

SPECIAL MEMORIES OF THE ST. MARY'S RIVER, GUYSBOROUGH COUNTY

By
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MY INTRODUCTION TO FLYFISHING

In the mid 70's I had been invited by some friends to go trout fishing at Otter Lake in the Liscomb Sanctuary. As soon as we arrived we gathered firewood and set up our tents over spruce boughs. After camp was ready, we headed out on the lake for a good days' fishing. I was using a spinning rod with spinners and worms and all of the others were fly-fishing.

After dinner we were sitting around our campfire. It was still light and Ken MacDougall from New Glasgow grabbed his fly rod and suggested I follow him over to the edge of Governor's Lake. "Time you tried a fly rod" as he placed it into my hand. Under his instruction I slowly began getting the feel of things with a very short line. I had only made a few short casts when to the surprise of both of us there was a swirl and tug. I had hooked my first fish on a fly rod! I couldn't believe the action as the trout jumped. I could feel every pull through that supple rod. The trout felt much bigger than it actually was. I released it, but I was the one that was hooked. Little did I realize at the time what Ken had introduced me to and the amount of enjoyment that awaited me.

FLYTYING AND MY FIRST FISHING TRIP TO THE ST. MARY'S

Jim Baillie was on the phone. (Jim had fished salmon when he lived in New Brunswick and was then manager of Central Trust Company in New Glasgow.) He was laid up with a broken leg in a cast and his wife, Murida, had bought him a fly trying kit. "Come on over" Jim's voice boomed. I was curious to see how flies were tied and went over to his house to watch.

When Jim took me into his room he had already set up two vises. "Might as well tie as watch," he said. After a bit of getting used to thread and a bobbin, we tied a nymph and Mickey Finn streamer. That was the beginning of a whole new connection to fly fishing, strange materials disappearing from Lillian's sewing kits etc and later appearing around the family room. Learning, experimenting and countless hours of pleasure at the bench lay ahead.

Early that summer Jim invited me to join him on the St. Mary's before going to work. We headed down well before sunrise and arrived at Mitchell's pool. Jim let me go first with my eight and one-half foot trout rod. I was still a beginner and was more than a little conscious of my casting, but no one said a word as I flailed away.

Just before we were ready to leave and head back to town and work, Jim decided to make "one last pass". As he reached the bottom of the pool his line tightened and a bright fish jumped in the air. Jim caught the fish and I think I was more excited than he was. I decided that I had to return to this beautiful river.

BARREN BROOK

After an unsuccessful morning trying to find some sea trout, a friend and I ended up at Barren Brook on the West Branch of the St. Mary's. It was about 1:30 in the afternoon and very bright and hot. The conditions were "totally wrong" but there wasn't much else going on. Gary was going to show me a little about salmon fishing.

As he was just beginning to feed his line out at the edge of the pool, his line went tight and the leader snapped. To his complete surprise a grilse had grabbed his fly close to his feet and he had forgotten to change his trout leader to a heavier leader.

It was my turn and I began with a sparsely tied White Wulf with an orange yarn body. Given what had just happened, we were both excited. I made a couple of short casts at the lip of the pool and suddenly my line went tight. There was a pull on the rod, my reel began to sing like I had never heard it before and the hair stood up on the back of my neck! What a thrill as that fish jumped and landed causing a tremendous spray, the first of several runs and three jumps. My heart pounded and I actually prayed that I wouldn't lose it. Under my friend's guidance, I was fortunate enough to hook and land my first grilse. What a noble bright fish! I doubt if anyone forgets the excitement of hooking, playing and landing their first Atlantic salmon.

We continued fishing and somehow I foul hooked two more fish. A stranger on the bank said he'd really like to have one but we politely declined his request and released both fish. Shortly after two fisheries officers appeared out of the woods. They explained they had been watching us since we arrived. After seeing us release both of the foul hooked fish they explained they weren't worried about us and headed to another pool.

Of course for several years my favorite pool was Barren Brook. I didn't often see many other fishermen there. I started my son Mark fishing Barren Brook and on his first trip he could see the fish lying in the pool. He was so excited that he cast over them for hours and wouldn't take time to eat lunch.

MaCKEEN'S BROOK

One trip I was staying at Eddy Cormier's camp on the West Branch in Smithfield. We ended up at the MacKeen's Brook pool on the East River branch. I put on an ugly fly that I had tied based on a fly that a friend, Bob Stevenson, once showed me. I didn't know anything about fishing bugs and decided to prove it to all present.

Before I finished my first pass through the pool, I successfully had nine raises without hooking a fish!. This is not as easy as it might sound. I pulled the fly away from fish, let them spit it out, let them pull it under and everything you can imagine, except hooking a fish. I attracted a lot of attention and some sympathy. Even the fisheries officer, Don Barnes, was on his feet urging me on.

After this little performance, Sammy MacDougall came over and asked what I had on. I showed him the fly, which had orange hackle at the head, a brown deer hair body with brown hackle and black calf tail for the tail. Sammy smiled, shook his head and readily agreed it was one of the ugliest flies he had ever seen. But it had caused a commotion, probably because no fish in the river had ever seen anything like it.

