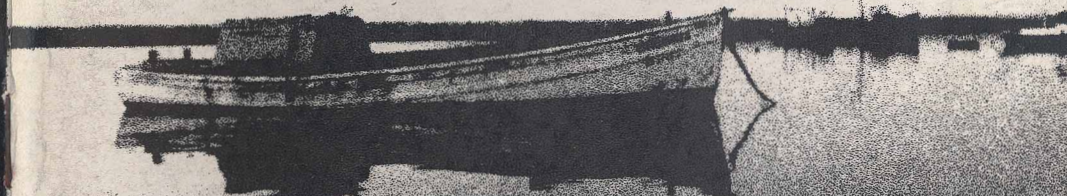




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Provincetown Trapboat Fishing

The End of an Era



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Written material compiled by:

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Advertising Sales: *Helen Fernald*

Cover Art: *Mary Bono*

Photograph for Cover & Trapboat Dinner Poster:
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Photographs: *William Noble, Raymond Gaspa,
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*THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED
TO THE TRAPBOATS AND
ALL FISHERMEN*

THE END OF AN ERA IN PROVINCETOWN

Text copyright © Kathie R. Florsheim, 1977

as printed in the National Fisherman

I have lived in Provincetown, Ma., intermittently for the last nine summers. My family's house overlooks Cape Cod Bay. We have a full view of all the marine activities from Race Point to Beach Point and on a clear day, we can see down to Eastham.

Until this past year, we watched the weir fishermen draw their traps, which were directly off our bulkhead. But now, for the first time in nearly 100 years, there are no more traps fishing in the bay.

Trapping has ended in Provincetown because there are no longer enough fish to support the industry.

I became interested in trap fishing (also called weir fishing) because some neighbors, who had seen the number of traps diminish over the past 20 years, pressed me to photograph the operation before it disappeared. I ignored their suggestions until the summer of 1975, when I finally photographed the Carlotta, Provincetown's only remaining trap boat.

As it turns out, I may have been the last outsider to photograph or go aboard the boat before the operation shut down, in December 1975.

It was like a bad dream to have trapping ended. Local doomsayers had predicted its demise for years, but no one took them seriously. Provincetown has been a fishing port since 1608. And many of the year-round residents who make their living from the sea have, at one time or another, trapped.

The industry's disappearance marked the passing of one of the oldest and most picturesque ways of life the town had to offer.

Through talking with neighbors and townspeople, it became evident that very little had been done to preserve the history of the weirs. A few photographs of spectacular catches remain in the town hall and a local restaurant, and there are a few privately owned scrapbooks.

But written documentation is very sparse. The U.S. Government publication on commercial fishing gear barely mentions trap fishing. The National Marine Fisheries Service in Provincetown has sent all but its most recent records of trap landings to Woods Hole to be stored in a computer. (Retrieving that information would cost a small fortune and involve hours of work.)

So, most of the information I was able to get came by word-of-mouth.

No one seems to know exactly when or where traps were first used. John Worthington, a former trapper and the past owner of Pond Village Cold Storage, says that the earliest evidence of trapping was found while excavations were made for the Boston Public Library. Fossilized remains of an Indian Trap were uncovered.

It seems to be common knowledge, however, that American Indians were the first to use this method of fishing. Theirs were stake traps that used tree branches instead of twine. These traps were set in shallow water and drawn at low tide.

Weir fishing first appeared on the Cape in the early 1800s, off Truro. (Provincetown became involved several years later.) Floating traps, which were used at first, were replaced by staked traps, because they are more suitable for the tidal conditions in the area. These traps supplied bait, mostly herring and mackerel, for the area's many longline trawlers that fished Georges Bank.

This tremendous demand for bait gave rise to the development of cold storage plants. Surplus catches could be frozen for future use. The traps also produced a lot of foodfish, such as butterfish, tuna and whiting. Cold storage made it possible to freeze the catch and wait out low market prices.

Growth of the railroads further advanced the industry. Rail lines usually passed within a few feet of the cold storage plants. They provided rapid and reliable transportation to the fish markets in Boston and New York, delivering the fresh fish the day after it was caught. (This mode of transportation was quite a change from the cargo-carrying schooners that raced around the Cape to Boston, delivering the fish whenever the wind got them there.)

Fishing methods changed substantially about the time of World War I. The beam trawler came into wide use and large quantities of bait were no longer necessary. But the traps were still producing and foodfish, instead of bait, became their most productive catch.

During their heyday, the traps yielded about 25% of the fresh fish available on the northeastern seaboard, from Boston to New York and Philadelphia. There were, at that time, some 100 traps set between Wellfleet and Race Point, a shoreline distance of about twenty miles, and about twenty-five boats fishing them. Trapping and its related industries employed much of the area's work force.

Trapping was a popular way to fish. Because most of the traps were inshore, the fisherman could spend his days at sea and his nights at home. Trapping was also much safer than other methods of fishing, and it attracted many able-bodied men because of that. (In the town of Truro alone, the sea claimed 352 fishermen between 1800-1888. In one storm, on October 3, 1841, a gale killed 51 Truro fishermen in different accidents.)

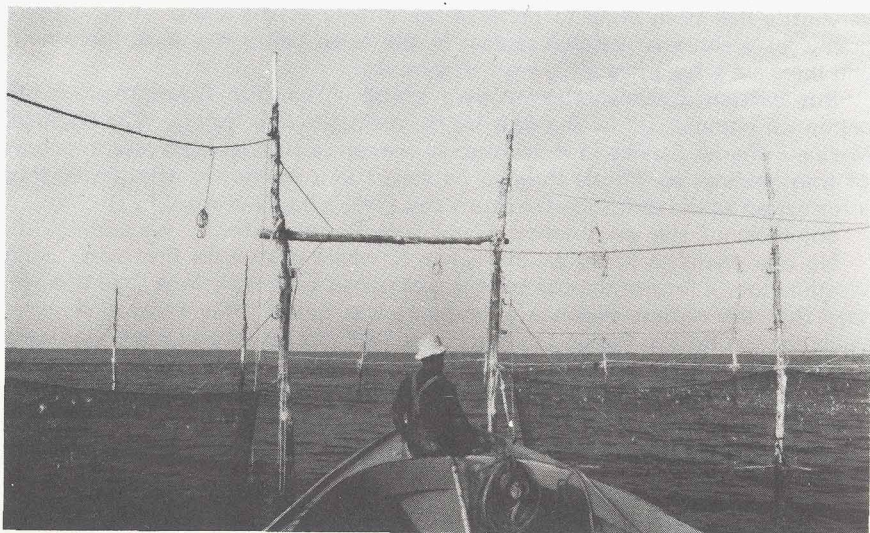


PHOTO COPYRIGHT ©1975 KATHIE R. FLORSHEIM

Bowman Joe "Tar Baby" Kennedy looks directly through the gate poles into the bowl of the trap. The boat is inside the heart, headed for the bowl.

The bowman traditionally helped bring the boat through the heart to the gate by hand, using the centerline, which is visible as the line connected to the crossbar on the gate poles.

To an unfamiliar eye, a weir appears to be a random bunch of poles, some strung with twine, sticking up in the water. The trap is, however, a very carefully ordered structure. It has three sections: the leader, the heart, and the bowl. They are made of hickory poles, anchors, lead weights and twine.

The leader is closest to shore, and in a broad sense connects the weir to shore. It is a wall of large mesh, about 900 feet in length, that guides the fish into the heart.

The heart is the first area where the fish are enclosed. Although the mesh is smaller than that in the leader, the mesh is often large enough for the fish to swim through without a struggle.

The heart and leader are intended only for preliminary concentration of the fish. They are not designed to hold the fish.

