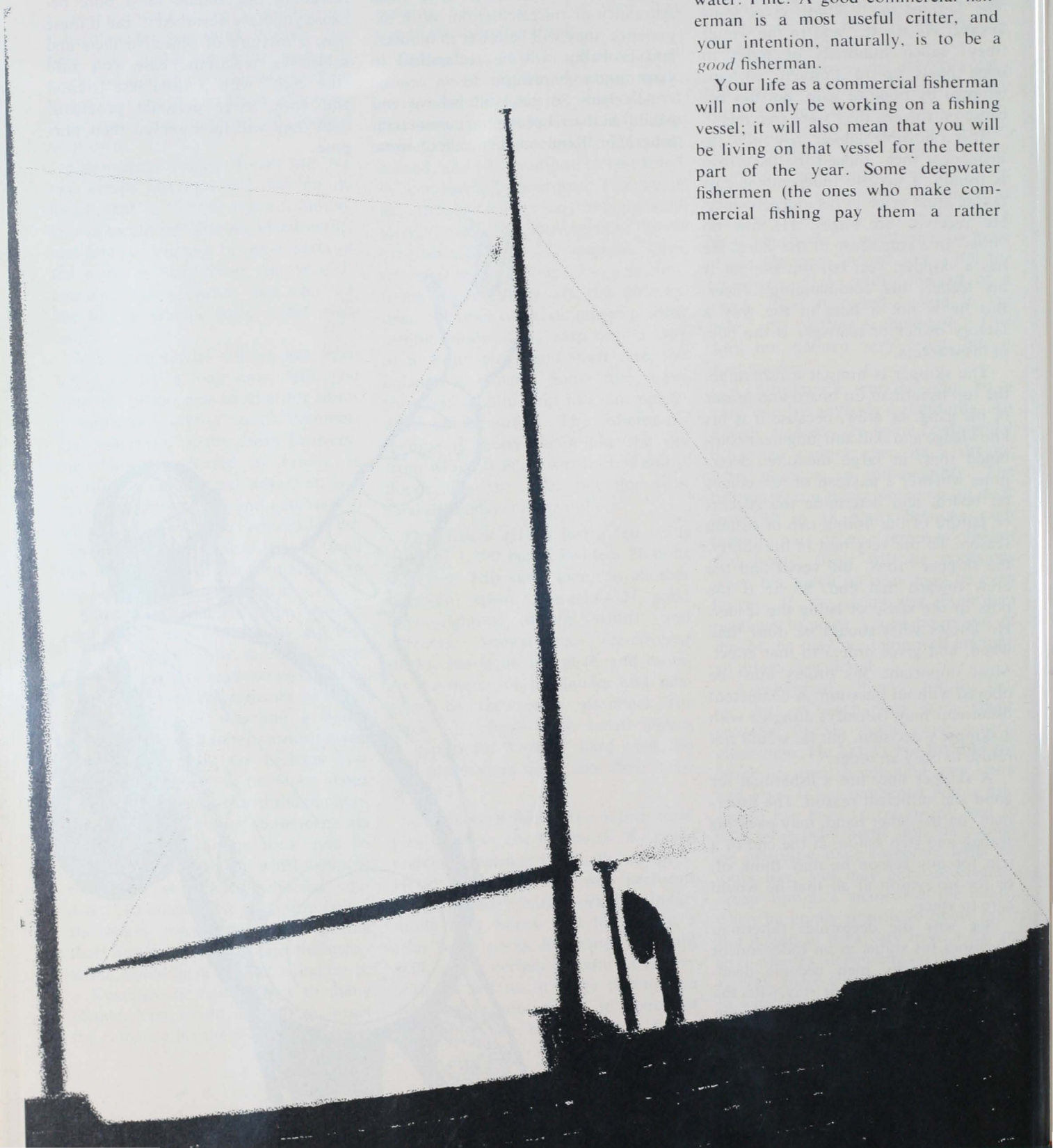
Living in the Fo'c'sle

You have made up your mind to become a commercial fisherman—that is, to make your living on the water. Fine! A good commercial fisherman is a most useful critter, and your intention, naturally, is to be a *good* fisherman.

