

# Port Credit's Old Man River takes life one day at a time

Reel Bio. Bk.

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It's 2:30 on a perfect Friday afternoon. The hot sun beams down on a pair of kayakers paddling across the Credit River's serene waters. Fishermen cast their lines while Canada geese queue for bread crumbs.

And while most of Mississauga is still sweating it out at work, Cliff (Tex) Taylor is holding court at his home on the west bank of the river, in Port Credit's Memorial Park.

Under the shade of a big willow tree with a cool breeze blowing by, he drinks ginger ale with friends from styrofoam cups while stoking the barbecue he found discarded from a nearby apartment building.

On today's menu — potatoes wrapped in silver foil and plenty of salmon straight from Lake Ontario.

*'You can always get by from flat broke, if you're using your head for more than just keeping your ears apart.'*

To the inevitable query regarding contamination, Tex replies, "That's argumentative. You don't eat the big ones that have been swimming around for five or six years. You eat the small ones."

"(You) get a beautiful fish out of there. It makes a good dinner. If you go down to the store along there, it's 10 bucks for a fish like that."

"I've eaten fish out of here for eight years and I'm healthy for 58... sort of," he says with a grin his blue eyes sparkling from the hard folds of his face.

True to his word, Taylor has made out all right since he gave up the 9-to-5 world eight years ago.

With his trademark leather cowboy hat, Tex is equal parts sage, mystic and troll, as he roams the river and coffee shops of Port Credit.

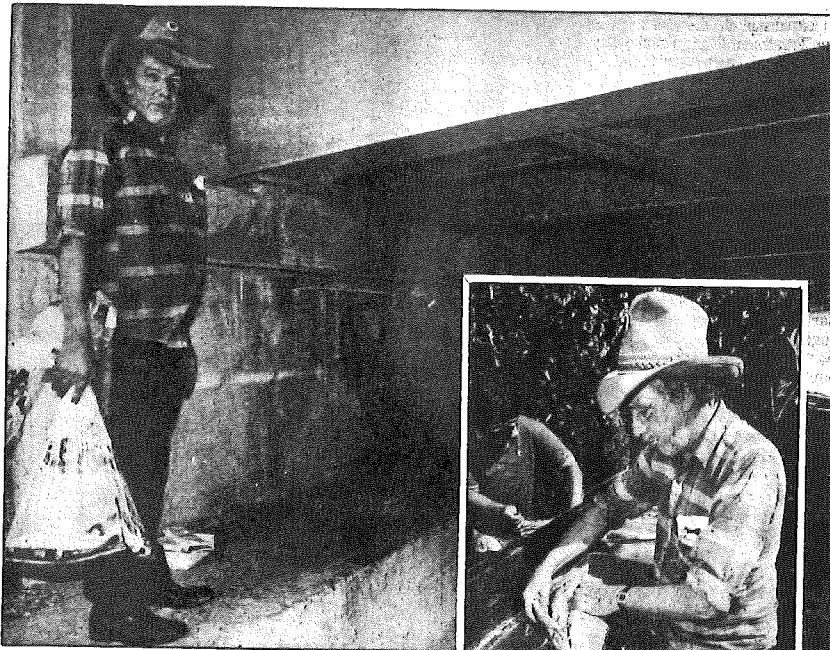
On this day, surrounded by his worldly possessions — a bike with several plastic bags jammed on the handlebars and two milk cartons on back, a white freezer box for his food, a coffee percolator and a fishing pole — he talks about his life.

"I tried different businesses (lumberjack, taxi, shopkeeper). Lots of it was woman trouble," he says.

He first married at age 26 (to a "ravishing redhead") and split from her two years later. His second wife left him eight years ago in favor of a co-worker at a local taxi company. Since then he's drifted around Mississauga.

"I steal absolutely nothing," he says, sternly. "You can always get by from flat broke, if you're using your head for more than just keeping your ears apart."

He hasn't gone the welfare route either, except on the odd occasion. Instead, he makes systematic rounds of the area parks, where he fishes beer cans from the garbage.



Photos by David Burnett

**A PLACE TO CALL HOME** — Cliff (Tex) Taylor stands beneath the Lakeshore Rd. bridge which has offered him shelter during many frigid nights. Taylor, who has been living on Mississauga's streets and in its parks for eight years, often dines on Lake Ontario Salmon (inset).

