

# Pacific Northwest Quarterly

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# For the Love of It

## A Short History of Commercial Fishing in Pacific City, Oregon

Joseph E. Taylor III

*I wish I was a fisherman tumblin'  
on the seas,  
far away from dry land and its bitter  
memories,  
casting out my sweet line with abandonment  
and love.  
No ceiling bearing down on me save the starry  
sky above.*

—Waterboys, "Fisherman's Blues"

Fishermen are often romanticized, as the above passage implies: they are lonely wanderers separated from the trials of life encountered on "dry land." To a commercial fisherman or even someone casually acquainted with the fishing industry, stereotypes seem naïve at best. An examination of the evolving fishery of the Nestucca River and the Pacific Ocean near Pacific City, Oregon, and the careers of seven local fishermen reveals the struggle associated with the calling and the necessity for innovation and adaptation to the changing political, technological, and economic environment. From river netters to ocean trollers, theirs is a story of both persistence and change.

The Nestucca River is located at the southern end of Tillamook County on the Oregon coast. The land has a varied topography of steep, forested hills and mountains running eastward from the beaches all the way to the western reaches of the Willamette Valley. A series of creeks, rivers, and floodplains cleaves the Coast Range and constitutes the Nestucca river system. Along the tidal zone lie two population centers that were important to the evolving commercial salmon-fishing industry of the area: Woods—Ocean Park (the name Ocean Park was later changed to Pacific City) on the Nestucca, and Oretown near the Little Nestucca River and Nestucca Bay.

Historically, the streams that compose the Nestucca river system—the Nestucca, Little Nestucca, and Three Rivers—together with a multitude of secondary creeks, have had excellent salmon runs. The Nestucca Indians, along with some Tillamook, Clatsop, and Nehalem, had a well-established fish culture in the basin until Anglo-Americans entered the area in the early 1850s. The Indians employed traditional coastal techniques for harvesting the salmon: traps, woven gill nets, spears, and hooks

and lines. In addition, they practiced a superstitious form of resource conservation by observing the "law of the pelican," which forbade capture of salmon in the bays and rivers prior to the arrival of pelicans at midsummer. This tradition allowed enough salmon to escape upstream each year to insure a full crop of spawners for the next generation.<sup>1</sup>

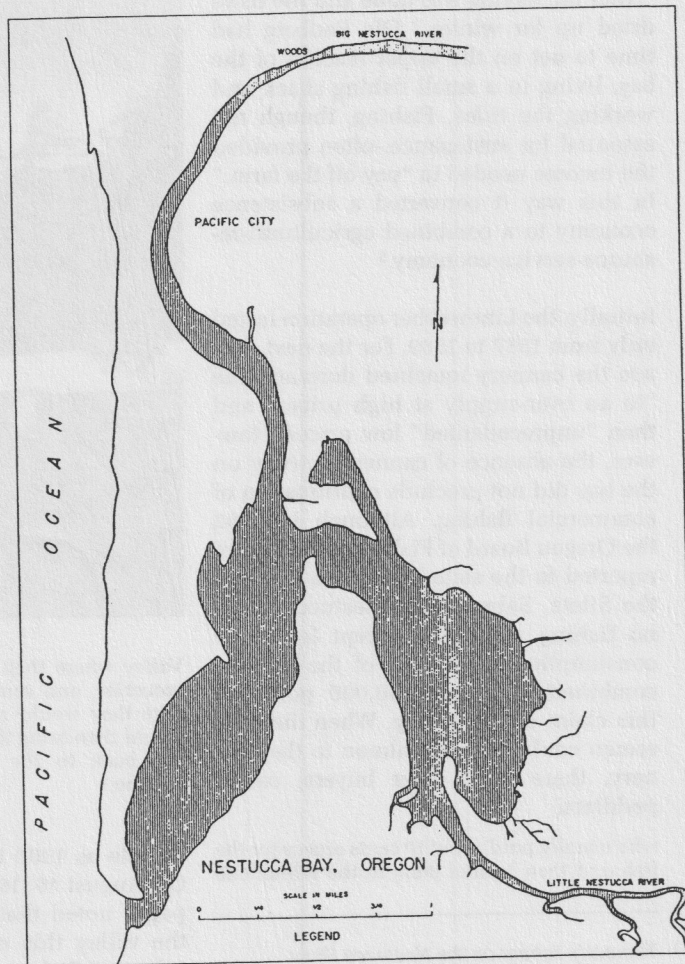
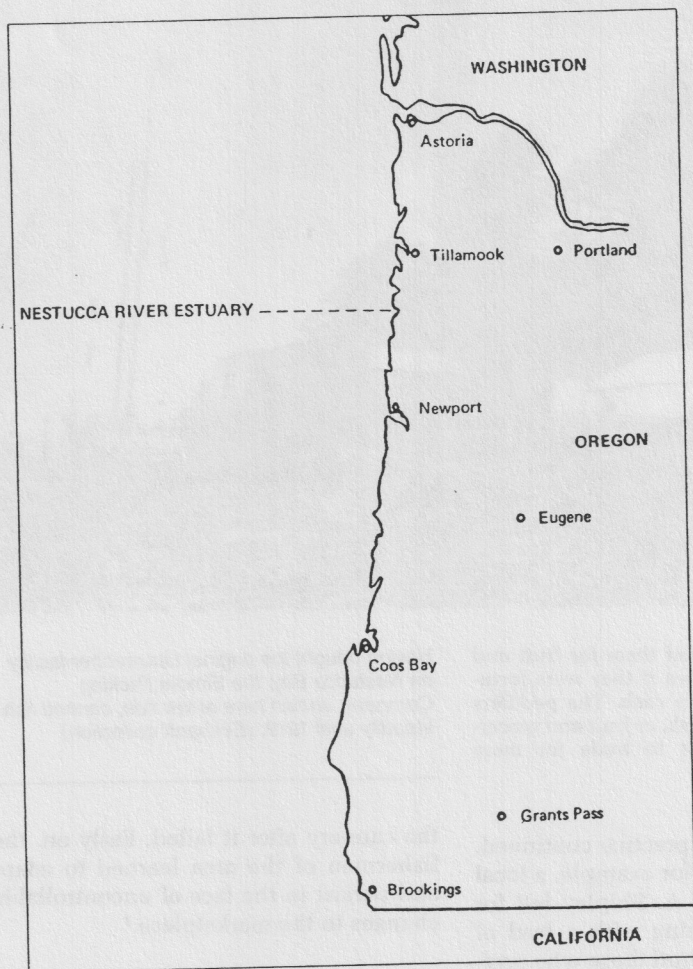
A treaty in 1855 relegated the Indians to a reservation in the Little Nestucca River valley, but by 1876 this agreement was abrogated in favor of white settlement of the basin. During the spring of that year, a group of men from Oregon City traveled from Grand Ronde over the old Gaudy Trail, an early route to the Little Nestucca Valley, to file on homesteads. In June, under pressure from the United States government, the Nestucca vacated the valley. They departed by canoe, paddling downriver, over the ocean bar, and south to the Salmon River. By 1877 a school was opened, and by the next year a post office was established for Oretown, which be-

1. Lloyd McKillip, "A Short History of South Tillamook County" (1984), 1, Tillamook County Pioneer Museum (TCPM), Tillamook, Oreg.; John Sauter and Bruce Johnson, *Tillamook Indians of the Oregon Coast* (Portland, Oreg., 1974), 54-62, 117-18. The pelican tradition was first recorded in Warren N. Vaughn, "Early Settlement of Tillamook County, Oregon: 1851-1858" (1890), 28, TCPM.