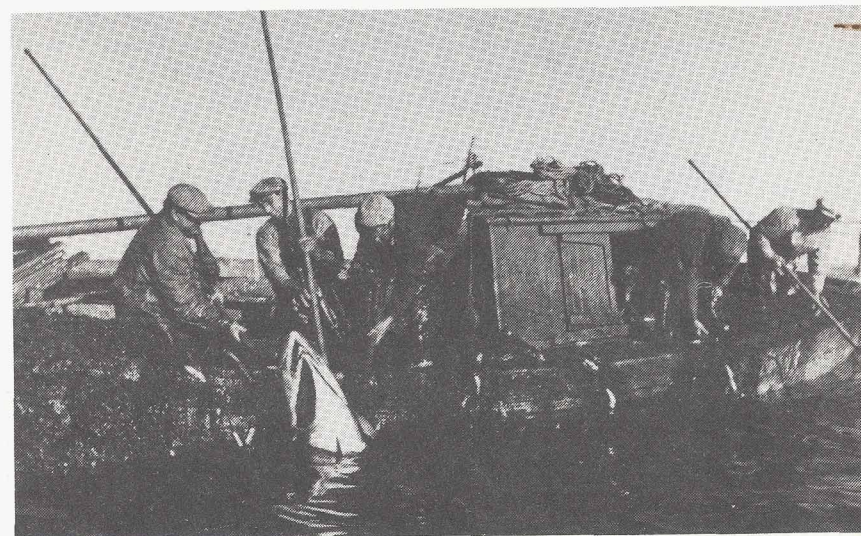
The heart leads to the bowl, a circular area in which the fish are able to swim about freely until the trap is drawn.

Although no one is certain why a trap works, there are several theories that could explain its success.

Traps are positioned in shallow, inshore waters. They are designed to catch school fish, most of which inhabit these waters. Fish run for deeper water when there is an obstacle in their way.

So when they see the leader, they swim toward deeper water to escape it. They end up swimming parallel to the leader, thus following it into the heart. Some people say they follow the leader because it appears to be a shadow, which they will generally chase. Others say that fish move parallel to any obstruction. For whatever reason, the fish end up in the bowl, swimming in a figure-eight pattern until the trap is emptied. (Technically, emptying is called drawing or hauling.)

continued on page 43



A trapboat from Pond Village Cold Storage laden down with tuna.

Note the tuna being gaffed in the foreground of the picture.

This picture appears through the courtesy of Mr. & Mrs. John Worthington.

ear appeal.

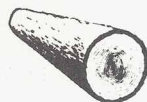
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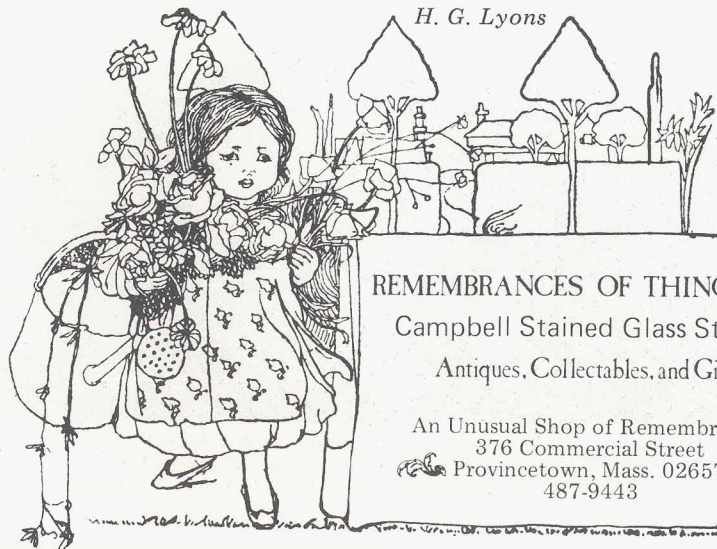
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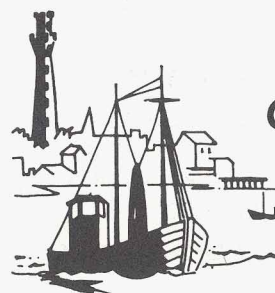


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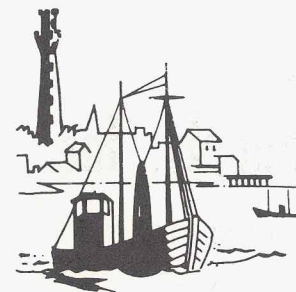


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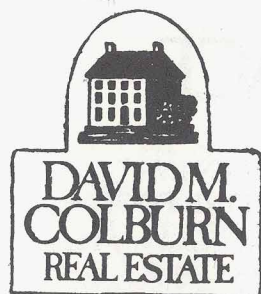
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SOUTH WIND

by Heaton Vorse
 as printed in the Oracle

In other years spring was the season when the score or more trap boats operating from Cape tip harbors flooded the working wharves of Provincetown with their catch of herring. The weirs lined the bars along the Wellfleet and Truro shores, took a break for the deeper waters near Provincetown, Long Point and Wood End, and reappeared to line the bars that stretch along the off shore waters of Herring Cove and Race Point.

Provincetown harbor itself was not exempt from weirs that were floated from corks and glass balls. There were only about ten such. But those that hung from poles along the shoals numbered close to a hundred. No where else in the world was there such a concentration of fish traps. A considerable part of the local fishing industry was centered around the traps—often called the wy-ers.

Five huge freezers were erected to handle and warehouse the catch from the nets. A shipyard that constructed, launched and serviced the two special types of craft needed to set and operate the traps was busy the year around, though the nets themselves were in use only from May to December.

Winter ice would have sheared the poles like a scythe. The investment in buildings, machinery, boats and wharves must have run into the millions and the cost of the nets and poles probably equaled that amount. Yet today the only weir trap to be found on the end of the Cape is the model at the Visitors Center in the National Seashore. The last remaining trap boat is due to be hauled ashore, repainted and installed as an exhibit in the Historical Museum. The next graduating class of high school students won't even recognize the term "weir" should it come up in a crossword puzzle.

And of the five freezers: one has been torn down to make a parking lot in spite of the fact that it is valuable waterfront property; another, also torn down, has been replaced by a restaurant. A third is a souvenir store. One stands gaunt and empty while the owners, the Fire Department, the Zoning Board, and assorted individuals, battle over the wisdom of turning it into living quarters. The Board of Health is split fifty-fifty on the subject. The last one operated up until the first of the seventies. Fish was bought at bottom prices during mid-summer, frozen into blocks and sold in mid-winter at five or six times the price originally paid. The conglomerate that owned most of the stock took the profits and returned little in either upkeep or management.

The condition of the huge building rolled down hill. I heard folks say that if the freezing machinery ever broke down the building would collapse. The only thing holding it up was ice. The story was good for a laugh. Wider marketing of freshly caught fish and quicker means of distribution meant better prices to the fisherman. They didn't choose to sell to the ice box. With nothing to freeze and nothing to sell the plant had to close down operations on a Christmas eve. It took a little less than nine months for the ice to melt but when it finally did one whole side of the structure fell to the ground. So it not a gag, after all. What was left was fire hazard and was torn down. The government bought the property and will locate a Coast Guard Station there to replace the one at Race Point. Sic Transit and all that stuff.

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It wasn't the weirs that were particularly special. As long as big fish swim after little fish who chase after the tiny fish that live inshore on the edge of the tide, people will be setting out weirs to trap the larger ones.

The weir operates on the principle that a free swimming school of fish will turn to deeper waters if they meet even the most casual of obstructions.

A line of poles fifty or more feet apart is set in a bar at right angles to the shore—and so towards deeper water. The line may be anywhere from a quarter to a third of a mile in length. To these poles is hung a net curtain of very large mesh through which the fish could easily swim if they wanted to. This is the leader. The leader goes into the heart, so called because of its loose resemblance in shape to the pip on the ace of that suit in a deck of cards. The gate to the trap proper is at the point of the heart.

The trap is about one hundred feet long and forty feet wide, an oval. The mesh is fairly fine and the twine of which it is made is heavily tarred. Each pole supporting the trap is braced against its opposite number by a taut stretch of telegraph wire running across the trap and counter braced outside the net by a well buried anchor. A special scow equipped with a water pump and a pile driver is required to set each pole in place.

The craft used to pull the trap had to be especially made for its job as well. It could be no longer than the width of the trap and yet be ample enough to hold more fish than any one trap was liable to catch in a day's time. A crew and boat used to pull anywhere from two to four traps on a single trip. And a trip was generally made with each dawn.

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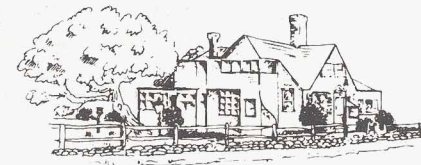
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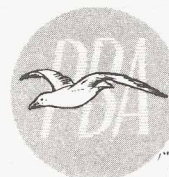


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PROVINCETOWN FISHERMAN NOSTALGIC OVER TRAPFISHING ERA

by Mary Klein

as printed in the Cape Cod Times

When Capt. Louis Cordeiro permanently removed his fish traps from Provincetown Harbor two years ago, an era of Provincetown's fishing industry ended.

