Yarnspinning the old way

One ship east, another west…!

BY DEBBIE HORNE

"One ship sails east, another west, and the self-same breezes blow; it's not the gale, but the set of the sail, decides where the ship will go."

Everett Hardy, an 82-year-old retired fisherman from Freeland, recalls how his cousin John W. Palmer would recite poetry as he sailed the Gulf [of St. Lawrence] waters near his home.

Mr. Hardy often reminisces about his own experiences on the water and he enjoys spinning yarns about days gone by.

As a boy of nine years of age, Mr. Hardy sailed his first boat.

"I was just able to hoist the sail. I would sail back and forth, sometimes for two and three hours in a lick," he said. "It was all windpower in those days, and if it blew you had power, but if it didn't you had to row. When the wind was against, we'd tack back and forth to get into the harbour. You had to be an expert in the sailboat to get in sometimes."

For fifty-four years, Mr. Hardy fished those same waters for his living because that was the only thing you could get for work in those days.

At the age of twenty-one, he purchased his own gear and despite the scars of a childhood affliction of polio, he fished an average of 325 traps a day. When the ice would clear off the waters, usually in April, he would begin tending his nets.

"It all had to be pulled in by hand. I had a six horse power Atlantic engine, and I put it in an old remodelled sailboat. "My father financed me to start," he said. Mr. Hardy named the boat the Queen of the Fleet.

There was a lot of shipping along the Gulf at that time and moving sands caused navigation problems. Shipwrecks were common even with the lighthouse there as a guide for sailors. In the early years, two kerosene lamps hoisted high on poles served as the signal.

Mr. Hardy explained how one chap from Rustico had lost his boat on a sand bar.

"He had taken a contract for a plant in Rustico," he related, "and he bought an old schooner; two-masted and 35 tons. He bought a twenty-horsepower cylinder engine. Captain Perry, I think, was his name."

With only a nine-year-old boy for a crew hand, the man headed out for New Brunswick for a cargo of lumber. As they were sailing back through the Gulf, an east wind blew up and while there were other boats out that day, they were able to get ashore before the gale set in.

"He didn't have a crew and he decided to come into our harbour [Hardy's Channel]. He struck a sand bar on the way in and she went aground," Mr. Hardy explained.

Local fishermen were able to rescue the man and the boy, and the next day the schooner looked like it would dislodge itself. However, it wouldn't budge from the sand bar.

"They had to take all the lumber off and carry it by rafts to Rustico. It took six boats to do that and I don't know how much that ended up costing, but the boat was lost," Mr. Hardy said.

The sandhills have been a haven for beachcombers for years. Mr. Hardy remembered the time when a loaded three-decker had to throw over a shipment of tongue and grove boards to enable passage through shallow waters.

"It was the best of lumber and my brother and I went over and got 16 pieces. They were beautiful big pieces and well seasoned. We carried it by hand, and as we laid one piece down to get some more, someone came along and took the whole thing," he said.

Mr. Hardy said that he can remember three different times where part of a ship's deal came ashore.

Back in the 1920s, a number of lobster canneries were located on the sandhills. Traps and nets were made there as well, and in the winter time when the "Narrows" [Conway Narrows, a channel between the mainland of north-western Prince Edward Island and the barrier sand dunes] was frozen over, logs were hauled there and sawed into laths. It was an industrious place and everyone knew they could earn a living.

"It was free enterprise in those days and a person had his freedom," Mr. Hardy ventured.

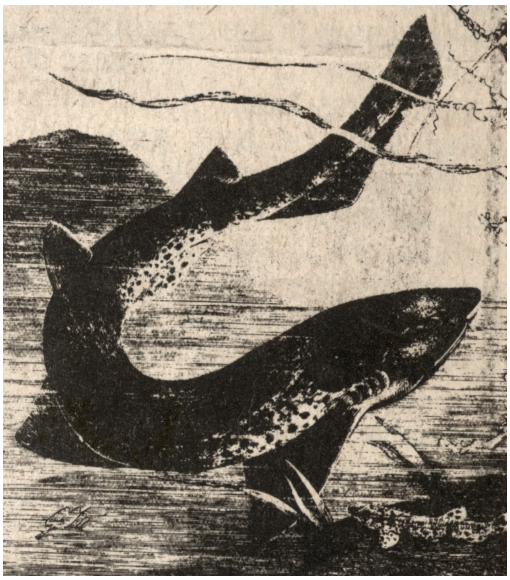
Mr. Hardy said that his parents leased a piece of property at the sandhills for $2.00. They built a factory and the next year they had two boats fishing for them.

Using a cooking boiler four feet long by two-and-one-half feet wide and a bathtub boiler, about 100 pounds of lobster could be cooked at a time. Each can was lined with paper, packed with the cooked lobster, and pickled and sealed with copper. Each can was soldered carefully to seal the product. Water was used straight from the Gulf for the cooking and pickling process.

"There was no pollution back then," Mr. Hardy pointed out.

One year 400 cases were packed for shipment, and an average of 200 to 300 cases per year were sold. Lobsters went for $12 a case, Mr. Hardy said, and there were 96 cans in each. Fishermen were getting 4 cents a pound for their lobster at that time.

"We sold to Charlottetown buyers and there was never any trouble selling because of the excellent quality. It was the best on the market," he said. The factory closed down in the 1940s after his father passed away.



Mr. Hardy has fished every species found off the coast and he said that even dog fish and sharks were used in those days and were sold for fox meat.

“We got a big shark in our net one time. As we were hauling him, his teeth hit the side of the boat and took splinters right out. One fellow got two sharks that same day," he said.

