# Pacific City Dories

*Men routinely launch and land their small crafts through the waves at Pacific City.*

Story by Daniel Lindley

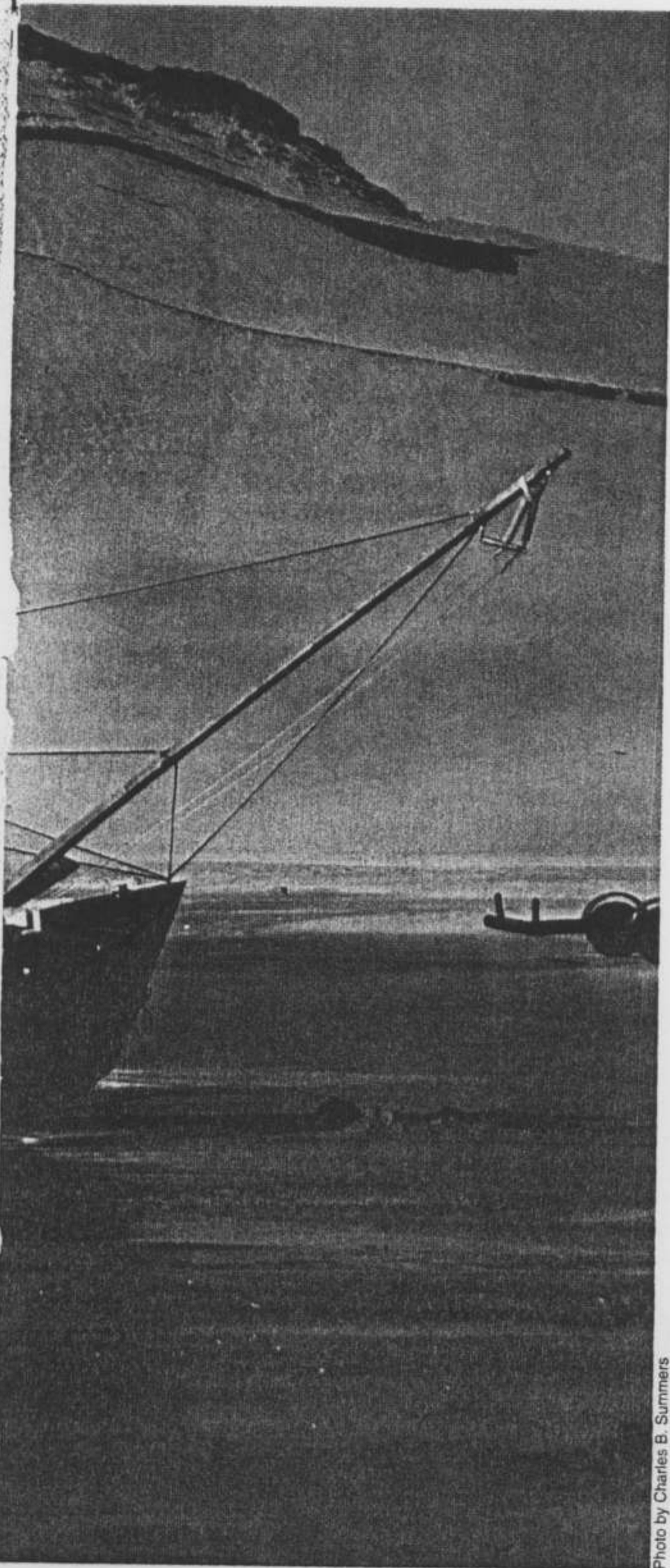
Photo by Charles B. Summers

Photo by Daniel Lindley

*Jack Gilman standing by his dory the* Flipper *outside his house in Cloverdale.*

IT'S EBB TIDE for the Pacific City dory fleet. The salmon are hurting and so are the fishermen who depend on them. Everyone has an idea of where to place the blame—but the reasons boil down to the mysteries of nature or mere human greed. No one owns the sea, and everyone seems to.

Photo by Charles B. Summers

*Preparing to launch.*

It's ebb tide, but tides rise and fall. For men who routinely launch and land their small wooden boats through crashing breakers, nature (human or otherwise) may be endured. Like the salmon, the dorymen and their boats will probably survive.

