



HUGH MCKERVILL





SHAUN LOWE



BY HUGH MCKERVILL

# OUTPORT COMEBACK

BIT BY BIT LIFE RETURNS, THANKS IN PART TO *SALMO SALAR*.

**H**UDDLED AT THE FOOT OF ROCKY PROMONTORIES AND FRAMED by steep green hills, a clutter of wooden buildings takes ghostly shape in the swirling mists. As you climb out of the small wooden boat to wade ashore in the shallows you feel as though you are stepping back in time. For history hangs heavy here in North Bay at the head of LaPoile Inlet, nine miles back from the swells that pound Newfoundland's rugged South Coast.

Nobody lives year round at North Bay anymore. It's a ghost town. Actually, it never really was a town; just a tiny outport community. Yet, from the time that Frank and Andrew Strickland moved their young families to where their father, John, had already built a log cabin near the mouth of the LaPoile River back in 1875, a handful of resilient men and women—13 families at the peak of population—lived in this small and quiet place. For nearly a century, they hand built skiffs and schooners that sailed the seas. With a combination of ingenuity, incredibly hard work, skills that were passed from generation to generation, plus an intimate knowledge of the land, the sea, and the river—despite an abiding scarcity of cash—they lived successful and fiercely independent lives.

Salmon, and anglers like the one tied into a silver demon (facing page), make an important economic contribution to the isolated village of LaPoile on Newfoundland's south coast.

That era ended more than forty years ago, the last resident having pulled out by 1968. Depletion of accessible timber, government relocation policies, and the commercial fishery's shift to steel-hulled, offshore vessels conspired to doom the diminutive outpost. A poignant hush prevails over the place now. The scream of the saw that once ripped logs into planks is hushed, and the forested hills no longer echo the rhythmic thud of mallets caulking hulls. Only the cry of wheeling gulls, the osprey's piercing protest, the river's ceaseless mutter, and the annual return of the Atlantic salmon suggest eternity.



Sundown at the upriver camp of Salmon Hole Lodge. There is also a base at the old outpost of North Bay.

It was the river valley's abundant timber—not salmon—that drew early settlers to this isolated location. Of course, fishing for food was a necessity for the settlers. It was viewed as a natural right, and for people who relied upon nature for much of their sustenance, the annual migrations of salmon and trout would have

provided an important part of their diet. Also, a commercial salmon fishery operated in the bay until 1984 when it was closed by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans to reduce the interception of returning breeders. Sport fishing, however, was a different matter. Local people had little spare time to spend at the delicate and relatively unproductive art of angling. Even as an activity with potential for bringing much-needed revenue to the community, the recreational fishery was slow to develop. Indeed, despite better than average catch to effort ratios over the years, the LaPoile remains one of Newfoundland's lesser known salmon fishing rivers—which, of course, is all the better for those who make the effort to get there.

Getting there does indeed require some effort. The LaPoile River is not a destination for the type of angler who likes to cast a line within walking distance of his/her vehicle parked at the side of a road. This is a remote, wilderness river. Rising in the Long Range Mountains, its 40-kilometre course drains approximately 588 square kilometres of high plateau barrens, devoid of human development. Getting to the river from where the road ends at Rose Blanche, east of Port aux Basques, involves two hours of boat travel on the open ocean—weather permitting—plus another hour heading up the fjord-like inlet. Even then, although a number of pools are near the mouth, the majority of the twenty or so fishing spots are scattered for several miles up-stream. Reaching these places calls for hiking over kettle-sized, riverbed rocks, trekking across island meadows high with marsh grasses, cow parsnip and Queen Anne's lace, and following trails through alder groves thick with ferns, and embroidered with wildflowers and berries. Several tricky river crossings are also required. However, challenging though the journey may be, the scenery is breathtakingly beautiful, and the fishing—on what is the largest of nine scheduled salmon rivers in the south coastal area—usually makes the trip well worth the effort.

Bob Pike and his long time fishing friend, Dr. Verne Schaffner, certainly found this to be true. Sometime back in the 1930s these fishing buddies from the Kentville area of Nova Scotia discovered North Bay and the LaPoile River quite by chance. Far from being discouraged by its remoteness, they were enthralled by the wild beauty of the place. Assisted by able and knowledgeable local guides who would haul their gear and grub up river using oxen, they relished the opportunity to fish in near total solitude. Pike eventually hired some of the local people to build a small log cabin three miles up-stream at a place dubbed Salmon Hole, and the two pals returned annually to hunt caribou and moose in the fall, and to fish for salmon and sea trout in late spring and summer. Over time, the group from Kentville expanded. Guests from other locations also joined the growing number of visitors, and a recreational fishery began to take shape on the LaPoile River. For guides

SHAUN LOWE (2)





SHAWN LOWE

and small local businesses it was like a tender economic shoot emerging from the rubble of the dying boat building business.

