

# THE HAUT-SAINT-LAURENT WILDERNESS AT THE TIME OF SETTLEMENT BASED ON SELLAR'S HISTORY

- Part I: Wildlife -

by

Jacques Brisson and André Bouchard

Institut de recherche en biologie végétale and Université de Montréal

*My purpose is to tell how this section which, in 1800, was a howling-wilderness, impenetrable save to the Indian as he sought the wild-beast in his lair, has become transformed into one of the most highly cultivated districts in the Dominion. Sellar, 1888, p. 1*

Two hundred years of severe deforestation, drainage of marshes and bogs for land reclamation, cattle grazing, hunting, episodes of increase and decline in agriculture, and other human activities have profoundly modified the impenetrable howling wilderness referred to by Sellar. While it is easy to imagine a romantic time with forests of giant trees densely inhabited with wild animals, in reality, we know surprisingly little about the exact composition and characteristics of this complex wilderness. Ecology being a recent science, there was no effort made at the time of settlement to quantify, record or describe the original virgin forest and fauna before it was gone.

Recently, there has been an increasing interest in reconstructing in the most detailed way the composition and characteristics of the presettlement forest for scientific reasons. This reconstruction, by providing a baseline standard for evaluating present-day environments, is considered an essential component of conservation planning and ecosystem management. Yet, besides any practical motivations, it is the mere fascination that drives us, - car-loving, web-surfing, 21<sup>st</sup> century humans - to turn our attention back toward the simple but adventurous way of life that our ancestors met when they set foot in the wild and virgin land that the Haut-Saint-Laurent once was.

During the 1880s, Robert Sellar collected narratives of the remaining original settlers of the Haut-Saint-Laurent and recorded these priceless accounts in his **History of the County of Huntingdon and the Seignories of Chateaugay and Beauharnois**. There are numerous direct allusions to the early wilderness scattered across Sellar's book. As two ecologists working on reconstructing the original forest landscape in the Haut-Saint-Laurent (see the reference section), we found these references to be invaluable in providing information not available by any other means. However, as Robert McGee points out in **A Companion to Robert Sellar's History**

Sellar's approach makes the reader's task difficult, especially if one focuses on one particular topic. Hence, we have extracted and sorted all references to vegetation, forest composition and wild animals from Sellar's book in order to draw up a general picture of the wilderness at the time of settlement.

Of course, one has to be cautious in interpreting such references. There are occasional contradictions in the numerous anecdotic recollections reported in Sellar's history. Indeed, Sellar's work being based on an oral-history approach, any single account could be exaggerated, incorrectly reported, plainly false, or reflect Sellar's own biases. Yet, it is the weight of similar or concordant accounts that give credibility on the conclusions that can be drawn from a particular subject.

In the following, we list all excerpts pertaining to wildlife in Sellar's History, classified in animal category for convenience. The presettlement forest composition and vegetation will be the subject of a future article. The page number in Sellar's book (from the 1975 and 1963 reprints) and the identity of the settler quoted by Sellar is given when known. The approximate location involved is also given for each excerpt, and in this respect, Robert McGee's "*Companion*" was often helpful in locating the settler's origin. Excerpts within an animal category are ordered according to their appearance in the book. Details given between brackets within an excerpt are our own. We summarize and briefly comment on each animal category, but we keep our comments minimal, preferring to let the settlers tell their own story through Sellar's pen.

## 1. Bears, wolves and lynx: dangerous wild beasts....

Nowadays, the only large mammal of any significant numbers in the Haut-Saint-Laurent is the harmless deer. Yet, it appears that the first settlers had occasionally to face wild and menacing animals. There are many reports of encounters with bears and wolves in Sellar. These animals must have been particularly frightening to the immigrant of the British Isles since they were unknown to them, both bear and wolf having been eliminated from the Isles long before they left (Rackham, 1986).

