Martha's Vineyard Boats

By JOSEPH C. ALLEN



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VINEYARD FISHING BOATS

THEIR ORIGIN
AND DEVELOPMENT

By JOSEPH C. ALLEN



First of
A Series of Sketches
of Martha's Vineyard's Early History

This limited edition is presented to Dukes County Historical Society with compliments of Reynolds Printing, New Bedford to inspire others to help bring glorious

Martha's Vineyard's "background" to the foreground

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THE FISHERMAN'S WAY

There haint no style on a fishin' craft,
No more than there is on a lumber raft,
The men of her crew berth fore and aft,
And ship on the self-same lay.
The rules, what there is, are fair and square,
"Each man is expected to do his share"
If he don't—waal, somebody parts his hair!
For that is the fisherman's way.

In port, sometimes, when they're fittin' out, You kin hear men argue and growl and spout With the skipper, who, maybe, is watchin' out While they tauten a shroud er stay: "This here is a devilish rotten fall!" "That fore-s'l you got don't fit a-tall!" But the skipper says: "Heave ahead!" that's all. For that is the fisherman's way.

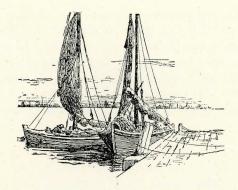
When the fleet stands out on the off-shore tack, A-cartin' sail till the mastheads crack, And there haint a line or a stay that's slack, You will hear these fellows say: "We're holdin' our own, without no fuss, No son-of-a-gun takes the wind from us. Our spars are springin'? They might do wuss!" For that is the fisherman's way.

On the fishing bank when the trawls are set Or the seine-boats out with a mile of net, And the fog drops down like a blanket, wet, That shuts out the light of day. They don't stop to figure out which is worst, To swamp and go down or die of thirst But say, "Damn the man who gives in first!" For that is the fisherman's way.

When one of the fleet gets blown inshore, And strands on the rocks in the breakers' roar, You think that the rest dodge an extra chore? Or twiddle their hands and pray? It's: "Over the dories!" and off pell-mell, And as they shove clear you can hear em yell: "We'll fetch em all back or we'll go to Hell!" For that is the fisherman's way.

So they live their lives all along our coast, They suffer some, but their women, most, But there's always one for to take his post When a lad goes out to stay. For the risk and toil and the miseree, Can't scare a fisherman off the sea, It was always so, and 'twill always be, For that is the fisherman's way.





HISTORY of the boats of Martha's Vineyard is full of flavor and even of romance. And so vastly have the craft used by the Island fishermen changed during the motor age that it is only in such a history that the real beauty of the boats which Vineyarders devised and built can be realized and appreciated. Fishermen and farmers at the same time, the early inhabitants of Martha's Vineyard tilled and cultivated their lands at the proper seasons and fished when opportunities offered. It was a part of almost every man's regular duty to catch and salt a supply of fish for winter use, and if he obtained a surplus he usually found a ready market.

These fishermen-farmers needed boats that could be pulled with oars by one man in a calm, stiff and able enough to carry sail, burdensome enough to carry a ton of fish, and light enough to be hauled out on the beach where there was no harbor. Where was such a boat to be found? The Vineyarders set to work with their native resourcefulness and ingenuity to create the craft which was wanted. The result was the first schooner type of vessel used in these waters.

She was sixteen to eighteen feet long on the keel, open fore and aft, and sharp at both ends. Her timbers were very light, her planking also, and three heavy thwarts crossing her hull and securely kneed into place, gave the boat great strength and life. She carried two small sprit sails on masts that could easily be stepped, and unstepped when desired, and steered with a rudder hung on the sternpost.



BOATS WERE NOTABLY SEAWORTHY

The seaworthiness of these boats was notable. In them the farmers went fishing and even journeyed to the mainland and Nantucket.

The boats were kept hauled out along the northern shore of the Vineyard all the way from West Chop to Gay Head, and various places such as Lambert's Cove, bearing the name of early settlers, designate the landing places of Vineyard fishermen of old times. No mention of leeboards has ever been made, and the first of these boats had no centerboards, but a narrow keel on which they could be skidded. This was the method used in hauling them up, a ladder of oak saplings being used, with a groove in the middle of each rung for the keel to run in. When this was smeared with grease, and a pair of oxen hitched to the bow, the boat and cargo slid over the beach very easily, steadied by a man or two.

