

[Yankee Fisherman]

Nothing usable in This - S/

ORIGINAL MSS. OR FIELD NOTES (Check one)

PUB. Living Lore in New England

(Rhode Island)

TITLE Tiverton Fisherman (Captain Nat)

WRITER

DATE WDS. PP. 7

CHECKER DATE

SOURCES GIVEN (?) Interview

COMMENTS

[Rhode Island?] 1938-9

THE YANKEE FISHERMAN

All was hustle and stir aboard the Mizpah as the crew loaded the gear and tackle aboard making ready for the next day's trip.

Mackerel had been sighted yesterday over at the mouth of the sound and by this the fishermen knew that these wary fish would show up in the bay by the next day. So the old captain was busy making final preparations in order to be ready to sail on the morning tide,

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which would be full about three thirty, with the moon a silver wafer of light in the velvet August sky.

By the time the work was finished, twilight had begun to fall, and the men left for their nearby homes. With many a "So long, Cap. See yer in the mawnin'," they hurried off, great sturdy men, headin' for the home port.

The Captain lingered aboard, going over every chain, rope and ring of the great purse seine, making sure that there'd be no mishaps when the time came to drop her overboard. As the name implied, she was like a great purse, with a bag of seine and purse strings of rope, which ran through great brass rings, and by which she was "pussed up." There lay the five-hundred-pound tom weight which sinks into place when the seine is in position. There too were the ladles with which the fish were to be bailed into the boat. Everything was ready and t'hand. Yet the Captain lingered as if he hated to leave. How he loved the boat. She seemed to be part of him, since most of his living days had been spent aboard of her. Wife and family, friends and relatives a-plenty lived their cozy lives ashore in snug harbors, yet he and the Mizpah battled with wind and tide, happy in their life together, each a part of the other.

2

Sitting there he heard a light running step aft, and a young voice called - "Where are you, Uncle Nat?"

"Here I be, sonny, up for'ard. Just thinking of going home myself. Come on over to the house, spend the evening with us, won't you? It's getting close to supper time, and I reckon your Aunt Dora'll have something pretty good for a young city [?] slicker like yourself.

"You know she will and that's why you came? Well, you young rascal! Say I thought your folks lived pretty high what with that butler fellar an' all, to wait on you. Here you come over to the cove to eat in our house. O h o - so you sneaked away from a shindig to be with

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your old sea dog relation. Now tell me, as man to man, what's on yer mind? Out with it. So-o that's it! Want to go long o' me mackereling tomorrow morning. Do tell. Does your ma know where yer be? She does, heh! Told yer 'at I was the one who taught her t'sail a boat, did she? Yes siree! Best little deck hand in these parts, when she was no bigger'n a weasel. Could hold her own at the tiller, too, beat her up to the wind'ard, almost take the stick right out of her. Game kid all right. And here you be teasing just like she used ter, to go along too.

“Well sonny — there's Aunt Dora a wavin' and sayin' suthin'. What's that? So-o Archy is to stay all night. Well, I swan - your Ma phoned, saying you could. Now that's plumb good news, ain't it.

“What's that, mother? Sure he'll like quahaug cakes. Such a tang as you get on 'em. Good 'nough for the President.

“We'll wash up out here on the bench, sonny. A fellar can splash all he wants out here 'thout riling the women folks. There's yer towel, son, on that nail. There now - let's tackle that supper. Put plenty under yer belt. You'll need a good stand by for tomorrer.

3

“Comin', Dora, Comin'. Set there Archy. You be first mate this voyage. Are we all seated? Let's bow our heads. “May the Lord bless this food and may we be duly thankful. Bless, O Lord, our brothers on the deep and bring them to a safe harbor.”

“Now, Archie, here's your chowder. Cakes come next course. Guess that chowder is good an' no mistake. Takes a Rhode Islander to make a real chowder. Those quahaugs were dug this mornin'. Came from that white sand bar yonder, and the meats are as pretty and plump as ever I see. That's what you call flavor, me lad. Ready for the fried quahaug cakes —patties some calls 'em. Yes, sir, for myself I think they beat a fried oyster any day. But they are sure tarnation good. The sweet corn's the beet we've had this summer, and

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these cukes is fine. Have some of this baked tautaug, son—put on plenty of this good thick cream and tell me did your butler ever serve you a dish so tasty?

“Come now, don't be bashful. There's plenty o'lobster and more in the pots, so don't go without. What? you can't hold much more? Sure you can! We've only just begun. Leastwise I have. Oh sho ready for pie so soon? Well go ahead eat your pie and I'll keep right on workin' through the whole bill o'fare. “Got to take you to a real Rhode Island Clam Bake soon. The one over at the Old Stone Church will be next week. There's where you eat and no mistake. The bake opens at one o'clock and we eat until four thirty or thereabouts. Now that's an occasion.

“Oh! you're all goin' from your house? Wouldn't miss it, yer Ma says. Well, every one in town, and all the state officials 'll be there. That's where little Rhodey goes to town, gathers her own under her wings and do we all enjoy it! Yes, the bake's a great institution.

“Let's sit on the porch for a spell whilst the women folks clear away and maybe someone 'll pass by an tell us a little news. There's Lucy 4 Brown, that old colored woman, comin' round the landin'. She's been workin' over to Capt. George's all day. Maybe she'll be able to tell us how the Captain made out swordfishin'.

“Hello, Lucy! Where you headin'? Oh, going over to the bridge. Well, say Lucy did you hear tell how the Captain made out with the swordfishin'? What's that?

