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### **Odd Fish Stories from the 1800's**

As with most articles involving history it is sometimes difficult if not impossible to get as Joe Friday would say "the fact's Mam, just the facts." Different sources give different dates for the arrival of Henry Ross. The year 1847, was one date offered, while 1849 is given in the Dunnville Centennial Year book of 1950 as the date of Henry's settlement at Port Maitland. The date is not as important as the fact that Henry, a native of Germany came to this area as one of the first commercial fishermen to fish the waters in and around the Grand River. Henry was soon joined by other commercial fishermen. The surname Hoover is first found in commercial fishing as early as 1853. A bit later the name Absalom Hoover comes up in 1880 when he begins fishing in an undisclosed location in Haldimand County.

Nineteenth century commercial fishing families that fished out of Port Maitland and Dunnville had surnames such as; Booth, Brooker, Clark, Crawford, Crosby, Dougher, Gorral, Green, Hendershot, Jones, Little, Martin, McIntee, McKee, McKeown, Moss, Mossip, Moyer, Siddall, Taylor, Thomas, Thompson, Ward, Wardell, Weaver, and of course Ross. Today, many Dunnville area families with names such as Little, McKee, McKeown, Siddall, Thompson, and Weaver descend from Henry Ross.

In 1888, Captain George Brooker who fished on the Grand River at Port Maitland for Catfish sold two boat loads to the Buffalo market, and received \$42.00. The Dunnville Gazette thought this was a great catch and remarked, "No wonder our people feel an interest in the fishing question." By this time fish stocks were fluctuating greatly from year to year and there was concern that overfishing was taking its toll on the industry. As early as 1871, concerns were being expressed that the rough fish catch was not as good as in previous years.

Concerned for the dwindling fish stock in the upper river, the government installed a fish slide west of John Scott's residence at Byng in the same year. Politics and maybe some indifference played a role in fishing in the nineteenth century as evident in a Reform Press letter of 1886. "Can anyone explain why the \$2,000 fish slide in the dam here had the step left out all of last season and this spring, too, so far? Is the Fishery Inspector afraid the fish would have too easy a climb or does he want to take it easy himself making the office a sinecure"-an office which provides revenue without requiring work. Signed Fisherman.



Gill netting was introduced in Lake Erie in 1884, by fishermen from Dunkirk NY. During one early attempt they found themselves in difficulty after catching two barrels of large whitefish some twenty miles south of Port Maitland. A strong wind drove them to our shores where they sold their catch to James A. McIndoe of Port Maitland. Later in that same year we find in The Reform Press this clipping. "A company from Dunkirk NY, has been engaged in fishing near Port Maitland, using gill nets and sinking them in deep water, about twelve miles from the shore, exporting the catch principally Whitefish of good size and excellent quality to Buffalo. It is the first trial of deep gill net fishing in Lake Erie in this vicinity and no doubt will prove profitable."

In 1886, a fish hatchery was established near Erie Pennsylvania on Lake Erie. The following year fifteen million young Whitefish were to be released into Lake Erie on the South shore in lots of two million. (Good math ah?)

Large numbers of Muskellunge were caught below the dam each spring, many reported to weigh in excess of 37 lbs. Richard Smithers, told the story that his father claimed a Muskellunge weighing 52 lbs., had been caught by an Indian in 1890. Richard himself claimed to have seen a Billfish 8 foot long at Farr Point, and of ripples reaching the boat he was in from a fish jumping out of the water a mile away. Mr. Chas Green is reported to have caught in an hour at Port Maitland, 250 Herring, without bait, and a Muskellunge weighing 45 lbs.

The Reforms Press, throughout 1891 reported; "The Martin Bros of Port Maitland caught 44 barrels of fish in one day, the biggest haul they, or perhaps anyone else ever made at this place. That Sturgeon were being caught in Sulphur Creek at Byng - one weighting as much as 115 lbs. Also that a Muskellunge, weighing 44 lbs. was caught by Martin Green in the lower river (and shipped to George McArthur at Buffalo, who had it on exhibition at the Tift House astonishing the Queen City folks). James Crawford caught 49 Sturgeons in his pound net (more familiarly known as pond nets) at one haul off Port Maitland." Herring were being caught by the tons, as had suckers, especially below the dam in Dunnville. By this time the Dunnvilleites, were once again becoming concerned that very few of the rough fish were getting as far as the dam. Seine and pound net fishing at Port Maitland and in the lower river permitted few of them to reach above the fish slide.

It was not only the commercial fishermen who fished the river and lake. One such group who made annual junkets to Port Maitland was The Buffalo Fishing Club, "of professional gentlemen". Many of these men arrived in Dunnville by train then headed for Port Maitland in boats that taxied tourists and supplies up and down the river. Sport fishing benefited the hotel keepers, local boat owners, and merchants. There are several newspaper accounts such as these. "The steam yacht Louis Miller, with a party of about 15 sportsmen from Buffalo, arrived here on Tuesday afternoon. They "did" the town, apparently fully enjoying themselves and left in the evening for Port Maitland, where they will spend a few days fishing." And "The steam yacht Fairy, owned by Captain Robinson will be in the lower river next week, when fishing or other parties can charter her for long or short trips."

Amazing fish stories are told, many difficult to believe. On July 27, 1888, John Taylor, a resident of Port Maitland, while working on the pier noticed something floating on the water. He found a boat and proceeded to the spot, where he discovered it to be a Sturgeon. John cautiously approached it and

caught it by the tail, but in his anxiety did not succeed in getting it. John did not despair, for in a few moments the finny monster again came to the surface when a second attempt was made by Mr. T. who caught the fish in his arms and landed him safely in the boat.

In another we are told. A Rock Bass was seen swimming beneath the bridge behind Haney & Middaugh's Mill. As it rose to the surface, a large black spider suddenly dropped upon the fish, clinging to its back fin. Whether or not the Bass was stung and poisoned, or stunned, it continued to float and move slowly and steadily toward the shore. Then for some reason it flopped, or was turned by its captor upon dry land. The truth of this story, although seemingly improbable, was vouched for by Mr. S. Haney.

Lamenting about the good old days when Sturgeon were plentiful, some old-timers expressed their regrets to The Reform Press in 1893, "Sturgeon-fishing is not what it used to be. I have seen 24 large ones caught at a single haul in a seine." Another, a man named Brown, said "I have heard, caught 75 at one time, and at the next haul the seine split in two. One year the catch here exceeded 1,000. I have seen 85 corded on the shore, and they looked like a load of wood a short distance away. But the biggest run I ever saw," he continued, "was at Byng, on the Sulphur. You have heard of slashing in a forest, where trees are felled across each other to burn, in clearing land. Well, the bank where the Sturgeons were strewn so very thickly about, vividly reminded me of one of these slashings."

These are only a few of many accounts of commercial and sports fishing in the Grand River and Lake Erie until the ninetieth century gave way to the twentieth. I leave it to you to believe what you will and reject the unbelievable. By 1900, fish populations had been reduced considerably from what they had been at the beginning of the 1800's, yet the sizes, variety, and quantity remaining for the taking in 1900, would today bring fishermen from all over the continent to sample our rich resources.

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