

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

Chapter 4

Eking Out a Living

The land has always been the main provider for Sunny Bank's residents. Employment has usually involved farming, lumbering, fishing, or mining. Industrialization has left the entire Gaspé region somewhat behind larger centers. Gaspé's rugged landscape and climate have prevented the population growth necessary for the manufacturing industries. As a result, excepting the last couple of generations, most Gaspesian men were busy simply providing for their families. This involved such enjoyable things as fishing and hunting for food, but also required long, hard days of work in the fields and woods on a seasonal basis.

To summarize what was discussed in the previous chapter, the life of the pioneers revolved around the seasons. In the spring and summer, planting, weeding, and harvesting crops occupied most members of a family for long, exhausting days of back-breaking labor. In August hay had to be cut, which in the early days was done by hand with a scythe. Then it had to be turned in the fields until dry, and hauled into the barn by horse and wagon. Autumn was the last chance to prepare for the long dark winters. Berries were picked and stored in jams and jellies. Meat and fish salted or smoked. Vegetables from the summer harvest were stored in underground cellars where the temperatures remained fairly constant at about 40°. Sufficient quantities of firewood had to be cut and hauled near the house. All winter this wood was carried into the house by the armload.

Livestock had to be looked after, feeding the animals, milking the cows, and collecting eggs provided morning and evening chores year around. Mothers could normally be found in the kitchen cooking, baking or washing for her family. Many of the clothes were homemade, knit from homespun wool or hand-sewn from "store-bought" cloth or, sometimes, flour bags.

Despite their uncanny competence at self-preservation, these early settlers required some goods from the local general stores. Salt, flour, sugar, some clothing, and most tools and dishes had to be bought. To purchase these essentials, and an occasional luxury item, the men found seasonal employment. In the early days there was lumbering, shipbuilding, whaling, and fishing. Later, jobs became more specialized and some found year-round employment.

From the earliest days of settlement Sunny Bank men worked in the woods. Before the arrival of the English, the wealth of the forests surrounding Sunny Bank was recognized. A mill was constructed by the French on the Mill Brook about 1726. This undoubtedly supplied their small settlement established at "Gaspée" sometime between then and 1745.

During the 1800's lumbering was an important occupation for several families. Timber cruising, looking for the best stands of trees, was undertaken during late spring when the rivers were navigable. Areas with the best timber were staked out and were cut during the fall and winter. Groups of men would venture into the wilderness, often on snowshoes, for weeks at a time. They would live in crude camps, working all the daylight hours. Long evenings were passed singing or playing cards. Trees were cut with crosscut saws, axes were used to remove the limbs, and horses hauled the logs to the river's edge. There they were piled until spring. During the annual melting of the winter's snow, when rivers were high, men would return for the "log drive." Logs would be thrown into the river. Workers then followed them down-stream, returning stray logs to the currents and breaking up occasional logjams.

In the earlier days lumber was manufactured right in Sunny Bank. The Miller family had their own "saw pit" where logs were whipsawed into lumber. The saw pit was simply a hole dug into the ground under a bench designed to hold a log steady. A large saw with a handle at both ends would be used to rip the log into boards. One man was positioned in the pit to pull the saw down, while another pulled up from above. Boards were then hand-planed. When completed it could be sold locally for constructing houses or used for shipbuilding.

By the beginning of the 20th century, with the advent of the steam and gasoline engines, small sawmills were established. These power-driven circular saws replaced the whipsaw, and increased productivity. The Calhoun Lumber Company ran a large lumber and shingle mill in L'Anse aux Cousins. They sawed lumber from spruce and fir and made shingles from cedar, both readily available locally. Sheppard and Morse moved in and expanded operations in the early 1920's. They operated a lumber mill, shingle mill, box factory, and a planer. Their planer was said to be the "fastest in the east." All were powered by steam engines. Almost a thousand people were employed seasonally by this company which shipped lumber to the New England States. In the Great Depression of 1929, the market dried up and the mill shut down.

As time passed power saws replaced the cross-cut and Swede saws, and J-5's and Timber Jacks replaced horses. Several Sunny Bank residents are still employed in the forests. Today, with the lack of large stands of trees, most of the wood cut is used in the pulp and paper industry. Now whole trees are cut and hauled by timber jack in bunches of five or ten at a time. These bunches are hauled to a "dump" where another worker cuts them into 4 foot logs and piles them. They are then transported by trucks carrying as many as 18 cord at a time to the mill in Chandler.

