on the Restigouche, and at Assamaquagan, Amquag, and other streams on the Metapedia, they take the fly voraciously about the 1st of August.
- * There is another migratory trout that I have met with in the rivers Nouvelle and Escuminac; also, I think, on the extreme head waters of the Miramichi. Its average size is larger than the *S. trutta*, its colour deeper, and the spots more clearly defined, and its habits seem identical with those of *S. salar*.
- * The tooladi (*S. confinis*) I have only seen in the Metapedia lake. It is very like the great lake trout of Scotland and Ireland. It is a non-migratory fish, though in the Metapedia there is no obstruction. It is coarse eating and gives no sport to the angler, though it attains an immense size. I am told by the Indians that they have speared them as high as 30 lbs.
- * The brook trout (*S. fontinalis*). In its habits, food and other particulars there are some remarkable points of difference between this fish and its British congener. In winter they leave the rapid rivers and move either to the tideways or to lakes and deep holes. At the mouth of the Restigouche they are caught in large numbers and of considerable size, through holes in the ice, in the months of February and March; and indeed at all seasons of the year the brook trout are to be caught in the tideways of the Bay of Chaleur rivers. Here they acquire that silvery hue

* which in the old country we associate with the *S. trutta*. Nor is the resemblance between the two species confined to colour alone, for the good feeding they get in the tideways tends to build them up in shape like the sea trout, and even to make the flesh more firm and pink than in brook trout in general. The American brook trout is a more voracious and indiscriminate feeder than his British congener. I have caught them continually with mice and moles in their stomachs. They are cannibals also, for when pulling in a little fellow, about five inches long, in the Causapsacol, it was seized by a monster about 5 lbs. weight. In fact, they eat anything and everything, pork, beef, partridge, fish, mice; nothing comes amiss. I have made my biggest bags on a worn-out old salmon fly, with a junk of pork attached... if there is any fault to be found with trout fishing in the Bay of Chaleur, it is that it is too good....two little rivers, the Nouvelle and Escuminac are famous for the size and quality of their trout. The trout fishing in the latter stream in the month of July is about the best I know of anywhere. This stream, flowing from the snow-clad Shickshock mountains is icy cold and as clear as crystal. Civilized trout would object to rise at a fly under these conditions, but in Escuminac they are not fastidious. On one occasion I counted from the bank six fish lying together behind a little rock; I caught them all one after the other, and was then giving up, when my Indian, who had climbed a little tree close by, sung out, "Try again, more trout come", and sure enough I went on till we had two dozen (quite as many as we were able to carry, as they averaged 3 and 1/2 lbs.)



Salmon