RIVER RECOLLECTIONS:
Portraits of Life along the St. Lawrence River in the 20th Century

Ann M. Gefell

Author's Note: In 1983 I began to talk with people who lived along the St. Lawrence River and had experienced the economic, social, and ecological changes resulting from the building of the Seaway. Library shelves are filled with books about the engineering of the St. Lawrence Seaway, but except for books about early exploration, shipping and navigation, little has been written about the peoples' relationship to the river. My purpose was to learn about this relationship by listening to the words of the people themselves. Those who tell that history include farmers, sturgeon fishermen, Mohawk elders, a river boat captain, shopkeepers, farm wives, former and present municipal representatives, town historians, dwellers of islands and small towns that were flooded—people who knew a different way of life upon the St. Lawrence. They discuss their lives since then and what they feel about the future of the St. Lawrence. “River Recollections” celebrates the mighty St. Lawrence, its beautiful natural environment and rich history, and draws attention to its increasing fragility.

Special thanks go to the following members of the Mohawk community at Akwesasne: Ernie Benedict, Ron LaFrance, Jake Swamp, Angus “Shine” George, Loran Thompson, Sally Benedict, Douglas George, Peter Blue Cloud, Barbara Barnes, Tony Barnes, and Barry Montour and to the memory of Ira Benedict.

Harry MacDonald fishing off Longue Sault Island, c. 1933. Warners's Island in background. Photo courtesy of Mae MacDonald
Aerial view of Longue Sault Rapids, pre-Seaway.

The River
The beautiful St. Lawrence River Valley was once dense with deciduous and coniferous forests. The river flowed swiftly and sinuously for 760 miles, draining water from all the Great Lakes to the Gulf of St. Lawrence and the Atlantic Ocean, making it the largest fresh-water watershed in the world.

During the Ice Age, the glacier formed the St. Lawrence Valley at the eastern end of the Canadian Shield where it nestled between the foothills of the Laurentian Mountains to the north in Canada and the Adirondack Mountains of New York State to the south. The forests were abundant with many kinds of wildlife and wood to sustain the self-sufficient traditional cultures that flourished there. The rapid river offered multitudes of fresh fish— including sturgeon, muskellunge, bass, white-fish, pike, and eel. The wetlands and marshes offered reeds for baskets and fur-bearing animals for meat and warm clothing in the cold northern winters. To the Mohawk Indians, this place, their home, was Manatowana, or the Garden of the Great Spirit.

Though the waters that flow through the St. Lawrence have their source somewhere east of the Rocky Mountains and north of Lake Superior, the river claims its beginning at the eastern end of Lake Ontario at Kingston. Here the open Lake narrows at the largest of the many islands to become the river winding east and north. This part of Manatowana is called the Thousand Islands, because for seventy-five miles as it makes a gradual descent, the River widens and narrows in and amongst islands varying in size from a rock with a tree on it up to thirty square miles. Because the winds blow from a predominantly southwesterly direction, many of the tall pines on these islands appear to be leaning over, bending with the flow of the river stream. At Ogdensburg, the only U.S. city directly on the River, another river, the Oswegatchie, flows into the St. Lawrence, directly across from the Canadian town of Prescott, and together they make their way down the narrowest part of the river to what was, until thirty years ago, some of the roughest water in North America.

What was once the International Rapids Section was a series of seven rapids: the Galop Rapids, the American Galop Rapids, Dead Man Rapids, Rapid de Plat, the South Sault Rapids, and finally the largest two, the infamous and torrential Longue Sault Rapids near Cornwall, and the Lachine Rapids, near Montreal. Near Akwesasne and Cornwall three more rivers flow into the St. Lawrence—the Grasse, the Racquette, and the St. Regis.

From Montreal the river flows wide and free through Quebec. At Tadoussac, the Saguenay River flows into the St. Lawrence, there
known by its French name, Fleuve Saint-Laurent, and from there the river opens wider still through the Gulf of St. Lawrence to the Gaspe Peninsula to Anticosti Island and out into the Atlantic Ocean.

