

Smelt fishing in the Powell brook: from miraculous to ecologically disastrous

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For two decades in mid-April, an event took place on the shores of the Powell brook (also known under the name of McIntosh), transforming the bucolic municipality of Austin into a veritable fairground. The instigator of this annual upheaval was a small fish, the 8-cm long smelt. Here is a look back at what happened...

The region had teemed with fish for centuries, sustaining both the Amerindian populations and later, the settlers. Introduced into Lake Memphremagog in the 1870s, the rainbow smelt was assimilated into the food chain, eating small fish and getting eaten in turn by larger species such as the trout. In the spring, when conditions were favourable, the smelt swam up the brooks to spawn. The writer Mordecai Richler, who lived at the mouth of the Powell brook for 30 years, has described the children who came to see the smelts run up after the ice broke. They could be caught in large quantities, with a net or even a bucket. For decades, the local population celebrated the smelt's run up Lake Memphremagog's tributaries, and the Powell brook became well-known. It was a veritable manna from heaven for

Catholics, who had to abstain from red meat on Fridays and during Lent.

By the 19th century, however, the smelt had become unpopular with fishermen's associations, merchants and governments, who prized "game fish" (caught by angling) and blamed the latter's reduced populations on the "white fish" and the smelt, caught with a net. Nevertheless, the Magog fish farm continued to raise smelt, probably to feed the "nobler fishes." This may have contributed to the smelt's huge population, however, for in the aftermath of the war, the Powell brook teemed with smelt. Dozens jumped out, forming, here and there along the shores a white line that could be seen from afar. In 1955, 20 tons were fished out of the Powell brook alone!

The profusion of smelt in the Powell brook delighted Austin residents but alarmed the Memphremagog Conservation Fish and Game Club, who declared the smelt "harmful" and asked the Government to remove restrictions on smelt fishing. In 1970, the Memphremagog Club took over smelt fishing in the Powell brook. Widespread publicity spurred a veritable

"smelt rush". Local festivities lost their homegrown flavour and got out of control. In 1972, condemning vandalism, the club dissociated itself from the event.

Nevertheless, in 1975 the Memphremagog Club resumed the monitoring of smelt fishing, this time with the help of the Austin Fish and Game Club. Fishery guards occupied a cottage at the mouth of the brook as hundreds converged toward Austin, many toting "cases of 24" brewed by the companies who sponsored the event. Even Hells Angels bikers shelled out the 50¢ or \$2 fee to gain access to the brook. Some days, there were 500 to 700 vehicles parked along Nicholas-Austin Rd. The Municipality restricted access to Powell Brook Rd., whose path ran along the brook. Occasionally, the overwhelmed guards would call in the Quebec Provincial Police.

Meanwhile, the smelt itself was driven away by the overfishing that had destroyed its spawning grounds. In 1982, a ban on smelt fishing was imposed in the Powell brook but by then, the smelt had already abandoned it. Many felt that the smelt's disappearance resulted not only from overfishing, but also from a series of works that had caused sediment to accumulate at the mouth of the brook: refurbishing Nicholas-Austin Rd., replacing the wood bridge by a concrete one, clearcutting along the brook, and blasting away beaver dams...

Recently, a few smelt have returned to spawn in the Powell brook, but they do so surreptitiously to avoid the nightmares of the past...

FISH BY TON.
MAGOG, Que., April 25.—(CP)—Eastern townships residents, using buckets, bags and their bare hands, are lifting tons of smelt from Powell brook, a stream on the west side of Lake Memphremagog. Quebec game officials declared an open season on smelt this Spring, for the first time in many years. Fishing is limited to Powell brook, however, and each fisherman has a 10-lb. limit.

■ SMELT ■

→ THE MEMPHREMAGOG CONSERVATION CLUB invites you to fish smelt in Lake Memphremagog.

AT: POWELL BROOK (MacIntosh)

BRING THE FAMILY and FRIENDS
EVERYONE WELCOME!

NEW—NEW

SMELT DERBY
PRIZES TO BE WON

ALSO: MAGOG KENTUCKY FRIED CHICKEN will be serving their famous fried chicken.
Watch the Record for the start of the run



1955-04-25 – The Ottawa Journal. Advertisements in the Ottawa Journal. In 1955, the Memphremagog Conservation Club obtained from the Government that smelt fishing be authorised to protect game fish.

1972-04-26 – Sherbrooke Daily Record. For a long time, smelt fishing had been a family and community event. The owner of the local restaurant, Albert Ducharme, would sell hot dogs and hamburgers right on the shores of the brook. The arrival of Magog's Kentucky Fried Chicken heightened the event's commercialization.

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