Since 1851 Provincetown fishermen had set their traps along an area stretching from Race Point to Ryder Beach in Wellfleet. At one time there were more than 100 traps.

The heyday of trap fishing was in the 1920's and 1930's, amateur historian George Bryant said.

But by the 1950's the industry had declined. Capt. Cordeiro, who owns the trap boat Charlotte, was the last Provincetown fisherman to go trap fishing.

Several former trap fishermen talk about the industry's demise with sadness. Trap fishing to them was more than a job. It was a life style they thoroughly enjoyed.

"It was beautiful," Manuel Goveia said. "Trap fishing was a healthy, vigorous life and you felt good all of the time. I loved it."

Goveia's trapping career came to a sudden end when he lost his boat Agnes and Stephania in a 1956 gale. He recalled a happier time, however, when his crew caught 600 tuna, weighing an average of 135 pounds each, in one trap.

But trap fishing is obsolete, he added, because the cost of the gear has become prohibitive. Goveia purchased his entire outfit, boat, traps, net, dory and the other equipment for \$7,500 twenty-four years ago. Today, the same gear would cost \$250,000.00, he said.

Fish traps were round and were made by attaching a net, 320 feet in circumference, to 60 poles. The net formed a wall and a bottom and lay on the ocean floor.

The poles, up to 75 feet long, were driven six to 10 feet into the ocean floor. The method of setting the poles was an ingenious one. A jet of water was pumped through a pipe blasting a hole into the ground. A pole could then easily be fixed in up to 45 feet of water.

A boat would enter the trap by easing through an opening left between two of the poles. Once inside the trap, the men would haul up the net trapping the fish inside. They then would scoop the fish into the boat. Their only mechanical aid was hand powered winches.

Joseph Oliver, 75, began trap fishing as a youth and at the age of 18 was the youngest skipper in Provincetown. He worked for a cold storage company until he became one of the owners of the Charlotte which the local historical association recently salvaged.

Trap fishing was inextricably tied to the cold storage plants in town, Oliver said. The companies owned the boats and the traps. From the late 1800's through the 1930's most Provincetown trap fishermen worked for one of the seven plants. The Atlantic Coast Fisheries became the most powerful company, he continued, as it bought out all of the others except for Provincetown Cold Storage located at the foot of Johnson Street.

A cold storage company divided the profit 50-50 with the crew and paid the captain two per cent of the total catch profit. But the fishermen never

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knew for certain what prices a company received for its fish. They did know, however, that the prices quoted to them were often quite low. Regardless of any price discrepancies, "I earned a wholesome living," Oliver said.

The state leased each company, or individual fisherman if he owned his own boat and traps, "grants," which were specific ocean areas where traps could be set. This arrangement prevented feuds over prime locations, Oliver explained. The grant cost was minimal.

Trap fishermen spent considerable time maintaining and repairing their gear, he continued. Trap poles were often destroyed in storms. And if the weather did not ruin them the sea worms would.

"If you took a knife to a worm eaten pole it went through it like cheese," Oliver explained. The poles, usually of hickory, came from Connecticut or Maine.

Nets continually needed to be mended, cleaned of mussels and other sea life which attached itself to the mesh, and periodically dried out so the cotton twine would not rot. Also, each year the nets were tarred for added strength and weight. A net cost \$3,000 to replace, Oliver noted, so the maintenance work was well worthwhile.

After Christmas the fishermen would pull up their traps. They spent the off-season in repair work.

Those days were different in many ways, Oliver recalled. "It was an unwritten law that you always took care of the old men. You helped them with their work. We had two men fish with us who could hardly walk."

They caught mostly herring, mackerel, squid, tuna and an enormous amount of whiting, he said. The boat, heavily laden with the catch, often rode only six inches above the water.

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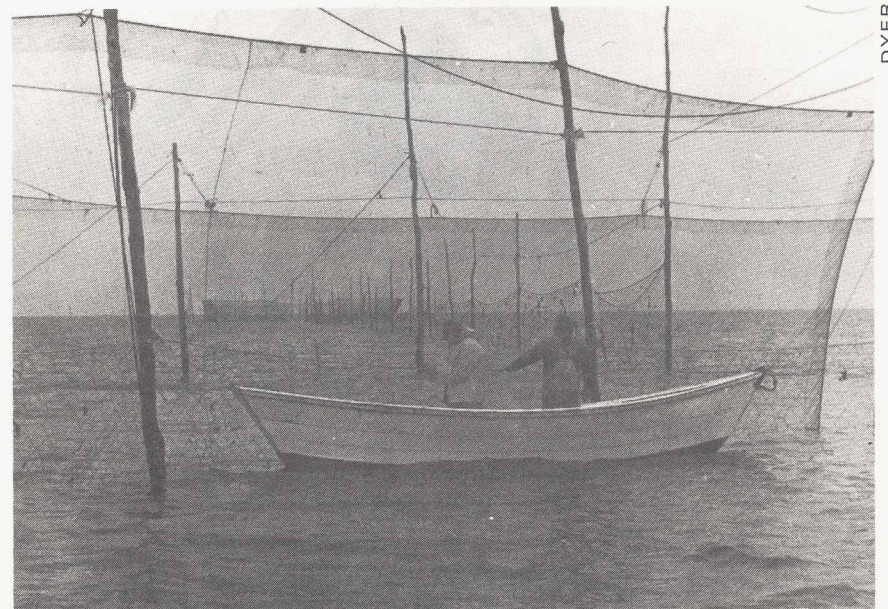


Photo courtesy of Louis Cordeiro

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THE INDUSTRY

by John Worthington

Fishing has provided the principal means for the livelihood of the natives of the lower Cape for the first two and one half centuries since their original settlements during the early 1700's. Several methods have been employed. In the beginning the effort was directed to the Grand Banks involving a round trip of some twenty-six weeks. Upon return the catch had to be brought ashore, the curing operations completed, and packed for market—frequently the West Indies. In the early 1800's there was a great abundance of mackerel in the bay and along the outer Cape, and most of the fleet changed to fishing locally for mackerel. The fish were caught on hooks handled from the deck. When all the various fleets of Massachusetts and Maine and Nova Scotia were on the mackerel it would amount to sometimes 500 vessels. These fish had to be brought ashore, salted, and then reloaded and taken to market. Much time and effort was involved in the initial locating and catching the fish, through the various processes of preparation, to the ultimate delivery and sale.

Two great events occurred during the latter half of the nineteenth century which transformed fishing and expanded it enormously. First was the development of the fleet of big fast schooners that could bring fresh fish from the Georges and supply the daily market at Boston. The second was the extension of the railroad to the lower Cape which, among the many innovations provided, was overnight service to the fresh markets at Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore.

The vessels provided a constant demand for bait which could not be satisfied by the rather primitive methods in use at that period. Interest developed in the possibilities of weir fishing which was not used on the Cape at the time, although the primitive one uncovered by the excavation for the foundation for the Boston Public Library indicates the method had been used in the area in the past. Local navigators were very familiar with the big weirs of Western Nova Scotia and with the elaborate traps made of vines and brush, very effectively, in the estuaries of South America and Africa.

The first weirs installed on the Cape were off Pond Village. Mort Small tells us they were floating traps and were a failure, although later Captain Simmons and Captain Zeke (?) operated two, up in the Cove, for years with great success. The bay shore was too shoal and the seas too rough for deep floating traps, so fixed pole traps were installed and eventually developed into a durable, reliable, productive means for catching fish.

Fish weirs first appear in the Truro records of the Selectmen who issued the original grants in 1883, and with few additions re-issued the same locations to various operators for more than ninety years. There were several sailing scows in town which formerly delivered hay and wood to Provincetown that were effectively cut off from their source of supply at the upper Pamet, by the new railroad bridge. These sturdy craft were readily adaptable to carry weir poles from the beach and erect them on location with the help of a four-man hand pump of the type carried by fire departments of the day, and a portable gin which guided a wooden block called the pelter which also worked by manpower. Weir poles made from local growth were inadequate and soon freshly cut hickory poles of required lengths were being freighted from the Middleboro area in car load lots.

