

THE DUKES COUNTY INTELLIGENCER

Published by
DUKES COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY, INC.
EDGARTOWN, MASSACHUSETTS



The Lobster Industry of Martha's Vineyard

BY DOROTHY COTTLE POOLE

DCHS News

February 1974

Vol. 15, No. 3

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 Edgartown, Massachusetts

The Lobster Industry of Martha's Vineyard

BY DOROTHY COTTLE POOLE

Eons before European explorers reached the Atlantic Coast of North America, large numbers of crustacea made their homes in the rocky ledges along the shore. Furnished with abundant natural food supplies and protected against their enemies by their heavy shells, these creatures were longlived¹ and numerous. Accounts of early explorations all make reference to these shellfish, which the earliest colonists caught by hand and served as a special gastronomic delight, even as we serve them today.

In 1609, Henry Hudson, sailing along the coast of Maine, reported catching "one and thirty lobsters" in the shoal water. Another entry in his journal states that his men caught "seven and twenty great cods in the morning; in the afternoon, went for lobsters and caught forty."

A later account says, "Lobsters were once so plentiful along the rocky ledge of the Maine Coast that one Vinalhaven fisherman reportedly caught 900 in one day, mostly picking them up by hand."²

Nearer home, Bartholomew Gosnold, exploring the waters of Buzzards Bay and Vineyard Sound, commanded a company of his men to "seek out for crabs, lobsters, turtles, and so forth for sustaining us."³ And in nearby Plymouth, a few years later, Governor Bradford wrote, "Crabs and lobsters are in their time infinite."⁴

"Infinite" they may have seemed, for they were always a luxury item and the demand did not exceed the supply until the recent trend in our country which labels luxuries as necessities and insists not only that there be "a chicken in every pot," but a lobster as well.

Lobsters are called shellfish, a misnomer because they are not

fish. Lobsters are *arthropods*, having jointed legs like insects and spiders. Their hard coating of *chitin*, sometimes like bone, sometimes tough and leathery, sometimes thin and transparent (depending on the amount of lime in the *chitin*) puts them in the class *Crustacea* (hardshells). They belong to the same order as shrimps and crabs, the *Malacostraca*, and to the family *Homariidae*. The lobsters along the Atlantic Coast from North Carolina to Labrador are known as *Homarus americanus*, the genus and species to which they belong.

Other true lobsters are the *Homarus vulgaris* found in Northern European waters and the *Homarus capensis*, a small species living along the coast of South Africa. Other decapod crustaceans such as the spiny lobster, rock lobster, crawfish, et cetera are sometimes known as lobsters in the parts of the world where the waters are warm. All are esteemed as food and support extensive fisheries in South Africa, South America, Australia, New Zealand and along our Pacific Coast. Canned tails (but only tails) are imported in quantity to Europe and America.

A lobster's body is divided into sections: five for the head, eight for the thorax and six for the abdomen. There are two pair of antennae on the head and two compound eyes, really clusters of many simple eyes, which are on slender jointed organs called "stalks." The antennae and the eye stalks move constantly, searching for food and watching for enemies.

On the body are five pair of jointed legs: four thin pair for walking and a fifth pair, thick and ending in large claws, which extends in front of the head. One claw is very heavy and has thick teeth to crush shellfish, dig burrows and fight. The smaller claw has sharp teeth with which to tear food apart. (The heavy claw is not always found on the same side of the head.) Around the Vineyard, lobsters are dark green, black and occasionally creamy colored, reddish or orange. When cooked, the lobsters' shells turn bright red.

Lobsters live on the ocean bottom and hide under rocks or in holes or burrows which they dig in the mud to a depth of six feet or more. During the day they stay in their burrows but at night they walk the ocean floor, looking for food.

The female lobster carries her eggs, externally and internally, nearly two years, but she produces 5,000 to 100,000 (97,400

actual count). The "coral," found only in female lobsters, is a mass of undeveloped eggs lying within the ovary. At some time after the formation of her eggs, the female lobster molts (sheds her shell). Mating takes place only within a few hours after molting, the sperm cells of the male being placed within the female's abdominal chamber, the seminal receptacle. Here the sperm cells remain alive and vigorous for nine months. Then the female extrudes the eggs and attaches them to the swimmerettes under her tail. The eggs are fertilized in their passage from the oviduct, through the seminal receptacle, to the swimmerettes. Then for nine to ten months, the female must constantly guard her eggs against predators and also against their being scraped from her body. Curling her tail section over the eggs is effective protection, but can be used only sparingly, as the embryos need oxygen and water. Nevertheless, a high percentage of the tiny larvae survive to become plankton, at which stage the mortality rate increases tremendously. About one-third of an inch long at birth, these small lobsters rise to the surface, where they drift and swim for three to five weeks, easy prey to marauding fish and seafowl. These baby lobsters bear no resemblance to their parents. They must undergo three complete molts before they begin to look like adult lobsters, and many more molts before they reach maturity.

The lobster's shell serves in lieu of a backbone, providing protection and attachments for muscles. Because it is outside the body, the shell does not expand with the growing lobster, which must molt frequently. Around the Vineyard, lobsters molt ten or eleven times the first year, the annual number becoming progressively smaller with age. When molting, lobsters are particularly vulnerable to attacks from sea birds, fish and other lobsters, for these creatures are cannibals. Lobsters first shed their shells two days after hatching, then at weekly intervals until the third molt when they begin to resemble adult lobsters and give up their drifting existence to become bottom dwellers. Although then able to hide and burrow, the lobster is still only about an inch long and depends for survival on its ability to be inconspicuous. Before molting, most of the blood in the claws flows into the body and the lime in the joints dissolves, softening the old shell. The muscles shrivel and the lobster humps up through the opening, drawing its pincers back, its legs up and its tail forward and out. Sometimes a

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leg or a feeler is broken off in the process, but there is little pain or bleeding and, when the lobster molts again, it grows a new limb. (It may be small, but will grow with each molt.)

Mr. Hughes⁸ reports that there are few injuries at the Hatchery but, when one occurs, a lost claw can be replaced after two molts. However, during the process of regeneration, the increase in carapace length decreases, which indicates that a lost claw might inhibit overall rate of growth.

Lobsters feed principally on fish, dead or alive. They also eat small mollusks and larger ones which they can crush with their claws. Cannibalism is common and vegetable matter is eaten occasionally. In the Lobster Hatchery at Oak Bluffs, it has been established that a one pound lobster has consumed fifteen pounds of food since hatching. Diet affects the color of the lobster's shell. A diet of fish and shellfish only produces sky-blue shells which eventually fade to pale bluish gray. If freshly-killed blue crabs are mixed with the above, a bluish lobster will approach the typical dark greenish-brown coloration and, after its next molt, will be identical with the wild lobster.

Lobstermen use fish, fresh or salted, to bait their traps. In the early days, a man would often be both a pound fisherman and a lobsterman. He could then use the trash fish from his pound to bait his lobster pots. When pounds became scarce, and finally extinct around the Vineyard, the fishermen bought their bait from the draggers. Now there are few draggers, and getting a sufficient supply of bait is a problem. Swordfish heads and other scraps are used to supplement the herring, robin, skate and flounder bought from the draggers. To preserve the bait, since it cannot be obtained when needed, the lobsterman makes a strong brine and keeps the bait in it until he is ready to use it. On certain fishing grounds the lobsters seem to prefer the salt bait to fresh. There is a great need for some satisfactory synthetic bait. So far, the Vineyard lobstermen have not found one, although a few years ago they were rejoicing at the manufacture of "Loblure," (which several Vineyard lobstermen tested) and other synthetic baits. T. M. Prudden and his partner, Osborn M. Curtis, worked long and hard to develop an artificial bait, attractive to lobsters and not prohibitive in price. They tried many materials and many forms of dispensing the bait but, though an occasional lobsterman reported

some success with one or the other of these artificial baits, in the main they did not work well and the project was abandoned.

