



Photographs by the author.

SEALS AT LA TABATIÈRE

by FRED BRUEMMER

WHEN SUB-ZERO weather grips the rugged coast of the north shore of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, the fishermen in the small isolated villages of Quebec near the Labrador boundary get ready for the annual migration of harp seals from the Arctic through the Strait of Belle Isle into the gulf.

In most settlements the men string out 'shoal nets', single nets set in a straight line from the shore out into the gulf. But in La Tabatière, members of the Robertson clan (13 of the village's 17 families are Robertsons) set an extremely complex trap to capture the migrating seals. The trap, an intricate maze of nets and floats, is so efficient that in recent years Robertsons have been hired by the Department of Northern Affairs to teach the method to the Eskimos. A similar trap is now operated with considerable success by the Port Burwell Eskimos on the northeastern tip of Labrador.

This peculiar seal trap was probably invented by Samuel Robertson, La Tabatière's founder, and great-grandfather of Hiram Robertson who, at the age of 82, is now the dean of the village's seal catchers.

The American naturalist John James Audubon visited Labrador in 1833. On July 23, he noted in his journal: "We visited today the Seal establishment of a Scotchman, Samuel Robertson, situated on what he calls Sparr Point . . . This man has resided here twenty years, married a Labrador lady, daughter of a Monsieur

Despite his 82 years, Hiram Robertson, dean of La Tabatière sealers, still helps to drag seals ashore.



Chevalier of Bras d'Or, . . . His house is comfortable and in a little garden he raises potatoes, turnips and other vegetables. He appears to be the lord of these parts and quite contented with his lot. He told me his profits last year amounted to £600 . . . His seal-oil tubs were full and he was then engaged in loading two schooners for Quebec with that article."

Sparr Point or, more correctly, Spark Point, named for the glinting mica chips on its shore, was later called St. Joseph de la Tabatière by a visiting priest whose snuff box dropped accidentally into the bay. Now the name has been shortened to La Tabatière.

The trap, or 'great fishery' as it is locally known, is set in early December, according to a master plan handed down from one generation of Robertsons to the next.

The main net is strung from Spark Point to Fishery Island, an islet in the bay. This net has a 14-fathom (84-foot) wide "door". The seals, their migration route blocked by the net, find this door and swim through it into the trap's main chamber. From it, V-shaped, net-enclosed funnels lead to the "puzzle", an intricate maze of chambers, all surrounded by nets. Lost in this labyrinth, the seals strike the net, get tangled up in its mesh and drown. The total weight of the trap's nets and ropes exceeds 3,300 pounds.

The seals usually arrive near Christmas time, when the weather has turned so cold "that the water burns your hands" as the sealers say. At the same time the bay begins to freeze over and each day becomes a struggle with ice and freezing water and, sometimes, dense fog.

After being loaded with seals, the men return to La Tabatière. Sealing takes place near the end of the season and the sealers have to struggle daily with increasing ice and sometimes dense fog.



A harp seal, caught by the net, is heaved into the boat.

For the men of La Tabatière the annual seal harvest is vital. Some earn half their annual income in the two weeks around Christmas and New Year, when the seals usually arrive.

The price for seal pelts has fluctuated wildly in recent years. Hiram Robertson remembers when in his youth Halifax merchants came in spring to buy seal oil and pelts. They paid 50 cents for the skin of an adult seal and 25 cents for a bedlammer (young seal) skin. (The word 'bedlammer' is a corruption of the French 'bête de la mer' — sea beast.)

In 1964, a peak price year, the sealers got as much as \$27 per pelt. In 1965, the price dropped to about



The seals are sculped immediately after landing, before they freeze solid. The sculps are then stored between layers of snow in sheds.

\$15 per pelt and indications are it may go down to \$10 in 1966.

The sealers leave at daybreak in their sturdy clinker-built boat and force their way through the ice along the shore to reach the trap in the bay. Each portion of the labyrinthine trap is lifted in turn, and caught seals are heaved into the boat. The seals are either brought ashore or to the edge of the ice, and hauled from there by teams of dogs to the village. The carcasses must be skinned immediately before they freeze solid.

The sculps (the seal skin plus the attached blubber) are piled between layers of snow in the storage shed. Most of the meat is used to feed the numerous dog teams, La Tabatière's main form of winter transport. Many villagers also like the dark seal meat, especially the flippers.

In spring the skins are cleaned and stretched. The seal blubber is melted down in a soot-coated, old-fashioned tryworks. The resultant oil, classified according to colour and quality as 'pale oil', 'straw oil', and 'dark oil', sells for an average price of about 50 cents per gallon. The blubber of 15

Maynard Robertson scrapes fat off a seal skin which has been taughtly stretched on a frame.



After a long day hauling in seal nets in sub-zero weather, Clifford Robertson's face and parka are rimmed with ice.

seals is needed to fill a 45-gallon drum.

At the beginning of January old male harp seals arrive in La Tabatière. Locally they are known by the quaint name of 'Pat Jones', a rather amusing adaptation of the French 'pattes jaunes' — yellow legs. They are the last to descend from the Arctic and their arrival heralds the end of the frantic and frigid seal catching season at La Tabatière.

Often, though, the bay freezes over before the last seals have come and then the men are lucky if they can save their great trap, worth thousands of dollars.

Catches vary greatly. In the time of Samuel Robertson, 3,000 seals

were commonly taken. Seventy years ago, when Hiram Robertson was a boy, 1,500 seals were considered a good catch, though some years less than a dozen were taken. Now the labyrinthine trap captures, on the average, about 500 seals in the short season.

The nets stiff with ice, are carefully stored. In summer they are dried and repaired, a painstaking job requiring usually more than 300 pounds of netting twine. Then everything is ready for the next season when, for two weeks, the Robertsons will brave again ice and fog, cold and sudden vicious gales, as their forefathers have done for 150 years.