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ACROSS THE ISLAND

Fishing Story Goes Back Hundred Years

By NEIL A. MATHESON

I TALKED recently with Beecher Court, the veteran fisherman of North Rustico who is still active after more than 70 years in a fishing boat. Mr. Court started fishing with his father when he was 10 years of age. This year, at almost 83, he's still active with his sons.

Smart and apparently nimble, this man of the sea gets around like a much younger man though he tells me he gets tired in the evenings.

We talked of many things during our visit together. We talked, for example, of salt mackerel and the demand there was for it in earlier days.

They were a real delicacy at the time and sales were keen, recalled Mr. Court, who noted that salt was the only way of preserving fish at the time. There was no refrigeration.

Fisherman's Strike

EVEN TODAY salt herring is a prized delicacy in some areas, he observed.

He recalled, for example, the days when American companies came to this province to establish fish plants. They sent men here to establish shore plants. They hired native fishermen, sometimes they paid them by the day, sometimes by the hundred pounds of fish they caught. A lot of fishermen came here from the United States as well.

They packed mackerel then in 200-pound barrels. There were three American firms in Rustico alone.

Schooners were used for transportation in the earlier days, there were no railroads then.

This would be the period of perhaps 100 years ago, he said. There were plants at Covehead, at Little Harbor. Captain Marshall, a really famous character, was established at Marshall's Cove. It was formerly known as Doyle's Cove in the area where Tom Doyle, a well-known politician of his time, lived later.

There was plenty of fish, at times the catch had to be curtailed because the factories could not pack it. Lobsters were canned but the sealing was done by hand, so the capacity was limited.

The Portland Packing Company was the first company who ever packed lobsters, Mr. Court told me and thereby hangs a tale.

A Prized Delicacy

THE COMPANY had six boats fishing for them and the pay was 40 cents a hundred pounds of fish. One day the fishermen decided to strike. They tied up their boats and demanded 50 cents per 100 pounds, a 10 cent increase.

The strike lasted two days and the company manager told them, with apparent regret, the company would have to close down its operation, because it just couldn't afford to pay 10 cents more. So the fishermen went back to work, without the additional 10 cents they had requested.

Later the fishermen considered they might have gotten the extra money, had they held out, but the speculation was not productive, because they had given in without prolonging the struggle. That would be around 1889 (?) or possibly 1895 (?).

Discussing lobster fishing in those early days, Mr. Court recalled that the catch was limited by the quantity of lobsters the factory could pack.

Hand Sealing Slow

TINS WERE hand sealed in those days and the packing operation was slow as a result. Fishermen would be limited to a certain poundage per boat, because the factory could not handle all the lobsters when the trapping was good.

And lobster fishing was really good at times. Mr. Court recalls, for example, when he hauled 100 traps and took in 1,000 pounds in his boat, which is slightly more than 10 pounds to a trap. Today one-half pound per trap is not so bad which illustrates the difference.

At the time they got about three dollars per hundred pounds, Mr. Court told me.

The lowest price I saw in my time was \$2.25, he added.

There was a period of very, very hard times and that would be around, or slightly before the turn of the century.

Mackerel had dropped out, lobsters were worth very little, codfish were worth very little.

Beecher went to fish with his father at the age of 10; he went to school in winter but fished in the summer months.

Powerful Men Beyond Hunter River

Mr. Court recalled hearing his father talk about a group of big, powerful men who "came from the other side of the Hunter River". That could be Hartsville or some place in the area. There were big powerful men in the Hartsville area, indeed from the Strathalbyn area, which includes the area where I was born. But I never heard of them being fishermen. If anyone has any idea who these men would be, I would appreciate hearing from him.

I recalled at one stage of our conversation that as a boy, I recalled a half barrel of salt herring in just about every porch or cellar in the country where I lived. They were great eating with blue potatoes, or with any other kind of potatoes I imagine, though I've heard more folk talk of the blues than any other variety.

Many of those half-barrels had been put up in Rustico, as Mr. Court still recalls. He thinks they were no more than \$3.00 a barrel.

