

Sunny Bank, Our Ancestral Home
By Andrew Patterson (1995)

Chapter 1

Where is Sunny Bank, Anyway?

The Gaspé Peninsula, along with the entire Appalachian Mountain Range, was formed during the Paleozoic era about 300 to 500 million years ago. These mountains, which formed the backbone of north-eastern North America, were gradually worn down by rain, snow and glaciers. The final molding was complete when the most recent ice-cap melted about ten to fifteen thousand years ago. Gaspé, with its lofty mountains and rugged sea coast, is regarded by many as one of the most scenic regions of Canada. As it was aptly said in "The Gaspé Peninsula, History, Legends, and Resources," published by the government of Quebec in 1930: "The hills of Cannamara and the vales of Kildare, the forests of Leinster and lakes of Kenmar, Lough Neagh and Banty Bay, the wilds of Connaught and Atrim's rugged shore, the head of Kinsale and the Lasalts Giant's Causeway, are all duplicated in the mountains, valleys and lakes of Canada's wonderland, the Gaspé Peninsula."

The Gaspé area receives primarily a moist continental climate, with certain influences from the near-by Gulf of St. Lawrence. During the cold winter months temperatures drop as low as -35°C (-30°F) and sometimes exceeds 30°C (86°F) in summer. Winters are long and cold, and snow falls in abundance. Well in excess of 150 inches (380 cm) fall annually, bringing almost everything to a standstill during the more severe storms. Clear skies usually prevail in summer, although only June, July and August consistently bring warm weather. The frost-free growing season in most areas is less than 90 days, permitting none but the hardiest of crops to be successfully grown.

Draining into the Gaspé Bay near the tip of the peninsula are three small rivers, the Dartmouth, York and St. John. The York River has its headwaters near Murdochville, the home of Gaspé Copper Mines Ltd. It supplies drainage for about 1600 sq. km (600 square miles) of the Gaspé Peninsula, and carries the run-off through the Gaspé Bay to the Gulf of St. Lawrence. It has an average annual flow rate of 21 m^3 (750 cu. ft.) per second, and swells to an enormous 225 m^3 (8,000 cu. ft.) per second during spring flooding. The deposit of silt and gravel carried by the York River during the past several million years has created a typical alluvial plain near the mouth. This relatively flat area is several miles in length and terminates in marsh in the southwest arm of the Gaspé Bay.

It is on this aluvial plain, about six miles west of Gaspé, on the south side of the York River, that Sunny Bank is located. This seemingly insignificant portion of land along a small river has been home to many who look back at it with fond memories. Both those who presently reside there, and those who have long since left, vividly remember the old swimming hole on hot summer days and sliding on the nearby hills during the long winter months.

Thickly wooded hills can be seen on all sides and the soil is relatively good for farming. These, combined with its easy accessibility by river are the primary reasons for its early settlement. Climate remains one of its greatest weaknesses. Spring thaw is late and freeze-up comes early in autumn. Undoubtedly this is an important factor in the constant emigration of pioneer Gaspesians. The little village of Sunny Bank itself stretches from the Mill Brook to the Long Reach, about two miles in length (refer to sketch on p. 15). The width of the populated area is seldom more than a half mile, stretching from the York River southward to the hills. Except for the eastern end, Sunny Bank is almost entirely flat.

Sunny Bank, being six miles inland, has its own microclimate, which is even more extreme than that of the Gaspé area in general. Winter nights are often ten to fifteen degrees colder, and summer days are likewise hotter. In Sunny Bank temperatures have been recorded below -40°F (-40°C) and have exceeded 100°F (38°C) in the shade. Daily temperatures also fluctuate more, resulting in cold summer nights that even further diminish Gaspé's already short growing season. Frost has been observed in all twelve months of the year. Sunny Bankers rarely have more than 70 frost-free days, beginning around the middle of June.