Commercial lobstering brought the need for regulations, state and local. There is no "closed season" on lobsters in Massachusetts, but lobstering is prohibited from sunset to sunrise. The minimum size is set by the state at three and three-sixteenth inches from eye socket to carapace. Especially made metal measures are carried by all lobstermen, who measure any lobster of doubtful length. A fine of \$50.00 is imposed for possession of each illegal lobster ("short") and the state may impound a man's boat and rescind his license.

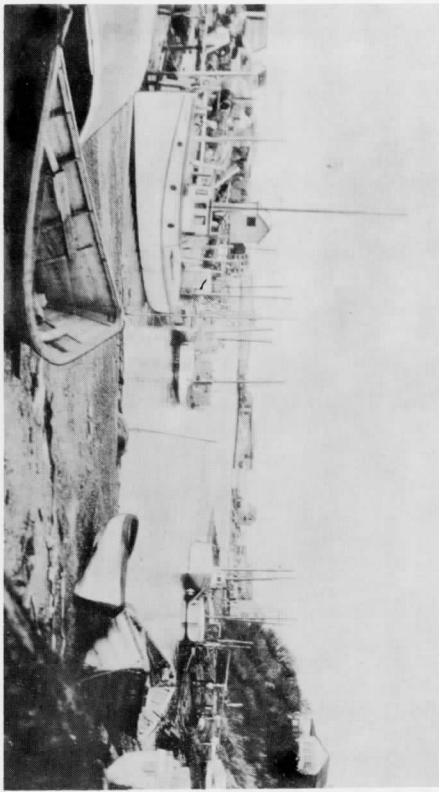
It is also illegal to sell female lobsters bearing eggs. Such lobsters must be returned at once to the water from which they came or be taken to the Lobster Hatchery at Oak Bluffs. Unscrupulous lobstermen have been known to "scrub" such lobsters (remove the eggs) and attempt to market them. The penalty for this is very severe.

As early as 1903, the Commonwealth "made arrangements to collect egg lobsters" from the fishermen from Cape Ann to Cohasset. About 21,000,000 fry were planted at strategic points from Essex to Salem. Since 1951, the Division of Marine Fisheries of the Massachusetts Department of Natural Resources has maintained a lobster hatchery and research center at Oak Bluffs which has been very successful in raising and liberating spat in the waters around the Vineyard. John Hughes, Director, is considered one of the country's foremost authorities on lobster culture.⁶

Fishermen have always been troubled by "pirates" hauling their gear to rob their catches. In an effort to lessen this, all lobster pots and buoys must now be branded with the last four digits of a lobsterman's Social Security number and a buoy, painted with his own distinctive color and pattern which is registered in Boston, must be prominently displayed on each boat. Pots and buoys are stolen, deliberately, from where they are stacked to dry, or picked up when they wash ashore after a storm. A state law now prohibits anyone from salvaging this gear and permits a lobsterman to "trespass" in order to retrieve his possessions.

A person must be licensed to go lobstering. At the beginning of commercial lobstering, a license was just a dollar and a man did not have to be a citizen to obtain one. Many aliens in New

Bedford went lobstering in Vineyard Sound from April until August and then moved to Nomansland for another season. When the law was changed so that only citizens could get a license, these aliens simply went out beyond Nomans, beyond the three-mile limit, and "caught up all the lobsters." Since then the cost of a lobster license has risen to \$2, to \$5, to \$10 and, two years ago, to \$100. The \$100 license is for commercial fishermen; others may obtain a license for \$25 and be restricted to 25 pots and to fishing only from June 15th to September 15th; the "casual" lobsterman only pays \$10, but he must not sell his catch. Skin divers are subject to the same regulations as the pot fisherman.



The head of the Basin, Menemsha Creek, about 1930.

After January 1974, wooden and bottle buoys must all be replaced by plastic buoys, but most of the Vineyard fishermen are already using the latter as they are lighter and more buoyant and one set of plastic buoys replaces four sets of wooden ones.

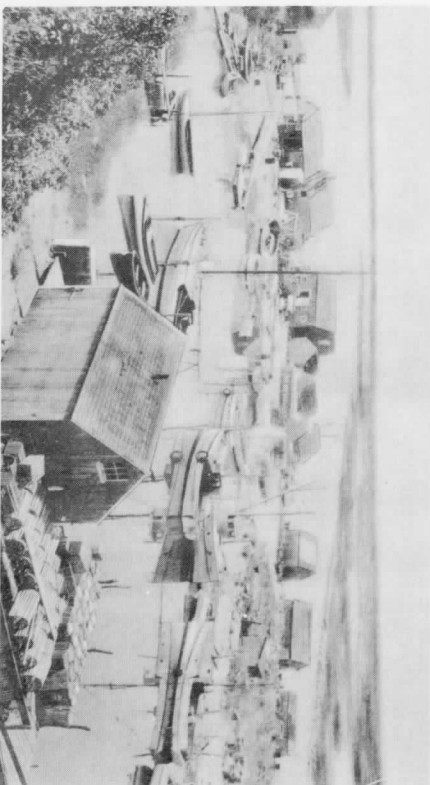
The state maintains a number of motorboats which patrol the waters of the Commonwealth to be sure that these rules are being obeyed and to check pot and buoy markings and the lobstermen's licenses. The Vineyard has a resident Fish Warden, Paul Hotz.

Besides making regulations and maintaining a hatchery for experimentation and research, the Commonwealth annually gathers data from all lobstermen and compiles tables of statistics which show methods, gear, lobsters caught, et cetera. In 1971 (the

latest publication released); 90.5% of the 6,856 licensed lobstermen in Massachusetts filed reports. Lobstermen are classed as regular, casual and other, and also according to the method of fishing; e. g. potmen, diver or combination of both. The lobster fishery is the state's most valuable fishery conducted within its territorial waters and the figures for Dukes County, taken from the latest edition of the Massachusetts Coastal Lobster Fishery Statistics (1971) follow.

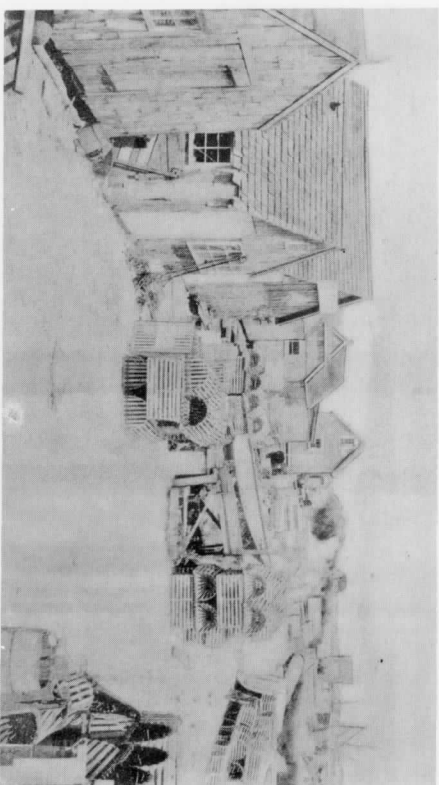
Dukes County Lobster Fishery Statistics - 1971

Categories of Lobstermen	Lobstermen	Pounds of Lobsters	Number of Lobsters	Value of Lobsters	Number of Pots Fished	Value of Pots	Value of Diving Gear	No. of inboard motorboats	Value of inboard motorboats	No. of outboard and non-powered boats	Value of outboard and non-powered boats
Regular potmen	23	74,506	60,634	91,871	3,904	34,785		19	98,020	6	2,220
Potmen-divers	1	6,260	5,216	7,449	200	1,782	300	1	2,500	1	250
Sub-total	24	80,766	65,850	99,320	4,104	36,567	300	20	100,520	7	2,470
Casual potmen	15	5,007	4,023	5,958	289	2,575		8	10,756	10	4,070
Sub-total	15	5,007	4,023	5,958	289	2,575		8	10,756	10	4,070
Other potmen	59	3,603	2,433		333	2,967		14	11,420	36	8,725
Divers	11	442	244				1,725			1	200
Potmen-divers	2	175	96		11	98	144			2	800
Sub-total	72	4,220	2,773		344	3,065	1,869	14	11,420	39	9,725
Totals	111	89,993	72,646	105,278	4,737	42,207	2,169	42	122,696	56	16,265



Another view of the Basin about 1930.

