

FISHERMEN'S VOICE

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News & Comment for and by the Fishermen of Maine

FREE

Fiddlers on the Tobique (Part I)

We'd heard about the Tobique River Fiddlers a few years ago. Wanted to go ever since. Timing was never right. Too many projects or weather in the way. This June stars crossed and we called old friends Claude and Susie Toner to see if there was an empty bed or patch of grass to pitch tent for declared weekend. Answer was an enthusiastic positive. So by Thursday night we'd wended up I-95, crossed over at Limestone into New Brunswick and were seated around Susie's table enjoying an extraordinary dish of fresh creamed yellow beans and potatoes from Claude's farm and talking of the weekend's schedule. Amidst the good cheer and laughter of the evening, Susie sort of casually mentioned having brook trout and fiddleheads for lunch next day.

Next morning with a quick run to the mall there in Grand Falls for final supplies and a stock up of Canadian butter for the summer, we headed east toward Plaster Rock. I'd quizzed Susie that morning how she was so sure of fresh trout for lunch but with a mischievous twinkle said we'd see soon enough. Not a half hours drive we pulled into a driveway with a beautiful new house by a large brook. Here was the answer, we'd catch our lunch. Two pools just down the hill. One loaded with beautiful Brookies ranging from 6-20 plus inches.

Only problem, wouldn't bite. Artificial lures were of no interest. AJ the ex-farm girl started turning over rocks for worms or bugs. First fresh worm found produced a fish. Excitement was on the rise. Would have been easy to diss fishing from a pool but this was fish for lunch, adding at once to the intensity. About 45 minutes later, having turned over a majority of rocks around the pool we'd found enough crawlers and strange bugs to attract 5 lbs. of gorgeous brook trout, colors glowing for which we compensated the pool owners \$15 of well spent Canadian dollars.

Next (after traditional stop for ice cream sandwich), Riley Brook where Susie and brother Mike maintain what's left of the old family farm and remaining acreage with help from brothers and sisters. AJ and I really enjoy it. (See 'Riley Brook', FV Vol. 10, No. 11, Nov. 05 and Vol. 11, No. 2, Feb. 06). Within minutes Susie had us settled in her own hands-on-built cabin "outback" (another story) and we had gathered round the big wood stove in farmhouse kitchen putting together the simplest, finest meal ever. Fish were so fresh as to curl out of the fry pan. AJ had to hold em' in. And with Susie's fiddleheads just out of the Tobique made for another memory.

We lit the smudge stoves, a cylindrical pot where egg cartons or cardboard smolders giving off clouds of smoke and utilized until snow flies when Riley Brook black flies finally retire from the battles. We soon began to see the canoe laden cars and pickemups, some with trailers traveling by.

Susie's brother, Mike Rideout, guide and supercook pulled in and we finished opening the farmhouse and did the necessary arranging for the folks who'd be coming later. Took a ride up to Tobique Valley Outfitters sporting camp where we'd watch the fiddling next day to see Dave McClure and Belinda Wilson. They are proud owners of a new family of ten 2-week-old English setter pups and proud mother Lacey. Talk about cute, all piled together in the large dog bed slipping and sliding around on each other. I've been away from the hunting dog scene so long I'd lost track of the value for pups. Was awestruck when Belinda told me the price they'd command.

With promises to stop by that evening we headed back to the farm, made a stop for ice and last minute thoughts at Riley Brook's only store. Tent villages were beginning to spring up as the never ending stream of people and canoes began to fill up this small New Brunswick river town of population 25. By tomorrow, Saturday, there'd be somewhere in the participation of 1400 canoes and kayaks on the river and some 8,000 plus people in, on, and around.

"Fiddlers on the Tobique" had enjoyed a rather innocuous start. Bill Miller, third generation master canoe builder, in 1994 had heard a couple of snips of fiddlin' music advertising a concert in Perth/Andover, New Brunswick. Featured were the old tunes, "Mouth of the Tobique", "St. Ann's Reel", "Maple Sugar", "Big John McNeil" and more. This was Bill's music, reels, contras, polkas of the old days. Now Bill isn't prone to go driving off 60 miles on a lark, but this looked worth the trip.

Concert was great. Bill bought a CD. Then, of course had to have it autographed. Ivan Hicks, renowned fiddler had played that night and said, "Sure I'll sign it."

"What do you do for a living Bill?"

"I build wooden canoes."

Ivan replied, "I've never been in a canoe."

"Well," Bill allowed, "Bring your fiddle and come for a ride on the Tobique."

"When?" he asked.

"Tomorrow." Bill replied.

Agreed. Ivan would come to Bill's shop the next day and they'd fiddle and paddle down the Tobique by canoe to Riley Brook.

Next day dawned one of those clear Canadian days. With two canoes carrying Ivan and wife Vivian, Doug and Helen Edgar, Joe Yacovino and Anita Black with Bill in a kayak armed with video camera. They started down river. Needless to say it was a signature day. Fiddlers had a great time and that evening everyone was invited to Anita's for dinner. Bill hooked up the video and played back the day. Dynamite. Even the soundtrack was good. On spot a date was proclaimed for summer of 1995. That summer a few more fiddlers and canoes joined up and Vivian, a piano player, played Bill's keyboard. People in camps along the river heard the music, came out to watch and listen. Canoes pulled in, variously played a few tunes and a glimmer of where this might be going began to blink in Bill's mind. This Tobique fiddlin' was not only unique, it was fun.

Sometime during the winter of 96 Ivan called Bill and said this year would be his 50th year of playing the fiddle. If he brought 50 fiddlers to the river could Bill find canoes enough to accommodate everyone? “Absolutely,” was Bill’s reply. And he went about the organizing.

Somehow CBC television of Canada got wind of the event and asked to televise it. Bill located 35 Miller canoes, set up a float for square dancers, and again the day arrived in brilliant sunshine. Incidentally, Bill remarked in the 14 years of fiddles on the Tobique no fiddler has ever gotten wet. Might rain or drizzle in the morning, but sun is out by float time.

As the last two years, day was a resounding success. Canada watched as some of their greatest musicians had a music romp and decided this was an event to join—continued next month.

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Mike Rideout is a guy of never ending surprises. Many related to his skill with a fry pan. Sitting around enjoying the afterglow of a great day, Mike appeared with a bowl of the lightest corn fritters I’ve ever enjoyed. Trick was not to make the evening meal from them.

Nana’s Corn Fritters

Mazola oil in fryer 350 degrees
Well beaten 2 eggs and 2 tablespoons milk
Stir in one 19 oz. can cream style corn

Sift together 1 cup flour
1 1/2 teaspoons baking powder
1 teaspoon salt
Bit of pepper

Add to first ingredients, stir well. Drop by tablespoonfuls into hot fat. Wait just a bit and roll over. Serve with pure maple syrup.

Bet you can’t have just one.

Fair winds and good roads.

Lee Wilbur