It was sometime after this boat had come into common use that Vineyarders became interested in bank fish-

ing. The early records of the 1700s speak of mackerel trips offshore and codfishing trips on which the catch was salted. Only one bank schooner was ever built on the Island, a 100 ton schooner, afterward used for whaling. But on vessels from the mainland, and on vessels commonly used for coastwise freighting, numerous Vineyarders sailed to the banks for brief periods at certain times of the year.

They fished from small boats that were patterns of the earlier longboat and gig; round-bottomed, heavy-built boats with heavy thwarts kneed into place. Fitted with a heavy ringbolt at stem and stern, these boats were hoisted aboard the vessels and carried on deck. The vessels, sloops or small schooners, were commonly called smacks, and the small boat, smack-boats, a name that is still sometimes heard in referring to craft of this kind. These smack-boats became popular with Vineyard lobstermen, and others who fished in the great ponds and near the shore. Displaced by the trawl dory, or "Newbury-chaise", for which no improvement or satisfactory substitute has ever been found, the smack-boat disappeared entirely.



GAINED IN POPULARITY

But the double-ended Vineyard craft gained in popularity. She was safe in a sea-way and faster than the smack-boat. Occasionally one would be built that was a

trifle larger than the common run and one has been heard of that had a twenty-two foot keel, and was used for freighting.

Fishermen began to find that they could secure a heavier catch by going further to sea, and by using the island of Noman's Land for a base from which to operate they could get a full day's fishing in deep water without venturing too far from land for safety.

A colony of fishermen sprang up on Noman's Land, each man fishing out of one of these boats, which soon became known by the name of the Island. The Noman's



Land boat of that generation was rapidly becoming a beautiful example of marine architecture. Only the finest of materials were used in their construction, only natural bends and knees, and no metal but copper for fastening. The only change made in boat or rig up to sixty years ago was the discontinuance of the two masts of equal length and the adopting of the yawl rig, with a more lofty foremast and a tiny jigger stepped in the stern-sheets. No jib was carried, nor were any stays used. Some racing was done in these boats during the existence of the Noman's Land settlement, but the races were endurance tests rather than tests of speed.

It was somewhat over sixty years ago when Perez Horton of Vineyard Haven put the first wash-board and curbing on a Noman's Land boat. This made them much more comfortable and added about four inches to the height of the gunwales. About this time Capt. George Butler of Noman's Land equipped the first boat with a centerboard. But the finishing touches were added to the already beautiful craft by William Mayhew, also of Vineyard Haven.

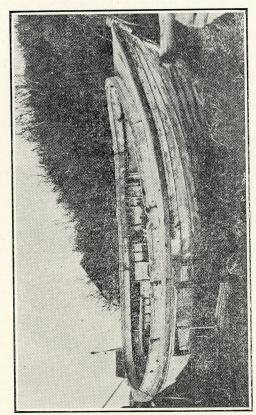
His first improvement was the gaff, which was pronounced ridiculous. It was said that a gaff-headed sail would hang off and prevent the boat from doing her best sailing on the wind. Incidentally it was said that Mayhew rigged his sail with a gaff because he was too lazy to roll up a sprit-sail. But that did not discourage the inventor. The next year he rounded off the foot of the stern-post so that the boat could be launched either bow or stern first, and with that, the development of the Noman's Land boat ceased. All boats built since that time have carried gaff-headed sails and have had a rounded stern-post, but long before gasoline engines made their appearance the jigger was abandoned and a larger mainsail took the place of the previous two.



THE TRUE NOMAN'S LAND BOAT

The true Noman's Land boat did not always carry a boom, a club often being used instead. Where a boom was used, the sail was not laced down but simply made

An Able Craft of Long Ago



fast at the after-clew, and there were those that carried both boom and club, a combination that was clumsy and added nothing to the appearance of the rig. But the old boat men always stressed the fact that the Noman's Land boat was narrow on the quarters and professed to believe that she would not stand too much "heaving down".



The term "true" Noman's Land boat is used because there were numerous large double-enders built along similar lines, but much larger. These boats were half-decked, some had small cabins, and all carried a regular cat rig with the mainsail laced to the boom and sheet blocks running on a traveler. They were able craft and were employed extensively in handlining. They were fast sailers and good sea boats.