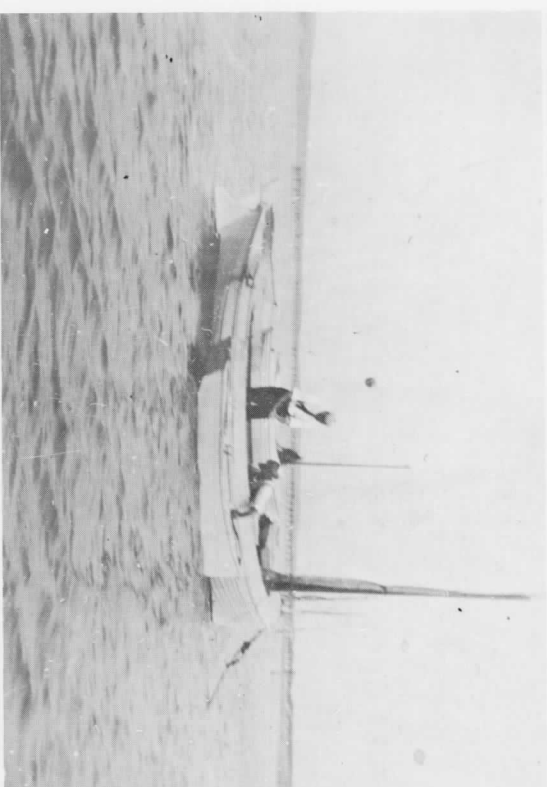
In the late 1800's, fishermen from the Vineyard sometimes spent half the year on Nomansland, codfishing in the spring and fall, and lobstering during the summer.



View from the rear of the fish houses along Menemsha Creek about 1930.

Nomansland then, as now, was a part of Chilmark. The land was mostly held in "sheep rights," but this was construed to include the right to build and occupy a shack for seasonal fishing. Annie Wood said the fishermen were given "verbal rights to erect

dwellings upon the northern shore, close to the beach."⁷ At one time about 70 fishermen and their families camped there in two groups, known as Crow Town and Jimmy Town. Living there was considered a "vacation" for the wives because housekeeping was minimal. A few families lived on Nomans all year, fishing and farming. Some of the fishermen lived on Nomans only from Monday to Saturday, returning to the Vineyard for Sunday. Each Monday morning they would be accorded a royal welcome, as they invariably returned with crocks of doughnuts and cookies, freshly-baked bread and other foodstuffs which could not be prepared with the facilities at Nomansland.



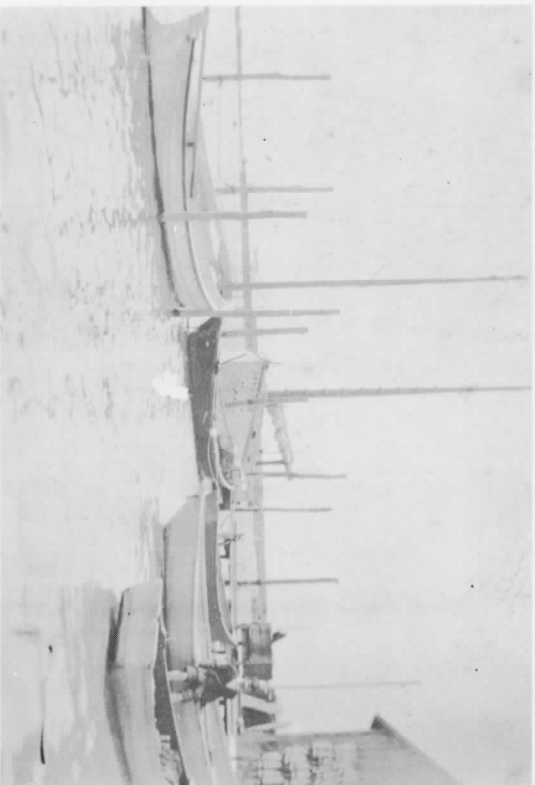
William S. Mayhew's Nomans Land boat moored off the Lobsterville Beach in 1907, with a skiff alongside. This was probably before Willie had an engine in her as the sail wrapped around the mast would indicate. The old Lobsterville clay wharf at which schooners tied up to load clay can be seen in the background.

The shacks were close together and all activities, except the actual catching of fish and lobsters, were communal. When a boat had to be hauled out, everyone lent a hand. Together the men set gill nets for herring for use as lobster bait and traps for conchs, bait for codfish.

Frequently, the wives prepared a collective dinner, serving it

out-of-doors when the weather was clement, or commandeering the largest building if necessary.

After a large lumber schooner was wrecked off the island, the men built a church (also used as a school) from the salvaged lumber. They had no minister, but met together in a dignified service of hymn-singing and prayer. But title to the land on which the church was built was questioned and a lawyer was to come from Boston to take formal possession of the property for his client. The fishermen learned of the impending visit and put the church on planks and rollers, moving it to an undisputed site.



Another photograph of Willie Mayhew's Nomanstander. This was taken in 1918 when she surely must have had a two cycle make-and-break engine in her.

For many years, each family brought its own supplies from the Vineyard or from New Bedford, although sometimes the "smacks," small schooners, which came to buy fish or lobsters, would bring a supply of staples or a small cargo of fruit.

The fishing around Nomanstand required a special boat, sharp at both ends, open fore and aft, and small enough to be rowed by one man when the wind failed. These boats were fitted with two masts, which could be unstepped, and were strongly built with an oak keel and stem, and with cedar planking, usually lap-streaked.

Some fishermen built their own boats, but Delano of New Bedford built the majority of them.

There was no real harbor at Nomans and the boats, built with iron shoes on their keels, were hauled up each night over a track with a groove, well-greased with tallow or cod-liver oil, into which keels fitted. Several men on each side held the boat upright while a pair of oxen pulled it - with catch and gear still aboard - up the beach beyond reach of the tide. Israel Luce, a deaf-mute, owned the oxen and charged each fisherman five dollars a season for this service.

One fall, George Fred Tilton, home from a whaling voyage, had been persuaded by his brothers to go to Nomans. He went out with the codfish fleet early one morning, anchored and fished four different places and went ashore eight hours later with three fish. When he reached Nomanstand, his neighbors had the ladders laid, hitched a pair of oxen to Tilton's boat and began to haul her up the beach. As the boat neared the end of the ladders, George Fred called out, "Lay another. Lay another. Lay another." Finally, some one asked,

"Where are you going? There's no storm coming."

