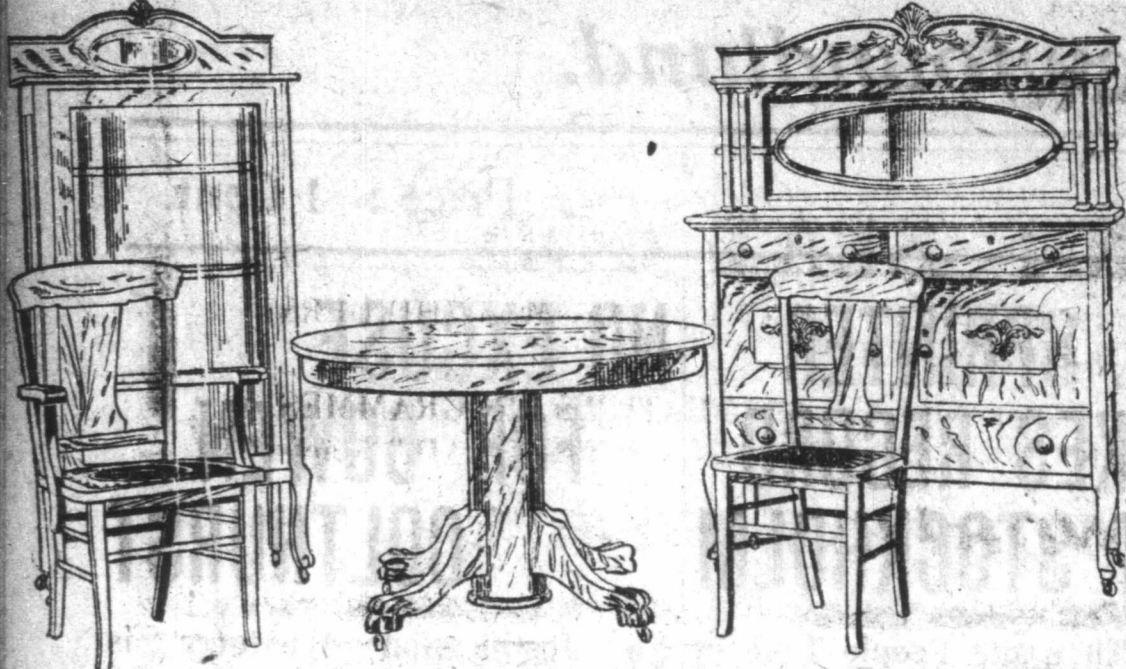


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The Fisheries of The North.

by R. J. Fraser.

The prospect of large commercial fisheries in the northern tidal waters of Hudson's and James' Bays has been studied at odd times during the past two centuries but the resultant opinions and reports, which have been diverse and contradictory, were mostly stamped as vague and insufficient and in consequence were laid aside. Little system and less thoroughness were shown in the undertakings and for lack of confirmatory information the project received scant attention, and that only at long intervals. The first explorers, from the days of Henry Hudson and Captain James, claimed that the great waters which now bear their names were the habitat of many edible fishes. In the log-books of the early navigators who sailed the northern waters in the service of the Hudson Bay Company one may read of crews who, caught in the Bay by early freeze-ups and forced to remain for many months far distant from their posts or depots, subsisted mainly on the fish they caught. On the other hand, contemporaries stated that the fish in the waters they had sailed were few, and those few of species generally considered as unfit for human consumption. Tales of the old fur traders living on the coast, whose gastronomic feats have been recounted by early writers, contain descriptions of factors' tables with great dishes of fish as the chief items on the menu. These, though, were caught, not in the salt waters of the Bay, but in the rivers and streams which are tributary to it. In nearly all of these latter goodly hauls of a small specie of whitefish—similar in nature to the whitefish of our lakes—are taken, and used mostly for food for the fur-trading companies' sleigh dogs. Some of these streams are well stocked with sturgeon and trout but not near their mouths, and few other than the Indians who travel these waterways attempt to make use of them. For the natives each spring and fall these fish provide a fortnight's sustenance.

