

# The Amphibex: one Acadian's dream of entrepreneurship

By CATOU MacKINNON

**BATHURST** - Past white houses with coloured trims that hug the coastline, the Pigeon Hill wharf hides a lime-green beast in its waters.

It's called the Amphibex, and it's one man's way of getting out of a declining fishery and into business for himself.

Paul Laplante and his partner Noelline Richard invested in the strange half-a-million dollar creature of the sea that can crawl on land, float and navigate in water. It's an "amphibian excavator," and it can travel up to eight knots, it's the length of a small transport trailer.

With long poles firmly planted at one end of the barge-like vessel, the Amphibex lifts itself onto the ice in the Pigeon Hill wharf, and breaks it coming down.

"I was formerly a fisherman," said Mr. Laplante. "Fourteen years inshore, 13 years mid-shore.

"I saw that the fishery was going downhill, I saw the problems.

"I was the manager of the wharf here, and I saw the problems with the port silting up, which stops the boats from getting into the wharf.

He stood at the edge of the wharf, walkie-talkie in hand, directing the next movements his machine should make.

He said he'd been looking for a piece of equipment to help dredge out wharves for eight years, and hadn't found anything versatile enough, and what he found was all old equipment.

He said he saw an ad in a magazine, went to Toronto to see how the machine worked and liked it. He spent the next four years trying to work out a way to get the equipment to northeastern New Brunswick.

He said people call it the frog because it works on land and water.

He laughs when asked what Amphibex looks like. "It's a little



Paul Laplante oversees his ice-breaking contract at the Pigeon Hill wharf.

Catou MacKinnon/Telegraph Journal

robotic, but everyone that sees it is impressed. People were at the wharf all day watching it.

"It walks on ice, it goes in the water like a boat, it's impressive," he said.

So far, business is going well, but he's disappointed he hasn't gotten any government support yet. "We've created five jobs with this, and when you first start a business, it takes some time to get the experience."

In the summer, the machine works 24 hours a day, with four people working the 12-hour shifts.

He got the machine in May 1998, and there hasn't been "too much" work, but he hopes to expand his

territory to southern New Brunswick, breaking the ice on rivers to avoid flooding.

The Amphibex was used during the search for a young couple who disappeared in Pointe-Sapin. It's also travelled as far as Val d'Or, 1,500 kilometres away in Quebec to get clay out of the bottom of a wharf that no other machine had been able to do. "We discover things [about the machine] as we go along."

"This season was the first time we had a machine that can go into the wharf and break ice." He said that's useful to the lobster fishermen at the beginning of the season.

Clearing off the ice, Mr. Laplante has entrepreneurship in his heart.

Facing a fierce northern wind at the Pigeon Hill wharf, he looked over to the ocean and talked about the potential for tourism.

A nice restaurant that would overlook the wharf, with fresh lobster and scallops is what he imagines.

"You can see Miscou Island bridge, and on a good day, all the way to the Gaspé mountains."

He is still in the process of requesting government assistance, but basically he and his partner put all of their savings into the mysterious green machine.

And although it's not been easy, he said it was a "nice challenge."

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