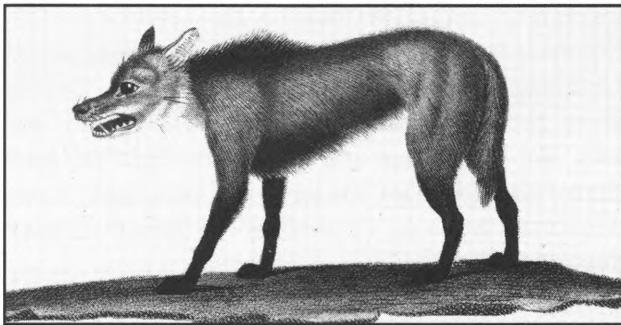
The bear rarely happened to constitute a real danger, and indeed, occasionally finished on the settler's plate. On the other hand, the wolves were a real threat, if not for human himself, at least for his livestock. It was thus implacably hunted to extinction in the region. But nature hates emptiness, and a new, smaller predator, the coyote, appeared in the Haut-Saint-Laurent around the 1950s.

There are only two references to wild felines in Sellar, one stating that "catamounts" were rarely met, the other mentioning the cry of "panthers" at night. If these reports are authentic, they more likely refer to the red lynx (also called Bobcat), which was very likely present, although not common, at the time of settlement, than to the Canada lynx (more boreal) or the Eastern cougar (extremely rare at the time, nearly extinct today).

*...and bear's meat, "bush-pork" the settlers called it, were frequently on the table... (Hemmingford, p. 20)*

*The country was in its primeval state, wild beasts abounding. [James] O'Neill used to relate that they never caused in him a feeling of dread save once when, while returning from Champlain with a bag of flour on his shoulders, a pack of wolves suddenly rushed past, a little in front of him; happily for him, too much engaged in the object of their pursuit to notice him. (Havelock, p. 20)*

*During his frequent absence, she [Samuel Covey's wife] passed the night in terror of wild beast... (Covey Hill, p. 25)*



(Cuvier, F. 1819-1829. Dictionnaire des sciences naturelles: 2e partie, Règne organisé: les Mammifères. F. G. Levrault, ed. Paris.)

#### **Wolves constituted the greatest threat to the early settlers**

*He [Louis Hainault's father] cut into the hole, and in so doing cut the nose off a young bear cub, which at once set up a howl. Then he saw the trunk of the tree shaking, and an enormous she-bear descending upon him... My father was a great bear-hunter; he killed no fewer than nine in one fall. (Louis Hainault, Beauharnois [Melocheville], p.35)*

*One night, when [James] Wright was on his way to see them [the Andrews], he heard what sounded like a human cry, and was going towards whence it proceeded, when a second shriek convinced him it was a wolf. (English River, near Howick, p. 38).*

*One of them [the Scotch], Sandy [James] Williamson, had an exciting adventure with a bear. While chopping, he struck a hollow tree and the crash of the axe speedily aroused a huge bear asleep within it, which rushed out, felling the dog that was with Williamson with a blow from a forepaw and eluding the stroke of the axe... There were not many bears... (Georgetown, p. 45-46).*

*He [Benjamin Palmer] trapped and shot a large number of wolves, whose heads were bought by Americans, who used them in obtaining the bounty paid by the towns, which gradually rose to \$20 a head. (Huntingdon, p. 160)*

*Catamounts were rarely met with, but bears, especially near swamps, were plentiful. Occasional stragglers have been killed in Teafield as late as 1870. Of all wild beasts, wolves were the most annoying, and they, for the safety of sheep and young cattle, were hunted without mercy. (Huntingdon p. 163-4)*

*The settlers were in no way troubled by wild beasts. There were bears in the Teafield, but they did not stray their way, and wolves were equally unknown. (Port Lewis, p. 187).*

*There were wild beasts around us, and we lost a 3-year old heifer, which was found dead, with the marks of a bear's claws in its torn back. (Angus McPherson, St. Anicet, p. 224)*

*Wild beasts were plentiful for over 20 years after I came, and I shot from first to last a great many bear. The largest one, I killed on lot 30, 3rd range. I heard one was in the habit of jumping into an old log shanty in which a neighbor had stored his oats. I watched and when he came and stood up scenting round before entering, I sent a ball clear through him and carrying with it a streak of fat. He turned on me quite fierce, and it took two more shots to kill him. He was rolling in fat... There were a few wolves. James Higgins, I remember, shot one that had killed a number of sheep. (Patrick Curran, St. Anicet, p. 237)*

*...the country was so near its primeval state conditions that the MacArthurs, on leaving their work on Saturday afternoon to spend*

