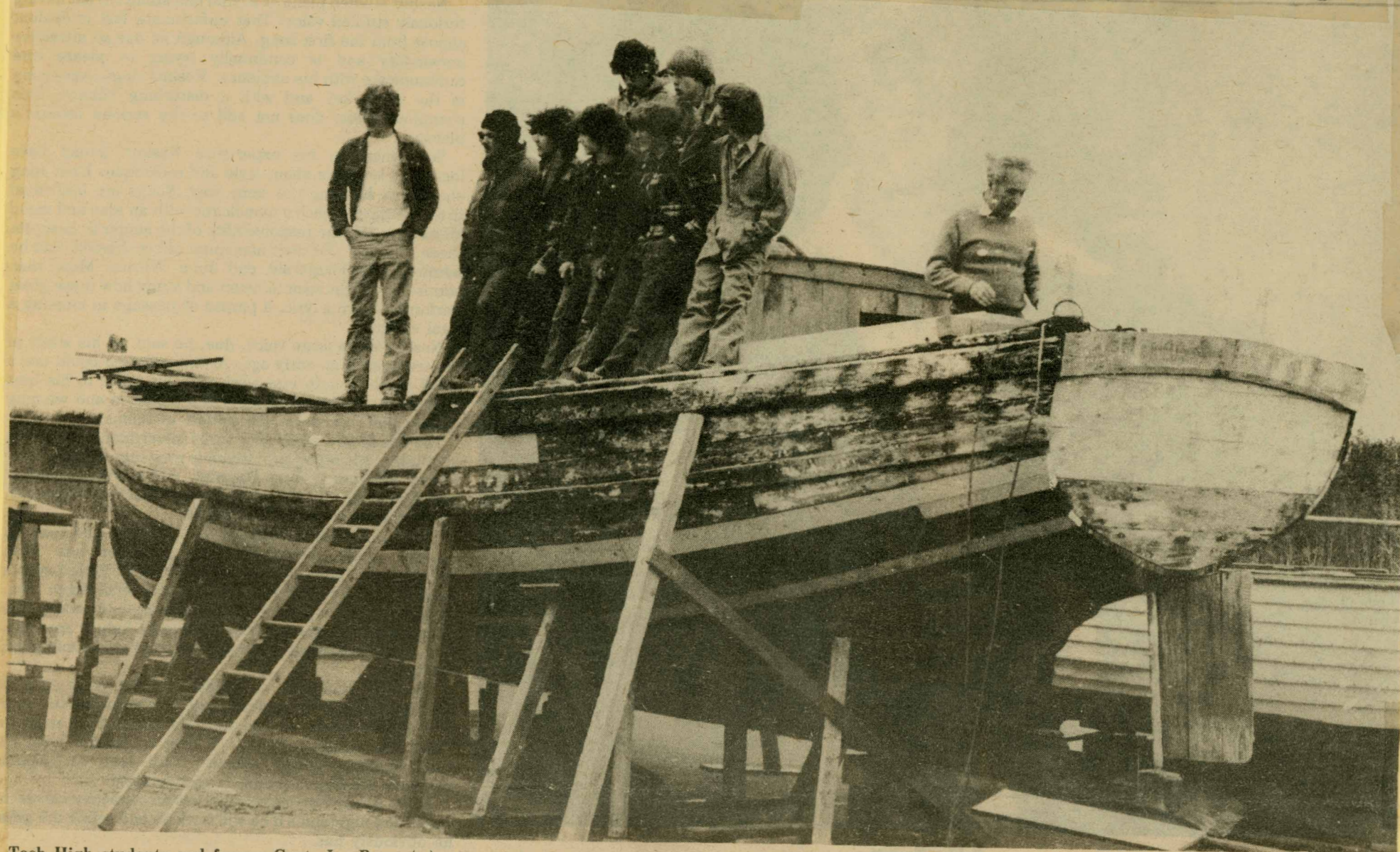


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Charlotte was end of an era

Trapboat resurrected for posterity



Tech High students and former Capt. Joe Perry (r.) aboard the Charlotte

Photo by Cyril J. Patrick

By Ben Hammer

Before May, 1977, the trapfishing boat Charlotte was 13 tons of rotting debris buried to her gunwales on the muddy flats off the Provincetown Inn.