During the period in which the Noman's Land boat was most popular, the Woods Hole boat made its appearance. This boat was about the same size as the Noman's Land boat, but built with a square stern. It was commonly rigged with a single large sprit-sail, although some carried a cat-rig. Designed as an improvement over the first-mentioned craft, it was never popular around the Vineyard because of its square stern that made landing difficult, but Cape Cod and Falmouth fishermen used it extensively. Very few of either craft are to be found in commission today. Too small for present day fishing and poorly adapted to the installation of gasoline engines, they have well-nigh disappeared. But they have left a wonderful record behind them, for fast sailing and seaworthiness,

and as for their construction, an occasional Noman's Land boat may still be found, condemned and abandoned for years, but still resisting decay, so beautifully were they constructed.

About the time that the Noman's Land boat reached the height of its perfection, a new craft appeared in Vineyard waters. This was the cat-boat, although differing materially from the present day models. In size they were larger than is common today, ranging from twenty-eight to thirty-five feet overall. They were of deep draught and low freeboard, with but little sheer, plum stems and overhanging sterns. Many of them had decked cockpits, but some were simply sheathed, with a few feet of flooring in the stern sheets after the fashion of the double-ender. All had living quarters aboard, built in the eyes of the boat, but commonly called cabins.



NOT THE REAL "CAT" RIG

Their rig was not the real "cat", as many carried a jib, and the largest carried the mast stepped back to give the headsail more room. Flat and beamy as they were, they were excellent sailers and behaved wonderfully well in heavy weather. Broadside on, they resembled the English cutter sloop. An occasional boat of this type may

still be found around the Vineyard, but her canvas will be lacking and her propelling power will be gasoline.

Before these first cats had become plentiful, the Crosbys had begun to build catboats, and as these last were a superior model, they became the most popular around the Vineyard and vicinity. The first of these Crosby boats had the plumb stem, but the stern was square and without any over-hang. They were somewhat smaller than the first models and of shoaler draught. All had tight cockpits, and they were not designed to carry head-sail. The "high-headed" model soon followed them, and these last boats were the ones that made racing history in Vineyard waters.



From twenty-two to twenty-five feet overall was the size in general use among the Vineyarders. Many had fish wells on either side of the centerboard box, some steered with tillers, others with quadrant-wheels, and all were fast sailers. The masts were stepped so far forward that old timers declared that mast and stem post were made in one piece. The only standing rigging was the single head-stay and it is still a marvel that the weight of the great sails did not split the boats in two.

The single sail of the catboat often contained 100 yards of canvas and even more, the mast towering into the air and the boom extending ten and twelve feet be-

yond the stern. As if this were not enough, the Vineyarders shipped bowsprits and carried jibs of staggering dimensions. Plans are on record today of Edgartown catboats, showing the area of their sails, and in at least one case a bowsprit twenty-two feet long was carried on a boat that was not more than six or seven feet longer! No other type of fishing boat was ever subjected to such strain and certainly no such press of sail was ever carried on a single unsupported spar. Yet accidents were very rare.



MARKED OFF WITH COLORED YARNS

With these boats the fishermen of the Cape and Vineyard raced whenever the opportunity offered. They devised various means of trimming ballast and sail in order to get as much speed as possible out of their boats. Sheets were marked off in lengths with colored yarns inserted in the lays so that the sails could be trimmed with exactness. The chief anxiety was felt for the lengthy bowsprit which sometimes picked up a sea.

This spar carried the regular vangs or bowsprit-stays, but was unsupported from aloft. The single jib-stay led

through a bee-hole to the cutwater in order to allow the spar to spring when thrust into a sea. Otherwise it would have broken.

When gasoline engines were introduced, somewhere about thirty years ago, fishermen valued them only as an auxiliary, and clung to the sail. Many declared the engine impractical and were loathe to install them. Yet, within eight or ten years' time it was difficult to find a commercial fishing boat that did not carry its kicker.



These first engines were from three and a half horse-power to ten, according to the size of the boat. Most of them were of the heavy duty type with the "make and break" sparking device. The double-bladed propellor was commonly used, as it could be turned up behind the stern post when sailing and thus eliminate a certain amount of the drag. The sail was still carried, but the booms of the Noman's Land boats were left ashore, the bowsprits disappeared from the catboats, and the big mainsails were shortened by a reef or even two. Today the old-style full-sized mainsail is almost never seen on a catboat in these waters, and never on a fisherman.

