



COMMUNITY

CENTURIES OF FISH TALES

MORE HISTORIC MEMORIES OF DELTA FAMILIES, AT SEA

by Laurie Jones

photography courtesy entrants of the LFCA's 75th anniversary photo contest and the Delta Heritage Society and City of Delta

As with the rich heritage of generations in Delta's farming community, an important piece of the region's colourful history are the many families who made their living in the fishing industry as far back as the 1800s. While salmon has been a primary catch for over a century, fishermen have continually brought in tonnes of other products from the sea, including cod, halibut, herring and shellfish, including prawns, crab and other delicacies.

John Stevens, president of the Delta Fishing Heritage Society, is proud to be a fourth-generation fisherman and is still actively fishing today. "I started going out on of the boats when I was eight years old in 1958," he says. "I was packing salmon with my grandfather, Nick Stevens, on the Fraser River. He had a couple salmon packers and his own little company, working with BC Packers. But he also had a fish buying license and was one of the first people to sell fish to the public." Stevens adds his grandfather was on the Delta City Council and has a paving stone in front of the building commemorating his name.

The fishing run in 1958 was so successful the canneries stopped buying fish because they couldn't keep up with the loads that were coming in. "The reason for that run was a volcanic event in Alaska which created a huge ash cloud in the Gulf of Alaska. That was the perfect storm for the food chain out of the ocean," Stevens explains. "The same thing happened in 2010 when we had 30 million sockeye come home to the Fraser River. That run came back again in 2018, although smaller, but bigger than we had seen in previous cycles."



› Lead photo: Bev Galbraith with her brother Wayne and Mom on the family's gillnetter, circa 1952.

Bottom row, from left: British American Cannery at Canoe Pass; brailing salmon; The Quatsino with a full load of salmon.



› Ladner fishing boat *Klemtu* built approximately in 1927.

To accommodate the plentiful runs of fish, there were once 44 canneries along the banks of the Fraser River, from the Hudson’s Bay saltery in Fort Langley to Ladner in Delta. “There are no longer canneries in Delta. Most of the fish is shipped elsewhere for processing,” he says.

Over the years, the technology changes in fishing boats have been significant. The boats are now bigger and more powerful, with much more efficient fishing gear. “In my great-grandfather’s day, they used linen nets and cotton lines, and they had to carve the corks out of red cedar,” says Stevens. “Those nets were much thicker and less transparent than the synthetic ones that we’re using today. At one time everybody pulled by hand – there was no power on the sailboats used for gillnetters. When the seine fleet started, they could only fish at slack tide and get their net back before the tide started running. Now with all the power equipment they can fish in just about any tide with deeper nets so it’s much more efficient.”



Technology has also decreased the number of crew needed on a ship. “When seining started, the average crew was eight men on a boat,” Stevens explains. “Now with drum seining, they only need five crew members. It is still a dangerous occupation because with so much power, people have to be fully trained. Several safety procedures have to be adhered to when you’re hauling in a net.”

Living the life

Gordon Lande, now 79, also has a long history in the world of fishing in Delta. “When I was fishing it was a way of life, but that is now long gone,” he says. “For those who really got into it, it was a very good way of life. I’ve been around most parts of the industry – I fished the river, I ran a boat for Canadian Fish for a while and I spent two years doing research for four months at a time for the biological station. We seined for salmon and herring, and we fished halibut way up north, closer to Russia than the United States, through the Bering Sea.”

Lande remembers the first time he stole his brother’s boat in 1953 to go fishing when he was 13 years old. “He was out working on a seine boat, so

SAILING INTO HISTORY

Prior to canneries getting their fishing licences in the late 1880s, they were receiving fish from the Native fishermen in canoes. As the century ended, the canneries provided the Natives with 20-foot long flat bottomed skiffs with detachable masts and sails. The boats could also be rowed with oars. After the season was over, the skiffs were repaired and stored at the cannery. □ (Text: Steveston Museum archives)



