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Morning Memory

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Morning Memory

The first rays of the sun crept silently over the mountain, making their way down the spruced slopes to the mirrored surface of Somes Sound and me. It was the summer of my fifteenth year.

The light woke the earth. First the fish. Then the gulls. Sitting alone in a skiff tied to the seine twine corks a fathom and a half below my keel, I watched it all. I heard it all. I smelled it and I felt the flowing rhythm of it. Life's birth of a new day.

The corks of the seine twine had been sunk before daylight after the fish had been shut off.

They were sunk using pairs of "bollicky" rocks. These pairs consisted of two round popple stones with a hole drilled through the center of each. Into each stone's hole an end of a fathom-long rope was inserted. A wooden shim was hammered in each hole to wedge the rope tight. A pair of these were dropped over the cork line and as many other pairs as were necessary to sink the corks deep enough to allow the herring to swim over them.

The herring were shut off earlier in the night as they swam into the cove where our dories, filled with twine, were anchored. The fish were first noticed when the black night water glowed brightly as we cruised through the cove in the bug-boat. When the man in the bow thumped on the side of the boat or when he stamped his foot on the deck, the water "fired" as the fish startled in unison. Their mass movement stirred the phosphorescence in the water and gave away their location. That fire is what we looked for as we sought the herring.

Once we found them in the cove, we would often take another pass though them with our fathometer running or perhaps with a crew member using a feeling oar to determine how many

fish were there. If the captain determined there were at least ten hogsheads in the school we ran the twine.

Running the twine consisted of getting the dories from their anchor, attaching one end of the twine to the shore on one side of the cove then towing the dory, with the twine paying out over its stern, in a long arc across the mouth of the cove, often incorporating more than one dory load of net, to the other shore of the cove. When the twine was run the cove was effectively sealed. The running twine held to the sea floor by its bottom line of lead weights and floated on the water's surface by its line of cork floats. Between the cork line and the lead line was the twine netting that was the barrier to the herrings' escape.

After the shut off was complete we fashioned a pocket, sometimes called a pound, on the outside of the running twine. It was into this pocket that we would encourage the herring to go. The basic instinct of the herring, one that has enabled them to survive for centuries, is to travel en masse to deeper water where they used to be safe from man-made traps and nets.

The herring did not know, did not even suspect, that I had lowered the corks with the bollicky rocks. They thought they were swimming to deep water as the sun came up. That's what they were supposed to do. They didn't know they were swimming into their final net trap before being pumped out of their world into the hold of the sardine carrier. Once in the hold they would be transported to the factories where they would be put into cans becoming sardines or into the bait pockets of so many thousands of lobster traps.

It is with great sadness that I note the decline of the stop seine herring fishery in Maine. For generations it existed, with its now departed herring weir cousin, as the only two practical ways to catch herring along the Maine coast. Now the purse seiners and the trawlers go off shore

to the fish rather than wait for the fish to come to shore, to them. I suppose it is more efficient and practical to catch the herring this way but it does seem to lose something in the process. Using improved technology that allows us to go get the fish where they have traditionally been able to hide has put pressures on them we did not anticipate and they cannot bear. Perhaps that is why we have had to impose catch quotas on herring and many other marine species and fishing limitations on all our fishermen.

Sitting in a skiff as dawn breaks on the surface of Somes Sound watching the life-blood of the sea flow under your keel is something I wish everyone could do...at least once. The world might be a better place.