2. McKillip, 1; Stephen Dow Beckham, "Cascade Head and the Salmon River Estuary: A History of Indian and White Settlement" (1975), 19-22, University of Oregon Library, Eugene; Alexandria Rock, "Short History of the Little Nestucca River Valley and Its Early Pioneers" (1949), 45-46, TCPM.

3. McKillip, 1; Rock, 4.

4. Courtland L. Smith, *Fish or Cut Bait* (Corvallis, Oreg., 1977), 5; *idem*, *Salmon Fishers of the Columbia* (Corvallis, 1979), 17-18, 21, 53; Clark Patrick Spurlock, "A History of the Salmon Industry in the Pacific Northwest," M.S. thesis (University of Oregon, 1940), 124 (qtn.); John Ernest Damron, "The Emergence of Salmon Trolling on the American Northwest Coast: A Maritime Historical Geography," Ph.D. dissertation (University of Oregon, 1975), 22. For a history of a salmon fishery on another Oregon river, see Gordon B. Dodds, *The Salmon King of Oregon: R. D. Hume and the Pacific Fisheries* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1959).



came the first official settlement in the Nestucca region.<sup>2</sup>

With the removal of the Indians, pressure on the Nestucca fishery was reduced. The Indian dietary emphasis on salmon was much greater than that of the white settlers, who were beginning to import cattle and to plant grains to supplement their diet. So relocation of the fishing-dependent Nestucca, combined with an initially smaller white presence, must have proved a boon to the salmon. After 1876 the salmon runs of the river system likely burgeoned due to decreased human predation and increased spawning rates, but that changed when the Linewebber and Brown Packing Company decided to build a cannery on Nestucca Bay adjacent to Oretown in 1886.<sup>3</sup>

The building of the cannery on Nestucca Bay was not an isolated business venture but part of a coast-wide trend in the salmon-canning industry. William Hume, George W. Hume, and Andrew S. Hap-

good developed commercial salmon canning on the West Coast in 1864 on the Sacramento River. However, within two years the trio decided to move operations north to the Columbia River because of depleted salmon runs on the Sacramento resulting from hydraulic mining, overfishing, and stream obstructions. Success on the Columbia rapidly increased pressure on its salmon runs as well. During 1873 there were 7 canneries operating on the Columbia. Two years later there were 14 canneries, by 1880 there were 35, and by 1883 there were 40. One Hume brother foresaw this trend and its subsequent impact as early as 1876. R. D. Hume "feared that the river was being fished out and accordingly he established the first cannery on a minor stream, the Rogue River, and made his first pack there in 1877." His success initiated a rush: canneries on Oregon coastal streams increased to 13 by 1888. Meanwhile, canneries on the Columbia declined by half during the period between 1883 and 1889 because of sharply falling salmon harvests. The

Linewebber cannery on Nestucca Bay was just one of many coastal stream ventures by Columbia River canners spreading out from overfished to virgin waters.<sup>4</sup>

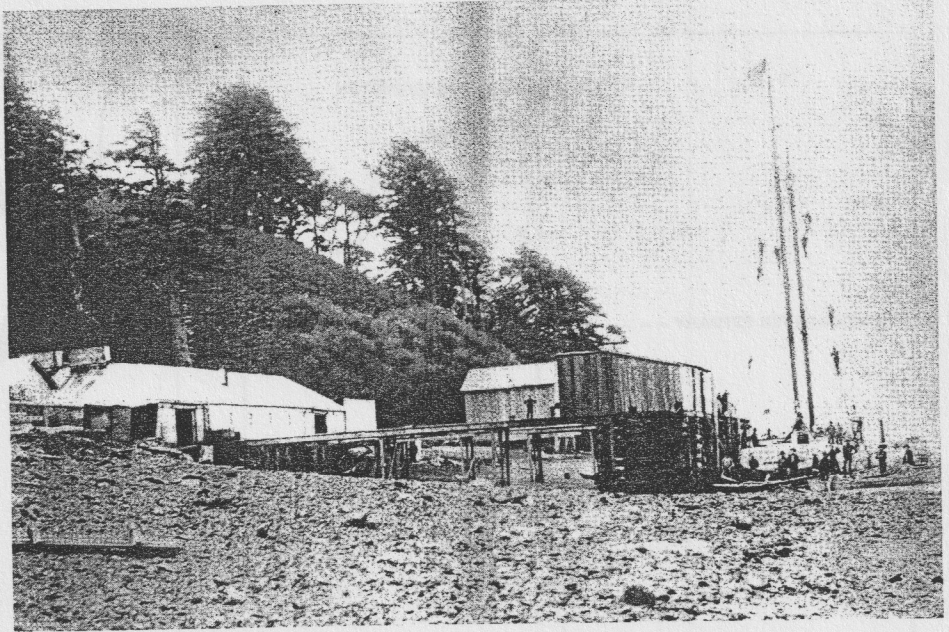
Besides being part of a regional trend, the cannery had a deep and lasting impact on the local economy. Prior to 1887 Oretown was strictly a farming center, but economic opportunities arose in support services for the new industry. Several families opened their homes: in 1887 Mrs. Sarah Boxley offered her two-story house to both male and female roomers (segregated by floors, of course), and the same spring Mrs. Anna Christensen began serving meals for "cannery workers, boat crews, fishermen and people living in the neighborhood." Carpenters found work constructing living quarters for Chinese cannery workers and shacks for fishermen and their families along the bay and rivers. Soon local farmers discovered that fishing made a substantial yearly contribution to their finances.

"After the haying was done and the cows dried up for winter," Ole Redberg had time to net on the upper reaches of the bay, living in a small fishing shack and working the tides. Fishing, though not essential for sustenance, often provided the income needed to "pay off the farm." In this way it converted a subsistence economy to a combined agricultural-resource-service economy.<sup>5</sup>

Initially, the Linewebber operation lasted only from 1887 to 1889. For the next decade the cannery remained dormant due "to an over-supply at high prices" and then "unprecedented" low prices. However, the absence of cannery activity on the bay did not preclude continuation of commercial fishing. Although in 1892 the Oregon Board of Fish Commissioners reported to the state legislature that "on the Siletz, Salmon, and Nestucca rivers no fishing was done except for home consumption. The catch of the streams combined may reach 50,000 pounds," this claim is misleading. When the fishermen could not sell salmon to the cannery, there were other buyers, called peddlers,

who usually paid about 10 cents apiece for the fish and then hauled them to the Willamette

*The early fishery on the Nestucca River provided supplemental income to farmers. Note net drying on rack. (Lorraine Eckhardt collection)*



Valley where they traded them for fruit and groceries, and sometimes if they were fortunate they would receive cash. The peddlers would then bring the cash, or fruit and groceries, back to the coast to trade for more salmon.<sup>6</sup>

As late as 1900 this practice continued. On August 16, 1900, for example, a local paper noted that "P. A. Shipley left for the valley this morning with a load of salmon." Fishermen and those who profited by their presence and activities sustained their livelihoods independently of

*Having bought the original Linewebber facility on Nestucca Bay, the Elmore Packing Company, shown here at low tide, canned fish steadily until 1919. (Eckhardt collection)*

the cannery after it failed. Early on, the fishermen of the area learned to adapt and persist in the face of uncontrollable changes in the marketplace.<sup>7</sup>

The cannery went back into production in 1899 as the Astor Packing Company and ran for three years. Commercial fishing continued on the Nestucca in 1902 with five dealers and 16 nets, and in 1903 with one dealer and 19 nets. Just before the 1905 season, the Elmore Packing Company purchased the cannery, renovated the facilities, and resumed canning operations, which went on until 1919 uninterrupted except for the 1909 season.<sup>8</sup>