Your life as a commercial fisherman will not only be working on a fishing vessel; it will also mean that you will be living on that vessel for the better part of the year. Some deepwater fishermen (the ones who make commercial fishing pay them a rather



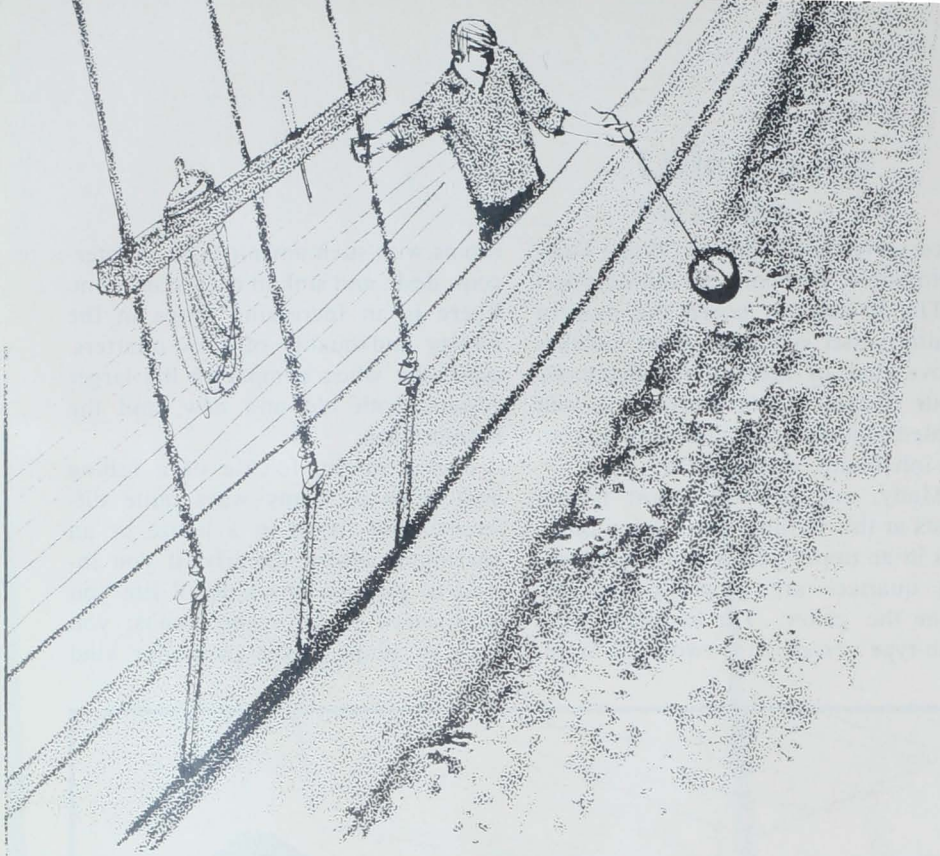
high income) may spend up to 250 or more days of the year at sea. In addition, a good many days are spent on the dock or on the deck mending and building the fishing gear used while at sea.

On board the fishing vessel, the fo'c'sle will be your home—living room, bedroom, basement, and in many cases your kitchen and dining room as well. By the way, "fo'c'sle" is old sailor slang for "forecastle," that low, dark, and wet hole beneath the forecastle head (fo'c'sle-head) which once served as a sailor's "home away from home" on board old sailing ships.

The fo'c'sle on board the modern fishing vessel is a good many notches above that of the old windjammers. Your fo'c'sle will be warm, dry, well lighted, and as clean and cozy as you, the inhabitant, want it to be.