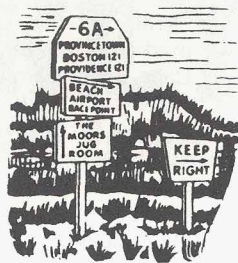
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To install and operate traps required a well-organized shore layout. First there had to be a building with ample room to pack fish for shipping, to mend and remake nets, and a room with heat for comfort while having meals and to keep oil clothes and boots warm. There had to be an ample ice house which when filled in the winter would supply enough ice to refrigerate the fish barreled and shipped daily by freight to the various markets. Also a tar vat for treating the nets. There had to be room to store the trap poles through the winter. Most important was the driver with his wagon and team of horses that got all the various equipment off the beach and eventually back on. In addition to all this each installation required several acres of drying field.

The original boats were about thirty feet overall with a ten-foot beam drawing about two and one half feet and powered with a two-cycle engine, as far back as anyone can now recall. However they all had a mast step forward and probably made their initial appearance under sail along with the scows.

The fishing grants provided locations for traps from the north end of the Wood End bar to the light. Then there was a succession of grants from the west end of the harbor through the harbor, down the Truro shore to the Wellfleet line.

Before World War I and before any engines were put in the vessels, whenever one looked out to sea he would sight at least one or two of them. When daylight came there would be a dozen or more just outside the traps cruising back and forth with the ensign flying from the main shrouds indicating she needed bait. If one was lucky enough to be a passenger aboard the trap boat he was hoping also for bait because of the marvelous breakfast he was sure to get aboard the vessel. As he got back aboard the trap boat everyone on the schooner was baiting trawls—except the skipper who was already tightening the sheets and heading up for the Point, while the trap boat nosed into the off shore trap.



John W. Worthington

PHOTO BY CYRIL PATRICK

The traps by this time were pretty well standardized with a 300-foot rim, 200-foot hearts and up to 1500 feet of leader and further changes principally were to mesh sizes, at least in this area.

There were also similar weirs at Plymouth, Manomet, Sandwich and Barnstable. At Brewster on the shoal ground there were weirs with brush leaders and the traps were tended with horse and wagon. There were deep traps also at Chatham that are the last remaining still fishing.

When the Atlantic Coast Fisheries built those two big trap boats the **Atco** and **Nordic** they installed two traps just outside the Race. Instead of placing

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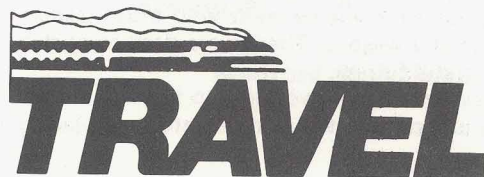


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the leader perpendicular to the shore they were parallel to it and very close to the rise. They were installed in time for the spring run of pollock. The boats were loaded with pollock run directly to Boston and unloaded at the Fish Pier. These traps were brought ashore after the spring run and stored until the following spring. The weirs caught all the pelagic types in various quantities and also occasional strays, such as a flying fish, a white marlin, and other odd southern varieties. At one time the Truro weirs were so loaded with weak fish that they could not be handled and had to be released. A few years ago a single weak fish came into a trap. No one in the boat knew what it was. When they landed at the wharf there was nobody who could identify it. They had to send for **Fishes of the Gulf of Maine** for identification. It was always an experience to come into the gate of a trap and take a new look.

The digging of the Cape Cod Canal in 1910 changed the currents in the Bay which in turn affected the weirs. Some locations became less desirable and hauldowns were necessary to keep others operating. And the pattern of the migration of the fish, like the weak fish, was altered not necessarily to the good of the weirs. The most difficult immediate result of the Canal to the weirs occurred to the poles. They were all suddenly riddled with holes. The canal let the toredo or ship-worm into the bay which had never been infested. The worms not only mined an entire set of poles, but from then on there was an enormous maintenance charge for expensive copper paint to protect against the worms.

The widening of the canal in the early '30's further affected currents which curtailed the operation of more traps.

The beam trawl came into operation in the early teens and soon the demand for bait began to diminish. During World War I the development of the otter board in England rendered long-line trawling obsolete and began the conversion of the inshore fleet to dragging. The weirs at this time were catching, among other species, great quantities of whiting. The Atlantic Coast Fisheries developed a product, headed and gutted whiting, frozen in fifteen-pound wooden boxes, that took the country by storm. The dragging fleet got into the act landing round whiting at Pier 3 in Boston where the fish were headed and gutted at long tables in the open. The difficult part for the weirs was that most of the dragging was done around the traps. A terrific confrontation between trappers and draggers took place at the State House which was finally settled by an act in the Legislature closing the bay to dragging from May 1st to November 1st. It didn't make much difference to the draggers because they already knew they could find whiting almost anywhere.

After World War II came an enormous increase in the cost of rope and fishnet, with no change in the price of fish. The cold storage plants were all built for the express purpose of freezing bait. The fish entered at the top floor, dumped loose, through scuttles to the freezing floor where it was shoveled on to flakes over the coils. When frozen the fish were dumped from the flakes on to the floor and through scuttles to the storage rooms from where they were packaged and shipped. The plants were all old and could not be rebuilt to handle modern products. Three of them were sold, but ceased operations within a few years. One has been converted into an apartment house—the other taken down. The last weirs were operated by Joe Oliver and have been ashore for over a year. An exciting era is now history. □

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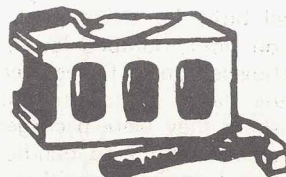
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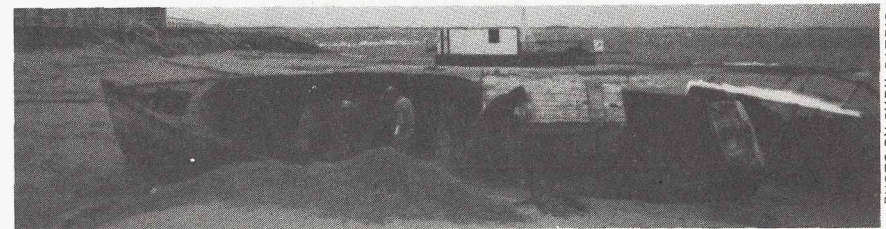
Text by Nadja Maril (Revised from an article printed in the Oracle)

Photographs by Peter Carter and Cyril Patrick

Last May nine men struggled in 37 degree temperature and 55 mile per hour winds to raise a 14 ton trapboat built in 1918 named "The Charlotte." The boat had been abandoned on the West End Provincetown beach beside the breakwater for nine years. Children had played on it, tourists had taken pictures of it, the tides had come and gone and "The Charlotte" had sunk herself deeper and deeper into the mud.

Trapboat fishing had once been a major part of the fishing industry on the Lower Cape, but due to the general depletion of fish in the Cape Cod Bay the era of trapping has come to an end.

Trapboat fishing relied on weirs, poles and nets set into the bay's waters to literally trap schools of fish. Although the fish were not physically restrained in the nets, they thought they were and so they stayed until the trapboat fishermen came to haul them out. In its prime, between 1870-1920, trapping accounted for 25% of the fresh fish available on the Northeastern seaboard.



7:30AM May 9th, Warren "Pinky" Silva's crew members digging out "The Charlotte" by hand.



After the third attempt, the boat was cracked out of the mud and it was discovered the keel was intact.
Aboard "The Charlotte" is volunteer worker Bobby Pierce.

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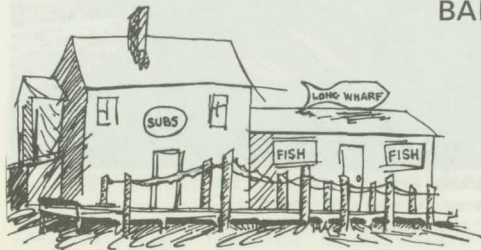
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Aware of the importance of trapboat fishing to the history of the fishing industry of the Lower Cape, Cyril Patrick, President of the Provincetown Historical Association, proposed that an attempt be made to rescue "The Charlotte" from its bed of mud, restore it and put it on display as part of the Provincetown Heritage Museum's Collection.



May 11th, the boat is finally lifted by crane.



Provincetown Historical Association President Cyril J. Patrick (right) with Dick Alberts (center), head of Marine division of the Cape Cod Regional Tech. School and renovation consultant Joe "Ducky" Perry.

