

# Wharves once lined Provincetown's water front

(Continued)

vessels on the East Coast and many of the large schooners were built exclusively for Grand Banks fishing.

• These vessels were rounder and heavier than the sleek, speedy boats used for the winter, fresh-fish trade in and around Cape Cod Bay. The Grand Bankers were designed for carrying capacity and stamina, an understandable priority for ships that spent weeks at anchor on the open, exposed banks of the North Atlantic.

The Grand Bankers were sailed mostly under the command of Nova Scotian and Portuguese captains. They would make from one to three trips from Cape Cod to Newfoundland during the May-to-October fishing season. The men fished out of dories all summer, catching cod on individual trawls and hand lines. They rowed back to the schooner, gutted, cut and salted the fish, slept for two to three hours and began all over again. On the banks men worked six days a week. After several weeks of this fishing

they returned to Provincetown with straining holds.

Captain Kemp, a Nova Scotian born in 1854, said, "The Provincetown vessels could not get full crews here, so some of them went to Nova Scotia for men. That's how I happened to ship from Cape Breton. When the fleet was fishing the families of the men never went a day without necessities. The owners always were careful to watch out for them. And just as soon as a vessel unloaded, the captain would ask the men how much money they wanted before regular paying time."

Kemp made \$85 on his first trip in 1869 at the age of 15. His highest pay as a crew member was \$295.

The town's big markets for dried fish were Chicago, St. Louis, Philadelphia, New York, Portugal, Spain, Italy, South America (particularly Brazil) and the West Indies.

The collapsing fishing industry got a healthful shot around the turn of the century when Puerto Rico and Cuba were acquired after the Spanish-American War. This developed into a "salt fish and fruit trade" developed with those countries. Provincetown schooners would transport salt fish to the Caribbean during the winter and return with tropical fruits.

Dried fish were often packed for transport by being squeezed into large, concentrated bundles. The H. and S. Cook Co. pressed fish at its fish commission store, also known as "MacMillan House," two doors east of Bryant's Market. In the basement of the house fish were squeezed into bundles with a device much like a cider press equipped with a large, stationary screw.

The H. and S. Cook Co. dealt in whole meat, mackerel and codfish. The company owned a long and well-constructed wharf across Commercial Street from the Figurehead House. This house was then owned by Captain Henry Cook.

Until about 1900 the fishing businesses were primarily owned by the Yankee descendants of the original English settlers. But beginning in the 1860's, the Portuguese, Nova Scotians and Irish began moving in on the winter, fresh-fish business. In that business both profits and risks were enormously high. By the end of the 1860's the Portuguese emerged as the fishermen most willing to take on those risks. No salting was involved in the winter fishing.

Provincetown fish markets suffered a setback in the 1870's and '80's when some Gloucester-based companies began to skin and bone their dried codfish.

Gorton and Pew Co. of Gloucester created a demand for

this new, more refined product, which was very attractive to housewives. They proceeded to corner the market for it. The company employed large crews onshore. Women boned the fish, men and boys skinned them. Provincetown failed to jump on the bandwagon and continued to sell the hard, dried fish. But the Spanish-American War and its expanded markets helped Provincetown regain some of the ground it had lost to Gloucester's innovations.

Trap fishing, which began in the 1890's, was the last industry to keep the wharves busy. Because so many fish were landed at once, trap operations brought with them the big freezers and freezer companies.

The Atlantic Cold Fisheries Co. owned three large cold storage companies in town: the Consolidated Weir Co., near Bryant's Market, the Colonial Cold Storage Co., near the Old Reliable Fish House, and the Cape Cod Cold Storage Co., near fast-deteriorating Freeman's Wharf. The wharves and buildings owned by these companies were the last relics of the trap fishing era.

The Skarloff brothers of New York City built Skarloff's Wharf in 1910 near the CeeJay Marina. The original purpose of the cold storage facilities was to pack mackerel and herring, which was the bait used by the schooners.

These oily school fish were considered trash fish not fit for human consumption, Bryant said. But eventually the cold storage companies began packing the fish for the ethnic trade in New York, primarily eastern Europeans. Vita Foods Co., a large packing company now, began on Skarloff's Wharf.

Early in this century "almost everybody worked in a cold storage or had a relative who did," Bryant said. The six cold storages operating at the time of World War I were the major employers in town. One of these was at the location of the present Icehouse Apartments, on

Commercial Street in the East End.

The last salt fish operation, owned by Phillip Whorf, was in business until World War I. Whorf's Wharf was located where Don's Cafe is now.

Turn-of-the-century economic and marketing reverses that had begun crippling the fishing industry were supplemented by a blast from the northeast in November, 1898. The famous Portland Gale, named for the steamship Portland which went down in the storm killing more than 175 crew and passengers also flattened many of the town's wharves. This was almost the final blow for many of the fish companies, Bryant said.