Barrel making was also a part time job. In the 19th century many products, including whale oil and fish, were shipped in barrels. Sunny Bank was an ideal location for coopers because of its proximity to the forest. Fir or cedar was cut into staves about 4 feet long and thoroughly dried. A drawknife was then used to shave them smooth. They are then jointed to make the edges of the staves convex, and beveled toward the inner side. These were matched as well as possible and placed in a circular frame. Thin strips of ash were soaked in water and placed around the barrel like belts. The strips dried and held the staves in place. Finally, the heads are attached and the barrel is complete. To quote one of

Gaspe's last barrel-makers, Mr. George Miller of Peninsula, "Barrels are made to contain 200 lbs. of pork or green fish when well packed, so they have to be very exact as to size, and of course, water tight. Therefore, they have to be very carefully made." When complete, these were sold to local whalers and fishermen.

Around the middle of the 19th century local residents began taking full advantage of the abundance of salmon in local rivers. Licenses were given and as many as twenty nets were set in the inside bay during the spring. Some Sunny bank residents got involved. The salmon was sold in the United States. However, this method of fishing was gradually abandoned because it took far too great a toll on the salmon stock, though it did continue in the outer bay until the 1960's.

Sports fishing has also employed many Sunny Bank residents for almost two centuries. In the words of a local fisherman, "The York River has been a gold-mine for years for the people of York and Wakeham." Wealthy vacationers would come to Gaspe by boat and local guides would take them up the rivers by canoe to catch the famed Atlantic salmon.

Groups of wealthy people, often American, would get together and lease a river for sports fishing. The Canadian Government granted leases for a fee ranging from \$20 to \$500 per season. A condition of the lease was that they hire a guardian during the spring salmon season, and retain his services until spawning time (late October). A one-room camp was built below the first pools. Pay was around \$100 for the season.

They would have a camp constructed and return every summer for a wilderness vacation. In the words of A. G. Wilkinson, "Comfortable houses have been erected at much trouble and expense every ten or twelve miles on those parts of the York and St. John which abound in good pools." Escaping the fast-growing American cities, they would spend several weeks at a time along the river. These sojourns on Canada's salmon rivers were obviously highly treasured, as Wilkinson goes on to say, "It is more difficult to lease a good salmon river than to secure an election in congress."

During their stay they were waited on by Gaspesians who would cook, clean, and make their stay as pleasant as possible. Guides who knew the rivers well would take them to the best salmon pools. Guiding involved long days of maneuvering canoes through rapids, taking care of fishing equipment, and netting and cleaning salmon. Camps or tents, and meals were provided for the guides. Many of them moved to the fishing camps and remained there for the several month-long fishing season. There were also several people who would leave Gaspe annually, moving into camps along the north shore of the St. Lawrence, where they guided on such rivers as the Moise and Marguerite. In exchange for their work, Sunny Bankers and other Gaspesians would get some badly needed employment.

Wilkinson goes on to describe an invitation extended to him by a good friend, Fred Curtis Esq. of Boston, to fish the York River in 1874. It was then owned by Mr. Reynolds of Ottawa. Along with his companion, Mr. Lazell, he traveled by express train to Montreal, and boarded the Grand Trunk Railway to Quebec City. There they secured their fishing supplies at Waters on St. John Street. From Quebec it was a 38-hour ride on the vessel

“Secret,” owned by the Gulf Port Steamers, to reach Gaspé. Their first of many expected annoyances was a storm, which delayed their arrival by a half a day. They were greeted at the dock by many local residents who were personal friends of Mr. Curtis.

Leaving Gaspé by horse and wagon they made their way inland along the York River. “Six miles from the settlement the road became a mere path, and we took to our saddles, which the thoughtful George had stowed away in our two-horse wagon. Two miles further we were at the first pool of the river called High Bank Pool.” While beginning to set up their rods for fishing they discovered, “Insects of various sorts were long before us... These pests were so persistent that we were glad to put on our linen mitts, which tie around the elbow and leave the fingertips exposed. Finally, the little brutes drove us to anointing our finger-tips with tar and sweet-oil...”

