

Long Island: An 1873 Perspective

by Charles Hallock

TO THOSE OF US FAMILIAR with the highway-laced, exhaust-wreathed Long Island of 1993, this excerpt from *The Fishing Tourist* by Charles Hallock (Harper and Brothers, New York, 1873), is indeed a surprising and welcome journey into the past. A writer whose "sketches of travel and adventure" appeared periodically in Harper's Magazine from 1856 to 1873, Charles Hallock affords us a bucolic glimpse into a world long gone, 120 years ago.

He describes an island where the only means of access were "occasional cart-paths," where communities lived in "primitive simplicity," and where it was evidently not uncommon (particularly if you possessed a romantic sensibility) to find "upright God-serving well-to-do farmers who go bare-foot and eat with silver spoons."

Long Island, the thick arm off New York and Connecticut was once rich with succulent shellfish; wild, raw salt marshes; great forests; pure, mossy, secret trout streams; and only lightly dotted by human habitation. You'll see why Hallock asserted there was "no more pleasant or profitable way of spending a two weeks' vacation than to take a horse and wagon, fill it with provender and equipments, and make a round trip of the entire island, stopping at the various fishing-grounds by the way." As is our editorial policy with historical material, the word usage and spelling of such a document has been preserved for reasons of flavor as well as historical integrity. EDITOR

THE WATERS OF Long Island are familiar to few beside the anglers of New York and vicinity, and although extolled by them, would hardly be appreciated, I fear, by the brotherhood at large. The most expert disciple

of Izaak Walton may have wet his line in many a mountain lake and stream, or purling meadow-brook, and still have much to learn if he has never thrown a fly where the saline breezes blow over the salt marshes of the famed "South Side," or attended the roisterous opening of the season on the 15th of March. For thus early, while interior streams are bound by Winter's fetters, and snow-drifts mount the fences, the waters of Long Island have been released by a more southern sun and the tempering breezes of ocean. The ebb and flow of

waters where a tyro could not, perchance, provoke a single rise? For, be it known, Long Island trout are *educated*. They are not only connoisseurs in taste and epicures in diet, but quick to detect a fraud; they have been taught in the metropolitan school which cuts eye-teeth. The marshy brinks of their brackish realm are as bare of cover as a floor, affording no screen for stealthy approach. The most delicate tackle, a long line deftly cast, with flies that drop as snowflakes on the unbroken surface—these are the sole conditions of success.

The application of my remarks is to creek-fishing only—to the outlets of streams which head in limpid ponds, whence, tumbling over artificial dams, and purling under spreading willows, they wind through sinuous channels to the Sound or Ocean. Of course the tide ebbs and flows in them, and the water is salt; but the trout are nevertheless the genuine speckled beauties of the mountains, in full livery of blue and crimson,

and much improved in flavor by their access to the sea. They run in and out with the tide, and it is said that specimens have been taken in nets in the bays, three or four miles from shore. In these creeks one may angle without let or hindrance, though full baskets cannot be expected. To no others have I the right to invite the indiscriminate public. But there are magnificent preserves and private ponds, where full-fed monster trout can be caught by the score from boat or bank by inexperts, provided they have access thereto by proprietary indulgence, or the "open sesame" of personal acquaintance.

Notwithstanding the insular position of Long Island, and the sandy character of its soil, which extends in areas of bar-



tide have purged them of snow-water, and the eager trout, after his long Lenten season, is glorious game for the sportsman.

Long Island is said to resemble a fish in shape—a remarkable delineation of its physical character. Gotham experts deem it the finest trouting region in the world for scientific anglers, because none but skillful rods can take the fish of its creeks and streams. Worthy members of the brotherhood who are wont to steal a march upon the Culex family in their annual trips to the north, may have taken at times their fifty pounds of trout per diem in Adirondack or Canadian waters; but how can such cheaply earned success compare for *sport* with the capture of a good half-dozen fish in

ren plain over thousands of acres, its entire surface is diversified by ponds and extensive swamps, which send forth copious streams, clear, cold, and sparkling. There are no less than seventy of these streams. Most of them afford abundant mill privileges, and some have been used as mill-sites for two hundred years. The Peconic River is the longest, measuring fifteen miles. These take their rise not only in the central dividing ridge, but all along both shores above and below the line of high water-mark, though they are most numerous upon the south side. Nearly all abound in trout. The most celebrated are Success Pond, Ronkonkoma, Coram, Great Pond, Fort Pond, Killis Pond, and the considerable bodies of water at Smittown, Carman's, Islip, Patchogue, and Oyster Bay. Great Pond is two miles long, and Ronkonkoma a mile and a half.