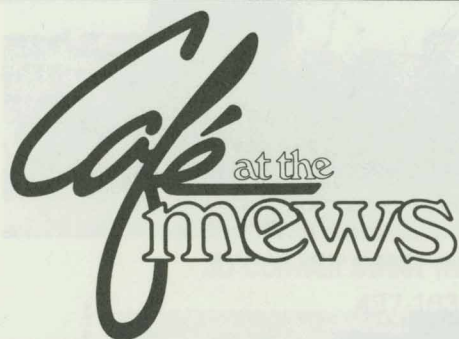
A dinner to raise money for the project was arranged at The Moors restaurant to finance the first part of the project, lifting the boat off the beach. "We were told by Dick Albert, Head of the Marine Repair Department at the Cape Cod Regional Technical High School, that the boat was only worth restoring if the keel was intact," said Mr. Patrick. "The most impressive thing about the boat is the excellent condition it's in. The hard oak keel was in almost perfect condition!"

For three days, May 9th through 11th, contractor Warren "Pinky" Silva directed the operation of digging "The Charlotte" out of the mud. Crucial to the successful removal of the boat was the crane brought from Harwich and operated by Fred Pina and the flatbed trailer and professional help of Philip Deschamps from Nauset Marine. All the professionals working on the project charged the Historical Association only for their expenses: the cost was \$575.00.

continued on page 65

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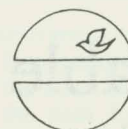


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SOUTH WIND continued from page 13

It was a broad, open barge with an engine housing set aft and a tiny cockpit in the stern where the captain steered the boat. There was a small hatchway in the peak for the bowman to stand in. Otherwise the boat was a broad, open hold in which to put fish. A set of pen boards ran amid-ships from the engine room forward almost to the peak. This was in case the traps held two kinds of fish; squid and mackerel in summer, whiting and herring in the spring.

I have no proof, but I have heard that it was the Indians who taught the early strays from the Plymouth Colony and such other white immigrants to these shores the use of the weir.

The use of weir traps here on a large commercial scale came about at around the turn of the century. The advent of fast fishing schooners who trawled the Georges Bank for the long part of a week and then raced each other to port with fresh fish, the first boat getting in getting the best price, created a market for fresh bait and a lot of it. Provincetown was the home port of more than a score of such schooners. And while they sold their catch and iced up in Boston, what could be more natural than getting their bait here just before putting out for the Banks again after a weekend at home.

A vessel flying an American flag upside down on the foremast stay was not a distress signal but a sign that she wanted bait, and a trap boat would pull along side and make a sale of supplies directly over the bulwark. Often the trap boat's crew would get themselves a free breakfast in the schooner's forecabin as a bonus. Any fish that was left over or caught on days when there were no "bankers" in port would be taken to the freezers to be made into cakes of ice and stored for such times when they were needed. As, for instance, during the winter when the nets were down, but the schooners needed bait.

But in time the motorized beam trawler replaced the sail driven line trawler and the call for bait dropped to nearly none. That put the first crimp in the weir business.

This was countered to a certain extent by the wider use of fish of all varieties in the general market place. Squid, looked upon by some with horror because of its squirming arms, is considered a delicacy in other neighborhoods. Better and quicker ways of transporting whiting and small mackerel kept them in the market. Herring was shipped to pet food and fertilizer factories. There was still a lot of money to be made from the weirs. But as trap boat crews became older and retired they were not replaced by younger men. During the fifties and sixties the number of trap boats still in operation dropped from four to two and then to one.

The last boat had a lucky year in 1974. A good catch of sardines in the spring and a lucky run of tuna in September paid off well. But the next year was a flop. Too many blue-fish and not enough price. So at the end of the season the captain didn't bring his poles ashore but left them to drift away.

As I type these last words the phone rings to tell me that today the last trap boat is being cradled ashore for its final paint job before being taken to the museum for exhibition like the bones of an extinct dinosaur. For like the dinosaur, it was too special to survive.

And while it will be on land from here on out, I can only wish it

Good Sailing ☐



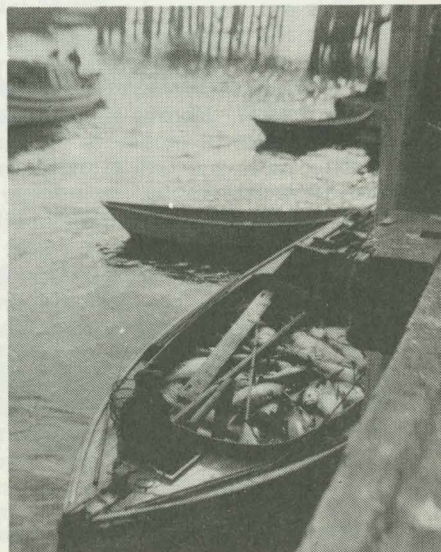
Skow hauled up next to Provincetown Cold Storage Co.
Photo donated by Raymond Gaspa.



Photo by William Noble.



Atlantic Coast Fisheries crew, Colonial Cold Storage boat. Left to right: John Raymond, Manuel Meads, John Fields, Manuel Gaspar, Capt. George Briar at wheel; trapboat along side of skow.
Photo donated by Raymond Gaspa.



Crew of the Atlantic Coast Fisheries trapboat, Colonial Cold Storage boats. Left to right: Zeke Meads, Capt. George Briar, Joe Lopes, John Raymond, Manuel Gaspar.
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A REMINISCENCE

by Joel O'Brien

The tack and gear and sight and sounds of trap fishing are an integral part of the fabric of my childhood. Summer in Provincetown is an unending wonderland for a small fry and the components of trap fishing were ever woven through this idyll.

I slept in one of the upstairs bedrooms overlooking Old Man Pigeon's shipyard which is now Bryant's parking lot. Often I would drift out of sleep briefly between four and five in the morning to hear the soft put-put of the "gasoliners" out in the Harbor as they made their way out to the traps. In those days the traps were put down offshore from Wellfleet to North Truro, spotted along the west end of the Harbor, and then outside the Harbor from Wood End to Race Point. My day would start between seven and eight and I'd awaken to the rhythmic song made by the fish buckets as they came down the rail from the Consolidated Cold Storage opposite Howland Street to the wharf where trap boats were unloading. While one of the large buckets was pulled up the track to a huge room where the fish were processed, another bucket would swing into position to be filled from the hold of the weir or trap boat. My memories of those few summers are filled with sun, swimming, hot sand, the flats, clamming, rowing, jigging for squid and tinker mackerel, walking over the dunes to Peaked Hill and going trapping with Captain Walter Crosby.

Old Capt. Crosby was a yankee right off a canvas by Norman Rockwell. He was spare of frame and his weathered face was lean. He wasn't over-talkative but the right occasion always found a twinkle in his eye. He was a deacon of his church, Methodist, I believe, and he wouldn't allow any swearing on his boat.

One summer—I think I was nine years old—I went out regularly with Capt. Crosby and his crew. My bed was right next to the double dormer window and I'd tie a flounder line around my right big toe and throw the rest out the window with a sinker at the end so the wind wouldn't blow it away. Come four o'clock or a little before, Capt. Crosby would come in the yard, grope around for the line and give it a yank. I'd respond with an, "Okay, Cap'n," slip into my clothes and join the Captain and any members of the crew already gathered in the trap shed at the foot of the wharf.

The sense memories of that trap shed are finely etched. The available light usually came from only one kerosene lantern. The small room was redolent with the smells of tar and oilskins. Fishing gear was hung on the walls and some piled on the floor. Usually one of the men would be mending a net. Talk was at a minimum. Sometimes I'd ask, "Cap'n, did you have any trouble finding the string?" And the good Deacon would reply, "No trouble at all, Joey, but I did have a little trouble getting up when I tripped over it." And the crew would respond with a low chuckle.

Then, with the last crew member accounted for the lantern was extinguished and we stepped into the clear Provincetown air for the short walk down the wharf where the swamscott dory was tied up. Down the ladder, into the boat and we were off under the quiet orders of the Captain who always addressed his crew members as Mr. so-and-so. Not a word was spoken on the ten minute journey to the trap boat, the only sound being the dull clunk-clunk of the

continued on page 61



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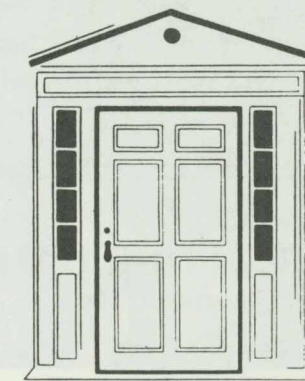
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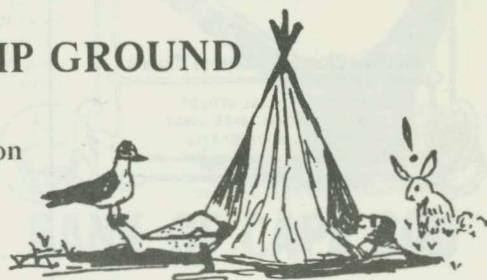
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THE END OF AN ERA continued from page 7

There is nothing to stop the fish from swimming out of the bowl once they are inside it. The mouth of the trap, however, is disguised by wings which direct the fish around the opening, rather than through it. And should they run back into the heart, it too is shaped to direct them back into the bowl.

