

# Fishing for a Living on the Great Lakes

by Janet C. Gilmore

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Commercial fishing on the Great Lakes, as with most work today along or on the water, has become a much less pervasive, visible activity than it once was. Fewer people operating larger, more powerful equipment harvest an increasingly restricted catch. Fishing has become a specialized occupation no longer fully-integrated into the daily lives of the lakeside population. While perpetually threatened with extinction by overfishing, heavy pollution, and the introduction (purposeful and inadvertent) of non-native species, edible fish still survive in the Great Lakes in enough numbers to sustain an average annual U.S. catch of 75-100 million pounds. Also threatened, but with political constraints and a smaller share of the catch, a hardy lot of Great Lakes commercial fishers has continued to pass on to new generations its way of making a living.

Of all the Great Lakes states Michigan touches upon the most lakes and boasts the greatest shoreline, yet her numbers of commercial fishermen and pounds of fish commercially landed fall surprisingly second to Wisconsin's and barely surpass Ohio's. Partly because of complex political issues and partly because of profound regional differences in the state, most of Michigan's commercial fishers work off the Upper Peninsula. The greatest numbers of these, and some of the fiercest resisters of downstate fisheries policies, share with Wisconsin one of the most productive fishing grounds in Lake Michigan: the shallower, more sheltered waters of Green Bay, bounded by Big Bay de Noc to the northeast. Like the Petersons, Hermesses, Caseys, Sellmans, and several other fishing families, most fish off the Garden Peninsula (Fairport, Garden, Manistique), where some can fish to the east with their Indian fishing rights and to the west with their non-Indian fishing rights. Others, like the Nylund and Ruleau families, are based near Menominee, Michigan/Marquette, Wisconsin, where they may fish more profitably under both Wisconsin and Michigan fishing licenses and thus use a greater diversity of traditional fishing gear and equipment.

Michigan's Lake Michigan commercial fishers fish primarily for native whitefish and chubs (lake herring); Native Americans may use gill nets to catch these fish in specified waters while non-Indians must now use another kind of gear long in use on the Great Lakes, the trap net. Many part-time fishermen harvest non-native smelt in the spring with pound nets, equipment similar to but more labor-intensive than trap nets and at one time more commonly employed. A few big operators like the Ruleaus of Cedar River have adapted otter trawl gear to capture huge quantities of "trash fish," including non-native hoards of alewives, for the pet-food industry.

Fishermen used to knot their own net-webbing of cotton line and hand-carve wooden floats, buoys, and bobbins (needles for



Leeland's "Fishtown," 1930. Photo courtesy Michigan State Archives, Department of State

Emptying two tons of white fish from a pound net, near Grand Haven, 1930. Photo courtesy Michigan State Archives, Department of State



making and repairing nets), but they have quickly embraced ready-made counterparts in nylon, polyester, and plastics. They still mold their own leads for gill-, pound-, trap-, and trawl-net lead lines; cut and shape machine-knotted webbing to make their nets; "string" gill nets, lead sections of trap and pound nets as well as the heart and pot sections of pound nets; set, mend, and periodically clean and treat the nets, replacing them at a slower rate than in former years; cut, splice, and install pound-net stakes; and build a variety of equipment for commercial ice-fishing during the winter (distinctive shanties on runners, running poles, shove sticks, and crooked sticks). While fishermen hire experts to produce custom trap nets, the net builders are often fellow local fishers and peers, like Otis Smith of Fayette and Alvin Champion of Marinette-Menominee, who have good heads for figures and an eye for design. The net builders and fishermen perpetuate a small repertoire of basic knots such as half and clove hitches to produce and repair nets. In addition, on board their boats as they use and service their gear, fishermen daily practice another round of basic knots.



Otis Smith sewing the selvage along the tapered edge of a trap-net pot piece. Photo by Janet Gilmore

Rod Gierke emptying another dip net full of fish into Ben Peterson's measuring box, Big Bay de Noc off Fairport. Photo by Janet Gilmore



And the expert net-builders, with their proclivities to knot-tying, enjoy the opportunity to practice trick knots and “joke” knots, to voice sayings and anecdotes concerning certain knots, and to tell stories about great knot-tyers and the grand old days of knot-tying and net-building.

