

## In 1908, Bangor fishermen fretted over salmon decline

**T**he opening of fishing season at the famous Bangor salmon pools each April 1 was one of the memorable events of the year a century ago. Who would catch the first salmon? Who would eat the first salmon? Such questions were on the minds of many. The salmon pools were so close to home for residents of Bangor and Brewer that anyone so inclined could find the time to wet a line. Penobscot salmon steaks were a popular — and expensive — meal.

The Bangor Daily Commercial proclaimed the season was about to open on March 30, 1908. "It is likely ... there will be fishermen on the pools as soon as daylight shines ... for a great rivalry exists among the salmon fishermen over the taking of the first salmon. ... Besides that there is a big pecuniary incentive, for the first salmon usually sells for about \$1.25 a pound and it is a pretty good day's work for the fisherman who lands an 18 or 20 pound fish."

Conditions were good in the several pools located behind Eastern Maine General Hospital. The ice had left and the water level was low. Things might not be so favorable later when the ice broke up above the dam. The water level could increase and ice floes passing by could be dangerous.

Stories of past years were retold. Statistics were important. Last year, Charles Bissell of Brewer had landed the first fish on April 4, an 18.5-pound beauty. He had sold it to Fickett's Market. During the season, about 200 fish were taken from the pool.

Every spring a dark cloud floated by, however. "Salmon fishing on the Penobscot has been declining for years," the Commercial reporter reminded readers. "The time was when salmon were as plentiful as smelts in the Penobscot and the boys bound out as apprentices put it in their articles of apprenticeship that they should not be obliged to eat salmon more than a limited number of times a week. The fish were so plentiful they were thrown on the fields for fertilizer.

"Now the salmon make their way up the river to deposit their spawn and the fisherman counts himself lucky if he gets more than two or three in a season, while the price of salmon in the markets seldom gets below 25 cents a pound and then not until very late in the season."

There were two prevailing theories as to why the salmon were declining. One blamed the chemicals and waste from the saw and paper mills. Another blamed the downriver weir fishermen from Bangor to Castine who caught large amounts of the fish for market, preventing them from getting to the Bangor pools. Two or three weirs took more salmon in a season than all the fly fishermen at the pools, said the Commercial in a story on April 3.



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The debate was as much about free enterprise as it was about conservation. The weir-men were entrepreneurs. "If it rested upon the fly fishermen to supply the markets with salmon, the price of salmon steaks would never get below 50 or 75 cents a pound and salmon would be only on the tables of the ... rich. It is upon the weirs that the market depends," said the Commercial. "So notwithstanding the objections to the weirs which are lodged by the salmon fishermen at the

pool, the downriver fishermen pull their nets and sell their salmon and fatten their bank accounts. ... With salmon steaks at a dollar and something a pound most folks will be glad when the weirs are doing business and the price of salmon comes down."

The first fish of the season that year, caught on opening day, was landed by John Doane and Carl Anderson, who were fishing together. "The fish was not a large one, weighing but 11 pounds, but it was gamy and gave its captors a stiff fight," declared the Commercial the next day. The fish was what was known as a kelt or a racer, said the newspaper, "a salmon which did not return to salt water after spawning and consequently is thin and black, with none of the plump silvery sides of fish newly come from the salt water."

But catching a fish on opening day was a good omen. Ice was still running in the river and the downriver men still hadn't put out their weirs. The salmon still had a chance to get to the pools. Charles Bissell again took the first "good salmon" of the season at noon Monday, April 6, the Commercial announced. Bissell fought the fish for half an hour near the Brewer shore. Dennis Tracy, another legendary fisherman, helped him land it.

The fish weighed 16.5 pounds. It was bought by Oscar A. Fickett, the marketman, who sold it to John McGregor of South Lincoln, who purchased it for W. Campbell Clark of Newark, N.J., a connoisseur of Penobscot salmon. Clark "receives one every week during the season," said the newspaper.

It would be four years before Bangor started sending the first salmon of the season to the president of the United States, who happened to be William Howard Taft. The custom lasted until 1954, when it was discontinued because of river pollution. The debate over how to save the Atlantic salmon had barely begun.