During the years after construction of the cannery, the communities around Nestucca Bay had an influx of settlers, fishermen, and speculators. The town of Woods, two miles upstream from the bay, had been settled by John Belleque, his wife, and Joseph and Mary Woods in the early 1880s. Across the river, Thomas Malaney platted the proposed summer resort community of Ocean Park in 1884. By 1900 Woods had an established body of businesses, including a general store, a drugstore, a sawmill, a cooperage, a cabinet shop, a boatbuilding company, and

two newspapers, but Ocean Park was already a fleeting memory. Some of the lots from the original plat had been purchased, but none had actually been developed because of flooding during the winter of 1894. Gradually settlement took hold downstream, and the town of Ocean Park became today's Pacific City.<sup>9</sup>

Among the immigrants who spurred the growth of Pacific City after it was platted in 1910 was a family from Buchanan, Virginia. Syd Fisher had spent several years exploring the West Coast, and he and his family made five trips across the country before settling in Pacific City in 1912, drawn to the abundant fish and wildlife. Because of the inaccessibility of the area, the Fishers traveled from Portland to Tillamook by train, rode the stage as far as Cloverdale, and then took a boat downstream to their destination. Walt Fisher, his two brothers, and their mother arrived at a town that was "all a dairy farm," and the family's first residence was the Ferry Building, the hub of town activity.<sup>10</sup>

*Enterprising and adaptable, Syd and Walt Fisher cleared land and pastured animals in addition to fixed- and drift-net fishing on the Nestucca. (Walt Fisher collection)*



Syd Fisher quickly began his career as a drift netter. He usually fished the lower river and bay and sold his catch locally. Like most fishermen, he worked the ebb tides, making one or two drifts before the water became too low to float a net. When he had picked and sorted the salmon from the net, he sold them to the cannery, the salt house, or one of the boat tenders that cruised up and down the river as a relay service between the fishermen and the cannery. In 1912 the Elmore Packing Company paid 3½ cents per pound for chinook salmon weighing over 25 pounds, 3 cents per pound for chinook under 25 pounds, 2½ cents per pound for silverside salmon (coho), and a nickel for culls (salmon that had already started to decay in fresh water). The essential cleaning, repairs, reweaving, and regular maintenance of boat and nets that are the everyday tasks of all fishermen consumed much of his nonfishing time. Sleep came at odd hours, as tides, weather, and fish migration dictated, during the season that ran from mid-July through March.<sup>11</sup>

Syd Fisher eventually purchased some pastureland south of town for penning the horses and draft animals of summertime campers. It was another way to make ends meet, and he instilled this entrepreneurial ethic in his children as well. Walt and his brothers worked with their father hauling nets on the river, tending the penned animals, and clearing timber from farmland throughout the lower valley. "A fisherman usually was a fisherman; that's about all he did was fish. Dad didn't see it that way. When the fishin' wasn't good we had a job slashing brush, clearing the land. . . . We got fifty dollars an acre and the wood for cutting and clearin' the land—all hand work."<sup>12</sup>

Walt Fisher began fishing on his own when he was 16, employing several methods in order to earn a living and, like his father, adapting to the changes and opportunities around him. He set both drift and fixed nets in the river. He and his brother Louis also speared and raked crabs in the lower bay: "We'd go down on weekends and fill up our fish box full of crabs, perhaps two hundred, and bring 'em back and land there where the bridge is now, and people would gather around. We'd sell them for a nickel apiece." Thus Walt found in sea-

sonal tourists an additional market for his catches.<sup>13</sup>

The bar at the mouth of the Nestucca River was notoriously dangerous, and several fishermen lost their lives there by drifting too far out during the ebb tides. Caught in the solid line of breakers that crossed the bar, the heavily clothed men in short-freeboard rowboats stood little chance of surviving such an encounter. Because of the dangers, men like William Scott and George Miles began rowing out from the surf-protected shore of Cape Kiwanda, one mile northwest of Pacific City, before 1900. The easily accessible ocean reefs north of the cape and around Haystack Rock were rich with lingcod

5. Rock, 13, 42 (1st qtn.); Ralph and Marie Redberg interview, Cloverdale, Oreg., Sept. 10, 1989 (2d qtn.). All interviews cited herein were conducted by the author, who retains the tapes.

6. *Third and Fourth Annual Reports of the State Board of Fish Commissioners to the Governor of Oregon, 1889-1890* (Salem, 1891), 37 (1st qtn.)—although subsequent reports had varying titles, within this essay these documents will be designated fish commission report with appropriate year; *ibid.*, 1897, p. 31 (2d qtn.), 1892, p. 34 (3d qtn.); Ada M. Orcutt, *Tillamook: Land of Many Waters* (Portland, 1951), 186 (last qtn.).

7. John N. Cobb, *Pacific Salmon Fisheries*, 4th ed., U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Report of the Commissioner of Fisheries for 1930, App. 13, Bureau of Fisheries Doc. 1092 (Washington, D.C., 1930), 566; *Ocean Wave* (Woods, Oreg.), Aug. 16, 1900.

8. Fish commission reports for 1900, p. 64, 1902, p. 133, and 1903, p. 66; Cobb, 566.

9. McKillip, 3-4.

10. Walt and Si Fisher interview, Woods, Sept. 6, 1989. Walt proved to be the last surviving fisherman from the net-fishing era of the Nestucca River and the only remaining firsthand source of information about those days due to a dearth of written material by either participants or contemporary chroniclers.

11. Fisher interview; Lloyd McKillip interview, Cloverdale, Sept. 10, 1989; Oren Burke interview, Cloverdale, Sept. 8, 1989; Redberg interview. Some information on the rhythm of the fishing season was extrapolated from or confirmed by a collection of the Redbergs' Elmore cannery fish tickets from 1912 and 1918.

12. Fisher interview.

13. *Ibid.*

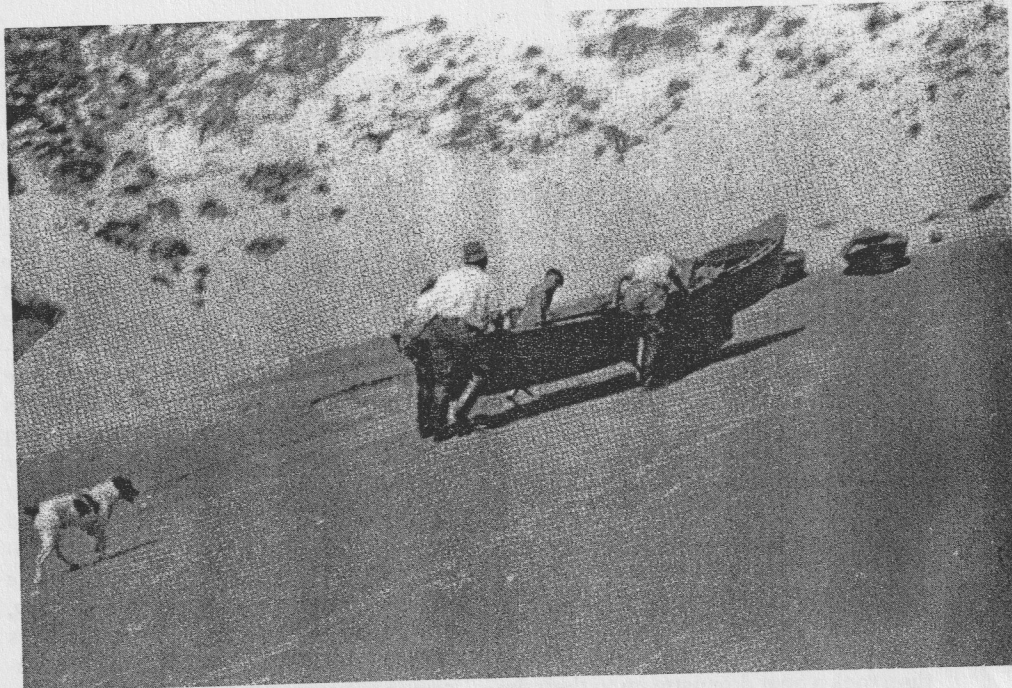
*Cape Kiwanda fishermen daily hauled their dories across the sand between the creek and the ocean; here they roll one on a barrel.*  
(W. Fisher collection)

and ocean bass. Peddlers bought these fish, packed them in ferns, and transported them to Willamette Valley markets; during the summer, campers provided an additional fresh fish market.<sup>14</sup>