Many, and probably most fishing boats at this writing, have living quarters in an upper deckhouse. The sleeping quarters are generally separate from the galley. The modern, king crab-type vessels have two-bunk staterooms with such amenities as an intercom, desk, and sink in each stateroom. There is an increasing range in the variety and quality of crew quarters, especially when comparing the larger vessels, both old and new, and the smaller ones.

Living in the fo'c'sle of a fishing boat is in so many ways quite different from living in a house or an apartment ashore. Clearly, if you intend to go into this kind of life you must learn its do's and don'ts; you have to adapt to the particular kind



of living needed to survive and prosper.

There are, in fact, quite a few procedures you must learn; some of the usages mentioned here may seem small or petty to you right now. Right you are! They are small and petty, taken one by one. In the aggregate, however, they amount to this: if you follow these usages, you will become a dependable and pleasant shipmate, esteemed and respected by your fellows, and your life in the fo'c'sle will be a pleasant and rewarding experience. If not followed, you will be an undesirable shipmate, one who is somewhat less than beloved both in the fo'c'sle and on deck. Your own happiness on board will be . . . well, you can figure that one out for yourself. Thus, it is in the best interest of everyone that budding fishermen learn the rules and live by them.

1. Safety first, always. The very first thing you must learn is to keep yourself inside the railings of your vessel. While under way, don't try to use the railing for an easychair or a sofa. Do not sit, lie down, or walk on the railing!

2. Need a bucketful of clean seawater? Don't wrap the drawbucket lanyard around your hand! And, don't drop the bucket overboard before your other hand has secured a good grip in a shroud, a guyline, or some other dependable anchor. In short, stay inside the railings. If the ugly scream of "man overboard" is ever heard on board your vessel, let it not be you they are screaming about.

3. Don't climb shrouds, stays, or guylines. Keep out of the rigging entirely, unless ordered up by the skipper for a valid reason, perhaps to replace a burnt-out lightbulb.

4. In the fo'c'sle, your bunk and locker are your only private territory; the rest of the fo'c'sle must be shared equally with your shipmates. Equally means just that: that all inhabitants are equal and that no one may use, or demand to use, more space than the next. That again means you may not throw your clothes and other personal belongings wherever you like. Somewhere in the neighborhood of your bunk you will have a clothes hook, perhaps even two, that is your very own. That is where your clothes must be placed when undressing for the bunk or changing into your going-ashore clothes. Keep in mind that the clothes hanging from a hook on the bulkhead or in a clothes locker must be secured so they do not swing as the boat rolls, which it does rather constantly. More than one coat or shirt has been worn threadbare early in its life from rubbing against the bulkhead.

5. Your clean, spare clothes belong in your locker, as do your toilet articles, reading/writing matter, cigarettes, gum, candy, and whatever small personal items you may pack along. Your personal possessions should also include identification, especially a naturalization or birth certificate as proof of citizenship. This proof is necessary if you re-enter the United States from a foreign port like Canada, although this requirement may be irregularly enforced. Birth certificates can be photocopied in a handy wallet size, plasticized for a dollar or two, and the original kept home in a safe place. For naturalization certificates, which may not be photocopied, get a U.S. citizenship identification card from the immigration station nearest you.

6. A man's locker is his most private territory on board. Never go into a shipmate's locker to "borrow" a pack of cigarettes or a pair of gloves or anything at all without first securing his permission to do so.

7. Keep your fo'c'sle clean. In a good crew, everyone takes his turn to wash the floor, the benches, the table, and the companionway. Wipe out the wash basin. Spruce up the stove. Keep things in good order. On the run, or while weatherbound in harbor, bedding should occasionally be brought on deck and given a good airing, weather permitting.

8. The ship's toilet (called the head, by some) is also a part of your living quarters and must be treated as such. Keep your toilet clean.

9. Be aware that the method of flushing your toilet on board a fishing vessel may be quite different from the one you are used to ashore. On some fishing boats there is an electrically driven pump furnishing the water for

flushing, but on many others, especially the older boats, the flushing water may be nothing more than a part of the engine's raw water piped through the toilet bowl. This means that there is no flushing water except when the main engine is running. There is a draw bucket, though, for use whenever the main engine is not running. Be sure to use that bucket! And to save someone else embarrassment, delay, and a frayed temper, if you use the last of that roll of necessary paper, *you* replace it.

