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Boothbay Region Historical Society News

July 2020

Researching and preserving our history

It will not be forgotten

Photograph: Barbers Island class in the 1950s

From Our Archives

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Ernest Newcomb about 1940

Fishing with the Newcombs, Part II

By Ruth Newcomb Begin

(first published in the Boothbay Register)

This is a continuation of last month's article on the Newcomb family. Author Ruth Begin, born 1922, wrote her memories about her family and its fishing experiences for the benefit of family members. Her father Oliver (born 1878) married her mother, Ina Belle Kelley (born 1888) about 1903. Her six brothers, Harold, Oliver "Buzz," Ernest, Malcolm "Mac," Lowell "Bud," and Philip were born between 1905 and 1926. Ruth

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Whenever there was a family get-together when I was growing up, the men soon would gravitate to one spot, usually in the kitchen. The conversation invariably turned to fishing. Just as invariably the womenfolk would complain: "Can't you ever talk about anything but fishin'?" But fishing was their way of life and the only one they knew.

My mother didn't want her boys to become fishermen and did her best to keep them in school in the hope that they would find better paying jobs and a more secure future. "I never saw a rich fisherman," she was fond of saying. I often heard her complain that whenever she thought she was going to have a few dollars ahead, something went wrong with "that blessed boat." Of my six brothers, Ernest was the only one who graduated from high school and he was a fisherman all his life.

Fishing as Boys

At one time or another each of my six brothers went fishing, (hand trawling and, occasionally, gillnetting) sometimes two or more of them together. (Two brothers, Oliver and Philip, and a Peters nephew were lost at sea when the *Kit* went down in a 1953 storm.) When they got together in later years, they would reminisce about their experiences. The four eldest learned to bait trawl as soon as they could reach the trawl tub and learned the arts of boat handling and navigation along with their ABCs. In a way they had an advantage over the sons of non-fishermen because they could always earn spending money by baiting trawls at fifty cents a tub. Mac and a friend of his were baiting trawl for one of the local fishermen. He was mystified by the fact that his trawls kept getting smaller. The answer was that when Mac and his friend came to a snarl in the trawl, instead of clearing it, they cut the line and dropped it down through a hole in the bait shed floor.

Mac and Ernest went fishing with Papa when they were only eight and ten. Papa said he had to keep one in the bow of the boat and the other in the stern because they fought so much. Papa would laugh heartily when he told about the time they were fishing no'theast of Matinic. He put Mac and Ernest in a dory with a tub of trawl and told them to set it. "Where do you want us to set it?" the boys asked. "Set it wherever you want to," was Papa's reply. "They set it all right," Papa related, "right on top of a ledge." Papa was exasperated. "Haven't I learned you two how to set a trawl?" Then with a chuckle, "Funny part of it is, they caught quite a few fish."

My mother often told the tale about some relative of hers in Jonesport, Maine (as far as I could tell, everyone in the town and a lot of those on Beal's Island were related) who had a fear of being drowned and never would go to sea as did the majority of the men in that area of Maine. One night he went aboard a boat tied up at the dock to

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brother Ernest to comment: "Ain't no sense to be afeared of the water. If you're born to be hanged, you'll never drown."

A Pocket of Cusk and a Leaky Boat

My younger brother, Bud, went fishing with a local man when he was only twelve. He lied about his age and joined the Navy at sixteen. After the end of World War II, he was discharged and came home to Boothbay Harbor. There was little work so he teamed up with a friend and went clamming on Westport Island. Clams were plentiful and selling for \$5 a barrel. After a few weeks of breaking up the ice to get to the clam flats and breaking his back in the freezing cold, he threw away his clam hoe and reenlisted. He retired after twenty years in the Navy and went to live in Portland where Ernest also lived. Ernest had picked up what Bud referred to as "an old slab of a boat" and was fishing out of Portland. His son-in-law fished with him. Ernest needed another hand and Bud willingly accepted the offer to go along, since there wasn't much work available in Portland at that time. Things went along smoothly for a time, but on this one occasion when they were fishing off the outer banks of Jeffries, they hit upon a pocket of cusk such as they never had seen before. There was a fish on every line. Ernest figured the fish had been driven in by foreign draggers that were fishing just off Jeffries.