Before the Seaway was built, the river floor from Ogdensburg to Longue Sault dropped 92 feet over the course of forty miles, creating rapids long recognized for their potential for hydroelectric power generation. Developing this power in the 1950s destroyed the rapids and changed the course of the River.

History of the Seaway and Power Projects

Before any canal system was built, the series of rapids between Ogdensburg and Cornwall prevented long-distance navigation up the river, and even the best of navigators feared the rapids when traveling downstream. Alternate routes that bypassed the rapids via the Ottawa River through the Rideau Lakes to Lake Ontario were prohibitively time-consuming. In 1842, Irish and Scottish masons finished the Cornwall canal along the northern shore of the River, establishing the first direct shipping route into the Great Lakes from the Atlantic Ocean. In 1895, the Ontario Hydro Commission drew up engineering plans for the St. Lawrence Seaway and Power Projects that would enlarge the River to accommodate larger and deeper draught ships and would utilize the rapids for hydro-electric power generation serving Ontario, Quebec, and New York State. The combined projects would be a subject of international debate for more than fifty years.

When work began on the project in 1954, nine thousand Canadians, Mohawk Indians, and U.S. citizens who lived in the 50-mile stretch of the International Rapids Section were removed from over 40,000 acres of alluvial farmland and large farming islands that the U.S. and Canadian government agencies claimed were needed for the projects. The lands were condemned and expropriated under the laws of the right of eminent domain. Land were also acquired for two large recreational parks in the region—the St. Lawrence Provincial Park in Ontario and the Robert Moses New York State Park. [New York State’s “Power Broker,” Robert Moses, of downstate’s Long Island “Moses Parkway” and Jones Beach, was the first commissioner of PASNY (Power Authority of the State of New York), formed initially to build the Niagara Falls and St. Lawrence Projects.] For the Power Project, the famous, torrential Longue Sault Rapids were dammed to flood land that created the 100 square mile man-made “Lake St. Lawrence,” a reservoir or head-pond for the hydroelectric generating station that stretched across the river at Massena-Cornwall near the Quebec border.

Work on the Seaway portion proceeded concurrently, dredging river bottom and blasting glacial till, some of the hardest known rock, to deepen and widen the river channel to create a “water highway” that allowed large ocean-going “salties” up the river into Great Lakes ports.

The massive projects took four years to complete, and between 1954 and 1958 completely enveloped Northern New York and the eastern Ontario region near the border. Within a few weeks of authorization of the Seaway Act in U.S. Congress in May of 1954, construction zones were made out of cow pastures, and the air was filled with promises of a better future, of cheap hydroelectric power, industry, jobs, and a much more “modern” way of life. It was said to be the largest public works project the United States had ever undertaken. Canadian involvement was as great.

On July 1, 1958, the “Day of Inundation,” (as it is now locally known), Canada’s Dominion Day, the Projects began to flood 40,000 acres of ancestral lands and cemeteries, covering twelve small villages and four large farming islands. The rushing Longue Sault Rapids had been dredged and removed, changing the social and ecological character of the river forever. A completely new water table was created when the river level was raised 80 feet and controlled by dams. Trapping and fishing grounds and populations were affected, including the migration habits of the only real commercial fish in the St. Lawrence, the sturgeon, known not only for its roe-caviar—but for its long life and huge size. Excursion steamboats no longer criss-crossed between Canadian and American ports, or shot the Longue Sault Rapids, and the river’s freezing and thawing patterns changed. All island lands in the project area which sustained apple and dairy farms and year-round populations were condemned and expropriated by the Power Authority of the State of New York (PASNY) and abandoned, though some in past years have been used for cattle grazing and some have recently been put up for sale.