Following the lead of Scott, Miles, and others, Walt Fisher rowed passengers on his ocean trips for \$2 a head. Confident in his abilities and the productive reefs, he guaranteed his customers fish (one day he brought in three boatloads), including salmon when he "knew they was around." Though he could make trips only when the weather and surf allowed, he was still able to improve his financial situation by adapting to a set of local factors that presented a market opportunity but required an innovative approach.<sup>15</sup>

On occasion Fisher and several others would row 12 miles north of Cape Kiwanda to Cape Lookout to try the northern reefs. Rowing such distances was extraordinary even then, but there was no other method but oars; oars took the fisherman everywhere, on the ocean or the river. Walt Fisher married another fisherman's daughter when he was 18, and oars even carried him to her. Courtship meant rowing from Pacific City to the cannery (about three miles downstream), hiking over the hill to Oretown, and then making the return trip at the end of the evening. "That made a pretty good night out of it, and sometimes the tide wasn't right either," he remarked.<sup>16</sup>

Later on, Fisher, who had begun to raise mink, also caught ocean bottom fish for feed, selling the excess to other mink ranchers. He expanded his feed business by building an icehouse and storing surplus fish and dead calves from nearby dairy farms. This sort of enterprise was essential in a local economy that involved very little intercourse with the world beyond the valley. There were no improved roads into the area until the mid-1920s, so supplies for the communities and cannery came by wagon over poor roads or by steamer (chiefly the *Delta* and the *Gerald "C"*) across the treacherous bar. Accordingly, these were also



the only means of exporting the local products: fresh, canned, and salted fish, cheese, and, of minor importance, lumber.<sup>17</sup>

During the period between 1910 and the mid-1920s, Pacific City remained primarily a fishing community. Lack of economic diversification might have resulted in severe hardship after the Elmore cannery closed in 1919, but the community did not fold; it simply adjusted. Art Edmunds had for some time salted fish commercially in Woods, and Bill Gage operated the salt house upstream from the Ferry Building in Pacific City for the Burke Fish Company of Portland. Salmon once destined for cans was now salted and stored in barrels called tierces. Peddlers continued to buy and transport fish to the Willamette Valley for the fresh fish market. Additionally, the summer campgrounds and a local hot springs operated by the Brooten family (the Brooten boys also netted salmon on the nearby bay) still filled Pacific City with summertime tourists and potential customers for the fishermen.<sup>18</sup>

Walt Fisher was well prepared for most changes in the fishing economy. He continued to carry passengers on his ocean trips, run his nets in the river, and supply fish, which he ground into meal, to

mink ranches. But on February 24, 1927, House Bill 282, introduced by two representatives from Yamhill County, was signed into law; commercial salmon fishing and all use of nets were declared illegal on the Nestucca River and on the bay as well. Willamette Valley sportsmen wishing to have the waters to themselves thus tore local fishermen from their livelihood. The *Oregon Voter*, an independent Portland journal of state legislative activity, commented on the bill:

*Persistent and effective effort on the part of organized sportsmen, operating through the state game commission and allied clubs, forced the passage of the bill. . . . it is argued that the interest of the entire people of the state, represented, we presume, by the interests of the sportsmen, is paramount in impor-*

14. Cloverdale Courier, Oct. 8, 1915; *Ocean Wave*, Aug. 16, 1900.

15. *Tillamook Headlight*, July 8, 1915; Fisher interview.

16. Fisher interview.

17. *Ibid.* For more on the early growth of Tillamook County and its dependence on remote markets, see Vaughn; [Lila V. Cooper Boge, comp.], *Tillamook History* (Tillamook, 1975); *Tillamook Memories* (Tillamook, 1972); and [Lila V. Cooper Boge, comp.], *Tillamook, Lest We Forget* (Tillamook, 1979).

18. Fisher interview; Evelyn Rock interview, Oretown, Oreg., Sept. 13, 1989.

tance to the interests of the local fishermen. . . . So runs the argument, but we are not, in this case, much impressed by it. . . . The question may properly be raised as to just why the right of some people to make a legitimate living should be cramped by the desire of a relatively few men to flick a fly or cast a spoon.<sup>19</sup>

Affected fisherman formed a committee and circulated petitions statewide to challenge the law in a special election, and they succeeded in gathering enough signatures to qualify for the June ballot. But the referendum was turned down by 6,132 votes. Overwhelming resistance came from Clackamas, Marion, Multnomah, Polk, Washington, and Yamhill counties—all located in the Willamette Valley, and none with a vested interest in the economy of the Nestucca basin. In Walt Fisher's own words, "After they closed the river there was none of us that made a living [at fishing], but some of us fished."<sup>20</sup>

Fisher was one who continued to fish, both legally and illegally. Other coastal streams were still open to net fishing, so he took his equipment and worked Tillamook Bay and the Siletz River during the next several years to make ends meet. But he was at a disadvantage on those waters. It takes years to learn the best drifts and optimal times on any given river, because each has its own unique characteristics, and the best sets are secrets closely guarded by fishermen who have worked hard to learn them. Fisher and others struggled to make a living on these unfamiliar streams, where it was legal to fish but unprofitable. Eventually, the temptation to ply the Nestucca got the better of several of them, and a rogue fishing cadre emerged in Pacific City, including Fisher, Victor Learned, Charlie Edmunds, Wayne and Floyd Franklin, Vern Jackson, and Clarence Holley.

Under cover of darkness a few locals would set nets in the rivers and on the bay, but it was a risky enterprise. Some of the tales that survive are hilarious; others, harrowing. On one occasion Walt Fisher and Charlie Edmunds tried to retrieve a net during the day by blocking

the road a quarter mile in either direction, while Hank White set off dynamite to create a diversion and a fourth man went into the river to secure the net. Victor Learned, Jr., remembers earning 50 cents or "a couple bottles of pop" as a boy by keeping a night watch on the riverbank; he would warn the fishermen by firing a shotgun if he saw any game wardens. "That's the way they got by," he says, "and probably would never even made a go of it, if it hadn't been for their fishin'." Many times patrolling game wardens ran off the fishermen. One night on the river, Fisher and Pat Baker were cornered by several wardens, and Walt decided to make a break for safety downstream. "I figured if I come up[stream] they'll catch me sooner or later because they could follow the river all the way, so I headed for the bay. And as I went under the bridge . . . I could see spurl away where the bullet hit the water."<sup>21</sup>

Since there was no local buyer, the fishermen found several other markets for their illegal catch. They either took their fish to the canneries still operating on Tillamook Bay or hauled them to Portland and sold them under the counter. But it was a losing battle. Only a few managed to hang on during the depression of the 1930s; most simply packed up and left. A core of local fishermen continued to practice their calling and eventually bested adversity by innovating dory fishing near Cape Kiwanda.<sup>22</sup>

After 1927, Walt Fisher, far left, regularly took passengers with him on the ocean; he guaranteed a catch of bottom fish or salmon when schools were present. (W. Fisher coll.)



