

Cape End Trawlers Once Landed Fish At Helltown Village, Now New Beach

Years ago Irving S. Rogers, now in charge of the Welfare Department, then successively Public Health Agent, and Selectman, showed signs of being a promising writer. Among his unpublished articles is the following account of Helltown, located at what is now New Beach. Here Provincetown had a village of sheds, shacks and more substantial buildings, including a whale oil rendering plant. Here fishermen stowed their trawls, dories and other fishing gear and here at the end of a hard day, they unloaded their catches. At the turn of the century gasoline engines began to replace sails and oars, as Mr. Rogers points out, and successive storms—nature's own housecleaning implement—destroyed the buildings until today there's not a single trace of any of them.

by Irving S. Rogers

At various times through the expansion and settling of Provincetown there are vague records of small fishing hamlets located on the back shores. In the final analysis, many varied and conflicting tales depend on dimming memories. But we consider the following to be fairly accurate.

The first settlement, which was located just across our harbor and on the sandbar now known as Long Point, finally had to be moved over to the town. The outcome of this necessary move caused a drastic change in the lives of small dory fishermen. In tiny fifteen-foot dories they had been going out about six miles after the elusive cod and haddock. But now the trip was twice as long, and much too hazardous even for the sea-going men of that period.

Provincetown's fleet of grand bankers and fresh fishing schooners only operated from some late date in April until sometime in November. This five month lay-off resulted in a situation in which the men had to seek other means of employment. Somewhere just beyond the ever-restless breakers was a paying industry, and sustenance. Regardless of the risks the fishermen had to go out over the lurking bars. A calm, peaceful and gentle sea, during the Summer seasons, but treacherous, unrelenting and ever-demanding of its human sacrifice, especially in the Winter time. Trawling from open dories powered by sail or oars, carrying a two-man crew and loaded with tubs of trawl, buoys, anchors and cordage, was the general routine. With a fair chance of making a good catch the already overloaded dory had then to be coaxed back through cross-rips, heavy seas and swift moving tides.

A Small Village

Thus the only logical solution was a group of sheds on the back beach. The first settlement of this type was located in the Her-

ring Cove, which would be somewhere near the present Wood End Coast Guard Station. But we have selected Helltown for our topic, maybe because it sounds more fascinating and probably because we have a clearer picture of that set-up. The site chosen for Helltown was a spot just beyond the last bend at what is now the New Beach. In the late 1890's, thirty-three buildings of odd shapes, and sizes, grew up out of driftwood, second-hand lumber and miscellaneous materials to make quite a sizeable fishing center. At about the same time that Helltown was suffering from growing pains, a Summer colony of lobster fishermen located near Race Point Light was petering out.

Helltown became a project of individual effort on the part of Provincetown fishermen, and was a source of employment for approximately 125 men. They maintained families and homes in Provincetown and left nice warm beds for a marrow-chilling walk over the dunes in wintery pre-dawns. Rain and cold, snow or blow, it was out to Helltown they would go! After brief warmup sessions around crackling stoves, the order for the day was to don oilclothes, and woolen mittens, before shoving off through the surf for an eight-hour stretch at their trawling. About thirty dories in all, beating to windward or possibly on a larboard tack, but mostly it was backbreaking labor on the oars, with a chant of, "Heave around my hearties, for it's only six miles out to the grounds". Out in the clear, and space those lines well, make every set, through it's cold as Hell.

The women played an important part in this unusual scene of the development of such a vital industry. Wives, sisters and sweethearts prepared warm lunches which they often carried out to their chilled menfolks. Frequent-

ly, John (Jack) Welch, who was the first teamster to bring in the day's catches for shipping at the depot, was asked to pick up the lunch boxes as he made the first trip out. While waiting for the first dories to land, Jack managed to keep occupied by tending the fires in various houses.

Some Were Swamped

One of the lightest and oft-repeated stories associated with Helltown is about a local man commonly nicknamed "Skarrey Jack". Competition was quite keen and every dory crew tried to out-manoeuvre the rival house crews. The consequences were that each dory was over-canvased, and thus being tricky craft they frequently swamped. "Skarrey" was beating in through the Race tide-rips when his dory foundered. He was most fortunate to have help near at hand and they pulled him out of the drink. His famous first words were, "Who done that to me?" But little things like that didn't stop them, and Skarrey continued to fish out of Helltown.