The trap must be drawn daily, for several reasons. It is impossible to know what kind of fish will be trapped. A school of blues or tuna will drive bait. They also have a tendency to chew up the nets.

Some fish, like goosefish, when trapped will eat the foodfish. Also, sharks, whales, and turtles often get trapped, and they must be freed before they tear up the nets. In addition, a trap that has stock in it does not fish well.

Trap fishing begins at dawn. The morning I fished with the Provincetown crew, they motored out past the breakwater to tend two of their four traps. That day four crew members manned the Carlotta: Capt. Louis Cordeiro, Ernie Cordeiro, Joe (Tar Baby) Kennedy, and Stephen Perry. (There are usually five men to a crew.)

We traveled along the leader until we reached the heart. Then Kennedy, the bow man, pulled the boat through the heart to the gate by hand, using an overhead line (called a centerline). The crew raised the gate so that the fish could not escape as the trap was being drawn. (The gate, when raised, acts as a door.)



PHOTO COPYRIGHT © 1975 KATHIE R. FLORSHEIM

Stephen Perry and Ernie Cordeiro bringing up the "Carlotta" through the mouth of the trap.



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Captain Louis Cordeiro's face shows a grim expression, as he takes off his oils. When this picture was taken, Cordeiro had fished his traps for weeks with no marketable catch.

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Once we were inside the gate, the crew began to work the Carlotta around the bowl, by drawing the net into the boat. This process of working the fish into a smaller and smaller area is called pursing up. Pursing up was done both by hand and with the help of a gypsy winch. The fish were landed with a gaff and with a kill devil, which is a large dip net. (When tuna were caught, they were shot and then brought aboard with the gaff.)

Unfortunately, the only catch that day was dogfish. They were all turned back because there was no market for them in Provincetown. We drew two traps and returned by about 9 A.M. emptyhanded.

Traps in Chatham and Harwich are the only ones remaining on the Cape. I went out with Capt. Fran Jones' crew out of Stage Harbor, in July 1976. Their operation, although similar to Provincetown's, uses lighter equipment. That is probably because blues are the largest fish they catch, so they have no need for the heavy equipment used in Provincetown.

The waters they fish are shallower, also, so the traps are built of somewhat lighter material. There is, however, a strong tidal current in that area and it necessitates an additional piece of equipment, called a downhaul, on the bowl poles of the trap. The downhaul is a rope that is attached to the bottom of the bowl and keeps it open in spite of the strong tidal current.

The one substantial difference between Provincetown's and Chatham's method of fishing is that Jones' crew sorts the stock as the trap is drawn. This is a very slow process; drawing three traps and sorting the catch took nearly six hours. Cordeiro's crew, on the other hand, drew the trap and dumped the catch into the boat. Sorting was done at the pier afterwards.

A trap requires a lot of care to keep in shape. It fishes best when it is free of sea growth and, of course, is considerably lighter. The bowl must be cleaned periodically to keep the organisms living on it to a minimum. Sea



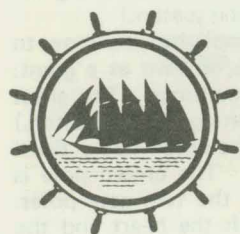
A trap boat, "The Helen", from Pond Village Cold Storage loaded with mackerel.

This photograph, available through the courtesy of Mr. and Mrs. John Worthington, was taken during the mid-1930's.

A Local Landmark



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Ernie Cordeiro and Kennedy purse up the twine.
They are working the catch into a small area so that they can draw the trap.



Perry, Ernie Cordeiro and Kennedy use the mast to help purse up the twine.
Notice that the crew has worked the fish into a small enough area to land them.
When the catch is in position to be landed, they are "dried up".
Unfortunately, the catch was a school of dogfish.

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The remaining portion was divided among the crew, with the captain getting a double share. Although everyone generally made a decent living, the cold storage firms were notorious for cheating the fishermen. Through general sharp business practice, the ice houses short-changed the fishermen. But the fishermen had no recourse because there was no way to prove the company was wrong.

Despite all the problems with the cold storage companies, making a living as a trapper had many advantages. A man could work the traps during the day and spend his nights at home. He also had a lot of free time because fishing was usually finished by noon unless it was an exceptionally good day.

Trapping had its intangible benefits too. As Manuel (Cul) Goveia, a former trapper, said, "It was a healthy, invigorating life."

I spoke to a number of former trappers about their experiences fishing the weirs. All of them spoke warmly of the years spent trapping. It was really a way of life.

As Reggie Enos, a former trapper who is now Provincetown's shellfish warden, said, "You have it in your blood." Most of these men grew up by the sea. In many instances their fathers had been trappers or dory fishermen.

Joe (Ducky) Perry sums up what most of the men expressed: "Fishing, I loved it! It's a nice healthy life. I had beautiful jobs offered to me. I wouldn't take them, just so I could go fishing."

In the good old days, when the traps were really producing, it wasn't unusual to draw them three times a day. Perry recalled times when there were fish in the traps even after they had been drawn three times. Trouble was, the cold storage plants had more fish than they could handle. And, as always, too much fish in the marketplace drove the price down.

"I've seen so much whiting in one trap, we'd trace it up," said Perry. Goveia remembered one day when his crew landed 3000 pounds of striped bass in one trap. Another day, the crew landed 6000 pounds of tuna in one trap.

On occasion the going price for the catch was so low that they gave it away rather than sell it. "Fish were so cheap in those days, a lot of days I'd rather give the whole load away than sell it for the price it was going for," said Goveia. Joe Oliver, captain of one of the few independent crews, recalled giving hundreds of barrels of fish away, "to the rich and poor alike" because the price was so low.



Crew from Stage Harbor in Chatham gaffing blues aboard. The boat is inside of the bowl, looking directly down the leader.

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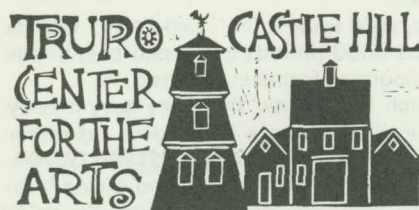
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Perry remembered tuna selling, at its lowest price, for three cents a pound and whiting for two dollars a barrel. Enos said there were times when the prices were so low that the crews refused to draw the traps.

Stocks were plentiful and life was good while the supply lasted. Fishermen could rely on the appearance of certain fish yearly. Herring were first to show in mid-April. They were followed by mackerel, whose season was from about Memorial Day to July. Then the tuna moved in. Herring and mackerel returned in August.

According to Enos, this was a "cycle you could rely on year after year. And when it changed you knew something was wrong." And the cycles did change and the change was the first hint of trouble.

Enos noted that the disrupted cycles became apparent when a baitfish would reappear after an absence, but the predator did not follow. These altered cycles were the first indication of grave problems and they were, unfortunately, to bode the industry's collapse.

If fish stocks were so generous and trapping so productive, why did the industry die? The most obvious answer is that fish stocks have grown increasingly scarce over the last 20-25 years. This shrinking supply has affected trapping radically because the industry was directly responsive to the availability of the resource.

John Worthington attributes trapping's decline to the construction of the Cape Cod Canal. He believes that the canal altered the currents and raised the water temperature in the bay. Both these modifications could affect spawning, by changing where the fish laid their eggs and how many of the spawn consequently survived. It could also affect the migratory patterns.

While few besides Worthington cite the canal as a culprit, there is general agreement that foreign fishing fleets were responsible for trapping's decline. Without a second thought, most people blamed pulse fishing for the dramatic decline of the resource. (Pulse fishing is especially threatening to the resource because the factoryships that follow the stocks can continue to take the same level of fish. They do not alter the amount of stock they take according to a scarcity. These ships continue to fill their holds until they are chock-full because that is the only economical way to operate a fleet of this size. So the economics of the operation prohibit any restraint that might be exercised. It is probably this method of fishing that has altered the cyclical appearance of the stocks that Enos referred to.)

