

St. Mary's Riverboat



Salmon Boats at Silver's Pool by Joseph R. Crilley

The St. Mary's Riverboat

These colourful punts on the St. Mary's River, Nova Scotia, are used in the upriver reaches and pools. Fitted with outboard brackets, they are shorter than the riverboats found near Sherbrooke. A 20-foot long plywood riverboat waits along the bank of the St. Mary's in Stillwater. The punting pole and the bailer are inside. All the angler needs to do is bring his rod and cast off.

Punting is an ancient art. Briefly, the pole is pushed to the riverbed and used as a lever to force the craft forward. It is a subtle combination of leg, arm and trunk co-ordination. A skilled punter can make it look easy as he poles to a better location.

Salmon Anglers on eastern Nova Scotia's St. Mary's River cast their flies with artistic flourishes, testing their skills as they sit or stand in long, slender, shallow punts called "riverboats". These deceptively simple craft have been used for as long as anyone can remember. St. Mary's River settlers probably began building punts when they found enough time for recreational fishing and boat building.

For example, there was a punt like ferry at Sherbrooke in 1819, when Lord Dalhousie visited the area: military artist Major J.E. Woolford, Lord Dalhousie's companion, sketched the craft at that time.

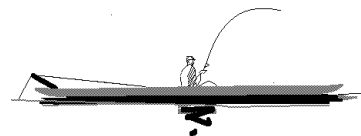
Before sawmills supplied planks, settlers made dugouts from logs. The long, narrow shape of the dugouts was well suited to the shallow, swift waters of the St. Mary's River. Therefore, when settlers began building riverboats, they imitated the shape. Subtle changes are continually made to traditional craft, though boats appear to remain static in form. As boats grow old and are replaced, owners tend to incorporate small, imperceptible alterations based on experience or observation. These changes no doubt make boats safer. In the case of riverboats, anglers have less chance of tipping overboard than their predecessors.

The type of riverboat seen today is much wider and has less-vertical sides. It was first built from two long spruce side planks with ramps cut on each side end, the fore ramp being about two times longer than the aft ramp. The bottom was then cross-planked with pine boards, sometimes tongue-and-groove flooring planks. Local spruce, used for the sides, provided strength, while the pine, used for the bottom withstood the wet and dry conditions encountered seasonally.

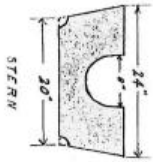
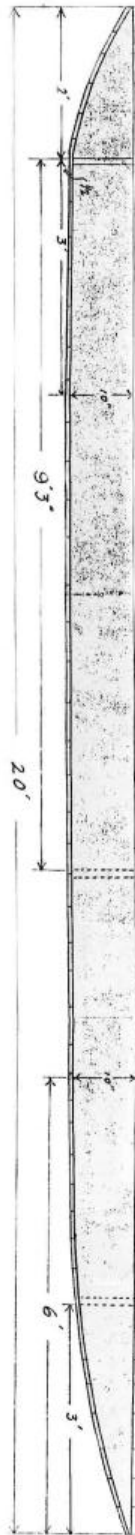
The bow of the riverboat is wider than the stern, as anglers believe that a narrow bow will yaw in swift currents. The relatively wide bow and the long ramp also allow for easier entry. Stern widths, on the other hand, are usually determined by the weight of the owner: he needs the correct amount of buoyancy to support him while keeping the punt balanced on an even trim. He always stands near the stern when poling upriver, and when fly casting, he usually stands or sits near the centre. Some considered it wise to hold the anchor up by standing on the anchor rope rather than wrapping it around a cleat. This ensured the anchor would drop and secure the boat if the angler were to fall out of the boat.

Used in various parts of the world, punts are propelled with a long pole thrust into the river bottom and used as a lever for the angler to push against. This skill is learned and practised to perfection, as the pole may stick to the bottom and pull the operator overboard, or may get lost. Expert anglers, in fact, can actually hold a riverboat still with the pole under their arm while casting. Some anglers now paddle their punts, while some others have fitted theirs with small transoms for outboard motors.