“You don't mean it! Hear that, Archie? Says Capt. George reckons one he got today weighed eight hundred. We'll have to take a look at it later. No, not now. Jest rest a spell. You know what my father used to say, swore it was gospel truth, that every time Lucy Brown came round the landing, there was sure to be a high wind. I've seen him go so fur as to send a boy down the road if 'n he see her comin', to tell her to turn back, give her a dollar if she would go, 'specially if he wanted to set trap at the Old Bull. All the fishermen hated to see Lucy put in to the bridge if they planned on much fishing the next day, cause

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she was an omen, so my father used to say. Never noticed myself. Those old sailors was full o' omens.

"Is Lucy old? Nigh on to a hundred I guess. She was a slave for the Brown family so you can see how old she must be.

"Yes, there's one more born slave as I know of. She's Bess Wanton, was one of the Wanton family slaves. You know the Wantons was rich my yes; That's the old Gov. Wanton place up the road a piece. Built like a southern mansion. Yes that's the one where the Barkers live now.

"Well, now, son , we can't linger out here much longer. I could set here half the night tellin' you about the old folks round here.

"No can't get on to any long whalin' yarns tonight, but did I ever tell you about old Gid Fox as used to work for us back along? Well, during the winter when the boats were on dry dock we kept our men busy, knitting up 5 traps, mending and such like. There's a big town shed over on Aquidneck, where the fish factory used to be, at the north end of the island. There's quarters there still for the men and Leander was the cook, but all in all, I suppose 'et got kinda lonesome. No one new around 'cept for the tramps as used to drop off at the Hummocks and kind o' spend the winter at the abandoned factory. Some o' them was characters, that I'll tell you about some other time. Well, to get back to Gid, he'd been over at the factory working on nets all winter and when April came we sent him over to the bridge to get the poles ready for the traps. Some of the boys met him and asked him where he'd spent the winter.

"Well,' says Gid, 'I was six weeks in the month o' March over on the island, and [?] I'm sure glad to get back on land once more.'

"What's the matter with your foot Gid?' asked Joe. 'You've got it all tied up there.'

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"Well boys, I dropped an eye bolt onto it and she is sure sore.'

"Does it pain you, Gid?' asked George.

"No she don't pain me now,' said Gid, 'She's kinda stopped painin' and gone to achin'.

Now that aint so bad,' he'd drawl out. Then the boys would haw-haw. All in good fun, you know. Now poor Gid's dead'n gone this many a year.

"What's that! Eight bells! Whew-w. We must turn in if we expect to be up at three. Do you want to sleep in the old rope bed under the eaves or would you like to sleep aboard the sloop? Kind o' stuffy below this weather. Oh! you'd like to sleep in a hammock on deck. They're the most uncomfortable contraptions, son. Did you ever try one?

"Oh, so you saw them in the movies. Well let me tell you, boy, that's a good place to leave 'em. The only reason that you can sleep in the blame 6 things is because you're so plumb worn out you could sleep anywhere, and as for gettin' sea sick when we're out, they'll make you sickern' a dog, even in a light roll. Better sleep ashore son and you'll be fresher'n a daisy in the mornin'."

So with many a good night, the old Captain and Archie turned in, the latter to dream of the day when he'd be master of his own ship.

The short night ended when the Captain's voice called to the boy, at three, to come down to breakfast. This was steaming hot with plenty of Rhode Island jonny cakes, fried to a delicate brown, along with eggs and bacon and plenty of hot tea. Yankee folks like tea for breakfast. Although the younger ones go in for coffee somewhat, tea is the favorite.

After their meal, the two hurried over to the dock, where the clanking of chains and the murmur of voices told them that the crew was on hand with everything in readiness. They

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soon cast off and headed up into Mount Hope Bay to look for a school of mackerel. The captain kept the glasses to his eyes searching up and down.

Suddenly he called, "Drop off!" and the two working boats were hauled alongside. One for the Captain and one for the mate. The big purse seine was divided equally between them and as soon as the crew were in the boats they started rowing in opposite directions. Archie was in the Captains boat helping pay out the seine. The ripple and noise of schooled fish was on every side, the gills showed out of water like silver dollars, shining and glistening in the pale light of the setting moon. Soon the noise was almost a roar as the great school struck into the waiting net.

"There she strikes! Puss her up! Close in!" called Captain Nat, and the experienced crew rowed towards each other closing the great purse. The tow weight held her an the bottom as the mackerel splashed and tore to get out.

7

The big boat now came alongside. Great scoops dipped into the net hoisting the catch aboard. The chug-chug of the motor was heard above the yelling of the crew as the silvery beauties were bailed into the hold. Out swung the scoop again, much as a steam shovel digs dirt, scooping in the fish. As the loaded scoop passed the mate, now on board, he pulled the tripping line and this dumped the fish. So the bailing went on until all were safely aboard.

Over in the east the sun was just beginning to rise and the hungry crew hurried aboard the sloop for another breakfast.

"We'll make another set as soon as we can get the decks clear and the seine in shape," said the Captain. "Whats that? How do I know that there'll be more in the Bay? Well, son, mackerel is easy to figure on and when one school shows, there's another not far off. Come now, you take the glasses and tell me what you see. Ha ha, nothing. Well, keep looking! Look over that way, south by west, swing west a little. That brings ye about at the

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ferry landin'. See anything yet? A ripple, a long ripple? Now what do you see? Shinning like silver? You know now. Which way are they headin'? Away from us. Yep that school is. Swing your glasses up the bar up toward Kickemuet. What's that, you saw one jump clear o' the water! That's the scout. The school'll be back of him. One fish is always out in front leading the rest. You see they follow feed and it's his job to find it. Now we'll set again. Drop o-o-off! Drop o-o-off!

And so all day the men worked. Late afternoon found them on the dock, barreling and icing the catch. The trucks were there to take them to market and the old Captain went into the wheel house to reckon his earnings and check up the log.