*Sunday with their families, lost their way in making for the Chateaugay, and in another time were in danger from wolves. (Williamstown, p. 268-69).*

*...Sandy Campbell saw two cubs on a tree. He climbed up to it to catch them, when the bear appeared and began scrambling after him to protect her young. Swinging outward, Campbell dropped to the ground, and ran for Brodie's. The animal, too content to rejoin her cubs, did not pursue him. A settlement where bears made their dens could not be far advanced. (North Georgetown, p. 276).*

*Both bears and wolves were numerous, having their dens in the swamps and ridges on both sides of the [English] river. My father had 3 sheep killed by bears, and a dead horse we left out was picked clean to the bones by wolves. (William McKell, English River, p. 297)*

*The sounds were so varied and human, that the boy took them for those of men calling them to come up the bank, and was about to do so, when his father [David Wilson, of Ste. Martine] told him it was a pack of wolves. (near Howick, English River p. 297)*

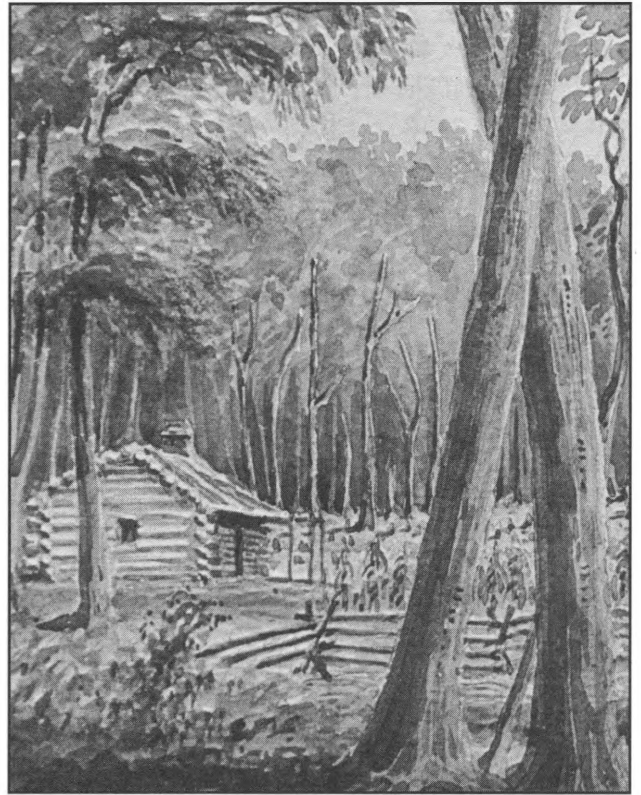
*For many years we were troubled with wild beasts and at night in winter, in going from shanty to shanty, women would carry a blazing stick to scare the wolves. One night, when her husband was away at work, Mrs. Metcalfe was aroused by a pack around her shanty, and looking out of its sole window, a square of four panes, she counted 12. (Irish Concession, English River, p. 300)*

*There were wild beasts in the forest, but they never gave me any annoyance. I only met a bear once...I suddenly heard the trampling on the dry litter, and shortly two bears came in sight...Another time John McConachie... was astounded, on raising his head over the top log, to find himself looking facing a bear, which was scrambling up the other side. (John Symons, North Georgetown, p. 322-323).*

*The country back of my lot was full of deer and wolves. (James Sadler, Ormstown, p. 347)*

*...wolves were so plentiful and bold that they came at night to [Francis] Smith's door to snatch any scraps that might be strewn around it. (Jamestown, p. 347)*

*...I thought I would save part of the way by taking a short cut across the bush and lost myself. As there were wolves, I climbed a tree*



(National Archives of Canada)

**The early settlers of the Chateaugay Valley were never far from the bush as their cabins were built in what was a "howling-wilderness"**

*and did not close an eye all night. (John Woodrow, Jamestown, p. 351).*

*An equally dangerous adventure was that of [Jonathan] Sparrow, who one evening came upon a pack of wolves, climbed a tree and remained there until daylight caused his besiegers to seek their dens. The swamps were the refuge of wild beasts and a score of years after wolves and bears were unheard of in other settlements, they troubled New Ireland. (Godmanchester, p. 414)*

*Wolves and bears were plenty. One fall I [Alexander Lunan] had 13 fine fat sheep killed by wolves. (Godmanchester, p. 421)*