Dories—small, sharp-prowed skiffs—have been revered for their seaworthiness for centuries. On a number of Atlantic Coast beaches, fishermen in search of cod and striped bass have launched them through the surf for hundreds of years. The tradition is younger and rarer on the rough Pacific. Dories first were launched in the lee of Cape Kiwanda around 1900, and Pacific City remains one of the few places on the West Coast where fishing boats put out directly through the breakers.

As recently as the 1970s, hundreds of the boats plowed into the Pacific from the sandy spit every day. Now tourists outnumber fishermen. Dories sit for sale in the driveways of weathered houses.

The life of a doryman has always been a precarious one, financially as well as physically. Only a handful make a living from the dories. Even in the best of times, most dorymen have had to take jobs on the beach. They wielded wrenches or brooms, or shuffled papers, and dreamed of a summer at sea. Some hauled charters, but as the world became more crowded and litigious and as the salmon became more difficult to find, insurance rates all but put an end to that. Booking a ride through the surf is still a possible, though almost illicit, undertaking involving furtive inquiries on the beach.

"Now the fishing's a thing of the past," says Jack Gilman, who has fished dories for six decades, longer than anyone alive. "All the other old guys, they're all gone now. They've died." Gilman's father, a red-haired man casually known about town as Brick, was a doryman who taught his son how to handle a boat in the surf. In 1932, six-year-old Jack caught his first salmon. He was simultaneously caught. He's fished ever since.

To support his habit, Jack has spent much of his life cleaning the Cloverdale High School. The walls of a school seem a world away from the freedom and wide expanse of the sea, and some of his friends laughed when they heard he had taken the job. How could he forsake the ocean? But the job was a living, fishing was a life, and one reality held up the other. When the salmon were thick, he would make more money in two months of fishing than in 10 of scrubbing floors and changing lightbulbs. When the fish were scarce, he could still support his family.

Brick, despite his name, had worked with wood and water. He was a carpenter who built and worked dories on the side. In the days before outboards were in common use, men rowed and rowed—through the surf, around the ocean all day, and back in at night. During the depression, the sea was more bounteous than the economy, and as kids, Jack and one of his brothers made a pretty good living out of their double-ended dory.

Jack learned early that the salmon bite was hottest in the first half hour after sunrise. Often he would catch more in those few minutes than in the remainder of the summer day. He and his brother would rise in the middle of the night and walk over the dunes from their home in Woods, a tiny hamlet a bit north of Pacific City, pushing into the surf in the darkness.

They left their dory on the beach all summer. There was little thievery or state regulation.

Fishing with rod and reel, Jack and his brother might catch 25 or 30 fat salmon in a day, then haul them up to Willamina in a Model A Ford and hawk them on the side of the road for 50 cents apiece. Few customers had cash. Often they bartered.

When the salmon weren't biting, the men would go after the bottom fish that were always hanging around the offshore reefs: gap-

## Early Morning Traditions Continue . . .Barely

Four in the morning in August in Pacific City: Only a score of boats have launched. "Eat . . . Sleep . . . Go Fishing" bumper stickers seem to adorn every pickup truck on the beach. Two youths in sleeping bags surrounded by a midden of beer cans are groggily trying to ignore the revvings of outboards. Two old men discourse in the parking lot. "Fishing's out. There ain't no more money in fishing. Licenses—who would want one of those?" one scoffs.

Mark Roberts is single-handedly launching his 22-foot-long dory, the *Fish Assassin*, on this rare day when the Pacific seems to have lived up to its name. It's as tame as a farm pond. Roberts backs his truck down the beach and unleashes his dory. It bobs in the gentle swell, sitting there like a well-trained horse awaiting its rider. He drives back up the beach and parks his truck.

Fishing hasn't been good, he admits, as he saunters back to the ocean. He can only afford to get out on weekends. Even so, he still clears a few hundred dollars a month. And the benefits can't be beat. The *Fish Assassin* swings lazily around. "Things could be worse," he says, shrugging as he climbs aboard. The outboard kicks over and he heads out. ☐

—D.L.

ing-mouthed, sharp-spined, sluggish rock cod and lingcod, mostly. It was hard to sell these white-fleshed fish except to local mink ranchers, who might pay a half a cent a pound. The price was all right with Jack: "At a half a cent a pound, a thousand pounds were worth $5. Pretty good wages for two guys back then. Lots of guys were working for $30 a month, so in comparison it wasn't so bad."