19. Oregon, *Journals of the Senate and House* (Salem, 1927), 61, 615; *Oregon Voter* (Portland), Vol. 49 (June 18, 1927), 29-30.

20. Oregon *General Laws* (Salem, 1927), chap. 189, sec. 100, pp. 219-20; see 1927 Referendum Petition for "Nestucca Fish Closing Law" (chap. 189, H.B. 282, 34th Legislative Assembly) Filed May 27, 1927, and Voter Abstracts for the June 28, 1927, Oregon Special Election, both in Oregon State Archives, Salem; Fisher interview.

21. Victor Learned, Jr., interview, Woods, Sept. 8, 1989; Fisher interview.

22. For accounts of the attempts to restore the net fishery, see Oregon, *Journals*, 1931, 1933, 1935 (see Nestucca Bay fishing); *Oregon Voter*, Vol. 80 (March 9, 1935), 17. For a similar situation in Puget Sound, see "An Outrageous Proposal," *Pacific Fisherman*, Vol. 25 (February 1927), 18-19; Fisher interview.



Ernest Gilman was raised in Willamina, Oregon, in the early 1900s, but work and an employer's daughter brought him west across the Coast Range to Woods as a young man. Working for George Miles, Brick Gilman (he got the name Brick for his red hair) fell in love with Miles's daughter, Elsie. Courting her involved a two-day walk from Willamina to Woods by trail. During his stays with the Mileses, Elsie's brothers, Clint and Dick, introduced him to fishing. The Miles boys ran nets in the river and, on occasion, launched a boat from McPhillips Beach, just north of Cape Kiwanda. Following their lead, Brick Gilman soon became one of the first to row through the surf at the cape in a small dory. From that time on, he made his living fishing, both as a commercial fisherman on the ocean and river all summer and fall, and as a river guide for sportfishermen during the winter.<sup>23</sup>

After commercial fishing was prohibited on the Nestucca, emphasis gradually shifted to Cape Kiwanda for the few fishermen who remained. Brick Gilman, Walt Fisher and his brother Louis, Pat Baker, Al Southmayd, Elmer Hunter, Enis Turner, Pete Belleque, and Norman and Elwood Reddikopp turned to dory fishing off the beach. For the most part, they concentrated on bottom fish—greenling, rockfish, and cabezone—for the mink ranch market. Fisher and the Reddikopps had their own ranches to supply; Gilman, who did not, was dependent on market demand to a greater extent than the others. Still, because of the number of mink ranches in the area, he usually found a buyer for his catch.<sup>24</sup>

The Cape Kiwanda dory itself was an evolved boat form. Though no one knows exactly where the design originated, the general consensus is that it emulated the traditional New England cod boats used for centuries on the northwestern Atlantic. The first Kiwanda dories were constructed of spruce planking obtained from a box factory south of Tillamook. The planks were butted and caulked together on the sides and bottom, and they had to be kept wet for the seams to swell shut. This need led to an important but comical struggle among the few fishermen of the cape: "There used to be quite a crick that run out there on the beach right by the Cape, and used to pert

near fight just to get to putting your boat in the crick. You'd set it in the crick, so it wouldn't dry out."<sup>25</sup>

In a fishery without benefit of a deep-water harbor or other mooring place, the local fishermen had to adapt. Each spring they hauled their dories across the sand peninsula that separates the Nestucca from the ocean and stored them between trips in the creek on the beach at Cape Kiwanda until fall weather dictated the end of ocean fishing for the year. Another adaptation stemmed from the introduction of outboard motors in the mid-1930s: wells were built inside the dories so engines could be operated for trolling. However, the motor had to be removed for travel through the surf, because a boat propelled by an 8- to 10-horsepower outboard was not as strong, as quick, or as maneuverable in waves as one being rowed. Using the small, spring-fed creek and building engine wells were just two of the pragmatic solutions that fishermen devised for the numerous problems confronting them.<sup>26</sup>

Brick and Elsie Gilman's third son, Jack, was born May 18, 1926, in Woods. Except for military service, he never left the area, and like his father, he always was, at least in part, a fisherman. He began fishing as an extra hand with his father and older brother when he was six. During the depression, Brick guided sport-fishing trips on the river and ocean, while Jack and his oldest brother, Warren, who was born in one of the fishermen's shacks on the bay near the cannery, would do what they could to help make ends meet. Lingcod sold for half a cent per pound, but there was no local buyer for ocean-caught salmon after the river was closed. Warren often took a day's catch, loaded it in his car, and drove inland to Sheridan where he tried to sell the salmon for 50 cents apiece. He would "usually end up having to give half of them away or trade for corn or strawberries or something. The people didn't have fifty cents. . . . [Fishermen] made their livin' however they could."<sup>27</sup>

After being released from the service in 1946, Jack Gilman fished with Warren out of Newport on a troller. The following spring he built a 19-foot dory with troller-type poles—an innovation that spread his fishing gear to cover more

ocean. He remembers that "they all made fun of me: 'Look at this kid; he thinks he's got a troller.' It beat having two lines hanging off the oarlocks." Most agreed, and soon everyone was using troller poles. Jack Gilman learned boatbuilding as a boy by watching his dad make some of the first dories in the area. Over the years he built up to five boats a winter in his spare time, for himself and others, and some of them are still in use today.<sup>28</sup>

The process of fishing was labor intensive and dangerous. The fishermen arrived at the cape early each morning from town on foot or by horse, or later in crude sand buggies, and they carried or rolled their dories on barrels from the creek down to the water. Once they had maneuvered their boats through the surf, they installed the outboard motors and prepared to troll. Each man readied two sets of woven cotton lines, attaching bait and five-, four-, or three-pound lead balls, and dropped them over the sides. As fish were hooked, the fisherman stopped the boat and hauled in the lines by hand. Using this method, Jack Gilman and others could fill a dory with bottom fish or perhaps catch 20 to 50 coho when schools were around. The end of the day meant another risky foray through the surf, this time rowing boats weighted down with fish. The men then loaded their catch into wagons or the backs of

23. Jack Gilman interview, Cloverdale, Sept. 8, 1989.

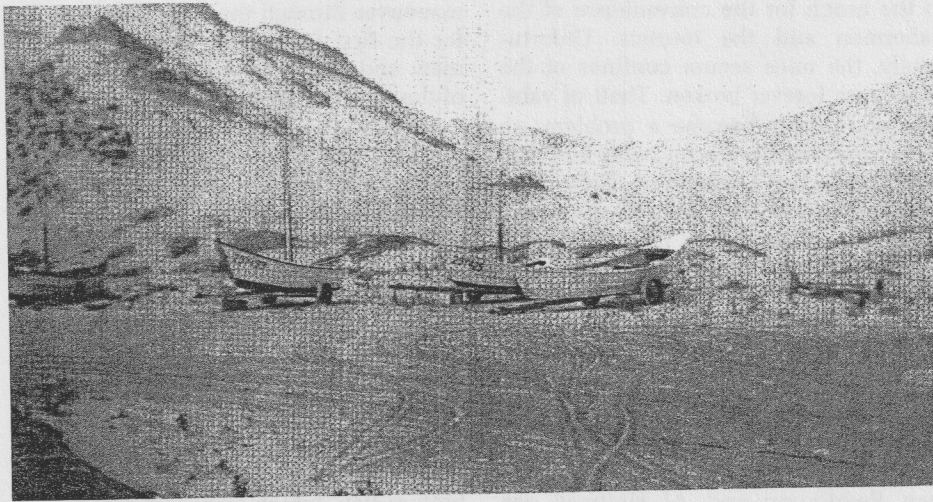
24. *Ibid.*, Oct. 15, 1989. Mink ranching was pioneered in the area by Walt Fisher and others. It grew to be, and still is, a minor industry there, and the ranchers became stable buyers of lingcod and ocean bass caught by local dorymen until the advent of ocean trawling in the late 1930s caused the price of bottom fish to fall drastically and drive the dorymen out of that fishery.

