

## **Salmon Fishing on the York River**

**By Andrew Patterson**

The headwaters of the York River, formerly known as the Southwest River, are about a hundred kilometres inland near the town of Murdochville, and it empties into the Gaspé Bay. Settlement by the French began in the mid 1700's, at which time Revol had a saw mill constructed on the Mill Brook in lower Sunny Bank. John Patterson, one of Gaspé's first permanent English residents, settled on the bank of the York River about 1764. For these pioneers the river provided salmon and trout for food and the forests provided a source of timber used in the construction of ships and as a valuable commodity for trade with Europe. The only route inland was along the rivers, with canoes and river-boats used for transportation in summer and dog-sleds in winter. Many of John Patterson's descendants earned their living from the lumbering and fishing industries which developed along the York River. This river even provided passage for the Miller brothers to reach their copper discovery in the early 1900's.

### **The home to big salmon**

By the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century sports fishermen discovered Gaspé's rivers. These sports fishermen traveled for days by boat for the pleasure of catching the famed Gaspé salmon, and the York was known as the home to big salmon<sup>1</sup>. This is exemplified by the following text from Lady Dufferin's journal, June 1874; "Fred was given the best pool today and D went up to the "Little Salmon Hole" and the "Flat Rock" pool. I walked there with him, a distance of about three miles through the woods, and Archie went up the rapids in a canoe. He and I then looked on at the sport, he amusing himself between times by cutting down trees with a hatchet and by feeding the fire with wood.

"D's first fish was a very lively little one, which jumped and frisked about, and finally took him right down the rapids. It was 12 pounds. The second sulked, and merely kept a good, steady pull on the line, keeping it up for an hour, and only making for the rapids at the last moment. It weighed 23 pounds<sup>2</sup>."

Lord Dufferin was the third Governor General of Canada. For several summers he and Lady Dufferin vacationed in Gaspé as guests of Thomas Reynolds of Ottawa, who leased the York River in the early 1870's. Lady Dufferin continued, "This is a beautiful river; number of pools, a very rapid current, very clear water. The woods have a great deal of birch in them, and the look-out is much more open than on most of the rivers."

### **A gold-mine for the people of York and Wakeham**

Sport fishing has employed many Gaspé 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." Groups, often Americans, would get together and lease rivers 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 in late October. A one-room camp was built below the first pools. Pay was around \$100 for the season.

Camps were constructed and these "sports" returned 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<sup>3</sup>.”

During their stay in the Gaspé wilderness locals would cook, clean, and make their vacation 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 entire fishing season. Thus, Gaspésians found some badly needed employment.

### **Memories of a sportsman, A. G. Wilkinson, 1874**

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. 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 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 latter 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). Describing 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.’”

### **The Fishing Clubs**

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. Many famous people who once fished our rivers, such as Dexter, Curtis, Murdoch, Dufferin, and Nicholas, have pools named after them.

In the early 1900’s 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 is currently the only private water on the York River. In 1980 the rest of the river was expropriated by the Quebec Government and given to the ZEC (Zone d’exploitation contrôlée) for the enjoyment of everyone, at an affordable price<sup>4</sup>.

Since that time numerous Gaspésians have adopted the sport of salmon fishing, and the York River is world renowned among anglers for its beautiful scenery and wonderful fishing. Although salmon are less plentiful than in days gone by, substantial amounts of money are still spent annually in the area. Additionally, several dozen local residents continue to earn a living working on the three famous salmon rivers of Gaspé, the St. John, York, and Dartmouth.

1. *Atlantic Salmon River Log*, by George Gruenfeld, 1988, p.65.
2. *Gaspé of Yesterday*, by Ken Annett, Vol. 2, Article 61, “Lady Dufferin’s Journal”
3. *Hunting and Fishing in Canada*, Edited by Frank Opper, Castle Books, 1988, page 9.
4. *Sunny Bank, Our Ancestral Home*, by Andrew Patterson, 1995, p. 36.