Fate also played her role in the picture of Helltown's growth and prosperity. The worst tragedy occurred when both father and son were lost from the same dory. Heavily laden with fishing gear, and a good catch of haddock, Joseph and Jesse Souza were running in over the shoaling bars when their dory rolled under and the men perished. So did the indiscriminating seas take their toll regardless of family ties or waiting kin-folks. The morbid details of each case is about the same, with overloads, heavy surfs, cranky dories, northwest blows and man-power, playing the major part of the battle.

Some of the fishermen who survived that hectic period are still living in Provincetown. Others have since died, and a few have disappeared from the local scene of operations. We do have knowledge that Manuel Peters, Skarrey Jack, Antone (Tony) King, Jesse Fratus, Antone White, Jesse Cabral and Frank Gaspa were all former Helltownites, and could tell some swell yarns about their experiences.

The first dories began to hit the beach about noon, were pulled out and unloaded, the catch weighed, cleaned and prepared for shipping to New York City. But the day's work wasn't over then. Tired, cold, hungry or wet, the fishermen still had his gear to look after. Some of the trawls had become snarled, chaffed, or badly damaged, and required



Photo Courtesy Arthur Bickers

While horses, today, are a luxury here, they once were vital to the Cape End economy. Here a pair get fish from dories at Helltown for the long, heavy, sandy haul to the railroad in the center of the town. An extra pair of horses helped move the load what is now Grand View Hill.

prompt attention before they could be used on the following morning. Then came a tedious and dreaded task of baiting up hundreds of hooks, which was done inside near pot-bellied stoves. It wasn't all drudgery, because after the clean-up there were poker games, maybe a snort or two of whiskey, recountings of tall tales about various fishing yarns, with arguments or discussions, which were climaxed by the long walk home. A night at home with the family, but back to Helltown at 4 in the morning.

Fast becoming just another vague memory in the minds of those who knew it, Helltown existed and prospered, while the gasoline engine was still an unknown quantity. But progress began to assert itself, with engines replacing the more unreliable sail and laborious struggle at the oars. Thus did Helltown, Crow Hill, the Race Point settlement and other like fishing centers fade into oblivion. In Provincetown's advance the stories of Helltown will be handed down through each generation. Maybe they will be touched up, given a little different coloring or enlarged upon, but the basic tale will always be one of accomplishment, courage and determination of the Provincetown dory trawlers.

Picture Recalls Old Memories

"Bushey" Bill Prada said, when he saw the picture on the front page of a recent issue of The Advocate, "Where in h— did you get that picture? That's me, 50 years ago when I was 28, with my wagon and horses, 'Dick' and 'Baby', and that's 'McCart' Tavers, a fisherman, standing beside me while I took fish from his dory. 'McCart' would be about my age, but he's been dead a long time." Then Bushey took the same picture off his wall to show.

Bushey remembers Helltown well and the men who worked there. He went on to say there were four or five others who carted fish from there. There was Charlie Foster, Ole Man Campbell and Tom Powell, who had a fish market where the Cove Lunch is now—all dead now. He remembers when whales came ashore the men would bring them in and try out the oil in what was called the Whale Factory. The men went out in their wagons on old Race Road, out by Weathering Heights, blocked off now by the State. He went on to recall var-

ious shipwrecks. One was about two years before Helltown came into being. At that time Hershey Taylor, the undertaker, had his parlor where Aresta now has his hot dog stand in the center of town. Mr. Taylor called Charlie Foster, who had six horses and told him to go to Peaked Hill, where a coal barge had come aground. Bushey was working for Charlie at the time and brought in 16 bodies that night. John Cook, another undertaker, who had his parlor where Rush Fish Market and Suburban Office is now, brought in more bodies.

About six or seven years later a vessel went ashore between Race Point and Race Light loaded with lumber. At that time Bushey was driving for Horace Watson and he loaded the wagon with lumber and took it to Race Point Coast Guard Station. Another time a two-masted vessel went ashore between Peaked Hill and Race Point loaded with potatoes. Bushey was called out and found the ship high and dry on shore. He went into the hold about five feet down and hove 200 pound bags onto the deck where other men took them to Charlie Dyer's paint shop for storage. That was right across from 'Ole man Brook's stable' and next to what