25. Gilman interview, Sept. 8, 1989.

26. The older dories retained the essential style of the New England design, having two high-raked bows and incredible buoyancy. Later design changes squared the stern and reduced the rake to accept an outboard motor and to improve the dory's planing ability.

27. Gilman interview, Sept. 8, 1989 (qtn.); Andrew Kershaw interview, Oak Grove, Oreg., Dec. 23, 1989; Fisher interview.

28. Gilman interview, Sept. 8, 1989.



Once there was road access to the cape, dorymen adapted to theft of equipment by trailering the boats they formerly left on the beach overnight. (Victor Learned, Jr., coll.)

buggies, carried their dories back up to the creek, and made the return trip to Pacific City, where a buyer might or might not be.<sup>29</sup>

Radios, flares, and life preservers were not yet commonly used. An accident at sea or in the surf was a lonely crisis, because there was no way to call for help, so the close-knit group of fishermen stuck together when fishing or rowing. Hauling fish in hand over hand and negotiating the surf in a double-ended dory, now low in the water, with only 6 to 18 inches of freeboard, were demanding and dangerous tasks, and exhaustion became an extra factor operating against the fisherman's safety. Tired arms and poor judgment could easily endanger a man rowing through tricky surf at the end of a long day. Romanticized images of care-free fishermen ignore the omnipresent stresses and perils of working on the sea.<sup>30</sup>

Methods changed little during the first era of ocean fishing. Hand-tended cotton lines, multiple small weights, double-ended dories powered by oars and small outboards characterized Cape Kiwanda fishing. The fleet numbered around 10 or 12 boats throughout the forties. Fishing was a cozy though unsustaining enterprise. Jack Gilman has remarked, "I always thought I could catch about as

many fish as anyone, and I never tried to make a living at it." This underscores a basic fact of fishing since the river closure in 1927. The relatively short ocean season available to small boats on the Oregon coast has precluded the doryman from making commercial fishing his sole source of income. Conversely, this income from fishing has represented a significant portion of a family's financial resources and often substantially improved its standard of living. Gilman always had another job to go along with his fishing, but perhaps it is more accurate to say that he always had his fishing to augment his other jobs. Says he, "If I was gonna make [fishing] my number one source of income, I'd [have] never done it in a rowboat."<sup>31</sup>

Victor Learned, Sr., was born in Denver, Colorado, February 22, 1891. In 1902 his mother and stepfather brought him to what would become Pacific City but was still called Ocean Park, and in 1903 the family settled on land between Woods and Cloverdale. At age 16 Learned began pulling nets on the Nestucca for a fisherman, but later that fall he and his brother, Alva, began drift-net fishing on the lower river for themselves. Like Syd Fisher, Ole Redberg, and others, the Learned brothers sold fish to the Elmore Packing Company. They got 2½ cents a pound for 14 tons of chinook salmon and 1½ cents a pound for 6 tons of coho. They made \$880 their first season.<sup>32</sup>

After 1910 Victor Learned owned and operated a soda fountain and pool hall in

Cloverdale, but he continued to fish the river commercially. In 1917 he enlisted in the army and was sent to Fort Columbia, Washington, for training, but his unit was never transferred to Europe. While stationed in Washington, he married his sweetheart, Grace Edmunds, whose four brothers were fishermen, and on his release the two settled down to run the soda fountain and a sporting goods store. Soon the couple sold out and bought farmland south of Cloverdale. There they began clearing the land and raising dairy cows.<sup>33</sup>

Learned continued to fish as well as farm. During the fishing season he and his wife lived in a shack alongside the Elmore cannery on Nestucca Bay. It was there, on November 21, 1919, that their first son, Victor, Jr., was born. Young Victor learned to pull nets for his father, and after the river was closed he helped watch for game wardens. He also watched four of his uncles leave the area after 1927 to continue their fishing careers, while his father and a handful of local men forged the dory tradition at Cape Kiwanda. The boy took his first fishing trip on the ocean when, camping near Cape Lookout, he had a chance encounter with Walt and Louis Fisher, Floyd Franklin, and Vern Jackson, who were fishing overnight nearby in their dories.<sup>34</sup>

On graduating from high school in 1938, Victor Junior made his first stab at commercial fishing. He and two cousins rented a dory and bought a commercial license for \$5: "We never sold a fish, but I took a lot of friends out sportfishing that summer." They returned the boat in the fall and paid the rent on it. Not until 1948 did he, his brother Edmund, and his

29. Fisher interview; Kershaw interview.

30. Kershaw interview.

31. Gilman interview, Oct. 15, 1989.

32. Learned interview; *Tillamook, Lest We Forget*, 136 (Learned's birthday is erroneously recorded as 1892).

33. *Tillamook, Lest We Forget*, 136-37.

34. Learned interview.

brother-in-law, Walt Caspell, again attempt commercial salmon fishing. They successfully experimented with fishing techniques, among them trolling tuna jigs and using a dip net to bring the fish into the boat. The trio fished together until 1952 when Edmund Learned left to work for Boeing in Seattle and Caspell turned his attention strictly to farming. Victor fished alone for the first time, in a classic double-ended, spruce-planked dory powered by an 8.5-horsepower outboard. The fleet still consisted of only about a dozen boats, with a regular contingent of six or seven. Yet time was altering the old ways. Plywood was a recent innovation in boatbuilding, and Andy Kershaw and Warren Gilman had the new wooden boats. Storing plank-bottomed dories in the creek became unnecessary as they were replaced by craft with bottoms made of a single sheet of wood.<sup>35</sup>

Change and innovation continued, both on the shore and on the water through the 1950s and 1960s. Road extensions brought better access to the cape, but this proved a mixed blessing for the fish-

ermen. Fish buyers moved out from town to the beach for the convenience of the fishermen and the tourists. Unfortunately, the once secure confines of the cape were forever broken. Theft of valuable equipment became a problem, so fishermen had to remove poles and motors nightly for safekeeping. Soon they removed the dories themselves, transporting them on trailers to and from the cape.<sup>36</sup>

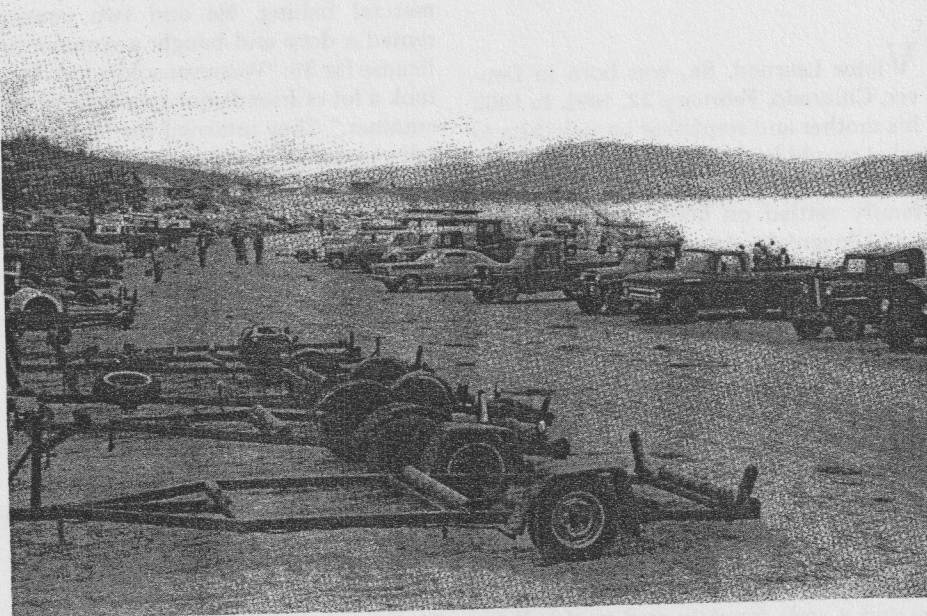
Fishing gear changed as well. Old-style cotton line gave way to stronger wire line and hand-crank gurdies, outboard motors increased in power, and the dory underwent a radical design change. Norman Reddikopp and Al Hoffman are credited with being the first to give up the old handline method for wire line on a hand-turned spool. They employed 20-pound lead cannonballs to carry their gear far deeper and retrieve it with greater efficiency than ever before. Manufacturers offered more powerful outboard engines, and soon 15- and 20-horsepower motors led to drastic alteration of the dory itself. When Lloyd Boylan, a local fisherman, came to Howard Kellow with a request for a double-ender, Kellow suggested building a square stern. By placing the engine at the rear of the dory instead of in a central well, the boat would be easier to steer. And greater