Enos, who remarked sadly that he "never thought he would see the day when trapping ended," believes that the "Russians are taking a heck of a lot more fish than we think." Cordeiro and Oliver also suggested that our own dragger fleet might have harmed the industry by disturbing the ocean floor and consequently upsetting the spawning grounds.

Several other factors may have placed a part in trapping's decline. Pollutants that are released into the water, such hydrocarbons, poison marine life. Any foreign matter floating on the water's surface, like oil, is especially dangerous to larvae because the eggs rise to the surface of the water after spawned.

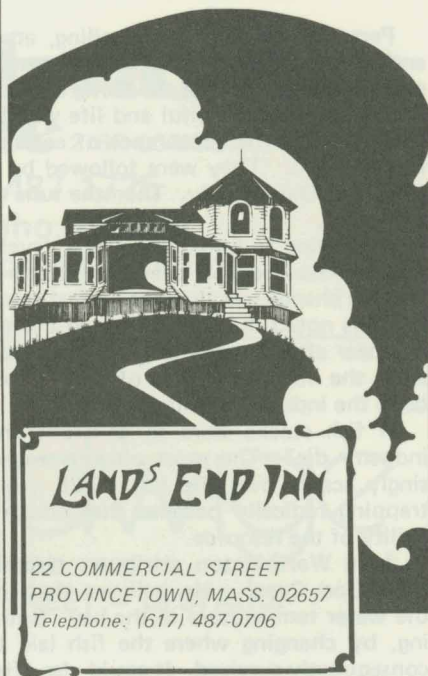
Pleasure boat owners and sport fishermen were responsible for many of the industry's problems. They frequently ran through the traps and tore them up. Sport fishermen often anchored just outside the traps to fish. And skin divers have been known to shoot fish that were in the trap. They have also cut the twine in the bowl to get to the fish.

CHERRY STONE GALLERY

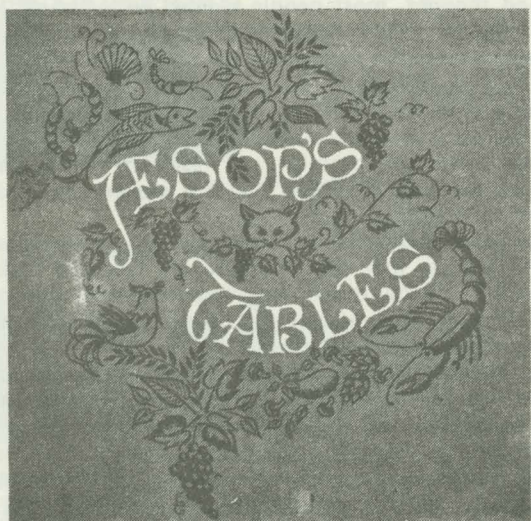
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There is yet another possible reason that trapping declined. Most fish stocks rise and fall periodically. Even when trapping thrived, there were great abundances of some fish while others were absent. It is possible that some of the decline of the stock seen in Cape Cod Bay is due to the natural cycles of the stocks. Natural variations in migratory patterns could also be a factor.

Trapping is an expensive industry to maintain. Even when the traps were producing enough to make their existence economical, normal yearly upkeep was about \$20,000. Although some people estimate that within 10 years after the 200-mile limit takes effect, fish stocks will be sufficiently replenished to support trapping again, the industry will probably not be rejuvenated because of the exorbitant cost. According to Cordeiro's estimate, it would take about \$250,000 to start a trap business today from scratch. Materials for one trap alone are currently estimated to cost in the neighborhood of \$40,000.

It is unfortunate that trapping probably will not be revived because it is, as Gayle Charles, former head of the Provincetown fish co-op and a current member of the New England Fisheries Steering Committee, says, "a benign way to fish." Trapping is compatible with nature because weirs, by their nature, cannot over-fish. A weir is a stationary structure and it catches only the species that are available. It is self-limiting.

None of these explanations means very much to the men who used to make their living as trappers, mostly because the explanations do not change the fact that trapping is gone. Reggie Enos believes that the death of trapping is indicative of the entire industry's woes. He said, "Everything is dying away". □

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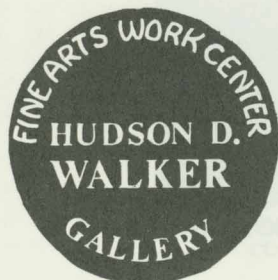


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PROVINCETOWN FISHERMAN NOSTALGIC continued from page 19

Bryant pointed out that through the years the types of fish caught varied. The original product of the traps was bait fish, primarily herring, used to bait the handlines of the dory fishermen who went after the great cod. Herring was not considered a marketable fish at that time, Bryant said.

But by 1910 draggers became popular and the demand for bait collapsed. The trap fishermen then began catching fish for food.

"The whiting were so thick that you couldn't see the ocean bottom," Oliver said.

But when the draggers appeared on the scene "they put us out of business. They scooped up everything and killed everything by disturbing the ocean floor."

Louis Cordeiro agreed that dragging hurt the trap fishing industry. "At one time you could go out and walk on fish.

"If fishermen had stuck with trawling we'd still have fish today. The ocean is just like your garden at home. You have to take care of the ground," Cordeiro explained. "But dragging tore up the ocean bottom."

Trap fishing is dependent on large quantities of fish a half mile to a mile offshore where the traps are set, he added. As fish become scarcer, the trap fishermen were forced out of business.

Another reason for the scarcity was the construction of the Cape Cod Canal which brought about changes in the Bay current and made deep water traps inoperable, Bryant noted. And the foreign fleets took a tremendous toll, he added.



PHOTO BY PETER CARTER

Joe Oliver

The demise of trap fishing meant the end to a pleasant life style, Joseph (Ducky) Perry said. Perry was one of the owners of the Charlotte along with Oliver.

The fishermen would go out to the traps early in the morning and often returned by 9 or 10 a.m. They often had free afternoons and time to spend with their families. And because they did not fish in the winter, the fishermen enjoyed a three month semi-vacation with only repair work to do.

Perry also pointed out that the trap fishing industry employed many people. The Cape Cod Cold Storage alone hired 100 workers on a year-round basis. And each trap boat had a crew of four or five men, he said.

For many fishermen it was financially impossible to switch from trapping to dragging, he continued. The move meant starting from scratch as the small trap boats could not be converted to draggers.

"It's a sad thing that trap fishing is gone," Perry said. "I just loved it." □

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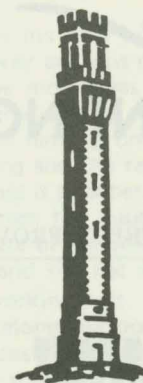
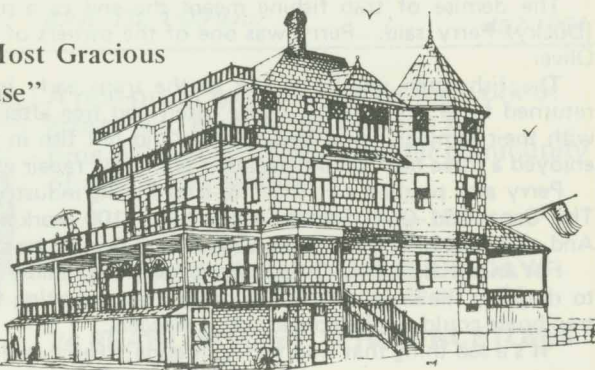
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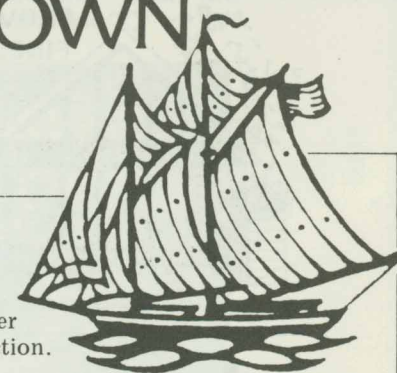
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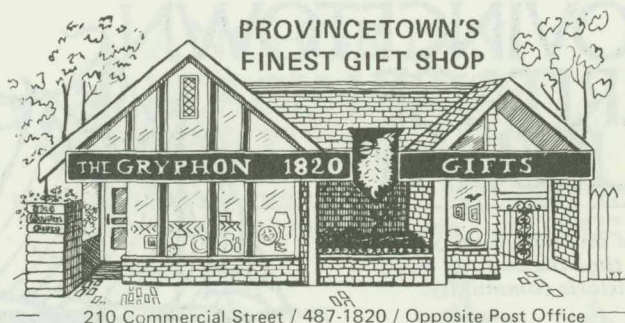
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A REMINISCENCE continued from page 39

four oars in the hole pins and in the water at every stroke and the water past the hull.

