

SEA FOLK

A photograph of an older man with a grey beard and hair, wearing a dark green hooded raincoat and grey gloves. He is standing in the middle of large, teal-colored fishing nets. The background is a blurred view of a body of water and a rocky shoreline. The overall tone is somber and documentary.

JIM WELLMAN

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JIM WELLMAN

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DEDICATION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book is dedicated to everyone in the fishing industry.

For the past five centuries, thousands of people in what is now called Atlantic Canada have depended on the ocean's bounty for survival. It hasn't always been easy. Far too many barely managed to make ends meet and others have lost their lives to an often unforgiving sea. But still, the ocean also gives freely of her bounty and thousands of Atlantic Canadian men and women today are still doing what their forefathers and mothers did years ago. We salute them.

I'd also like to dedicate this book to the directors of the *Navigator* magazine and the TriNav Group of Companies. Paul Pinhorn, Trevor Decker, and Rick Young have given me the platform to publish my short stories in the *Navigator* for

the past fifteen years since the inception of the publication. Their support and encouragement has been tremendous. And thanks also to the editor of the *Navigator*, Jamie Baker, for his support. Among other things, he provided the cover photo, that of fisherman Dave Jenkins from Clarke's Beach, NL, capelin seining on board the longliner *Chelsea Noelle I*.

And thanks to all the people who allowed me to take so much of their time to ask questions about their lives and especially about the loved ones they lost to the sea.

You are all Sea Folk who make our lives richer because of your contributions.

Thank you.

PREFACE

The fishing industry shapes and moulds fascinating people.

Sea captains and fishermen are different than people who work on land, due partly, I suppose, to the fact that they work in the most dangerous trade on earth, but also because they never know what the sea will deliver. One year, the ocean can produce a bountiful crop, but the following year can be a financial disaster. But whatever it is about a life on the sea, most wouldn't trade it for anything else in the world. Some say it's because they have salt water running through their veins that can't be washed away and forgotten.

The fishing industry has produced a unique culture that also extends to more than people who work on board vessels. With constant uncertainty of raw material supply, even from one day to the next, fish processing plants make

for a different sort of workplace. Consequently, fish plant owners and operators along with the men and women who work there are also a different breed. Several of the stories in this book profile some of the fascinating folk who work in boats and/or process fish on land.

I've been privileged to know so many fisheries people from all over Atlantic Canada and I am deeply honoured to be able to tell some of their stories.

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Many people, including writers, have tried to describe what it is like to be a fisherman. Very few of us have come close to the way the late Joseph O'Brien of Bay Bulls so eloquently explained it to a young school student who was doing a class project in the early 1980s. Mr. O'Brien's simplistic but articulate ramblings to the student, captured beautifully the way it was and the way it will never be again. In turn, the student wisely wrote Mr. O'Brien's words in the vernacular, thereby providing us with a more personal glimpse into the culture of small-town Newfoundland more than thirty years ago, when the cod fishery sustained about 200 communities that dotted the coastline of Newfoundland and Labrador.

We thought it appropriate to start this book with a peek into the soul of an inshore fisherman as

captured in a school project by a young Bay Bulls student, Fern Burke, titled very simply:

The Fisherman

. . . I WAS NAMED AFTER A great saint, St. Joseph. He was a carpenter, but I didn't follow upon him that way. I am a fisherman.

I've big marks on my arms from saltwater pups. They'd get all infected and my hands would swell right up. I'd take my pocket knife and cut open my gloves to get them on. But you had to go; you had to do it.

We have six children—three boys and three girls. Loyola and Joe, they learned to fish with me. I used to take their mother along because they wasn't afraid of me, but they was afraid of her. She fished with us for years—a strong woman. She'd stand behind the hydraulic winch, she'd pull the nets, and we'd clear out behind her. The three of us would take out the codfish, the flounder, and the crab. She'd keep the boat going ahead into the wind.

We'd bait our hooks in the nighttime. We'd go away before dawn. When we got the trawls all set, we'd make a good fire, boil the kettle, toast up some bread and a bit of fish, and have our lunch. I'd always cook. My wife said I was a better hand for cooking fish than she was. It was probably an excuse, but I believed her. After lunch we'd haul back our longlines. We'd get in about midday and sell our fish.

We'd go out again in the evening to jig squid for bait. They'd squirt this awful black dye into our eyes, and when we came home, it would take us half an hour to wash ourselves before we could go to bed.

It wasn't an easy job, but it was joyful. There was something about it. The sun came out of the water in the morning. You'd hear the birds singing and whistling, and if there was fish on your longline, you didn't care if the world hung upside down.