horsepower would enable fishermen to maneuver through the surf under power for the first time. Walt Fisher, Jack Gilman, and others were initially skeptical of the new design, but they all converted quickly.<sup>37</sup>

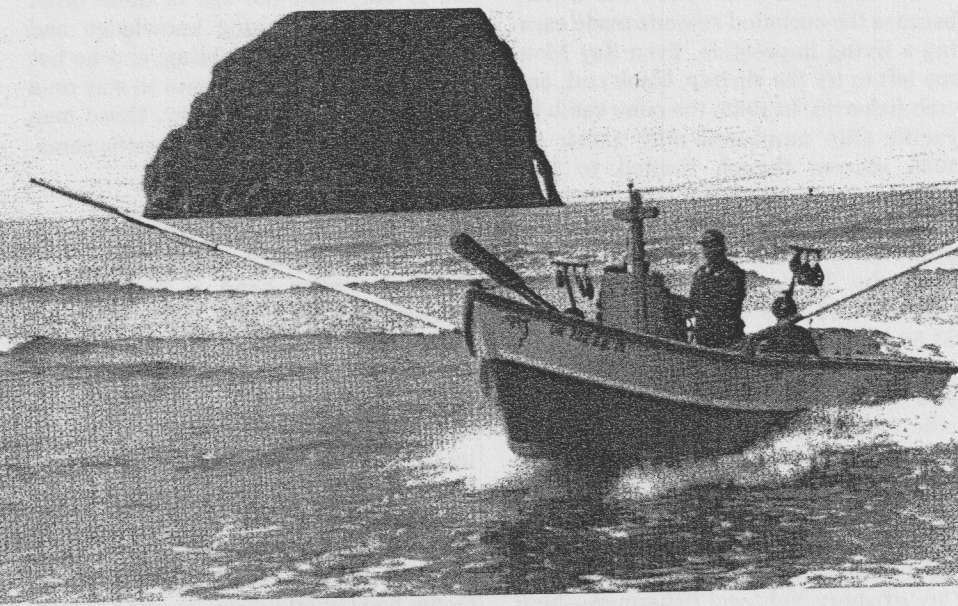
Victor Junior was among those who adopted the square stern. The design revolutionized the fishery: it facilitated use of bigger engines, which increased the speed and range of the dory, and eventually ushered in hydraulic-powered gurdies, inboard engines, and sophisticated electronics. Each advance bore a larger price tag, but fish prices did not keep pace. In 1952, salmon commanded between 18 and 22 cents per pound, and bottom fish, which were still purchased occasionally by the local mink ranchers, 2½ cents. In the following years, though prices increased, they did not offset the rising costs of fishing. By 1969, fishermen received 60 cents per pound for coho, but few were making a profit.<sup>38</sup>

Although Victor Learned, Jr., like his father, Walt Fisher, and Jack Gilman, had never depended entirely on fishing for a livelihood, he found that by the late 1950s fishing had taken an increasingly supplemental role in the family income. In 1946, he and his wife had bought a 97-acre farm just upriver from Pacific City. He worked odd jobs, felled timber, fished in the summer, and trapped in the winter to make ends meet. "Of course, it didn't take you a whole lot to live then—ten dollars then instead of a hundred now, just about." In 1955, he went to work in the Tillamook plywood mill along with Jack Gilman. He continued to fish on weekends and holidays, but every other month he had to work swing shift, which kept him off the water. The next year he did not even buy a commercial license. After the plywood mill shut down in 1961, he went back to his farm and built it into a small dairy operation. He resumed fishing, and eventually his earnings increased. Nonetheless, he kept the cows and ran the dairy with the help of his wife. In 1975, he and his son, Terry, began taking orders for dories, and thereafter, like Jack Gilman, they built a few boats every winter for the added income. In 1991, father and son were still building dories for local fishermen.<sup>39</sup>

*By the late 1960s, Cape Kiwanda fishing had changed completely; hundreds of rigs lined the beach that had in past years hosted only the tiny local fleet. (Jack Gilman collection)*



By all accounts, 1967 transformed sal-



*Pictured here in 1981 landing his high-powered, well-equipped modern boat, Jack Gilman is one of the Pacific City fishermen who adapted to changes in the fishery. (J. Gilman coll.)*

mon fishing in Pacific City. That year the coho catch jumped from 6,013 to 44,146—an incredible 734 percent increase. The success of the '67 season spurred a huge rush to the fishery over the next few years, and the dory fleet grew from about 20 in 1966 to several hundred a decade later. Just as they had in 1927, outsiders soon dominated the local fishing environment. Many entered the commercial salmon fishery for the first time after reading glowing reports of the get-rich-quick scene on the Oregon coast written by journalists like Don Holm, wildlife editor at the *Oregonian*. Vic Ferrington's production-line dory-building operation at Cape Kiwanda supplied this sudden increase in demand. The style and atmosphere of salmon fishing at the cape changed drastically after 1967. The quiet fishery that had existed from the days of William Scott in 1900 through those of Syd Fisher, Brick Gilman, Victor Learned, Sr., and their sons, had slipped away for all time.<sup>40</sup>

Ray Monroe was born August 30, 1957, and raised in Santa Monica, California. In 1969 his mother and stepfather, Judy and Darrel Landingham, left their jobs and moved Ray and his younger brothers

and sister to Woods. Having heard the fantastic reports about Pacific City's salmon boom, Landingham decided to become a fisherman; he spent the summer dory fishing to support the family, and 12-year-old Ray went to work for his grandfather, Bill ("Redeye") Wilson, as a puller, earning 1 percent of the catch. Redeye raised Ray's wages to 3 percent by the end of the summer, and the next year the boy received 6 percent. In 1973, at the age of 15, Ray was leasing dories, and he earned enough to buy his own boat in 1975.<sup>41</sup>

Ray Monroe's first seasons on the ocean were a time of growth and change for the dory fleet. Into the 1970s, technological changes in equipment made the job of catching salmon more efficient and less tiring. Fishing theory changed as well. During the late 1940s and early 1950s, Victor Learned, Jr., took the suggestion of Dutch Shermer, owner of the local sporting goods store, and began trolling tuna jigs to catch coho. During the 1960s, colored plastic squid called hoochies gained favor with the dorymen, who in 1971 improved this lure by chopping up frozen herring and placing the chunks on the hook to add a scent.<sup>42</sup>

Monroe's first fishing seasons varied greatly. In 1971, he remembers, coho brought a mere 36 cents per pound, but fishermen landed almost twice as many fish as they had the previous year. A better price and an above-average coho run

combined to make the summer of 1974 one of the most profitable ever. Two years later came the great boom: a record coho catch by the largest fleet in Cape Kiwanda history. Three rows of rigs with their trailers parked side by side on the beach for a quarter mile; 300 to 400 dories were launched every day, all summer long.<sup>43</sup>

But after all boom times comes the proverbial bust. The 1977 and 1978 seasons saw landings plummet to a third of the 1976 figures. Fishermen who bought new boats, motors, and equipment in anticipation of good times were caught in financial straits. Finally, the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) instituted a moratorium on commercial salmon-fishing licenses. No new boats were allowed to enter the fishery, and seasons were drastically cut. In 1978, the coho season lasted from June 15 to October 31, but in 1982 it was reduced to just 12 days in July. Although the coho price rose, no one made very much in so short a season. In the late 1970s, dorymen began trailering their boats to

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*, Oct. 14, 1989; Paul Hanneman interview, Woods, Sept. 6, 1989.

