

TRAP BERTHS

by

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Back in the early days of the cod moratorium, when it was still being looked on as a temporary measure, many knowledgeable people were looking to the future when the moratorium would end and the fishing industry would be rejuvenated. There were many calls for a return to more traditional, and presumably less destructive, fishing methods such as hook-and-line and cod trapping.

During that time (in 1993 to be exact) it occurred to me one day to ask, "What if the cod don't come back?" I was obliged to conclude that, in such an eventuality, cod trapping (and all the traditional knowledge and cultural heritage surrounding it) would soon become a lost art. Because I am interested in recording and preserving local heritage, and because trapping was the primary fishing method in the Conception Bay North area where I live, and because I am a landlubber with absolutely no personal knowledge of the subject, I set out at that time to see what I could find out about cod trapping in and around Carbonear.

I quickly found a retired fisherman who had all the information I needed to know, but who was not charmed with the idea of having his name publicized, and so he shall remain anonymous. (I know that research papers require citations, but I am *not* a professional historian. You will just have to take my word for it that I didn't make up any of this stuff.)

The information which follows is a concise history of the cod trapping industry as it was in the Carbonear area. I have no reason to think that the broad issues would not also apply to many other inshore fishing areas, and I am convinced that all the delightful local idiosyncracies, such as the trap berth names, have (or alas, had) their own form in other Bays.

When the cod trap came into common use in the latter part of the nineteenth century, it became necessary for fishermen to locate suitable places along the shore for trap berths. Not every site was useful, due to incorrect depth, bad bottom shape, or strong tides. Scarcity of good berths in the Carbonear area became more and more serious as the number of fishing crews increased, and not a few confrontations resulted from competing crews coveting the same few good berths.

By the 1920s there was enough activity to force many crews to use second-rate and third-rate berths, and even led some fishermen to the extreme measure of having to "manufacture" good berths from poor ones by the practice of dumping ballast to improve bottom configuration.

Eventually, competition for berths in this area encouraged the adoption of a new procedure. It was agreed that no gear would be put in the water before 12:00 noon on June 5th of any year. It is unclear if this had any legal basis or was merely a gentlemen's agreement. It was designed to give every fisherman an equal chance at good berths, but it produced some unexpected results.

Some crews took to going out to productive berths several days in advance and waiting for the appointed hour to set their gear. This tactic created a chain-reaction among other crews, who were obliged to do likewise to protect their own interests. Thus, a certain amount of friction prevailed in the Carbonear fishery.

This system continued until the late 1930s. Then, the number of crews declined sharply due to the sudden availability of other work, mostly connected with the war effort. Pressure for space was relieved on the few remaining crews and few problems were encountered through the

1940s, 1950s and 1960s. Habitual use of certain berths led to informal but unchallenged claims on their continual use.

In the 1970s however, a sharp rise in the price of fish produced an understandable increase in the number of local crews and it became necessary to adopt a system that had long been used in other areas: trap berth draws. All fishermen were equally subject to the luck of the draw each spring. This system worked quite well and prevented a recurrence of previous unpleasanties.

Somewhere along the way, the trap berths in this area acquired names. I'm sure this probably happened elsewhere, too. The following is a list of the more popular trap berths of the Carbonear area. We shall proceed from Carbonear Island northward to Salmon Cove Head.

On the south side of Carbonear Island:

Black Rock.

Derricks.

Salmon Rock South Side.

High Lands. (Early berth.)

Flat Rocks. (Early berth.)

Mousehole. (Early, late, and rough.)

On the north side of Carbonear Island:

Easter Rock. (Early, late, and rough.)

Butt-of-the Rock.

Golden Cup.

Black Gulch.

Salmon Rock North Side.

Soper's Point.

Between Crocker's Cove and Clown's Cove:

Butcher East. (Late berth.)

Butcher West. (Late berth.)

Tuckermills. (Not much used before 1970s.)

Maidenhair Island.

White Rock.

Bradley's Rock.

Mad Rock.

Sunkers.

Between Clown's Cove and Salmon Cove Head:

Blow-me-down Bank #1. (Late berth, Well off land.)

Blow-me-down Bank #2. (Late berth, Well off land.)

Tinkers #1. (Rough bottom.)

Tinkers #2. (Rough bottom.)

Tinkers #3. (Rough bottom.)

Tinkers #4. (Rough bottom.)

Jimmy's Rocks.

Long Point.

The Hoof.

Salmon Cove Head.

No doubt, these wonderful, picturesque berth names have their counterparts all over Newfoundland. If the cod moratorium had lasted only a few years, these names might have survived in common usage. Now, however, they are probably quickly vanishing. The Carbonear berths have been recorded. Some local fishermen's unions may have some old lists formerly used for draws. For other places, time is running out.

Carbonear.
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