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317 & 349 WATER STREET.
(Opp. the Post Office.)

Quebec's Wriggling Industry

THE GENESIS, EXODUS AND REVELATION OF THE PROFITABLE EEL AS RELATED BY PIERRE THUOT.

By NAPIER MOORE.

A celebrated writer of sea stories recently wrote for a widely circulated American weekly a series of articles describing in vivid language the life of the fishermen who harvest the Banks. They were thrilling narratives of schooners, rail under, scudding before a gale; of dories adrift amidst mountainous seas; of the spears of sword-fish standing in the "pulpit," under the bowsprit, neck deep in green, swirling water. They were the type of men who, in the stinging, icy blasts of an Atlantic winter, sail forth to wrestle with death itself in order that they may bring fish to market and earn at most a modest livelihood.

This, too, is the story of a fisherman. He dwells in a picturesque little French-Canadian town. His "bank" is the swiftly flowing Richelieu River. He fishes three, or maybe four, months of the year. His market is assured. His daily catch for the next five years is already contracted for. And he stows away \$10,000 or more each season.

He is Monsieur Pierre C. Thuot, Le Pecheur of Iboville, Province of Quebec. He is the harvester of eels.

For some time we had carried in our pocket a newspaper clipping announcing that three hundred barrels of live, squirming eels had been shipped from Montreal to Germany and Holland; that whole barge loads of eels were being shipped to New York and Chicago; that such exports might mark the beginning of a trade which would prove profitable to the Province of Quebec. An idle reference to the Encyclopaedia revealed the fact that since the days of the Ancient Greeks, the eel has been a mystery. The subject of eels at once became fascinating. Where was the nearest Faculty of Muraenidae? Iboville. We went.

Across the Richelieu River, between Iboville and St. Johns, is a dam. Built of stones, it zig-zags through the rapids. It is fashioned, roughly, like four huge Vs, with the points leading downstream. Long wooden fences run the length of the dam. They appear comparatively modern. But the stones were placed there long ago, whether by Indians or by the earliest French settlers, no one knows. The known facts are that the barrage for one hundred years has been used for catching eels and that the right to conduct the fishery has been held throughout that period by the Thuot family. It is to the present head of that family that one must apply for information.

It is eleven of the morning. We enquire at the nearest house where Monsieur Pierre Thuot may be found. Monsieur Thuot, le pecheur? But yes, Monsieur Thuot was at his fishery between three and four in the morning. He will be at his house in Iboville, sleeping.

We tramp the dusty road back to

Iboville and find the good-looking cottage of Monsieur Thuot. The womanfolk are in the kitchen, bustling over the pots and pans. Certainly, Monsieur Thuot will see us. We enter. Immediately a demonical laugh shatters the peace. He! He! Haw! He! He! He! It is a parrot, clattering in its cage suspended from the ceiling.

We are ushered into a room, half sitting room, half office. From a couch rises Pierre Thuot. A short man, with ruddy face, white moustaches and a pair of mighty shoulders. They carry his near seventy years as though they were but forty.

We apologize for interrupting his nap. "He! He!" sniggers the parrot.

"Tels? Monsieur fills his pipe, lights up, and sits back in his chair. "I have been catching eels here all my life. My father caught eels here all his life. He was 84 when he died. He had two partners. They were over 90. Before my father, my grandfather caught eels here. Before him, my great-grandfather maybe. Maybe my son will catch eels after me. So? Always the Thuots catch eels. I have a license which I renew every nine years. It gives me the sole use of this spot. Three hundred dollars I pay the Provincial Government each year."

Eels That Pass in the Night.

We learn that the eel fishing season is short. It starts in May (this year, May 17th), and by September it is all over. Unlike scale fish, eels when they have spent a certain length of time in fresh water, travel down-stream to the sea. This they always do in the summer months, and always by night. On moonlight nights they do not travel in such numbers as on dark nights. In this short period of from three to four months, an average of a thousand eels are caught each night. The method of capture is simple. At the four points of the big zig-zag dam are fixed wooden boxes, 5 feet x 3 by 2. With a hinged lid, they are completely enclosed except for a hole near the bottom. Leading into each box through this hole is a long funnel-shaped wooden structure. The boxes and funnels are submerged. The dam and the wooden fences upon it make corridors down, which the eels are forced to go. And once they enter the funnel and thence into the box they are trapped.