The unusual facilities and attractions which these waters afford to sportsmen were recognized a century ago. The best localities were quickly appropriated by private individuals, who improved and stocked them at considerable expense, and leased fishing privileges to city sportsmen at a fixed rate per diem, or \$1 per pound for all fish taken. Several were subsequently secured by clubs, who laid out ornamental grounds, built spacious club-houses, and added largely to the original stock of fish. The princi-



pal of these is the South Side Club, near Islip, which comprises a hundred or more members. But there is a coterie of fifteen gentlemen, who enjoy at Smittown the use of angling privileges equal to those of a majority of the private preserves. They have four ponds, of which the chief are Phillips' Pond and Stump Pond. The former is noted for its big fish. Their domain is an old-fashioned farm, which literally flows with milk and honey. There are orchards that bend with fruit in its season, and with

congregated turkeys always in the still watches of the night. Great willow trees environ the house, and through their loosely swaying branches the silvery moon may be seen glistening on the ponds. Through a wicket-gate and under overarching grape-vines a path leads to the "Lodge," within whose smoke-grimed precincts none but the elect may come. Its walls are hung with coats and old felt hats, and suits of water-proof, with creels and rods, and all the paraphernalia and complex gear of a sportsman's repertoire. Cosy lounges invite the weary; there are pipes and glasses for those who wish them; and in the centre of the room a huge square stove emits a radiant glow. In the cool of April evenings, when the negro boy has crammed it full of wood, and the smoke from reeking pipes ascends in clouds, this room resounds with song and story, and many a stirring experience of camp and field. No striplings gather here. Some who stretch their legs around that stove are battle-scarred. Others have grown gray since they learned the rudiments of the "gentle art." Might I with propriety mention names I could introduce a royal party. To-morrow they will whip the ponds, and wade the connecting streams; and when their brief campaign is ended, you will see them wending cityward with hampers filled with trout nicely packed in ice and moss.

Of private ponds the most famous and richly stocked are Maitland's Pond, near Islip, and the Massapiqua Pond at Oyster Bay. Nearly all the ponds throughout the island lie along the main highways, in many cases separated from the road only by a fragile fence, but jealously guarded by trespass notices, dogs, and keepers; and it has not infrequently happened that some neophyte uninitiated into the mysteries and prerogatives of Long Island fishing, has innocently climbed the fence, and tossed his fly into the forbidden waters—whereby and in consequence hang tales of "withered hopes," not to be repeated except on chilly evenings in the ruddy glow of a blazing wood-fire, and then *sotto voce*.

In those earlier days of undeveloped locomotion, when the Long Island Railroad was the grand highway between New York and Boston, the only means

of access to either side was by occasional cart-paths that traversed the intervening plains. Over these barren wastes hearse-like vehicles made quotidian trips from the railroad stations. From Farmingdale to Riverhead, throughout an area forty miles by six in extent, scarcely a house or cultivated patch was seen. The only growth was scrub oak and stunted pine,



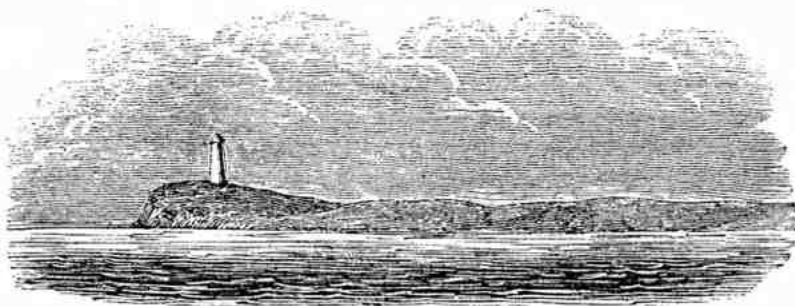
through which devastating fires ran periodically. Into the yielding sand the wheels cut deeply, and the journey, short as the distance was, seemed slow and tedious. Those who now gain easy access to either side by the railroad facilities provided, have small conception of the discomforts of the olden time. It is difficult to realize the magnitude of the improvements made. Once across the line that circumscribes these wastes, and the scene changes, as if by magic, to one of thrift and plenty. Bursting barns, capacious farm-houses, and smiling fields attest the exuberance of the soil. City merchants and gentlemen retired from business have seized upon the choicest spots within a distance of fifty miles from town, and made them attractive with every modern innovation and appliance. Even portions of the barren wastes, which were regarded of trifling value, have been reclaimed, and now "bloom and blossom as the rose." On every hand are stately mansions, back from whose well-kept lawns and embowering shrubbery stretch acres of farm, garden and nursery, all under highest cultivation. There are conservatories filled with rarest plants. Graperies blushing in their fulness of purple and crimson, expose their crystal façades to the southern sun. There are trout ponds, whose cost to form was by no means insignificant, with arbors and kiosks dotting their grassy banks, wild-fowl disporting along their margins, and pleasure-boats floating listlessly at their moorings. There are princely barns and carriage-houses, and stables

filled with imported stock. Suburban mansions of the city have been set down quietly among the antiquated houses, quaint mills, shops, and country stores of the primitive inhabitants. New ideas and modes of dress and living have been sown among the simple-minded, yet there seems no jealousy or clash of interests. The thrifty housewife in cap and gown and guileless of hoops, looks out from beneath the yellow ears of corn and strings of dried apples hung on her tenter-hooks, to the modern improvements of her neighbor, and sighs not for his flesh-pots or his finery. Her "old man," in rustic garb and cowhides, "talks horse" with the fast young men who drive down in sulkies, and listens with some show of respectful attention to the "chaff" of sportsmen in the tavern bar-rooms. He hears the respective merits of rival rods and guns tenaciously extolled, and politely nods assent when appealed to by the earnest disputants; but he seldom puts his "oar" in. These little technicalities do not concern him much.