Sammy then gave me a fly that really was a bug. He kindly took me up to the head of the pool and taught me how to fish a dry fly, giving a little tug and rolling my wrist up river at the end of the cast, getting drift, following the fly with the tip of my rod, watching the slight dip in the water over eel holes etc. I'll never forget his understanding and patience, which ultimately led to a great deal of satisfaction fishing dry flies.

LOVE THOSE HURRICANES

Several years ago I recall heading for the St. Mary's after a hurricane. Others had the same idea and there were a number of fishermen fishing the West River run into Silver's Pool. I decided to park before the bridge at Silver's and head through the brush until I reached the north bank of the West River run. A hurricane had passed and the fish were running and taking unlike anything I had ever seen before! I suppose it had something to do with a rapid change in the air pressure.

For the first time in my life there were several times when I looked down river and saw four fish on at a time. Parker Wong was across from me and I remember hooking two fish and then reeling in my line. Parker asked where I was going. We had company coming. Regretfully I had to return home!

I recall another time in July 1996 when I had just returned home from business in South Carolina at the tail end of Hurricane Bertha. I headed straight for the St. Mary's to fish salmon the first time that year. I hooked a nice fish at MacKeen's Brook on my first pass of the year and lost it. On my next pass I hooked a grilse, which gave me seven jumps before Phil Turner released it. Both on a Black Bear, Green Butt. Great way to start the season. On the way home I stopped and fished the run into Sutherland's Pool on the West Branch. I hooked and released a small salmon on an orange butterfly, lost two more grilse and had two more raises. Give me a hurricane anytime.

STITCH

One morning on the West branch flowing into Silver's, I was sitting on the bank listening to Ray Buckland and Wilson MacLeod talking about the fishing. Ray had a yellow lab, which had an obvious scar on his lip that had been stitched up. He was appropriately called "Stitch". Being a Lab, Stitch loved the water.

While I don't remember the topic of conversation I'm sure it was important. Suddenly there was a splash and the three of us looked around to see Stitch carrying a rock out of the River. Stitch went over a second time and as he put his head completely under water looking for another rock, Ray got up and starting hollering "Stitch, get out of the water."

Wilson finishing taking a drag on his cigarette, looked at me and very slowly observed "I don't know which one is crazier: a dog taking rocks out of the river or Ray hollering at him when his head in under water!" We had a great laugh over that. Stitch was always friendly. Although Ray growled at Stitch from time to time, Ray loved him. He accompanied Ray in his truck and on the riverbank for several years.

TURTLES

I started both of my boys fly-fishing when they were very young. Michael was under ten years old and wanted to try salmon fishing. We headed for the St. Mary's and on the way down he asked if we would see any turtles. I replied "maybe", but didn't want to get his hopes up. We went up to a spot above the Meadow pool where we wouldn't disturb anyone. We were upriver from where I normally begin, so I decided to go first as I didn't want Mike stepping into any holes.

We had just begun when I heard Mike yell "Turtle Dad...BIG turtle." I called back that it was just a sod and he should continue on. "Big Turtle!" he yelled. With that he ran out of the river and threw his rod on the bank.

As I looked behind me I suddenly saw a head the size of my fist on a neck sticking several inches out of the water. I watched in awe as the biggest turtle I had ever seen slowly drifted past me. Mike and I watched together as the fishermen below on both sides of the Meadow pool parted and watched as the turtle passed through.

THE CROW'S NEST

One evening I decided to take my sons Mark and Michael with me to the Crow's Nest. Both boys were pretty young and all three of us slept in the back of my Land Cruiser. I can still remember lying there in our sleeping bags, excited, listening to the sounds of the river beside us and wondering if we'd ever get to sleep.

Soon it was morning. I cooked and breathed in the aroma of the bacon and eggs on our camp stove. It was incredibly peaceful as we ate beside the river. The boys must have been hungry because breakfast seemed to disappear as soon as I put their plates in front of them. We had slept and eaten well and now we would be first to go through the pool.

Each of the boys put on their hip boots and stayed near the shore and I started through, fishing a Blue Charm. I let my fly swing over a sod and suddenly I felt the gradual deep tightening of my line. I knew I had hooked a pretty good salmon and quickly passed the rod to Mark. His eyes went wide open and he felt that pull of the fish and played it for a minute or so. I then did likewise with Michael. Neither of the boys had ever played fish this big.

As soon as I took over the rod, the hook pulled out and the line went slack. The fish disappeared back to its lie. We stood there for a few seconds quietly looking at the river. Suddenly Mike turned and looking at me with his big brown eyes innocently asked, "Why did you do that Dad?" I still chuckle about that moment every time I drive by the Crow's Nest.

MIKE'S FIRST GRILSE

One of the most exciting things to see is a young person catching their first fish. On one trip Michael and I were fishing the West run into Silvers. The action was a little slow and Mike was getting a little bored. Suddenly, Dougie Chisholm from New Glasgow hooked a grilse ahead of us. Mike went down the shore to watch. Dougie called him out into the river, handed Mike the rod and let him play and land the fish. Dougie tagged and gave it to Michael. It was a tremendous gesture and an unforgettable experience for a young boy just getting introduced to salmon fishing.