"Keep hauling," replied George Fred and repeated the admonition until the boat was safely shored up between two fishhouses. Then he turned to the gang and said,

"If I can't catch more than three fish a day, they will have to be a damn sight bigger than these." With this he got his gear together and the next day went to the Vineyard and thence to New Bedford, where he shipped as a boatsteerer aboard the whaleship *Tamerlane*, bound around Cape Horn for the Arctic.

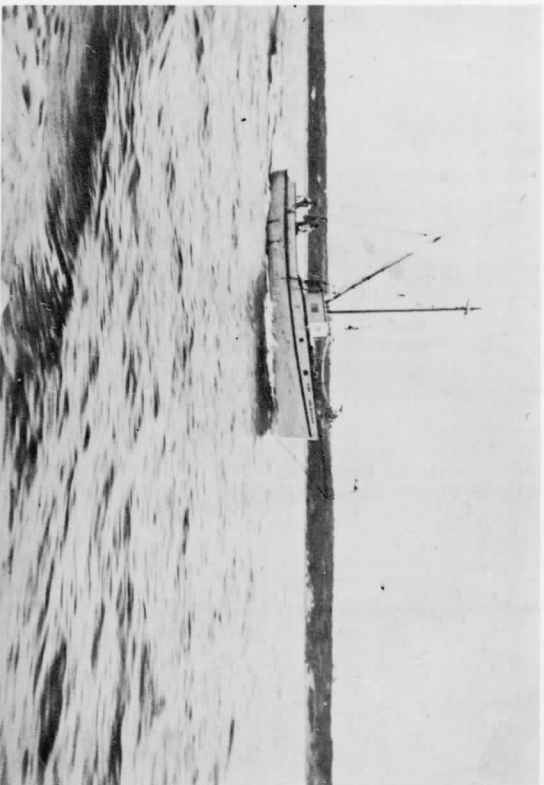
Some other men from the Vineyard who fished from Nomanstand were Captain George Fred's brothers, Welcome and William. "Bill" was a great story teller and he loved to tell about one year when he was lobstering on Nomans and the wind blew constantly. He had his dory hauled away up on the beach, but the wind blew northeast so hard that "the sides blew right off the dory, leaving the bottom on the sands."

Another was Captain Ellsworth West who, as a boy of fourteen, went lobstering summers with Captain Francis Cottle, a retired whaling master. Young West had to walk from his home on the Middle Road to Menemsha very early every Monday morning.

Then he and "Captain Frank" would go lobstering. Captain Cottle had a Nomansland boat and occasionally had to have new sails. Of course, these did not remain snow-white for long on a fishing boat, but Captain Frank did not wait for his sails to discolor naturally. He took his new sail out to the pigpen, tramped on it and triumphantly announced,

"Now I won't have to worry about its getting dirty."

Captain Cottle's lobster pots were set all the way from Gay Head to about ten miles southwest of Nomans. He would haul gear all day, but when night came, he'd beach at Nomans instead of beating his way back to Menemsha. It saved much time to use Nomans as a base, but Captain Cottle went home each Saturday.



Ernest J. Dean's lobster boat *Two Sisters*. She was the first launch to join the Menemsha fleet of catboats and Nomansland boats.

John Pease, Charles Cleveland, the Butlers (George, George, Jr., David and Frank), Lucies, Looks, Nortons, and Henry Davis were others who spent several years at Nomansland. A number of Gay Head men fished from Nomans, but kept their boats at Cooper's Landing (Gay Head.) Some of these were William Vanderhoop, Charles Ryan, John Belain and Frank Manning.

Most of the lobstermen were also codfishermen and their catches nearly all went to market as salt fish. The fish were "corned" (soaked in brine) and then spread to dry on Stony Point. Some were saved for the long winter months - to eat at home or to trade at S. M. Mayhew's store in West Tisbury - and the rest were sold in New Bedford or Providence.

During the latter part of the time that Nomansland was a fishing village, another was being established at Lobsterville. Great mussel beds on Lucas Shoal and the Middle Ground were excellent feeding grounds for lobsters but, west of Lambert's Cove, the only shelter for boats was behind Dogfish Bar, the Gay Head side of Menemsha Bight. Except in a northeaster, this provided excellent anchorage so lobstermen, trapfishermen, and handliners used it as "home port" from April until September. They fished not only along the Bight, but off the entire north side of the Vineyard. They built nethouses for their gear along the shore and some of the men ate and slept in these cramped quarters. Others built two, three or even four room houses and brought their families to Lobsterville for the summer. Some of these men were David Butler, Horace Hillman, Chris, Linus and Rufus Jeffers, Frank and Walter Manning, Linnie and William Mayhew, Anderson and Everett Poole, Charles, Bill and Grover Ryan, Austin Smith and Onslow Stuart.

Many of the men tended their pounds very early in the morning and then went lobstering. For others, lobstering was a full-time job. Most of them owned woodlots in the center of the island where they went in winter to select and cut the stock for their lobster pots. This was hauled to their winter homes where, through the cold months, each man cut his own laths, steamed his bows and built his pots. After the pots were lathed, the bait spindles in place, and the doors hung, the pots had to be weighted so that they would stay on the bottom. It took much time to find rocks the right size and shape so sometimes brick were used. Stones or bricks had to be fastened by tying them on or nailing laths across them. Lines, whose length varied with the depth of the water, in which they were to be used, had to be dipped in tar or copper paint to retard fouling and two buoys had to be fashioned and painted for each pot. The finished pots were baited and stacked on the boats, ready to be set soon after daybreak. The

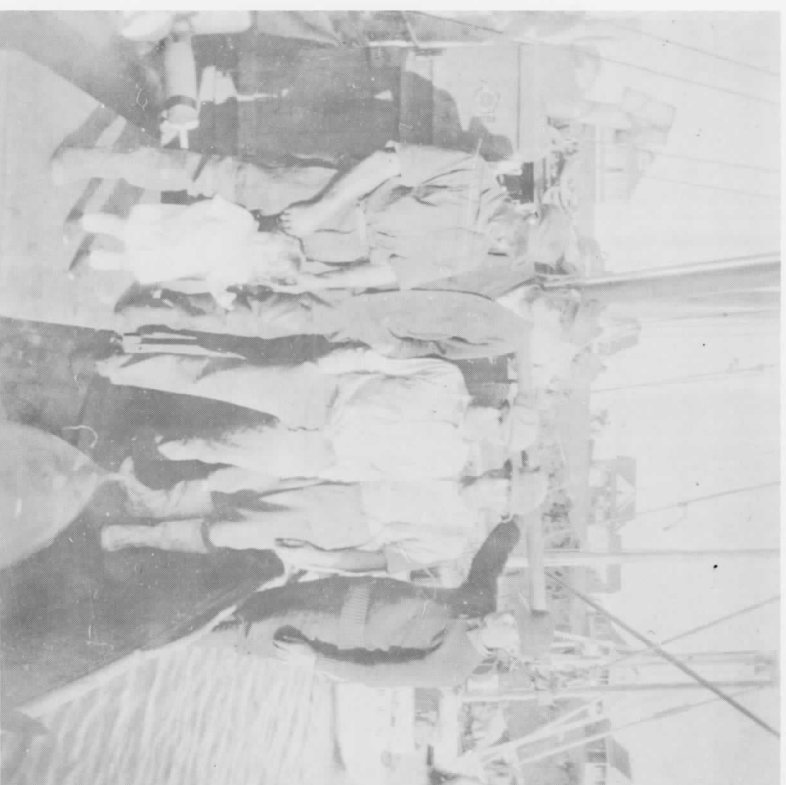
pots were allowed to fish two or three nights before being hauled, but most fishermen had several strings to haul each day. It was necessary to "catch the tide," that is to reach the gear at slack water, when the buoys would show. Most of the men used Nomanland boats or dories, but a few catboats were owned and they anchored behind Dogfish Bar. The anchorage used for the small boats is all dry land now. In bad weather and at the end of the season, the boats were hauled up the beach by oxen. The fishermen crated their catches for a week or two and then sailed their catboats to market: Oak Bluffs, New Bedford or Providence.