Has not the city-bred reader, while aestivating in some inland farm-house, often longed for the little delicacies and conveniences of the city which were lacking there, desiring that delectable combination of *urbs in rure* which would make perfection—a dash of champagne and oysters with his fresh eggs and milk, for instance? Well, if it be possible to find that rare union anywhere, it is on the famed "South Side." There are fresh veal cutlets, hog and hominy, beef, biscuits, butter, eggs, milk, all raised or made upon the place and unpolluted by huckster or market-man; luscious trout fresh from their element, with fried eggs, shad and flounders; broad-bill ducks, snipes and plover; sponge-cake, doughnuts and sparkling cider of the best selected apples. And the rarest luxuries of the New York market are within easy reach! The table cutlery is unexceptionable, and the china innocent of the omnipresent country blue. An attentive black boy serves you. The guests are of the class, in fact often the same persons, one meets at the Clarendon or Fifth Avenue, and there is no smell of the barnyard or musty boots beneath the mahogany. And yet the room, the furniture, the

house and its appointments are all of the primitive country style. It is the same quaint old structure of seventy years ago with its huge fire-place where the great back-log flames and smolders. There are the same diminutive window panes, the low ceiling, and elaborate wainscoting; the labyrinth of passages, staircases, and pantries; the tall Dutch clock in the corner, the stiff-backed chairs and the mantel ornaments of stuffed birds and marine curiosities. Over the bar-room door, beneath the porch, is the head and antlers of a Long Island deer—one of the tribe of which a few are still left to roam the scrubby waste lands of the Plains. This is a simple pen-picture of the sportsman's rendezvous on this "sea-girt isle."

Taken all in all, I much doubt if there is any locality where the angler may enjoy his favorite pastime with the same luxurious ease as on Long Island. Very different is the roughing it in the bush, with all its hard vicissitudes. If any stranger desires to test or taste the quality of the fishing here, let him first try the Cedar Swamp and New Bridge creeks at Oyster Bay; then, if time and inclination serve, go on to Patchogue and put up at Austin Roe's hotel, where he will receive the attentions of a landlord of a thousand acres, who owns



rights in nearly all the trout ponds and creeks in the neighborhood. There he can fish *ad libitum*, and free of charge, and take home with him all the fish his luck or skill may bring to his creel. There is no more pleasant or profitable way of spending a two weeks' vacation than to take a horse and wagon, fill it with provender and equipments, and make a round trip of the entire Island, stopping at the various fishing-grounds by the way. The roads are for the most part good; and when the tourist has passed through Babylon, Jerusalem, and Jericho, and left the western half of the island behind him, he will find himself among a community living in primitive

simplicity, who have possessed the land for nearly two centuries and a half—upright, God-serving, well-to-do farmers, who go barefoot and eat with silver spoons—men who have seldom traveled beyond the limits of the townships in which they were born, whom cares of state do not perplex, and whose ancestors were the original purchasers of the land from the aboriginal owners, with whom they always lived in peace. There he will find a remnant of the Indian tribes themselves, and discover traces of their ancient burial grounds and fortifications. He will discover a nomenclature new and strange, and curious geological freaks; ponds with no visible outlets that rise and fall with the tides; sand-hills one hundred feet high that shift with every gale that blows; fantastic cliffs and singular tongues of land; groups of islands, between which the ocean currents set like a mile-race; skeletons of wrecks imbedded in the beach; graveyards with one hundred headstones sacred to entire ships' crews who perished on the strand.

A peculiar and fortune-favored people are the Long Islanders, who know how to enjoy life in a quiet way, and do have an unusual variety of its good gifts convenient to their hands. The railroads now bring them the daily papers from

city, and whatever luxuries the great emporium affords. The intervening plains furnish an occasional saddle of venison and a great variety of feathered game. The fertile belt of land which girds island yields of its abundance—its grain-fields, its gardens, its orchards, and its livestock. Water-fowl and

fresh-water fish throng its ponds and streams, and the broad salt marshes afford an excellent shooting-ground for sportsmen. Beyond them the ocean rolls up its surf on the outer beach, while within the sheltered bays the most delicious fish shell-fish are found in profusion. The long, level roads offer the rarest opportunities for driving and trotting, the bays for bathing, boating, and yachting.

The James Slip Ferry connects with Long Island Railroad at Hunter's Point, and the Grand and Roosevelt Ferries with the South Side Railroad. The entire journey to Greenport is made in about four hours.