A few years later Rod Stevenson, Mike and I tried Salmon River, Guysborough County. We noticed someone raising a fish several times but it just wouldn't take. We started Mike next and I moved up river behind him.

Just as I was starting into the water I heard a "Dad", looked up and all I could see was a big smile on Mike's face as a bright fish began the first of five magnificent jumps. I was so excited I stayed back out of the way while Rod calmly coached him. The fisherman below eventually netted the first grilse that Mike had actually hooked, played and landed. There were several fishermen on the shore and learning that this was Mike's first fish, almost all of them shook his hand and congratulated him. Two of the fishermen were from Chicago and one asked Mike what fly he had used. Mike replied "a Black Bear, Green Butt". As they didn't have any, we gave them two and headed home.

The next morning I was lying in bed and the phone rang. Lillian heard me laughing after I answered the phone. The caller asked, "Is this the home of Michael Sutherland, the salmon fisherman?" I replied yes. It turned out to be one of the Chicago fishermen who was returning to the airport. He had taken the time to try several phone numbers to reach us. Turns out that he had hooked his first salmon with the fly Michael gave him. Although he didn't land it, he said it was one of the most exciting thrills he had ever experienced and he just wanted to say "thank you".

FISHING WITH THE STEVENSONS

When I was in university I became good friends with Bob Stevenson from Harbour Grace, Newfoundland. Bob used to entertain us with salmon fishing stories, most of which included his brother Rod. Little did I realize at that time that I would eventually become interested in salmon fishing.

Several years later Rod moved to New Glasgow and became my doctor and a close personal friend. I was just a matter of time before we began fishing together. Bob had an interest in the Aesculapius, a club on the Lower North Branch Little Southwest Miramichi River, where we had

several good trips. And the Stevensons would come to my camp on the St. Mary's. Bob was an excellent fisherman, but he made a few trips before he landed his first St. Mary's grilse at the East River run into Silvers.

On July 5, 1997 we decided to head for Salmon River. The tide was wrong in the morning so we played eighteen holes of golf at the scenic Belmont golf course and then returned to the river in the early afternoon. One of our traditions was to start a trip with a bottle of beer. Bob finished his first and started through the pool, hooking a nice small salmon on a Blue Charm. The fish jumped eight times and Rod released it. Fishing had been slow and this brought others to their feet. I was behind Bob and hooked a fish a minute later, before Rod had time to get his gear together. This fish jumped seven times before Rod released it. On our next passes Bob and I again each hooked and released another fish.

On his final pass Bob raised another fish. He told the fisherman across the river that the fish would take and asked him if he wanted to try it. The other fellow seemed surprised, but Bob assured him he should try the fish and Bob backed slowly out of the pool. After a few casts the fish took and the fellow across the river was pretty excited.

As quickly as we had arrived, we left and returned to the camp where we joined our wives and relaxed over a fine dinner telling many stories with lots of laughter. Golf, great fishing and a fine dinner – hard to imagine a better day!

THE MISSING PADDLE

If you like water, one of the most relaxing, or sometimes exhilarating things you can do, is canoe the beautiful St. Mary's River. For a number of years Rene and Carol Beaver, Wayne and Joyce Beaton, other couples and Lillian and I would start, usually at Sutherland's Bridge or my camp in Smithfield. Spring or surrounded by Fall colours, it is always fun to hit the water with friends and to paddle, watch, listen, laugh and enjoy.

In May, 1996 we dressed warmly and had a relaxing trip down the river, together with about ten couples from the Dartmouth Canoe Club. It was pouring rain when we started but good to get out in the fresh air. Lillian was in the bow and our springer spaniel Ruffles in the middle. We were approaching a small island in the river opposite the head of the cornfield above Rene's place on the Hattie Road in Glenelg. It had been a peaceful trip, we were almost finished and the water was very quiet to the right.

At the last minute I said to Lillian "let's go through that little stretch of white water on the left of the island" and so we did. Suddenly we caught a large rock, the canoe swung sideways and Lillian let a shriek out of her as the canoe began to turn over. The next thing I knew I was on the bank and my pants and clothes seemed dry. I don't know how I managed that. Although some almost accused me of it, I certainly don't remember stepping on Lillian's head on the way to shore.

I looked in the river. The canoe was overturned, Lillian was trying to stand in the current and fell in again. I waded into the river, rescued her from the cold water and then brought in the canoe. We were both okay. It was the first time in over twenty some years of canoeing that we had ever tipped.

Then I noticed there was only one paddle on the shore. At this point I sternly lectured Lillian that "Your never, never, no matter what, let go of your paddle. It could be the difference between life and death!" She looked up at me and knew I was real serious. Fortunately I had a spare paddle tied inside the canoe and minutes later we were paddling on our way to Rene's.

Before very long I spied a floating paddle and picked it out of the water. To my horror, I realized it was my paddle. I didn't say a word.

Before long we took a warm shower and changed our clothes. We went to Rene and Carol's motel for dinner and the boys and I had a few laughs about the trip and paddle. I'm not sure how Lillian found out, but she did and I had to eat crow for several days after.