*Bear meat, named bush pork, was much more palatable than venison, but few settlers ever tasted it. (Elgin, p. 448)*

*...the only enemies were the wild beasts of the woods, which at night would help themselves to a late supper off the settler's clearing. (Elgin, p. 451)*

*While the fire was burning, 3 young bears crossed my clearance, the only time I ever saw that animal. I [James Hamilton] lost 2 or 3 sheep, and blamed the wolves, whose cries we heard almost every night. (Hinchinbrooke, p. 467-8)*

Nightly we heard the screaming of the wolves, and once my husband, while driving home at night, was followed by a pack, which did not come close to him however. (Mrs. Peak [or Peake], Hinchinbrooke, p. 470).

Wolves were not plentiful when we came, but increased afterwards. (Mrs. Robson, daughter of John Telford, Hinchinbrooke, p. 476)

Bears gave us a good deal of trouble, for they came from the swamps to the north in search of food. (Lewis McKay, Hinchinbrooke, p. 487)

He [Zebulon Huntingdon] had also a large flock of sheep, and at times was troubled by wolves. When he suspected a pack of them being near, he sounded a conch-shell. (Willis C. Roberts, Edwardstown, p. 518)

The country was in a state of nature, and we barricaded our doors at night, for cries of the wolves and panthers were awful...At the south end of my brother's lot [Charles] Colston had a bear-trap, using corn as bait, in which he caught several. (Robert Stevenson, Covey Hill, p. 535)

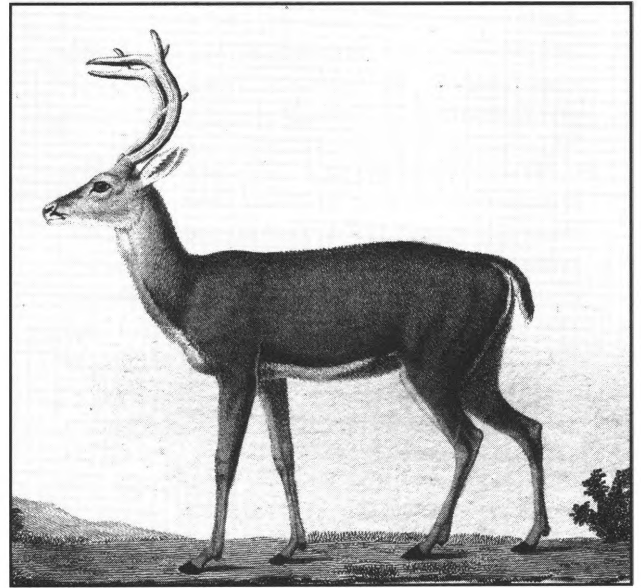
Wild beast abounded, and he [John Reay] lost calves more than once by prowling bears (Hemmingford, p. 544)

Waking the household, they [the Robsons and Reverend Merlin] went out, when they found a wolf chasing the cows and sheep round the yard, the brute barking and snarling. [following is an account of the wolf being shot dead by the farmer, but not before having bitten and hurt several farm animals, all of which later died of rabies] (English River, Hemmingford, p. 552-553)

## 2. Deer and moose: meat on the settlers' table

Deer are a very common sight in the present-day Haut-Saint-Laurent and some even consider them a nuisance. So it is easy to conclude from the few references to their large number in Sellar that not much has changed since the beginning of settlement in terms of deer population. Yet, the fact that many original settlers made a point of noting that deer "were" abundant suggests that they were much less so at the time Sellar interviewed them, in the 1880's.

As for moose, they may never have been abundant as suggested by the only two reference made by Sellar. Today, a few rare stragglers probably coming from the Adirondacks are occasionally seen.



Cuvier, F. 1819-1829. Dictionnaire des sciences naturelles: 2e partie, Règne organisé: les Mammifères. F. G. Levrault, ed. Paris.