They set sixteen tubs of trawl and had hauled back twelve when the old slab sprung a leak around the stuffing box of the engine. Bud and Teddy were all for tying off the other four tubs of trawl and heading for port. They already had more than 14,000 pounds of fish in the kids. "Not by a goddamned sight," Ernest sputtered. "I just spent every cent I had on this gear and I'm not leaving it out here. Just get busy and start pumping." Bud and Teddy spelled each other at the pump, swapping off between pumping and hauling the gear. Only when the last line was hauled did they head for the dock in Portland. It breezed up, but luckily the wind was off the stern quarter and they made good time getting into the dock. All told, Bud and Teddy spent seventeen hours pumping. They both were sore in every muscle, including some they didn't even know they had.

Finally Home

Once they reached the dock and the bow and stern lines were secured, Bud threw his boots and oilclothes up onto the dock, vowing never again to go trawling. In parting, he hollered to Ernest, "Don't call me, I'll call you." Not very original to be sure, but it expressed his feelings. Ernest just threw back his head and guffawed; he knew Bud too well to take him too seriously. "You'd better come down tomorrow when

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evenly among Ernest and his crew, which meant, of course, if they got the higher price, they would share \$315. There were no benefits or perks.

There were always some fish buyers who would try to skim off a few hundred pounds when the fish were taken from the kids on the boat. Ernest could gauge within a few pounds the amount of his catch and the buyers he dealt with soon learned that it wasn't too wise to try to skim too many from him. Trawl fish are in much better condition when delivered to the dock than those caught by draggers and gillnetters because the fish are still alive when pulled in. In gill nets the fish smother and those at the bottom get bruised. Draggers store their fish in holds for days before returning to port.



Fishermen, some of their boats, and their gear on the east side of Boothbay Harbor, 1948.

For more articles by Barbara Rumsey check our website

www.boothbayhistorical.org/out-of-our-past

Special Event For Our Members

Cruise aboard Nellie G II!

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On Wednesday, August 12, 4:00 pm to 7:00 pm, join us for a spectacular members-only Boothbay Harbor cruise aboard Nellie G II. This BRHS fundraising cruise has been generously donated by society founding member, George McEvoy. Appetizers and beverages will be served, and historical tidbits will be shared by BRHS Outreach Manager Kathy Goldner. Reservations are required and tickets are \$75 per person. Space is limited to 20 guests plus crew.

If you are not yet a member, please join us! Memberships begin at \$15 a year.

For reservations or to become a member, call us at BRHS at 207-633-0820. We can take credit cards over the phone.

On August 1, we will make a final decision on whether to hold this fundraiser based on CDC guidance for gatherings. All reservation deposits will be returned, if necessary. .

We welcome Judy Adamson to our Board

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Judy Wyman Adamson, the newest member of the Boothbay Region Historical Society Board of Trustees, is no stranger to the area. She grew up in East Boothbay on Ocean Point Road. Her childhood home, while still there, now shares space with Smugglers' Cove. Judy graduated in 1959 from then brand new Boothbay Region High School and left Maine to attend Cornell University, from which she graduated in 1963. In 1980 Judy set up a private law practice in Boston dealing mainly with real estate law. In 2000, she returned to the Boothbay region and spent 18 years as a real estate broker with Pottle Realty. After her retirement Judy worked with the non-profit Rebuilding Together-Lincoln County, and we are excited to have her join us at Boothbay Region Historical Society!



Harbor School students c. 1890

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MUSEUM REOPENING

We are open now for researchers only and by appointment only, Thursdays through Saturdays. Anyone wishing to do research at the museum should first contact office manager Claire Rittershaus to schedule a time to work alone or with local historian Barbara Rumsey.

To make an appointment to visit the BRHS museum, contact Claire at brhs@gwi.net or 207-633-0820. For research inquiries, please contact Barbara Rumsey at bsr@gwi.net.

On behalf of the board of trustees, thank you for your patience.

Please check our website or Facebook page for updated information.

Let's celebrate our cultural heritage together

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*We're (normally) open year-round,
Thursday through Saturday, 10 am to 2 pm.*

Please check our website for COVID-19 restrictions.

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