It seems no coincidence that, faced with “cut over” land denuded of appropriate timber and situated in the big steel-producing heartland, upper Great Lakes fishermen turned increasingly from wooden to metal boats after World War II. Many upper Lake Michigan commercial fishermen have negotiated the design and construction of custom steel and aluminum hulls with the big shipyards in Marinette, Sturgeon Bay, and Manitowoc, Wisconsin, and with smaller yards that have operated off and on in Menominee and Escanaba, Michigan; many have acquired second-hand steel vessels and related fishing equipment from the lake area, some as far away as the Ohio and Pennsylvania shores of Lake Erie. Most have purchased an existing steel boat for gill-, pound-, or trap-netting, gutted it, cut the boat in half crosswise, sometimes lengthwise, to add length or breadth to the hull, entirely rebuilt the superstructure of wood or steel, and refitted the vessel with self-styled equipment often composed from the detritus of modern civilization — agricultural implements, truck and automobile bodies and machinery. As soon as electricity came to the U.P., area fishermen acquired welding equipment and became adept at using it to fabricate and repair their own fishing equipment (grapples,



Ben Peterson and Rich Lynts packing and weighing whitefish, Fairport, Michigan. Photo by Janet Gilmore

fish measuring boxes, and metal components of trap and pound nets, for example), to repair and reshape the metal hulls of new or second-hand fishing vessels, and, spectacularly, to fashion small, open “assist” boats to use in their trap- and pound-net operations. While these “scows,” as some call them, vary in exact dimensions and shape, they are generally broadly square-sterned, usually pointed at the bow but sometimes pugged in a narrow square, nose with a flattish bottom that rises forward following the bow’s slight sheerline; they are usually eight to ten feet in length and three to four feet across at the mid-section, built to be powered with an outboard motor as well as oars, and used to navigate inside float lines to operate a pound net or adjust a trap net. Not surprisingly, they resemble the homemade wooden row boats formerly built and used in the area for the same purposes.

Inveterate tinkerers and “improvers,” “craftsmen of necessity,” and “jacks of all trades and masters of none,” these Great Lakes fishermen reflect the traditions of their occupation and their region. Where jobs are scarce, incomes low, and services and ready-made goods expensive and not easily available, they diversify in their talents and means of earning incomes. Upper Michigan fishermen not only catch and dress their fish, but they act as their own middlemen, marketing, processing, packing, and shipping the “product.” Several fishing families operate small fish processing plants not only to make as much as they can of their fishing businesses, but also to be able to offer a variety of jobs to members of the family and the local community.

Indeed, the U.P. fisherman relies extensively upon a closely-knit, extended family familiar with the vagaries of the occupation and its effect on domestic life. The male members of the family — fathers, sons, uncles, nephews, brothers, cousins, and in-laws — pass among

themselves preferences in fishing gear and equipment; special twists and techniques in the production and operation of gear and the handling of fish; and names for fish, fishing equipment and components, and landmarks and features of the underwater landscape important for navigating and locating fishing spots. They keenly observe each other and fishers from other families to protect (hide, actually) their fishing grounds and productivity, to gauge and perfect their fishing performance, and to look out for one another in an often treacherous working environment. They know much of others' "tricks of the trade" and basic approach to fishing, yet they carefully maintain their own special vocabularies, techniques, and family fishing philosophies, trying to keep as much of this lore secret as possible.

The maintenance of these "secret codes" for traversing and exploiting the water makes these fishermen self-conscious conservators of a tradition and a resource, and restricts the occupation to insiders. While this behavior strengthens family bonds and unites fishermen across regions and generations, it can also separate local fishermen from each other and from the community at large. Such practices and attitudes can lead to political dissension among peers, dissipated political clout, and deep-seated misunderstandings by the public. Thus, the fisherman's very means of occupational self-protection and perpetuation in fact often works against him.

Eternally faced with this quandary and a life of hard economic circumstances, many U.P. fishermen have at one time sought better, easier lives in the region's big cities. As the classic personal experience story goes, they find they cannot bear the urban environment and working "by the clock." They return, committed to what they see as a special place and another way of life, determined to make a living at what they know best.

#### *Suggested reading*

*Door County Almanak*, vol. 3. Sister Bay, WI: Dragonsbreath Press, 1986. [All about (commercial) fishing in the upper Lake Michigan region.]

Halverson, Lynn H. "The Commercial Fisheries of the Michigan Waters of Lake Superior." *Michigan History* 39(1955): 1-17.

Kaups, Matti. "Norwegian Immigrants and the Development of Commercial Fisheries along the North Shore of Lake Superior: 1870-1895." In *Norwegian Influence on the Upper Midwest*, ed. Harald S. Naess. Duluth: Continuing Education and Extension, University of Minnesota, 1976.

Kuchenberg, Tom. *Reflections in a Tarnished Mirror: The Use and Abuse of the Great Lakes*. Sturgeon Bay, WI: Golden Glow Publishing, 1978.

#### *Suggested films*

*The Last Fisherman*, by Phyllis Berg-Pigorsch. 28 min., 30 sec. Yahara Films, Madison, Wisconsin, 1975.

*Good Man in the Woods*, by Michael Loukinen. 87 min., 30 sec. Northern Michigan University, Marquette, Michigan, 1987.