Game, abundant in all the other settlements, was particularly so in Hemmingford, and venison...[was] frequently on the table. (Hemmingford, p. 20)

He [Samuel Covey] shot moose...together with innumerable deer and smaller game...Covey still, with the carelessness of a hunter, relied more on his gun than on enlarging and cultivating his clearance, and moose meat was more common than bread...He fired at a large bull moose but only wounded it. The infuriated animal dashed at him before he could reload. (Covey Hill, p. 25-26)

One fine evening in summer, returning from the field with his loaded gun on his shoulder, he [Louis Hainault's father] saw before him, through the trees, a deer running. (Louis Hainault Beauharnois [Melocheville], p. 35)

.....deer were exceedingly plentiful. (Georgetown [St. Chrysostome] p. 46)

Of the abundance of game that prevailed previous to that period [1820], we can have little conception. In every direction deer-runs were found in the woods, all leading to some creek or river. Deer were met not singly, but in herds, and as the early settlers, more manly than the sportsmen of our own day, never shot any unless needed for food, they multiplied long after the settlement of the district began. Old Mr. McClatchie boasted that 365 deer had fallen to his rifle... To his rifle fell probably the last moose seen in the district, and which he shot near where the bridge crosses the Hinchinbrook south of Herdman (Huntingdon, p. 163)

*Deer were abundant, however, and venison in its season was a welcome variety to their monotonous diet. (Port Lewis, p. 187).*

*Deer came trotting daily in the dry season to drink at the lake. (Dundee, p. 198)*

*...they [the Scotch settlers] coming from where game-laws were strictly enforced, wondered to see men freely fishing, and shooting deer and partridge at pleasure. (Angus McPherson, St. Anicet, p. 223)*

*Deer were plentiful, and I ran down with the dogs one winter 7. (Patrick Curran, St. Anicet, p. 237)*

*...the only opening on my lot was on the creek, where the deer had made a lick in coming to drink. The country back of my lot was full of deer ... (James Sadler, Ormstown, p. 347)*

*Deer were very plentiful. (James McDonald, Godmanchester, p. 425)*

*Deer were plenty, and in the morning we often found them with the cattle. (James Marshall, Godmanchester, p. 429)*

*For many years deer were plentiful, but few settlers cared about hunting, so that venison was not common, and soon tried of, for it is dry and lacks flavor. The deer fat was preserved and made into candles. (Elgin, p. 448)*

*The season was favorable and we had a large crop, but were troubled by the deer digging up the potatoes with their hoofs and eating them. (James Hamilton, Hinchinbrooke, p. 465)*

*Deer were very plentiful. In 1826, when the snow was deep with a crust, my brother with a dog ran down 6 in one day and 6 the next. On going on the 3rd day to haul them home, 5 more were killed. (Mrs. Robson, daughter of John Telford, Hinchinbrooke, p. 476)*

*Venison was the only meat we had. I have shot deer from my own door. (Lewis McKay, Hinchinbrooke, p. 487)*

*...and deer seen in herds, often of half a dozen. (English River, Hemmingford, p. 553)*

### **3. Beavers and otters: the elusive aquatic mammals**

While much of the wilderness was untouched when the first settlers established themselves in the Haut-Saint-Laurent, at least one animal species had been already severely affected by the Europeans.

Beavers had been almost trapped to extinction by Indians and *coureurs des bois* for fur exploitation before the beginning of the settlements in the Haut-Saint-Laurent. Not surprisingly, there are very few references to beavers in Sellar's book, and mostly as a reminder of its past or declining abundance. Fortunately, a fall of popularity of beaver fur, an interdiction of trapping in Canada in the 1930s and a re-introduction campaign in regions where it had been extirpated allowed the beaver to make a spectacular comeback up to their current abundance.

There is little information on the abundance of otters in the Haut-Saint-Laurent, although the name given to "Otter creek" may be an indication of its past presence or abundance, as noted by Sellar himself.

*The inducement to select his lot was the abundance of ash and elm that covered an old beaver-meadow. (Hemmingford, p. 18)*

*He[Samuel Covey]...trapped beaver, being, probably, the last to do so in Huntingdon... (Covey Hill, p. 25)*

*Beavers were trapped as late as 1820, and otters occasionally shot. (Huntingdon, p. 164)*

*There was a good-sized beaver-meadow on my lot, with the dams still remaining, but the beavers had gone before I came. (Patrick Curran, St. Anicet, p. 237)*

*The Indians who visited the settlement, raising their wigwams beside the creek, called it Otter creek, from the abundance, at one time, of that animal. (Elgin, p. 438).*