Commander A. P. Low when he made his cruise with the "Neptune" in 1902 investigated the fisheries to a slight extent. The substance of his report explained that in the southern part of Hudson's and James' Bay large quantities of sea-trout and whitefish were taken by the natives. The Arctic salmon, a fish far superior to the Pacific salmon, was plentiful along the eastern side of the Bay to the northward of James Bay, as well as in the mouths of the rivers of the northern and northwest coast; and also along both shores at Hudson Strait.

Cod were taken at several places along the east shore of Hudson Bay, as far north as Cape Smith; a few occurred in Roes Welcome on the western side and some small specimens were taken among the ice at Fullerton.

Beyond these few facts nothing more of value was known of the fisheries of the deeper waters of the strait and bay. Furthermore, it has been since claimed by many that the cod thus found were merely rock cod and not the true fish that is taken in the North Atlantic waters and on the banks of Newfoundland.

At Cape Chidley, the northernmost point of the Labrador coast, the Moravian Church has for a number of years conducted a mission among the Eskimos. In connection with it a cod fishery was established and these fish have been taken in abundance. The Newfoundland fishermen, who "can smell cod-fish ten fathoms down," followed the fish this far only each summer several of their schooners pursuing the trade to this point on the coast. Beyond that, though, they have not ventured; the ice fields of the strait prevented the small sailing craft from exploring the waters farther west. In the bottom of Ungava Bay, at the mouth of the George River, Arctic salmon are taken in large numbers by the employees of the Hudson Bay Company and the fur trading firm of Revillon Freres. Their respective supply steamers visit these posts once a year and by each annual shipment of cured fish, aggregating many tons, is consigned to the southern market.

This was the extent of the knowledge of the fisheries of the North up till the season of 1914. The subject lay dormant for several years but did not wholly die, and the recent activities in the projecting of the Hudson Bay route revived the investigation. Two parties went north by canoe routes in the month of June and returned again in October. The one which travelled down the Albany River and explored the streams and coastal waters of the west shore of James' Bay brought to light the fact that there were sixteen different species found there, either in the bay or

in the rivets flowing into it. Chief of these rivers is the Albany. From the estuary of this stream, year after year, 1300 pounds are taken and in seasons when game is scarce a population of more than 400 souls find abundant sustenance. Sturgeon, pickerel and pike and a great many speckled trout are caught each season but the whitefish is one of the best fishes on this coast. The economic value of these species, excepting the whitefish, is not great and with a few exceptions they are nearly all fresh water. Rock cod occur in the bay here but no record is available of a single specimen of the true cod being found on the west coast.

Monsieur Droulette, for over ten years District Manager of the Revillon Freres Traders in James' Bay, has claimed that the deeper waters of the bay contain many marketable fishes. He had been connected with the trawling industry of the French ports and the similarity of the waters and bottom of James' Bay to those of the coast of France so attracted him that he had visions of his company employing a trawler there. On one occasion he experimented with this little steamer, rigged with crude, improvised gear, to test the worth of his theory. The results obtained were not unsatisfactory. But thus far nothing on a larger scale has been attempted.

It was from the other party, that which explored the east coast, that more promising results were looked for and these were indeed gratifying in the extreme. C. D. Melville, a western Englishman whose investigations and reports on the fisheries of the Peace and MacKenzie Rivers had brought him before the eyes of parties thus interested, was the man selected for the work. He left Cochrane, Ontario, late in June and with two Temagami guides travelled slowly down the Mattagami and Moose Rivers to Moose Factory on James' Bay. He fished as he went. From the Moose River he travelled across the bay on the Hudson Bay Company's little steamer, the "Inewew," to Rupert House. There he launched his canoe again and from there to Cape Jones, 200 miles up the coast, he prospected the shores, river mouths and coastal waters of the Bay. From officers and employees of the trading companies he gathered information and specimens of the fish to the north of that point, even to Cape Wolstenholme at the west entrance of Hudson Strait. In the fall he returned to Moose Factory and up the Missanabi river to "the line," more than satisfied with the results of his season's work, wonderfully surprised at the possibilities

of the future.