The dogfish off the Gulf look exactly like sharks, he said, and they are often found in their nets. Mr. Hardy said that he has studied the species and one time when he caught a particularly big one, eight of its young sprang from its belly as it was killed.

"All the little dogfish spilled out alive into the water," he said. "Later I caught a great big codfish and what do you know but it was full of eight little dogfish. That really happened to me," he said.

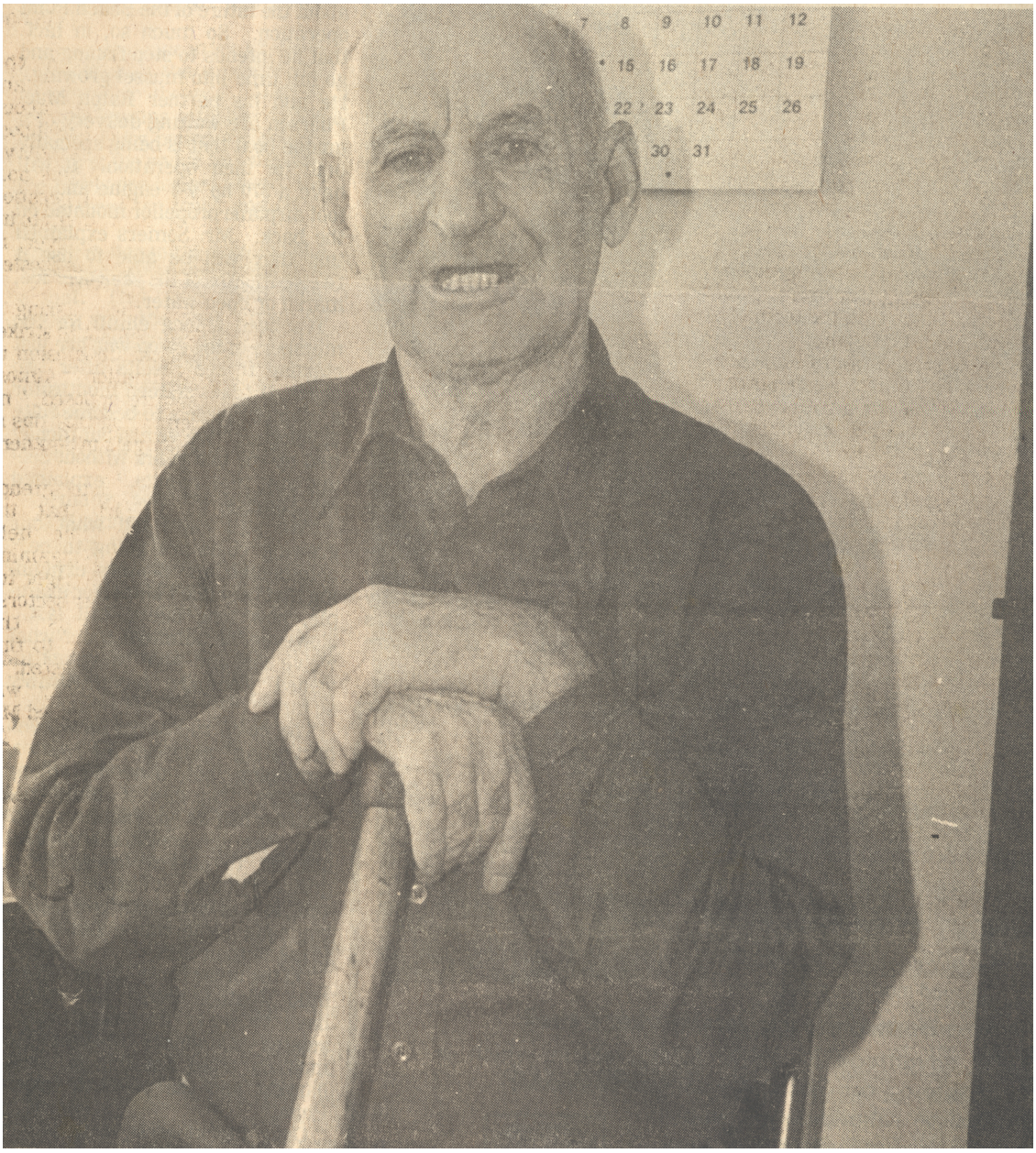
Whales are not uncommon, either, and Mr. Hardy said they would often see them swimming between the boats. A blue whale was brought ashore one time and it caused quite an interest among the local fishermen.

“I done everything but get inside him, I examined him so close. He had good heavy blades on the tail and they were about two feet long. The skin was just like velvet and the outside skin was as smooth and thin as Saran Wrap. I cut out a chunk and his fat was chalk white inside. He had two stabilizer fins and a little tiny curve fin on his back. I've seen lots and lots of them, but I never knew what it was," he said. They found out that day that it was a blue whale and they grow up to 100 tons in weight. “This one was just a baby at about two tons," he related.

Mr. Hardy said he was never tossed overboard no matter how busy thing got on the boat. He was always prepared and everything was ready in case of an emergency. There were no sounders, fish finders or two-way radios in his day, and maneuvering through the Narrows past the sandhills was done every day and night with experience, patience, skill and nerve. The only instrument sailors and fishermen had when he launched was a compass and a chart.

There were times when the waves would swell and roll, but Mr. Hardy always knew when to wait out the storm. He claims he never had to pay for mistakes because he was always careful not to make any.

"For the last four years, I go down to the wharf and with a cushion underneath me, I help with the traps and talk to the fishermen," he said.



Tells Stories of the Sea

Everett Hardy from Freeland is 82 and he enjoys telling stories about the sea as much as he liked being out there fishing with his boat Queen of the Fleet.