Riverboats, about 20 to 22 feet long on the lower stretches of the St. Mary's are also held stationary by an unusual anchor made from a small bundle of iron chain. Flexible, the bunch conforms to the rocky river bottom without snagging like a traditional fluked anchor. The anchor is held over the bow of the punt on a tiny davit and pulley. The anchor rope is attached to the stern, where the angler poles, so that he can loosen the rope from its cleat and drop anchor with the least amount of movement.

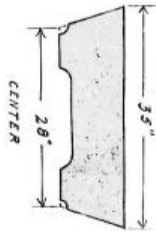


PLAN OF TOM ROSS PUNT

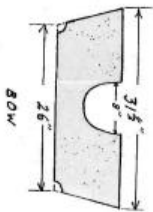


STERN

Side boards 1 1/2" wide 3/4" thick 20' long pine or spruce
 bottom " 3/4" not over 6" wide. Use 5" wooden gal nails
 bore all nail holes easing slightly smaller size drill.
 Planned by - Walter Mackison and Cliff Hingley
 Drawn by - Don Gunn



CENTER



BOW

PUNTS OF THE ST. MARY'S RIVER

by David A. Walker

The International Maritime Dictionary defines the word PUNT as:

"... formerly applied in a generic sense to various small craft used as ferries, barges and lighters. Nowadays it is usually confined to a lightly built, flat bottomed craft, very long in proportion to its breadth, with square ends and sides slightly narrowing from the centre towards the and stern. It is propelled by poles"

This could not be a more accurate description of the St. Mary's River Punt if a salmon angler from Sherbrooke had written it himself! These little craft can be found along various stretches, pools, and runs of the river, from the head of tidal water at Sherbrooke, upstream as far as they can penetrate into hidden shallow spots of the river which will float them. The higher upstream they are used, the shorter they get. The big ones, the longest ones, are those over twenty feet which are used on the lower reaches of the river.

To return for a moment to the dictionary definition, the first description can also apply to the St. Mary's River. In 1817 Lord Dalhousie visited Sherbrooke during his travels around Nova Scotia, and with him was an army officer, John Woolford, who made watercolor sketches of various parts of the province; a common duty of army officers before the advent of cameras. Woolford's sketch of the St. Mary's River illustrates it in spate with heavy woods along both banks and a punt-like ferry transporting passengers and being poled by two men, one at each end! This watercolor is in the Nova Scotia Museum collection. The punt has long and close historical ties with the river.

But the first punt, its builder, its size and shape are a mystery, on one can recall when they were first used for sporting purposes. It is not until the end of the 19th century that we are sure they were in use. We have a photograph, probably taken by J. W. Leslie, the noted Sherbrooke photographer, about 1905. Though the background does not resemble the river, it is most certainly a lake in the region and also almost as certainly not the first punt that was ever built! From that time onwards there is ample evidence that the punt (and very large salmon!) were a common feature of the river.



Arch MacIntosh fishing the Stillwater Bridge Pool, St. Mary's River. Photo courtesy of David Clark, Arch's grandson..

District carpenters were building them for local anglers and they have been building them ever since. The boats are almost always built by fishermen today, as plywood has replaced all the cross planking. This makes construction simpler, as there are no seams to caulk or plank to bevel round curves. The last man to build punts commercially, though it was not his sole means support, was Ed Jordan of Jordanville. It is unlikely that anyone made a living from building these craft, but those that had a good pattern were asked to make another for sale. Many punt builders were also carpenters, saw mill operators or house builders in their 'day-job'.

The most famous builder, with a universally acclaimed pattern was Tom Ross, a sawmill operator at Waternish. He was born in 1865, the son of Alexander Ross and Sarah Smith, he died in 1941. Some stories suggest that Ross was born in England, a tale which gives credibility to the similarity between the English punt and those of the St. Mary's. However, there is little evidence to support this as Ross' parents are buried near his grave at Waternish. Unfortunately, he had no direct descendants, his only son, A. MacLean Ross died at the age of 14. He did however have a brother who lived in one half of the Ross homestead, but we haven't found his descendants. The family surname and forenames suggest a Scottish heritage.

