

Scotty Mitchell – Shuswap’s pioneer Salmon advocate

A Shuswap Passion column for the Shuswap Market News

By Jim Cooperman

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After sharing my last column about James Teit with Wendy Wickwire, a University of Victoria professor who is writing a book about him, I received from her a remarkable manuscript by Shuswap pioneer David Salmond Mitchell about the demise of the great Sockeye salmon runs. Within this paper that was originally written in 1918, are some fascinating descriptions of what the Shuswap was like when he arrived here in 1889 that also provides more insights about the Secwepemc people.

Mitchell, or Scotty as he was affectionately called, was the supervisor for the Granite Creek Hatchery from 1902-1916 which stood next to the mouth of the creek. In those days, the salmon stocks were becoming depleted due to overfishing by the canning industry and to boost production several hatcheries were built by the federal government. The hatchery was a large building in which artificially spawned eggs taken from various fish traps around the lake grew in containers flushed with fresh water from a reservoir created by a dam higher up the stream, now called Tappen Creek.

The manuscript begins with some poetic descriptions of the Shuswap area and the Secwepemc people, “These great lakes lie like miles of mirror duplicating the fire-draped mountains in reflection, while leaping trout break through...” Mitchell obviously respected the original people, “this beautiful region was the ancestral home of the Soowahp-mgh Indians, a kindly intelligent people, with a language as resourceful as Greek,”

In 1889 he found the lake “was dotted with their canoes, calmly gliding about....little clouds of flimsy blue smoke indicated the many camps where canoes lay pulled ashore.” He described the region as a “great Eden” filled with wildlife, including deer “so tame and inquisitive that they would almost surround one.” There were “Swans nesting at Canoe, then Puk-a-meechumn, the place of the white swans’ nests. All along the 200 miles of shoreline, mink were in incredible numbers.”

He described the native people as “vivacious, often garrulous; some were splendid narrators, and would hold a big campfire audience spell bound, a spell that kept leaking giggles until it burst with a chorus of laughter, for the yeast of humour was always working...” Mitchell explained that once their larders were supplied, the men would spend hours playing “slik-amoius,” a game of skill played with bones while singing and drumming on a long dry pole or board. And they would bet anything, from horses and saddles to muskets, blankets or dried salmon.

A photo of Mitchell from that era that was likely taken by one of Salmon Arm Bay’s first European settlers, Jim Hatherly, shows an earnest mountain man with flowing locks, a bandolier filled with bullets on his chest and a large rifle sitting in front of some massive hides. Twenty years later, a cartoon of Mitchell in the 1912 Chase Tribune shows a more portly gentleman, who as the caption claims, “While D.S. Mitchell’s with us, fishing

always will be good.” In later years he built his home as a partial pit-house and was deemed an eccentric.

The R.J. Haney Museum and Archives has many of Mitchell’s letters to Judge F.W. Howay, the co-author of four early volumes of B.C. history. In a 1915 letter, Mitchell explains how in the days that he spent prospecting around the lake, “I used to live pretty much like a bear: lying down without blankets or coats under some tree, or overhanging ledge of rock wherever night overtook me.”

Most of the 58-page long manuscript is devoted to the salmon, with detailed descriptions of the Indian fishery, the massive runs in the early days, the operations of the hatchery, the ecology of the Shuswap, and all the factors that led to the serious decline of the once plentiful fish. Although he was in charge, Mitchell was no fan of the artificial hatchery system that violated the natural functions and employed “brutal men” who sometimes beat the fish before stripping them of their spawn. At the end of his narrative, he advocates for a halt to fishing until the nearly extinct runs are re-built and on behalf of the Indians, who “have been using these salmon since the glacial age, and that morally constitutes a right.”

Mitchell also criticized the early settlers who pitch forked wagonloads of salmon to fertilize their crops and who wantonly shot the hawks and ospreys that preyed on the ling cod. As without predators, the ling proliferated and gobbled up young salmon fry. Boys were hired by the hatchery to chop holes in the ice and spear these ling that were “dull and stupid” in the broad daylight.

The hatchery was closed a few years after the 1913 blasting for the railway above the Fraser River which caused a rock slide that blocked the river and the salmon at Hells Gate. Mitchell and his wife moved to his property in Larch Hill where they farmed, while still working at times for the Fisheries Department. Wickwire describes Mitchell as another one of those “amazing Scots who ended up in B.C. with a solid education that included a heavy emphasis on natural history.” Certainly, we need to remember him as a great pioneer advocate for the conservation of our most iconic feature, the salmon.

[To learn more, see “Fleeting Images of Old Salmon Arm.”]



Photo – courtesy of the R.J. Haney Museum and Archives