Rasmus Klimm's lobster boat *Joanne L. Butler* 1917 or 1918. She was also rigged for swordfishing as the stand and swordfish tails on the fish house indicate.

Everett Poole had been on just such a trip to Newport. It was dusk and he was eager to get back to Lobsterville, but outside Brenton's Reef Lightship the wind died out. He was dismayed until he discovered a tow-boat with a string of barges bound east. As the flotilla passed him, he threw his anchor rode and grappling iron aboard the stern barge and "hitched" a ride. All was well until he got off Gay Head. Then he had to lash his tiller, run forward and cut his anchor rode, losing his grappling iron and his lines. He was glad to be just off Lobsterville but he wondered, as he made

his way ashore, just what the barge captain would think the next morning when he discovered his extra cargo.



A group of Menemsha fishermen on a lobster boat in the Basin about 1925. From left to right they are: Rasmus Klimm with his son Bobby, Willie Mayhew, George T. Silva, Everett Poole and Stanley Poole. The boat is Rasmus Klimm's *Joanne L. Butler*.

Lobster snacks came from New York and Long Island, Providence, even Boston to buy the lobsters. One buyer was accustomed to pay the odd change for a catch in dimes and it became the custom for the men at Lobsterville to give these dimes to their wives. After awhile, one of the wives told the buyer of this habit and the next trip he paid each man for his entire catch in dimes only.

At that time, ten and one half inches from the tip of the snout

to the end of the tail was the legal size for a lobster in Massachusetts. The skippers of the smacks bought the lobsters by the piece and, if a lobster was exactly ten and a half inches long, some buyers would take two for one.

Ten and a half inches was the legal limit in Massachusetts, but in Rhode Island it was nine. Massachusetts maintained a boat named the *Lexington*, in which Detective Proctor patrolled the waters of the state to enforce this and other regulations. Some of the Lobsterville men saved their nine inch lobsters, in crates sunk off the shore, until there was a good north or northeast breeze. Then they would sail to Rhode Island, where the nine inch lobsters were legal. The crates so used became known as "Proctor pots."

Another "short lobster story" is that of John Belain of Gay Head who was arrested by the Fish Warden for using short lobsters for bait to catch bass. Hauled into court, John said he needed no lawyer; he did not see how he could be held responsible for two lobsters that crawled out on the beach beside him. The case was dismissed.

Some cases never reached the courts. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, bass clubs were established on Pasque, Nomans and at Squibnocket and their members and the commercial fishermen were frequently at odds. In 1876, the Pasque Island Club hired a caretaker to protect the club's property and "to try to prevent residents of Cuttyhunk and the Vineyard from setting their lobster pots and fish pounds in the waters immediately adjacent to Pasque."⁹ This never succeeded.

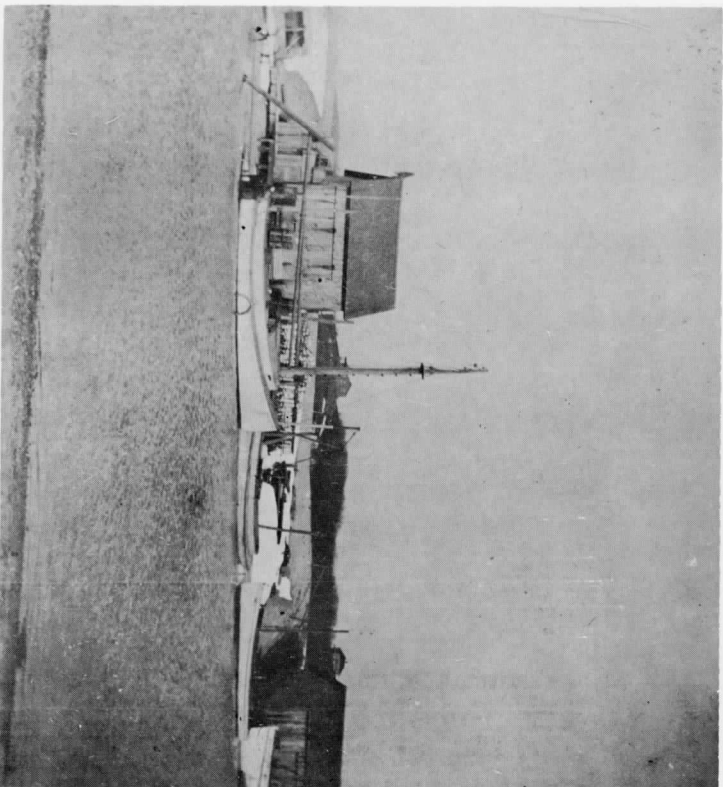
On the other hand, some of the Bass Club members "clumped" for bass with short lobsters. Because of this, huge quantities of lobsters were destined never to become of legal size and the lobstermen were incensed.

Henry David Thoreau visited Long Point, Provincetown, around 1857. Seeing the lobstermen there fishing from small boats just offshore, he wrote, "... the lobsters catch themselves, for they cling to the netting on which the bait is placed, of their own accord, and thus are drawn up. They sell them fresh for two cents apiece. Man needs to know but little more than a lobster in order to catch him in his traps." (The netting to which the lobster cling was attached to an iron ring with a bridle of lines which ran to a single line leading to the surface. These were the earliest lobster



Everett A. Poole at the wheel of his *Anna W.* Captain Poole was a lobsterman for fifty-two years. But in the off seasons he also fished for cod and mackerel. Some years he followed the mackerel all the way up the coast from Chincoteague, Virginia. Also for a good many years he combined trap fishing with lobstering, setting pounds in both Squibnocket Bight and in Vineyard Sound near the Brickyard.

pots used. They were called "ring nets." Half-round pots developed from these, but some lobstermen now prefer "square" pots.



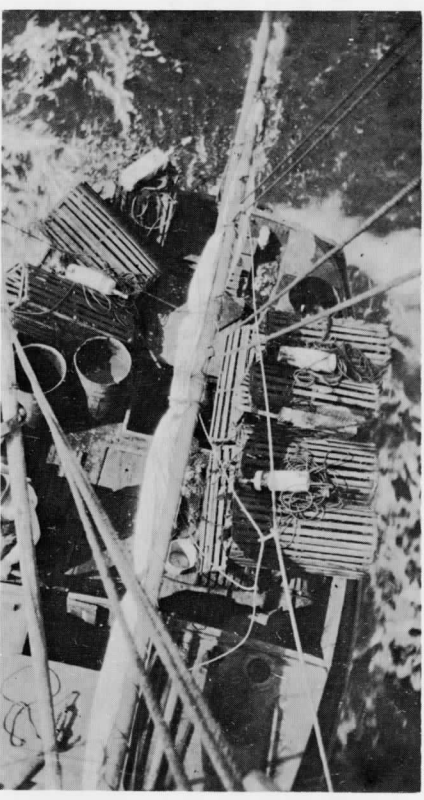
Captain Everett A. Poole's catboat *Anna W.*

A visit of a few weeks at Lobsterville or Nomansland would, I think, have altered Thoreau's opinion of a lobsterman's need for knowledge.

But despite its difficulties, life at Lobsterville was remembered nostalgically. In 1904, Menemsha Creek was dredged to make a fine harbor and the lobstermen deserted their colonies at Nomansland and Lobsterville, lived at home and fished from Menemsha.