Today, environmental protection laws, particularly the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1970, together with the economic climate of the country, would hinder initial development of a project of such magnitude. Even so, in the
1970s and early 1980s, winter shipping, hotly debated even before the Seaway was officially opened in the spring of 1959, was tested on the upper Great Lakes. The St. Lawrence River, the bottleneck of the entire system, became the focus of heated debate about Congressional authorization of winter navigation or season extension, leading to enthusiastic citizen participation and the formation of various watchdog environmental groups along the river. In addition, plans were drawn up and public meetings held by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in 1982-83 about building longer and wider locks to handle 1000 foot long “supertankers.”

Both projects would involve extensive deepening and widening of the present Seaway channel and dredging of 128 million cubic yards from the bottom of the river for the winter navigation portion alone. The dredging and blasting would affect underwater and wetland ecology, cause more river bank erosion and further degrade the natural shoreline. In addition, already dangerous toxic sediments in many areas would be stirred up. With the anticipated increase in traffic and the transportation of a wider variety of cargo, the river area would become more susceptible to oil and chemical spills. Though currently tabbed as economically unfeasible after much controversy, discussions about winter navigation, and additional locks, continue with a fervor in some federal agencies. Both projects could be revived at any time, and with the engineering design plans already in place, approval by Congress, given the right political climate, is possible.

Meanwhile, downstream seventy miles near Montreal, Quebec’s plans for Project Archipel, a Montreal recreation park and hydro project promoted under the guise of the need for more hydroelectric power for the province of Quebec, has been shelved. Strong voices from the Mohawks at Caughnawaga, who are living with many effects of the original Seaway, have led the opposition to this project that would have flooded the Lachine Rapids, the last remaining set of rapids on the St. Lawrence River.

On July 1, 1958, the “Day of Inundation,” (as it is now locally known), the Projects began to flood 40,000 acres of ancestral lands and cemeteries...

Recollections of the Old River and the New River

In the area of the St. Lawrence River Valley where the roaring rapids once were, the peoples of three nations come together sharing the mighty St. Lawrence River. These people have witnessed great changes to the river, one of the world’s greatest natural resources, during this century. While all people can see the physical changes that came with the Seaway and Power Projects in the form of the large dam and the shipping locks dominating the horizon, those who have lived closely with the River have felt the changes of the season and the long-term changes that came with “progress” and can reflect upon the subtleties of everyday life along the river over the course of many years.

River people like Angus “Shine” George speak of the days when the river was clear, clean and swift, full of fish of all kinds. Ira Benedict and John Graves remembered the excitement and pleasure of fishing for sturgeon. Island dwellers Mae MacDonald and Ray Cross recall farm life on the islands and crossing the dangerous rapids in rowboats, and Irene Miller remembers the childhood thrill of accompanying her father, a river boat captain, on the excursion steamers plying the Longue Sault rapids, and of the ice jams at Morrisburg and the powerful winds that made her sure “that there was a ferocious God somewhere.” Charlie Crober, a Canadian customs official for thirty-one years who rode the ferry boat every day from Morrisburg over to Waddington, feistily comments on the informal travel between Canada and the United States—“Why, there wasn’t any border!”—and remembers the closeness, and rivalry between the two communities. Evelyn Castle reflects on “how it was all around free country. You didn’t have to go beg somebody to go swimming, or slide down hill. You had it all right there right on your own land.” And Ron LaFrance, now a Mohawk chief, remembers how as a young boy he was “swimming underwater with a real fast current, of really listening to the River. It had a language... And it speaks to you, of being free. Our philosophy talks about being free, as an Indian people.”

Some of their memories are of a river we barely recognize today. They describe vividly life along the River before the Seaway, about the “old days,” of hearing about the Seaway for many years, and about being forced to “move out of the way” when it finally did come. They speak about the changes in the river and river life and the long-term effects to the river culture due to the disruption of the natural environment by industrial development and river construction. And too, they speak about their hopes and fears for what the future may hold for the St. Lawrence River.