10. Keep yourself and your clothing as clean as work and conditions will allow. Fish can be pretty smelly critters and that's all right for a fish. But there is no good reason why a fisherman should smell like a fish! Many of the modern fishing vessels in the king crab fishery have automatic washing machines and clothes dryers on board. With such labor-savers close at hand, and free, a fisherman has no excuse for going 'round in dirty clothes smelling like a spoiled fish. Keeping your own carcass clean at sea is also becoming less and less a problem as more and more new fishing vessels install shower stalls on board. Even so, use no more water than necessary.

11. Because of the long irregular hours and the hurry to get to bed, many fishermen tend to forget the regular habits of cleanliness. Most noticeable among such personal matters is neglect of the teeth. An old jam jar is a good container in which to keep tooth brush and toothpaste. Take a jar full of water out on deck for at least one daily brushing. For face and arms a wash cloth does a better scrub job than the hands-only process.

On board the older and the smaller fishing boats especially, the freshwater tank is all too often pitifully small, and the supply of fresh water is not adequate according to shoreside standards. Nothing much can be done about that except learn to live with it. That is, learn to use fresh water with great care.

On such a boat, the green man does well to follow the practices of the rest of the crew. Or ask the cook. He is usually the one who will get bawled out by the skipper if the freshwater tank runs dry before the trip is finished. Even so, there is an abundance of clean seawater close at hand, though it is not just as good, no. Still and all, fishblood, slime, and gurry can be removed effectively by washing in clean seawater. Ergo, there is no need to go into the galley or the fo'c'sle, or into your bunk, without first having removed some 99 percent of the blood and slime and gurry from your hands, arms, and face. When you are on a long trip and far from home, and have several days running time ahead of you, a seawater sponge bath helps before you put on a clean union suit when you start for home. Your homeward run will be more pleasant for yourself and for your shipmates as well.

On some fishing vessels, especially the halibut schooners and some of the older seine-boat types, the galley is located in the fo'c'sle. In such a fo'c'sle, where your bunk will be only a few feet removed from the stove, extra neatness and cleanliness (not to mention tact) are of the utmost importance.

The cook on a fishing vessel, especially on a smaller one where the cook must also work on deck, is not "living the life of Riley." He has a man-size job on his hands and deserves your consideration and help as your own work permits. Here are a few examples of what you may do to help: carry the slop bucket on deck for emptying, washing, and scrubbing;

take rubber mats or other fo'c'sle floor coverings on deck, wash and scrub them, and hang them up to dry; help wash the dishes; and dress and trim the fish the cook wants to bake for dinner. Otherwise, stay out of the way when he is cooking.

The "mug-up" is a between-meal occasion when massive sandwiches are sometimes built from a variety of meats, sausages, and other goodies that are always available in good quantity and quality on most fishing boats. But this can also be the source of problems for a "greenhorn" (or in-breaker) the first time he goes on a trip.

After that "mug-up," be sure to wash and put away your cup and your knife or whatever tools you may have used. That also means replacing the lid on that jam jar and putting it back in its place, unless there is satisfaction in getting chewed out by a savage cook because the jar rolls off the table and spills when the boat heaves. It is uncanny how quickly a man learns not to leave a cup or jar unattended on the table when he cleans up the mess himself. It is not an easy habit to acquire, when your life has, to date, been spent ashore where the coffee cup stays in place no matter where you set it down.

Even seasoned fishermen, after some months ashore, when suddenly restricted to a small boat with several days of running time to the fishing grounds, get constipated. This can be painful, and even a source of seasickness. The best preventative: eat lightly and don't neglect roughage like fruit and vegetables. Get out of that bunk or off the bench in the galley, and if the weather is so tough you can't pace the deck, do a few bending exercises to get things moving.

