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Lobster Fishing on the Maine Coast
Past and Present

BY DOHN A. CLUFF

THE lobster fishing industry here on the Maine coast, as elsewhere in New England, can well be called representative of the few industries in which the oldest methods are employed, side by side with the new.

With the man who rows his dory or skiff to fish his string of traps goes the earliest methods; but a few hundred yards distant will undoubtedly be one of the latest powerboats, capable of quick getaway and high speed. The modern lobsterman employs the latest of electronic devices, one of which is the depth indicator, enabling him to tell in a matter of moments whether or not he is over a suitable depth. This is a far cry, nowadays, from the time when a hand lead was all to be had. Now a man can set his traps without guesswork and be sure of the grounds he is on.

As with all of our natural resources, the lobster is now the object of conservation. Once so plentiful that in some localities the lobsters were used for fertilizer and in other places many could be picked up along the shore at low tide, they are now subject to regulations governing their size, and the female, when carrying eggs, must be returned to the water. A now obscure slang definition of the word lobster meant, at the turn of the century, ‘an awkward or worthless person.’ The word ‘awkward’ may still be descriptive, but to define the lobster as ‘worthless’ is certainly a misstatement. But this does illustrate in one way their comparative value to today’s catch that retails usually at a half dollar and better per pound. The estimated value for the 1952 catch in Maine was in the neighborhood of nine million dollars, or half the value of the total Maine fish landings for the year.

It is hoped the sketches accompanying this article will give the reader a better insight into the manner in which the lobsterman makes his catch. Every conceivable type of hand-propelled craft has been used and is still, and the variations in the powerboats are many; so the drawings do not intend or pretend to cover lobster fishing craft completely but merely to
show the most representative types used down through the years.

Trap building has changed greatly through the years. Old engravings I have seen depicted traps much longer than those of today, built half round and providing access at both ends. Double-ended traps were not satisfactory due to the lobsters’ working out of the lower end when the trap was brought to the surface. Also, the old-style traps appear fragile compared to the traps today, although this may not have been so. Present-day traps are constructed of live oak, fastened with galvanized nails, and are of two basic types; the oblong trap shown in Figure 1 and the half round which is the trap shown in Figure 2. The half-round trap may be predominant at one place, but a few miles distant, the oblong trap will be more in favor; whether one greatly outnumber the other is difficult to say. Definite construction characteristics are apparent, however, in both styles. Each employs a knitted twine pothead, with a large ring as its center on either side at one end, directly opposite each other. This consumes better than one third of the trap itself and is called the entrance. Variations in the half rounds may have but one pothead, either at one end or on one side only. Inside of this, opening toward the opposite end of the trap is an incline entering into the ‘parlor’ and this incline or parlor head may be knitted of twine as is the outside arrangement, or it may be built of trap stock. The latter is shown in Figure 3. Proper at-
tention here determines the success of the trap. This incline must be so constructed to enable the lobster to enter easily, yet the end of the in-

![Figure 5](image1.png)

cline must be high enough from the bottom of the trap so that the lobster cannot reach it with his tail, for it is in reverse that this creature works out of the trap. A few bricks secured to the bottom of the trap serves to

![Figure 6](image2.png)

weight it down and to overcome its buoyancy to a certain extent. The only great difference in trap construction that I have ever come across is pictured in Figure 4, and this trap is a half round, but with an en-
trance so narrow that a pothead could not possibly have been employed. One of the advantages the flat trap has in its favor is that it is better suited for carrying and stacking. Another, it is claimed, is that this type of trap will not travel along the bottom to the extent that the half round will, because of the corners that may cause it to wedge against some obstacle. This, of course, refers to normal conditions at sea; neither trap style can withstand a fall gale if they are set close to shore.

The era of the old-time lobsterman is nearly over, and the man that fishes his string of traps today from a dory is generally doing so ‘on the

side’; that is, in addition to some other regular occupation. In Figure 5 you will see a man ready to boat his trap. With the pot marker in the boat, he has hauled in his warp (line from the float to the trap that is about ten fathoms in length when fishing inshore), bringing the trap to the surface and he is now ready to slide the trap across the gunwale, which is, at this point, nearly to the water. A slip of the foot now, or a cranky boat, would most certainly put him overboard. As lobstermen work fully clothed and generally wear boots, this is not a pleasant prospect, regardless of swimming ability.

Small sloops were employed in the lobster fishery years ago, but hauling traps was difficult and rowing these craft, which was necessary to do when among the set of traps, was indeed a chore.
Figures 6 and 7 depict powerboats that are now becoming less common along our coast. They are both of dory construction and were very serviceable. The craft shown in Figure 7 could perhaps be called the prototype of the modern work boat, and in Figure 8 you will see the cockpit of the type of boat that is now an everyday sight the length of our coast. The modern lobster work boat is generally without ornamentation; the cockpit is clear, with the power plant forward of the bulkhead that carries the few controls. The snatch block is on the starboard side. This is an open-ended block so constructed that it allows the line attached to the float to be placed upon the sheave without reeving. This is in line with the pot hauler, visible on the bulkhead. A windbreak is set up on the port side to shelter the fisherman, as the starboard side is, with very few exceptions, the working side and to leeward. And you can be sure that whenever you see a striker’s pulpit jutting off the bow that the owner keeps an eye open for tuna during the summer months. Sun-
days are usually tuna days, when the whole day is spent searching for what the old-timers call 'hoss mackerel.'

While the method of catching the lobster has really not changed a great deal, even though the craft used in this fishery have been developed to a greater efficiency, neither compare to what has happened to the trim lobster smack that once delivered Maine lobsters to the cities south of us. Where wind once filled sails, we now have a large truck hurrying along the well-known U. S. No. 1 highway and the lobsters reach Boston and New York in a matter of hours, rather than days.

Dohn A. Cluff, a navy veteran of World War II, lives at Sanford and Ogunquit, Maine. He is a member of the Maine Historical Society, is interested in maritime history, and goes lobstering.