The world had given her—as well as trapfishing, once one of Provincetown's major industries—up for dead.

The Charlotte, built in 1918 in Amesbury, was pried loose from her muddy grave and trucked to the Cape Cod Regional Technical High School, where she is being restored by students of the marine repair division.

Under the direction of Richard Alberts, the Charlotte is being rebuilt from the decks down. After completion, she will be placed lovingly outside of the Provincetown

Heritage Museum.

The restoration, which is being financed by the Provincetown Historical Association, has a budgeted cost of \$5000. Of that money, \$2400 has been spent.

To raise funds, the association is holding a dinner in the Tiffany Room at the Provincetown Inn tonight at 6 p.m. The keynote speaker will be ex-Gov. Francis Sargeant. Other speakers will include state Rep. Howard Cahoon, state Sen. John Alymer and Cyril J. Patrick, president of the association.

Trapfishing is an ancient method of fishing that was first practiced by the American Indians hundreds of years ago

and very successfully by generations of Provincetown seamen. The Charlotte represents that heritage. Hence, all the interest in her.

The Charlotte is a little less than a third complete on her cradle at the technical school. "All of the work is going smoothly, and we are right on schedule," Alberts said. "The decks are almost complete, and the bottom will be redone in the fall after the students return from summer vacation. Except for the remnants of the Charlotte and her sistership the Carlotta, which is still afloat but not trapfishing, little trace remains of the once robust trapfishing industry. It's death marked the end of a way of life for not only the fishermen of Provincetown, but also for

the hundreds of workers and their families who worked in the icehouses.

Trapfishing was a way of life for fishermen that can't be found in today's world of commercial fishing. Since trapfishing was begun at dawn, when the fleet chugged out to the nearby traps, the fishermen would be home in time for lunch. They lived a life that was important to them and their families—at home and safe.

Trapfishing simply collected the wealth of the sea. Men didn't go to sea in high-yield factory ships. They didn't stay at sea for weeks. They were not indiscriminately wiping out the creatures on whom they depended so much.

Instead, they set their traps and waited for what the sea would yield. The sea treated them well, as evidenced by the photographs of trapboats all but swamped from the weight of their tremendous catches. Sometimes the fish were so plentiful they were given away instead of sold at low market prices.

Now Provincetown fishermen are hunters who scour the sea for ever more elusive fish, taking all they can find, which means fewer fish and more difficult searches.

Trapboats like the Charlotte and Carlotta were ugly ducklings, low and squat in the water. Their broad beams made them not only commodious but stable as their crews hauled heavy nets laden with fish over the side. Most of them were built in Gloucester, Plymouth and Bristol, Maine.

After World War I the beam trawler that is so familiar now was becoming popular. They did little harm to the trapfishermen, who continued to haul in the very marketable food fish like whiting, herring and bluefish. Cold storage in the icehouse made even more economic sense because their catches could be frozen, giving the cold storage companies the opportunity to wait for high market prices.

In the earlier part of the century, over 100 traps stretched from Wellfleet to Provincetown. Trapfishing accounted for 25 percent of all foodfish taken on the eastern seaboard. But as with all good things, trapfishing had to come to an end.

For reasons that no two men seem to agree on, trapfishing ceased to be productive here in the late 1950s. It was all downhill from there. Some think the construction of the Cape Cod Canal was finally taking its toll on fish-spawning by raising the water temperature and changing the flow of currents. Others believe that the indiscriminate reaping of the sea by foreign factory ships depleted the stocks. But the result is still the same. Trapfishing is dead in Provincetown. It is gone but not forgotten. The Charlotte will be a perpetual monument to that part of Provincetown's heritage, a reminder of a simple but productive way of life.

Joe "Ducky" Perry, who was the captain of the Charlotte, said "I was offered all kinds of other jobs, but I never took them. All I wanted to do was fish. It made me sad to see trapfishing end in this area. It was a marvelous way for a man to make a living. It was a peaceful kind of thing."