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History of Wilmot Creek

In 1796 Richard Lovekin became the first European settler in the Wilmot Creek basin, setting up a homestead on a hill overlooking the mouth of the creek (then referred to as Baldwin's Creek). From that point forward, the remainder of the watershed was surveyed and a slow but steady increase in population occurred. In 1816, Samuel Street Wilmot purchased 400 acres of land on the banks of the creek north of the present day Highway 2.

The bounty of Atlantic salmon was likely a saving grace to the early settlers who would have relied on these fish for one of their main food sources. Settlers from all around the area would come to the river to capture their winter's supply, with reports of catches of over 1000 fish in a night.

Brook trout were also important to the settlers to offset periods when salmon were not available. Historical accounts of brook trout indicate that they were so bountiful in the Orono area, that they would be caught by settlers while dipping their buckets in the creek for fresh water.

The unprecedented speed with which the settlers cleared the land for farming, industry and export, had a profound effect on the environment. In less than 30 years, 16 mills had been established in the watershed, most of the land had been cleared of trees, and the ecosystem had responded in a negative way.

By 1861 nearly all forest cover was gone, as were many wildlife species previously common in the area (i.e. turkey, lynx, bear, and passenger pigeon). The settlers had become dependent on farmed animals and imports to sustain themselves, rather than natural resources. The head waters on the Oak Ridge Moraine were cleared and settlers attempted to farm these soils, but soon discovered that not only were these soils infertile, they were highly vulnerable to erosion from wind and rain.

The Atlantic salmon population responded immediately to these changes. It wasn't long before the combination of over-harvesting and inability to spawn in preferred habitats resulted in dramatic declines in the population. Landowners began to take steps to protect the now diminishing populations, such that in 1842 the so-called "salmon wars" occurred at the mouth of Wilmot Creek.

Salmon stocks continued to decline until Samuel Wilmot (Jr.) began experimenting with propagation in 1865. By 1868, a hatchery was in full operation, and production soon exceeded 1 million young fish per year. For a short time, the population seemed to respond to the hatchery efforts, and increases in run sizes were observed for the first decade of the program. But the optimism was short lived as the salmon once again became very rare and were extinct by the turn of the century.

In 1922 the Department of Lands and Forests opened a tree nursery near the village of Orono, in recognition of the magnitude of the problem with soil erosion and its consequent effects on local economies and the stream environment. Trees from the Orono nursery were used to reforest the head water areas and valley lands of the Wilmot Creek watershed, but progress

was slow as resources were limited at that time. By 1947, it was reported that Wilmot Creek once again contained a relatively good population of trout.>

Then in 1954, Hurricane Hazel hit southern Ontario and caused flooding in Wilmot Creek. Hazel moved massive amounts of stream bed material, washed out bridges, over-topped old dams and generally caused an entire shift in channel form of Wilmot Creek. Nevertheless, Hazel seems to have had a positive effect on fisheries production. Shortly after Hazel, a rainbow trout fishery emerged in Wilmot Creek. Recommendations were made for additional surveys and restoration work over the next 20 years.

The assessment program included habitat and electrofishing surveys, aquatic invertebrate surveys, operation of a counting fence and fish tagging studies at the old hatchery site (just south of highway 35/115). These studies showed that rainbow trout numbers had continued to increase over time.

A coho and chinook salmon fishery emerged around 1976. Chinook salmon spawn in the lower part of the creek in large numbers, and have been found all the way up to the 8th concession. Coho salmon appear to concentrate their spawning in the middle and upper reaches of the creek. Brown trout spawn in lower numbers than chinook salmon and concentrate spawning around the 7-8th concessions.

Beginning in 1995, research has been carried out to explore the feasibility of restoring Atlantic salmon to Wilmot Creek. To date, few Atlantic salmon have returned to the creek, although no studies have concluded that restoration of this species is not possible.

(This article is excerpted with permission from the Wilmot Creek Fisheries Management Report of the Ganaraska Region Conservation Authority)