

Allen, Sonia L. "Sunny" PHELPS McCawley -

The Good Old Days of Dory Fishing

as published in the Headlight Herald July 15, 1981

retyped by Dean Bones February 15, 2023

Long before the sun rises on a summer morning when the rest of the area is asleep, a procession of four-wheel drive rigs and various other contraptions towing dory boats is arriving at the beach. A steady stream of arrivals mingles with unloading, launching, and parking of rigs and trailers. Amid muffled voices come the thunder of oars, and outboards sputter to life as the dory clears the first line of breakers.

This is Cape Kiwanda near Pacific City unique in that it is one of only 2 or 3 places on the Oregon coast where dory boats can launch directly through the surf. Over 300 dories call Pacific City home now, and the town describes itself as "Home of the Dory Fleet."

Back in the "good old days" a half dozen or so dories were being launched here as early as the 1920s. Before that time commercial fishing had been conducted in the bay and rivers until gill netting and commercial fishing were closed in the inside waters thus forcing the fishermen to take to the ocean.

Some launchings through the surf at McPhillips Beach mostly for bottom fish had occasionally been undertaken. The lee at Cape Kiwanda was a better launching place protected and with less surf. However, the river had to be crossed about where the bridge is now, the dory carried across the dunes to the beach, launched and rowed up to the cape. Once there the dories were left for the summer.

Early settlers by the name of Southmate used dories to ferry folks out to Haystack Rock. Once there they were transferred to a larger boat anchored out by the rock. The tourists got a grand tour and fishing trip all rolled into one.

Other folks involved in early dory fishing were Clint and Cliff Miles, Pat Baker, Walt and Louie Fisher, Jake, Elwood & Norman Reddekopp, Ennis Turner, and the Gilmans, Ernest, Warren, Cal, Jack and Norman. Some of these were father-son teams, and some of the them are still dory fishing.

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Called a dory because they were double enders they were not the true dory used to fish cod off the East Coast. The true dory has a narrow flat bottom with flared sides.

The double ender was adopted by the old timers as they strove to build the best type of boat suited for launching through the surf. Spruce planks and ribs were used, and when left to sit in the sun very long the caulking would fall out. Stories are told of the races that would develop as the boats returned to the beach each trying to beat the other guy in and put his boat in the little stream flowing out in the corner of the cape. This kept the planks wet and the caulking intact.

Early gear was cotton line with homemade wobblers and plugs. Pine from the nearby woods were cut for trolling poles, and little brass bells warned of a strike. All lines were hand-pulled, and all power was rowing. Motors began to come into use around the late 1930s, and although not reliable greatly increased mobility and safety.

Wooden poles and brass bells are still being used, but the rigging is considerably changed with monofilament line, herring, and an array of flashers and lures to tempt the most reluctant silver. Most of the boats now are equipped with hydraulic gear to pull the lines and have all kinds of sophisticated electronic gear.

Way back when, the season was open year-round. No limit and no license was the rule of the day. Bottom fish were sold to the mink farmers for 1/2 a cent a pound and hauled off the beach on horses. Some of the old time dory men were also mink farmers. Salmon were peddled from door to door in an effort to sell the catch, and they were even hauled to the valley to sell or trade for vegetables and fruits.

The old cannery on the lower Nestucca Bay had been abandoned when the bay and river were closed to gill netting and commercial fishing. Finally a cannery was built by Bob Stacy on the Big Nestucca just about where the Riverside fish market is now. This provided a small market for the dorymen and encouraged commercial ocean fishing.

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"Brick" Gilman was one of the first dorymen to make a living solely from commercial dory fishing. He and Andy Kershaw also successfully ran charter trips for sport fishing for years using a classic Calkins Dory built in Delake.

The present road was built to the beach at the cape in the late 1950s making it very easy to reach the launch area at the cape. At that time there were still only 20 some odd dories fishing out of the cape area. From that time on the number of dories fishing here has increased rapidly to the present large amounts.

Recent years have seen drastic cutbacks in season length. Last year, 1980, was the shortest yet - 7 weeks. There aren't as many fish out there any more, and there are a whole lot more fishermen. Throw in the big business of fish farming and politics, and who knows where it will end. One thing for sure, those good old days are gone forever.