After a long day on the water, the brothers unloaded each of several hundred slippery, spiny, bottomfish from the dory, packed them in saddlebags, put the bags on a horse, and rode the horse about a mile along the beach to the banks of the Nestucca River. They had to make several such trips because the saddlebags were small. Then they would transfer the cargo to another boat, row it across to Pacific City, and load everything into the Model A parked on the nearest road. "It was an operation, yeah," Jack concedes laconically. "We probably were tired after it." He shrugs, "People were used to getting tired in those days."

Sometimes Jack and his father would carry charters at $1 or so a head—usually doctors or lawyers from Portland. In the limitless promise of the pre-dawn darkness, father and son would lead the visitors down to the shore then launch and row them about until they had their fill. Though Jack recalls no catch limit in those days, the lack of roads and motors imposed a voluntary restraint that modern fish wardens might envy. The prospect of lugging more than three or four 20-pound salmon, plus fishing gear, back up the hill tended to discourage gluttony.

Progress, so-called, did come down inexorably through the years. One day, Brick sawed a hole in his dory for a motor well to accommodate an outboard. At the time such motors were cranky and cantankerous contraptions prone to fits of sputtering and long, unexplained, sulky silences, often miles from shore.

As mechanical horsepower replaced flesh-and-blood manpower, the dories changed. The old double enders, pointed at both ends, were replaced by square sterners. The square-sterned dories could handle bigger motors, and they could plane. The fishermen had learned through hard experience that they couldn't motor the old double enders safely back through the surf. The boats were like tipsy old-timers trying to act younger than their age—plodding and tippy. With the ability to plane, the new dories could give quick bursts of speed to outrun following waves.

Accidents still occurred. Watching the boats launch and return had always been a spectator sport in Pacific City, and it remains so. As with crowds at car races or circuses, the watchers' appreciation of the protagonists' grace, skill, and speed is probably tempered by a macabre fascination with the possibility of disaster. No doryman has