To be a doctor in Canada, you've got to go to college for six or seven years. To be a good fisherman, a prosperous fisherman, you also have to go to school. You have to learn



Left: Joe and Loyola O'Brien

Right: The late Joseph O'Brien, a well-known inshore fisherman
from Bay Bulls, NL

(Photos courtesy of the O'Brien family)

to mend and how to knit your nets, make sails and traps, repair or build your boat. You've got to be a carpenter. You've got to build your own house. You've got to be a meteorologist; know the weather, the moon and stars, the tides and the winds and where the fish congregate at certain times. When the water temperature changes, you must know whether to set your nets deeper or shallower.

I have more respect for a fisherman than I have for any doctor. To be a fisherman, you've also got to be a damn good man. You've got to be a family man. You've got children to rear. You've got to teach them, too. You've got to be a teacher. Then you had to be a cobbler. You had to sole your own shoes. You had to put heels on them. You went to the general store, and you bought pieces of leather and cobbler tacks. If you were going to a dance that night, you couldn't put too many tacks in your shoes—they'd make too much noise. The woman, she taught her daughter how to sew with the sewing machine. She showed her how to make an apron, how to make a dress. If they were to go to a dance, they made their own clothes.

The Grand Banks are being cleaned up. The big companies are sweeping up all the fish that's out there. All Europe is out there and all North America, too. Nothing can withstand that. It's a pity. The Portuguese came here and got hundreds of years fishing out of her, but they fished with only one hook. Plenty of men, but one hook for each little dory. There'd be fish for the whole world if everybody fished like the Portuguese, but big business got into it and greed got into it. We had to fatten up England. We had to fatten up France. We had to fatten up all Europe.

The biggest damage is being done on the famous Hamilton Banks. That's where the fish spawn in January and February. The big companies have put heavy steel bows on their trawlers and made them twice as big and twice as strong so they could go there and catch the fish right when they're beginning to spawn in winter.

If you go killing the hens when they are laying the eggs and you kill all the sheep when it comes time to lamb, you can't have any eggs, you can't have any lambs. Take all the young women away, and you won't have any children. And the business people know it twice as well as I know it. Cut down on the big companies, put every fisherman on a quota, put a moratorium on the Grand Banks, and by jove, she'll come back. Twenty years time, she'll come back, and half the loaf is better than no bread, any time . . .

Joseph O'Brien, Sr.
Retired Fisherman, Bay Bulls

Note: Our thanks to Fern Burke from Bay Bulls for bringing us to this delightful story.

Friday the Thirteenth

JANICE DROVER WAS NEVER A superstitious person but she has a newly developed nervousness about Friday the thirteenth these days since she nearly lost her husband on Friday, August 13, 2010.

Janice married Randell Drover from Upper Island Cove in Conception Bay, Newfoundland, almost forty years ago and together they built a successful fishing enterprise and included a couple of their sons. In 2010 the Drovers had two vessels as part of their business. The *Cape Lisa* is a forty-eight-foot crab boat, skippered by their son Shawn, and the *Drovers Choice* is a smaller (34'11") boat.

Shawn and his crew on the *Cape Lisa* had finished catching their quota on Wednesday, August 11, and had tied up in Harbour Grace waiting for the next fishery.

Friday was a lovely day with light winds and bright sunshine. Randell had another 1,200 pounds left in his quota and this would be a perfect day to finish up the season. It was a great way to wind up the crab fishery for the summer. Randell and Janice drove from Upper Island Cove to their boat that was docked in Harbour Grace, and after picking up ice for the crab, *Drovers Choice* was heading out from the harbour in a northeasterly direction. Along the way they stopped to pick up their son Robin, who had been out fishing with a friend. By 10:00 a.m. the three members of the Drover family were on the crab grounds and the first problem of what would become a terrible day in the lives of the Drover family occurred. The reflectors/markers for the first fleet of crab pots were missing, and after two of hours of searching Randell decided to move on and try and find the missing pots later.

After moving on to the next fleet, things went more or less according to plan. By mid-afternoon, they were keeping an eye on the time because Janice had a function on that evening at the school and she needed to be home in Upper Island Cove by five o'clock. With that in mind, they hauled the last set of pots about 4:00 p.m., and although they hadn't taken the full 1,200 pounds that they were allowed, Randell wasn't concerned because, overall, things had turned out pretty well. Little did he know that an hour later he would be fighting for his life.

When they arrived at the wharf in Harbour Grace, Randell and Robin started to prepare their crab boxes

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