It was at Rupert House in July that I met Mr. Melville, then just starting-up the coast. "What are prospects so far?" I asked. "Do you expect to find anything worth while?" His reply was for from enthusiastic. "No, I don't," he told me, "but," he answered, "from all accounts I've gathered, from the inhabitants here and at Moose, the fish in the bay are a negligible quantity. At present I feel like stating in my report that whenever I wished to observe fast days I was compelled to purchase fish from the fur-trading companies—salt cod that came from St. John's, Newfoundland."

It was at Moose in October that I again met the explorer. He was on his return to the "outside." Naturally I inquired as to the success of the expedition. This time his words bubbled forth from a well of enthusiasm. "I'd contract," he added in conclusion as he stepped into his canoe, "to contract to start from Cochrane with nothing but a fish net and live off the country—or rather the waters—all the way to Cape Wolstenholme and back."

Amongst the islands and in the sounds and "tuckles" of the east coast of the bay his nets caught land-locked salmon, the ouananiche—similar to that caught in Lower St. Lawrence and Quebec Province waters, lake trout, or salmon trout, and the speckled species of the same family; sturgeon, whitefish, pickerel, and silver chubb, in the mouths of the coastal streams. The sea hauls brought up several species of flat fish. But what, from a commercial point of view, was the most valuable find, was the cod, the true cod—the "Newfoundland's cod"—and this in goodly numbers. The ancient controversy over that valuable food fish, existence in Hudson's Bay waters was brought to a glorious end.

According to Mr. Melville, with the questions of quick transportation to a waiting market and a sufficiently lengthy period of safe navigation settled, the whitefish fishery of the North will prove one of the greatest in Canada. With its development the other fisheries will become of relatively great value.

At present the fisheries in operation—on a very small scale with what we shall see in the near future—are those of Port Burwell and Ungava, already mentioned, and the smaller ones conducted by the Hudson Bay Company's posts at the mouth of the large rivers on the east side of Hudson Bay. At Fort George, 800 miles south of Cape Wolstenholme, nets and tidal weirs are being successfully operated and large catches of salmon are taken annually.

It is in this locality that Mr. Melville obtained his finest specimens. For many miles out to sea the waters are studded with islands and the sounds abound in whitefish. The coast is very similar in nature to that of the North Shore of Lake Superior between Thunder Bay and Jackfish. And the experimental fishing here compared most favorably with the fresh water lakes for in four days in August 140 fathoms of net, of different meshes, 4 1/2 inch, 4 inch and 2 1/2 inch, caught over 600 pounds of fish. This section gives promise of a most prolific fishery. The chief reason why the trading companies have not established a greater industry in this line on the east coast is because the chief consumers, the dogs, are well fed on seal blubber, easily obtained.

The present great drawback to the establishing of commercial fisheries is that of quick and short transportation to a market. The future will see that overcome. By 1197 the Hudson Bay Railway from LePas to Port Nelson is to be completed and the latter will then have been made a port in more than name only. Sheltered harbours on the east coast of the bay are numerous and facilities for wintering fishing craft of all tonnage can be found. The shore country is quite habitable, except for a few hundred miles from Wolstenholme. Timber is plentiful—in fact, the seasons and climate are less severe than those experienced by the fishermen of the bleak and barren Labrador. Large coal deposits have been found on Clarke Island and others in the neighbourhood of Port Harrison and from these points to Port Nelson is but 400 miles—a comparatively short voyage for collecting steamers.

Now, what is known of the feasibility, the safety, of the much discussed "Hudson Bay route"? What of the risks incurred by vessels entering these waters? The following facts should at least breed optimism.