After a long day he continues, “We reached the comfortable quarters of House No. 1 at 9 PM while it was still light. We found that our house was clapboarded, and contained two comfortable rooms; one with berths like a steamer’s, which were furnished with hair mattresses and mosquito-bars; the other served as a sitting and dining room. A large house adjoined and was furnished with a good cooking stove, while a tent was already pitched to serve as a quarters for our men - five in number. Stoves and furniture are permanent fixtures of the houses at the different stations, as are the heavier cooking utensils, so that moving up the stream one has merely to carry crockery, provisions, blankets and mosquito-bars, which the later are of strong thin jute canvas. Above the first house the men make their beds of piles of little twigs of fragrant fir-balsam, whose beauties have been recorded by every writer upon angling. Near each house is a snow house, dug into the hill-side and thickly covered with fir-boughs and planks. The snow is packed in them in winter by the men who go up for that purpose and to hunt the caribou that frequent the hills adjoining the river... The fish as soon as killed are packed in the snow, as are the butter, milk, and eggs brought up every two or three days by the courier, who remains at the Basin ready to start for you at any moment that letters or telegrams arrive.”

Few names are mentioned in the article except Coffin, “old” William Patterson, “young” James, and Annette (Annett), though of Gaspé men Wilkinson was very complimentary. “They come from good old stock, Scotch-English, and are as true as steel. Money and jewelry were safer in our camps than at home in the way of our servants. They never touch a drop of liquor, and work faithfully from morning till night. Even after long and tedious hours of poling up rapid streams, under the hot sun, they are ready to anticipate your slightest wish.” Later he states, “How patiently would our faithful fellows sit on the cross-bar of the canoe, and now and then, when the mosquitoes were unusually troublesome, break the silence with ‘I don’t care if I do take a little o’ yer fly-ile.’”

In the late 1800’s clubs began to form. York River Fishing Club once owned the entire river. They had camps at Big Fork, Mississippi and Still Pool. Land was eventually purchased at the lower end of the York. It was owned by such famous people as Dexter, Curtis, Murdoch, and Nicholas. Many of these who once fished our rivers have pools named after them.

In 1953 the Middle River Salmon Club was formed. They purchased private property at the lower end of the river and had a camp about a mile above Silver Brook, locally known as "Nicholas' Camp." In 1973 this section was bought by Mr. Earl MacAusland and became the Gourmet Salmon Lodge, which remains today. In 1980 the rest of the river was taken over by the ZEC (Zone d'Exploitation Controle) for fishing by anyone at an affordable price. Since that time numerous Gaspesians have taken to angling. Although salmon are less plentiful than in days gone by, thousands of dollars are still spent annually in the area. About two dozen English-speaking people still earn a living working on the three famous salmon rivers of Gaspé, the St. John, York, and Dartmouth.

For almost the entire 19th century the whaling industry flourished in Gaspé, providing seasonal employment. It was a difficult and dangerous occupation, requiring rugged individuals. For whatever reason, it appears that Gaspé was the only place on east coast of Canada with prolonged whale fishing.

Sailing vessels ranging from 40 to 80 ton would leave during the summer months in search of whales along the north coast of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, through the Strait of Belle Isle, and along the shores of Newfoundland and Labrador. These ships carried two 30-foot whaling boats and a crew of 15-17 men. Each whaling boat required 6 men; a harpooner, a steersman, and four oarsmen. The other three to five men comprised the main crew, sailors, cook, etc.

Ships would leave port with ample empty barrels for the whale oil and provisions for several weeks at sea. Once whales were spotted the smaller boats would be dispatched. When near enough the harpoon would be thrown to pierce the tough skin of the whale. A harpoon had a razor-sharp, barbed steel tip on a five-foot hardwood handle, fastened to 300 fathoms (500 m) of rope. Once hit, the whale would make a dash to escape, "pulling the rope out so fast that water had to be poured on it to prevent it from catching fire." The huge whale presented high risk. In its thrashing it could easily strike the boat tossing the men into the water. Drownings were not uncommon in this line of work. When the fish was exhausted it was killed and towed to the main vessel where it was cut up and towed ashore. The blubber was then melted in large cast iron pots and stored in barrels. Each whale provided an average of 600-800 gallons of oil, which sold for as much as 150 pounds (about \$750). Capturing 5 to 10 whales a year made whaling the most lucrative occupation of its time in this area.

