

The Blueberry Cannery

By Andrew Patterson

Legend has it that sometime in the 1870's a fire began on the islands of the York River and burned southward through to Malbay in one day, a distance of about 40 km. In any case there was a serious forest fire which devastated the forests south of Sunny Bank, on a hill later known as the "Berry Hill."¹ This must have been a disaster for the local residents who depended largely on the forest for their livelihood, but from that mishap grew an industry which helped provide some badly needed money to purchase supplies essential to subsistence living.

Robert Loggie and his family emigrated from Scotland to New Brunswick in 1779. They settled in Black Brook, New Brunswick, which later became the town of Loggieville. His descendants became prominent entrepreneurs and politicians in the Miramichi area. Two of his great-grandchildren, Andrew and Robert, incorporated the A. and R. Loggie Company in 1881, which soon became the largest exporters of fish in Atlantic Canada. As the company grew, it began to diversify. They operated ice houses throughout New Brunswick to store beef, pork and poultry, a factory where they made cans which were used for their other operations, and even generated their own electricity. Always on the lookout for new opportunities, they discovered the abundance of blueberries in New Brunswick and surroundings. Soon they became major exporters of wild blueberries, with three canneries in New Brunswick, six in Quebec and one in Vermont.²

Little or nothing seems to have been written about the Blueberry Cannery in Gaspé, so the following account is primarily from the memories of elderly Gaspésians. A special thanks to Dorothy Phillips who suggested this endeavor and assisted throughout. It could be presumed that the Loggie brothers heard about the abundance of blueberries in Gaspé, as a result of the recent forest fire. In the summer of 1870 Andrew Loggie arrived in Gaspé and propositioned John Phillips to be the agent and operate the cannery. However, John felt that his younger

¹ Interview with Ralph Patterson.

² Dictionary of Canadian Biography, Andrew Loggie, http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/loggie_andrew_15E.html

brother was better educated, and probably more capable of the bookwork and management duties involved in such an operation. His brother Charlie Phillips accepted the job and embarked upon the task of securing land for the operation and constructing the necessary warehouse.³

On August 1, 1870 he obtained a three-year lease on property belonging to Charles White in Brassett, part of primitive lot # 16, Range 1, York Township, stretching along bank of the York River in a spot known as the "Gulch."⁴ The property is now owned by Cynthia Jean and Rene Dion. The lease was 70 feet along the river and 20 feet from shore. More could be obtained as needed and the rent was to be \$5.00 annually, payable on October 15 each year.⁵ A building was constructed to house the operation, including a small office in the back. In the first year of operation berries were shipped to the Loggie Cannery in New Brunswick in the hold of a ship. Imagining the condition of the blueberries upon arrival, one can easily understand the reason for setting up the canning operation in Gaspé the following year.⁶

Pay was one and a half to two cents per pound. To quote Coleman Patterson, "We picked leaves and all. There was a very high rock there where everyone lunched, where they "winded" the berries. We put a box on the ground, got up on the rock, held the pail as high as we could and poured them in the box. The wind blew the leaves out as they fell. Then we put them in flour barrels and put the head [top] on it when it was full. They were hauled from there to the factory with a horse and truck."⁷ Barrel making was a sideline for several local families. Maple was cut and moulded to form the sides and the hoops were formed using local black ash. The finished product was often sold to whalers to store whale oil to be shipped to foreign markets. Families also used these locally made barrels to transport their blueberries to the cannery. Each family had their own barrel, or if one was an extra good blueberry picker, they would have their own barrel. Two such people were

³ Interview with Dorothy Phillips.

⁴ Interview with Alfred Miller.

⁵ Interview with Dorothy Phillips.

⁶ Interview with Dorothy Phillips

⁷ Interview with Coleman Patterson.

sisters, Pearl and Cora Patterson.⁸ People usually kept a “buskazoo” nearby to carry their blueberries while picking. A buskazoo was a wooden backpack in which one could dump blueberries while wandering the fields, and then carry them to the depot to be emptied into a barrel.

Obviously

Despite the short season, picking berries was lucrative employment for residents in an area where few had year-round jobs. As many as 400 people were employed seasonally, from pickers to gather the blueberries, people with horses to transport them to the cannery, packaging the berries in cans and attaching labels. Blueberries were bought for 1 ½ cents per pound, and in later years the price went up to 2 cents a pound.⁹ One resident of Sunny Bank was able to purchase enough flour for the winter with money earned picking blueberries.¹⁰ In the factory eight people were employed operating the boiler and filling and washing the cans. In one season of operation over a thousand cases of 24 cans were shipped to the U. S. by schooner.¹¹ As with other products handled by the Loggie Company, blueberries were sold under the “Eagle Brand” label.¹²

As happens after any fire, trees and other vegetation grew back, and the Berry Hill became a forest again. Just before the first World War, about 1912, the cannery closed, and with it went another chapter of Gaspé’s history.



A "buskazoo" was probably similar to the wooden backpack above.

⁸ Interview with Dorothy Phillips

⁹ Interview with Bert Palmer

¹⁰ Interview with Robert Palmer

¹¹ “Sunny Bank, Our Ancestral Home,” by Andrew Patterson, page 37-38.

¹² Provincial Archives of New Brunswick, Dictionary of Miramichi Biography, “Andrew Loggie, 1848-1928.” <https://archives.gnb.ca/Search/Hamilton/DMB/SearchResults.aspx?culture=en-CA&action=0&page=572>