Ross built many punts, and it appears that none have survived, but we have a drawing of his pattern (or possibly two). One, drawn by Dan Gunn was published in the SMRA News, April, 1989. It shows a 20 foot long punt, with 10" deep sides, 20" wide at the bow, and 18" at the stern. I have another drawing which is the same length but 9" deep and 19" at the bow and 17" at the stern. There are also variations between the three molds. This demonstrates a significant feature of the St. Mary's River Punt, few were ever built exactly alike. At the Ross homestead in Waternish, I found two patterns, or actual wooden molds from a Ross punt, and they were different yet again.

There were many other notable builders, besides Ross and Jordan, among them were the McIntosh brothers, Alex, Archie, Clarence, Dan and Ted, all building to their own pattern. There were also Cliff and John Hingley and Gordon MacLane. I'm sure there were others, as I am sure that adherents to one of these builders would only use their pattern and swear by its qualities. One thing seems to be constant, from the study of old photographs, measuring many punts, and checking drawings: the punts have changed over the years in at least one respect. The older punts has more vertical sides than today's model. The angle between the bottom and side has increased by over 5 degrees. This may not seem significant, but is quite noticeable and it makes for a much safer craft in rapidly moving water.

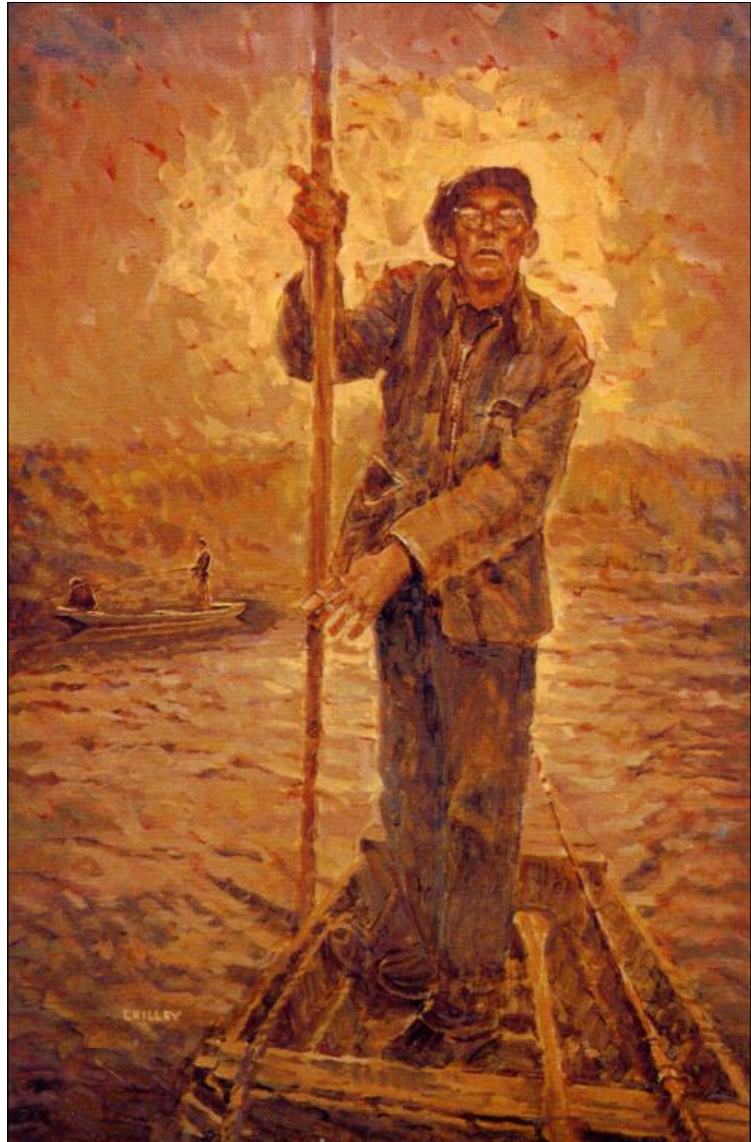
The Riverboats, as they are sometimes called, are deceptively simple, yet subtle and are very adapted to their purpose - fast water punting. English punts are never subjected to the rigours of rapid shallow water streams, the daily lot of their Canadian cousin. Their shape in the plan is the first indication that these are purpose-built boats for this river only. The bows are always wider than the sterns, this ensures they do not fall off or yaw when they are being poled upstream. Narrower bows or pointed sterns would not track nearly so well. The difference between the widths or bow and stern is always maintained, even when the stern width has to be increased to allow for the increasing weight of an aging angler. The underwater ends of the craft are also gentle in profile, there is a shallow, gentle six foot long arc at the bow, while the stern usually has a sharper curve of only two feet. This serves the purpose of giving a low resistance entry to the wide bow and added buoyancy to the narrower stern.