Every morning, Thuot and his helpers rise at three, put off from their shed in a flat-bottomed, punt-like boat, and row up the rapids to the traps. The lids are opened and the eels transferred to the boat by a big-throated, stout net. The boat is specially constructed, with overhanging planks around the gunwales to prevent any sprightly eel from wriggling out of the boat. With a big catch—and as many as 2,400 have been trapped in one night—two or three trips are necessary in order to transfer the squirming cargo down-stream to the receiving boxes—stoutly timbered square vats placed in the river—into which the catch is tumbled. Later in the day they are taken out and packed, still alive, in barrels. Fifty pounds of ice go into each barrel first, then 100 lbs. of fish. Early on the following morning the barrels are collected by the

Dominion Express and shipped by rail to Quebec. All Thuot's eels are sold under contract to the American Eels Corporation of Quebec. This company loads them into vessels and ships them to Holland and Germany. New York and Chicago maintain big markets for eels, but under a New York State law, no fish caught in the Richelieu River may enter that State. Therefore, New York receives its eels from other fisheries than those of Quebec.

The American Eels Corporation pays Thuot eleven cents a pound. During the war the rate was 12 cents. Afterwards it dropped to 8 cents, before rising to the present figure, which Thuot regards as good pay. Thuot's average daily catch for the last three years has totalled 3,000 pounds. His average total for the season has been 100,000 pounds. At 11 cents a pound, the income is easy to figure. His expenses, including the Government license fee, average \$2,000 a season. This covers wages and the cost of setting up his dam, fences and replacing those parts of the stone barrage which are carried away by ice.

For four months work this sounds like a good return. But it is strenuous work while it lasts. Each fall the fences and boxes must be removed from the river. Each spring they must be rebuilt. As the water level rises and falls, intricate adjustments of the apparatus must be made. The daily work of handling and packing a writhing, slithering three thousand pound mass is laborious.

Monsieur Thuot rises, goes to a cupboard and produces a jar wherein are four inch, cylindrical strips of gray flesh. They are smoked eel. He has a scheme for putting out canned eel, but as to that he can do nothing for five years, for it is not his entire harvest during that time contracted for Smoked eel, he figures will cost 30 cents a pound.

And now to consider the eel, whence it cometh and whither it goeth. We pull out the clippings and extracts from the Encyclopaedia.

"The Greek philosopher Aristotle said that eels have no sex and lay no eggs, but spring from the entrails of the sea," we begin: "We read further, that hundreds of years elapsed before an Italian scientist, Syrski, of Trieste, discovered there was a male eel as well as a female eel. To be precise, this revelation made the year 1873 a memorable one. How the male eel has kept himself out of sight during all these centuries was considered an unfathomable mystery until L. Jacoby, after much patient research, announced that he had found no gentleman eels exceeding nineteen inches in length, whereas the females reached a length of thirty-nine inches or more."

Monsieur Thuot nods. "I catch them well over three feet, sometimes."

"Scientists tell us," we continue, "that there is every reason to believe that all eels have their origin in the depths of the ocean, either in the vicinity of the West Indies or the Azores; that the female eels spawn there and, spawning, die; that the eggs are hatched as they float midway between sea-bottom and the surface; that the baby eels (measuring less than an inch at birth), find their way to the rivers, swim upstream and remain in fresh water for about twelve years. Then they are smitten with a desire to return to their birthplace. They go down-stream to the sea, or to be caught in traps and sent to feed the sturdy Germans and Dutch."

Monsieur Thuot shakes his head doubtfully.

"We are even told by Compton's Picture Encyclopaedia that eels may often be seen wriggling through wet grass or along a muddy road, in search of fresh water."

"HEH! HEH! HEH! HAW! HAW!" roared the parrot.

Monsieur Thuot smiles.

"Monsieur, for me the eels are born in the fresh water—in Lake George, Lake Champlain. I, myself, have found in Lake George, young eels not three inches long. Did they swim from the middle of the Atlantic and walk over muddy roads and, Monsieur, for me the eels don't lay eggs."

"No eggs, monsieur," reiterates Monsieur Thuot. "You have eyes. I have eyes. You shall see for yourself, maybe if we are lucky. Come!"

We march along the road until we have passed the dam and are below the rapids. We come to an unassuming wooden shed and enter. Barrels are stacked in the middle of the floor. The walls are hung with ropes, lanterns, wicker boots, well-sealed overalls, and an assortment of odds and ends that have a Dickensian flavor. Monsieur Thuot takes a stout pole with a husky net on the end. We embark on the flat-bottomed boat and push over to the half submerged box. Monsieur Thuot raises the lid. The sunlight pours into the pit, Pandemonium! It is as if an octopus with a thousand tentacles had been suddenly smitten with itch. One sees a writhing, wriggling, shimmering mass, splashing furiously. There are over a thousand eels in that box. One thousand eels trying to get out.