› Clockwise from above: Charles Tine, Frank Radoslovich and Leo Vidulich, LFCA founders; Bill Vidulich mending net on the river, circa 1933; The names of the Ladner Fisherman’s Co-operative Association; Harbour Light, formerly known as *The Austrian* tug during construction, circa 1912.



his boat was just sitting there. He grumbled and growled at me, but I fished with it anyways. When I did start working as a fisherman, we fished from 8 o'clock on Monday morning to 8 o'clock Friday morning. We did that all season, but things have changed so drastically that this year there was only a total of 30 hours of fishing on the Fraser River." He adds he still has the fishing license he bought for \$1 in 1957 on his wall that gave him the ability to fish the coast. "We also got a free tide book from the Department of Fisheries with that license."

Another fisherman with a long family history in Delta is Gerry Mackie, 78. "When my grandfather, George Mackie, came to Canada from Scotland in the late 1890s, he started working in sawmills, then switched to fishing for salmon from a row skiff on the Fraser River," Mackie explains. "He was also a partner in a company called Butterfield and Mackie, which owned three fish packers – a larger vessel that is used for packing fish from the fishing grounds to the canneries. They also transported goods, including nets and food supplies, from the city out to the various fishing camps that were located around the coast."

George Mackie changed his mind about being in the fishing industry in the early 1900s and moved his family to the Shuswap region to a homestead. "The homestead was not prosperous, so in 1932, he moved the family back to the coast," says Mackie. "My uncle, George Mackie Jr., started a trucking firm and my father, Bill Mackie, wanted to go back to fishing. We were living on River Road in Sunbury, right underneath what is now the Alex Fraser Bridge." He notes his father was a gillnet fisherman on the Fraser River, but they also took their boats north and went to Rivers Inlet and Smith Inlet. "My dad and his partner often fished along Johnstone Strait, whereas most fishermen headed back to the Fraser River and fished that exclusively."

Mackie remembers there were a lot of canneries along the Fraser River, when he was a child, but many had closed down. "St. Mungo cannery was a large operation operated owned by the Nelson Brothers Fisheries," he says. "Before it was demolished to allow the Alex Fraser Bridge to be built, it was essentially a net loft and general centre of operations for supplies and so on. They had moved their main cannery operation to Steveston."

While the fishing industry could be lucrative, Mackie also experienced the lean times and pursued a more stable career as a civil servant.

Tall, but true tale

One humorous memory Mackie shared happened the first year he went north fishing with his father. "I was 12, and on the trip home we stopped in a small harbour by a place called Cape Caution, which is well named," he says. "We picked up two men from a fisherman who had found them running naked along the shoreline. As it happens these guys were from Saskatchewan and



➤ Above: a crew of fishers use a brail (dip net) to haul fish into a boat from a purse seine in the Strait of Georgia, circa 1946. The fishing boat is a table seiner called *Splendour*, a Martinolich boat. Below: The Martinolich fleet, circa 1955. Left: Gerry Mackie's \$1 fishing licenses.



had read about the fortunes to be made fishing for salmon in British Columbia.

"They spent a lot of money on a boat and equipment, even though they had no experience fishing on the open sea. They went into a narrow channel called Seymour Inlet at high tide, not knowing returning to the open sea could be dangerous. By the time they were on their journey back, all the water from high tide in the inlet that was draining out through the narrows, and that created a raging torrent. Therefore, the swift outflowing current meeting large incoming waves created an extremely dangerous situation that completely overwhelmed their boat causing it to capsize."

Mackie says the men had to take off their wet clothes to swim to shore, climbing over barnacle-encrusted rocks to safety. "They spent the next few days wandering the shoreline in an uninhabited area before they were rescued. We transported them to the South Coast where they made arrangements to return to Saskatchewan."

Community bonds

Today the fishing community is still strong in Delta. It is not uncommon for the families to gather at the Ladner Fishermen's Co-op Hall, which is owned and operated by the Ladner Fishermen's Co-operative Association who recently celebrated their 75th anniversary. "We had a photo contest to showcase the anniversary and received over 100 entries," says Stevens. "They can be seen on our website at lfca.ca." ■