The trip ends at the beer store where he cashes in a day's take of \$2 to \$30.

From there he usually winds up at Hellen's Restaurant, across from the park, for breakfast.

"He's just an old guy who comes in here a lot. He doesn't bum. He did the windows for us a couple of times," says cook Robert Lahay. "He helps out the runaways in the park."

"And he's got a \$19-million home in the winter," Lahay adds, pointing to the bridge across the Lakeshore.

Indeed, Taylor slept under the bridge last fall, until the cold finally drove him to refuge in a large abandoned crate in the area.

These days after his rounds, Taylor generally wanders across the road to the site of the Toronto Star Great Ontario Salmon Hunt, where he cleans fish for the anglers.

It seems the natural place for him. To Tex, all the world is a fish story.

With his kind heart and tales of the road, Taylor has ingratiated himself to the people who hang out down by the river, including his "girlfriends." These include a girl named Leslie, who often pays Tex a visit with her English bull terrier Striker in tow.

"He's very industrious. He doesn't rely on the government. He'll go out and collect stuff," she says.

"He gets claustrophobic inside four walls. He goes nuts. It gets chilly, but this is his home."

Some days Leslie will buy him breakfast. And that seems only fair, as Tex helped her through the breakup with a former boyfriend.

"I knew he was no good from the start. She found out later," Tex says, fatherly.

He also likes to visit Diane, a launch attendant at the Salmon Hunt.

"He keeps things in order around here," she says, smiling.

"In the morning he helps me clean up. He knows it might not be that safe for a girl making rounds alone that time of day."

Indeed, it seems the only thing offensive about Tex is the stench that comes off his green clothes from skinning fish.

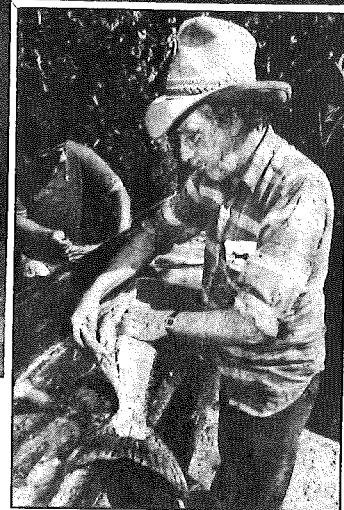
He cleans up at friends' from time to time. And some days he'll steal a few winks in a friend's car.

The friend, named George, recalls his first meeting with Tex, when Taylor offered him a freshly rolled cigarette, saying "Do you want a tailor-made cigarette."

"I said that's not tailor-made. He said sure it is... Cliff Taylor."

The next afternoon Tex is back under the willow tree. He's made his day's trip to the grocery store.

"They're straggling up until now. There's some," he says of the salmon, expected to start their trip upstream any time." His friend, an elderly, deaf Japanese man who throws out his fishing line by hand off a wooden spool, motions Tex to put another marshmallow on his hook. "He comes here every day," Taylor says. "He catches three to six a day."



Taylor has a ready answer for the law when they periodically come around. Mississauga parks department says getting him out of the park is a police matter. Peel Regional Police abolished vagrancy laws several years ago.

"I'm fishin'," he explains. "It's illegal to live here. I don't live here. They don't say what the hours are. I'm fishin'. Lot of people fall asleep while they're fishin'."

In what he calls the honest Gospel, Tex has an answer for everything. Take the distressing drug problem in Mississauga and Metro Toronto, from which he sees drugs being pushed on 14-year-olds in the area.

"If somebody gets caught doing drugs, they should take them to the hospital and have them tested," he says. "If there's (heavy) amounts of drugs in their bloodstream, take them out back and shoot them. Would you do drugs if you knew you were going to be shot?"

In his timeless world, with no rent, mortgage or car payments hanging over him, Tex could convert just about anyone on the right day... almost.

But the following Friday the glint is gone from his eyes as he stands outside the doughnut shop, the material world having closed in around him like a lariat.

"You're up early," he says. "Early, I've seen the sun rise every day for the past 20 years."

"How's it going?" "I've got a problem. The cops said they're going to run me out last night. They say I'm trespassing."