But though the port changed, the fishing remained about the same except for the use of more and more power boats. And on stormy days, the men still recounted their experiences. George

Butler was hauling his lobster pots off Nomansland when he found a swordfish with its tail tangled in the warp of his pot. The fish was dead and spoiled but could be used for bait.



A load of pots ready to go overboard. From the masthead of Captain Everett A. Poole's *Anna W.* About 1920.

That was on a hot summer day, but some of the lobstermen fished until Christmas. Everett Poole was hauling his lobster gear in a November snowstorm when he sighted the five-masted schooner, *Dorothy*, bound towards South America. The schooner's captain, not knowing what a hardy breed Island fishermen were, hailed Poole and offered to put over a boat "to rescue him."

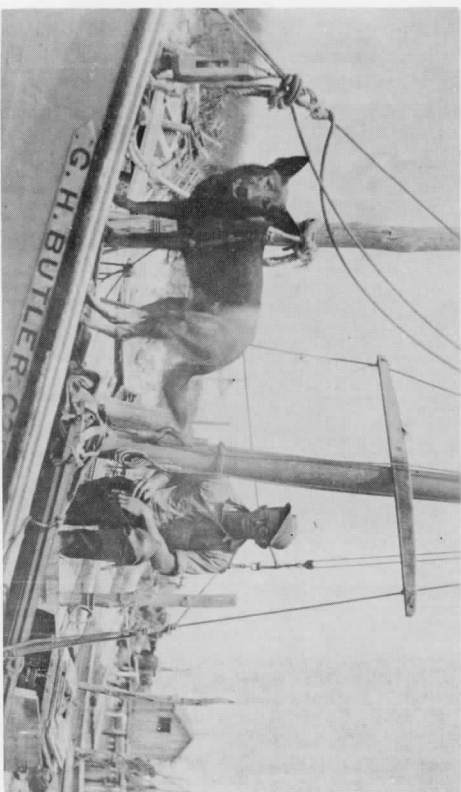
At one time, a few men went lobstering from Edgartown. They fished from dories, often with sails, setting their pots around Cape Pogue. Here, as off Menemsha and Nomansland, there were great beds of eelgrass, kelp and rockweed called "hogbeds." That lobsters were to be found in these spots is graphically told by the story of Jerry Look of Menemsha who, instead of putting extra ballast in his pots, took them out to the "hogbeds" to "soak up." When he pulled them out several days later, he found three lobsters in every pot - and all without any bait.

However, the Edgartown men baited their traps, often using bluefish because they brought half a cent less a pound than lobsters, which sold for two cents a pound. The men kept their

lobsters in cars under Osborn's Wharf until they had enough to take to market at Woods Hole or New Bedford.

Levi Jackson and his sons, who were the last men to make a business of lobstering out of Edgartown, fished mostly around Nomansland. Today, one of their townsmen, Henry Smith, goes lobstering from Menemsha in the summer months.

All lobstermen know that lobstering "suffers unexplained cycles"¹⁰ which, in the early days of the industry, were reflected in the law of supply and demand. Back in 1916, a Boston newspaper headline quoted lobsters at 75 cents a pound, the "highest price ever known in New England." Boisterous weather, an unusually late spring and small imports from Canada were advanced as causes.



Gale Huntington on the deck of his lobster boat the *G. H. Butler*. The dog was not Gale's but belonged to Ted Suffern who was going mate that summer with H. G. Reed. The date was 1930 or 1931. Gale bought the *G. H. Butler* from David Butler who built her and named her for his father, G. H. Butler of Nomans Land. That was after he had given up his very pretty catboat.

In 1922, the "tide turned" when a northeaster swept thousands of lobsters high and dry for twenty miles along the south shore of Massachusetts. Motorists from miles away came to gather the crustaceans which the cold weather kept refrigerated. Carlton Knight of Brockton remembers driving to Nantasket and others

gathered them at Hull and Green Hill. Other less dramatic harvests of lobsters have occurred around the Vineyard. Henry Smith remembers seeing lobsters washed up on the South Beach for a quarter of a mile, about forty years ago. And only five or six years ago, a great drift of lobsters washed up on the shore at Cuttyhunk.

But the same storms which were responsible for this largess were also the cause of lobsters being five dollars a pound at retail in Boston a few months later. The stormy spring and rough seas kept the lobstermen from tending their pots and destroyed their gear as fast as they could set it. Moreover, the price of their gear was going up. Pots now (1922-1923) cost \$2.00 to \$2.75 to build, where formerly they had been \$.75 to \$1.00.



The *Dorothy and Everett*, Captain Donald LeMar Poole's latest model fiberglass lobster boat. Including his apprenticeship with his father, Captain Everett A. Poole, Donald has been lobstering for more than sixty years. The remaining illustrations show Captain Poole in the actual process of lobstering.

Many aspects of lobstering are the same today as they were a century ago, but some of the work is not quite so arduous, though it is far more time-consuming than most people realize. Then 75 to 100 pots were ample and a man did not go far beyond Nomans. Today, he must have three hundred pots and fish as far as twenty

miles outside Nomans.

Here are the names of some of the fishermen who went lobstering from Mememsha Creek in the 1920's and 30's. Most of them were Chilmarkers, some were from Gay Head and a few from West Tisbury. These were the men who owned their boats either individually or as father and son, or brother and brother teams.

David Butler	Napoleon Madison
George and Edmund Cooper	Frank and Walter Manning
Roy Cottle	B. Carlton Mayhew
Ed Dalen	Ernest Mayhew
Ernest J. Dean	James (Jimmy) Mayhew
D. Herbert Flanders	William S. (Willie) Mayhew
Ernest Flanders	Reginald Norton
Gale Huntington	Everett A. Poole
Linus Jeffers	Donald LeMar Poole
Rasmus Klimm	H. G. Reed
Dan Look	David and Leonard Vanderhoop
Jeremiah (Jerry) Look	Norman West

And it is hoped that none have been left out. If the names of men who went mate were also included it would make the list more than twice as long.

A few fishermen still use bricks to weigh down their pots, but most pour cement into frames built on the center of the pots. After the cement hardens, the frames are removed, scraped and stored for reuse. Most lobstermen now buy their pots ready-made, though a few still make their own. However, they buy their laths, cut at specified lengths, their bows bent to shape and runners ready for assembly. Bait spindles now come ready-made and some men even buy their bait bags, although others still knit them from twine. Buoys are no longer home-made, but they have to be painted and branded. Wooden buoys were outlawed the first of January so a complete set of plastic buoys must be readied by spring. In the days of Nomansland and Lobsterville fishing, pots cost \$.75 to \$1.00. Today, ready to set, a pot costs \$12.00 to \$25.00. Rope and twine are no longer manila or sisal, but all synthetic materials. The Nomansland boats and catboats have been replaced by especially designed lobster boats, first wood and then

fiberglass, with large powerful engines installed as the lobstermen went farther and farther offshore to fish.