It is through these people that the River as it was comes to life for us to imagine, as it did for them as they told these stories. They are our St. Lawrence River historians, and the last generation to have lived fully with the free-flowing St. Lawrence. Their river recollections are a celebration of life along the River in different days and are a true inspiration for an appreciation of the St. Lawrence River today.
"My memories of when the Seaway came—that was 25 years ago—is almost like a nightmare. Watching the machines come in and tear up the land. Seeing the apple orchards covered, seeing the farm destroyed and moved. Strawberry patches gone. I was 12 when they started it—30 years ago for me. On Racquette Point anyway, we kids 8-12 years old, we would pull up surveyor’s stakes, harass the surveyors, throw rocks and apples at them, destroy their signs, thinking we could halt the process, what it was doing to this little stretch of land that we felt was ours then, that we still feel is ours. But we saw the machines come in 24 hours a day, cutting, cutting, cutting..."

"There was a whole culture of a River. You could talk about the culture of the Cajuns, if you went to Louisiana. Well, among our own Mohawks there was a river culture, there was a river language, there was a feeling, there were songs, there were stories... And the Seaway just amputated that.... And then the monument they left to us was a rounded hill of clay to remind us of that."

"I remember as a young boy, swimming under the water with a real fast current, really listening to the River. It had a language. You’d see the weeds and the different color rocks as you’re going underwater. And it speaks to you of being free. Our philosophy talks about being free, as an Indian people."

Ron LaFrance
"The Longue Sault Island was right across here. They cut through the center of it and piled it up to make the dam. I was one of the last people to leave Dickenson's Landing. I couldn't settle with Hydro. Why, they tried to scare you out, eh? Burning fires on windy nights out there. We lived in fear that the sparks would reach our house. Oh, yes, I tell you, there were a lot of dirty tricks. And promises? They didn't promise us anything and we didn't get anything. No lower power rates! Why, the City of Cornwall buys its power from Quebec!

And I often wonder, what would they have done if those 8000 people wouldn't sell their properties to Ontario Hydro? What would they have done?"

Serve Ransom

"And the old folks - I don't think any of them wanted to leave. I don't think they thought the Seaway would go through. Really. They never believed that it could, that they could even do the job. A lot of people felt that way.

I know one man who had a farm over there, on Croil's Island. He moved to this side, the mainland, and he used to put signs up 'THE LONGUE SAULT WILL ROAR AGAIN.'

This was after the flooding. He just never believed they would tame the Longue Sault."

Ray Cross
"I lived down the road probably about three miles—what they call Coles Creek. They took all our property and there was nothing left. So I bought the land where this house is now from Raymond. And we moved our buildings up here next to him.

Clyde Castle

"Bush Island was Indian property before it was flooded. And Gooseneck Island—well, my home was straight across from there. You see, I was born and I always lived there. I left in May, and I had a heart attack in November, 1956.

Sure, I got enough to relocate here... But I'd have rather stayed where I was. You take right out on the main route 37 with the river right in front of you.... That means quite a bit. And I don't care who you are. There's no place like home. You always think of home. No matter what it is."

Earl Carr

"Outside of Les Clark's farm and ours, they took all those farms up through to where the Iroquois Dam is. And they didn't need to—Kenny Castle and the Burlingame farm and the Dunn's and the McMann's. It wasn't necessary. The land is still there. They've done nothing with it."

John Mitchell
“Well, I was born on Longue Sault Island two days after Christmas 1904. Now when I was born, probably like most of them, they went across the island and across the Big River to Dickenson’s Landing—that’s Ontario—and got Dr. Fader and they’d come back across the river and back across the island, and I was born then.

“They had Ault Park at Sheek’s Island, on the head. There was a big rock and they brought that up from Maple Grove up the ice, and they put it on the head of the island, and had a brass plate put on it. It was pretty high.