Whaling in Gaspé began around 1800. Few records exist before the 1850's, but it is known that there were about 10 schooners based in Gaspé at that time. The last of Gaspé's whaling captains, Capt. Joseph Tripp launched his 46-ton, two-masted, square sterned schooner, the "Admiration" on Aug. 30, 1855. It appears he continued whaling until his newer vessel, the 94-ton, 78 foot "James Dwyer" was shipwrecked on the north shore of the Gulf of St. Lawrence on Oct. 24, 1893. Though names of crewmembers are somewhat uncertain, it is known that members of both the Miller and Patterson families of Sunny Bank were hired annually by Capt. Tripp or Capt. Stewart of York. George Patterson (B 1838) married his wife near Trinity Bay, Nfld. on one of these voyages.

Several factors contributed to the demise of the whaling industry in Gaspé. In the last half of the 19th century kerosene began to replace whale oil for lamps. Sailing vessels were rapidly being replaced with the faster and more efficient steam powered ships. The harpoon was replaced by a harpoon gun. By 1878 Capt. Tripp was the only whaling captain left in Gaspé. He harvested his last whale oil in 1893, and died only two years later, at the age of 71.

Around the turn of the century a blueberry cannery operated near the Mill Brook. It was located near the river on the Brassett side of the York Bay. It gave the young people of Sunny Bank a chance to make some money every August. They picked berries on "The Berry Hill," about a quarter of mile southwest of the present CBC tower, behind Sunny Bank. Pay was one and a half to two cents per pound. To quote Coleman Patterson, "We picked leaves and all. There was a very high rock there where everyone lunched, where they "winded" the berries. We put a box on the ground, got up on the rock, held the pail as high as we could and poured them in the box. The wind blew the leaves out as they fell. Then we put them in flour barrels and put the head [top] on it when it was full. They were hauled from there to the factory with a horse and truck."

The New Brunswick firm of A. & R. Loggie owned the canning factory. In the factory eight people were employed operating the boiler and filling and washing the cans. In one season of operation over a thousand cases of 24 cans were shipped to the U. S. by schooner. No records of dates have been found, but the cannery was opened before 1890 and closed around 1911.

The "Fire Association" also hired a number of local people. Their job was fire prevention, and gathering a crew to fight fires once they had started. At the top of some prominent mountain's lookout towers were constructed, along with a camp to house the fire ranger. His job was to remain at the camp during all dry weather, and provide surveillance. If a fire was discovered he would notify the Gaspé office as quickly as possible. In later years this was done by telegraph.

Others were hired to operate gates controlling all forest access roads. They would record all persons entering the woods so that if a fire broke out they could be questioned. Fires, like the famous "twenty-one fire" destroyed countless acres of forest, at a time when lumbering was the livelihood of many Gaspé people. In 1921 an area from Spruen's Rock (half way to Murdochville) to Fourth Lake (Lac Baillargeon) burned, an area of several hundred square miles. Some of this area, high in the hills, hasn't regenerated yet. Even through disaster profits are found. Over 300 men were called to fight the fire, and the next year wages were \$35.00 per month plus board for cutting the burned wood while it could still be used.

People of Sunny Bank were often obliged to leave for seasonal employment. Men would take the train west, to the States for tobacco picking, or to the Canadian Prairies for the wheat harvest. The ticket to Winnipeg was \$15.00 and wages were \$3.50 to \$4.00 per day, far more than could be earned here. Some returned, but many settled in new regions, leaving their Sunny Bank heritage behind.

Gaspe Copper Mines, discovered by Alfred and Frederick Miller (see chapter 11) has unquestionably been the largest employer of Sunny bank people. From working the claims in the 1930's, to road construction and exploration in the 1940's, and underground into the mine in the 1950's a vast number of local people have been employed. Unfortunately, because of its distance from Gaspe, most who worked there moved to the town of Murdochville and never returned. Upon retirement they frequently headed west to the warmer climate of Ontario.

Though no Sunny Banker ever tried to make a living at it, many men have earned a few dollars trapping fur-bearing animals in the nearby forests. The marsh of the York River has always provided an abundance of muskrats. Beaver could be found in nearby lakes and streams, and for many years lynx were plentiful in the area.

Though not popular among conservationists today, the extra dollars earned by trapping usually provided a little extra cash for families who were already struggling making ends meet.

As outlined elsewhere, many Sunny Bank residents were also employed in schools, at the hatchery, operating the post office, and in small stores. Though few in Sunny Bank ever got rich, everyone who remained managed to eke out a living. Those who had the urge for wealth and prosperity were forced to leave, providing Sunny Bank's chief export, young people!