

South Wind

HEATON VORSE

In other years this 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 then constructed, launched and serviced the two special types of craft needed to set up 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down to make a parking lot in spite of the fact that it is valuable waterfront property; another, also torn down, has been replaced by a restaurant.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 fishermen. 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 wasn't a gag after all. What was left was a 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.

I suppose some sort of moral could be read into the fact that the last of the Life Saving Stations that once lined the back shore between Wood End and Monomoy is being replaced by a facility on the harbor side on the spot where the last of the freezers once stood. I can't think off hand what the moral might be unless it is that overspecialization is the first step towards oblivion.

It wasn't the weirs that were particularly special. As long as

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.

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 Indians used brushwood to make a leader of sorts and sunk the trunks of small trees in the sand, twining the upper branches of the trees together to make a trap. I have no way of knowing whether this is so. But such a snare could have only been of use in comparatively shallow waters.

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.

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