Irene has got pictures of them drawing that stone up the ice. Oh, it was a big one. They had eight, ten, horses bringing it up.

Irene used to play on that stone. We used to go over there all the time and have a grand old time. Nice spring there. Had dances there and everything.”

Ross Miller
"It was just that the Seaway went through. It was getting dirty, dirty, dirty. They kept promising, promising, "We're going to this, we're going to do that, we're going to clear the water." And finally they said "There's nothing wrong with it."

Angus George
St. Regis Village

"Oh, I liked farming on Croils Island, but when I went down to ALCOA I made a lot more money in just so many hours. So it was a lot easier. But I liked farming. And then, where I worked for ALCOA they flooded that out—the River Department for ALCOA. We had some barges, tugs...So when the Seaway went through we were flooded out.

I spent 18 years there. Then I went with the Seaway. I got a job with them, and worked for them for 21 years and then I retired from there in 1979.

I always worked on the water, yes. I've always been on the River."

Ray Cross
"I remember myself, my wife would tell me to go hunt some of the Indian medicine. Because we are both Indian we depend on Indian medicine. I would know just where to go. Before the Seaway went by here, well, the farthest you needed to go was our next neighbor down towards the River. All those different kinds of medicine. So that's as far as people had to go to pick up different kinds of medicine to get along with."

"You wouldn't be able to find islands as beautiful as this island a few years back when we took care of our lands, our fields. Now we are dependent upon the department stores in Cornwall, instead of on our gardens. The life is so much different now than a few years back. I was born on this island and always lived here until I got an idea I should go away, see some different places. I went to Manitoba. I stayed there a little while and then I got thinking of home and who would help me take care of things at home. We always raised good crops at home. So I didn't stay away for long—I returned home, to this island."

Ira Benedict
Cornwall Island
A lot of us made a nice living from fishing, just during the summer months. And as we’d start guiding, and got good, we’d start to guide fishermen from different states. They’d come here just for the fishing. For commercial fishing there was mostly sturgeon. The sturgeon was shipped to New York. It was a delicacy. I remember when they shipped it for a dollar and a half a pound. But now the fish can’t get up from below, because of the dams. And the pollution is killing the spawning grounds. When they spawn into these smaller rivers—the Salmon River, St. Regis River, Racquette River, Grasse River—those are four great places to spawn and they’re polluted now. And it’s killing the spawning beds.

Tony Barnes
Racquette Point
"I think it was the most fun I ever had on the river was when I was fishin' sturgeon. I caught one one day, 127 pounds! I went down and look at the line and sometimes I'd have three or four of them, anywhere, fifty, sixty, seventy pounds. Made it handy right there where the milk plant was. They had an ice house there, too. And they used to ship them in barrels, packed full of ice. You didn't skin 'em. All you did was cut the fins off and take the innards out of 'em, cut the head off and pack 'em in barrels. Just like that."

"And eating sturgeon—Oh, it's just like eating steak. No bones at all. There's only one bone, a center bone, a round bone, and inside that round bone, there's what they call a tape, and you have to pull that out. If you try cooking 'em with that in 'em, it makes 'em strong. I used to give a lot of sturgeon away. See, you couldn't ship anything under eight pounds. They'd have to be over eight pounds before you could even ship 'em. So when you'd get the little ones, I used to give 'em away. Of course, we'd eat a lot of 'em ourselves."

John Graves
April 1983, Lisbon, NY

One time you could fish all along here. You didn't have to go in a boat, just cast in and catch your fish. That's it. We knew where they were all the time. But today—we've got to look for them. There were walleyes. There were plenty of walleyes—so many—it's like eating perch today. If you want fish you've got to look for them. They've been going down, going down. You're lucky if you catch one or two all day, today. I'd say we lost 80% of all the fish now. Sturgeon, too. All the ones that don't spawn in the ocean. Like the eels—they spawn in the ocean.

Angus George