Interest in racing diminished rapidly with the advance of the engine. Many of the boats that had been famed for speed under canvas proved to be but slow crafts under power, and even when engines of greater horsepower were installed, these boats could not be driven above a certain speed because of their build.



TURNED TO VESSEL FISHING

As beforementioned, Vineyarders had not engaged in vessel fishing to any great extent except to ship on mainland craft occasionally for a season. But about the time that fishermen were becoming accustomed to the engines, the Edgartown men, realizing that luck was continuously shifting to deeper water, began to purchase or build larger boats. A few also appeared in Vineyard Haven, but these last gradually disappeared, leaving it to Edgartown to build up the fleet of deep-legged craft that represents the Vineyard in blue water today.



The present fleet of Vineyard fishermen is thoroughly modern. Vessels and small boats have been kept up to the standards set by fishermen of the larger mainland ports. Since the gasoline engine has been accepted as a principal means of propulsion, there have been very few boats built for the Vineyard fishermen that were designed for sail-carrying. The schooners, however, are real



There are still many catboats in use, but the masts have nearly all disappeared, and those that are carried are used chiefly for hoisting. Two Noman's Land boats remain in commission, both equipped with power, and in place of these faithful, old wind-jammers, the launch model has been adopted, and is commonly ordered or purchased whenever a new boat is needed. Running to various sizes, they are generally larger than the common run of boats of thirty years ago. They are faster and more comfortable, equipped with lighting plants, power winches and various labor-saving devices which lighten the burden of the fisherman and allow him to broaden the scope of his activities.

The present generation of fishermen swears by these boats. Never having had experience with others, they cannot easily imagine anything quite as good. With all things working well, this is true, but the fact remains that these new fishermen are wholly dependent on their engines. They are not built to carry sail and cannot do it.



A SIGH FOR THE PAST

The present boat is efficient, and comfortable, but she is an ugly-looking craft compared with the graceful boats of the past. There is little racing done, and when it occurs there is a lack of the thrill that comes from straining spars and swelling canvas. The course is always straight-



away, which is where the efficiency comes in, but the young fisherman of today does not know the tides as his father did. He does not need to, because he is not obliged to use them. Properly belonging to a machine age, these boats perform like all other machinery and contain just about as much romance, art and poetry as any other mechanical arrangement. But there are still those who speak wistfully of the days of white duck and yellow pine power, and voice the regret that there is no practical way in which they can be retained on the small boats.





TRAWLIN-'

Out where the gray sky comes down to meet the sea, Where sullen, heavy graybacks, roll on majestically, Far from the reefs where the breakers shout and bawl; That's where the fishermen go out to set the trawl.

> "Work your passage out, lad, the labor isn't nice, Sittin' in the fore-hold, on a cake of ice, Baitin' up the trawl-hooks, tis nasty, cold and wet, Got to have em ready though, fer to make a "set".

"Overboard the dories!" 'Now we'll wet our twine.'
Pass along the trawl-tubs, grapplins, buoys and line".
Pull short on your oars, lad, let her rise and fall,
Else you'll get your jaw broke, shootin' out the trawl."

Shot and buoyed and anchored, gettin' dark and late, Drop down to the schooner, get a tub of bait; "Slip the foot-boards in, lad, open up your ear!" "Keep an oar long-side you, to give her bow a sheer."

"Creak! creak!" the gurdy goes, luck is split in haaf"
'Heres another dogfish! Pass along the gaff.
'Hold up her nose when a grayback comes this way,
If one should ketch her now, lad, we'ed be here for to stay."

"For when the sea has passed with a sort of hissin' roar,
There'll be a tub a-driftin', or a bailer, nothin' more!
And back to home next week, lad, the paper-boys will call;
How: "Two from schooner So-and-so, were lost a-tendin' trawl."

Back aboard the schooner, "Ice and stow 'em down,
A few days more of this, lad, and we'll be back in town.
Alongside the dock, in our oil-skin overalls,
Pitchin' out the fish for the shore folks' codfish-balls."

Homeward from the banks, not a guiding light to burn, Dodging ships in darkness, a howling gale astern. "Never touch a reef-point in blizzard, fog er squall!" Thats the way the fishermen come in from setting trawl.

Out where the gray sky comes down to meet the sea, Where sullen, heavy graybacks, roll on majestically, Through gales of all the year, in their dories crank and small, The fishermen are there, lad, a-tending of the trawl.



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