Scott Smith, the present licensed operator of Salmon Hole Lodge, is conscious of the small but important economic contribution the sport fishery makes to the local economy, and he operates the business with this constantly in mind. It's an attitude he learned from his father, Dr. Duncan Smith. Duncan was a respected vet-

erinarian who started coming to the LaPoile with the Kentville group sometime prior to 1965. He loved the area so much that when the small up-river camp became available in 1967, he purchased it—along with a house that belonged to one of the departing North Bay property owners. Duncan saw a controlled, full season sport fishery as a way to protect the river and its fish, while bringing employment to an isolated community where jobs were scarce. He was largely responsible for





Outport life: supplies are unloaded at North Bay and hauled up to camp by tractor, an improvement from a bygone era when oxen were used. Above, the Chant brothers—Alex, Sid and Garland—are part and parcel of the LaPoile River (facing page) operation.

expanding the range and number of visiting anglers. Sad to say, he died suddenly at 55 years of age. Scott—a young man in his early twenties at the time—inherited the property. But he also inherited something more valuable—a responsible attitude towards the river and the fish, and deep respect for the local people, most of whom now live in the village of LaPoile at the mouth of the bay.

Scott recognizes that without the trustworthy support of Alex, Sid and Garland Chant—three brothers from LaPoile whose connection with the lodge goes back more than 25 years—it would be virtually impossible to operate the camp, for his previous career as a profes-

sional engineer took him all over North America. Even now, he is seldom at the lodge when visiting anglers arrive. The guides, including Phil Bond (Alex's brother-in-law) who looks after the lower camp at North Bay, possess a remarkable range of skills and knowledge. Between them they look after all the day-to-day operations, including guiding, cooking, upkeep of the buildings, maintaining the trails, fine tuning the generator, fixing the plumbing, or keeping the tractors (which long ago replaced the oxen) in running condition. Likewise, when Scott decided to replace the log cabin and the old house in North Bay with new, more modern buildings, the work was done by his trusty guides, and—as he likes to point out—without the benefit of government funding. Building materials, when needed, are purchased in Port aux Basques, the closest outlet to the camp. Most groceries and supplies are bought at a small local store in LaPoile. Even all the bread for the two camps is deliciously home baked by Eileen Chant, Alex's wife.

This symbiotic relationship between outfitter and local people carries over into a shared sense of care for the environment. “I’ve always felt a responsibility to keep the LaPoile River Valley as clean, natural and pristine as possible,” says Scott. It’s a sentiment echoed by all the guides who make sure that cans and bottles and other recyclables are carried out. The result of this policy is soon obvious to the visiting angler, for the river banks and trails are free of litter of any kind—as they should be. Indeed, Scott is so serious about protecting the pristine quality of the watershed that blatantly

SHAUN LOVE

HUGH MCKERVILL



careless sports may find a slot is not available to them next season. The use of high-tech rechargeable 12-volt LED light systems that provide light at night without running the generator, is just one example of this operator's determination to run the camp in an ecologically responsible manner.

Similar responsible stewardship is exercised towards the runs of salmon and sea trout. Despite growing up in an environment where fish and game were generally regarded as food to be taken, the LaPoile River guides recognize that protecting the fish as a sustainable resource is in their own long-term interest. "The guides have been consistent about enforcing the angling regulations and promoting the idea of catch and release," says Scott. "Possibly because of this, the river's salmon and trout populations are in good shape relative to many other rivers."

Phil Bond, who was river guardian on the LaPoile for more than ten years, confirms an improvement in the numbers of returning fish. "More big salmon are showing up now," he says, with some satisfaction. Such improvement is no doubt the result of many complicated factors, the closure of the commercial net fishery at the mouth of the bay being one of the most significant. However, maintaining a controlled and limited recreational fishery in a responsible way has also contributed to the wellbeing of the river and its runs of fish, thus making this lesser known river a special place to visit.

For the salmon angler who is looking for a pristine wilderness experience with better than average prospects of hooking fish, Salmon Hole Lodge on the LaPoile is a unique opportunity. It is not a "high end" lodge, and the rates are deliberately kept modest

## Travel Logistics

- For more information about fishing the LaPoile River contact [www.salmonholelodge.com](http://www.salmonholelodge.com) or email [scott@salmonholelodge.com](mailto:scott@salmonholelodge.com).
- For marine travel between Newfoundland and Nova Scotia contact Marine Atlantic: [www.marine-atlantic.ca](http://www.marine-atlantic.ca) Ph. 1-800-341-7981
- For more tourist information contact NL Tourism - [www.newfoundlandlabrador.com/fishing](http://www.newfoundlandlabrador.com/fishing) Ph. 1-800-563-6353

because Scott has a conviction that sport fishing for salmon should not be the exclusive domain of the wealthy. Nevertheless, the unpretentious lodge is clean and comfortable. The magnificent scenery and clean air are exhilarating, and Garland's meals—that never stray far from no-nonsense Newfoundland cuisine—are delicious and nourishing. Perhaps most of all, the company of professional guides like Alex, Sid, Garland and Phil—authentic representatives of the place and its unique history, and so genuinely tuned to their environment—makes a visit to the LaPoile River a unique privilege. And, just to help ensure that the experience will be there for future generations, Salmon Hole Lodge became an official ASF sponsor of live release in 2009. Good for you Scott!

*Hugh McKervill is a longtime Journal contributor. His latest book, "Like an Ever Rolling Stream," is reviewed on page 14.* 🐟



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