

A FAMILY RIVER

A HISTORY WELL WORTH READING.

On a rare evening off from my studies on Quebec North Shore salmon rivers, under the generous tutelage of Mrs. Francis Low, I rose my first-ever salmon in 1980. Using her two-handed rod, I cast from a canoe in the shadow of the high banks of the St. Jean River, where the Lows were guests at the imposing log structure known as Hill Camp.

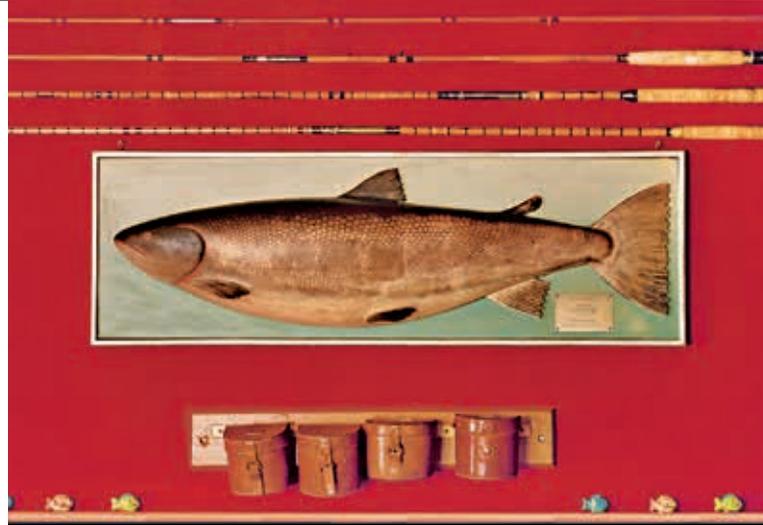
As the salmon rose three times, only to eventually sink into the depths, it was I who ended up deeply hooked. So it was with anticipation that I waited for “Sea Winter Salmon – Chronicles of the St. John River,” to arrive from the publisher for review. It was a book I was pre-disposed to like.

The principal author, Mari Hill Harpur, is the great-granddaughter of American Railway magnate, James J. Hill. He founded the camp in 1889, constructing the main building with locally-sourced 25-foot, 10-inch spruce logs. In this book, Hill Harpur has drawn on over 25 years of experience managing the camp with her husband to engagingly relate stories based on five generations worth of salmon seasons spent on the St. Jean.

The attractive softcover volume is akin to a busy scrapbook, with elements of family history, archival documents, anecdotes, biology, and evocative photography cramming the pages. Early lease negotiations—when English-speaking folk would have called the river the St. John—are of historic interest, and some inner family workings are revealed, notably a negotiation on transfer of shares in the camp, between Hill Harpur and her uncle, Anson Beard, who ran the camp for 40 years. There are some great photos, both archival and contemporary, of local native band leaders with members of the Hill and Chambers families, attesting to a seemingly warm, ongoing, relationship among all the parties, on the St-Jean at least.

It is particularly nice to see fulsome recognition of the long involvement of the Rivière St. Jean-based Chambers family in operating the camp on behalf of the owners, with photos of the local agents appearing often. In fact, the strong suit of the book is in the snaps of early camp life, copies of various key documents and Hill Harpur’s contemporary photos, some superb, of camp guests, the river and the environs. Two appendices (biographies of some key players over the years, and some “fish tales” relating to camp guests), and a gallery of 22 additional full-page photos by Hill Harpur round out the book.

The Hill family is to be commended for their interest in, and support for, Atlantic salmon research, principally conducted under the aegis of ASF and its predecessor the ASA. The focus is work done since Hill Harpur took over management of Hill Camp, but not mentioned is the work in the 70s and 80s by students based at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution’s Matamek Research Station. Another curious omission is any description of the salmon pools on the river and the flies used by anglers.



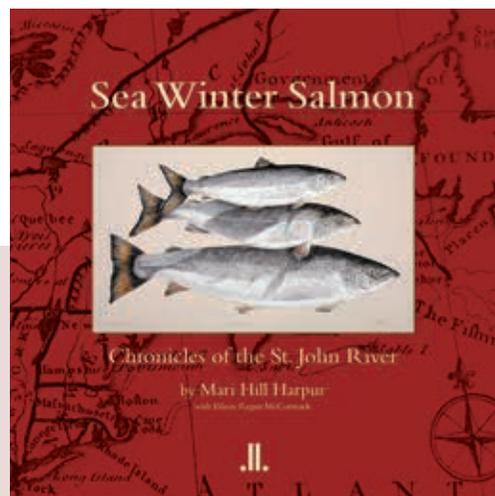
MARI HILL HARPUR

A carved reproduction of Louis Hill’s Sr.’s 1906 record fish, which adorns the dining room at Hill Camp. This fish had the distinction of being the largest salmon ever properly recorded on the St. John River, weighing 36.5 pounds.

There are a couple of other minor irritants. Salmon clubs can sometimes be somewhat frozen in time, existing apart from their surroundings. I found the attempt to use the anglicized name for the river in the title and throughout the book an anachronistic affectation: even when I was at the camp, guests and guides alike called it the St. Jean, and there are multiple instances in the book where that name is used, intentionally or not. Likewise, the main part of the title is a bit meaningless as nearly all fish returning to most rivers world-wide are sea-winter salmon, whether one (grilse), two, three sea-winter or multiple-spawning fish.

But, an over-invested biologist’s quibbles aside, this is clearly a well-written book whose heart is in the right place. It provides insight into the origins and workings of a long-established private camp, and serves as a reminder of an important time in my life, and a place I’d gladly return to, even by simply having the book on my shelf.

—ALEX T. BIELAK



Sea Winter Salmon – Chronicles of the St. John River

By Mari Hill Harpur with Eileen Regan McCormack, 2015, \$29.95

Linda Leith Publishing, available at: www.seawintersalmon.com