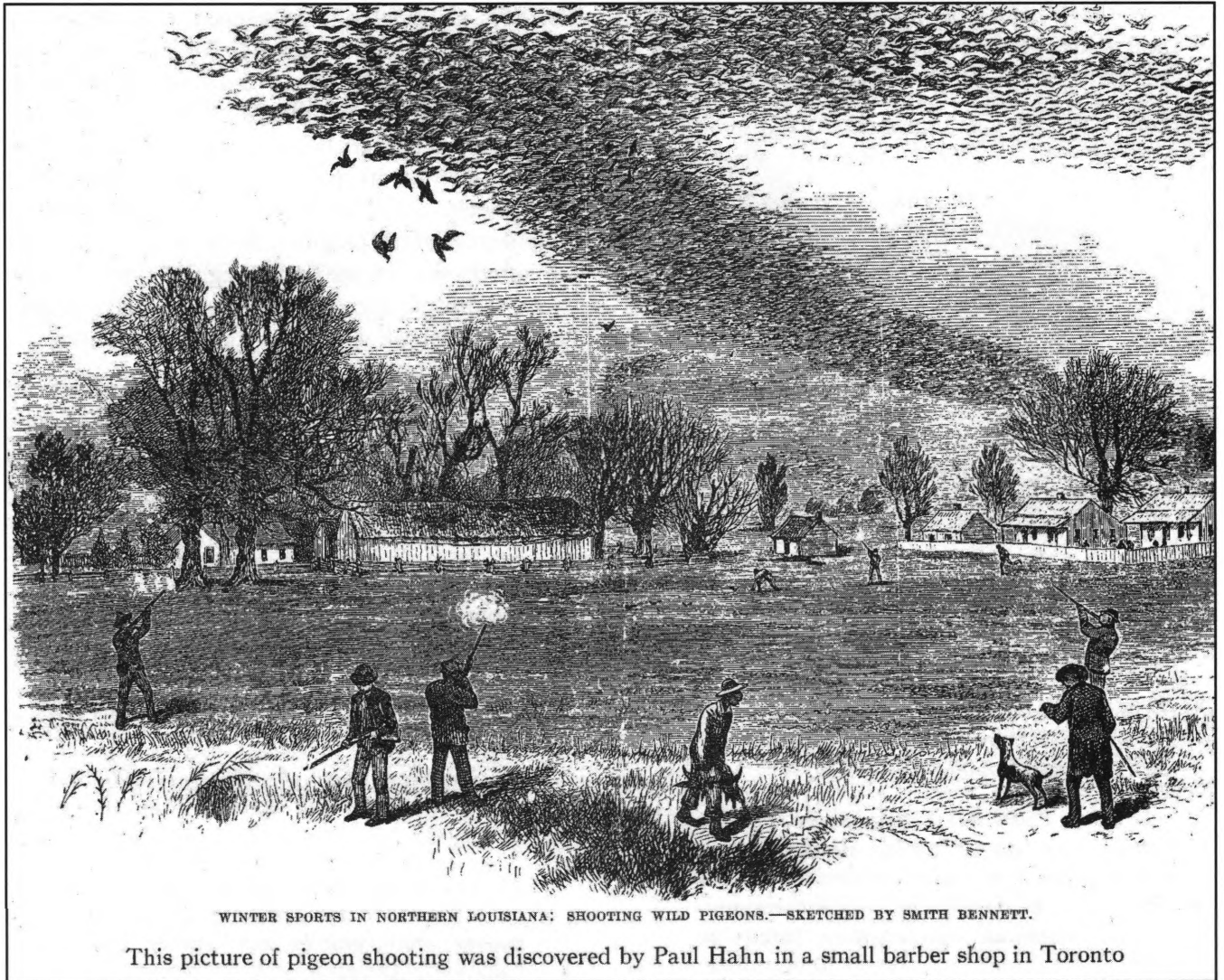


Cuvier, F. 1819-1829. *Dictionnaire des sciences naturelles*: 2e partie, Règne organisé: les Mammifères. F. G. Levrault, ed. Paris.

