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Herring and Pollock

William Lawrence

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Story: "Herring and Pollock"
Storyteller: William Lawrence
Town: Eastport, ME
NA1333 CD770 Track 5
Collector: Hugh French
Date: January 9, 1979

To say that "**Herring and Pollock**" is a fish story is an understatement. As a child, William Lawrence saw herring so thick in Passamaquoddy Bay that he thought one could walk on them with snowshoes. Moreover, the bay was also full of pollock chasing the herring that people grabbed the pollock with pitchforks. Lawrence took pity on some herring that had been pushed ashore and tossed them back into the water. This story sounds like a gross exaggeration, but before dismissing it entirely we should consider some facts. First, consider that this was not only a memory of what happened some eighty years earlier, but a memory of how he perceived it as a child. While the suggestion of walking on herring is far-fetched (even with snowshoes), there is little reason to believe that he fabricated or dreamt up the part about the pitchforks. This brings up a second important point: these types of stories about the abundance of nature are neither new nor limited to this instance. For a local, terrestrial example, listen to this story about how plentiful the blueberries grow on Mount Desert Island. Or check out this story collected in Illinois about fishing with a pitchfork from a boat: <http://avbarn.museum.state.il.us/viewclip/1239>. Finally, it is worth noting that while spear fishing is or was a common technique, a pitchfork was never made for that purpose and would not normally be used for fishing. However, that still does not mean this farm tool was never used for fishing. Suffice to say, what we have here is a story based in reality, with some embellishment added from the perspective of a child.

Despite the presence of humans in the story, the main characters are really the setting and the fish for which the story is named. Eastport is the easternmost city in the United States and a deep-water commercial port located on Moose Island in the Passamaquoddy Bay. The city overlooks the Old Sow Whirlpool, the largest tidal whirlpool in the Western Hemisphere, which can be seen from Eastport's Dog Island two hours before high tide. Emphasis is usually placed on the city's fishing, scallop harvesting, and lumber shipping industries, but Eastport is also the leading center of the aquaculture industry on the East Coast. Plus, blueberry and cranberry harvests are abundant in this part of Maine. Though fish stocks have dwindled since William Lawrence's childhood, meaning it is unlikely anyone would even imagine walking on the herring in Passamaquoddy Bay these days, many kinds of fish have been important to Maine's economy for a very long time. The two species mentioned in this story are quite different but linked in the food chain. Pollock can grow to over three feet long and weigh over forty pounds, but has not always been popular species to eat. For some reason, pollock developed a reputation as an "inferior" fish many years ago. However, with the overfishing of cod and haddock, pollock becoming a common alternative (and was clearly never a problem for the folks in Eastport). Herring refers to a much smaller fish more commonly called sardines, which is in turn the generic name for several saltwater fish species. In Maine, this is the Atlantic Herring, *Clupea herengus herengus*. The smallest of these herring, from five to seven inches in length, are dressed and canned as sardines, while larger fish are cut and packed as fish steaks or filleted and smoked to make kippered snacks. Herring travel in huge schools and live in the open ocean, ranging from Greenland to North Carolina, which is why Lawrence notes that some parts of the year the factories in Eastport could find a local supply and at

other times could not.

Transcript:

Now, when I was a kid, I was just going to grammar school, I used to get out of school and come up and the tide served right. And right down here around Dog Island, the herring would be, I'd make the remark that I thought the herring were so thick on the water up against the beach that you could almost walk on them with snowshoes. Well, on the outside of them was cod and big pollock, and the big pollock was chasing them, and them herring would come ashore. And I've seen people, they'd have a pitchfork with five or six tines on it, and they'd wade out as far as they could; the pollock come in, they'd stick the pitchfork in and throw 'em up the beach. I was a kid, and I'd go along these little herring, they'd be up on the rocks right along the edge of the water; I used to take pity on the fish, I'd used to pick 'em up and throw 'em back in the water. That was a certain time of year those herring would hit these places here and, of course, other times the factories didn't get any support from this local stuff.

Maine Folklife Center