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Seiners Face Long Nights Without Qualms But They Hate That Moon

Editor's Note—This is the first in a series of articles which will cover the various phases of one of the oldest and most important industries of Santa Cruz, fishing. Both day and night the year around, Santa Cruzans involved in this colorful work have the elements in a constant quest for seafood. Commercial fishing does not involve merely the dropping of net or line. The catching of different fish requires a great variation of equipment and skill and know-how many times handed down from father to son. This story concerns the "seiners" who fish at night with nets.

By Wally Trabing

It was a wonderful night for landlubbers.

The sea was calm and the moon was full. It reflected as brightly on the water as any seaside chamber of commerce could ask.

But the fishermen aboard the "Sal Boy" were not happy with the situation. The moon is not their friend when they're going about their business. These men are seiners, specialists among the Santa Cruz fishing fleet in night fishing.

Their tool is the net and the tricks of their trade are founded upon years of weather-beaten experience.

I spent the night aboard the "Sal Boy" to watch these men seek their wages out of the dark waters of Monterey bay.

On the way to Moss Landing where most of Santa Cruz' fishing boats are kept, Captain Salvatore Ferranti and Andy Machi talked of the strange mixture of skill and luck which determines a fisherman's bankroll. They also discussed the mysterious change which is taking place in the Pacific waters which they said was changing the feeding grounds of the fish.

To top it off there was a full moon. "Fishing will be bad tonight," said Andy, almost apologetically, "but we all have families to feed."

What he meant was to be seen shortly when the "Sal Boy" moved out of the small harbor around 1 a.m. towing a long fish barge.

Once out in deep water, two men kneeled by the bow, almost in a landlubber's "seasick position," and peered into the water.

The highly hunt is for herring. The market is bait. From Monterey to San Francisco, sport fishing boats, and seaside bait shops are on a constant quest for the tiny fish.

To catch these fast darting swimmers the fishermen must work at night. The giveaway is the phosphorous glow emitted when the fish streak through the water. The darker the night, the deeper the fishermen can spot their game. As the moon brightens the reflection seems a discouraging wall across

Getting Ready For A Long Night's Work



Captain Salvatore Ferranti's crew of seiners work at night netting herring and other bait fish and also often spend their

days mending the nets and putting the ship, the "Sal Boy" in shape for the night's cruising. The crew members pictured above on the deck of the "Sal

Boy" are Vince de France in the stern, Johnny Cecchini, Antone Altavilla, Andy Machi and Captain Ferranti in the bow.

maneuvered by a boom.

Amid the thousands of slithering herring can always be found a smattering of other fish. The "foreigners" range from anchovies, octopi, mackerel, sardines and pompanos to five or six ton bask-

the men aboard the Sal Boy.

His trick was to cruise around until the net was nearly to the point of being hand hauled. Then over the top of the net he would come. Once in the net area he darted about in ecstasy, stuffing

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the face of the water.

Andy boasted that the captain, a seiner for 40 years, could often name species by the phosphorous streaks.

About a mile offshore, one of the men in the bow raised his hand. Immediately the throttle was eased back and aproned crew members moved with silent teamwork into action.

The barge had been set adrift. Then a small buoy, topped with a light was lowered into the sea. Using this as a marker, Captain Ferranti swung the "Sal Boy" in a slow arc as the dark forms in the stern reeled out the nets "bucket brigade" fashion.

By the time the seiner completed its tour back to the lighted buoy, 180x6 feet of net, forming a wall, with the "purse" in the middle, lay awash in the water.

A new sound broke the silence. Two winches drew the nets in a slow tightening circle toward the boat. As the netting came up from the depths phosphorous jelly fish clinging to the twine created a weird wall of dull white which disappeared as the line of net broke the surface.

During this fascinating display of underwater sparkle, great flashes of light seem to explode periodically under the boat which gave this reporter excited visions of Moby Dick impatiently waiting underneath for the payload. What it was made sense to the fishermen, however.

As the nets are hauled in a "submarine light" is lowered on the opposite side of the boat. Its sudden flashes frighten the fish back into the nets and understandably so. Such a sight in night waters is an eerie one.

As the circle of net lessened to about 20 yards in circumference, the winches are stopped and the crew, working in silent unison, continue to draw in the net by hand.

When the fish are at boatside a powerful spotlight on the mast lights the deck like a stage in a world of darkness and the catch is unloaded. The fish are scooped out of the net by a large basket

A gun is kept handy to quiet the big ones before they tear up a \$2800 net. The fishermen have no qualms about releasing a good catch of fish by dropping the nets to free a shark or other giants of the sea.

There is always mounting tension, even for these veteran fishermen as the net is drawn close to the boat—and they drew five this night. The net can hold over 24 tons of fish, but that is a fisherman's dream.

According to Captain Ferranti, when the water within the net circle sparkles like a thousand diamonds, the catch will run into tons.

More than likely, in these times, it is not until the net is drawn nearly to the boatside that an estimate of the catch can be made.

A good haul is from five to ten tons, and the average nightly catch is around three tons—but much less on moonlight nights.

Working months are from February to December and the crews are out from 20 to 25 nights a month. All hands share the load.

When the fish are running heavy, the captain sometimes uses his sonar, which he operates from the tiny bridge. The sonar is an instrument which records the ocean's depth. On its round clocklike face, one flicker of light records the surface, another the ocean floor. The intrusion of a light between tells the captain he is passing over a large school of fish.

In the drama of these nightly visits to the sea there usually appears a buffoon—the seal. This lone fellow picked us up after the third net, and breathing noisily in the stillness of the night, enjoyed a hearty meal at the expense of

fishermen with corrallied herring. Just about the point where you'd think he would surely be trapped and brought aboard, the net thief would make a bursting leap out of the nets and disappear.

"He's the smartest of them all," Andy called from the deck.

For their night's work, the herding catch brings from four to six cents a pound, according to Machi. Yearly wages run from \$5000 to \$10,000.

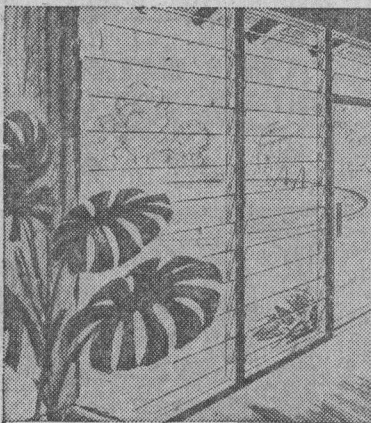
Once a week the great sweep of nets are dried for five or six hours then boiled in "tan bark" a substance obtained from the red oak tree. The boiling kills the sea bacteria, which would soon rot the nets if left alive.

The crew, besides the captain and Machi, included Vince DeFrance, John Cecchini and Antone Altaville.

In the cold morning light as the "Sal Boy" turned its bow toward Moss Landing, the immediate reward for the night's work was doled out in the small cabin—coffee and hard-tack.

And brother, did this landlubber love it!

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