*The country was very wild at that time and I often trapped beavers to the north of my farm. (Lewis McKay, Hinchinbrooke, p. 487)*

### **4. Passenger pigeons, ducks, and other flying delicacies**

In the early 1800s, the passenger pigeon was considered the most abundant bird in North America. Yet, its sheer number, estimated in the billions, could



“Shooting wild pigeons”, sketched by Smith Bennet, in *The Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, July 3, 1875. Reprinted in Mitchell, M. H. 1935. *The Passenger Pigeon in Ontario*. Univ. of Toronto Press. p. 181.

not protect it and compensate for its extreme vulnerability to overhunting and forest clearing. A little more than a century later, the species became extinct (the last known passenger pigeon died in captivity at the Cincinnati zoo in 1914).

*The country at that time was visited by immense flocks of pigeons, and John Manning, who had a net for snaring them, was in the custom of salting hundreds of them for winter. (Hemmingford, p. 20)*

*Of the flocks of pigeons, quails, ducks, and, more rarely, of geese, the statements of the early settlers would be incredible were they not so well substantiated. In the spring and fall pigeons darkened the sky like clouds and where they lit vegetation was destroyed. (Huntingdon, p. 164)*

*We had pigeons, cooked in a variety of ways, at each meal, for the country was black with*

*them. (William Grant, near Chateauguay, p. 272)*

*The marshes were also valuable for more than the hay which they afforded, for they were visited by such flocks of geese and ducks that, when they rose, they darkened the air like a cloud. When the flocks of pigeons were seen coming from the Glengarry side, the men and boys hurried to the water's edge each armed with a long pole...Wild swan were occasionally met with, but the king of American edible birds, the wild turkey, never, so far as I have been able to learn, visited Huntingdon. (Dundee, p. 198)*

### **5. Fish, frogs and snakes: the cold-blooded animals**

Despite Sellar's claim, there have never been any salmon in the Chateauguay River or, for that matter, anywhere in the Haut-Saint-Laurent, including the so-called “Salmon River”. Except for a few possible stragglers, there have never been any

salmon in the Saint-Laurent segment between Lake Ontario (where there originally were landlocked salmon - also called ouananiche - until the end of the 1800s), and Jacques-Cartier River, near Quebec City, which is the most upstream location where the Atlantic salmon can reach (Legendre 1980).

Thus, the "salmon" referred to in Sellar's, and the one that gave its name to Salmon River, is undoubtedly the brook charr (or brook trout). Today, more salmonid species, such as the brown trout and the rainbow trout, can be found. None of these found their way to the settler's plate, since they are not native to our region and were introduced from Europe after 1900.

*It has been denied that salmon frequented the Chateauguay, but of this I have had abundant evidence. Up to the time the sawmills got fairly going, they were plentiful during their season, and in the rapids opposite Huntingdon were speared as late as 1825 (Huntingdon, p. 164)*

*Of fish they had a fair supply, lake St. Francis at that period abounding in them. (Port Lewis, p. 187).*

*The St. Lawrence was then well-stocked with fish, which so swarmed in the bays that the habitants came from far and near to fish in them during the season, so that at night 40 or 50 canoes could be counted. The mode of fishing was wholly by spear, which was practiced during the day as well as by night. (Dundee, p.197).*

*The bullfrogs filled the country then by the millions. (William Grant, near Chateauguay, p. 272)*

*A black snake sprang up and, in a twinkling, wound itself round one of my naked legs. I seized the reptile's head and jerked it away. (William Grant, along the Chateauguay, p. 273)*

*...they [men sent by Alexander Reeves] found a brood of snakes sunning themselves on the roof of the log-barn that stood on the lot, and, attacking them, succeeded in killing 18, not one of which was less than 2 feet and a number nearly 3 feet long. Of the coming of the first settlers into this desolation, where so shy a reptile as the garter snake of this province flourished unmolested, ... (Howick, p. 295)*

*There were no trout or salmon in the last-named [the English River], but it abounded*

*when he came with large pike. (William McKell, English River, p. 297)*

*In September of that year there was a flood in the river, which was followed by an influx of salmon, when Palmer, Bowron, and Percy speared a large number and barrelled them...Standing by the north end of the dam he and Hugh Cameron counted 93 large salmon jump it. (Huntingdon, p. 374)*

*...which form the remarkable creek that flows through the lot, and which then abounded with trout. (Godmanchester, p. 419)*

*There were no trout or salmon in Trout river when I came. (John McDonald, Godmanchester, p. 425)*

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