But preparation of gear and cleaning and repairing it when the pots come ashore is a small part of what a lobsterman must understand. Around the Vineyard, there are at least a score of lobster grounds far enough to be called by name. Beck's Ledge is off the brick yard; Whiskey Ground is in Vineyard Sound; the Queer Place, Sound Ledge and Garfield Ground are all at the mouth of the Sound between Gay Head and Cuttyhunk; two separate Point Ranges: one back of Gay Head and one off Nomansland; the Waterfence is south of Gay Head and Moll's Ledge, Brown's Ledge and the Camp Ground are west of Gay Head; There are Peter's Ground, East Reef, the Henry Louis Ground (Inner and Outer), the Cottle Ground, the Mud, the Woods Ground and twenty miles southwest of Gay Head is Cox's. Each fisherman, to be successful, must know on which ground to set his pots at each particular time of the season. He has to establish his own "ranges" (points on land) for locating his gear



Bringing a pot aboard. And the winch (pronounced "wench") doesn't do all the work as will be noted.

and Garfield Ground are all at the mouth of the Sound between Gay Head and Cuttyhunk; two separate Point Ranges: one back of Gay Head and one off Nomansland; the Waterfence is south of Gay Head and Moll's Ledge, Brown's Ledge and the Camp Ground are west of Gay Head; There are Peter's Ground, East Reef, the Henry Louis Ground (Inner and Outer), the Cottle Ground, the Mud, the Woods Ground and twenty miles southwest of Gay Head is Cox's. Each fisherman, to be successful, must know on which ground to set his pots at each particular time of the season. He has to establish his own "ranges" (points on land) for locating his gear

and he must determine how many strings (number of pots) to set in each locale.

A lobsterman's day is long; his work is hard; his cash returns uncertain. At the end of the day when he hauls his last pot, he is hungry and tired - and he still has an hour or more before he can unload his catch at Menemsha, get fuel for the next day and tie up to his own dock. Even then, his work is not over for he must cut up bait to fill his bait bags and wash down his boat before he can go home to his well-earned rest.



How many lobsters are in this pot? That is always the question.

As inshore lobstering has decreased, there has been some effort made to expand the offshore lobstering. There has been much controversy as to whether lobsters are included in the "natural resources of subsoil and seabed" along the Continental Shelf, because they are not really immobile at the harvestable stage. Now this is of tantamount importance because of the offshore lobstering. Congress decreed (Dec. 1973) that lobsters are a "creature of the shelf."

Because the depth and character of waters near shore vary, as do habits and distribution of fish inhabiting them, there is no

universal agreement on the extent of territorial waters. At the General Convention of the U. N. in 1958, 86 states were represented and 21 of those nations claimed a three-mile limit,



A load of pots baited and ready to shove overboard.

In the nineteenth century, anyone speaking of lobstering "offshore" meant off Nomansland. John Slater in the *Viking* from New Bedford, set a long string of pots to the south and southeast of Nomansland and his crew tended them from dories. Everett Poole was the first to go lobstering southwest of Nomans. Others soon followed.

Real offshore lobster catches date back to 1900 when beam and other trawls were introduced in American waters. Those catches of lobsters were incidental, for the vessels were fishing for fin fish. The earliest recorded otter trawl catch of lobsters was 8,000 pounds, brought into New York in 1921.

The theory that lobsters live only in shallow waters has been exploded. The research vessel *Caryn* of the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute recorded lobster catches at 250 fathoms in 1948 and the *Delaware*, a vessel belonging to the U. S. Bureau

eleven claimed a 12-mile limit, and others had varying limits up to two hundred miles. Since 1958, the majority have agreed to a twelve-mile limit, adopted by the United States in October 1966.¹¹ Last year Massachusetts claimed a 200-mile limit, but the state has no means of enforcing her claims.

of Commercial Fisheries, recorded lobsters at 400 fathoms in 1956.

Now commercial operations are concentrated along the Continental Shelf, from Corsair Canyon (SSE of Nomans) to Hudson Canyon and occasionally off the coast of Delaware. There are between 20 and 30 full-time lobster draggers from New Bedford, Sandwich, Plymouth, Newport and Point Judith. These vessels are usually 80 feet or more in length and they fish for ten days to two weeks, keeping their lobsters in tanks. The best catches are in late fall and early spring, but there are lobsters to be found all year.



Measuring a lobster to be sure it is of legal size.

The *New Bedford Standard-Times* of December 11, 1973, had large headlines: "End of *Prelude* Fishing." The *Prelude* Corporation of Westport Point was established by William D. Whipple, a divinity student. Mr. Whipple hoped to develop offshore lobster fishing on a large scale. His corporation had four 100 foot boats which were engaged in a series of conflicts with the Soviet fishing fleet along the Continental Shelf in 1971. The company successfully negotiated an \$89,000 settlement with the

Soviets for the loss of gear, but it could not survive the huge decrease in resources caused by the foreign fleets. For two years, *Prelude's* fishing operations have been on the decline and now its four boats are awaiting buyer offers and the operations in Westport are expected to close soon.

Offshore lobsters tend to be larger than those caught inshore. Lobsters under three pounds are known as "selects;" those over three pounds are "jumbos." Lobsters caught off the Continental Shelf often weigh ten, even twenty or thirty pounds. These lobsters are taken from international waters, fifty to one hundred miles beyond the twelve-mile limit, so there are no restrictions on the method of capture or the size or condition of the lobsters. However, state laws regulate landings. Maine prohibits the sale of lobsters larger than five inches from eye socket to carapace, but Massachusetts and Rhode Island permit selling larger lobsters. The largest lobster authentically recorded is on display at the Museum of Science in Boston. From the claw tip to the tail fins, it measured thirty-eight inches and weighed forty-five pounds.¹²

The Vineyard has no trawlers, but has had several fishermen who set lobster pots in this same offshore territory. At present, only the Mayhew brothers, in the *Eileen* and *Ben*, do this type of offshore fishing. They set several hundred pots and, in 1973, some of their gear was in the vicinity of the wreck of the *Andrea Doria*. Lobsterpots are expendable in this venture, because they are quickly destroyed by sea worms and a man is fortunate if his gear lasts through the season. Some lobstermen are experimenting with metal pots, but no real solution to the problem has been found. Foreign draggers are another hazard for the offshore lobsterman. Fishing vessels from Russia, Poland, Roumania, East and West Germany, Spain, Portugal, Korea and Japan all cut back and forth across this gear, cutting off pots with every tow. These vessels are allowed a large number of lobsters as "incidental" to their primary catch, but there is no check made to be sure that even the minimal laws are being observed.

Despite all the regulations, lobster catches have decreased in the last decade. On Martha's Vineyard, something is being done about it by John Hughes, Director of the Massachusetts Lobster Hatchery at Oak Bluffs. He and his staff have been experimenting with lobster propagation and have raised lobsters to the fourth

molt stage, when they are released in selected areas along the coast of Massachusetts. Female lobsters bearing brown eggs (which will hatch the next summer, in contrast to the dark green eggs which will not hatch for another year) are collected from the fishermen and placed in hatching tanks supplied with continually running sea-water. The eggs are not removed, but are allowed to hatch naturally. The drifting lobster fry are entrapped and placed in special rearing tanks until they grow to the bottom-crawling stage. Using many precautions to keep the fry in top condition and to protect them from eating each other, up to 30% of the fry will survive. One season the survival rate was 42.6%. At the fourth molt, the fry is released and little is known of how they fare or to what extent they contribute to the fishery. The main reason for this is because no satisfactory method of marking or tagging juvenile lobsters has been developed. A long-term tag (one that is retained through molting) was developed by the United States Bureau of Commercial Fisheries and was first used in 1968. It was tested around Monhegan Island, Maine and of two thousand lobsters tagged, 60% molted and 90% of those retained their tags. It is hoped that this tagging may help to discover the relationship between inshore and offshore lobsters.



A good one which certainly does not have to be measured.

"One of the most important breakthroughs pertaining to potential commercial hatcheries involves producing second generations by hatchery-reared adults. Until recently, none of the successfully mated females produced fertilized eggs."¹³ Then, John Hughes, who wrote the above, was able to add that the Oak Bluffs Hatchery had reared three red lobsters which were successfully bred and hatched swarms of red lobster fry.

Also, the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service was successful in hatching lobsters in Maine, but there has been no commercial development. Profits from Maine lobster farms are not likely to be high enough to make the necessary heavy investment pay.