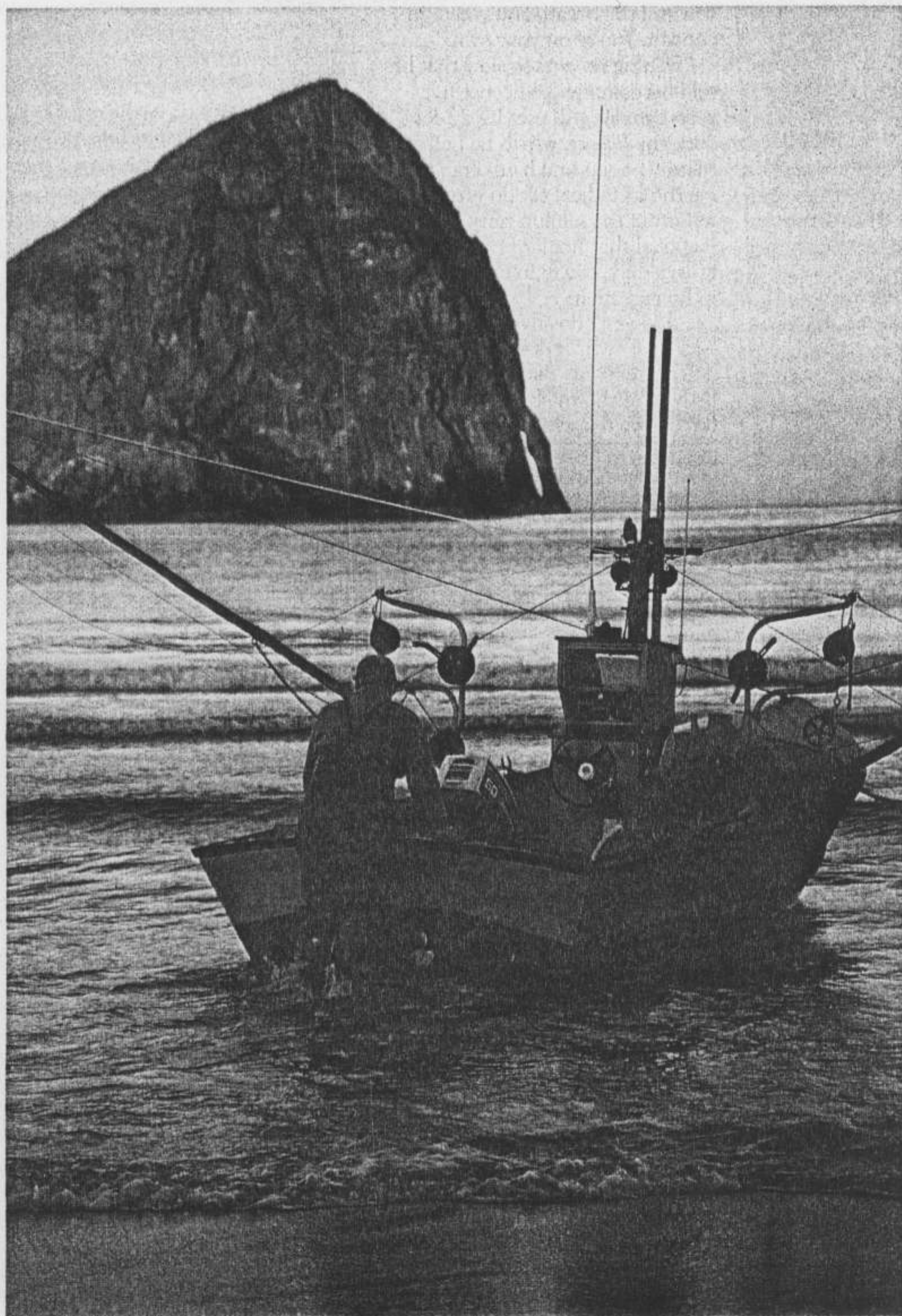
Photo by Charles B. Summers

*Launching through the surf with Haystack Rock in the distance.*

died in the surf, as far as anyone can remember, although there have been plenty of spills. These often result in broken egos and occasionally boats, but rarely bones.

Jack steadfastly continues to row through the surf and says he's never flipped. He doesn't look for danger, but he doesn't mind it. "It's fun. No problem. Because you're the guy that's in control," he says. "Somebody else can't kill you. It's you and the ocean, and you're in control. You're on your own."

Fishing became so slow that he sold his commercial license five years ago. He still uses his 22-foot dory, the *Flipper*, which he built. Mainly he sets and hauls crab traps. He thinks radical action is needed to restore the salmon runs, but he's skeptical that humans can manage it. In a dory, you're in control. But in human affairs . . .

"It doesn't do any good to look back," he says. "It doesn't make any difference to me. But it will to somebody. I caught my share of fish. Ah, boy! It was fun while it lasted." □

Daniel Lindley is a Eugene freelance writer. He dug clams commercially as a teenager on Long Island and continues to dig them for pleasure on the West Coast.

## Forklifts to Fishing

A few dorymen scratch out more or less of a living from the sea. But most are sportfishermen or part-time commercial fishermen, like Don White, who fixes forklifts in the Portland suburbs. There was a glorious boom in the late 1960s and early '70s when White got started. Unlike Gilman, he and his partner didn't grow up in the craft. But the old-timers helped them out. Every time they got their truck stuck in the sand attempting to launch at Pacific City, some fisherman with a quizzical grin would tow them out.

And the salmon seemed to be everywhere. White and his partner trailered their dory up and down the Oregon Coast, following not only the schools of salmon but the seasons decreed by the bureaucrats. "We lived like gypsies," he recalls fondly. At Cape Kiwanda, "there used to be a show all day." Hundreds of trucks and trailers raced up and down the beach. Dories peeled off into the gray dawn and wallowed back laden with bright fish in the evening. At the time, a commercial license sold for $4500. Lately they've been going for about $100.

It wasn't just the money, White says, but it wasn't just the fishing, either. It was more than sport, beyond mere commerce. "It's not just the being and the catching. That's all great. But you get to the end of the day, and you have a marketable product that puts a few bucks in your pocket, and that's just the frosting on the cake. That's kind of what it's all about. Kind of." Nowadays, he fishes when he can. Some day the salmon may be back. Meanwhile, there are the forklifts. □

—D.L.

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