Between the years 1670 and 1870, the two centuries during which the Hudson Bay Company exercised its chartered monopoly, seven hundred and fifty vessels, ranging from seventy-gun ships of war to ten-ton pinaces, in the service of the great fur company, crossed the ocean, passed through the strait, and sailed to and fro over the bay. And only two were lost. If one considers that this was

before the days of steam propulsion and iron clads and modern aids to navigation, it must be conceded a marvelous record.

Since 1910 during the season of navigation over one hundred and fifteen voyages in and out of the bay have been made. These were to and from Port Nelson and other points in Hudson's and James' Bay and Montreal, Halifax, St. John's, Newfoundland, Labrador, and England. These voyages were made by vessels of different descriptions mainly in the employ of the government and trading companies, a few on scientific pursuits. Several were totally unprepared for battling with the northern ice fields. Yet none failed to make a passage.

The ice menace to navigation in the Hudson Strait may in a few years be little greater than that of Belle Isle and the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Several splendid harbours of refuge along the route have been explored and surveyed, and a system of lights including no less than ten permanent light houses in the Strait alone is under consideration. These, with a wireless patrol of the ice movement, will greatly facilitate quick passages and ensure mariners of a safety in those waters that was little dreamed of a few years ago.

Now, having established beyond doubt that the fish are there, that the great growing West offers a ready market, with an entrance through Port Nelson ready in a year's time for shipping operations, sea routes made practicable and comparatively safe, the project lacks but the necessary pioneers to show the way to the fishermen. These are to be found in the Labrador fjords and the sea villages and ports of Newfoundland and Acadia. As the trade grows the southern markets of Ontario and Quebec will stretch out inviting hands by way of the projected James Bay railways, the one the northern extension of the Temiscamincue and Northern Ontario, the other the North Railway from Montreal. For each of these terminal sites and harbour locations have been found, the one at the mouth of the Moose River, the other in Rupert Bay.

It is a good omen that the government is still going ahead with the Hudson Bay route and though we may not see it next year, nor for a succeeding year or two, the time is surely coming when the fisheries of the North will be counted among the great natural resources that are building up the Great Dominion.

The following is a fairly comprehensive list of the food fishes to be found in James' Bay and its tributary streams:—Sturgeon, whitefish, tullibee, speckled trout, lake trout, or salmon trout, land-locked salmon (ouananiche), long-finned charr, jackfish or pike, pickerel, dore or well-eyed pike, sucker (two species), ling, codfish, toothed herring, and silver chubb. This list is according to the investigation of Mr. Melville.

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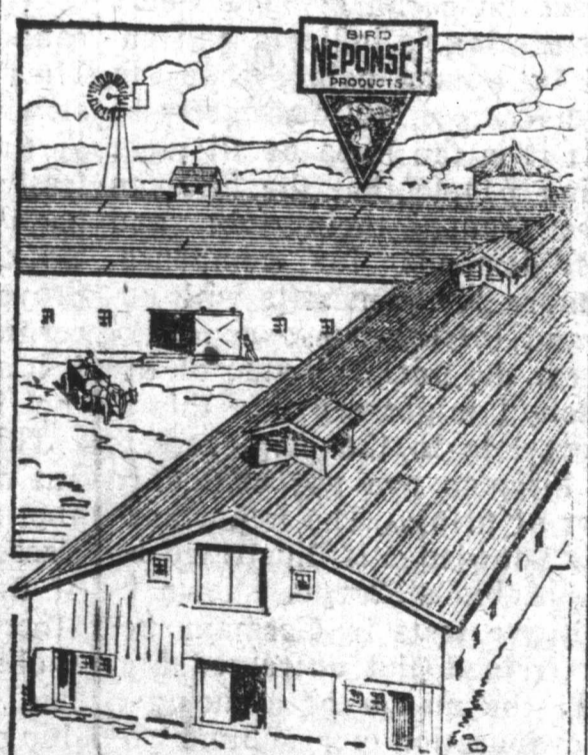
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