37. Gilman interview, Sept. 8, 1989; Learned interview, Oct. 14, 1989; Howard Kellow interview, Pacific City, Sept. 9, 1989.

38. State agencies kept no record of salmon prices prior to 1972; figures presented here come from fishermen's and fish buyers' recollections and are otherwise unverified.

39. Learned interview, Oct. 14, 1989.

40. Oregon Dept. of Fish and Wildlife, "Historical Troll Report for Coho," unpublished annual fact sheet (Portland); Gilman interview, Oct. 15, 1989; Learned interview, Oct. 14, 1989; Hanneman interview. For an example of Holm's writing, see *Portland Oregonian*, July 14, 1968, mag. sec.

41. Ray Monroe interview, Pacific City, Sept. 10, 1989.

42. Hanneman interview; Learned interview, Oct. 14, 1989; Terry Learned interview, Cloverdale, Sept. 10, 1989; Monroe interview; Judy Landingham interview, Pacific City, Dec. 26, 1989.

43. Monroe interview; Marlene Carter interview, Pacific City, Sept. 11, 1989.

other ports on the California and Oregon coasts, going where reports held promise of better fishing, and they also began fishing earlier in the year. Some Pacific City fishermen traveled as far south as Morro Bay, California, for the spring salmon season, while others ventured down their own coast for the early chinook season.<sup>44</sup>

"I still believe fish production was the number one problem," Ray Monroe observes, reflecting other dorymen's opinion. Meetings with representatives from British Columbia salmon agencies opened the eyes of many Oregon commercial salmon fishermen. "They said that in 1975 [British Columbia] was ten years behind the United States in salmon production. By 1979 they were ten years ahead of us." The improvement was brought about by intensive stream rehabilitation, efforts to enhance spawn survival, and fidelity to stream stock genetics. The British Columbia program was very similar to the Tillamook County Landowner Program, a grass-roots hatchery effort established in the mid-1970s that produced positive results that ODFW officials ignored.<sup>45</sup>

Local fishermen began to believe that state agencies were not serving their best interests. Several of them, working with a state representative, Paul Hanneman, compiled statistical information and produced two reports, the first in 1979 and the second in 1980, that amounted to a state-of-the-fishery assessment. The second, "ORCO '80," effectively addressed such issues as conflicts between commercial fishermen, the public hatchery system, private salmon ranchers, and ODFW policies. The final chapter presented 20 recommendations to the department and the Oregon legislature for improving fish production, but for the most part the report got the cold shoulder. Bureaucratic intransigence was partly to blame; the report's supporters also "had to teach the legislators the technical side of salmon before they began to fully grasp the significance of ORCO '80." In the meantime no days were allotted to Oregon commercial salmon fishermen for coho fishing in 1984. None. It appeared, as it had in 1927, that Pacific City fishermen were fighting a losing battle for their livelihood against state authorities.<sup>46</sup>

Many fishermen abandoned the fishery because the curtailed seasons made earning a living impossible. Even Ray Monroe left to try the shrimp, black cod, and crab fisheries. In 1985, the coho catch for Pacific City numbered only 1,004; the 1986 season, though limited to July, brought in 63,302 coho. The next year Monroe and others started making a profit for the first time since 1982, and in 1988 the boom returned. The price opened at \$2.50 per pound for coho and \$3.50 for chinook, and fishermen landed 68,258 coho and 6,345 chinook—the second highest total ever for chinook at Pacific City. However, the 1989 and 1990 seasons recalled the post-1976 era with subpar salmon runs and poor prices.<sup>47</sup>

Over time, much has changed in Pacific City's fishery, but local fishermen—both the old Nestucca River netters and the modern Cape Kiwanda dorymen—out of necessity have learned to adapt. Fishing remains a way of life, though it is usually not their sole source of income. When the cannery shut down and when the river and bay were closed, these men did not abandon fishing, and they did not abandon their homes. They designed new boats, waged political battles, and traveled to where they could catch salmon.

Working on a fishing boat has never been glamorous. From well before dawn until after sunset, a fisherman handles greasy, smelly fish, cuts frozen bait with numbed hands, and shivers in wet clothes. Sleep deprivation and physical exhaustion wear down his mental alertness; his body constantly aches from back strain, bruised knees, torn hands, and frequent infections from working in manmade and natural filth. Recurring political struggles add another dimension to the trials of a salmon fisherman.

But salmon fishing is a labor of love. It is a calling. Walt Fisher always took pride in his days as a netter and a doryman, in rowing to and from Cape Lookout, in filling his boat with bottom fish. Jack Gilman was always the first on the ocean before sunrise, and it seemed as if he always had a boatload of salmon. Victor Learned, Jr., has both an impeccable pedigree as a Pacific City fisherman and a commensurate talent. Though Ray Mon-

roe is only half the age of these other fishermen, his fishing knowledge and boat expertise are humbling, and he has the strength and persistence to stay on a good bite or a rough ocean. These men are proud of their work; it means something to them.

Fishermen's hands are thick, calloused, scarred, and worn from use and abuse. Often an entire hand is permanently mangled or a finger is missing, as in the cases of Ray Monroe and Victor Learned. The body shows the wear too. Jack Gilman had several disks removed from his spine, and Learned still has a badly injured shoulder from an accident with his boat in August 1989. The year before that, Gilman sold all his commercial gear, calling quits to the second longest fishing career in Pacific City. Only Walt Fisher had fished longer; he was 83 when he died in April 1990. Learned at 71 and Monroe at 33 still fish. Why do it? Gilman, now 65, came up with the best and simplest answer: "I done it because I liked to do it. It was good supplemental income." That is the heart of the work for a fisherman. To make money at something you love is like finding the key to the universe.<sup>48</sup> □

Joseph Taylor is a master's student in history at the University of Oregon, where he is exploring the social and cultural problems attendant on the declining salmon-fishing industry in the Northwest. An earlier version of the present essay led to his undergraduate honors thesis, "A Persistent Calling" (1990).

44. For catch figures, see annual "Historical Troll Report for Coho"; Carter interview.

45. Monroe interview (qtns.); David Schlip, Richard Goché, and Paul Hanneman, "ORCO '80" (Pacific City, 1980), 39-49.

46. Schlip, Goché, and Hanneman, 50-54; Terry Learned interview; Paul Hanneman telephone interview, March 20, 1990; Carter interview.

47. "Historical Troll Report for Coho"; Oregon Dept. of Fish and Wildlife, "Historical Troll Report for Chinook," unpublished annual fact sheet (Portland).

48. Gilman interview, Sept. 8, 1989.