Mons. Thuot Reveals The Young Eel.

Monsieur Thuot takes his net, angles, and bags two. Bang goes the lid. With his hands he takes the captives from the net and flings them on the floor of the boat. They slither over our shoes.

Thuot picks one up and throws it on the scale. Four pounds. He raises it above his head and hurls it to the

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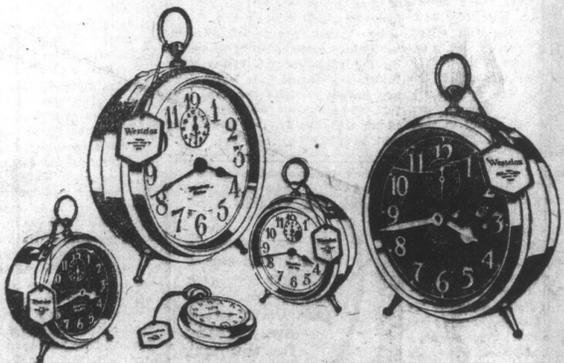


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floor. Again he does it. The eel seems stunned. We go ashore. Thuot hooks the eel's head on a nail and proceeds to skin it. Even when the body is skinned and severed from the head it continues to twist itself into knots.

Monsieur Thuot is about to make his big expose. Skillfully he dissects. He cuts open what appears to be a fleshy pouch situated slightly behind the gills. Carefully he scrapes. Then he thrusts the blade of the knife under our nose. On it lies a pinkish, semi-transparent, worm-like object about three-quarters of an inch long. Again he probes, and a second object lies on the blade. They wriggle slightly. They are alive.

"Young eels," announces Thuot, "We are lucky. It is getting late in the year. But in the spring, almost every eel I cut up has little eels inside. How they are born, whether from the mouth or from the gills, I do not know. See, you can see their eyes."

One cannot be a successful newspaper reporter without being sceptical. With his clasp knife M. Thuot, on the face of it, has just upset the theories of modern science as expounded by so august a volume as "E" of the Encyclopaedia Britannica. It is rather a poser.

M. Thuot shrugs his shoulders. "I know a worm when I see it," he says. "I have fished for carp and other scale fish. I know what worms look like in them. Worms haven't those eyes. These are little eels. I myself, in Lake George, have seen them when they have grown to three inches, swimming about. If they were worms they could not be in that part of the eel's body. See—worms would be here." With his knife M. Thuot opens up more of the eel. "Here is where the food passes through. Here there would be worms, like a carp. But no, there are no worms."

M. Thuot performs the same operation on the other eel. But there are no little eels.

M. Thuot sniffs at the wind. "I'm afraid for the frost," he says. "The first frost ends our fishing. For the eel finds it and he starts to dig in for the winter. The moment the eel finds the frost he looks for a nice, muddy bottom, and there he buries himself until spring. In early spring I have caught eels that had parts of their bodies colored deep red and other parts blue and other parts a sort of white, according to the shade of the mud in which they had lain during the winter. Yes, they bury themselves in the bottom of the lakes, in the upper reaches of the rivers, until the winter is over. Then they make for the sea."

"How old are they when they head for the sea?" we ask. "Scientists say they leave the sea at the age of about a year and remain in fresh water about some 12 years."

M. Thuot points to the eels he has sacrificed in the interests of know-

ledge. "Four pounds. Likely 50 or 60 years, maybe a hundred years. It takes an eel many, many years to grow three feet. They live to be very, very old."

"How about the scientific theory that the eel originates in the ocean and finds its way into the rivers," we ask.

"No scientist saw an eel going upstream. Neither did I," avers M. Thuot. "For me they are born in the fresh water. For me they lay 'no eggs.'"

We take leave of Monsieur Thuot. We go back to town and get out the Encyclopaedia. We turn to "Eels" and we look at a picture showing types of "Leptocephali," or small, eel-like fish. And, unless we are suffering from some chronic eye complaint they are exactly similar to the small specimens we saw lying on the blade of Thuot's knife. The reading matter says they are pinkish and transparent.

After all, M. Thuot has been associated with eels all his life. He ought to know something about them. At least he knows more about them than did Aristotle, whom the Encyclopaedia considers no small potatoes.—Montreal Daily Star.

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