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A Postcard in Time

Fish Shack Days, Seamanship Nights

by Peter H. Spectre

When I was a boy a friend of mine and I used to hang around a fish house much like the one in our postcard. We were fascinated by the fishermen and by the illustrated calendars they had hung on the walls, not to suggest that anyone, least of all us, was interested in the date, if you know what I mean.

We'd usually show up after school, just about the time when the fishermen were done for the day. They'd be sitting around smoking and drinking beer and yacking about this and that, bragging, arguing, pretending they knew something about everything but generally did not. Much of it was salty-dog talk, and most of it eluded us as we were inexperienced and didn't understand the references. We just liked the sound of their voices and the hairy-chestedness of it all.

I wish I could convey via the written word the way the fishermen talked -- their dialect, their phrasings -- but I can't. Plenty of writers, mostly novelists, have tried; most have failed. (I'm thinking of you, Dewey Lambdin, for this sentence and others like it: "Spoke'r two more'n us'll t' larb'rd, I reckon.")

There is, however, a handful of writers who can convey the voice of the vernacular via the written word -- Mark Twain, for one, and Rudyard Kipling, both of them first rank in every respect, and Maine's own Holman Day, a contemporary. Here by way of evidence is a snippet from Day's poem "The Doryman's Song":

Friskily kickin', the dories dance, churnin' the foamin' lee,

With a duck an' a dive an' a skip an' skive -- the broncos of the sea.

One winter during the height of our fish-house days I lived with my father and a couple of carpenters in a little just-barely-heated summer cottage across the road from my grandparents' house. It was what you might call simple living -- no, make it basic -- with lots of Dinty Moore's Beef Stew and B&M Baked Beans with fried Spam, and Red Cap Refresher to tone down the stale cigar smoke. In the morning, before school, I'd cross the road and eat breakfast with my grandparents. Their operation was pretty basic, too. A kerosene space heater in the kitchen, a linoleum rug on the floor, an ancient refrigerator with a rattling compressor on top; in the back room a floor-to-ceiling water

pipe that my grandpa marked as a record of my advancing height.

In the livingroom was an old, worn, sagging couch with a book holding up a corner that was missing a leg. The book, a heavy tome, was *Seamanship* by J.G. Nares, published in 1862, and one day my grandma pulled it out and replaced it with another. "It'll help you understand what the fishermen are saying," she said, giving it to me, and she was right about that. I read it until my head ached, and then read it some more.

I was talking shop many years later with another writer who like me specialized in nautical subjects. He asked how I came to learn the language of the sea. "Fish house days and Nares's *Seamanship* nights," I said, and while that might sound a tad glib, it is as close to the truth as any other explanation I might have provided.

[end]