

Equipment We Used

Lobster Traps: Most Pine Point lobstermen built and repaired their traps. Traps were made from oak. Bumpers were 3"x 2" oak-planked corners, the round-shaped traps had two bumpers on the bottom and three 1"x 1" oak bows placed in them with oak lathes nailed to the bows. Galvanized or copper nails were used. Square traps had 1" x 1"-square pieces on all four corners. All traps were 32 or 36 inches long until the 1980s when 4-foot traps were introduced. At that time nylon mesh was used on the front of the traps rather than oak lathes, making traps lighter and easier to lift. Three bricks were used in each trap for ballast, except when a trap was set for the first time and another two or three bricks were added for extra weight while the wooden trap "soaked-up." The heads, or nets, on both sides of the front and one larger net leading from the front of the trap to the "parlor" or back section of the trap allowed lobsters inside. A bait line was nailed to the middle bumper and attached at the top of the trap to a wooden "button." It was in a straight piece of oak lathe (about 5 inches long) which had both ends whittled out to allow the bait string to be wrapped around and tied to the button. The bait string served two purposes: it secured the redfish bait and held the door of the trap shut. To keep the door closed, buttons were also put on the inside of the last lathe of the door. The nets were knitted from sisal or manila rope. Whether round or square, the trap was completed with oak lathes. When broken or badly chaffed, lathes and occasionally the bumper had to be changed. Sometimes a fish or crab became entangled in the trap, creating a hole in the net. Each trap was "branded" on the end bumper with the fisherman's state license number. Now lobster fishermen use vinyl-covered wire traps. These traps have "snapper" (small lobster) releases, nylon heads and rope, Styrofoam buoys and bobbers. Instead of branding traps, metal identification tags carrying the fisherman's license number are used.

Winter was a time to clean and paint buoys and repair or replace heads in traps. I also recall helping my father pick up traps on the beaches after a hurricane or big storm, especially during the summer when traps were in shallow water. Dislodged by heavy waves and currents, traps would be tangled in giant snarls "posies" of rope and buoys. Each buoy had a different color and the snarl of rope and traps looked like a posy. Pulling and carrying the traps and rope any distance was difficult, but necessary. Each trap was valuable and most had been built at home and repaired annually.

Buoys: Cedar logs were used to make buoys. A lathe was used to shape a round buoy; a log cut in half with lathes nailed on each end made a "chopping-tray" buoy. No matter what shape, all buoys were branded and had a special pattern of paint color used to identify the owner of the trap. Most cellars or workshops in the older houses at Pine Point still have nails driven into sills on which freshly painted buoys were hung to dry.

Bobbers: Initially bobbers were sealed glass bottles, usually beer or soda bottles, tied onto one-fathom-lengths of rope fastened to the main line. Cork, such as used on nets, was also used. Styrofoam floats have replaced these earlier bobbers, because they are safer than glass bottles.

Hauling Winches: Once boats had engines, winches were used to haul traps. A belt attached to the engine's shaft pulley operated the winch. It was not unusual for rope to get caught in the winch and the only way to stop it was to shut off the engine and hope it would start again. This could be dangerous, especially during the summer months when good fishing was close to ledges. It was also dangerous because the glass bobbers had to be brought up through the top pulley mounted on the hauling side of the boat. When hauling a trap, the propeller was stopped, the rope was then hand-pulled for a fathom or so and then rewound on the winch. Pot haulers operated by hydraulic pumps have replaced winches. Once the rope is set in the hauler's groove, it's essentially a hands-free operation to haul the rope and

bobber into the boat.

Bait: In early days lobster fishermen would hand-line sculpin or mackerel to use for bait. Later a bait man, Mr. McCabe, brought filleted redfish from Portland to our river. He had a special dump truck fitted with two tanks to hold the filleted fish, which he sold for 50 cents a bushel, cash only. Many waited for the bait man at the shore or at the Co-Op where they gambled upstairs. Mr. McCabe announced his arrival by tooting his truck's horn. Bait was dumped into a punt a bushel at a time, rowed out to boats, put into barrels and salted. Bait was delivered once or twice a week; most men bought 4 to 6 bushels. One to three whole filleted fish were used for each trap. Baiting was accomplished by using a "sponger" to thread a bait string through the fish's eye sockets. The sponger was a steel rod with a wooden handle and a hook at the end for the bait string. The line from the middle bumper of the trap was laid into it and then the bait would slide into the trap. The bony skull of the fish held the bait on the line while the oily redfish attracted the lobsters. Other oily fish, such as pogies, were also used.

