

Glory in the Gaspé

This remote fishing camp became a horticultural paradise *By Nancy Wigston*

We've been driving east from Quebec City, along the south shore of the St. Lawrence River, on Route 132 for nearly five hours when we spot a giant lawn chair. Stop the car! This is the entrance to Reford Gardens. Scrambling aboard the wooden chair, I grin idiotically. Doubtless, Elsie Reford (1872-1967), the woman who created these eight hectares of English-inspired gardens in this unlikely place, would think me frivolous. Hers was a private paradise for family and guests — occasionally opened for fundraisers — but her magical way with plants had unpredictable effects. Starting down her winding garden paths, I wish I'd packed some ruby slippers.

Anybody who thought planting an English garden just south of the 49th parallel a good idea either had genius or a screw loose. Elsie had genius. Born in Perth, Ont., educated in Montreal, Elsie attended finishing schools in Paris and Germany. Her father was president of Lake of the Woods Milling Co. (a.k.a. Five Roses Flour), and her uncle, George Stephen, was president of the CPR. Elsie loved her uncle's salmon-fishing camp, Estevan Lodge. When he died in 1921, no one was surprised that he left it to her. The bigger surprise was that, at age 54, in 1926, while resting at Estevan after an appendectomy, she began designing a garden where the Mitis River ("Poplar River" in Mi'kmaq) meets the St. Lawrence. She read voraciously about plants, meticulously recording her triumphs and occasional failures. Lilies became her specialty.

For the next 30 years, Elsie transformed this 1887 salmon-fishing camp into a horticultural treasure. "Her creation was completely original," says great-grandson Alexander Reford, director of the Gardens, "the only fishing camp that I'm aware of that became an ornamental garden — and on such a large scale." Reford's (a.k.a. *Les Jardins de Métis*) 3,000 native and exotic species draw 100,000 visitors each year to the remote Gaspé Peninsula.

Some plants, like her beloved but difficult gentians — 3,000 in all — didn't survive after she died at age 95, and are now being reintroduced. Even today, her design prevails. "She put the plants in the perfect place," declares Patricia Gallant, the resident horticulturalist. Each time an aged tree must be replaced, "It's like an old friend is suddenly gone."

Visitors wander along Elsie's paths, crossing wooden bridges above the rushing waters of the brook around which this singular woman arranged her plantings. Abundance seemed to be her goal: 13,000 blue Tibetan poppy bulbs; 70 hybrid crabapple trees; hundreds of varieties of lilies, roses, peonies; a dwarf willow from the 1930s, amongst 70-year-old plantings of saxifrage and bloodroot.

Her challenges included fierce winters, heavy snows, meagre soil — and the utter absence of anything resembling a garden on the property. Elsie erected gates to keep out the public. Today, the garden, run by the non-profit Les Amis des Jardins de Métis, welcomes everyone to step inside a forest of century-old conifers and follow curvy paths toward visual surprises: blue poppies, azaleas, primordial ferns, a wild meadow, a pond, a woodland, glades, walks and sudden gardens.

With local fishermen and farmers turned gardeners, Elsie built walls, moved rocks, raised beds for drainage, traded salmon for leaves to make compost. Microclimates — those snows, that salt air — nourished azaleas and red Japanese maples, very rare in Gaspé. An oddly compact growing season tumbles seasons together; when peonies, for instance, have finished their season farther west, they are just coming into bloom at Reford. When a hybrid peony bloomed out of nowhere, it was dubbed the "Elsie."

No wonder her presence is palpable. When Gallant first arrived



NANCY WIGSTON; REFORM FAMILY ARCHIVES

The Reford Gardens were the life's work of Elsie Reford, who turned her inheritance into a world-renowned ornamental garden in east Quebec.



REBECCA YANOVSKAYA / NATIONAL POST

20 years ago, she recalls that "I felt something of her spirit in the garden, a strong feeling. I had to sit down." Elsie does seem to haunt the place.

In family pictures, Elsie Stephen Reford looks beautiful and severe. A stylish woman with a fondness for wearing men's neckties, she kept her 17-inch waist all her life. She played violin, worked for women's and children's charities in Montreal, served on the committee to celebrate Quebec's 300th year. She caught 45-pound salmon, hunted, was a crackerjack horsewoman. There were trips abroad with husband, Robert, and their two sons.

Today's Lodge houses a family museum on the top floor and a splendid restaurant/café downstairs. As we sit down, someone orders an *allongée* — a Quebec take on espresso. I have one and it's superb. Why am I surprised? In its heyday, Estevan Lodge entertained Canada's elite. In June, Chef Pierre-Olivier Ferry launched a "Blue Fork" menu, with sustainable fish and regional foods, such as pickled fiddleheads and marinated day-lily buds. Since Elsie's husband was the Canadian agent/director for Cunard Lines, Ferry recently added "Vintage" choices, adapted from a 1914 Cunard menu: six courses, from caviar to dessert, for \$45.

The Lodge does not function as an inn nowadays, so we check in at the Auberge Métis-Sur-Mer, a few kilometres east, perched above the shores of the St. Lawrence, overlooking its marvellous sunsets. Minutes from the Auberge is Métis, or Métis Beach, as the Anglos call it. In Elsie's day, it was popular with the Westmount crowd (whose descendants still summer in elaborate cottages hidden behind cedar hedges and white picket fences). As Daniel Colombe, of the Auberge Métis-sur-Mer, explains, "Métis was a Scottish community. There are three Protestant churches and three golf courses. In the old days, hotels had as many as 250 rooms."

The grand old hotels are gone, and visitors now come to savour natural pursuits. Daniel recommends seal and whale watching; a powerful telescope in the Auberge dining room — where Mme Colombe serves her fabulous dinners — is trained on the rock where dozens of seals congregate. On a distant point, Métis Lighthouse blinks its green warning to passing river craft.

Returning to the Gardens the next day, we say our farewells. This year's art installations at the ninth annual International Garden Festival are now in place. Chic, surprising, original, they are reached via a bridge from the Woodland Walk, and interesting works by architects and designers form the perfect complement to Elsie's spirit and daring. As Gallant says, "Her passion is here. You can feel it."

■ Nancy Wigston was a guest of Quebec Tourism.

Weekend Post

IF YOU GO

Reford Gardens
■ 200 Route 132, Grand-Métis, Que.
■ refordgardens.com; info@refordgardens.com
■ Open June to mid-October; adults \$16, seniors \$15, teens 14-18 \$8, 13 and under free.

Auberge Métis-sur-Mer
■ 387 Chemin Patton; 418-936-3563

Gaspésie Tourism
■ 1-800-463-0323
■ Quebec Tourism: bonjourquebec.com