The bunk on a long run can be a sleep trap, especially if you are bored. But sometimes in bad weather this is the only alternative besides standing a wheel watch. Even reading is difficult and seems to induce more sleep even after a 10-hour nap.

Courtesy is a very inexpensive commodity, so be courteous! It costs not a penny to say "thank you" when the cook performs some small service for you, or "would you please" when you ask him to perform such a service.

The source of hot water for that shave (if you don't have a battery-operated shaver) may not be a self-replenishing tank, but a large kettle on the stove. Use what you need, but replace the water you've used as a courtesy to the cook and your shipmates who will want hot water next.

On the run to and from the fishing grounds, or when anchored up in a harbor, most of the crew will be in the fo'c'sle most of the time. If the galley is also in the fo'c'sle, keep out of the cook's way while he is preparing your next meal. If you have a card game going or if you are using the galley table as a writing desk, keep an eye on the cook's progress and clear your stuff away when he is ready to set the table. In short, give the cook all the help you can, directly and indirectly, whether the galley is located in the fo'c'sle or on deck.

12. Many men have strong feelings on various subjects such as religion, politics, marriage, and the like. A calm discussion of such subjects may be all right, but emotion-filled arguments should be avoided. If you are taking part in such a discussion and notice that one of your shipmates begins to be emotionally stirred, ease up! Take a trip out on deck, grab a magazine, and start reading, or crawl into your bunk. Do whatever is necessary to stop that calm discussion from becoming an emotion-filled argument. They are bad business in the fo'c'sle. Again, be courteous.

13. Don't be a smart aleck, or a know-it-all. No one knows it all, and "that is a fac'," to borrow a phrase from Erskine Caldwell. Don't be a "sea-lawyer"—the fellow who can "put things to rights," because he "knows the law, by golly!" in any and all situations. Though he may think he knows, he wouldn't do you much good in a court of law.

14. Don't be a "pilothouse rat," a carrier of tales between the pilothouse and the fo'c'sle or deck, between the skipper and the crew. A tired and overworked man (whether in the pilothouse or on deck) may be exceedingly irritable. He may, under trying circumstances, say words that are somewhat less than complimentary to the skipper or to his vessel—words that he does not really mean and which he secretly regrets having uttered. Such words should not be carried to the pilothouse (or from pilothouse to fo'c'sle or deck). The same goes for rumors or gossip. The men who do such carrying, rumormongering, and gossiping are called pilothouse rats, and they are abundantly deserving of that name. Let it be noted, in all fairness, that there are not many such in the fishing fleets. Let it be further noted that most skippers do not enjoy having such an animal on board and will not dream of shipping one, if they know the score.

15. Don't be a crybaby. There is no need to tell your partner or the rest of your shipmates how cruelly your back, your hands, or your arms are hurting. They, too, are equipped with such parts and are using them just as much as you are using yours.

There was the fisherman who suffered an acute attack of arthritis in both hands at the beginning of what proved to be a long and dirty-weather halibut trip. Every joint in his hands swelled completely out of shape and all during the 9 days of fishing and for several days of the home run, he could neither button the fly of his pants, nor use knife and fork at the table. He couldn't bend his fingers enough to grasp such slender tools. His pain must have been excruciating, but he never did mention it, not one word. Moreover, he never missed a watch on deck, and he performed his full share of the work with a pair of hands that looked like deformed bear claws. All was done without a word of complaint. His shipmates admired him silently. To give voice to their admiration would have been too embarrassing for both parties.