Alewives were the fish of choice for bait when they "ran" in late May and early June, because lobsters were attracted to their oils. We would dip-net them by the thousands as they migrated up the rivers to spawn in fresh water! It was not unusual to have anywhere from three to seven fish at each dip of the net. Before the 1956 Pine Point Road overpass was built, the best place to dip-net alewives was across the street from Snow's factory

Wooden Cradles: In the off-season, boats were hauled from the water and stored on wooden cradles. Come spring, boats in their cradles were hauled onto the shore, usually by Jack Conroy's tow truck, and floated out of their cradles at high tide. The cradles were weighted down with sandbags before the tide came in. To release a boat from its cradle men would push from the boat with oars or poles. It was much harder to put a boat into a cradle in the fall. During the summer cradles were anchored on the marsh behind Bayley's Lobster Pound and, although somewhat waterlogged, sandbags were needed to help sink the cradles when boats were hauled. For many years, there were wooden pilings up river from the pier near the channel where some men used the pilings to hold cradles in place while running boats onto them. Often it took more than one attempt! At low tide, Jack Conroy would use his wrecker to winch the boat and cradle up to the Co-Op gravel parking lot. Because of the weight difference in the fall, Conroy often had to attach an oil truck to the front of his wrecker to keep it from dipping back. There was a tremendous strain on the two steel cables of the wrecker's winch. Each year, everyone was afraid they would snap! Yet, each boat was brought to the parking lot for the winter. It was common for powerboats to be hauled in their cradles to the fisherman's house, where he would have easy access to repair and paint his boat the next spring.

Lobster Boats: Growing up, I remember Mr. Ward Bickford building lobster boats in a large, garage-like building between his home and The Pillsbury Inn where the Hurd Annex parking lot is now. The boats were 26-foot long and powered by gasoline automobile engines. There was a reverse gear, but the boat went very slowly in that gear. Boats were made to turn sharply, for everyone fished traps alone. When hauling traps, one turned the boat each time to set the trap and let the rope go out. Dories and outboards were still used also. In those cases the traps were pulled by hand. I recall how some men were still rowing their dories as far away as the Old Proprietor Ledge, some 3 miles from the anchorage!

Mr. Bickford made most wooden boats from pine strips nailed to oak ribs. Other boats were pine planked and then nailed to oak ribs. Wooden lobster boats were very moveable, yet quite slow when compared to today's fiberglass diesel rigs. In many ways they were like logs and could withstand

choppy seas quite well and they were safe! Mr. Bickford also made many punts and larger skiffs (16-footers with higher sides). Many young men, including me, had their start in one of the larger skiffs.

Wooden boats required a lot of maintenance. By spring boats had dried out and needed to be recaulked. Once in the water for a few days, the wood swelled and the boat became watertight. Most wooden boats leaked from some source, so many fishermen carried long, galvanized hand pumps. In later years electric pumps were used. Boats were scrubbed, brushed and then painted. The upper hull and cabin were usually white, red or black, but the lower hull and keel were always “coppered.” This part of the job was awful, because the painter had to lie on his back on cold ground and paint above his head. Naturally, much of the copper-based paint fell on him. Because of the growth of barnacles, mussels, and such on the hull, especially if the boat was on the mooring a long time, the hull had to be scraped before a new coat of copper paint was applied. Typically a boat would be beached for two days and one side of the hull would be painted at a time. Inspection of coolant pipes would also be done at this time. Without proper maintenance, a slow boat would be even slower!

Lobster Gauge: A lobster gauge is a small brass device used to measure the length of the lobster’s carapace—from the eye socket to the beginning of the tail. The device resembles measuring calipers, except that the jaws are not moveable. There is both a minimum and maximum size. The minimum size is to make sure that lobsters have a chance to breed at least once before harvested. The maximum size limit is designed to protect breeding stock.

Knitting Needle: The knitting needle was an important tool in every lobsterman’s household. The needle was about a foot long, made of wood or metal (my father’s was brass) and used to knit heads, or nets for lobster traps. One end was pointed and the other had arm-like extensions on each side. The top third of the needle had an opening and a tongue, which faced the top. Twine would be put on the needle by wrapping it around the tongue and arms. Twine was either purchased or made by separating or “stripping” three-strand rope into three separate twines. A hook, usually on a door casing, held the twine while knitting the heads. It took about half an hour to make one head. Three heads were needed for each trap—two smaller ones at the front side and a larger one from the middle of the trap into the back area or “parlor.” I remember many winter nights when everyone in the family either stripped rope or knitted heads. Rope would be hanging all over the living room. As young children, my brothers and I stripped rope. As we grew older, we became involved in the knitting process. The door casing leading from our kitchen area to the living room still has the marks of where we used to knit! The newly knitted heads would either replace those on older traps or be used in new ones. Once nylon twine was available, heads seldom needed replacing. Nylon didn’t rot, was much stronger and was seldom broken by crabs, fish, or small lobsters. If broken, the heads were easily mended with nylon twine.