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Some ABC's of Fo'c'sle Living

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Want to Be a Fisherman?

So you want to be a commercial fisherman. Or you think you do. Before you make up your mind it might be well to do a bit of checking to see how much you know about the trade you are thinking of making your own.

Commercial fishing is very old. No one knows just how old, but we do know that a fellow named Simon, known locally as "The Big Fisherman," and later in life and in other parts of the world as Saint Peter, the "Rock," operated fishing boats and nets on the Sea of Galilee some 2,000 years ago.

Yes, commercial fishing has been going on for a long time. Still, you may not be too sure of what the terms "commercial fishing" and "commercial fisherman" really mean in everyday language. Stated as briefly as possible, a commercial fisherman is a man who goes to sea and catches fish which he sells to a wholesale fish buyer, who in turn sells it to a retail fish dealer, who in his turn sells it to the person who wants to eat it.

Chances are that you have heard or read stories about the "wild and free and wonderful" life at sea. Maybe you have heard or read stories from bygone days about the romance of deepwater fishing, of wrestling a living from the sea, and other stories played in the same key. Or perhaps you smelled "romance" in the story about the dory fighting its way through choppy seas in a blinding snowstorm, its crew of two straining their eyes to the utmost through the whirling snow for a glimpse of their schooner, and safety. Romance? The men who pulled the heavy oaken oar while craning their heads and staring into the snowstorm would have another name for it.

Romance is many things to many people. You would do well to forget the romance bit the moment you start

packing your seabag for your first trip to the fishing grounds.

Perhaps you have heard or read tall stories about the money being made in commercial fisheries. Rest assured that such stories are mostly true. Big money has been earned, is being earned, and will continue to be earned by commercial fishermen. Trouble is that this big money isn't being passed along to all the participants. Some fishermen do earn big incomes. Others earn barely enough for a skimpy living because they are the unlucky ones, the unfit ones, victims of a short fishing season. They earn only a part of a living wage and must seek the balance elsewhere. Some may have to accept public help like unemployment compensation. The fisherman's income is pretty much like the sea from which it is drawn: it ebbs and it floods like the tide, but not with tidal regularity, mind you!

One fellow earned just a few coins short of 1,100 bucks inside a 20-hour workday. This same man, on another occasion, spent 3 weeks—21 solid days—fighting strong winds and currents, snowstorms, ice-covered docks, snarls on the gear, and more. As payment for his labors and miseries, he received a paycheck for three (3) cents—three small pieces of copper for 3 weeks' hard work. So you see, it does flood, but there is an ebb, too.

Commercial fishing is a rather complex business, and the status of a commercial fisherman is equally complex. He is a working man who performs backbreakingly hard work for unnaturally long hours. But he is also a man who pools his time, strength, skill, and a certain amount of money with his fellows in order to fit-out a vessel, then goes to sea in search of fish which he hopes to sell for a

profit. The cost of outfitting a fishing vessel for deepwater fishing is high, and each fisherman is responsible for some share of that cost. Thus a fisherman risks not only his time and his work but also a certain amount of cold cash each time he goes to sea in quest of fish. He is a businessman as well as a working man.

The fisherman is on nobody's payroll and will not be handed a paycheck or pay envelope each Friday at quitting time. His earnings are derived directly and proportionately from his catch of fish and the price obtained for same. The settlement at the end of the trip may bring him a large paycheck, a small one, or none at all. He may, indeed, get a bill for his share of the outfit instead of a check. That is called "going in the hole," or "getting a hole-bill." This does not happen very often, but it does happen.

A fisherman's workday can be a long one by anybody's standards. An 8-hour workday for some commercial fishermen cannot even be a dream; it is perhaps an impossibility. The fisherman can figure on being on deck from 12 to 18 hours between each time he puts on and removes oilskins and boots; there will be occasions when his watch on deck may be even longer. If the deepwater fisherman manages to sleep 3 to 4 hours out of the 24, he may be doing well enough, all things considered.

A fisherman's "home" for the better part of each year is a small, crowded fo'c'sle shared with several other men. He knows but little of the home life that shorebound men know and love. It has happened that a fisherman has been so frequently and so long away from home that his youngest offspring have forgotten what he looks like, and may only uncertainly accept him as a member of the family when he finally returns to home port. But length of trips vary from a day or so to months, depending on the fishery.

Well, there you have a rough sketch of what the life of a commercial fisherman is like: hard and dangerous

work; long working hours; uncertain and highly variable income; spartan, crowded living quarters; long absences from home. Still, the deepwater fisherman goes fishing. Why?

Perhaps Johan Bojer, in his book, *The Last of the Vikings*, gives some answer. He wrote, "and in the winter (they) sailed hundreds of miles in open boats up to Lofoten, perhaps tempted by hope of gain, but too because on the sea they were free men."

It is a possible answer: *free men*. Independent men. Indeed the fisherman is usually a fiercely independent cuss taking great pride in his independence. He receives no wages. He has no "boss" in a true sense of the word. He has a skipper, yes, but the skipper is his leader, his commanding officer. But he is not a boss in the way a factory owner or manager is the boss of his workers.

The skipper is himself a fisherman, the top fisherman on board and leader of his gang, or crew, because it is his knowledge and skill and judgment combined that, in large measure, determine whether a payload of fish comes on board, and determine the success or failure of the fishing trip or fishing season. To the very best of his ability, the skipper "runs" the vessel and the crew toward that end. So he is the boss in the sense of being the leader. He knows what should be done, and when, and gives orders to that effect. Most important, his orders must be obeyed without question. A competent fisherman may (silently) disagree with a skipper's decision, but he would not refuse to obey an order.

A skipper may fire a fisherman for good and sufficient reason. The fisherman, on the other hand, may pack his seabag and step ashore at the end of a trip for any reason he may think of, or for no reason at all that he would care to voice.

See why the deepwater fisherman cherishes his status as an independent fellow and why men become deepwater fishermen? If you stay with the fishing industry, you will find within it your own other reasons (or rational-

izations) for remaining. These may include the variety of the work, the odds against which you pit your skill and endurance, and the pride of a successful hunt. Adventures, yes. But adventures generally arise from ignorance or miscalculation. With experience, they will be fewer in number, and probably will be reclassified in your mind as hardships.

All right. So you still believe you would like to become a commercial fisherman. Read on then, about some

of the usages he follows, his life-style, and his values. Some parts herein are repeated and rephrased for reasons you will come to understand.

After a season or two of fishing, rereading this should be a bore because you have absorbed it. But if these tips, a mixture of objective facts and subjective reactions, ease you into "the club" with a little less friction and with fewer personal problems, then they will have served their purpose.