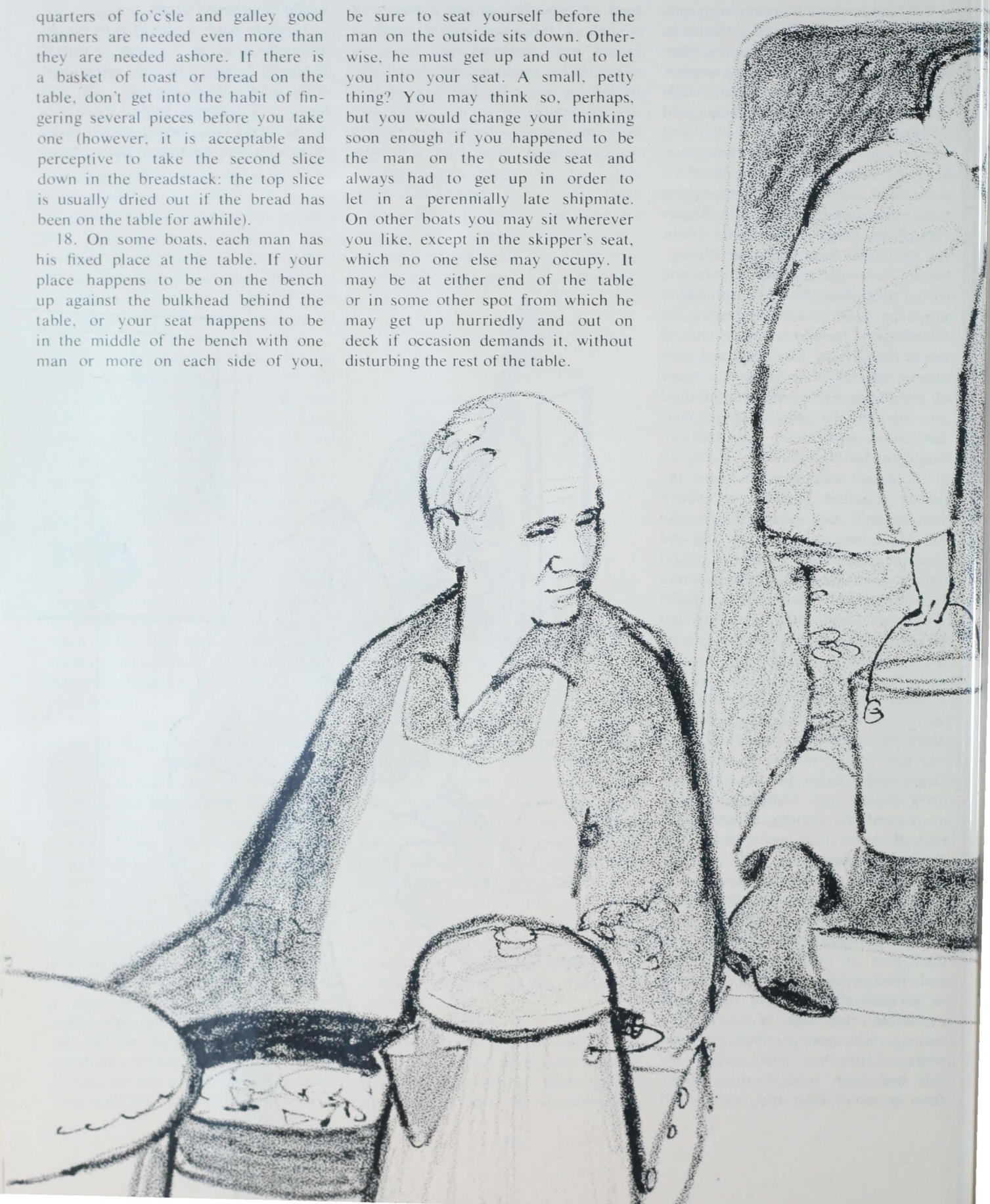
16. Avoid gambling on board the fishing vessel. A friendly (or even a well heated) card game just for the fun of winning can be a relaxing and pleasant pastime on a long run, or on harbor days. When big money comes into the game, however, the relaxed atmosphere will change, slowly but steadily, to an atmosphere of tension that grows in proportion to the money invested.