The boat is almost always built using a single 1" (7/8 nominal) plank along each side, usually local black spruce. The length of this plank was probably the maximum length of timber available from the local sawmill, determined by their carriage length. Some boats have been measured at 22 feet long.

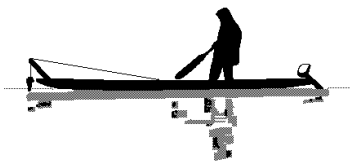
The width of the side was again probably determined by the available timber, but perhaps not as the Hingley's punts were usually built deeper than others. The bottom and end decks were planked in pine, usually 3/4" and caulked, though some builders used tongue and grooved boards. The width and shape was determined by three patterns, one at each end under the end decks and one a little aft of mid-length, under the thwart. Hingley's were known to build two thwarted punts for use with a guide.

There is a roller to carry the anchor at the bow. The anchor is usually chain as it grips the bottom of the river without snagging. Early boats simply had a raised vertical plank at the bow with a notch. A cleat is fitted to the inside of a side plank near the stern to hold the anchor rope and the boat is ready for use after a coat of paint or two.

The St. Mary's River punt is unique to this salmon stream only. It stands alone as an elegant, slender and practical craft superbly suited to the environment, the characteristics of these waters and the demands of the angler. Other salmon rivers in the province have boats which have evolved to suit local conditions, but none are as majestic in the poised way they ride their home waters.



“Dan MacIntosh”
Painting by Joseph R. Crilley



The TaraCarol

by Mark Smith

The TaraCarol is a modern version of the Tom Ross punt.

Our buddy Barrie Reid had us up to his place in New Glasgow one weekend to fish the East Pictou River for salmon. Little did we know he had a surprise for all of us. He was just waiting for the right time to tell us.

During a game of poker Barrie said, "I've got some news to tell you guys. I bought a camp on the St. Mary's River for all of us to use." At first we thought he was pulling our legs, but soon realized he was telling the truth. We offered to help him pay for it over and over again but he wouldn't take anything towards the purchase of the camp. All he wanted was a place for all of us to enjoy and fish from for the next 50 or 60 years. We agreed that we would at least lend a helping hand around the camp. So we came up as the idea of building a traditional/modernized version of a St. Mary's river long boat for Barrie, as a gift.

We built it over the course of 5 months in the winter of 2007-2008 in my father's garage. It is 19.5' long. We borrowed my buddy's car trailer to haul it from Porters Lake to the Waternish Rd. It is a little deeper and wider than the traditional sizes, made from marine grade 3/4 plywood, fiberglassed on all seams and butt joints. The seat decks are made out of cedar decking. Each seat and front and rear platform is hinged so they double as storage compartments and one seat has a built in cooler. The bow has a stainless checker plate guard and aluminum arm that supports the anchor. The anchor line runs from the stern to the bow through pex pipe that's used for water line in a new home. It helps protect the line from damage. The stern also has a stainless checker plate guard with a motor mount and two carrying handles. The top edge of her is protected with strips of puck board as is the bottom of her, four strips from bow to stern.

We named her the "TaraCarol" after Barrie's wife and daughter, and he really enjoyed that. We had her name machined into two pieces of aluminum and place them on the sides for an added touch. You should have seen his face when the four of us carried it down to the camp. Barrie had no idea. This is just another great story of how fishing can bring friends even closer together!

The builders' names are Joe Robichaud, Jason Tremblay, Phil Hatcher, and myself, Mark Smith. I'd like to send a big "thank you" out to my father for letting us tie up his garage for 5 months of the winter.

Thanks Dad!

Mark Smith



Christening the TaraCarol