My perch on the trap boat was on top of the engine house. There I was out of harm's way and out of everybody else's way on the journey to the first trap. Often the moon was out and the rays would roll off every curl in our wake in an ever-widening angle. Once, on a morning so calm and clear Noah could have been landing on Mt. Ararat, the orange sun was just rising as the moon was setting and the rays met on either side of the trap boat. I wondered if they could hold it prisoner.

On orders from the Captain the boat slowed down as it followed the first leader to the gate of the weir. Once through, the gate was pulled up so no fish could get out and the net was then pulled up, starting from the west side of the trap and working east. The net was pulled up by hand with the six man crew standing along the port gunnel of the boat. As the net was pulled up it would disappear under the boat which was being pulled itself into a tighter proximity with the other side of the net. And this was the exciting part. Would we get any horse mackerel (that's what we called tuna), butterfish? Or maybe strippers were running.

If one or more tuna were present it would be apparent early in the game. If not, the closing net would soon become a seething mass of various species which would be loaded into the hold of the trap boat by what appeared to be a giant butterfly net on a hoist.


I remember one occasion when one of the ropes raising the gate broke allowing the gate to sag down just as a giant tuna flashed out to open water. On most boats the blasphemy would have been heard to Wellfleet. On Capt. Crosby's trap boat there was a moment of stunned silence. Then, when he could trust his voice, he said, "Mr. Ross, please secure that line." □



PHOTO BY RAYMOND GASPA

Crew of
"The Charlotte",
left to right:
Tom Joseph,
unknown,
Peter Hunt,
Joe Oliver,
Capt. Joe Perry,
Tony Dutra,
John Raymond.

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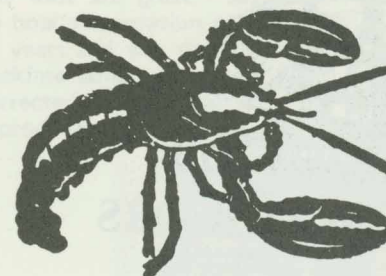
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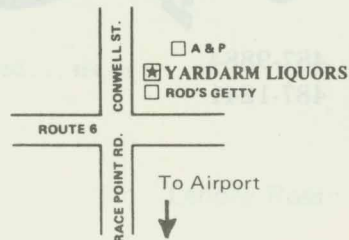
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THE RECOVERY OF THE CHARLOTTE continued from page 31

\$610.00 was subsequently raised at the trapboat dinner and in the fall of this year students at the Cape Cod Technical School began work on the boat. Already the entire ribcage of the vessel has been redesigned and reinforced. The small house aft, which housed the engine characteristic of older trapboats has been rebuilt. The starboard side has been replanked, the stern reconditioned and presently the students are working on the portside replanking.



PHOTO BY PETER CARTER

Cape Cod Regional Technical High School students working on the project. Front row — Mr. Joe Perry, Scott Kimball, David Perry, Steve Milliken, Aaron Gingnas, Raymond Thatcher. Back row — Richard McCarthy, Mark Crossby.

"The kids are great," says Joe "Ducky" Perry who periodically checks on the boat's renovation process. Mr. Perry worked aboard "The Charlotte" for 31 years and was part owner for 8 of those years. Under his supervision the deckline which had been slightly changed in the reconstruction process was corrected back to its original profile. Generally he's very pleased with the boat's progress.



PHOTO BY PETER CARTER

Former trapboat fisherman and consultant on "The Charlotte's" renovation, Joe "Ducky" Perry.

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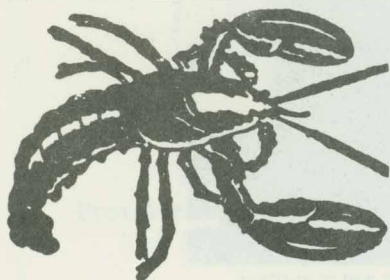
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When completed in the spring of 1979, "The Charlotte" will look brand new. The entire boat, from the keel up will be on display. Historical Association and Heritage Museums board members are discussing the possibility of putting it in the eastern courtyard outside Provincetown's Heritage Museum under a temporary canvas tarpaulin. Citizens working on the project include: Mr. Patrick, Heritage Museum Chairperson Josephine Del Deo, Barbara Malicoat, Nate Malchman, Claude Jenson, Grace Collinson, Peter Carter and Helen Fernald.

Last fall a painting entitled "Dories" by George Yater valued at \$700.00 was raffled off to raise money for the project and a net profit of \$400.00 was made. The Cape Cod Regional Technical High School is purchasing materials such as paint and building supplies for the restoration and charging the Historical Association the wholesale price plus 15 percent. The estimated cost of the restoration is \$5,000.00. □



PHOTO BY PETER CARTER



PHOTO BY PETER CARTER

Before the restoration.

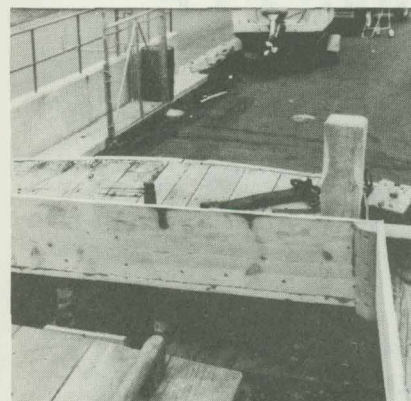


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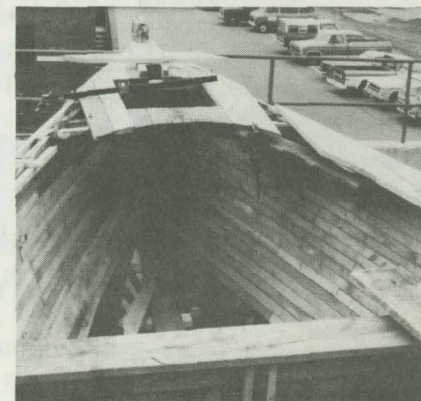


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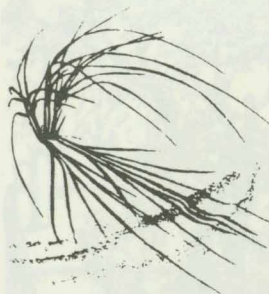
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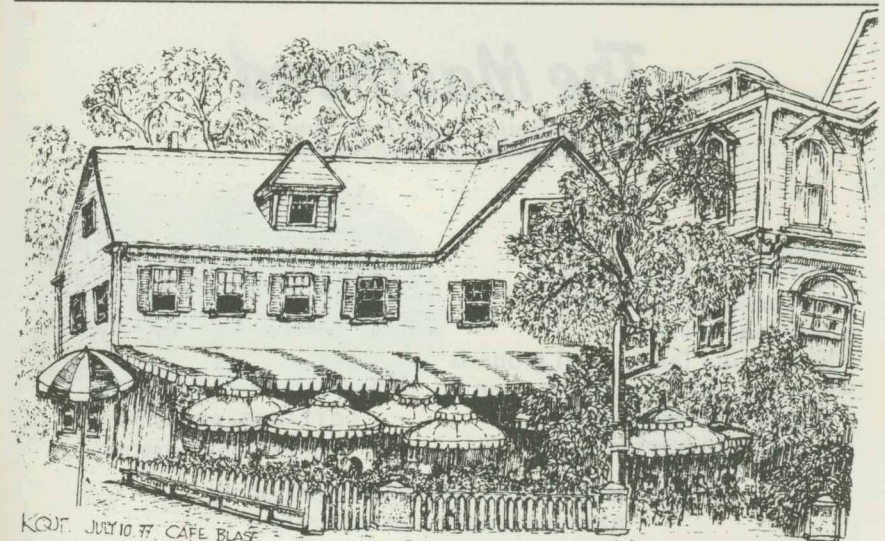
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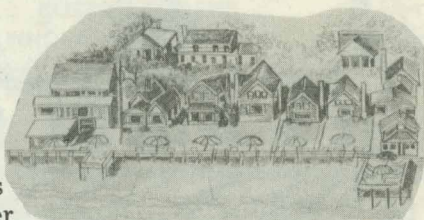


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