Many years ago, in the days of the "smoke-boats" (the halibut steamers), gambling on board ship was not only common, it became a plague and a curse. On the long runs from Seattle (or Vancouver, B.C.) to the Alaska fishing grounds and back to home port again, there was plenty of spare time, and a poker or blackjack or rummy game was in progress for days on end. Some men became so enamored with the games that they didn't have time to take their turn at the wheel; they hired and paid a non-gambling shipmate to perform that duty for them. The inevitable result was, of course, that many a fisherman gambled away his share of the trip even before the fish had been sold. Coming home from a month-long trip with a full load of fish—but minus a paycheck—such a fisherman would catch a bit of well deserved hell from his wife and his creditors, which led him to develop some hard feelings against the shipmate, or mates, who had won his money. Sometimes enmity arose between men who otherwise would have been friends.

17. You have no doubt been taught manners—that is, certain accepted modes of behavior in your association with other *Homo sapiens*. Do not leave your manners behind when you go on board your fishing vessel. Bring them with you, because in the cramped

quarters of fo'c'sle and galley good manners are needed even more than they are needed ashore. If there is a basket of toast or bread on the table, don't get into the habit of fingering several pieces before you take one (however, it is acceptable and perceptive to take the second slice down in the breadstack: the top slice is usually dried out if the bread has been on the table for awhile).

18. On some boats, each man has his fixed place at the table. If your place happens to be on the bench up against the bulkhead behind the table, or your seat happens to be in the middle of the bench with one man or more on each side of you, be sure to seat yourself before the man on the outside sits down. Otherwise, he must get up and out to let you into your seat. A small, petty thing? You may think so, perhaps, but you would change your thinking soon enough if you happened to be the man on the outside seat and always had to get up in order to let in a perennially late shipmate. On other boats you may sit wherever you like, except in the skipper's seat, which no one else may occupy. It may be at either end of the table or in some other spot from which he may get up hurriedly and out on deck if occasion demands it, without disturbing the rest of the table.



19. The importance of observing good manners, courtesy, and common decency on board the fishing vessel cannot be overemphasized. And one of the important items in this category is habits of speech. Rough language is not exactly standard speech on board fishing vessels, but it cannot be said to be a novelty, either. Some men use such language simply because they lack a sufficient vocabulary; others, especially youngsters, adopt the rough language in an attempt to sound tough, like what they believe an old "sea-dog" should sound.

Rough, earthy words are part of our language, and they have their uses, certainly. All that habitual use of such language will do for you when ashore, is to stamp you as being ill-mannered, almost but not quite civilized. Your shipmates will not take offense, but these habits, as we all know, are easy to get into and hard to get out of.

20. While speaking of manners, and of words, let's have a quick look at some words that may never be pronounced on board some fishing vessels, and a few other superstitions. Not that all fishermen are superstitious. Some are not, and the kind and number vary from boat to boat, and from fishery to fishery. Some superstitions are so old, and so well ingrained, that to argue over them won't alter anything but tempers. Some, too, have a practical basis on the boat, or used to.

There are forbidden words that no one may utter, on deck or in fo'c'sle: "horse," "pig," "hog." They are taboo. According to an old and well established superstition, the mere mention of those animals is enough to bring bad weather, poor fishing, snarls on gear, a line in the propeller, or any other trouble you care to mention. It is deemed to be very bad manners, if not worse, to voice these unmentionable names.

Don't turn the hatch cover upside down. Such carelessness will surely bring engine trouble. Don't whistle in the pilothouse, because that will bring a southwest storm over your head. Don't bring a black suitcase on board a fishing boat. Bad luck galore will be the result of such foolhardiness—as bad as if you were to break a mirror, although not quite as bad as if you bring an umbrella on board ship. That's the very last straw, and anything is liable to happen to the fishing, the vessel, and to each and every man on board.

Don't be quick to laugh, poke fun, or debunk the superstitions. The differences between a habit, a ritual, and a superstition may be one of degree, whether it is yours or his. Because they are more a product of emotion than reason, they will therefore be defended more hotly.