Lobstering, like all kinds of fishing, is a gamble. The substantial profits of a good season can be wiped out easily by one heavy gale. There is no guaranteed income, no fringe benefit, no retirement pension. But the true lobsterman plies his trade for the same reasons that his forefathers went whaling. He loves the sea and glories in its day-to-day challenge. Working at a task he enjoys, providing for others, and being his own master, afford satisfactions deeper and more abiding than those of fame and fortune.

NOTES

1. There is no way to tell the exact age of a lobster, and biologists' estimates by size are not reliable beyond seven years. But John T. Hughes and Charles L. Wheeler in *The Lobster Fishery Of Massachusetts* state that unmolested lobsters have "a life span of perhaps a hundred years."
2. *New England And The Sea*, by Robert G. Albion, et al. p. 197.
3. *The New Land*, by Phillip Viereck.
4. *ibid*
5. John T. Hughes, Director of the Massachusetts Lobster Hatchery at Oak Bluffs says that lobsters have few injuries, but when one occurs a lost claw can be replaced after 2 molts. However, during the process of regeneration the

increase in carapace length decreases, which indicates that a lost claw might inhibit the overall rate of growth.

6. *New England Marine Resources* No. 29.
7. *Nomans Land, Isle Of Romance*, by Annie M. Wood.
8. John T. Hughes, Director of the Lobster Hatchery at Oak Bluffs.
9. *Three Islands* by Alice F. Howland.
10. *New England And The Sea*, by Robert G. Albion, *et al* p. 255.
11. *Harvest Of The Sea*, by John Bardach.
12. *Encyclopedia Of Marine Resources*. Van Rostand Reingold.
13. *Grow Your Own Lobsters Commercially*, by John T. Hughes.

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DCHS News

Donald LeMar Poole has been my mentor for this article, which I could not have written without his help. He and his brother Stanley E. Poole furnished the photographs. I am also indebted to John Hughes, Richard W. Beals and Henry Smith for information about certain aspects of the industry.

The cold winds of winter have slowed the pace of life at the historical society, but we are still a pretty busy organization. The Thomas Cooke House, of course, is closed for the winter, and a few repairs are being made as well as some painting and preservation work. The library remains a center of research with an increase in activity now that the schools are in the midst of the academic year. In addition to a number of Vineyard school students, we have been visited by several scholars, who have made special trips to the library from as far away as New York and from as close as Falmouth. Mrs. Kenneth Stoddard, our genealogist (and president), is kept busy with genealogical inquiries from all points on the globe, and Mr. Huntington can be found in the library several afternoons a week working to correlate the material in the 1850 census with the genealogical records compiled by Roy Norton. Some of the operations have been hampered by the absence of Mrs. Bettencourt, but we wish her a warm vacation in Florida.

One of the most pleasant developments of the winter has been the generous response of our members to Mrs. Stoddard's appeal for contributions to the Preservation Fund. As most of our members know, the society is completely self-supporting, and we would have to close our doors if it were not for the support of the membership. The individuals contributing to the Preservation Fund in the period from October 15 to January 10 have been: Mr. and Mrs. James L. Adler, Mr. George Arkwell, Mrs. James Aronson, Mr. and Mrs. C. Stuart Avery, Mrs. Patricia Ware Baker, Mrs. Edward Ballantine, Mr. E. Jared Bliss, Mr. and Mrs. William J. Block, Miss Mabel V. Brooks, Mr. H. D. Burhoe, Mr. Donald F. Carpenter, Mr. and Mrs. Melville Chapin, Mr. John George Chantiny, Dr. and Mrs. F. P. Chinard, Mr. and Mrs. Nelson Coon, Mrs. Thomas Cooper, Mr. and Mrs. Robert D. Cronk, Miss Margaret Delano, Mr. and Mrs. Edward M. Douglas, Mr. and Mrs. James H. Douglas, Jr., Mrs. George B. Duffield.

Mr. and Mrs. Edward C. Fales, Mrs. Ida E. Ferrin, Mrs. Mary L. Flanders, Mr. John Gerson, Rev. and Mrs. John T. Golding, Mr. Alexander Gordon, Mrs. Hariph C. Hancock, Mrs. Howard S. Hart, Mrs. Allan W. Harrison, Mrs. Louise T. Haskell, Mrs. H. B. Hassinger, Miss Muriel Haynes, Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence B. Hillyer, Mr. Henry Hornblower, III, Mr. and Mrs. J. Logan Irvin, Mr. and Mrs. Norman Dudley Johnson, Mr. and Mrs. Everett N. Jones, Mrs. Louis P. Kayhart, Mr. Robert W. Kelley, Mr. Richard V. Lindabury, Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Littleton, Mr. and Mrs. David E. Lilienthal, Sr., Mr. and Mrs. Lane Lovell, Mrs. Kenneth Lyons.

Mr. and Mrs. Robert B. Marshall, Miss Gladys A. Mason, Mr. and Mrs. Ernest M. May, Mrs. Frank L. Meleney, Mr. Thomas C. Mendenhall, Mr. Maxwell Moore, Mrs. Emery Y. Morse, Mrs. Philip C. Mosher, Dr. Rose C. Munro, Mrs. Richard H. Neeld, Miss Mary Louise Norton, Mrs. Richard H. Norton, Mr. Theodore E. Norton, Mrs. Alexander M. Orr, Mr. John W. Osborn, Mr. Henry C. Ottiwell.

Mr. and Mrs. Donald L. Poole, Mr. Henry J. Potter, Mrs. Arthur Purvis, Mrs. John J. Radley, Mr. and Mrs. Dixon Renear, Mr. William O. Richards, Dr. and Mrs. Sidney N. Riggs, Mr. Walter M. Schwarz, Mrs. Arthur T. Silva, Mr. and Mrs. George T. Silva, Mr. Hollis Smith, Mr. and Mrs. Ruel S. Smith, Mr. and Mrs. Kenneth Southworth, Mrs. A. N. Swanson, Miss Olive N. Swanson, Mr. and Mrs. Robert J. Thomson, Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin W. Thoron, Miss Ruth Todd, Mrs. Stephen Trentman, Mr. Otto Van Koppenhagen, Mrs. Charles Van Riper, Mr. and Mrs. Donald Vose, Mr. and Mrs. Wellington Wells, Jr., Miss Rachael V. Williams, Mr. and Mrs. T. Cortlandt Williams, Mr. Harold Wilson, Mr. George H. Woodard, Mr. and Mrs. Walter Wrigley, Mrs. Gustav C. Wuerth, Miss Elizabeth Yerrinton, and Mrs. Louis W. Young.

In addition to the above contributors, we should note that many of our sustaining members have been paying the increased dues for sustaining membership in 1974. The next issue of the *Intelligencer* will contain a list of these members.

Thomas Norton
Curator

Some Publications

OF THE DUKES COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY ON SALE
AT ISLAND BOOK STORES AND IN THE SOCIETY'S LIBRARY.

The Mammals of Martha's Vineyard by Allan R. Keith. Illustrated, paper. 50¢.

Whaling Wives by Emma Mayhew Whiting and Henry Beetle Hough. A new edition. Illustrated. Cloth \$4.50.

Martha's Vineyard A Short History and Guide. Eleanor Ransom Mayhew, Editor. New edition with added index. Maps and illustrations. Paper \$3.00.

The Heath Hen's Journey to Extinction by Henry Beetle Hough. Illustrations. Paper 50¢.

The Fishes of Martha's Vineyard by Joseph B. Elvin. With 36 illustrations of fishes by Will Huntington. Paper, 50¢.

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